

a sweet romantic comedy boxed set

# HOW TO KISS A HAWTHORNE BROTHER



JENNY PROCTOR

HOW TO KISS YOUR BEST FRIEND

HOW TO KISS YOUR GRUMPY BOSS

HOW TO KISS YOUR ENEMY

HOW TO KISS A MOVIE STAR

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**HOW TO  
KISS A  
HAWTHORNE  
BROTHER**

**a sweet romantic  
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**JENNY PROCTOR**

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# HOW TO KISS YOUR BEST FRIEND



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*to Misty and Brian  
whose love story inspired this one*

# CHAPTER ONE

Brody

I STARE AT MY phone like it's about to sprout legs out of the speaker port and dance across the coffee table.

Kate Fletcher sent me a text.

Today.

Five minutes ago.

And I have no idea how to respond.

Look, I realize better than anyone that pining after my childhood best friend is a dangerous game. I have three brothers, and they have reminded me more times than I can count (and that's saying something because I am very good with numbers) that I am only setting myself up for heartbreak. They say if anything were going to happen with Kate, it would have by now.

Logically, I get that. I understand we aren't ever going to be together.

But I can't let her go completely.

Kate is my favorite bad habit. The impossible wish. The dream I can't shake.

It's been one thousand, four hundred and thirty-three days since we last had a conversation. That streak ended today. At least it will once I respond.

I stand up and start pacing, my fingers tapping against my leg. There are so many things I want to ask her. But I can't launch into an inquisition when all she said was hello. She's the one who reached out to me. I'm a mature adult, and a mature adult would say hello back and let her make the next move.

I am seventeen laps into my pacing when my oldest brother, Perry, knocks twice before pushing into my house, a backpack slung over his shoulder. "You ... do not look ready to go."

I pause next to the fireplace, halfway through lap eighteen. "I'm ... *close*."

"Right. Yeah. It looks like it." Perry surveys the room and sighs, but he's overreacting. My living room may look like an outdoor outfitter threw up all over my furniture, but I know where everything is, and I know exactly where it's going to go when I stash it all in my pack. I'm only waiting to finish packing because I just cleaned my tent, and it's still in the backyard drying off.

And also because Kate Fletcher just sent me a text message.

"What's up with you?" Perry asks as he discards his pack and drops into the chair by the window. "You look all weird and stressed and stuff." He pulls out his phone and reclines into the chair like he expects to be waiting a while.

"I, um, I just got a weird text, and it threw me off."

"Aww, did Taylor Swift finally respond to all the messages you've sent her fan club?"

I grab the bundled merino wool socks sitting on the arm of the couch and chuck them at his head.

He deflects the socks without even cracking a smile.

"Honestly, hearing directly from Taylor Swift herself would be less surprising."

Perry looks up, his expression morphing into actual concern.

"I got a message from Kate," I say.

His eyes go wide. "High school Kate? Your Kate?"

I nod and lean forward, resting my head in my hands.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She said hi. Said it’s been a while.”

The thing is, I do not hold Kate accountable for our friendship falling apart. We did a decent job of staying in touch after graduation even though I headed to college, and she headed to Europe to live with her dad full time. We saw each other once or twice a year, whenever she was back in the states, and we texted regularly.

Until we didn’t anymore.

It didn’t make me mad. It just made me worried about her.

My brothers, on the other hand, were thrilled when Kate dropped out of my life. *Now you can move on, they said. Now you can stop waiting for something that’s never going to happen.*

I know that at some point, I’m going to have to take dating other women more seriously. I’m twenty-eight years old. I don’t *really* want to spend the rest of my life reading Kate’s articles—she’s a travel writer—and stalking her Instagram feed. I know precisely how pathetic that makes me look.

Don’t get me wrong. I date.

Just not *seriously*. A three-month relationship here. A six-month relationship there. I even made it a year with a woman named Jill my senior year of college. But nothing ever sticks. Because somewhere in the back of my mind, I can’t let go of the hope that at some point, Kate will come back into my life and this time, things will be different.

“It’s been a while?” Perry repeats. “How kind of her to acknowledge.”

“Don’t do that,” I say. “You can’t play it both ways. You were pissed at her when we were still in touch, now you’re pissed at her because we fell out of touch?”

“I’m not pissed at *her*,” he says. “I just don’t like what she does to your head. She’s been messing with you for a lot of years, Brody.”

I push a hand through my hair. “But that’s on me. She didn’t do anything on purpose. I can’t blame her for what she doesn’t feel.”

Perry lifts a shoulder in the sardonic way that makes my oldest brother so annoying. “I won’t argue with you about it. But I think you’re being generous by saying she’s never strung you along on purpose.”

“Strung me—? Geez, Perry, do you even know what a real friendship looks like?”

He looks at me over the top of his phone. “I don’t need friends,” he says dryly. “It’s bad enough I have so many siblings. Friends and all their *neediness* would make my life even more unbearable than it already is.”

It’s arguable that the last four years of Perry’s life have been hard enough to justify his attitude. An ugly divorce, settled in court, that nearly cleaned him out. Then all the stuff we’ve dealt with at home. Dad had a stroke and was forced to retire early, leaving Perry to step up and take over daily operations of Stonebrook Farm, the working farm and event center that’s been the family business for almost thirty years. As soon as our only sister, Olivia, finished her MBA, she moved home to help out, but Perry is still juggling a lot.

All that aside, Perry has never been particularly . . . jovial? Happy isn’t the right word. I’ve seen him happy. He just doesn’t smile much. He’s Roy Kent minus the swear words. Stanley Hudson minus the indifference. Dr. House minus the cutting insults. He perpetually looks like he’s carrying the weight of the world—or at least our family—on his shoulders.

“Your life isn’t unbearable,” I say.

“And you aren’t in love with Kate,” he responds without missing a beat. His eyes are back on his phone now. “See? Saying something out loud doesn’t necessarily make it true.”

“I’m not in love with Kate.”

I say it mostly out of habit. Like it’s an affirmation I’m trying to will into existence. I don’t love her because I *can’t* love her. Because it’s fruitless to love her.

“Right. Sure. Should I get Lennox on the phone so he can jog your memory? I bet Flint remembers that night out at the ledge. Should I call him up, too?”

Perry is playing dirty.

I shouldn't be held accountable for things I said nearly nine years ago, the one time in my entire existence I allowed myself to get completely wasted.

I was with my brothers, up behind the orchards on our family's property, on a cliffside we brothers dubbed *the ledge*. It isn't truly a cliff. Had one of us ever fallen, we wouldn't have done more than tumble a few yards into a grove of rhododendrons.

But it still provided great views of the valley, was a short hike from the house, and an even shorter one if we took one of the Gators, the 4x4s we used to get around the farm, to the orchard edge. From the time we were old enough to brave the shadowy, Western North Carolina woods alone, the ledge was our escape whenever we were mad, sad, angry, or in trouble. It was also where we took dates when we wanted to impress them with the view and make out without the risk of our parents catching us.

That night nine years ago, all four Hawthorne brothers were on the ledge together, beverages provided by the two oldest. Perry and Lennox wore their older age like a badge of manhood and Flint, the brother younger than me, were still aspiring to.

I was exhausted after finishing freshman year finals and bemoaning the fact that my high school best friend had gone off and started traveling the world with some guy.

Preston was her long-distance boyfriend all through our junior and senior year, so I shouldn't have been surprised. But traveling together, visiting far-off countries, staying in Preston's family villas and seaside condominiums. It felt so . . . permanent. So *adult*.

I don't remember much of what I said out on the ledge that night. But my brothers seem to remember every last word of

my miserable tale of unrequited love. They must, because even nine years later, they remind me of it every chance they get.

They also remind me that, with tears streaming down my face, I poetically claimed I'd been in love with *two* women in my nineteen years of existence. Kate Fletcher and Taylor Swift.

“Are you going to respond?” Perry asks.

“Sure. Eventually. I just have to figure out how.”

Perry breathes out a heavy sigh. “Brody. How many minutes have you been staring at your phone?”

The number pops into my head as quickly as they always do. “Seventeen and a half.”

“You gotta snap out of it, man. Finish packing. Tyler will be here soon. You can respond in the car.”

I nod, knowing Perry is right. I've wasted too much time as it is.

It was a last-minute decision to join Perry on his annual two-week trek on the Appalachian Trail. We're all big hikers, my entire family, but Perry is the only one into the long-distance stuff. He says he'll thru-hike it one day—tackle the entire 2,190 miles in one uninterrupted trip—but I'll believe it when I see it. He likes working too much to take six months off to go hiking. I hesitated to take even two weeks off, but after the volatility that dominated the last month of the school year, I need the break. Even if it means hanging out with Perry.

I stand and start gathering my gear from various places around the living room.

“Did you read Kate's last piece in *The Atlantic*?” Perry is behind me now, rummaging around in my kitchen. “On the impacts of tourism on the Maasai tribe in Zimbabwe? It's brilliant.”

I stop and stare at my oldest brother. It does not surprise me that, after all the traveling she's done, Kate has turned herself into an accomplished travel writer. It does surprise me Perry reads her stuff. “You read Kate's articles?”

Perry walks back into the living room with a to-go container of leftover chicken fried rice in his hand. “Not as a rule. But I read *The Atlantic*. If she’s in it, then I read it.”

I, on the other hand, read everything Kate writes. And buy hard copies, whenever there is one, for safe keeping. “Yeah, I read that one too,” I say noncommittally.

Perry takes a bite of the rice and winces. “How old is this? The rice is crunchy.”

“Old. Why are you eating that for breakfast?”

“Why didn’t you throw it out?” He frowns but doesn’t stop eating. “Does it ever seem weird that you know so much more about Kate’s life and what she’s up to than she does about you?” He nudges the socks I threw earlier with the toe of his shoe. “Don’t forget these.”

I grab the socks and add them to my pile of gear, then move toward the back door to retrieve my tent. “I don’t know. She lives a pretty public life. I only know the stuff everyone else knows too.”

At least that’s how it’s been the past four years. I used to know everything.

I disappear into my backyard long enough to collapse my tent and fold it up. Back inside, I put it, and the rest of my remaining gear, into my bag. “Kate might know some stuff. I don’t post anything, but Olivia does. I’m pretty sure they still follow each other.”

“Olivia’s feed wouldn’t tell Kate anything but how much Olivia loves the farm. And Tyler.”

“True.” I glance at my watch. “Speaking of Tyler, shouldn’t he be here by now?”

“He’s coming,” Perry says. “He had to help Mom with something in the goat barn, but he said he’d be here by nine-thirty.”

“I swear she likes him better than the rest of us.” Olivia’s husband, Tyler, who will drop us off at Springer Mountain, the



Southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, made fast work of convincing Mom he was her favorite.

“Only because he loves her goats,” Perry says grouchily.

“And helped make her a grandbaby.” It’s not lost on any of us that the youngest of the five Hawthorne children, and the only girl, managed to find a husband and get pregnant before any of her older brothers have even come close. With the way things are looking, Olivia’s baby, due at the end of the summer, may be the only grandchild Mom and Dad get.

Perry swore off women after his divorce and despite our best efforts to resuscitate whatever part of his brain controls desire, he’s still uninterested. A vegetarian in the meat aisle of the grocery store.

Lennox, the next brother down, has the opposite problem. He desires *too much*. His problem isn’t finding a woman, it’s wanting to settle down with only one.

The brother right under me, Flint, has an acting career that isn’t exactly conducive to normal relationships. Last time I saw his face, it was plastered to the front of one of my AP Chemistry student’s notebooks—a cut out of the photo that made the cover of People magazine’s latest “Sexiest Man Alive” edition.

If it isn’t yet obvious, I’m the only Hawthorne brother who’s even remotely normal, at least when it comes to relationship stuff. I’d love to get married. Settle down. Have kids. Be the son who takes the kids over to have dinner with their grandparents every Sunday afternoon. It’s what I want. I just need to meet the right woman.

My eyes dart to where my phone is still sitting in the center of the coffee table.

Step one? Convince myself Kate is not the right woman.

I’ll get right on that. Make it my top priority.

Just as soon as I respond to her text.

## CHAPTER TWO

Brody

I WAS NINE YEARS old when Katherine Anne Fletcher—Kate—climbed onto the school bus just after the three o'clock bell, looked at the empty seat beside me, and said, "If I sit here, will you promise not to be stupid?"

She dropped onto the narrow bench, nudging me over with her hip, and pulled her overlarge backpack onto her lap. Her hair was long and dark, hanging over her shoulder in a thick braid, and her face was covered in freckles. We didn't get new kids in Silver Creek very often—it's too small a town for people to move in with any regularity—so everyone on the bus was sitting up and taking notice of the new girl. And the nerdy kid she'd chosen to sit beside.

As for me, I couldn't even manage a word. I just sniffed and pushed my glasses up from where they'd slipped onto the end of my nose.

"The thing is," she continued, "experience has taught me that most boys are dumb with a capital D." She eyed me, her gaze shrewd. "I watched you when you got off the bus this morning. You're nicer to your sister than the other one."

I looked toward the seat directly in front of me where my younger brother Flint and our little sister Olivia were sitting together. Our two older brothers were already at the middle

school and rode a different bus. Kate was observant. Flint was always tougher on Olivia, but Olivia was tougher on him too.

I lifted a shoulder. "I'm older," I said, like that explained everything.

She shook her head dismissively. "Some kids use that as a reason to be meaner. Are you good at math? I'm terrible at it, so it would be excellent if you are."

Was I good at math? Even with my limited experience, I understood that I was being interviewed. Kate Fletcher was deciding if I was friend material or not. And that question? It was a winning lottery ticket. I wasn't just good at math. I was a genius at math. The kind of next-level nerd who tested out of every math class our elementary school offered by the middle of my fourth-grade year. The kid who, two years later, would go onto the Ellen DeGeneres Show as a twelve-year-old "human calculator."

"Did you just ask if he's good at math?" Flint said, turning around in his seat so he could look over the back. He was a faithful and competent wingman even back then. "He's the best there is at math. Give him a math problem. Any math problem. Something with a billion numbers in it." Flint tapped the side of his temple. "He can do it in his head."

It was a slight overstatement. There were limits to what I was capable of computing in my head, but I usually did all right when it was kids coming up with the problems.

"Really?" Kate asked, her eyebrows arching high on her forehead.

I shrugged noncommittally even as my heart started racing and a thin sheen of sweat broke out across the back of my neck. "Sure."

"Any math problem."

I nodded.

"Two-hundred forty-five thousand, five hundred fifty divided by twenty-five."

“Piece of cake,” Flint muttered under his breath. “He can always do the ones with fives.” Olivia was watching now too, her eyes hopeful as her gaze darted from me to Kate and back again. She seemed to sense the gravity of the moment just like I did.

The answer tumbled into my brain with measured certainty. I can’t explain how it all works, though as an adult, it’s easier to recognize the patterns that back then just felt like magic. “Nine-thousand, eight-hundred twenty-two,” I said.

It’s been eighteen years and I still remember how her eyes lit up when she checked my answer with a calculator she pulled out of her backpack.

Our friendship was a done deal after that.

Kate decided we would be best friends—a very Kate move I recognize in hindsight more than I did at the time—and we were.

But now? I don’t know what to call what we are now. We aren’t estranged exactly. But we aren’t talking either. At least we haven’t been until today.

*Kate: Hi, Brody. It’s been a while.*

I don’t need to have my phone in front of me to see her text. The words are floating in my mind’s eye, even as I move around the room and pack up the last of my gear. I force myself to focus, mentally cataloging all the items in my bag, double and triple-checking that I’ve remembered everything. Perry’s list was comprehensive. The only thing I adjusted was how much water he suggested I bring. His estimates shorted me sixteen ounces.

“You’ve got all your food packed?” Perry says, eyeing my bag. “Everything I suggested?”

I nod. We’ll be on the trail three days before we can resupply, so we’ll be carrying everything we’ll need to eat until then. “I’ve got everything. Plus a little extra water, which you’re going to need too. How heavy is your pack?”

“Brody.” Perry levels me with a glare. “If you run the calculations for how much water I’m going to need one more

time, I'm going to tell Dad about the time you stole the Gator and drove it to Kate's in the middle of the night. He never did figure out who caused all four tires to go flat. I bet he'd like to know."

My words stop, even if the numbers keep moving through my head. Exactly how much water we'll need on the trail depends on a lot of factors. How fast we're walking. How hot it is outside. Our body weight relative to how much weight we're carrying. The distance we have to travel before we can resupply or find potable water on the trail. Perry ought to be glad I can run the calculations in my head. Dehydration is a big problem for long-distance hikers.

"Stop it," Perry says.

"Stop what?" I say as I shoulder my pack.

"Stop calculating." Perry grabs his own bag and follows me to the front porch.

"I'm not calculating anything."

"Yes, you are. Your eyes are doing that thing where they dart around. I promise we'll be fine. There's water all over the trail."

We will be fine. I know this. People hike the Appalachian Trail every summer without coming close to the kinds of ridiculous calculations that keep my brain occupied. Best guesses, rough estimates, those are good enough. Especially when there are so many unexpected variables with long-distance hiking that can't be calculated.

That doesn't mean I won't be doing the math anyway.

Sometimes I forget that constant number-crunching isn't normal. That all drivers aren't calculating exactly when they'll reach their destination based on slight fluctuations in their speed. That people on walks aren't estimating the number of steps they'll take before they reach some landmark in the distance. But it's how my brain works. It's actually why I decided to teach chemistry instead of math. There are still a lot of numbers in chemistry, but the science part gives my brain a break from the constant calculating.

Tyler pulls up minutes later, and we load up our gear. I take a deep breath and climb into the back seat of Tyler's SUV, content to let Perry take the front.

I need this trip. The decompression. The time in the mountains. The time away.

I settle into my seat and tap my cell phone into my palm. We won't be without service while we're hiking, and I've got a solar charger in my pack, but coverage will be spotty in places. If responding to Kate starts a conversation, I'd rather have it now, when I've got hours to kill in the car, than later, when I'm on the trail and Perry is watching my every move.

But what do I say? And how do I say it?

No exclamation points. That's important. I want to seem chill. Not overly exuberant. The fact that it's already been an hour since she first texted is a good thing. I won't seem over-eager, *annnnnd* now I sound as bad as the girls in my freshmen environmental science class stressing about how long they can leave guys *on read* without responding.

I have to just do it. Respond. Adult this situation once and for all.

I pull up my texting app, but a new message pops up before I make it to Kate's thread, this one from Monica, a fellow teacher at Green River Academy and the woman I sort of dated a few months back. I may or may not appreciate the delay. Even if it *is* caused by Monica.

*Monica: Hey! Wasn't sure you'd check your email before leaving. Confirmation just came through that the next school board meeting is delayed until you're back in town. I'm glad they're seeing the benefit of having you there to defend the program. In the meantime, enjoy your trip!*

I close out the text thread and pull up my Green River Academy email. Sure enough, there's the form email addressed to the entire district pushing back the date of the next school board meeting, plus a separate message addressed only to me. It's brief, relaying what Monica has already told me.

*Brody—The school board agreed you deserve the opportunity to speak for the program. I can't make any promises, but we'll give it our best shot. —John*

It's more encouragement than I've gotten from John Talbot, Green River Academy's principal, in weeks, so I'll take it.

Green River Academy is a charter high school focused on integrating experiential outdoor learning with regular classroom experiences. When they hired me to teach Chemistry and Environmental Science, they already had enrichment programs that covered rock-climbing, backpacking, horseback riding, and swimming.

What they didn't have—weirdly, because the academy sits less than a mile from the Green River—was whitewater kayaking. It took a little bit of maneuvering. Okay, *a lot* of maneuvering. I wrote grant proposals, begged for donations and support from local businesses, completed layers and layers of safety certifications. All total, it took thirteen months for me to get the Green River Academy whitewater kayaking program officially off the ground. The first year, six kids enrolled, which was good because I'd only managed to acquire seven kayaks. Five years later, the program is maxed out at twenty-five high school students, with another twenty on a waiting list.

And now the whole thing is under attack.

I force my jaw to unclench and take a long, slow breath. The whole point of this trip is to get *away* from the stress of all this.

Another text from Monica pops up.

*Monica: Would love to get together as soon as you're back in town. Without the teachers' lounge, I'm going to miss you!* She ends the message with a kissing emoji that makes me roll my eyes.

Monica is very nice. But she's also not taking the hint. And by hint, I mean a very specific conversation in which I told her I'm not attracted to her and only want us to be friends. I don't know how I could possibly be more clear.

Monica started working at the academy two years after I did, and since we sort of knew each other in high school, she glommed on quick, using me as her go-to guy for questions about the school. Everything from teachers' lounge politics to what cafeteria meals ought to be avoided. I never minded her questions that first year. She's a genuinely good person. Great, even.

That doesn't mean I feel any spark when I'm around her.

I can almost hear Perry's voice in my head. *You'll never feel a spark with someone new until you get Kate out of your head.*

Getting Kate out of my head might be easier if I didn't still live in Silver Creek. Reminders of her are everywhere. All over my parents' farm, in all the places we used to hang out. Every square inch of this place holds a memory with Kate in it.

Still, even if there is truth in what Perry is saying, that isn't what's happening with Monica. There's just nothing there.

I type out a quick response to her first text.

*Brody: Thanks for the heads up about the school board meeting.*

I completely ignore her second one. I've already said everything I could possibly say on the subject.

I switch over to my messages from Kate, my heart rate climbing. There's absolutely no reason to freak out. I have no idea what triggered her message, but it's probably something inconsequential.

I have a long history of trying to turn things Kate says or does into more than they are, but I'm too old to do that now.

I finally type out a response as friendly and generic as her message was and send it before I can spend even one extra second thinking about it.

*Brody: Hey. Nice to hear from you. How are you?*

Her response pops up almost immediately, like she was waiting for me to respond.



*Kate: A simple question with a complicated answer. I'm okay, I think. But ... I'm coming home. I'd love to see you.*

The words hit like a punch to the gut.

She's coming home. To Silver Creek. Weird to hear her call it home because she's done pretty well at staying away. She's passed through a few times, but she never stays long enough to even unpack. She used to joke about how different we were when it came to our life plans. How I was the guy who would never leave Silver Creek, the guy who would always play it safe and stay close to home, while she dreamed of traveling to every country on the map.

I wouldn't exactly call whitewater kayaking the Class V rapids in the Green River Narrows playing it safe, but still, she wasn't wrong. I *was* the guy who came back to Silver Creek the minute I graduated college. When I landed a job at the academy, it felt like hitting the jackpot. I've never wanted to live anywhere else. Meanwhile, she's got more stamps in her passport at twenty-eight than most people have in a lifetime.

I key out my response, trying my best to keep things neutral.

*Brody: That's crazy. It's been a long time.*

Again, her response comes through lightning fast.

*Kate: It has been a long time. I know I owe you an apology, Brody. But I want to do it in person. There's so much to explain.*

Relief washes over me. I don't know her reasons for going dark, but I know her well enough to trust that she has a good one.

*Brody: You don't owe me anything. How long are you in town?*

*Kate: I don't know, actually. A while? Mom has finally decided to sell Grandma Nora's house. I'm coming home to clean it up and get it ready. I was hoping you might be able to pick me up from the airport tomorrow night.*

Kate grew up living at her grandmother's, a two-story farmhouse with a big wraparound porch, right down the street

from where I live now. Nettie, Kate's mom, hasn't lived there full time since right after Kate's grandma died four years ago, though she's in town every couple of months checking on the place. I've always wondered if she planned to sell.

A pulse of excitement skitters through me. I'm going to see Kate again. And *soon*.

For a split second, I consider bailing on my trip with Perry so I really can pick Kate up at the airport. But that will not go over well with a brother who is already convinced she has me completely whipped.

*Brody: Actually, I'm out of town for a couple of weeks. Heading to the Appalachian Trail with Perry.*

*Kate: WHAT. That sounds amazing! Don't worry about me then. I'll figure out a ride. Or just rent a car. But two weeks?! That's so long.*

I run a hand through my hair, the knot in my stomach tightening. How am I ever going to handle two weeks on the trail when I know she's at home waiting for me?

*No.* Not waiting for *me*, exactly. But she *is* wanting to see me. And that . . .

"You okay back there, Brody?" Tyler asks, eyeing me through the rearview mirror.

I've been half-listening to their conversation, but I must have zoned out. "What? Yeah. I'm good."

"I thought you might be carsick," Tyler says. "You look a little green."

I feel a little green, but it doesn't have anything to do with being in the car.

"Did you respond to Kate?" Perry asks, turning in his seat to glare at me over his shoulder.

"Yeah. We've been texting back and forth. She's um," I clear my throat. "She's coming home."

"To visit?" Perry asks. "Or for good?"

I measure my next words carefully. I don't need a lecture about Kate, and knowing she'll be around awhile will absolutely make Perry lecture. But I won't lie to him, and I can't ignore a direct question.

I clear my throat. "Not for good. But she'll be around all summer."

His eyebrows are raised, a question in his eyes. "Living at her grandma's house?"

"Where else would she live?"

"The house that is exactly three doors down from *your* house?"

I sigh. "Perry, just say it."

"I'm not saying anything," he says, his tone cautious. "I'm just wondering how you feel about it."

"I feel like it'll be great to spend some time with her," I say, immediately proud of how chill my voice sounds.

"Um, I hate to butt in," Tyler says, "but who's Kate?"

"Brody's high school best friend," Perry says. "She moved away years ago, but she sure loves to swoop into town once or twice a year and stay just long enough to keep Brody obsessing over her."

"That's not what she does," I say, immediately defensive. "I haven't seen her in four years. And I'm not obsessed with her."

Perry shoots Tyler a droll look. "He's totally obsessed with her. He's been in love with her since middle school."

"Please let it go, Perry." I can't do this with him. Not when we're about to spend two weeks hiking together.

He turns his attention back to me. "Fine. But two months from now, when you're even more in love with her than you are now, and you're brokenhearted when she leaves again, I'm going to say I told you so."

"You won't be saying it because you're wrong," I say, hopefully ending the conversation. "Nothing is going to

happen.”

I turn my attention back to Kate’s messages. Perry doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I can handle this. I’ll be fine with Kate back in town. Everything will be *fine*.

*Brody: Two weeks will be long for you? While you chill in Silver Creek? I’m the one hiking with Perry.*

*Brody: We’re going to be alone on the trail, Kate.*

*Brody: All day.*

*Brody: Every day.*

*Kate: Do we need a safe word? Something you can text if you need me to come rescue you?*

I grin. It’s nice that after four years, we drop right back into our friendship like nothing has changed.

*Brody: The word is TACOS.*

*Kate: A man after my own heart.*

Ha. If she only knew.

*Brody: Nah, I’ll be all right. Perry won’t admit it, but he’s glad I’m coming along. He needs me more than he likes to admit.*

*Kate: Some things never change.*

*Kate: I can’t wait to see you.*

*Brody: Me too.*

Me freaking too.

## CHAPTER THREE

Kate

*FINE.* Yes. When I first hatched the plan to hike in and surprise Brody in the middle of his two-week trek with Perry, I vastly underestimated the logistical nightmare I was taking on. It isn't like the trail runs from town to town, complete with paved walkways and cell phone charging stations. The Appalachian Trail is *wilderness*.

The section Brody is hiking crosses through a few different towns close to the Georgia/North Carolina border, but pinpointing which one and when? It feels like one of those word problems you find on elementary school math tests. If train A enters a tunnel at three p.m. traveling fifty miles an hour, and train B enters a tunnel at six p.m. traveling forty-two miles an hour . . .

I could have used Brody and his math brain with all the calculating I've had to do.

How far do people usually hike in one day? How many days will it take me to get to one of those trail-crossing towns? Is it even possible to time it so that Brody and I are in the same town at the same time?

Possible? Yes.

Easy? Absolutely not.

Risky because Brody doesn't have any idea I'm here and might not want to see me? *So much yes.*

Worst-case scenario, I spend a gorgeous weekend hiking and hanging out in a quirky mountain town with my cousin Kristyn who flew down from Chicago to help me get started on Grandma Nora's house. Kristyn was unexpectedly enthusiastic when I suggested we change our plans and spend half our time tracking Brody through the woods instead. But it might feel like less of a wild adventure, as she called it, if we never even find him.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Kristyn asks.

I drop my bag at my feet and stretch my back. "There's a plaque right here that says Siler Bald. It's the right place." The metal plaque, bronzed and weather-worn, sparkles in the afternoon sunlight, marking the latitude and longitude of the mountain's peak.

Kristyn steps up beside me, her hands on her hips, her gaze on the horizon. "You were not lying about these mountains."

"I think I forgot how beautiful they are." I've seen a lot of amazing views over the past few years, and I've hiked to the top of a lot of mountains. But this is different. These mountains feel like home. My gut tightens, an unexpected pulse of emotion radiating out to my fingertips.

I focus on a distant lake nestled in between the rolling hills that stretch out in front of us. *Lake. Trees. Sky. Breathe in. Breathe out.*

I'm going to get through this summer if it's the last thing I do.

The Siler Bald trail is about two and a half miles one way. It only took us an hour or so to hike in, but the last quarter mile, a steep climb through knee-high grasses to get to the top of the knoll was more of a quad workout than I expected. The view from the top is worth it though. Three hundred and sixty degrees of rolling blues and greens, mountains as far as the eye can see in every direction. The Blue Ridge Mountains are the only mountains I've ever seen that melt into the horizon.

On a clear day, when the sky is a brilliant blue overhead, it's hard to tell where mountains stop and sky begins.

Kristyn nudges me with her shoulder. "It's been a while, right? How does it feel to be home?"

I'm not home, exactly. But I'm closer than I've been in a long time.

I tamp down the discomfort still pulsing in my midsection. I did not hike all this way to have a meltdown on the top of a mountain. I have done *hard* things over the past eight years. Traveled to every continent. Survived on a shoestring budget and a healthy side of gumption. I have met people whose lives make my own complicated history seem like a children's book. I can handle this. I can master my emotions.

"Good, I think? Maybe a little weird."

"Are you nervous about seeing Brody again?"

I *should* be nervous. Brody was my north star growing up. When the rest of my life felt impossible, he was the one who was steady and constant. When I missed my dad, who divorced my mom and moved away when I was little, when my mom resented me for reasons I couldn't pinpoint, Brody was reliable like only a best friend could be. But we haven't seen each other in a long time, and I was the one who stopped responding to his messages.

He says I don't owe him an apology, but I *really* do.

"A little," I finally answer. "But I'm more anxious than anything else." Even if Brody isn't interested in rekindling our friendship, I at least know him well enough to trust he will still be kind.

"It's been what, four years since you've seen the guy?" Kristyn asks. She pulls a couple of bananas out of her bag and offers me one.

"Four years since we've talked, but more like four and a half since we've seen each other."

"What if it's totally weird?" she says around her banana. "You know it could be."

I shoot her a look. “Thanks, K. I appreciate your positivity.”

“I’m just saying. Do you even know anything about what his life is like right now? He could be married and have kids for all you know.”

“In four years? He would have had to work fast.” A pulse of uneasiness skitters through my belly. I don’t think Brody’s married. His presence on social media is basically nonexistent, but I follow his little sister Olivia. If any of her brothers had gotten married, she would have posted something about it. At least a picture or two.

“I met and married Jake in eighteen months,” Kristyn says. “If we decided to have a baby right now—”

I shoot her a look.

“*Hypothetically*,” she adds. “I promise I’m not making an announcement. I’m just saying if we *did*, we could totally have met, gotten married, and had a kid in four years.”

I pluck the fabric of my tank top between my fingers and lift it a couple inches, relishing the breeze as it rushes past and cools my skin.

“There’s no way,” I say. “I would have heard something from someone. Or Brody would have told me himself.”

“Engaged, then,” Kristyn says. “He could totally be engaged.”

I hold my shoulders back and suck in a deep breath of mountain air. “So what if he is? I’m just here as his friend. That’s all we’ve ever been. A lot of time has passed, yes, but my friendship with Brody is bigger than time or distance. Just because we haven’t seen each other in person doesn’t mean things will be different.” Even if I basically ghosted him.

Kristyn shoots me a skeptical look. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

I crack a smile. “Oh, definitely myself. But it’s working, so don’t ruin things for me.”

She shakes her head and chuckles. “I just don’t want you to get hurt, Kate.”



“I know. But Brody won’t hurt me.” I lift my shoulders. “He’s my family.”

I walk to a spot on the knoll that will give me the best view of the bottom of the hill. The Appalachian Trail doesn’t climb the spur trail that comes up to the bald, so theoretically, Brody and Perry could hike across the field and not come close enough to see us. But knowing Brody, the potential view will be worth the climb.

“So what’s our plan?” Kristyn asks as she drops onto the grass beside me. “Are we just going to wait? What if we missed them?”

“We didn’t miss them. When I texted him last night, he said they were in Winding Stair Gap. That’s close enough that unless they started before the sun rose this morning, they haven’t been through here yet.”

I started texting Brody questions about his whereabouts and how many miles they were covering per day right after Kristyn and I arrived in Franklin, the nearest town to this section of trail. I called it “research” for a potential article on the Appalachian Trail, and as far as I could tell, Brody bought it. Last night, I didn’t even have to ask him where he was. He just sent me a screenshot of his GPS location, followed by a smiley face.

Some internet sleuthing also taught me most thru-hikers stop to resupply in Franklin. There’s even a shuttle that picks people up at the Siler Bald trailhead and drives them into town. The hope is we’ll be able to convince Brody and Perry to leave the trail and head into Franklin with us instead.

Hopefully.

If Brody wants.

But he will. Of course he will. Won’t he?

I wrap my arms around my stomach. “Okay. I think I lied before. I maybe am a little nervous.”

Kristyn eyes me, a grin playing around her lips. “What was he like in high school?”

I immediately smile. “He was the sweetest. Tall. A little gangly, but still so cute. And he was one of those guys who was just so genuine. Literally nice to everyone.”

“That sounds too good to be true. Are his brothers the same way?”

I huff. “His *mom* is the same way. I mean, they’re all great guys. But in high school, his brothers—at least the two closest to us in age, were total hotshots. Lennox was a player—he looked like he was twenty-five when he was seventeen, so girls were always all over him—and Flint was always hamming it up and making people laugh. Sometimes I think Brody stayed a little more chill because he felt like he had to balance them out.”

“Flint was funny? That feels so weird because he’s such a serious actor now.”

“Right? I mean, he’s great at the serious stuff. But yeah. He’s also a really funny guy.”

“I can’t imagine having Flint Hawthorne as a brother,” Kristyn says. “Talk about pressure.”

“I don’t know. The rest of the Hawthornes hold their own. It isn’t fair, honestly. The amount of beauty and brains in that family is completely ridiculous.”

“Did you and Brody ever hook up?” She nudges my shoulder and raises her eyebrows, a teasing gleam in her eye.

“Is that what it’s always about with you?”

“Yes. Yes it is. I always want the dirty details, Kate. You know this about me.”

I roll my eyes. “I promise there are no dirty details with Brody.”

“Really? You never looked at him and thought making out might be fun?”

Something flickers low in my gut. “I mean, maybe? He has these amazing brown eyes, and sometimes, the way he looked at me made me feel like he could see all the way in, you

know? A couple times, when he looked at me like that, I maybe *considered* the possibility.”

Kristyn claps her hands giddily and smiles wide.

“Stop it,” I say. “I know what you’re thinking, and that’s not what’s happening here. I’m pretty sure Brody has always seen me more like a sister.”

“Uh, I know you don’t have any siblings, Kate, so you can’t know this from personal experience, but my brothers *never* look at me in ways that make me want to kiss them.”

“I didn’t say he looked at me to *make me* want to kiss him, I just said sometimes the thought popped in my head. That doesn’t mean he wanted it too.”

“Whatever. You’re missing the point.” She turns sideways and crosses her legs, her hands resting on either knee, and levels me with a glare that feels way too serious for the situation. “The point is, Brody sounds totally hot with brains to match. *And* he has a fantastic family, *and* he has a steady job.”

She grows more and more excited the longer she talks, and I start to laugh. “What are you getting at?”

She shakes her hands like she’s just made some amazing discovery. “I’m *getting at* Brody sounding like a first-class catch.” She lets out a gasp and reaches out to grab my knee. “Kate! You could have a friends-to-lovers romance!”

I roll my eyes. “With Brody?”

“Of course with Brody. You already know each other incredibly well. You’re here for the summer, he’s hot and brooding . . .”

“Brody does not *brood*. And you read too many romance novels.”

“And all those novels have taught me a lot,” she says matter-of-factly. “In friends-to-lovers, the hard work is already done. You already know each other. You already *love* each other. All you have to do is crank up the heat.”

“You’re completely ridiculous.” I toss my banana peel at her, and she smirks as she catches it.

“You say that now, but—”

Her words cut off when I reach over and grip her arm, my eyes locked on a pair of men climbing the hill below us. “Look. I think that’s them.”

The figures at the foot of the hill are too far away for us to see discernable facial features, but there’s still something familiar about the man in front. Familiar because . . . it’s Perry. I’m sure of it. The dark hair, the set of his shoulders. I haven’t seen any of the Hawthorne brothers in years, except Flint who I’ve at least seen in movies, but they all have a very distinct look.

Which means the guy behind Perry . . . cannot possibly be Brody.

The hair is right. Light brown, a little wavy. But he’s so . . . *broad*. He looks up, and my breath catches. It *is* Brody.

Kristyn blows out a slow breath beside me. “Um, which one of those guys was gangly in high school?”

“The one in the back. It’s him. Oh my gosh, Kristyn, it’s him.”

I stand up and spin around, away from the trail. But it’s not like I can hide. I’m standing on top of a grassy mountain top. They call it a *bald* for a reason. There isn’t a tree, bush, or boulder I could crouch behind if my life depended on it.

Kristyn pops up beside me, setting a calming hand on my shoulder. “Just breathe. This isn’t a big deal. He’s your friend. He’s going to be happy you’re here.”

Her words are simple, but it’s just enough of a pep talk to help me refocus. I nod. “You’re right. I can do this. No big deal.” I turn back to the trail, watching as Brody finishes the climb.

His eyes are on the uneven terrain beneath his feet, his hands hanging onto the straps of his backpack as he leans into it. His t-shirt is stretched across his generously muscled chest

and equally defined shoulders, clinging to biceps he one hundred percent *did not* have the last time I saw him in person.

Still, it's Brody. *My Brody*. My heart squeezes at the sight of him, and a little laugh bubbles out of my chest. I've been a fool for staying away so long.

Without thinking, I take a few steps forward into the path, my hand shielding my eyes from the sun.

Whatever this summer is going to bring, there's no turning back now.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Kate

“BRODY!” I CALL WHEN he’s twenty or so feet away.

He stops in his tracks, his gaze jumping to the top of the ridge where I’m standing. The shock that overwhelms his features quickly melts into a wide smile. He shakes his head and starts to laugh, even as he makes fast work of the remaining distance between us. It’s the steepest part of the climb, but it seems to give him no trouble, not that I’m noticing the flex of his quads with every single step.

Okay. I’m totally noticing. But Brody almost looks like a different person. He’s the same, there’s just . . . more of him.

As he walks, he unbuckles the chest straps of his backpack and shrugs it onto one shoulder. At the top of the rise, he drops it onto the ground and takes two large steps until he’s standing right in front of me. In one fluid motion, he pulls me into a giant hug, lifting me off the ground and spinning me around.

He is warm and solid under my hands, and a surge of emotion floods to the surface, pricking my eyes with tears.

This moment, Brody’s arms around me, tears streaming down my face like I’m some ridiculous teenager hugging her first crush, it’s an emotional gut punch I’m not prepared for.

I am a capable, independent woman. I have traveled to twenty-seven different countries. I have lived with indigenous

tribes in the heart of the Amazon. I have hiked in the Himalayan mountains with Tibetan Sherpas and eaten live honey pot ants with the aboriginal people of Australia. I haven't had an actual *home* in almost a decade.

But that's what Brody feels like.

He feels like *home*, triggering a craving for something I didn't think I'd ever want again.

The moment is only slightly diminished by the smell which, honestly, it's . . . not great. Exactly what you'd expect from a man who's been hiking for three days with no shower.

"What on earth?" he says as he finally sets me down. "What are you doing here?" He hugs me again, my hands pressed up against his chest, and I start to laugh.

"I wanted to surprise you," I say, finally stepping back and wiping the tears from my face.

"I . . . you . . . I can't believe you're here," he says, a hand still pressed to his head. "This is why you were asking so many questions about where we were."

I lift my shoulders and grimace. "Guilty."

He laughs. His expression is warm, his eyes fully engaged in our conversation. He's already doing it again, looking at me with that intense, brown gaze, his attention wholly on me.

"I'm just seeing you, Kate," he would always say.

And he did see me. All of me. Saw my sadness, my frustration, my loneliness whenever I was particularly annoyed with my mom. And he always reacted accordingly, taking care of my emotions like no one else ever has.

I suddenly wonder what he sees when he's looking at me now.

Kristyn's suggestion pops into my mind. *Could* I see Brody as more than a friend? The way my body is buzzing, it doesn't feel like such a crazy leap to make.

That doesn't mean it's a leap I *should* make.

Brody looks over his shoulder at Perry, and my eyes follow.

“Hi, Perry,” I say.

Perry nods in his usual stoic way, no trace of a smile. “Kate.”

I almost laugh at the predictability of his response. All these years, and Perry is the same curmudgeon he’s always been.

Kristyn clears her throat beside me, and I step back, motioning her forward. “This is Kristyn. My cousin from up in Chicago.”

Brody extends his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah. You, too. I’ve heard a lot about you,” Kristyn says.

Brody holds my gaze for another long moment, his hands propped on his hips. “You look good, Kate. The same, but . . . better.”

“Thanks. *You* look like you were dosed with the super serum that turned Steve Rogers into Captain America.” I playfully push against his chest. “What is all this? I had no idea any of this was going on.”

“What would you have had me do? Send you shirtless selfies?” His grin is teasing in a way that feels very Brody, just a little more confident.

My eyes involuntarily drop to his chest, and I imagine, for a split second, what a shirtless selfie from Brody might look like.

The idea is as foreign as it is enticing.

I take a giant step backward, nearly colliding with Kristyn. “Fair point,” I say as I awkwardly regain my balance, one arm on Kristyn’s shoulder. “Though honestly, most guys who have all . . .” I wave my hand awkwardly toward his body. “. . . this going on would definitely be sending shirtless selfies. Or at least posting them on Instagram.” My voice is higher and breathier than it should be, and I clear my throat.

What is going on? There are two very different reactions happening inside my body right now. If my brain is the middle-aged mom at a Harry Styles concert, wearing earplugs and holding her purse in her lap, my body is the college



sophomore in the front row, screaming through happy tears as she throws her bra onto the stage.

But this is *Brody*. My body shouldn't be *reacting* in any sense of the word. I should be joking about this. I *have* to joke about this. Because the alternative?

Fantasizing about Brody shirtless or anything else-less is completely unacceptable.

"You okay?" Kristyn asks quietly.

"Mm-hmm," I mumble under my breath. "Totally good. Fine. Good."

She only chuckles. She ought to apologize. Had she not planted the seed in my head, I wouldn't even be feeling any of this.

Brody stretches his arms over his head, and his shirt lifts, revealing a brief glimpse of an inch of smooth skin above the waistband of his shorts.

*Fine*. Probably I'd still be feeling something without Kristyn's suggestion. But I still blame her for starting it.

"So what are your plans?" Brody says, looking from me to Kristyn and back again.

"We're staying in Franklin," I say. "We just hiked up for the day hoping we'd catch you."

He shakes his head. "I still can't believe you figured out we'd hit Siler today."

"Your last text made that part easy. We were already in Franklin, hoping you were close. When you responded, it was only a matter of leaving early enough this morning to beat you here."

"What would you have done if I hadn't responded?"

"Hiked in and camped, probably. And just hope you'd eventually show up. But trust me, we were happy to give up the campout for another night in our comfortable hotel beds."

"Says the woman who's slept on more mountainsides than I have."

I tilt my head. His awareness of my travels sends an unexpected burst of warmth right to my heart. “Yeah, well, Kristyn isn’t quite as adept at roughing it as I am.”

“I heard that,” Kristyn calls from where she’s kneeling over her daypack, digging through it like she’s looking for something. “I was perfectly willing to sleep on the ground, thank you very much.”

“Are you going into Franklin to resupply?” I say, not even trying to keep the hope out of my voice. “We could give you a ride, then maybe we could hang out for a night before you get back on the trail?”

“We’re definitely in need of a resupply,” Brody says. “And a shower.” He pinches his shirt and lifts it away from his body. “We haven’t left the trail in four days. In case you haven’t noticed, we stink.”

“Oh, I noticed,” I say, my nose wrinkling. “You smell terrible.”

He steps forward and wraps his arms around me, pinning my own arms to my sides. “What was that?” he says. I can’t see his face with the way he’s holding me against his chest, but I can hear the smile in his voice. “Something about me smelling bad?”

I shriek in protest—he really does smell potent—and lean away, but who am I kidding? If I wanted to get out of his arms, I totally could. Instead, I stay pressed up against him, loving that he’s here, that we’re together.

I haven’t been looking forward to a summer in Silver Creek. Facing my mistakes, making things right, it isn’t easy work.

But Brody will be in Silver Creek too.

That can only mean I’m going to be okay.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Kate

SOMETHING IS DIFFERENT.

First of all, sweaty, smelly trail Brody is ... delicious.

I don't know how I feel about this. I have loved Brody as my closest friend nearly as long as I can remember. And in all that time, I have never felt that visceral tug deep in my gut, the spark of attraction like I did on the trail this afternoon.

The new muscles help. He's broader than I've ever seen him, and he seems more comfortable in his body. But it isn't just that. There's something else that's different about him.

Or could it be that the person who's different is me?

When Brody steps through the doors of the Mexican restaurant just up the street from the tiny hotel we're staying in, a small noise sounds in the back of my throat.

If sweaty, smelly trail Brody was delicious, freshly shaven and showered Brody is glorious. The kind of glorious that inspires poetry. I'm not a poet by any stretch, and even I feel like writing some. There should be angels singing right now. At least a pair of violins serenading us from the corner.

Wait. Hold up. Not *us*. There is definitely not an *us* that needs serenading. These are strictly platonic, entirely physical observations I'm making right now.

Kristyn offers me a napkin, her expression dry. We're already seated, having gone ahead to the restaurant to get a table and satisfy my craving for chips and salsa while the men showered and cleaned up. "You're drooling, Kate," Kristyn says, shaking the napkin. "Might want to take care of that before he gets to the table."

My hand flies to my chin before I realize she's kidding, and I scowl. "That was mean."

She only grins. "You're being incredibly obvious. Maybe dial it back a bit?"

I sigh and sink into the booth. "I'm just . . ."

"Feeling attracted to a really attractive man who is also a great guy? I know. It's so surprising."

"Shut up. We aren't talking about some random attractive guy. We're talking about Brody. This is entirely different."

She cocks an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because we're friends."

"We went over this earlier, didn't we? That's how all good relationships should start."

"We're *just* friends."

"Adding a *just* doesn't make my observation any less true."

"But *he* doesn't see me that way. And even if he did, our lives are totally different. Totally—" My words cut off as Brody and Perry slide into the booth across from us.

I give Kristyn's knee a nudge under the table, hoping she understands it to mean, "Don't you dare say a word about *attraction*," and smile at Brody. "Feel better?"

He nods. "Much." He eyes the empty basket on the table between us, then smirks. "Hungry, Kate?"

I immediately grin, recognizing the cadence behind a question he used to ask me every day at lunch. I was usually hungry, and him asking turned into a game. He would ask, then pull out some surprise he'd brought from home to share. His mother cooked way more than my mother ever did, and by

the time we were in high school, Brody's older brother Lennox, a chef, was already baking and experimenting with recipes.

I grin. "Always," I answer, just like I did back then. We share a look that makes my heart squeeze. "The waitress is bringing us more."

"And some queso," Kristyn adds, totally oblivious to what's happening between Brody and me.

Brody glances around the restaurant. "Google reviews said this place was good. I hope it checks out."

I follow his gaze. I've been too hungry to notice much before now. The place is . . . festive? Kitschy might be a better word. The walls are covered in enormous sombreros and life-size cacti made out of paper mache. A mariachi band is tuning up in the corner, but the musicians look more like a country group who got lost on the way to their real gig. One guy is wearing a flannel underneath his traditional mariachi ensemble, four inches of shirt hanging below the hem of his suitcoat.

If I hadn't already blasted my way through an entire basket of chips, I might suggest we try and find something a little more authentic. Except, the chips were really good. Clearly homemade. And the salsa was legit.

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. "So far, so good. But the music hasn't started yet, so we'll see how things go from here."

Brody eyes the mariachi band and grins. "Are they in the right place?"

"I wondered the same thing."

We fall into easy conversation as the meal progresses. Perry even livens up a bit, contributing to Brody's story about their run-in with a bear a few days before.

"She wasn't more than ten paces away from my tent," Perry says, "and was even closer to Brody's."

"Close enough for me to smell her," Brody says casually.

“Oh sure. Close enough to smell her. That’s not a big deal at all.” I shake my head. “Who are you, and what did you do with the guy who hid behind me when we ran into a raccoon in the apple orchard?”

Perry chuckles.

“Listen,” Brody says, folding his arms. “Raccoons have very scary teeth. And I swear that thing was hissing at us. It was ready to charge.”

“Which totally justifies you using *me* as a human shield.”

“Come on,” he says with an easy grin. “We both knew you were tougher than me. You probably still are.”

I eye his muscled torso. “I’m not so sure about that.”

He takes a long drink of water, and I watch his Adam’s Apple bob up and down with each swallow. Did he have one of those when we were in high school? I feel like the answer is no because it feels impossible that I could have been around him and *not* noticed.

Kristyn nudges me with her elbow and I startle out of my stupor. Was I staring?

I *was* staring.

Oh, I am in trouble if I even think his *swallowing* is sexy. What is happening to me?

I clear my throat. “So what are you going to do with the rest of your summer?” I push my half-eaten burrito into the center of the table. The thing was legit the size of a football. I’m proud I managed to finish as much as I did.

“First, I’m going to eat the rest of your burrito,” Brody says, fork poised over my plate. He lifts his eyebrows in question, and I nod, nudging it even closer to him. He takes an enormous bite, and a wave of nostalgia washes over me. Somehow, it feels both achingly familiar and like an entirely new thing.

We have done this so many times. Shared meals. Passed plates between us without a second thought.

“Once I’m off the trail, I’m working an eight-week season at Triple Mountain, then I’m back at the academy the second week of August.”

“Triple Mountain?”

He nods. “It’s a paddling school on the Green River.”

“Oh, right. The kayaking thing. I remember you mentioning something about that.”

“Back then it was just a hobby. Now, I’m teaching.”

“How to kayak?” Kristyn asks. “Don’t you just sit in the boat and paddle down the river?”

Perry scoffs, but Brody only smiles, his expression kind. “It *can* be that simple. But I teach whitewater kayaking. It’s a little more complicated.”

“Oh, right. Of course,” Kristyn says. “Jake and I went whitewater rafting down the Menominee River in Wisconsin once. His idea,” she says, lifting a hand to her chest. “I was terrified. I guess that’s not where my brain went when you said kayaking. We were in these enormous rafts.”

I’m grateful to Kristyn for keeping the conversation going, because my brain is still functioning in slow motion. I’m only just blinking away the image of Brody’s bobbing Adam’s Apple, and now I have to think about him in a kayak, paddling through whitewater? There is little doubt in my mind that were I to happen across a random man, a stranger, and he mentioned he was into whitewater kayaking? I would immediately find him sexy. My taste for adventure, and for men who *also* love an adventure, has always been strong.

Whenever we talked about our plans, *I* was the one who was going to leave Silver Creek in search of adventure while *he* was the one who only ever wanted to stay in the mountains. In my head, that meant staying *home* and doing the things he always did when we were in school. He studied. He worked on the farm. Occasionally he would race the 4x4s with his brothers, but that was the most adventurous thing he ever did.

Brody says something else that I miss, but then Perry cuts in, snapping my attention back onto the conversation. “He’s

being modest.” Perry looks at me with an intensity that almost feels like he’s trying to tell me something. “He’s a level five whitewater kayak instructor. The best Triple Mountain has. He also runs a whitewater kayaking program at Green River Academy that’s getting statewide attention for how well it’s doing.”

“That’s where you teach?” I ask Brody, and he nods.

He’s sitting with his elbows resting on the table, his fingers steepled together in front of his face. His shoulders are slightly hunched, and I can tell by his body language that he’s uncomfortable with Perry’s praise. But when he meets my eye, there is something else there, too. A glimmer of pride? And . . . a question. He wants me to know about his kayaking. And he cares what I think about it.

“That all sounds really amazing, Brody,” I say.

His mouth lifts in the smallest of smiles. “It’s not a big deal.”

Perry scoffs. “It is a big deal.” He turns his attention back to me. “He likes to downplay it, but he’s really good.”

Brody makes a noise that sounds so similar to the one Perry just made, I almost giggle. Brody and Perry are the least similar of all the Hawthorne brothers, but there’s a common thread that runs through all four of them. Gestures, and sounds, apparently, that they all share. “Dane Jackson is really good,” Brody says. “I do fine.”

Perry rolls his eyes. It’s kind of adorable how enthusiastically he’s talking up his baby brother. “Dane Jackson is a professional athlete. Kayaking is his job. It’s not a fair comparison. Plus, what you’ve done at the academy is impressive.” He shakes his head and reaches for his drink. “No matter what idiots like the Carsons say.” This last part feels more like a general complaint than something he’s saying to anyone in particular.

I look at Brody, and he meets my gaze with a new heaviness in his expression. It ignites a flare of worry in my gut. “Who are the Carsons?”



“Parents of a student,” Brody says, his jaw tight. “There was an incident that happened at the end of the school year, and now they’re complaining about the safety of the program. But it’s not a big deal. It’ll all work itself out.”

The expression in his eyes says it’s a *really* big deal, but I don’t feel like I can push him. Not five hours into our newly reestablished friendship.

“An incident?” Perry’s tone is thick with disdain. “Some punk kid ignored Brody’s instructions and got in the water when he wasn’t supposed to. His kayak flipped over, he couldn’t get out, and it took Brody twenty whole seconds to jump in and save him.”

I look back to Brody, and he nods. “That’s the gist of it. Except I’m not even sure he was under water a full twenty seconds. Had he been listening instead of sneaking away and trying to skip ahead, he would have learned how to get himself out of the boat when he flipped upside down. For beginners, it’s a question of when not if you’re going to flip. But that didn’t stop him from whining to his parents that he almost drowned.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. “He flipped over, but he stayed in the boat? Was he strapped in?”

Brody shakes his head. “Not exactly. In a whitewater kayak, you wear this thing called a spray skirt around your waist. Then, when you’re sitting in the boat, the skirt stretches over the rim of the boat opening, sealing you in and keeping your kayak from filling up with water when you hit rapids.”

“Got it. Which works great until you flip upside down?” I might have a tiny bit of sympathy for the punk Carson kid. The idea of being trapped in a boat while hanging upside down in the water? I’m more adventurous than most, but that sounds terrifying.

“Only if you aren’t prepared. You can do a wet exit—that’s when you exit the boat while you’re underwater—in about four seconds. You just have to learn how.”

“Which the Carson kid didn’t do,” I say, finally connecting all the dots.

“And now his parents are passing around petitions and going to the news and making a big stink about Brody *and* the program,” Perry says. He swears under his breath, and I stifle a laugh.

I didn’t spend a ton of time hanging out with Perry when we were growing up. By the time Brody and I were in high school, he’d already left for college. Still, I’m positive this is the most I’ve ever heard him say at once. I shouldn’t have expected anything different though. That’s the way the Hawthornes are. Connected. Fiercely loyal. They’ve *always* been that way.

Somehow, I both crave that level of closeness and feel terrified of it at the same time.

“So what’s going to happen?” Kristyn asks. “Surely his parents aren’t getting any real traction. It was their kid’s fault for not listening.”

“They can’t necessarily come after me,” Brody says. “Or the school. Not legally. They signed the waivers and knew the risks involved. But they’re doing their level best to shut things down. I have to appear before the school board in a couple of weeks.”

“But they’ll listen to you, right?” I ask. “Hear your side?”

Brody nods. “I think so. But the bad press is hard for the district to ignore. We’re a charter school that depends on public funding. Negative attention like this stirs up people who think their tax dollars are better spent in more traditional schools with typical classroom settings.”

“But Green River Academy uses traditional classrooms too, right?” I feel my own anger rising. If this is something Brody cares about, I want to care too. “They can’t shut the whole school down.”

“Not the whole school. I spend most of my time in the classroom. I’m only on the river with students twice a week. But the district *can* shut down the kayaking program.”

I am of course furious that anyone is trying to end something that Brody feels so passionately about. But mostly, I'm just in awe of his passion. So much of him is the same. He was always an amazing teacher. I should know since he's the only reason I passed high school calculus. But he's different too. More confident. More . . . settled.

"When did you start kayaking?" I blurt out, not realizing until the words are out of my mouth that I've interrupted something Kristyn was saying. "Sorry," I say sheepishly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

She eyes me, her look saying she knows exactly why I wasn't paying attention. "That's okay. I was finished." She looks to Brody, and he clears his throat.

He holds my gaze for a long moment. "That first summer, right after you left." There's something else he isn't saying. I see it in his eyes, I just can't make out what it is.

"We were all positive he'd die on day one," Perry says. "He didn't even have biceps enough to hold up a paddle."

My eyes fly to Brody's biceps. Those things could definitely hold up a paddle now. A paddle and a boat. A paddle and a boat with me in it. Actually, let's forget the boat altogether. How about his biceps just hold me up?

I reach for my water and take a long drink. That feels slightly less obvious than holding the cool glass to my flushed cheeks.

"Hey now," Brody says, but his eyes are smiling. "So I was a late bloomer. There's no shame in that." His gaze shifts to me, and he looks at me with that same familiar intensity. "There's a lot about me that's different now."

He's trying to tell me something. Or maybe I just *want* him to be trying to tell me something?

Do I *want* to want him to be telling me something?

*Oh, good grief.* I have never been this upside down over Brody. Or any guy, for that matter. We're together, just like we've been thousands of times before. But even though all the same pieces are here, nothing is fitting together like it always

has. It's like I'm wearing my shoes on the wrong feet. Or my bra on the outside of my shirt. I almost feel like I need to strip everything off and start over just to figure out what I'm feeling.

*Annnd* probably I should not use metaphors that involve stripping when I already can't stop noticing all the new contours of Brody's body.

I reach up to my neckline and make sure my bra strap is covered by my shirt, like my discomfort *must* be obvious to everyone else. "I bet you're still the nicest guy anyone knows," I say. "You're still looking out for your siblings. Still taking care of your friends."

"Trying to," he says with an easy shrug.

Perry reaches over and wordlessly pats his younger brother on the shoulder.

"You should go and see Mom as soon as you're back in town," Brody says. "Don't even wait for me to get home."

I bite my lip. I would love to see his mom. I loved Stonebrook Farm growing up. All of it. The apple orchards. The strawberry fields. The baby goats. And of course, Brody's parents and the rest of the Hawthornes. But it's more complicated than that. "I'm not sure she'll want to see me," I finally say. "She has to be upset that I didn't come home for Grandma Nora's funeral."

There it is. The proverbial elephant in the room.

Except, it hasn't really *felt* like there's been an elephant in the room. I told Brody via text that I owed him an apology, and I do. But we haven't been alone yet, and we've been so caught up in, well, *catching up*, I haven't even thought about it.

But I've brought it up now, and there's no turning back.

The elephant has finally reared its head. Stomped its foot? Trumpeted its . . . trunk? Whatever elephants do to get attention, it's happening, and I can't ignore it.

Despite the trumpeting elephant, Brody's face softens. "She won't care about that, Kate. She's always loved you. She still does."

His lack of judgment, or at least his confidence in his mother's lack of judgment, does a little to soothe my guilty conscience, but only a little. When my grandmother died four years ago, I wasn't in a good place. Mentally, emotionally. But it shouldn't have mattered. I should have tried harder to get back.

Brody was at the funeral, of course. And his mama, who tended my mother and helped her take care of all the details.

"I should have been there," I say softly.

Brody nods. "Okay. So you should have been. That doesn't mean Mom won't love you anymore. Or me," he adds.

My breath catches, and I stare at my hands. I'm pretty sure if I look at Brody right now, I'll start to cry. The certainty and unwavering acceptance of his friendship are doing strange things to my heart. Despite my hesitation, my eyes lift to his. And yep. There it is. That intense gaze that says I see you, I understand you, *I know you* all at once. This man and his tenderness are going to end my life this very moment.

*Here lies Kate Fletcher. Melted by tenderness. And amazing biceps.*

When I open my mouth to speak, Brody gives his head the slightest shake, his eyes darting over to his brother.

*Not here*, his eyes tell me.

I nod my understanding. We need to have this conversation, but we don't need to do it here, with Perry and Kristyn as a captive audience. The thing is, I *would* have the conversation. Say the hard things no matter who is listening in. The discomfort of doing so would be a small price to pay to make things right between us. But all these years later, Brody is still looking out for me.

"I'll go see your mom," I say. "I promise."

I look over at Kristyn, who has been observing our exchange with raised eyebrows. “I’ll take you with me. I’d love for you to see the place.”

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m actually looking forward to going *home*.

## CHAPTER SIX

Brody

I CAN ALREADY SENSE the struggle it's going to be to maintain perspective with Kate around full time.

It's only been a few hours, and already, for every ounce of control I hold onto, two more ounces slip away. I feel like I'm on a tilt-a-whirl at the county fair, trying to keep a mug of coffee from spilling over the sides. The coffee is my resolve, and it's splashing all over my shoes.

Logically, I know the likelihood of Kate suddenly growing feelings she's never had before is slim. Kate loves me like a brother. She always has. But remembering that was easier when she was thousands of miles away.

Now she's back.

Here. Present.

Sitting right across the table from me, laughing and smiling over chips and salsa.

In her short cargo shorts and tank top, Kate looks like she should be modeling for an outdoor catalog. Her shoulders are toned and tanned, freckles speckling her skin just like they used to whenever she spent time in the sun. It's the strangest thing to look at her and simultaneously see the little girl she was—the one who quizzed me with math problems on the school bus—and the woman she is now.

Perry and Kristyn have both gone back to the hotel, leaving Kate and me to have dessert just the two of us. The waitress's eyes go wide when I ask for two servings of churros in addition to the one Kate ordered for herself, but I could probably eat fifteen churros and still be under my caloric need. There's no way to ever eat enough when you're hiking sixteen or seventeen miles a day.

"He just got off the Appalachian Trail," Kate says to the waitress. "He'd eat everything in the restaurant if you let him."

The waitress nods knowingly. "Ah. Got it. I'll be right back."

Kate shakes her head at me, and I grin. "You're lucky I only ordered one extra."

"What you probably ought to be eating is extra protein. Or some carbs with a little more substance to them."

"Okay, *Perry*."

She scoffs playfully. "You did not just call me Perry."

I smirk. "I've been eating oatmeal cooked in a Ziploc bag for three days, Kate. Let me enjoy my dessert."

Her eyes dance as she smiles, her expression bright. "When I hiked Kilimanjaro, my guides were constantly making me eat. Even more than I thought I needed to."

"When you hiked Kilimanjaro, huh? You're going to just throw that out there like it's something anyone can relate to?"

She rolls her eyes. "Shut up. I'm not the only person who has ever hiked it. We're relating here, Brody. You hike. I hike. I'm making conversation."

"I loved the piece you wrote about Kilimanjaro."

"You read it?"

That, and everything else she's ever written, all the way down to the responses on her Instagram comments. "I read it," I finally say.

She breathes out a sigh. "It was a great trip." Her gaze shifts to the window behind us. We have a clear view of the rolling



blue and green mountains in the distance. “What about the Appalachian Trail?” she asks. “Would that make a good story?”

“Absolutely. There’s a lot you could write about. It’s so much more than people hiking. There’s a whole culture that has grown up around the experience, especially for thru-hikers. You’re good at telling the stories that are under the surface. There’s a lot of those along the AT.”

She tilts her head to the side and studies me. “Do you read all my stuff?”

Heat creeps up my cheeks, but I don’t have a good reason to deny it. A *friend* would read all her stuff. There’s nothing wrong with that. “Of course I do.”

The smile she gives in response warms me all the way to my core. It feels *so good* to make her happy.

“How’s your dad? Is he still in Paris?”

“He’s all over, really. You know how Dad is. But yeah. He’s still got a place in Paris. That’s mostly where I stay when I’m in Europe.”

“He’s still working for the same company? Overseeing . . .?” I wince and shrug. I don’t actually remember what her dad does.

“Mergers and acquisitions. And yes. Same job. Same company. Same crazy travel schedule.”

“It runs in the family then.”

A shadow flickers behind her eyes, but then she smiles. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Tell me about Kristyn. I don’t remember you being close with any of your cousins when we were growing up.”

“We weren’t close until recently. We saw each other every once in a while, when Dad would take me to family reunions. But then I got stranded in Chicago during this freak snowstorm five or six years ago, and I couldn’t find a place to stay. Kristyn took me in like a stray puppy and decided to keep me.”

“I bet you loved that.”

“I resisted for all I was worth. But Kristyn wouldn’t budge. She insisted I needed her, and I eventually caved. Now, whenever I’m passing through the states, she lets me crash at her place.”

“So you’ve been in the states then? Recently?”

Her shoulders drop, and her expression shifts. Finally, she nods. “A few times.”

Disappointment pings around in my chest. It would be easier to understand if her mom hadn’t left Silver Creek. She’s always been pretty good at avoiding her mother. But her mom moved four years ago, right after *her* mother’s funeral.

“I wasn’t avoiding *you*, Brody,” Kate says gently, clearly sensing my unease. “I was avoiding Silver Creek. Avoiding . . .” She breathes out a long sigh. “Guilt, I guess?”

That, I can understand. But why didn’t she talk to me? Why didn’t she explain? “You know I didn’t judge you for missing the funeral. We could have—”

“But you should have judged me,” she says, cutting me off. “That’s what I’m trying to say. I didn’t have a good reason not to be there, except that I was so *angry* at my mother, and I knew skipping it would hurt her.”

“So you weren’t really stranded in Manila,” I say, remembering the excuse Kate gave for not being there.

“No, I was. There was terrible weather, these huge storms that lasted for days, and all the flights were grounded. But I knew about the funeral before the bad weather hit. I had two solid days when I could have left. And I didn’t do it.” She gives her head a little shake. “You want to know the worst part? I don’t even remember what Mom and I were fighting about. Probably something about her wanting me to move home. Settle down.” She huffs out a laugh. “Last time we talked, she said, and I quote, ‘Katherine, when are you going to realize you’re ruining your life just like your father did?’”

I can’t hold Kate’s decisions against her. My life experience is so colored by the unwavering support my family has always

given me. I know what a privilege that is. If I had to deal with the criticism Kate has over the years, I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing.

"Regardless," she continues, "it was wrong of me to shut you out, and I'm so sorry. I turned my back on anything I thought might remind me of home. Then enough time passed that I wasn't sure you'd even *want* to hear from me again. Staying away felt so much easier."

"I always want to see you," I say. "There's nothing you could do, Kate. We're family." Maybe not in the way I want to be family, but I'll take whatever I can get.

She sniffs. "I knew you'd say that."

I offer her a small smile. "And you stayed away anyway?"

"Don't try and understand. You'll never succeed. I'm just a mess. That's all there is to it."

I chuckle and hold out my hand, and she slips her fingers into mine. "You aren't a mess. You're here now. We move forward from here."

Her expression softens. "Thanks for not being a jerk about it." She pulls her hand away, and I squeeze my fingers into a fist, immediately missing her warm skin against mine.

"Can I ask you one question?"

She quickly nods. "Ask me a dozen if you want. I owe you the answers."

"What changed?" I shove my hands into my lap, hiding them under the table. It's the only way I know how to resist the urge to reach for her again.

*Just friends. Just friends. Just friends.* I repeat the mantra in my head like it's the combination to a safe holding a million dollars. If I'm going to get through this summer, it has to stick.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"What made you come home now when you haven't for so long?"

Her eyes drop to her napkin. She picks it up, creasing it over and over.

“The house, mostly,” she says without looking up. “I left Mom to handle everything when Grandma Nora died, so when she asked for my help, I didn’t feel like I could tell her no.” She shrugs, disappointment clouding her expression. “But I’m also in a better place mentally. I’ve been working on owning my choices more and paying attention to my motivations. Yes, Mom always made me feel terrible for wanting to leave Silver Creek, but that doesn’t make it okay for me to stay away only because I wanted to make *her* feel terrible back. I don’t want transactional relationships like that. I just want to do the right thing. And coming home to help is the right thing.”

“I bought a place right up the street from your grandmother’s house,” I say. “You remember the trail we cut through the woods? From your grandma’s house over to the back orchard at Stonebrook?”

“That was so much work,” she says through her grin. “Worst afternoon activity ever.”

I chuckle. “Come on. You loved using the machete.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Okay, true. I definitely loved the machete.”

“Anyway. The trail is still there. And now it’s wide enough for a four-by-four. It wraps right behind my house. I use it all the time when I need to get to the farm quick.”

“Brody, we were literal trail blazers,” she says. “I feel so proud!”

“I think of you every time I use it.”

Her eyes jump to mine, an unspoken question in her gaze. If she only knew how frequently I think of her, how many things in my life remind me of her on a daily basis.

I clear my throat. “Your mom must be paying someone to keep the yard up. It still looks good.”

“The yard, and quarterly cleaning,” she says. “I guess she and Fremont come up every couple of months?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen them around. In the summer mostly. Probably escaping Florida heat.”

“I can’t think of any other reason she would have kept the house so long.”

“Honestly, I was surprised she moved out of it in the first place. As much as your mom always chastised you for wanting to get out of town, she didn’t waste much time before leaving herself.”

“Tell me about it. I still don’t understand. But that’s nothing new. It’s not like Mom and I have ever understood each other.”

My heart stretches her direction. I remember how annoyed she always was with her mom. Sometimes Kate would show up at the farm, not knowing or caring if I was home, because she needed somewhere to be that *wasn’t* her own house. The last few years of high school, she probably spent more time in the goat barn with Mom than the rest of us did.

“It’s nice that we’re going to be neighbors,” Kate says.

I nod. “Yeah. I’m glad you’re back.” I almost chuckle to myself. Glad is such a small word when my actual emotions feel too big for my chest. I *am* glad she’s home, but I’m also terrified.

“It was time,” she says simply. She shifts, her focus drifting before she takes a deep breath, like she’s recentering herself in the moment. When she finally lifts her eyes, they are clear and full of conviction. “I recognize I need to be better at facing hard things head-on. I don’t want to run away anymore.”

There is a heavy awareness in her expression, almost like an apology. But she doesn’t need to be sorry. Not to me.

Still, I smile, wanting her to know I understand. Whatever she’s offering, I accept it. “Is that what’s been happening all this time?” I joke. “And here I thought you were just traveling for work.”

She laughs, tension draining out of her body. “You think I didn’t pick this job on purpose? I knew what I was doing, Brody.” She smiles, her voice lilting. “It makes an excellent cover story.”

“You’re awful good at it for it to only be a cover story.”

“Meh. I do okay.”

She’s a lot better than okay, but I won’t argue with her. “And now you’re back.”

She lifts her shoulders. Her gaze is serious, and I sense the strength of the commitment behind her words. “At least for a little while.”

*A little while.* It’s a better timeline than usual, but still one with a deadline. She isn’t here to stay. At some point, she’s going to leave again. Just like she always does.

Kate gives her head a tiny shake, like she’s ready to put the heaviness behind us, and rubs her hands together. “Can I quiz you? For old time’s sake?”

It’s a game I always got tired of playing with everyone else, but never with Kate. “All right. Shoot.”

She grins and purses her lips like she’s really thinking hard.

While I wait, I admire the slope of her bare shoulder, the long stretch of exposed neck next to her braid.

*Just friends. Just friends. Just friends.*

Kate sits up taller. “Okay. Four hundred, seventy-seven thousand, three hundred and thirty-three divided by eighty-one.”

The waitress arrives with our churros before I can reply, but I won’t forget the number. It’s floating in my mind’s eye, and it’ll stay there until I say it out loud.

I take a huge bite of churro, the cinnamon and caramel flavors bursting on my tongue. Weird mariachi band and outlandish decorations aside, this place knows how to serve good food. “Five thousand, eight-hundred ninety-three,” I say around my bite.

Kate lights up just like she did the first time she quizzed me on the school bus in the fourth grade. Like I’m the most interesting person she’s ever met. She grins and takes a bite of her churro before giving me another problem.

“Five-hundred and six divided by thirteen.”

*Decimals.* I wrinkle my brow. “Thirty-eight point . . . nine, two, three, zero, seven, six repeating.”

She starts to laugh. “It never gets old.”

*She never gets old.*

“Do you like teaching?” She sits up taller and runs a hand down her braid, just like she used to when we were kids. “I mean, I’m not surprised you’re teaching. You were always so good at it. But I’m surprised you aren’t teaching math.”

“You do a lot of math in chemistry.” I have a sudden itch to reach over and tug the elastic that’s holding her wild hair in place, see the dark waves cascading down her arms like river water rippling from a skipped stone.

“True. I bet your students love you,” she says.

My lips twitch. They *do* love me. It helps that I’m young. I still recognize the music they listen to and remember enough about what it was like to be in high school that I know when to cut them slack and when they might be lying about how much homework they have in their other classes. I took all those other classes. I remember what it was like.

“I do love it,” I say. “Almost as much as I love kayaking.”

“It’s amazing you’ve figured out a way to do both.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky in that regard. Or I have been anyway. We’ll see if I get to be after the meeting in a couple weeks.”

“It’ll work out,” she says, and I want to believe her. She can’t know that it will, but I appreciate her confidence in me anyway.

My eyes drift to the uneaten churro still sitting on Kate’s plate. It’s been a while since she’s taken a bite.

Kate chuckles and shifts the plate to me with a knowing grin. “Go ahead,” she says. “I think you need it more than I do.”

I eat the churro in two bites.

“I’d love to see you kayaking.” She reaches over and slides her finger across a drizzle of caramel on the plate. The gesture is innocent enough, but when she raises that finger to her mouth, my pulse immediately ticks up.

“Actually, can you teach *me* how to kayak?” she asks, a new hope blossoming in her eyes.

I shouldn’t be surprised by the question. There is no adventure too grand, no challenge too difficult for Kate.

Still, a little over a week ago, I thought I might never see her again. Then she texted and turned my world upside down. When she showed up on Siler earlier today, that upside-down world locked into place and started spinning the opposite direction.

And now she wants me to teach her to kayak?

On the upper Green, there’s a three-mile section of river called the narrows. Tight turns, massive boulders, huge drops. Class IV and V rapids with names like *Go Left and Die*, *Thread the Needle*, and *Gorilla*.

Right now, I might as well be approaching the narrows without a paddle. I am powerless to resist this woman.

Even scarier? I know exactly how things are going to end, and I don’t even care. I don’t *want* to resist.

“You don’t have to,” Kate says quickly. “It was just a thought.”

I must have been silent for too long. “No, that’s not . . . I can teach you,” I say. “Of course I can.”

“Really?” She smiles wide, and my heart turns over.

*Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.* There’s no way I’m getting through this without falling even more in love with her. And not just the high school fantasy version, but the real her. The sitting-right-in-front-of-me her.

But then the summer will end, and she’ll go, and I’ll stay. Just like always. This is exactly what Perry warned me about.



“I was thinking I could write about it,” she says like she still needs to convince me. “The Green River, it’s a big kayaking location, right?”

I clear my throat and nod. “World-renowned. There’s a race every November, the Green Race, and it’s a pretty big deal. Actually, it’s exactly the kind of thing you like to write about. The whole culture that has grown up around the race.”

She rubs her hands together. “I think I just found my next project,” she says in a sing-song voice that makes me grin.

I shake my head, wondering again how I wound up here. Across the table from Kate. With plans to spend the rest of my summer teaching her how to kayak.

I don’t know how any of this happened, but I know one thing.

It’s going to take everything in me to keep my head above water and my heart intact.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Kate

I PULL THROUGH DOWNTOWN Silver Creek, hands gripping the steering wheel of my rented SUV, and stop at a red light beside the middle school.

It is . . . weird to be back. Uncomfortable, even. But I'm still breathing. Still moving forward. Still doing the hard thing I've been hiding from until now, no matter how vulnerable it makes me feel.

"It's a cute town," Kristyn says. Her body is turned so she's facing the window, her eyes scanning the landscape on her side of the car. The woods are thick and wild, a rocky creek bubbling with white frothy water barely visible through the trees.

My phone rings as I ease through the intersection, and Kristyn picks it up. "It's your mom. You want to answer it?"

"Yeah, go ahead. I'm sure she wants to know where I am and if I've made it to the house."

Kristyn puts the call on speaker and sets it on the center console between us.

"Are you there yet?" Mom asks after I say hello.

"Almost. We're pulling through downtown now."

"Oh. Then I'm glad I caught you."

My eyebrows go up. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course!” she says a little too enthusiastically. “Everything is fine. But there is one detail I forgot to mention when we first talked about the house.”

My gaze darts to Kristyn who looks as concerned as I do.

“Is it a big deal? Because we’re going to be there in less than five minutes, and we’re planning on *staying* there.”

“No, no, no. Nothing big. The house is livable. I even had the house cleaner drop by to make up fresh beds for you and adjust the thermostat, so it should be nice and comfortable.”

“Oh. That was nice of you.”

“Nonsense. It’s what people do, Kate. You would know that if you ever came home. You’d *always* have a fresh bed ready for you.”

I grit my teeth and force a breath in through my nose. “What’s up with the house, Mom?”

“It’s a small thing, really. It’s just . . . well, your Grandma Nora’s bedroom is a little more crowded than usual. It might take some extra time to go through her things.”

“Crowded? Crowded with what?”

“Oh, you know. This and that.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

I turn onto Millcreek Lane and slow down as I approach Grandma Nora’s house, wondering which of the neighboring houses is Brody’s. Though, neighboring is a relative term. The houses all sit on at least an acre, with huge yards and stretches of forest dividing them. A house that’s three doors down might be a quarter mile away.

“She liked to hold onto things in the months right before she died,” Mom says. “And she did all kinds of shopping. The home shopping channel, and online too. Honestly, I didn’t even know she knew how to use the internet.”

I pull the car into the circle drive in front of Grandma Nora’s house. The yard is neatly trimmed, and there are fresh flowers

in the pots on the front porch. It doesn't look like a house that's been sitting empty for four years.

"I don't think she always understood what she was buying," Mom continues. "But she got so upset when I tried to stop her. Anyway, I'm sure you'll see it all when you get there. It's mostly in the back bedroom and in the hall closet. I only mention it because I didn't want you to wonder where it all came from."

"Okay, well, thanks for the heads up." I cut the engine and look at Kristyn who has been working hard not to laugh as she listens to my mom's . . . warning? I don't know what else to call it.

I'm imagining a hoarding situation, piles of debris and garbage mixed with unopened Amazon boxes and storage bins full of broken lightbulbs, but I can't imagine Mom letting it get that bad. She's always been pretty fastidious. And Grandma Nora was too.

"We're here now, Mom, all right? I'll call you if I have any questions."

"There should be a lot that you can sell, Katherine. Things that are still in their original packaging, even."

A dull ache starts to pulse at the back of my head. Mom already made it clear she left most of Grandma Nora's things behind when she moved. Linens, housewares, décor. I was planning to keep what could be used to stage the house and donate the rest. Selling *anything*, original packaging or not, doesn't sound like much fun. "All right, well, I'll keep you posted."

I end the call, drop my phone into my lap and lean my head against the seat, my eyes closed. "What have I gotten myself into?"

Kristyn unbuckles her seatbelt. "We might as well get inside and see."

I open my eyes and shoot her a look. "You seem way too excited about this."

She shrugs, but it doesn't do anything to diminish the literal glee dancing in her eyes. "I saw an episode of that hoarding show on Netflix that was all about a situation just like this. A grandma who had this crazy addiction to online shopping. She spent all her money on eBay though, on those mystery boxes people sell? Where you pay for the box having no idea what's inside it?"

"That's an actual thing?"

"Totally. And it's crazy what some of them sell for." She climbs out of the car, and I follow, moving to the hatch to retrieve our luggage.

"Anyway," she goes on, "they found the craziest stuff in her house. She had something like ten thousand spoons, none of them matching. What could someone possibly do with that many spoons?"

I half-wonder if Kristyn realizes the gift she's giving me with her random babbling. As long as she's talking, I'm not freaking out. And walking up the steps to my childhood home for the first time in half a decade—the first time since before Grandma Nora died—has significant freakout potential. "Only spoons?" I say as I retrieve the key from under the flowerpot next to the front door. It's right where Mom said she left it. "No forks and knives to match?"

"Only spoons. And no one in her family could figure out why."

I unlock the door and push it open, not letting myself hesitate. I can handle this. I can do hard things. I can . . . stand right here on the porch without going inside.

It isn't that my childhood home was unhappy. I was safe and cared for. I had food to eat and clothes to wear. But my mother and me? We didn't get along. Still don't get along. We aren't . . . enemies, exactly. We just don't understand each other.

Even though I have no memory of life before my parents' divorce, and I only saw my dad a few times a year, I've always felt more connected to him, which has only ever made things

worse with Mom. She resents him, even all these years later, and she resents me for *not* resenting him.

Still, she never stopped me from seeing him when I was growing up. Whenever it was possible, I spent holidays and summer vacations traveling with Dad, visiting all the far-off places his work took him. And I loved it. Lived for the weeks I was able to ditch small-town life *and* my mother's disappointment.

Because she was *always* disappointed. Disappointed when I never chose to spend holidays with her. Disappointed when I chose dinner at the Hawthornes over dinner with her and Grandma Nora. Disappointed when I told her I never wanted to live in Silver Creek.

Silver Creek was *her* town. Not mine.

But all that prickly, uncomfortable baggage still doesn't justify skipping out on Grandma Nora, and the guilt of that realization weighs heavier and heavier the longer I stand still.

Kristyn nudges me from behind. "You know, if my mother were here, she'd scold you for making her pay to air condition the outside."

I chuckle and finally push my way into the house. "Grandma Nora always said the same thing."

Everything is exactly like I remember it. The smell, the furniture, even the crocheted afghan draped over the back of the sofa in the living room.

Tears prick my eyes as I push further into the room. Memories are flooding back, but I can't go down this road. I have a job to do. Standing around and blubbering won't bring Grandma Nora back, and it won't change the choices I made to keep me from being here when she needed me.

I take a deep breath. I'm okay. I've got this. I just have to keep breathing.

"Did your mom take *anything* with her when she moved?" Kristyn asks as she slowly moves around the room.

“It doesn’t really seem like it, does it?” There are some empty shelves on the bookshelf and some pictures missing from the mantel above the fireplace, but those are the only signs anyone moved anywhere.

But that doesn’t surprise me. Even though we lived here for almost eighteen years—longer than that for Mom—it always felt more like Grandma Nora’s house than it did ours. My grandfather died when I was too little to remember, so it was just the three of us, and Grandma Nora was always the one in charge. She didn’t treat us like guests, but she always made it clear it was her generosity that put a roof over our heads.

I *expected* Mom to gut the house and finally make it her own when her mother died. Instead, she moved to Florida with a man she met on the internet to live in a sand-colored condominium with shuffleboard courts and a community pool.

“Oh, hey. There’s a note from your mom,” Kristyn says, picking it up from the console table behind the sofa. She hands it to me. “And some car keys, maybe?”

*“Thought you might need the Subaru while you’re in town. Freemont cleaned it and changed the oil for you, and we parked it in the garage,”* I read out loud. I look at Kristyn. “She left me her car?”

“Sounds like it.”

*“We also stocked the fridge and put some groceries in the pantry. Love you. Enjoy the house.”* I shake my head. “What on earth?”

Kristyn moves into the kitchen and opens the fridge. “Dang. She wasn’t lying. There’s a lot of food in here. Maybe she just really wants you to enjoy your stay?”

“This feels more pointed than that. Mom doesn’t do stuff just for the sake of being nice. She has an agenda. She has to.”

“Maybe her agenda *is* to be nice. You guys have both been through a lot the past few years. You’re here, right? Because you feel like it’s time to do better? Maybe she feels the same way.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” I say, but I’m still not convinced. I know Mom. And there is something else afoot.

We wander through the rest of the house and catalog what I’ll have to do in each room to get it ready to sell. Mom’s bedroom is already mostly empty, but she was right about Grandma Nora’s room. It’s chock full of boxes, some looking like they just arrived in the mail, not even opened. “Oh my word,” Kristyn says from the doorway behind me. “Your mom wasn’t lying.” She steps up next to me. “Can we please open all these boxes before I go home?”

“It isn’t going to feel like Christmas,” I say. “You heard Mom earlier. She made it seem like Grandma Nora wasn’t in her right mind. There could be dolls made out of discarded baby teeth and real human hair inside those boxes.”

Kristyn reaches for the closest box with an overly exaggerated roll of her eyes. She rips it open, hiding the contents from me until she’s had time to inspect her discovery. Finally, she grins. “Or there could just be ceramic salt and pepper shakers that look like praying kittens.” She holds them up. “They’re actually kind of cute.”

I eye her. “Want to take them home with you? They’re all yours.”

She winces. “Not that cute.” She drops the box back onto the stack nearest the door and rubs her hands together. “But seriously, what should we do first?” Kristyn asks. “You might have managed to procrastinate for half my trip, but you’ve still got me for three more days. We should tackle the hardest project first, while I’m still here to help.”

We head back to the kitchen and I pull a bottled water out of the fridge, offering it to Kristyn before getting another for myself. “We should. Grandma Nora’s bedroom is obviously going to be the hardest. But . . . let’s go over to Stonebrook first.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “Right now?”

“Why not? I want you to see it.”



“Sounds more like you want to avoid working,” she says with a smirk.

“One-hundred percent yes,” I say, not missing a beat.

She laughs. “Fine. But you can’t ignore this place forever. Promise me we’ll start Grandma Nora’s bedroom as soon as we get back?”

I heave a sigh. “You’re going to be pushy about this, aren’t you? You’re going to make me do hard things.”

“Only because of how much I love you.”

I grab my purse from where I left it by the door and pull out the keys to the luxury SUV the rental place gave me when they didn’t have the economy car I originally booked. Now that I have Mom’s Subaru, I’ll return the rental when I take Kristyn to the airport, but until then, we might as well drive around Silver Creek in style.

It’s a short drive over to the farm, but not so short that I don’t have time to worry about not calling ahead. Brody did say his mom would love to see me, but when we pull up the long, winding drive that cuts through the open pastures at the front of Stonebrook Farm’s expansive property, I’m still nervous.

Goats are grazing in the distance, the rolling hills divided by white picket fencing. Massive maple trees line either side of the drive, their deep green leaves shading the pavement. We round a bend and can see the pavilion where the Hawthornes held a graduation party for each of their kids. The year Brody and I graduated, they made sure everyone knew the party was for both of us. The pavilion is bustling with activity, staff setting up for what looks like a wedding.

Kristyn gasps as she takes it all in. “Can people get married here? I thought it was just a farm.”

“It is a farm. But they do all kinds of events, too. Weddings, reunions, corporate retreats.” Another bend in the drive, and the farmhouse finally comes into view. Its white clapboard siding gleams in the sunlight, and the windows sparkle. Huge barrels overflowing with blooms line the front porch, and

smaller versions adorn the steps. Half a dozen rocking chairs sit on either side of the enormous front door. At the end of the porch, a basset hound lazes against the sun-warm boards, angled so his body is entirely within the section of porch still touched by afternoon light.

“Wow,” Kristyn says as I cut the engine and unbuckle my seatbelt. “This place is amazing.”

We climb out, pausing at the base of the porch steps. “The Hawthornes used to live here”—I point up at the farmhouse—“but when Brody was in middle school, they converted it into offices and event space and built a family house on the back end of the property.” I turn and point the opposite direction. “The strawberry fields are that way. And then over there, if we were to follow the road that cuts through those trees, we’d get to the barn and the livestock pens. Beyond that are the apple orchards and the main homestead.”

Kristyn follows my gaze, her hands on her hips as she takes it all in. “I can’t imagine getting to grow up at a place like this.”

“It was magical even for me, and I was only here after school and on weekends.” We slowly start climbing the steps, and I will my heart to slow down. “I was mostly with my dad when I wasn’t in school, but Brody talked about their summers like they were the stuff dreams are made of. They worked a lot, but they also spent a lot of time sitting around the campfire, swimming in the creek, and playing with the baby goats.”

“Stop it,” Kristyn says. “Seriously. Every word you say brings me closer to leaving Jake and making a move on Brody just so I can call this place home.”

An uncomfortable pressure expands in my chest. “There are *other* brothers. None of *them* are married either.”

I sound defensive. Why am I defensive? I have nothing to be defensive about.

Kristyn stops and props her hands on her hips. “What’s this, huh? Are you worried your very married cousin was going to

make an actual move on your man?”

I scoff. “He’s not my man.”

“No, and *I* wasn’t trying to get a rise out of you just then.”

I purse my lips. “You aren’t funny.”

She makes a show of studying me closely, and I roll my eyes. If I didn’t love her so much, I’d smack the smug expression right off her face. “It almost seems like you *care* about who Brody does or doesn’t date.”

I fold my arms. Two can play at this game, and she will not get me to cave. “I don’t care. Who Brody dates in real or hypothetical situations is not my concern.”

“Uh-huh,” she says dryly. “Which is exactly why you got weird when I mentioned it.”

“I didn’t get weird. You’re the one who said you would leave Jake like it was no big deal. You’re the weird one.”

She shakes her head and moves past me to the door, laughter still in her voice. “Whatever you say.”

Once we’re inside, a receptionist smiles warmly. She’s young and pretty, and I suddenly wonder if Brody thinks she’s pretty. He’s so close to his family, he’s probably on the farm all the time. Does he stop by when he’s here so he can flirt with the pretty receptionist?

Kristyn nudges me, and I glance up, meeting the woman’s expectant gaze. She said something, and I totally missed it.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“She said, ‘Welcome to Stonebrook Farm,’” Kristyn says from just behind me.

“Are you interested in our event services?” the receptionist asks, her tone neutral.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recognize that I am thinking of Brody in ways I have never thought of him before. In less than three minutes, I’ve been jealous of two different women, first Kristyn and now a nameless receptionist, with zero grounds for justification. I don’t know if it was triggered

just by seeing him again, or if it was seeing him with muscle definition typically reserved for Greek Gods and Chris Hemsworth, but whatever the reason . . . I don't like it. It makes me itchy. Like I'm being reprogrammed to think and feel things I've never thought or felt before.

*Focus, Fletcher. Focus on the here and now.* “Actually, I'm an old family friend. Are there any Hawthornes around?” Based on Olivia's Instagram, which I may or may not have scoured last night looking for signs of Brody, she and Perry are handling day-to-day operations on the farm. Perry's obviously still with Brody on the trail, but if Olivia is here, she should be able to help us find her mom.

“Olivia is in today.” The receptionist looks at her computer screen and purses her lips to the side. “She's in a meeting with a soon-to-be bride, but they've been in there for going on two hours now, so you shouldn't have to wait long.”

I look at Kristyn. “Do you mind waiting a bit?”

She shrugs. “I'm down for whatever you want to do.”

“There are warm cinnamon rolls and coffee just over there. You're welcome to help yourself.”

“Yes, please,” Kristyn says.

The cinnamon rolls *are* warm which feels like a feat of culinary engineering because they're just sitting on what looks like a very normal plate. They are also divine—so divine I can't keep myself from groaning out loud.

“Right?” the receptionist says from behind us. “Chef Hawthorne is trying out new dessert recipes for the restaurant and cinnamon roll bread pudding is on the menu. He sent those over this morning.”

The way she says *Chef Hawthorne*, her voice all breathy and light, makes me think *she* might be the reason there are warm cinnamon rolls to go along with the coffee. Lennox always was a lady's man, and *Jenna*, I read off her nametag, looks perky and young enough to catch any man's eye.

Footsteps sound behind me, and I turn to see Olivia leading a pair of women down the hall. We make eye contact, and she

smiles wide, her expression flashing with surprise. She holds up a finger, tilting her head toward the women behind her, and I nod my encouragement.

Once Jenna has scheduled a follow-up meeting with the bride and Olivia has said goodbye, she turns to me, practically squealing as she pulls me into a hug. “Kate Fletcher, I thought I might never see you again!” She hugs me tight, then pulls back, her hands still on my shoulders. “Good grief, could you be any more gorgeous? All that traveling—it looks good on you.”

“Thanks. Marriage looks good on you.”

Her hand flies to her stomach, curving around her baby bump. “Are you kidding? I spend at least half of every day puking my guts out. Mom keeps telling me it’ll get better in the second trimester, but I am solidly in second-trimester territory, and so far? No such luck. Gah!” she says, pulling me in for another hug. “I can’t believe you’re really here! Oh my gosh. Mom is going to flip. And Brody!” She frowns. “Except Brody isn’t here. He’s backpacking. Please tell me you can stay around long enough for Brody to see you.”

I start to laugh, warmed by Olivia’s confident exuberance.

On the drive from Franklin down to Silver Creek, a part of me wondered if the Hawthornes would be angry I didn’t do a better job staying in touch, but so far, we’re three for three when it comes to Hawthorne warm welcomes. Well, lukewarm for Perry, but that counts as warm from him.

“I already saw Brody. I hiked in and surprised him. We did, actually.” I pull Kristyn forward. “This is my cousin, Kristyn. She’s only in town for a couple of days, but I’ll be here all summer.”

Olivia freezes, and something I can’t read flits across her expression. “Wow. All summer,” she finally says. I half-wonder if she doesn’t like that I’m planning to stick around, but she was clearly excited to see me fifteen seconds ago. Why would she feel differently now?

But then Olivia is smiling again, shaking Kristyn's hand and asking how I managed to find Brody in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains, and I let my suspicions go. I was probably seeing things.

"I love it," she says after I give her a SparkNotes version of the planning that led me to Brody's whereabouts. "I bet he flipped when he saw you. This is seriously the most Kate thing I could possibly imagine."

"You can say that again," Kristyn says. "You should have seen the way she researched and finagled her way into the information she needed to find him." I hadn't really thought about everything I did to find Brody as finagling, but I guess to someone else, it could totally seem that way.

"I'm not even a little surprised," Olivia says, clearly warming to the topic. "This woman has always had a way of making stuff work out. When I was in the seventh grade"—she looks at me—"I guess you and Brody were sophomores then? Do you remember convincing the entire boys' soccer team from that private school up in Hendersonville to drive down to Silver Creek and attend the homecoming dance?"

*That private school up in Hendersonville* was actually the very same school I attended from kindergarten through the third grade. My dad paid for me to attend, but then Mama got tired of driving me up the mountain every day and told me I'd have to "rough it" with the Silver Creek kids. In retrospect, I realize *she* was a Silver Creek kid and probably meant the remark as a jab against Dad, a native Chicagoan who is all big city and no small town. But I took her words literally and prepared myself for the worst.

Instead, I found Brody and the rest of the Hawthornes. It was the happiest surprise of my childhood.

I grin at the memory. "There was a notable lack of cute boys at Silver Creek High. I did what I had to do."

"How did you persuade them?" Kristyn asks around another bite of her cinnamon roll.

“I don’t even remember. I just presented coming like it was an idea they should have thought of themselves.”

My dad has always called my ability to make things happen my special brand of scrappiness. My finances are pretty solid now. I don’t have a lot of excess, but I have enough to get around and sustain myself in between projects. Never longer than a month or two, but that’s usually all I need before I’m on to the next thing. But for a while, I coasted on nothing but my own ingenuity. I once spent an entire week in a Zimbabwean village where I had to barter pieces of jewelry and clothing for my meals. That was after Preston, my boyfriend and fellow traveler for the first two years of my career, but before my first commissioned article. Back then, I had to fund everything, pay for all my own travel and research, then write a piece just hoping I’d be able to sell it. Now, it’s easier to pitch ideas and get an advance on something I’m *going* to write.

Come to think of it, I’ll have to reach out to my contacts and see if anyone bites on my Green River idea.

“Can you stay a while?” Olivia asks. She glances at her watch. “I’ve got a couple of hours free. Want to ride over and see Mom? We can probably catch her in the barn.”

“I would love that.” I glance at Kristyn who just shrugs.

“I’m down,” she says. “Can I have another cinnamon roll?”

Olivia smiles. “Have as many as you like.”

She leads us through the farmhouse and to the back door. Outside, a couple of 4x4s, like golf carts except with much thicker tires, are parked in a row. She climbs into the one furthest from the house, likely because it has a row of extra seats in the back, and cranks the engine.

As she drives the familiar path through the main farm and toward the orchard, my mind drifts back to the countless times I ran through these fields, to the hours I spent with Brody sitting in the strawberry beds, eating fruit right off the vine until we both felt sick.

Brody might not be here in person, but he is in every memory, imprinted on my soul in a way that makes coming

back feel like I'm coming home to *him*.

There's something comforting about that thought. About coming home to Brody. To Stonebrook Farm. If I focus on that feeling, the summer I have ahead of me actually feels *easy*.

But then I think about the way Brody looked at me across the table when we were eating dinner. The way my body reacted to seeing him again. Nothing about *that* seems easy.

Exciting, maybe. But not easy.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate

STONEBROOK IS A MUCH larger enterprise than it used to be. There are employees everywhere. There were at least two dozen in the pavilion when we drove in, and we've seen that many again on our way to the goat barn.

"Do all of these people work here full time?" I ask. Even just ten years ago, Stonebrook still felt like a family-run farm.

"Most of them are seasonal. We have summer staff who live onsite, either working the farm or events. Some stay through apple harvest in the fall, then things slow down again. It's the busiest you'll see it right now."

"I had no idea," I say, hardly able to take it all in. "It's really amazing how much it's grown."

She points down an eastern slope off to our left. "If you look down that way, you can see the expansion happening on the kitchen. It'll eventually be Lennox's restaurant."

"Right. I saw the press release you shared on Instagram." Lennox was making a pretty solid name for himself as a chef in downtown Charlotte before he decided to move home and open his own farm-to-table restaurant on Stonebrook's property.

"We're hoping it'll be ready to open about the time the baby's born, which, don't get me started on how complicated

that's going to be, but we'll figure it out."

Kristyn leans up from the back seat. "Does everyone in the family work here?"

"Nearly," Olivia says. "Not Flint, obviously. Or Brody. But the rest of us are pretty much here all the time."

"That sounds amazing."

Kristyn *would* find it amazing. Her immediate family is the same way. All up in each other's business all the time.

We park in front of the enormous barn, and Olivia cuts the engine. A wave of homesickness washes over me. I spent hours and hours in this barn my senior year. It feels good to be back.

"Speaking of Brody," Olivia says, eyeing me mischievously as we approach the barn door. "He's had a little bit of a glow up the last few years, huh?"

Kristyn snorts, and I choke out a laugh. "Um. I don't—" I clear my throat. "How so?"

"Kate. Come on. I know you don't see him that way because you're *best friends*"—she says this last part with an added eye roll for emphasis—"but you can't tell me you didn't notice. He's been working out a lot."

"Really?" I say, shaking my head. I shrug my shoulders. "I um, I . . . nope. I didn't notice." My hands wave around in front of my body like they're connected to strings and a drunk puppeteer is controlling their movements. I stare at the offending appendages and tuck them into my armpits. "Muscles? I mean, maybe? He definitely looks . . . different, but not bad different. He's good. He looks good. Good different." *Those . . . were a lot of stupid words that just came out of my face.*

"So convincing," Kristyn whispers behind me.

I try and stomp on her foot, but she darts out of the way at the last minute with a gleeful chuckle.

Olivia slides the barn door open with a heave, making it look easy despite her dress pants and heels. We step into the

shadowy interior of the barn. “Hey Mom? You still here?”

Mrs. Hawthorne appears at the other end of the barn’s center corridor. “I’m back here—” She freezes when she sees me, her hand flying to her chest, her smile stretching as wide as Olivia’s did. I’ve only seen her a few times since graduation, and not since long before the last time I saw Brody, but she looks exactly the same anyway. A little more white in her hair, and a few more wrinkles, but she’s just as beautiful as ever, and I find myself wishing I could figure out her secret. If I age half as well as Hannah Hawthorne has, I’ll be content. “Well, look who the cat dragged in,” she finally says.

“Hi, Mrs. Hawthorne.”

She rushes forward and pulls me into a hug. “Look at you!” she says, giving my shoulders an extra squeeze. “Goodness, child. How are you? And call me Hannah. You’re grown now. Enough with this Mrs. Hawthorne business.”

I am . . . *overwhelmed*. And am I crying? I sniff as I pull back, not wanting to get mascara-tinted tears on Mrs. Hawthorne’s—Hannah’s—shirt. What is wrong with me? I don’t mind hugs. I love hugs. But I’m not necessarily a person who *needs* them. A product of being an only child, maybe, and one practiced in traveling the world alone. But Hannah’s hug . . . it’s like it unlocks some dormant need buried in the hidden chambers of my heart.

*I belong here.*

The thought surprises me. I belong *here*? As in *here* here? I don’t know who my subconscious thinks it is, but I don’t need these unbidden smarty-pants revelations randomly popping into my head. I belong in Silver Creek about as much as I belong on the moon. And yet, that statement somehow doesn’t feel as true as it might have two days ago.

“Oh, hey, it’s all right,” Hannah says.

I shake my head and start to laugh as I wipe my eyes. “I don’t even know what’s wrong with me.”

She pats my back reassuringly. “You’ve got a lot of memories here. Coming back is bound to make you feel

something.” Her eyes dart to Olivia before landing back on me. “How long are you in town?”

“All summer,” Olivia answers before I can, that same measure of something in her voice. She’s worried about me being here. I can tell.

“Well, what a treat that’s going to be.” Hannah shoots Olivia a look that almost looks like a warning then tilts her head the opposite direction. “I’ve got a guy here fixing the milker. But there are plenty of new babies to see if you want to come visit for a bit.”

Kristyn perks up. “Baby goats?”

I sniff and laugh. “My cousin, Kristyn,” I say to Hannah.

Hannah smiles warmly. “Baby goats,” she says, turning and heading down the corridor. “Come on, girls. I might even have some work you can help me do.”

Thirty minutes later, Kristyn and I are gathering a dozen kids from the pen just behind the barn, ushering them inside for a vet visit scheduled to happen later this afternoon. We aren’t very good at our job, mostly because we are way more interested in snuggling than in making the goats go anywhere.

“You’re my favorite one,” Kristyn whispers to the jet-black newborn she’s cradling in her arms. “Don’t tell the others.”

Finally, I chase the last goat into the barn, and Kristyn follows. I close and latch the door behind us. It’s been years since I’ve been here, but I still remember a lot of how things work. Hannah wouldn’t have cared if I only ever wanted to hang out when I showed up with my high school angst and drama, but if I was willing, she always found something for me to do. I recognize now, all these years later, what a gift that was. Working on the farm kept my mind busy and drained the tension out of me in record time. Especially when I was spending time with the babies.

“I love it here,” Kristyn whispers as we make our way back to Hannah and Olivia.

I smile. “It’s great, right?”

“It’s more than great. It’s magical. It feels like a movie set. Like one of those places that makes you roll your eyes because no place is actually this idyllic unless it’s fake.”

Hannah is settling up with the repair guy when we approach. “All right,” she says. “I’ll call you if it gives me any more trouble, but Brody will be back next week. I’m sure he’ll be able to handle things.”

My heart trips when she mentions Brody, which is just ridiculous. *I am ridiculous.*

“How did it go?” Hannah asks, finally turning her attention to us.

“Thirteen goats collected and accounted for,” I say.

“And thoroughly snuggled,” Kristyn says.

Hannah grins. “Perfect. Let’s go check on them and make sure they’re settled, then what if we head over to the kitchen for some lunch?”

“Oh, no. We wouldn’t want to trouble you. We didn’t expect —”

“Nonsense,” she says, cutting me off. “It’s no trouble. Olivia is already on her way over to ask Lennox if he’ll fix something up for us, and that boy hasn’t figured out how to say no to his mama yet. I doubt he will today.”

“That won’t interfere with his work?” Kristyn asks as we walk toward the stall where we left the kids.

“Nah. There’s another chef on staff that handles the catering—he’s busy prepping for a wedding happening tomorrow night—but we’ll stay out of his way.”

Once Hannah has made sure the goats are settled to her liking, we wash up in the barn’s utility room, then she drives us over to the kitchen to meet Olivia.

“Does Brody usually handle repairs and things around the farm?” I ask as we make our way across the farm.

“Not always. But whenever it’s something technical, like the milker, his engineering brain can usually sort stuff out as well

as any repairman can. You remember how he was. Problem-solving even when the rest of us didn't know there was a problem."

"Yeah, that sounds like him."

"I love that you're all so involved," Kristyn says. "That it's truly a family business."

Kristyn would love it. She's spent her entire twenty-seven years living in the same northern suburb of Chicago. She even lived at home during college, moving from her bedroom into the apartment above her parents' garage. All four of her siblings, all grown and married now, and most of her aunts and uncles, minus my dad, live within twelve blocks of each other, their lives so intertwined, it's hard to tell where one family stops and another starts. Home isn't just a place. A concrete thing with walls and a roof. It's a whole passel of people who love and visit and eat casseroles together every weekend.

Technically, Kristyn's family is my family too. But my dad didn't stay in Chicago. Except for the reunion he took me to every summer, I never really saw his family.

I'm not used to that kind of connectedness. I mean, yes. I knew the Hawthornes were close growing up, but seeing them *still* close, even though they're all adults and have their own lives? It's a lot. I'm not very good at needing people like they seem to need each other. I'm not very good at being *needed*.

Lennox greets his mother at the kitchen's back door, while Kristyn and I hang back. I still feel weird about showing up and expecting him to feed us.

"Good grief," Kristyn says beside me. "You were not kidding about the blessed genetics thing. Every single person in this family is ridiculously beautiful. I mean, *look* at him."

"I know. *And* he cooks."

She grips my arm. "Listen. I know you were feeling a little iffy about the whole friends-to-lovers thing. And that's fine. But what if we try best friend's brother? It's an equally good trope, and—" She looks toward Lennox. "It's not like you'd be settling going for either of Brody's brothers."

“Ew. Gross, Kristyn. *No!* I could never.”

She sighs like she can't believe my stubbornness. “I just feel like you really need to consider how much marrying into this family could benefit your children. They might be born with literal superpowers.” Her eyes dart back to the restaurant, and she stiffens. “Oh my gosh. He's coming over here.” She clears her throat. “He looks a lot like Flint, doesn't he? I feel like I'm meeting a celebrity. I'm sweating, Kate. I'm actually sweating right now.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, but there isn't time to say anything before Lennox is standing in front of me.

“Hi, Kate,” he says easily, pulling me into a hug. “It's good to see you.”

“Hi, Lennox.” I introduce him to Kristyn, and Lennox hugs her too.

“*Oh my gosh,*” Kristyn says silently over his shoulder, her eyes wide.

“Mom says she worked you to death in the goat barn, and we owe you a meal to say thank you.”

“That is not even close to the truth,” I say. “But if you're offering . . .”

He motions toward the kitchen. “Come on in. It won't be fancy, but I'll come up with something.”

Hannah has already disappeared inside, and I still haven't seen Olivia, but I can only assume they'll be eating too. “Olivia tells me you hiked in to surprise Brody on the trail?”

*Ah.* So when Olivia came ahead to see about lunch, she was also giving him the scoop.

That same discomfort from before niggles at my brain. “Yeah. We did.”

Lennox grins as he holds the door open for us. “I wish I could have seen his face when he saw you.”

“Trust me,” Kristyn says. “It was pretty spectacular.”

I wish Brody and his spectacular face were here right now. It's weird to be surrounded by so many of his family members without him.

"Mom and Olivia are just through there if you want to join them," Lennox says. "Food shouldn't take long."

The four of us settle at a long farm table in what I assume will be the main dining room of the restaurant. It doesn't quite look like it's still under construction, but it isn't finished yet either. Plastic sheeting is draped along one corner of the room, half-hiding a bar area, and there still isn't any décor. But I can see the bones of the place and can already tell it's going to be beautiful.

Without Brody around, it's Hannah who does the most to put me at ease, though it could be she's just trying to counter Olivia's pointed questions.

What are my plans after this summer?

Am I dating anyone?

Traveling anywhere exciting?

She could be very excited about my life and career.

Or she could be anxious to get me out of town and away from her big brother.

"Tell them about the couple in Italy," Kristyn prompts after Hannah asks me about my favorite places to visit.

The request doesn't surprise me. Kristyn always has been a romantic.

"I would love to go to Italy one day," Olivia says.

"You should go," I say. "But don't just go to the big cities. The Italian countryside is amazing. When I was working on this piece about the wineries in the Campania wine region, I stayed in a villa owned by this adorable couple. They were in their late eighties, both of them, but you'd never know it for how spry they were. They were retired by the time I was with them, obviously, but before retirement, they ran this tiny winery, using two particular varieties of grapes that only grow in Campania. They were very good at what they did, but no



matter how many times they were approached about expanding their operations, they refused. They didn't want to sell wine all over the world. For them, they were content to make what they made, locally sell what they needed to meet their needs, and that was that."

"What happened when they retired?" Olivia asked. "Did they stop making wine?"

"They did. They have five hundred bottles stored in the wine cellar at their villa, and it's the last they ever made. When they die, it'll probably be worth a fortune because there are so few bottles. But they don't even care about that. Money? Fame? Who cares? For them, they were simply content to spend every day together, walking to this tiny marketplace just down the road and buying bread and cheese and fresh herbs for that day's meal. Cooking together. Singing together. They celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary while I was there. How crazy is that?"

"Sounds like a story Brody would love," Hannah says, her smile warm.

I scrunch my brow. "How so?"

Olivia is the one who answers. "Are you kidding me? Brody is a total romantic."

Hannah chuckles. "He's always going on about settling down and starting a family. Finding the kind of love you just described. He's a man who knows what he wants, I can say that much."

Olivia looks at me pointedly, almost like she's challenging me. "He'll be an excellent husband someday."

I smile, unsure if Olivia is trying to convince me or tell me to stay away. It doesn't help that suddenly my wandering, rootless soul keeps telling me I better settle in, because this place is *home*.

"If any of them manage it, it'll probably be Brody first," Hannah says. She glances toward the kitchen. "Then maybe he can rub off on his brothers."

Olivia's expression softens. "Lennox will be fine, Mama," she says, her tone gentle. Her eyes flick to me and then back again, but it happens so fast, I might have imagined it. "And the others too."

"Oh, I know," Hannah says. "I don't know why it's so much harder with these boys. I know they're grown men, and they have their own lives. And it's not like I want all the nitty-gritty details." She gives her head a good shake. "Let's just say they don't talk to their Mama like Liv over here does."

Olivia's hand moves to her baby bump. "I don't give you nitty-gritty details. Though, I can if you want me to."

"Oh, you hush," Hannah says with a scoff. "I want no such thing."

Olivia grins. "It was a hot and sultry night . . ."

"Don't you do it, Liv."

"Tyler was out of town all weekend, but then he came home looking scruffy and sexy and—"

"Oh, is that how you want to play it?" Hannah says, cutting Olivia off. She leans forward in her chair. "*Fine*. The first time me and your father—"

"No! Stop!" Olivia yells. "You win. No more details. I promise."

Hannah settles back into her chair with a smirk.

Kristyn grins wide, obviously enjoying the banter.

It's just like it always was. Brody's family knows how to have fun, to tease and pick on each other, but their dedication and love are evident even in the teasing. They're like a grove of trees. On the surface, it looks like they're all their own tree, but underneath the ground, their roots are entwined and connected, lending strength and support to whoever needs it most.

I used to think it would be impossible to have a family like that.

Maybe I still do.

“How did you know Tyler was the one?” I ask Olivia, suddenly curious. “I’m only asking because . . . I don’t know. How is it anything but good luck? The couple in Italy who stayed married for sixty years, or your marriage,” I say to Hannah. “How do you know when a relationship starts that it will endure like that instead of crashing and burning like my parents did?”

Olivia winces and I slap a hand to my mouth. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—I’m sure your marriage with Tyler is great. I didn’t mean to sound so doom and gloom.”

“I get what you’re saying.” Olivia glances at her mom. “It was almost immediate for me. I mean, I didn’t admit it for a long time. But I felt it right from the start. That bone-sizzling connection.”

“Shoot, it wasn’t like that for me,” Kristyn says. “I wanted to strangle Jake for the first three months of knowing him. He drove me crazy.”

Hannah chuckles. “I was somewhere in the middle. I’d known Ray all my life. I didn’t love him all my life, but then one day I just looked at him and thought, ‘well okay then. Here we are.’” She holds my gaze a long moment. “There are never any guarantees, Kate. Not in life, certainly not in love. But that doesn’t mean you can’t believe a love like that is possible, even hope for it. I’m willing to bet the people who do find it are the ones who always believed they would.”

Lennox shows up with the food, interrupting our conversation, and I breathe out a silent sigh. Sitting with a group of women who are all happily in love is exhausting.

“Turkey paninis, homemade potato chips,” Lennox says, setting our plates down in front of us. He puts his hands on his mother’s shoulders and leans down to kiss her cheek. “Now if you’re done enlisting me as your private chef, I’m going to get back to work.”

“I’m sorry, what was that? Something about the rent you aren’t paying me and how kind I am to let you live here for free?”

He throws a grin over his shoulder as he heads back to the kitchen. “Love you, Mom.”

“What about you?” Olivia says before I’ve even taken the first bite of my sandwich. She eyes me with blatant curiosity. “Do you think you’ll ever settle down? Give up the traveling life and find your own happily-ever-after?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure it would have to be one or the other.” Except, it would, wouldn’t it? I’m never in the same place very long. I use my dad’s place in Paris as a home base, but even my stays there only last six, maybe eight weeks before I’m up and traveling again.

“You were just saying the other day you’d never be able to have a family with the kind of traveling you do,” Kristyn says. “You really think you’ll be a nomad all your life? Never fall in love? Never have kids?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I say. “A lot of people never have children, and they still have happy lives.”

“Sure they do,” Kristyn says. “But is that what *you* want?”

I squirm in my seat, suddenly uncomfortable. There’s no denying that over the past couple of months, I’ve started to feel . . . impatient with my way of life. I’ve generally enjoyed settling into new locations and immersing myself in different cultures. I like to write while I’m still on-location rather than taking lots of notes, then returning home to hammer out a piece. It’s an indulgence though. Most of the time, I don’t *need* to stick around. I only do because it’s fun. But lately, the “sticking around” hasn’t been near as enjoyable. It’s like I have this insatiable need for something more. The next thing. The next job. The next location. But then the next thing doesn’t actually satisfy me.

Everyone’s eyes are still on me, their expressions expectant. I finally shrug. “I don’t know, really. I’ve been feeling like it might be time to make a change, but I’ve been doing this for so long, I don’t even know what that would look like.”

“Or who it might look like,” Kristyn says pointedly.

I shoot her a look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She grins. “It means I think you’re lonely. What you’re feeling is loneliness, and that has you all out of sorts because unless you’re going to find a Kate groupie with no life who can just follow you everywhere work takes you, falling in love will mean making some sort of change.”

“I’m not lonely,” I say, a little too defensively.

Kristyn only raises her eyebrows.

“I’m a *little* lonely.”

She crosses her arms.

“Fine! I’m lonely. I would love to fall in love. And yes, I’d love to have kids someday. Is that what you want me to admit?”

She smirks her satisfaction. “Only if it’s true.”

“You’re young yet, child,” Hannah says. “You’ve got time to decide. And in my experience, these things tend to have a way of working themselves out.”

I want to believe her. I *do* believe her. But that doesn’t mean I’m not terrified.

One of the things that makes me good at my job is my intuition. There are always the obvious stories. The ones that any journalist can spot the minute they land in a new location. But settling for the obvious story means writing a predictable piece—a take that’s just like any other journalist’s take. I’ve got a knack for sniffing out the stories that aren’t obvious. Like the couple in Italy who made wine for no other reason than because they loved to make it.

Why does that matter now?

Because my intuition is telling me there’s an untold story right here in Silver Creek.

And I’m pretty sure I’m the main character.

## CHAPTER NINE

Brody

A HOT SHOWER AFTER seven days without one is a bliss not enough poets have used as inspiration. It is the only thing I'm thinking about when I pile my gear on my porch and push through my front door. I only pause long enough to pull my dirty laundry out of my bag, because it smells even worse than I do.

The house is a little musty—not surprising since it's been closed up for two weeks—so after starting a load of laundry, I quickly open some windows on either side of the house, hoping a cross breeze will pull in some fresh air.

I peel off my clothes while I wait for the shower to warm up. I smell so bad. Unbelievably bad.

Tyler stopped for us in Newfound Gap after picking up half a dozen pygmies from a breeder up in Virginia. With the way his face turned green when he gave Perry a hug, I nearly offered to ride in the trailer with the goats.

I let out a long sigh when I finally step into the shower.

The hike was good. *Mostly* good. Let's say it was long stretches of good punctuated by short stretches of Perry trying to get me to talk about Kate.

I don't want to talk about Kate.

That doesn't mean I'm not thinking about her.

I just don't know what Perry wants me to admit.

Was I excited to see her? Absolutely.

Am I glad she's home for the summer? Sure.

Did seeing her wake up all the feelings I've managed to suppress over the years? Maybe?

I felt something when I saw her standing at the top of Siler Bald, and I felt a whole lotta things sitting across from her eating churros. But in the days since then, I've worked hard to tap into the same logic that has kept me from obsessing over her Instagram feed or framing a hard copy of every article she's ever published. (It hasn't stopped me from *collecting* said hard copies, but we don't need to talk about that.)

I've been checking my feelings for Kate for years, keeping them so far in the periphery of my life they haven't interfered with me functioning like a normal adult. I've had a lot of practice, so there's no reason why I can't keep it up.

Granted, keeping my feelings in the periphery is going to be more difficult when she is real and in person, living three houses down the street. But there's nothing I can do about that but cross my fingers and soldier on.

After scrubbing myself near down to the bone, I turn to grab my razor only to realize it's still in my backpack. On the porch. *Outside.*

I groan in frustration. I don't have to shave.

I scratch my chin.

But I really want to. I could just wait and do it after, but I am a man who appreciates routine, and my routine has always been to shave *in* the shower.

I rinse the soap from my body then hop out and grab a towel to wrap around my waist. I don't even take time to cut the water or dry off. I'm only going to be out for a matter of seconds. I open the front door and push through the storm door, leaving it propped open with my foot while I lean forward to dig through my bag. I've got my razor in my hand

when the cross breeze, strengthened by the open storm door, slams the wooden front door shut.

I freeze, knowing before I even check the handle that my front door is locked. The lock has been broken for weeks. If you've got your key in the actual door, you can unlock it, but as soon as you take out your key, the internal mechanism falls right back into a *locked* position.

I'd have fixed it by now, but most of the time, I park in the garage and go into the house that way. It usually doesn't matter if the front door stays locked.

I hitch my towel a little tighter around my waist, razor in hand, and try the knob anyway, leaning my forehead against the wood when I confirm that yes, yes, I am locked out of my own house.

In nothing but a towel.

"You need any help?" a voice calls from the road behind me.

But not just any voice.

Kate's voice.

I slowly turn around.

She's on a bike, stopped on the pavement in front of the house. She's wearing a pair of denim cutoffs, one toned leg leaning onto the ground while the other still sits on the pedal. Her hair is long and loose, hanging nearly to her elbows.

I swear under my breath. Keep Kate Fletcher in the periphery? Not a chance. She's a front and center kind of woman. She always has been.

"Hey," I say. "I uh, locked myself out."

She climbs off her bike and leans it on the ground before strolling forward, her hands pushed into her back pockets.

I tighten my hold on my towel. I glance down, noticing the way it hangs open at the bottom of one thigh. Seriously? Did I accidentally grab a hand towel on my way out of the bathroom?

"This is my house," I blurt out.



She smiles. “You don’t say.”

I close my eyes. “I just mean, it’s this one. I’m assuming you didn’t know. You wouldn’t, right? Know. Which one it was. So I’m telling you.”

“When I saw you standing here in a towel, I made the leap.”

“I was in the shower.”

“I gathered.”

I don’t miss the way her gaze rakes over my body, traveling down my arms and across my chest.

“I needed my razor, which was still in my bag, but then the door . . .”

She’s biting her lip, an obvious effort to keep herself from laughing, but it’s also drawing my attention, making me think of—*no*. I do *not* need to think about Kate’s lips right now. Or kissing. Or Kate. Or anything even closely related to Kate. I close my eyes. *Think about baseball, Brody. Only baseball.*

“Can I do anything to help?” she asks. “Do you have a spare key anywhere?”

My mom has a spare key, but the idea of calling Mom so she can also see me in a towel, or worse, see me in a towel hanging out with Kate? No thank you. She’s already going to have questions for me the next time we talk. I do not need this added layer of complication.

“Um, no key,” I lie. “But the windows are open in the kitchen. If I cut the screen, I can crawl through and unlock the door.”

She props her hands on her hips, her eyes sparking with suppressed laughter. “You’re going to crawl through your window? Naked?”

I scoff. “I’m not naked.”

“No, but you’re going to have to use your arms to pull yourself through a window, and I’m not sure that towel’s gonna do you much good if you have to let it go.”

I take a long slow breath, and Kate finally starts to laugh.

“This is not funny,” I say, even as my own shoulders start to shake.

“Oh, it’s definitely funny.” She motions toward the side of the house with a tilt of her head. “Come on. Show me the window. I’ll crawl through and open the door for you.”

“I ... can’t ask you to do that.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Do you have a better idea?”

I let my shoulders fall. I don’t have a better idea, as much as it kills me to admit it. “Fine.” I set my razor on the table next to the door and reach for the front pocket of my backpack, where there’s a small pocketknife we can use to cut the screen. I pause when a breeze creeps up the back of my legs. I shoot into a standing position, one hand reaching back to make sure my towel is covering everything that needs to be covered. This towel is literally pint-sized. I am wearing a doll-sized towel.

Kate laughs again and reaches out, pressing a hand to my chest. “You and your tiny towel should stay completely upright. Tell me what you’re reaching for, and I’ll get it.”

“There’s a pocketknife in the front pocket,” I say. “The small one at the top.”

“This one right here?”

When I nod, she pulls out the knife. “Got it. Which window am I looking for? Or . . .” She eyes my towel. “Do you want to show me?”

“I think I can stay upright while walking,” I say with a grumble. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

I motion for her to go down the porch steps first mostly because I don’t want her walking behind me watching my tiny towel sway in the breeze.

The back windows are higher off the ground than I thought, though they’re closer to the ground than the windows out front, so they’re our best bet for getting in. Kate can reach the screen easily enough and is able to use the pocketknife to slice it open, but she’s too far below the windowsill to hoist herself up.

She looks around my backyard. “Is there anything I can stand on?”

Normally, there would be patio furniture on my back deck, but right now, it’s all in my garage. Sometimes thunderstorms are bad enough to blow stuff around, and I didn’t want to have to worry about anything happening while I was gone. “I put it all up before my trip.”

She groans. “You are too responsible for your own good!”

“Here. What if you just . . .” I step forward, shifting one scantily towel-clad leg under the window. “Step on my knee and see if that will get you high enough.”

“Are you sure? I won’t hurt you?”

“Um, maybe take your shoes off so you don’t rip all the hair out of my leg?”

She pauses. “The things you never thought you’d hear someone say.”

She kicks her shoes off and lifts the ball of one foot onto my knee. “Ready?”

I brace myself. “Yep. Go for it.”

She pushes off and grabs hold of the window frame. “I’m totally high enough,” she says, but then she wobbles, her whole body swaying to the left. I grab her legs with both hands, stabilizing her . . . and completely losing my towel.

I close my eyes. This is not good. *Very not good.*

“Will you be able to get through?” I say, willing calm into my voice.

“Can you hoist me a tiny bit higher?” she asks.

*Oh sure. No problem. No problem at all.*

I glance at my towel. If I reach for it, I’ll drop Kate. If I drop Kate, she’ll see me reaching for the towel. The best shot I have of keeping her from seeing life, the universe, and *everything* is to get her *inside* my house, then grab the towel before she has the chance to turn around and look at me.

Assuming she doesn't look down before then. Or hasn't already.

At least we're on the side of my house that's facing the woods instead of the street.

I slide my hands a tiny bit further up Kate's legs, trying not to focus on her smooth, sun-warm skin, and lift her higher.

"How's that?" I ask, grunting from the strain.

"That's perfect. Are you sure you're—"

"Wait. Stop. Don't move." I can sense by the way she's shifting her weight that she's going to try and look at me. Make sure I'm okay with her own eyes.

She stills, more of her weight dropping back onto my leg. "Not moving," she says. "Are you okay?"

"Yep. I'm good. Just um, do me a favor and don't look down?"

# CHAPTER TEN

Kate

*OH.* That is a very fully naked Brody.

I gasp.

Brody swears.

We make eye contact. His jaw tightens. “I said *don’t* look down.”

I look away and scramble through his window so fast, I nearly face plant onto his kitchen floor. I hoist myself onto my feet, using his table for balance.

That was—

He was—

I don’t even have words. To be fair, I couldn’t actually see *all* of him. The way his arms were placed, holding up the backs of my legs, one of them obscured my view. This was not a full-frontal nudity situation. But I did see the entire length of his very muscular leg and the curve of his—oh, good grief. I saw *enough*, okay?

I turn back to the window and risk a peek, but Brody and his loin cloth, because let’s be real, that towel is hardly big enough to be anything but, have disappeared.

*Right.* Because I’m supposed to be letting him in.

I scramble to the front door, trying hard not to think about how much Brody looks like his body was sculpted out of smooth marble.

A glow up? Was that the term Olivia used? It doesn't feel like enough. Not that I've ever seen Brody naked before. But even just his chest and shoulders, the way he's filled out ... add in a week's worth of trail scruff? He has taken sexy to a whole new level.

I reach the front door and unlock it, but the knob won't turn. I jiggle it a little, pausing when Brody's voice sounds through the door.

"The lock is broken," he says, his voice muffled. "Twist the lock, then hold it in place as you turn the knob."

It works on the first try, and I swing open his front door to find him standing on his porch, towel securely in place.

He holds up his finger as he turns sideways to slip past me. "Don't say a word, Miss I Can't Listen to Basic Directions."

I stifle a laugh and press my lips together. "I just *did* listen to basic directions. I opened your door, didn't I?"

"Not those directions, the last directions," he calls as he hurries through his living room.

He's got me there. But the response was more reflex than anything. Had he said, "Kate, my towel fell off, so please don't look down," I might have paused before reacting long enough to control the impulse to, well, *look*.

"It was an accident!" I yell to his retreating form.

"Yeah, I bet." He disappears down the hall into what I can only assume is his bedroom. I have no idea if he wants me to stay or go. But I can't exactly blame him for not pausing long enough to issue a proper invitation. If I had been the one trapped outside in a towel, I'd want to be wearing pants before having a regular conversation too.

It feels weird to hang around, but it feels *more* weird to disappear. Because there is no way it won't look like he scared me off with his . . . I have to stop thinking about naked Brody.

But leaving *would* make things weird the next time we see each other. Better to just rip the band-aid off and talk about it.

Or in this case, are we putting the band-aid back on?

I wander around Brody's living room while I wait for him, pausing when I get to his bookshelf. The contents don't surprise me. Science books. Math books. Novels bigger than my head. All very Brody books. But then on the second shelf, I see several editions of *The Atlantic*, stacked with copies of *Southern Traditions and Travel*, *Explore Europe*, and half a dozen other magazines. It might seem random to anyone else, but this isn't random. These are all magazines that I'm published in.

He's collecting my bylines.

A door clicks open down the hall, and I spin around to see Brody entering the living room wearing jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and a sheepish expression that is maybe the cutest thing I've ever seen.

I've got to hand it to him. The man wears clothes as well as he . . . doesn't.

I swallow. "I saw you naked," I blurt. Why? Why did I blurt? It's like my mouth is working faster than my brain.

There are more words brewing. They're piling up on my tongue, and if Brody doesn't say something fast, I will start spewing them out like a word-slinging woodchipper.

When I'm nervous, words start flying with reckless abandon. I know this about myself.

Side note: I also hate this about myself.

Fortunately, there isn't much that makes me nervous these days. I've been too many places and seen too many things to get riled up easily. But I'm nervous now.

Brody's cheeks flame red. "Geez, Kate. Way to state the obvious."

"I'm sorry! I didn't want it to be awkward."

"Good call. This isn't awkward at all."

I press my hands to my cheeks. “Brody, I didn’t see anything.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t know how that’s possible.”

“I mean, I saw things. But your arm was blocking my view. I didn’t see . . . the *main* thing.”

He barks out a laugh. “The main thing? This keeps getting better and better. Please, let’s keep going.”

*Oh geez.* I just called his *thing* a thing. I am twelve years old. Also, I’m going to die of embarrassment. Right now. Right here in Brody’s living room. I drop onto the chair beside his bookshelf and press my hands over my face.

And then I start to laugh. Huge, body-heaving laughter. Tears streaming down my cheeks.

“You think this is funny?”

I peek my fingers open to see him standing across from me, his hands propped on his hips. His expression is stern, but his eyes are dancing. He’s not truly angry. “Honestly, Brody, what else can I do but laugh?”

He moves to his couch and sinks into it. “You could have not looked, for starters,” he says with a teasing grin. He props his feet up on his coffee table, and I’m momentarily distracted by his bare feet. I don’t have a foot fetish. But the easy way he relaxes into his furniture, he just seems so . . . comfortable. Like he’s really at home here. Which, duh. This is his house. He would be. But I’ve never seen him in it, which makes me realize how much I’ve missed.

“When I was little and couldn’t sleep, I would call my dad and he would always say, ‘Whatever you do, don’t think about polar bears.’ Of course, then all I could do was think about polar bears. When you said not to look, I couldn’t help it. It was like a reflex.”

“I’m not actually sure we can still be friends, Kate. At least not friends who look each other in the eye.”

“Oh, shut up. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You know you look good.”



“I . . . know no such thing.”

“Whatever. Maybe you don’t dwell on it like a lot of guys do, but you have eyeballs in your head. And I’m sure you notice women enjoying the view.”

He smirks. “Did you?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. You ‘glowed up,’ and we’re all proud of you for the time in the gym and the scruffy facial hair. It’s all very manly and impressive.”

I stand and move to the couch and drop onto the side opposite him.

“You’ve been talking to Olivia,” he says as he shifts to face me. “That’s her term.”

“Yeah. I took Kristyn up to Stonebrook before she left town. We saw Olivia and your mom. And Lennox too, actually. He made us lunch.”

He runs a hand across his almost beard, scratching at it before letting his hand drop back into his lap. “I bet Mom loved that.”

I smile. “It was good to see her. And yes, Olivia *did* ask me what I thought of you. Of your transformation.”

It’s his turn to roll his eyes. “She’s always calling it that. But I’m still me. I’m still the same guy.”

His bare shoulder, the curve of his bicep, the slope of his back, shadowed with muscle, as it angles down to his trim waist . . . the image flits through my brain.

He’s maybe not *exactly* the same guy.

But I get what he’s trying to say.

Even before he unlocked his superhero potential, he had a quiet, steady confidence, and he’s always been comfortable in his own skin. Which is saying something, because the brothers on either side of him both had a physical presence that could have dwarfed Brody, had he let them. But he always held his own. He never cared that he was smaller. *Was* being the definitive term. He’s definitely not smaller anymore.

“You are still the same guy,” I say quietly. Brody has too much happening on the inside to want to be defined by what’s on the outside. I hope he knows I know that. “And I’m glad.”

He holds my gaze a long moment. “How are you? How’s the house? Are you okay without Kristyn here?”

“I’m okay. She helped me get started, which was so nice. We were able to come up with a plan that makes the whole project feel more manageable.”

We’re leaning on the couch, our heads resting on the back cushion, our faces turned toward each other. We sat just like this countless times in the Hawthornes’ living room, rehashing our days, talking about our dreams and hopes and plans.

It was sitting just like this that I told Brody at the end of our junior year that once I left, I’d never come back to Silver Creek again. I’d had a particularly bad fight with Mom and was ready to get out of town and never look back. I don’t remember the exact subject of the argument, but I can guess. I was too much like my dad. Too unappreciative of all the sacrifices Mom made for me. I had no understanding of the *virtues* of small-town living. It was a tired argument—one I heard over and over again—and it never did any good. No matter how much Grandma Nora tried to coax us into getting along, Mom and I rarely managed it. The more she complained, the more she pushed me away.

Besides that, I loved being like my dad. Dad was adventure. Dad was possibility.

Brody listened—he always did—and simply said, “As long as you’re happy, Kate. That’s all I want for you.”

A wave of nostalgia washes over me, even as a question pops into my head.

“Brody, are you happy?” I ask.

The question takes him by surprise. I can tell by the way his eyebrows shoot up. He doesn’t break our gaze though. His eyes stay trained on me, like he’s searching for something he isn’t sure he’s going to find.

“I am now,” he finally says, and my heart swoops down into my belly. Now because I’m here? Do I want him to be talking about me?

“I wasn’t completely sure I wanted to come back to Silver Creek after college,” he says. “A part of me wanted to make my own way, you know? Not be so tied to my family. But I think I’ve found a way to do that with my kayaking and with the program at the academy.”

“You would have missed your family,” I say. “Had you gone somewhere else.”

“Yeah, some. I like that we’re close, though sometimes I wish I were a *little* farther away.” He grins. “Don’t tell Mom I said so.”

“So I take it you’re happy you aren’t working on the farm with Olivia and Lennox.”

“And Perry,” he says. “Don’t forget him. Though honestly, I’m there so often, sometimes it feels like I do work there.”

“There was a repair guy fixing the milker while we were there. Your mom mentioned she’d normally have you do it.”

He chuckles. “That stupid milker. I swear, it’s the summer help that’s always messing it up.”

“Are you dating?” The question feels casual, like I’m asking because I’m his friend and not because I’m interested. I give myself a mental pat on the back, because on the inside, I feel anything but casual.

He takes a second to answer, and I barely keep myself from looking around his living room in search of evidence, like proof of a current girlfriend will jump up and start waving at me.

“Not dating,” he says. “I went out with the drama teacher at the academy a few times, but it didn’t go anywhere.”

“And there’s no one else you’re interested in?”

“You know Silver Creek. Most of the women who live here I’ve known since we were kids and only two of them are still single. Actually, Monica—that’s the theater teacher—

graduated a couple of years after we did. You probably remember her.”

“Are you counting her as one of the two single women? Who’s the other one?” I don’t know why I care. But some illogical—and jealous—part of my brain urges me forward. I am a dog with a bone, and I’m going to suck every last bit of marrow from this conversation.

“Heather Anderson,” Brody says. “She graduated with us.”

“Oh right. I remember her, too. But come on. Surely they aren’t the *only* two single women in Silver Creek. The town isn’t that small.”

“It is that small, Miss World Traveler. You haven’t lived here in a decade.” He turns his head frontward, so it’s tilted up toward the ceiling and closes his eyes. “Your memory is probably cloudy after so long away,” he says, a teasing lilt to his words. “Just wait. Another few weeks of seeing the same twelve people every day, and you’ll get what I mean.”

“There are more than twelve people living in Silver Creek.”

He opens one eye. “Fine. But they’re all already married.”

I chuckle. “Every single one, huh?”

“Lennox has been trying to get me up to Asheville with him, says dating is much more happening up there, but . . . I don’t know. I just haven’t been feeling it lately.”

“Dating in general?”

“It’s stupid, right?” He lifts his arms up and props them behind his head, giving me another welcome glimpse of his biceps. “I mean, I know what I want, and the only way I’m going to find it is by dating. But the whole scene makes me tired.”

“If only a woman could fall out of the sky and land in your lap.”

He grins. “That’d be perfect. You’ve been all over the world. I’m sure you have extensive resources. Think you could hook me up? Find a woman willing to settle for small-town life in Silver Creek?”

I don't know if he's intentionally sending me a message, but I'm hearing one loud and clear anyway. His life is here. And no matter how much attraction zings down my spine whenever I'm around him, unless I want to make my life here too, there isn't a future for me and Brody. Not as anything but friends. A twinge of sadness flits through me at the thought, but that's crazy. *So crazy*. I can't even begin to think about what a life in Silver Creek would look like for me.

I sigh, a little piece of me wishing I had the same dream. There's no doubt I want to be in love, but I've never imagined myself settling down. A house, two kids, a white picket fence, a dog. Brody had that growing up. Of course he believes he'll find it for himself.

But me?

I had parents who were divorced before I started preschool. A mom who resented me every day of my life and resented my father for taking me away every summer and every holiday. Family has never been a safe space for me.

"What about you?" Brody asks. "Are you happy?"

I'm not sure there's anyone else in the entire world who could ask me that question without making me feel like they'll judge my answer. But Brody has only ever wanted the truth from me. And he's always held whatever that truth is with the same quiet confidence he's done everything in life.

"No," I finally say. "I don't think I am."

He frowns, but I shake my head and reach out and touch his arm. "That sounded worse than it is. I've *been* happy. But I'm tired, you know? I keep feeling like there's something else out there, something I haven't found yet and . . . I don't know. I've been all over the world, Brody. What could I possibly still need to find?" I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. "Maybe that's why I was willing to come back to Silver Creek. It's what they say when you're lost out in the woods, right? You're easier to find if you're sitting still?"

He nods. "That's true."

“Maybe if I sit still for once, what I’m looking for will find me.”

“Maybe you’re looking for a *home*, Kate. A family.”

I drop my head onto my knees. I want his words to be true, but all I do is shrug. “That’s always been your dream, Brody, not mine.”

Something in his eyes dims, but the warmth in his expression doesn’t change.

“Hey.” He reaches over and pats my knee. “You want to go with me to pick up my dog?” It’s an abrupt subject change, but I’m happy for it.

“You have a dog?”

“A basset hound named Charlie. He stayed up at Stonebrook while I was gone.”

“I saw him! He was sleeping on the porch when I went to visit.”

Brody sits up. “He probably didn’t even flinch when you walked by, did he?”

“He was laying in the sun. Kristyn wondered if he was dead.”

Brody chuckles. “That sounds about right.” He stands and holds out a hand. “Come on. There’s a Gator out back. We can take the trail through the woods, just like old times.”

I slip my hand into his, noting way too easily how warm and strong it feels against mine, and let him pull me to my feet. He holds my hand for a beat longer than I expect him to, giving it a little squeeze before he finally drops it.

Is he *trying* to unravel me? Because he is absolutely unraveling me.

“My shoes are still in your yard,” I say. “Unless you happened to grab them on your way inside.”

He grins. “Yeah. No. I was not in the frame of mind to stop and pick up *anything*.”

We split up long enough for me to retrieve my shoes and pull my bike onto his porch. He's already got the Gator running when I find him out back. I climb in beside him, noting how familiar this all feels. The sun-warm vinyl against the backs of my legs. The way the setting sun slants through the treetops, bathing the world in evening light. The buzzing of the cicadas as their song moves like a rippling wave through the trees.

Maybe I don't need my own house to feel like I'm home. Maybe all I need is Brody.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brody

I DO NOT WANT to have a conversation about how right it feels to have Kate sitting next to me on the Gator, her shoulder pressed against mine.

I half-heartedly try to convince myself it's only because we did this so many times as kids, but my good sense—the good sense I swear I had locked and loaded before Kate showed up at my house—has abandoned me completely. Two hours in her company, and I'm already trying to think of ways I might convince her to stay.

I also don't want to talk about how very *naked* I was for part of that two hours. I don't even want to think about it, though hearing Kate say she enjoyed the view might have been worth the embarrassment.

I've never been so grateful for all the hours I've spent at the gym. And by gym, I mean my garage. Silver Creek is too small to have an actual gym, so I've slowly been adding equipment to my garage. Perry and now Lennox both work out with me and have contributed as well, adding extra weights and a second bench. It doesn't compare to something you'd find in a bigger city, but it's better than nothing.

When we pull up to the farmhouse at Stonebrook, Charlie is right where I expect him to be, lounging on the front porch. He



lifts his head and woofs a greeting right as Olivia steps out the farmhouse door, with Monica, of all people, beside her.

Monica smiles when she sees me, but then her gaze shifts to Kate and her expression morphs into more of a grimace.

“Who’s that?” Kate asks as I cut the ignition.

“That’s Monica.”

“The Monica you used to date? *Oh*. Right. I guess I recognize her. Is this going to be weird?”

I eye her carefully. “Is there a reason for it to be weird?”

Kate smirks. “Well, I *did* see you—”

“Ahhhp—” I cut her off. “Do not finish that sentence. We’re not talking about that ever again.”

She presses her lips together. “Understood.”

Charlie reaches me before Olivia and Monica are down the stairs. I lean down and scratch his ears. “Hey, boy. Did you miss me? I hope you behaved.”

“Are you kidding? I don’t think he could misbehave if he tried,” Olivia says from the bottom of the porch steps. “He hardly *moved*.”

“Congratulations, Charlie.” I give him another good scratch. “You are officially the laziest basset hound in the history of all basset hounds.”

Monica approaches the Gator and offers an awkward smile.

“Hey, Mon,” I say casually.

“Hey. I was dropping some wedding cake samples off from the bakery. For mom. She was too busy to bring them over.”

I nod. She doesn’t really owe me an explanation. She and Olivia are friends. But with what’s happened between us, I understand her wanting to give me one.

“When did you get back in town?” she asks, sending Kate a questioning glance.

“Earlier this afternoon.” Kate is crouching down, petting Charlie, and Monica is obviously watching her. “You

remember Kate,” I say slowly. “She’s back in town for the summer.”

Monica smiles. “How could I forget?” She lifts her hands in mock celebration. “The dynamic duo back together again. Yaaay.”

Her *yaaay* is so unenthusiastic, Olivia snorts with laughter.

To Monica’s credit, her next words feel a lot more genuine. “Welcome home, Kate. I love your Instagram.”

Her words surprise me. I had no idea Monica followed Kate’s Instagram. Come to think of it, I don’t think we ever even talked about Kate, which feels weird since Monica just called us the “dynamic duo.”

Kate pushes her hands into her pockets. “Thanks. Brody says you teach theater at Green River Academy.”

“Yeah. He was super helpful in showing me around the school.” She shoots me a quick glance. “We’ve gotten to be really good friends.”

*Oh, geez.* I don’t like where this is going.

But Kate is unfazed, responding with a huge smile. “He is a really good friend. The best, actually. The kind who will help you break into your house when you get locked out. The kind that just—”

“Hey!” I say, stepping toward Kate and wrapping an arm around her shoulder. I give her an extra tight squeeze. “That’s great. Good friends. We’re good friends. We can drop the subject now.”

She smirks, her expression teasing. “Are you concerned about how I’m going to finish my sentence, Brody? I’m talking about friendship. That kind of *naked* awareness you have with people you’re really close to.”

I press my lips together, my shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “You have got to stop.”

Kate’s laughing now too, and I don’t even care that Olivia and Monica are looking at us like we’re crazy.

Finally, Olivia clears her throat. “Okay. This is fun, but Monica was just saying she needed to head out.” My sister shoots me a disapproving glare and I sober up quickly. I’m not trying to rub anything in Monica’s face, but I can see how it might look like I am.

“Right. Sorry. It’s good to see you, Monica.”

She smiles, a sadness in her eyes that wasn’t there before. “Walk me to my car?”

I glance at Olivia who gives me a tiny nod of encouragement. “Kate, want to walk over to the goat barn with me? Penelope is whelping for the first time right now. Tyler and Mom are with her, but I’d like to check on her too.”

“Penelope from TikTok? Famous Penelope?”

Olivia nods. “That’s her.”

“Oh, yes. Definitely,” Kate says. “Let’s go see her.”

Tyler is the one who made Penelope famous. His first summer working on the farm, before he and Olivia got married, he started posting videos of her following him around as a newborn, and her social media presence blew up almost overnight.

“I’ll be that way in a sec,” I say as they turn and head toward the barn.

I fall into step next to Monica. “Sorry about earlier,” I say to her. “That thing with Kate. It was sort of an inside joke, and I just—”

“You don’t have to explain,” Monica says. “Honestly, it was probably good for me.”

We reach her car, and she pulls out her keys.

“I’m not sure I follow.”

She lets out a disheartened chuckle. “I guess I was still holding out hope. I thought if I was around enough, you might eventually change your mind about us. But seeing you with Kate?” She shakes her head. “Brody, it’s so obvious. I can’t compete with her.”

“We’re just friends,” I say reflexively. “We’ve always just been friends.”

Both statements are true no matter how much I dislike them.

Monica leans against her car. “Maybe, but don’t pretend that’s how you want things to be. It’s almost as obvious now as it was back in high school.”

I don’t know about *now*, but there’s no denying what Monica observed back in high school. “I was pretty obvious, wasn’t I?”

She chuckles. “If she was the earth, you were her moon.” She nudges my shoulder. “Did you ever tell her?”

“No,” I say quickly. *And I never will.* “Some things aren’t meant to be, Mon.”

“Like you and me.”

At least she’s finally getting the picture. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “Nah, don’t apologize. I meant what I said, Brody. I *do* consider you a good friend, which means I want you to be happy. I just saw what it looks like when you light up for another person. That makes it really easy to recognize you don’t light up for me.”

I want to laugh at the hopeless picture she’s painting. “I don’t know what this says about my future, but it can’t be good.”

“Why? If not her, then who?” It’s a surprisingly simple summary of my conflicted emotions.

“Exactly.”

“And you’re sure it *isn’t* her?”

“No. But I’m pretty sure *she’s* sure it isn’t her.”

Monica looks at me, a frown creasing her brow. “Well, she’s an idiot then.”

She opens the door to her car and tosses her bag into the seat. “You know, you could just tell her now,” she says, like

it's the easiest suggestion in the world. "She can't really make a choice if she doesn't know all her options, right?"

We say goodbye, and I head up the hill toward the barn, thinking on Monica's suggestion.

I could just tell Kate how I feel. How I felt? How I might feel again?

But Monica is proof enough that sometimes, the spark isn't there. What if that's the way Kate feels about me? I know she loves me. But if she doesn't feel the same spark I do, I can't make her feel it any more than Monica could make me feel it for her.

And honestly, after all these years, if she *did* feel a spark? Wouldn't we have figured it out by now? I want to believe that seeing her this time has felt different, like there's a new tension that's never been there before. But I don't trust myself not to be seeing it only because I'm hoping for it.

I find Kate and Olivia with Mom, all three of them leaning against the half-wall that separates the corridor from Penelope's stall. Tyler is in the stall with Penelope who is still up and moving around, if a little awkwardly.

Mom pulls me into a hug, giving my shoulders an extra squeeze. "Welcome home. How was the trip? How was it spending all that time with Perry?"

I swallow the half-dozen sarcastic answers that push into my brain—Mom is not the right audience for those—and offer her a genuine smile. "It was great. I'm glad I went with him."

"Oh, I'm so glad. Olivia told me about the school board meeting. Do you feel ready?"

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. "As ready as I can be, I think."

She cups her hand around my cheek. "You just speak your truth, Brody. They'll see it. They'll recognize the good you're doing."

"Thanks, Mom." I lean against the wall next to Kate and look in on Penelope. "How's she doing?"

“So far so good,” Tyler says. “The vet was just here, and she said everything is progressing like it should.”

“You called the vet already?” I ask. Mom has helped countless goats with their first whelping. Normally she only calls the vet if she senses trouble.

Mom looks at me over Olivia’s head. “New parents,” she whispers.

“I heard that,” Tyler says, and Mom grins.

“I think he’s more worried about Penelope’s baby than he is our own,” Olivia says.

Tyler jumps up and moves over to Olivia, leaning forward and giving her a kiss that lasts long enough for me to feel like I ought to look away. “That isn’t even a little bit true,” he says.

Beside me, Kate breathes out a sigh.

“Hey, help me with something really quick?” Olivia asks.

I eye my sister, wondering what she could possibly need, but when she takes off down the corridor, I follow.

She stops at the stairs that lead up to the hay loft. “I just wanted to check on you,” she says. “How is it having her home again?”

“Well, it’s only been about four hours, so how about you ask me next week?”

She rolls her eyes. “You’ve known about her being in town longer than that though. And she showed up on the trail? Were you totally stunned?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Yeah. I was—it’s still weird, honestly. Like any minute she might disappear, and I’ll realize it’s all a dream.”

Her expression shifts, her eyes filling with worry. “Brody, I know you. If you spend time with her, you’re going to start to hope. You know you will.”

My jaw tightens. “I’m fine, Liv. I’ve got things under control.”

She lifts an accusatory eyebrow. “That display I saw earlier with you two laughing like a bunch of teenagers didn’t look like it.”

“It was an inside joke.”

“Oh, right. That makes it totally innocent.” She props her hands on her hips, obviously warming to the subject. “You should have seen her when I asked her about your glow up. She was all flustered and talking over herself in this weird squeaky voice. I think she might be attracted to you.”

“I thought you were telling me *not* to get my hopes up.”

“That’s just it. When I thought Kate was never going to love you back—”

I grab her arm and tug her further down the corridor. “You want to talk a little louder, Liv?” I whisper yell. I glance down the corridor, but all of Kate’s attention is still on Penelope.

“When I thought Kate wasn’t going to love you back,” she repeats, her voice softer but no less stern, “I worried about you because unrequited love really sucks. But you know what sucks more? Experiencing love, and then having it ripped away.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying if Kate is actually into you, and you go for it, and it’s the most amazing summer of your life, blah, blah, blah? Do you honestly think she’ll stay? I’ve never known anyone so bent on getting out of town, Brody. Even if she does feel something, I don’t see her changing. I don’t see her *staying*.”

“I appreciate the concern. I do. But I’m fine, Liv. You have to trust me on this. I’m fine.”

She looks about as convinced as I feel, but what would she have me do? I’m not going to *not* spend time with Kate.

“Listen to me. I want you to have what I have. And I know you want that too.” She grips my arms, just above the elbow, giving them a quick squeeze. “But I don’t think Kate is that

person for you. You are worth staying for. You deserve someone who sees that.”

“Hey, Liv!” Tyler calls from Penelope’s stall. “Can you come film this? Stuff is starting to happen.”

Olivia takes a deep breath, her gaze lifting to the ceiling. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I have to go livestream the birth of my husband’s grand-goat for his millions of TikTok followers.”

I smile. “And I’m the one you’re worried about?”

“Just be careful, all right? And think about what I said.”

I nod, but she’s already stalking down the corridor, pulling out her phone.

I know there’s validity to Olivia’s point. And I can’t fault my family for worrying. But as Kate and I take Charlie and drive back home, it isn’t Olivia’s warning that I’m thinking about. It’s Monica’s encouragement and Olivia saying Kate was flustered when they talked about me.

I’m doing exactly the thing my family doesn’t want me to do. I’m starting to hope.

Maybe things can be different.

Maybe she’ll change her mind.

Maybe this time ... she’ll stay.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Kate

I'M SITTING IN THE middle of my grandmother's bedroom.

Boxes are everywhere. *Stuff* is everywhere. When I say stuff, I really mean *stuff*. Like the most random stuff you could possibly imagine. Mom did try to warn me, but I had no idea what I was in for. She probably breathed the biggest sigh of relief when I agreed to come.

As if she can sense me thinking about her, my phone rings and my screen lights up with my mother's picture.

I brace myself like I always do for our chats and answer the call. "Hi, Mom," I say, infusing my voice with false cheer.

"How's it going?" she asks. "Have you met with the realtor yet?"

"Nice to talk to you too," I say. "How's Florida?"

She sighs. "Hot, like always. Sorry. I didn't mean to be short. How are things going?"

"They're . . . going," I say. "I just found a new-in-the-box wooden moose that poops M&Ms when you lift his tail."

"I wish I could tell you that's going to be the weirdest thing you'll find."

"It's almost as weird as the breast pillow," I say. "Listen to this." I reach across the couch and pick up the box, reading

from the side. “Are you a side sleeper? Does the weight of one breast falling onto the other get you down? Then this pillow is for you.”

“Well that doesn’t make sense. Your grandmother’s boobs looked like tube socks with pennies at the bottom.”

“Mom, gross. I do not need that visual.”

“So I take it you’re not in the talking with the realtor stage yet?”

“Not even close,” I say. “Mom, there’s stuff here that was ordered years ago. Decades, even. How did I not realize all of this was happening?”

“She always loved the Home Shopping Network. You remember all her jewelry, and that rhinestone tracksuit she used to wear everywhere. She ordered that off the television. Maybe you were too busy with your friends to notice.”

I take a deep breath, slow and easy.

“It didn’t get really bad until after you left home,” Mom adds as if to soften her earlier comment. This is the way she tends to roll. It feels like our relationship is a constant push and pull of her luring me closer only to knock me upside the head with one of her snide remarks, then soothe the wound with more kindness. It feels like whiplash.

“Mom, I know you said I should sell some of this stuff, but I don’t even know where I’d start. I’m just going to donate it. Is that okay? Selling it feels like a lot of work. This isn’t pawn shop kind of stuff.”

“How about the internet? One man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Isn’t that what they say? You do owe me this, Katherine.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and silently count to five. “Okay, Mom. I’ll do the best I can.”

“Good. But save the moose. Fremont might like it.”

I still haven’t met mom’s new husband in person. I’ve heard him in the background of our phone conversations a few times and seen the pictures that Mom has put on Facebook. I know

he's a retired commercial real estate agent, he has three grown children who live in Florida but has no grandchildren, he has a bad—and I mean *bad*—combover, and he drives a bright red Miata that, at least in pictures, looks much too small for his lanky frame. And apparently, he likes moose. Or candy? Maybe both?

I give my head a little shake. I'm giving this way too much thought.

"I'll save the moose for Freemont," I say. "Mom, can I ask you a question?"

I give myself a mental pat on the back. I'm being direct. I'm asking questions. I'm engaging in conversation instead of making assumptions.

"All right," Mom says.

"Why did you leave Silver Creek? I thought you loved it here."

She immediately scoffs. "Well, that's a funny question coming from you, Miss I-don't-need-this-town-and-I-don't-need-you. *You* left everything behind. Why shouldn't I?"

I shake my head. "Mom, that's not—" I take another deep breath. "You know what? Never mind. Forget I asked."

It doesn't matter that I said those words when I was sixteen and spitting mad over Mama grounding me instead of letting me go up to Stonebrook to stargaze with the Hawthornes. She reminds me every time we talk how much I don't need her.

It only ever makes me want to prove her right.

"I gotta go, okay?" I say.

"Wait, Kate. That was ... I'm sorry. Let me try again."

I pause. An apology is new. We've had this conversation what feels like a thousand times. But she's never apologized. "Okay."

"I did love Silver Creek. I *do* love it. But I also love Freemont."

*But you didn't love Dad?* The question sits on the tip of my tongue, but I can't bring myself to ask it. It's why they divorced, after all. Dad wanted a life that was bigger than Silver Creek, and Mom refused to leave.

"I'll keep you posted on my progress with the house, okay?"

"All right, dear. But don't rush on my account. Enjoy yourself. Enjoy Silver Creek."

"I thought you called to see if I'd met with the realtor yet. Aren't you anxious for me to finish?"

"Me? No! The opposite, actually. Freemont even thinks we could wait until fall to sell. Benefit from all the leaf-lookers that come through town. How's the Subaru driving?"

I . . . am so confused. Mom called me home to get the house ready to sell, but now she wants me to take my time and enjoy Silver Creek? I would understand her wanting me home if she was also here, but she hasn't even mentioned coming up from Florida.

"Katherine?" she says. "Did I lose you?"

"No, I'm here. The car is fine. It's driving great."

"All right, well, carry on. I'll call you next week."

I hang up the phone and look around the cluttered room, feeling slightly derailed from my conversation with Mom.

A few things in the house still feel familiar. The 1992 edition of Encyclopedia Britannica that lines the bottom of the bookshelf in the corner. The plastic tablecloth on the kitchen table. And of course, my childhood bedroom is exactly like I left it. But everything I've pulled out of Grandma Nora's closets? Digging through her dresser drawers? It feels like I'm rooting through someone else's belongings.

It makes me feel detached. Somehow separated from my own life. This was my *home* for almost eighteen years, but it doesn't feel like it. My eyes catch on the crocheted afghan that's draped over the back of the sofa. Okay. *Some* things feel like home.

I brush at my nose, the dusty air finally getting to me, then sneeze three times in quick succession. A sense of déjà vu washes over me. My grandmother never sneezed just once. It was always three times. A feeling steals over me, like a whispered exhale, a feather touch, and I sense my grandmother near. The sensation is gone as quickly as it came. So quickly, I might have imagined it.

Either way, I feel a renewed sense of purpose. I might not have much motivation to make my mother happy. But I can do this for my grandmother.

A knock sounds on the front door before Brody's deep voice calls out. "Kate? Are you home?"

"In here," I call. I wipe away the tears pooling in my eyes—when did I become a person who cries without warning?—and stand up, glancing down at my clothes to make sure I'm presentable.

Brody appears in the bedroom doorway with a bag of something that smells so delicious, my stomach immediately rumbles loud enough for him to hear it all the way across the room.

He grins. "Hungry, Kate?"

"Always." I inhale deeply, picking up notes of ... cilantro? Cheese? "Especially for ... tacos?"

He holds up the bag. "It's your lucky day."

"Oh, bless you," I say, stepping around the bed.

His gaze tracks around the room. "You've been busy."

"I feel like I've barely made a dent. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've found."

He tilts his head toward the kitchen. "Come eat and tell me about it."

I follow him gladly, uncertain if I'm lured more by the delicious smell of tacos or by the look of him in his shorts and polo shirt. Sunglasses are hooked over the collar of his shirt in a way that makes him look effortlessly cool.

“When did you stop wearing glasses?” I ask as I slip into one of the metal chairs that surround the kitchen table.

He slides a white Styrofoam container toward me. “I still wear them sometimes. For close work. When I’m at school, mostly. But I don’t need them for everything like I used to.”

“Oh, that’s right. The Captain America super serum would have fixed your eyesight.”

He drops into the chair across from me. “Very funny.”

I smirk. It will never not be fun to tease Brody about his new physique. Especially now that I’ve seen so much of it. Not that I’m spending any time at all remembering Brody’s physique.

And by any time at all what I really mean is always. *All* the time.

Except, that’s not entirely true. I’m not only thinking about his body, beautiful though it is. I’m also thinking about how good it feels to be around him. How much I look forward to seeing him when we aren’t together. I haven’t even been back in Silver Creek three weeks, and he’s almost always on my mind.

I knew I’d want to see him.

I didn’t expect to want to see him *all the time*. In the six days I waited for him to get off the trail, I must have walked up and down the road twenty times wondering which house was his, anticipating the moment I would see him again.

It was just dumb luck that when I did happen to see him again, all he was wearing was a towel.

I lift the lid of my to-go container to reveal the most beautiful tacos I have ever seen. I breathe out a sigh. “I love tacos so much.”

“I know you do. You’ve never had these though. There’s a stand next to the river school—I swear in the summer I eat there at least three times a week—and they’re better than anything I’ve had anywhere else.” He pauses, his hands

hovering over his tacos. “Try one. I want to know what you think.”

It only takes one bite to decide these are the best tacos I’ve ever had. And I have eaten a lot of tacos in a lot of different countries.

“Oh my word,” I say in between bites. “How do they make these? What do they do differently?”

Brody grins. “I’ve been trying to figure out the same thing. I think it has something to do with how they season the meat, but they won’t tell me. I’ve even taken Lennox, hoping he could figure it out, but he’s stumped too.”

“They’re really similar to tacos I had in Mexico City.” I take another huge bite. “Seriously. These are fantastic.”

“And you can get them right here in Silver Creek.”

I look up to see Brody’s gaze fixed on me.

“Small towns aren’t all bad, right?” he says as he lifts up his taco as if offering a toast. “Sometimes they have tacos.”

His comment is so pointed, I have to wonder if he means anything by it. Is he trying to sell me on small towns? I take another bite. It’s working. Few things woo me quite as well as an exceptional taco.

“Tell me what you’ve found,” he says. “Unearthed any family secrets?”

“My mother was right about my grandmother’s addiction to the home shopping network. Are you interested in an eighteen-inch dancing Santa Claus? He sings *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* and everything.”

“Man. My Santa collection is already full. But thanks for thinking of me.”

I grin and put down my taco so I can reach for my laptop. “Actually, there’s something else I want to ask you.” I open the laptop and navigate to the YouTube channel I had playing the entire time I was eating breakfast this morning. I press play—I’ve already got the video cued up to a certain spot—and turn the laptop around so Brody can see. “Is this you?”

He leans forward and slowly starts to nod. “That’s last year’s race.”

The video is twenty minutes of racing kayakers making their way through Gorilla—a section of Class V rapids in a part of the Green River known as the narrows. The river drops one hundred and seventy-six feet per mile through the narrows, eighteen of which happen in Gorilla. The channels of frothing whitewater, steep descents, and massive boulders look like an actual death wish to me, but what do I know?

That I won’t ever kayak the narrows. That’s what I know. With utter and absolute certainty.

I’ve been watching videos about the race all morning, my shock that this is something Brody participates in growing by the second.

In the video, most of the racers are upside down in their boats by the time they reach the bottom of Gorilla. Even though I’ve watched it more than once, and I know they always roll back up, I still hold my breath when Brody’s boat tips downward and the whitewater swallows him up. But then he emerges, paddle propelling him out of the swirling water at the base of the falls.

“That was an intense ride,” Brody says as I pause the video.

“Intense? I consider myself pretty adventurous, and you couldn’t pay me to get anywhere near that water.”

“To be fair, you’re watching the carnage reel,” Brody says. “It’s all the shots of people getting thrashed.”

“You didn’t get thrashed.”

“But I rolled for a second.”

I click over to a different window. “Have you seen what it says on the race registration page?”

I shift the screen closer and point to the bolded message at the top of the section titled *racer information*. “We do not recommend participating in this event,” I read out loud. “Then further down the page, it says, ‘Seriously, racing is not a good idea.’ Why does anyone sign up for this thing?”



He cracks a smile. ‘That’s to keep the casual kayakers from signing up. You have to know what you’re doing to race the narrows.’”

“And you know what you’re doing,” I say, a statement, not a question.

“I mean, I’m not winning. But I’ve raced twice, and I finished both times without swimming.”

“What does that mean?”

He grins. “It means I stayed in my boat.”

“Oh, right. So that’s mostly what was happening in the carnage reel.”

“It’s common. The narrows are brutal. It’s easy to flip, and when the water’s churning, sometimes the only way to get out of the rapid is to wet-exit.”

*Wet-exit.* It’s the second time I’ve heard him use the term. “Right. Which is what the problem kid *didn’t* know how to do when he flipped upside down?”

“Exactly.”

This makes twice now that I have listened to Brody talk about kayaking while eating delicious Mexican food. I am not complaining. It’s the best kind of research. In fact, I’d like *all* new information to be delivered in this manner from now on. Delicious tacos? *Check.* Sexy teacher? *Check.*

There is no topic I will not find interesting in this setting.

“So you’ve raced the Green twice? Have you ever competed anywhere else?” It was only after I started watching the video coverage of last year’s race that I wondered about Brody racing. I checked the race results for his name, gasped out loud because *oh my word he could die doing this thing*, noted his bib number, then studied the video until I found him. The bib number is the only way to identify any of the racers, unless you know what color boat they’re in because they’re all wearing helmets and gear that covers every inch of their skin. The race happens in November, which means *it’s cold.*

“A few times,” Brody says. “But nothing has quite the same vibe as the Green Race.”

“The crowd in the video. Is it always that crazy? Cowbells, horns, and everyone is holding a beer.”

“Like I said, the race has a pretty unique vibe.” He holds my gaze. “You should come if you’re going to write about it. Or come just to experience it. I think you’d dig it.”

“It’s in November?” Something stirs in my gut. Do I want a reason to stay in Silver Creek longer?

He nods. “On the fifth.”

“Are you racing again?”

“Most likely.”

A tiny thrill at the thought of seeing Brody race in person snakes through me, even as I shake my head. I still can’t believe the Brody sitting across from me, the cool and confident daredevil kayaker Brody, is the same Brody who was my best friend.

“Four thousand sixty-seven divided by three hundred eighty-one,” I say.

He stills, his eyes darting around like they always do when he’s calculating.

“Ten point six seven four five four zero . . .” He pauses. “Do you want me to keep going?”

I laugh and shake my head.

He eyes me, his expression curious. “Where did that come from?”

I press my hands to my cheeks. “I don’t even know. I guess I’m trying to make sure it’s still you.”

He closes up his to-go container and carries it to the kitchen trashcan. “I’m not following.”

“I don’t want to seem like I’m beating a dead horse here, I’m still having a hard time imagining high school Brody

doing something like whitewater kayaking the Green River narrows.”

He leans against the counter and crosses his arms. “What *can* you imagine high school Brody doing?”

“Calculus,” I say without missing a beat. “Maybe some chemistry? And of course, all the work on the farm. But even then, you were always trying to *science* the work, looking for ways to make things more efficient.” I stand up and throw away my lunch trash. The kitchen isn’t very wide, so when I lean on the counter across from him, our feet are almost touching.

“That’s all true. But then you left.” He reaches out and nudges my foot with the toe of his shoe, his hands pushed into his pockets. There’s a vulnerability to the way he’s holding himself, his eyes focused on our feet. Finally, he looks up. “Funny thing. You leaving is actually what made me decide I wanted to run the narrows in the first place.”

A new tightness squeezes around my heart. “Why?”

He shrugs. “You were so brave, Kate. Eighteen years old, and you packed your bags and took off like you owned the world. You weren’t afraid of anything. I was hiking along the river with Flint one afternoon a couple weeks after you left, not far from Gorilla, actually. Five or six kayakers came through while we watched, and I thought to myself, *I want to do that*. I wanted to do something different, something scary. And whitewater kayaking looked scary.”

I shake my head. “So then you just ... did it?”

He chuckles. “Not exactly. I told Flint what I was thinking, and he told me I was crazy and would probably get myself killed. But something happened out on that hike, and I couldn’t forget it. So I called Triple Mountain and signed up for a beginner course.”

“And now you work for them?”

He nods. “I didn’t do anything but Class I or II rapids that first summer, but that was all it took to get me hooked. Every

summer since, and whenever else I can swing it, I've been on the water."

"All because of me?" I tease. I nudge his toe back. "I always worried you didn't think about me at all when I was gone." I wrap my arms around my middle, willing myself to push through the vulnerability and be honest. "Then after that last time, after I ignored you for so long, I hoped you didn't. I didn't think I deserved it."

He holds my gaze a long moment, then extends his hand, palm up. Without even thinking, I slip my hand into his and let him tug me across the kitchen and into his arms. His hug is warm and strong, and I melt against his chest as his arms wrap fully around my lower back.

It could be a hug between friends.

It *is* a hug between friends. But my senses are on high alert anyway, cataloging every single detail. All the places our bodies touch, the way they're sparking with heat.

(Is he also sparking? Is the sparkiness only happening inside of me?)

Then there's how good he smells. How *strong* he feels. I have never enjoyed a hug like I am enjoying this hug.

"I thought about you every day, Kate," he says softly into my hair. "I never stopped thinking about you."

*Oh.*

*Oh*, that confession is doing strange things to my heart. I close my eyes and bite my lip, imagining for the tiniest moment what it would be like to look up, to catch Brody's gaze and press my lips against his.

But then he shifts, standing fully upright, his hands on my arms as he bodily moves me back across the kitchen. He clears his throat and looks away, taking a giant step away from me. He's further away now than he was *before* the hug.

That was . . . I only just stop myself from leaning down and sniffing my armpits. Maybe I smell bad? I've been digging around in closets all morning. I could absolutely smell like

mothballs and old people. Or maybe he felt me sparking and realized he was giving me the wrong impression? But then, he did say he never stopped thinking about me.

I am ... so confused. “Urrb.” And also tongue-tied, apparently.

“I should go,” Brody says at the exact moment I say, “Thanks for lunch.”

“No problem,” he says while I say, “Right. Of course.”

We both laugh, and it dispels a tiny bit of the tension hovering between us. Except, why is there tension between us? There has *never* been tension between us.

“I found a KitchenAid hand mixer,” I blurt out. “Still in the box. It’s never been used.”

*Oh no.* It’s happening. My woodchipper word-slinging. I’m nervous again, and Brody isn’t even naked this time.

Brody gives me a funny look. “What?”

I nod. “It’s baby poop yellow.”

That at least makes him crack a smile. *I’m funny when I’m nervous! Hooray!* “Kate, what are you talking about?”

I feel like I’m hovering above this entire interaction, watching me make a fool of myself, but I’m too far in to turn back now. I sneak past him and lead him into the living room where I go to the pile of kitchen supplies amassing by the fireplace. “I checked online, and this thing hasn’t been sold since 1987. It was a QVC exclusive.” I heft the box and carry it to Brody. “See? Isn’t that color the worst?”

“It’s very 1987,” he says. “I bet you could sell it. I’m sure there are people who love stuff like this.”

“Yeah, maybe. Mom wants me to sell as much as I can. But I’m more likely to take it all to Goodwill and donate it. Maybe it’ll make someone’s day to find vintage KitchenAid. The hard part is that I keep uncovering things I’ve never seen before. Mom said most of the weird shopping happened after I left home, but some of this stuff has obviously been here longer than that.” I hold up the baby poop yellow mixer like I’m

submitting evidence in a courtroom. My words are tumbling now, like water gushing down a mountain creek after a thunderstorm. “How did I live here and not know about all this stuff? It’s weird. And stressful. And I feel . . . guilty?” I drop the mixer onto the couch with a thud and rub my hands across my stomach. “I’m all smarmy inside. Like I’m the one at fault for not knowing about all this stuff. Then I talk to my mom, and she reminds me that I *should* feel guilty and I just . . . what if she’s right? I think I was a terrible daughter, Brody. Or a terrible granddaughter. Or both.”

“Hey.” He sets his hands on my shoulders, and they have an immediate grounding effect. Somehow in the last ten seconds, my nerves-induced word-slinging turned a ridiculous narrative about outdated kitchen appliances into a therapy session. “You aren’t a terrible daughter,” he says. “Or a terrible granddaughter. It’s just stuff. So you didn’t know what your grandmother stored in her closets. That doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“But I feel like it does. I loved her. But I’m not sure I *saw* her. Not like I should have.”

“You’re not remembering clearly, Kate. You were always sweet to Grandma Nora. She loved you. I know she loved you.”

“Then why does my mother use my *lack* of relationship as ammunition every time we talk?”

“Because your mother is insecure and making other people feel small is how she makes herself feel better.”

My eyes go wide, and Brody winces. “Sorry. That was probably too honest.”

“No, no you’re right. I’ve just never heard anyone say it so concisely.” I shake my head. “I just feel like I’m remembering all the times Mom tried, and I pushed her away. I was never here, and when I was here, I lived in my room. I thought I was so much better than her, that she was . . . I don’t know. I just know I said some really awful things.”

“You were a kid. We all say stupid stuff when we’re teenagers. But she said some stupid stuff too.”

My earlier conversation with Mom is evidence enough of that, but it still helps to know that Brody remembers Mom’s negativity too.

I almost hug him, but I’m still buzzing from the last time his arms were around me. I might short a circuit somewhere if I try again so soon. “This is hard, Brody,” I say softly. “Makes me understand why I ran away for so long.”

His grip tightens, squeezing my shoulders with gentle strength. “Nah. No more running. You can do hard things. We’ll do it together.”

I smile. “You’re good to me.”

“Tomorrow after your kayaking lesson, I’ll bring my truck over and we can haul a load of stuff over to Goodwill. Maybe getting rid of some literal junk will make the figurative feel lighter.”

I had momentarily forgotten that my first kayaking lesson is in the morning—amazing for how much time I’ve spent thinking about Brody.

Brody hiking.

Brody kayaking.

Brody lounging on an innertube tanned and shirtless.

*Fine.* I made that last one up, but after I broke into his house the other day, I have *all* the visuals I need to imagine him just about anywhere.

But tomorrow we will not be lounging. And I won’t just be observing. A pulse of anticipation fills me, radiating all the way out to my fingertips. I have never shirked a challenge, but whitewater kayaking might be the thing that breaks that record. “You aren’t going to make me kayak the narrows, are you?”

Brody chuckles. “Not if you paid me.”

I look up sharply. “But I *am* paying you. These are lessons through the school. I have to pay you.”

He scrunches his brow as if considering. “Mmm, technically through the school? Okay. But I’ve talked to my boss, and Griffin is fine with me teaching you on the side. Either way,” he says, dropping his hands from my arms, “we won’t be anywhere near the narrows.”

I lift my hands to my arms, missing the warmth of his palms. “And you won’t mind coming over to help me haul stuff even after we spend the morning together? You’ll be with me all day.”

He grins. “Just like old times.” He glances at his watch. “I really do have to go now though. I’ve got a class at two.”

I nod and follow behind him as he moves to the front door. He pauses on the porch and slips on his sunglasses. He looks back at me and smiles. His truck is behind him, a bright red kayak lashed to the back, and his smile is wide and warm. “Tomorrow?”

“I don’t deserve you,” I say with a little head shake. I always felt that way growing up. Brody was always the one taking care of me. Talking me down after fights with my mom. Helping me study my way through difficult classes.

And here we are again. I blustered my way back into town and picked up right where we left off. Needing him. Making demands of him.

He says I inspired him to do something scary, something brave. But I don’t feel very brave right now. I feel like walking out the front door and catching the next flight to New Zealand.

I bet there’s something I could write about in New Zealand. The Māori culture is beautiful, and the food—I could absolutely write about the food.

*But Brody isn’t in New Zealand.*

The thought gives me pause.

For years I’ve lived without him. Traveled without him. Ten years we’ve been living separate lives.



Why does it matter now?

I don't know the answer. I only know that it does.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Brody

IT HAS BEEN A very long time since I've been nervous about teaching anyone how to kayak. I've worked with beginners. With pros who are only looking to improve their technique. With teenagers who think they're too good to listen and kids who ask questions faster than I can answer them. Whenever he can swing it, Griffin gives me the clients he suspects are going to be more difficult because he says I keep my cool better than any of the other instructors.

All that experience, that evidence, means I shouldn't be nervous. I should be chill. Cool as a cucumber. Easy, breezy. I've got this. If I can talk down a ten-year-old who is terrified of getting water up his nose and teach him how to successfully wet exit out of a rolled kayak, I can handle today.

I can handle—

Kate climbs out of her mom's Subaru wearing a black bikini top and a pair of gym shorts slung low on her hips. A gauzy white button-down hangs loose on her shoulders, unbuttoned, making it easy for me to notice every inch of her curves. She is toned and tan and I . . . cannot handle today.

Griffin steps up beside me holding the waiver Kate will need to sign before I can take her out on the water. He isn't making me charge her, but he's smart not to turn his back on this part.

“How’s the flow?” I ask, my eyes still on Kate.

“River’s at ten inches,” he answers. “2000 CFS, medium flow—”

I can tell the moment Griffin’s eyes have shifted to Kate. His words stall in his throat, and he slams the waiver into my chest. “Whoa,” he says under his breath as Kate nears.

*My thoughts exactly.*

“You’ll introduce me, right?”

My jaw clenches, and my hand curls into a fist before I realize what’s happening and snap myself out of it. I intentionally shake out my shoulders. I do not have the right to react like some jealous animal. *Me Tarzan. Kate my woman. You jump off cliff.* Maybe I ought to start pounding my chest. Throw in a grunt or two for good measure.

“Ohhh,” Griffin says. “Got it. When you said she was your best friend, what you really meant was she’s your best friend . . . who you’re in love with.”

“I’m not,” I say almost reflexively. How many times have I given the same answer? Claiming I’m *not* in love with Kate is second nature at this point.

“Right. That’s exactly why you tensed up like you were ready to punch me for expressing interest.”

“I’m not,” I say again. “I’ll introduce you.” I swallow. “You can—”

Griffin holds up his hands, stopping me. “I really can’t, man. I respect you too much. Whatever is happening right now, you don’t need me getting in the middle of it.”

Kate finally makes her way into the shop, a bag slung over her shoulder.

“Hey,” I say when she’s finally within earshot.

She smiles wide. “Hey.” She looks around appreciatively. “This place is great.”

There isn’t much to Triple Mountain. The main building is simple. Metal walls on a concrete slab, with enormous doors

that, when they're open—and they almost always are—make the place feel more like a picnic pavilion than an actual building. In the winter when it's cold, Griffin pulls the doors closed, but in the summer months, it's easy to leave them open. This close to the water, and with the shade of the tree cover overhead, we don't have to worry about it getting too hot.

“Griffin gets the credit for that,” I say, tilting my head toward the counter behind me. “Come on. I'll introduce you.” I hold up the paperwork. “And there's some stuff for you to sign before we get you geared up.”

Griffin is polite but distant as he explains what Kate is signing. “I know the drill,” she says casually as she scribbles her signature across the bottom of the form. “Basically, if I manage to drown, it isn't your fault.” She eyes me. “Or Brody's.”

Griffin smiles. “You'd have to work pretty hard to drown on Brody's watch. I'd trust him to take my grandma down the rapids, and she can't swim.”

“I guess I'm in good hands then.”

*Oh*, I want her to be in my hands, all right. Every inch of her. In my hands. In my arms. In my living room sprawled on my couch while we watch movies and talk about nothing. In my bed when I wake up in the morning. In my kitchen when I fix my morning coffee. I want all of it. All of *her*.

I was a fool to ever think I could survive having her around all summer and come out on the other side unscathed. Kate Fletcher is my kryptonite. I was done for the minute she sent that first text before my hike. Before she ever set foot back in Silver Creek. “Come on. I've got all our gear ready to go.”

She waves goodbye to Griffin, and after storing her stuff in one of the lockers that line the back wall, she follows me outside. “Is there not anyone else in the class?” she asks as she looks around. I intentionally picked a time for Kate's lesson when the school wasn't busy, so there isn't anyone else around.

I lift an eyebrow. “Were you expecting there to be?”

She shrugs. “I guess I was. I just assumed there would be a bunch of us learning at once.”

“Even when we have a group, we never have more than three kayakers to one instructor. But today, you get me all to yourself.”

She shoots a saucy grin over her shoulder. “Do you talk this way to all the girls?” She bats her eyelashes playfully.

I run a hand across my face. If she even had half a clue what she’s doing to me ...

I gather up our gear, handing her a couple of paddles to carry, then lead her down to the river where I’ve already left our kayaks.

“Am I going to be cold?” Kate asks, looking down at her exposed torso. “I know you said to bring layers just in case. I have a base layer I can put on if you think I’ll need it.”

I glance toward the sky, but where we’re standing, it’s a futile gesture. I can only see tiny slivers of blue through all the trees. But I double and triple-checked the forecast. There’s no threat of rain, and where we’ll be on the river, there will be enough sun to keep us comfortable. “You’ll be fine without it.”

“What about my shoes?” She holds up one foot, her well-worn Chaco sandal on display. I can only imagine the places she’s been in those shoes. “I don’t have any water shoes, but I figured since these strap on, they would probably work?”

“They’ll work great.” I pick up her PFD. “Here. Let’s do this first. Before we get in the kayaks, I want you to swim around for a minute and make sure you’re comfortable in your PFD.”

“Is that the same thing as a life jacket?” She takes it and slips it on, and I step closer so I can adjust the fit.

“Not quite. Well, more like yes and no. All life jackets are personal flotation devices—PFDs—but not all PFDs are life jackets.” My fingers graze along her abdomen as I check her straps and make sure she’s in securely, and a trail of goose

flesh erupts across her skin. My fingers still for the briefest moment—it's *my* touch she's reacting to—and I clear my throat. "A PFD allows for more mobility, which is necessary when you're kayaking. It *will* keep you afloat, but it won't necessarily save your life. It's just meant to assist you when you need it, so don't get cocky."

"Got it. No cockiness allowed," she says. "But I promise the last thing I'm feeling is overconfident."

I pause. "Is the great adventurer Kate Fletcher feeling nervous about getting in a kayak? Honestly, I'm surprised you've never done this before. It feels like you've done everything."

"Not everything. I did go on a three-day kayak trip through the Southern French Alps, but the water was calm the whole way. There were no spray skirts or helmets involved."

"Actually, that experience should help you a lot. Kayaks can be pretty tippy. If you're used to feeling the way your body movements can rock them, you're better off than a lot of beginners."

After a few more minutes in the water, making sure all of her gear fits comfortably, I walk Kate through the steps necessary for a wet exit, should she find herself upside down once she's inside her kayak. She's a quick study, so within a few more minutes, we're in the water, Kate in her kayak, me standing in the water beside her.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

She nods. "So far so good. But I have a feeling you're getting ready to flip me upside down."

I grin. "I'll be right here the whole time. This first time, I don't want you to worry about trying to exit. Just hold your breath and try to relax. Count while you're underwater and if you can swing it, go all the way to ten, even twenty seconds. When you want to come back up, or when you get to twenty, whichever comes first, reach up and tap the bottom of your boat, and I'll flip you back up."

She looks at me, her blue eyes open wide, and takes a slow breath. “So I’ll be hanging upside down in the water.”

I nod. “But I’ll be right here beside you the whole time.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

She makes it about fifteen seconds before her hand lifts out of the water and taps the boat. I flip her back up and she takes an enormous breath, but she’s smiling, and my shoulders relax the tiniest bit. A lot of students panic at this point. It *is* a weird sensation to be suspended underwater upside down. When people can’t get the hang of it or relax enough to even *try* to get the hang of it, I usually end up taking them downriver without a spray skirt so if they flip, they just fall out of their boat. It works fine for Class I, maybe even Class II rapids, which is all we ever do with beginners anyway.

But I’m glad Kate is doing so well. I imagine taking her with me to run more serious rapids, sharing this part of my life with her, and a pulse of longing fills my gut. I don’t *need* her—or any woman I date—to love whitewater kayaking like I do. That doesn’t mean it wouldn’t be fun if she did.

“What’s next?” Kate asks, her eyes bright. “An actual wet exit?”

“Yep. This time, you’ll flip, and then go through the steps to get yourself out of the boat and swim.”

“Right. I can totally do it.”

“Walk me through the steps one more time.” I rest one hand on her kayak, holding her steady.

She scrunches her nose as she thinks. “First, I lean forward.”

“Right.”

“Then I grab the ‘oh crap’ strap and pull.” Her hands move to the strap that will release her spray skirt. “Then I relax my knees, pull them into the middle of the boat, and push myself out.”

“You got it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Saying it while sitting here perfectly comfortable and doing it while underwater are entirely different things.”

“You’re going to do great. Remember, you only need four seconds. And you just hung upside down for fifteen without freaking out. You have plenty of time. Just relax, think through the steps, and do what you’ve got to do.”

She takes another steadying breath. “You’re a good teacher, Brody.”

I smile. “You’re a good student. You ready?”

She manages the wet exit on her first try, popping up out of the water a few feet away from her kayak, a jubilant expression on her face. “I did it!”

“And on your first try.”

She swims forward and stands up beside me. “Can we go down the river now?”

“Easy, turbo. We’ve got to do a little paddle work first. Let’s make sure you can steer your way through currents. *Then* we’ll go down the river.”

Kate is a natural. Her previous kayaking experience and her natural athleticism make the next part of our lesson easy, and soon we’re heading downriver together. She could be pretending just for me, but it seems like she’s having a really good time. I don’t miss how much I want her to be having a good time.

She doesn’t swim until the final—and the largest—rapid. When her kayak flips at the top of the rapid, I hold my breath and wait for her to appear. When she doesn’t surface after five or six seconds, I start paddling toward her boat, panic rising in my chest. But then her helmet breaks the surface, followed by her toes. She’s doing exactly what she should be, nose up, toes up as she swims the rapid.

Once she reaches the bottom and I know she’s safe, I paddle over to retrieve her boat and hoist it up to drain the water it collected when she flipped. With most of the water drained, I



maneuver the boat around to a shallower part of the river where it will be easier for her to get back in.

Kate watches, an expression on her face I can't quite interpret. "You okay?" I say when I'm close enough for her to hear me.

"Did you seriously just lift a kayak full of water over your head? While sitting in your own kayak?"

"You can't get back in a boat full of water."

"But how did you even . . . do your *muscles* have muscles? That was crazy."

A pulse of pride fills my chest, but I'm too worried about her to dwell on it. "How are you? You had me a little nervous when you flipped."

She lifts her arm and cranes her neck like she's trying to see the back of it. "I'm okay. I scraped my shoulder when I pushed out of the boat, but I don't think it did any real damage. There's no blood anyway."

Her toughness, her resilience, stirs something deep in my gut. No, that's not really accurate. My gut is already a churning mess of attraction and desire and a billion other feelings. But seeing Kate face something she's never done before head-on, to see her flip and stumble and still want to get back in the boat? It makes all those churning feelings crystallize into something specific. Something tangible.

Once we're out of the water, we lounge on the banks of the river eating lunch. Griffin will be down with the truck to haul us, and our kayaks, back up to Triple Mountain within the half-hour.

"So what did you think?" I almost don't need to ask her. I've been doing this long enough, I've learned to recognize the excitement that buzzes in people who really loved the experience.

Kate's still humming, energy pulsing right under her skin. She smiles wide at my question. "I want to do it again. And can we do bigger rapids? I mean, not *big big* rapids. Nothing

like what I watched in the videos of the Green Race. But something bigger than what we did today. Will you take me?"

*Yep.* I'm totally done for. This woman has me.

"I would love to take you." *And give you anything else you ever want.*

"It was seriously such a rush. I felt so fast. And in control. It's easy for me to understand why you love it so much. And also why your program is so successful. You really are a good teacher."

"You better stop. Anymore, and my ego will be too big to fit in my boat."

She collapses back onto the grass and lifts an arm up to shield her eyes. "Nope. If your ridiculous muscles haven't done that yet, my compliments definitely won't."

I relax back beside her, propped up on my elbows. I tilt my face up and close my eyes, enjoying the warm sun on my water-chilled skin.

"Do you ever wish you could stay somewhere forever?" Kate asks softly.

My mind immediately goes to her staying in Silver Creek forever. "What, like . . . in a certain place?"

She turns her face to look at me. "More like, in a moment. Like this one."

"Yeah?"

She smiles. "I just did something really fun. And now my belly is full. The sun is warm." She pauses. "The company is good."

There is so much I could say. So much I want to say. But nothing I say is going to change the fact that Kate is only in town for a couple of months. When her grandmother's house is ready to sell, she'll be off on her next adventure. Her next assignment. The very nature of her career depends on her always leaving places. I swallow the words clogging up my throat. "It's nice to have you back, Kate."

Back in the parking lot of Triple Mountain, I walk Kate to her car. She retrieves her cell phone from her bag and holds it up. “Can we take a selfie next to the kayaks?”

“Of course,” I say. “But I also took a few photos of you while we were on the river. I’ll text those over later.”

“What? When did you do that?”

“It’s just part of the whole experience.”

She rolls her eyes. “I forget the rapids we did are like splashing in a kiddie pool for you. Of course you had time to take pictures. Did you file your taxes too? Do your grocery shopping?”

“Just stop it and get in here for a picture,” I say, pulling her close to me. My hand wraps around her waist, heat searing my fingertips when they press against her bare skin. She lifts the phone and tries to capture us both in the frame, but it’s obvious after a couple of attempts that with my longer arms, I should be the one holding the camera. I take it from her with my free hand, and she snuggles even closer into my side, one hand pressed against my chest.

I take a half-dozen different pictures—having a sister has taught me that one single photo is never enough—and hand the phone back to her. It buzzes as it passes from my hand to hers and I watch as Kate reads the notification. She pauses, her face shifting from shock to surprise to something that looks like excitement? But then she looks toward me and it’s like a mask slips into place, her face shifting into an easy neutral.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. Sure. That was just ... a work thing.”

My heart drops to my toes. “Your next assignment?”

“Um, sort of? Not exactly.” She looks over my shoulder. “It’s hard to explain. Hey, you should probably help Griffin unload those kayaks.”

I follow her gaze to where Griffin is lifting the boats off his truck to store them on the rack behind the gear shed. He doesn’t really need my help. There are only two boats, but I’m

smart enough to recognize this as the dismissal it's meant to be. "Okay," I say evenly. "You still want some help hauling some stuff to Goodwill this afternoon?"

"Yes!" she says a little too eagerly. "Absolutely. I would love the help."

She gives me a quick hug and then she's in her car and gone.

I move wordlessly to Griffin's truck and grab the last of the gear out of the back. He slides the paddles into a giant storage barrel while I hang the PFD Kate wore over a line to dry.

"For what it's worth, man, it definitely looks like there's something going on between you two."

"There's not," I say. I slide the helmets onto a shelf. "I told you we're just friends." A wave of weariness washes over me. I am so tired of telling this story.

Griffin eyes me warily, like I'm a tiger about to pounce. I *feel* like a tiger about to pounce. Like I'm full of energy—*emotion*—I can't channel into anything useful. It's maddening.

I turn to leave, then pause. "Hey, thanks for today," I say to Griffin. "I appreciate it."

He nods. "Anytime, man."

I head toward my truck, pausing when Griffin calls my name. "Brody."

I turn around.

"You okay?"

I nod and lift my hand in acknowledgment. It's not like I haven't played this game before.

Spend time with Kate.

Fall more in love with Kate.

Remember that Kate isn't mine to love.

And repeat it all again the next day.

Still, the way she looked at me today, the way she—

I stop the thought and shake my head. Even if the email she isn't telling me about isn't one that will send her off again, some other email or phone call or shiny new idea eventually will.

Just like it always does. Like it always has before. Like it always will.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kate

*OHMYLANTA* seeing Brody lift a kayak over his head was something.

Let's just state the obvious right up front. Seeing a man combine talent with hard-earned skill then top it all off with a blatant display of raw masculinity? Good grief. I was tempted to flip out of my kayak a dozen more times just to watch him do it again.

I would have had fun kayaking today with anyone as my guide. Once I got over the fear of flipping upside down, the thrill of moving through the rapids so quickly was intoxicating. It made me feel powerful. Capable.

At the same time, I was constantly aware of the water's dominance, how much it would control me if I stopped paying attention even for a second. The excitement of that contrast? I could get used to that.

But there's no denying it was *more* fun because Brody was the one teaching me how to do it. I loved watching him love what he was doing.

He was perfect.

Patient. Attentive. Steady. Strong. He was everywhere I needed him to be at the precise moment I needed him to be there. It's his job, I know. But it felt like more than that.

Then we got back to my car and my phone . . . and I got an email.

An unbelievable email.

A wholly unexpected email.

Here's the thing. I am not the world's greatest travel writer. I am scrappy and resilient and very good at getting myself into places where unusual stories are found. That's the only thing that makes me great at my job. I don't have an English degree. I never attended college at all. The only thing that qualifies me to keep doing my job is the fact that I've been doing it for so long. I have earned my place at the freelance table.

But I'm not qualified for real jobs.

Real jobs are given to people with letters after their name. MFAs and PhDs. Even a BA is better than what I've got. Because what I've got is nothing. And, newsflash, when you're dealing with a pool of applicants, nothing is the very easiest qualification to beat.

Imagine my surprise when the above-mentioned email tells me *Expedition*, travel magazine based out of London, wants to bring me on as an associate editor. They trust my eye, they say, and think I'll have valuable input regarding the reach and scope of the entire magazine. The email ends with an invitation to visit London the first week in July, complete with a tentative itinerary they'll formalize as soon as I agree.

It's been hours since the email arrived, and despite my best efforts to keep myself busy, I haven't been able to focus on anything else. Well, aside from Brody bench pressing a water-logged kayak like it was built out of feathers and air.

I'm in the shower now, expecting Brody any minute to help haul off a load of my grandmother's belongings. My thoughts are so disjointed, bouncing like a ping pong ball between Brody and London and fancy job offers, I can't even remember if I washed my hair before applying conditioner. Or maybe I conditioned twice? I sigh and reach for my shampoo. I have got to get a hold of myself.

*Pros and cons, Fletcher. Let's break this down like a normal, logical person.*

The email came from a senior editor named Marge whom I've worked with before. The magazine has purchased a few of my articles, and they've always been great. That goes in the pro column. Working with good people is important.

But I can't even imagine what being on staff full time would look like.

Having a consistent salary would be amazing. And insurance. And benefits! I've never had benefits. That's three more for the pro list.

But the email made it clear this was not a position I could handle remotely. They want me on location, in the office with everyone else, collaborating, contributing.

I suppose I should feel flattered. I am flattered.

But London?

I've been there, of course, but I've never considered living there full time. To be fair, I've never really considered living *anywhere* full time.

But I have been feeling like I'm ready for the next thing in my life. I told Brody if I sit still long enough, maybe that thing will find me. Could this be it? A tiny sliver of hesitation wiggles into my brain. Do I want this to be it?

I cut off the shower and reach for a towel, pausing when I hear footsteps downstairs. My heart trips, then steadies when I recognize the cadence of Brody's walk.

I wrap a second towel around my hair and step into the hallway long enough to shout down the stairs. "Hey! I'll be down in a sec," I call.

"No rush," he calls from . . . the kitchen? He sounds like he's in the kitchen. "Can I eat whatever this is on the counter?"

I grin. As soon as I got home from kayaking, I dealt with my buzzing energy by making a batch of homemade granola bars. "Go ahead!" I yell. I hurry to my room and throw on a pair of leggings and a sports bra, then layer on an oversized



sweatshirt. I toss my hair into a messy bun, pausing long enough to consider whether I want to put on mascara. Highschool Kate would not have felt like she needed makeup around Brody.

I pick up my mascara, then drop it back on the bathroom counter.

Things aren't different now, are they?

I pick it back up.

*Can things be different if you're moving to London?*

"Gah!" I say out loud, tossing the mascara down one more time. "Get a hold of yourself, Kate."

I flip off the light with a huff and turn to head downstairs, my face bare.

Brody is leaning against the kitchen counter, his mouth full of granola.

"These are amazing," he says through a large bite.

"I'm glad you like them. I got the recipe from Preston's little sister."

Brody frowns and grumbles. "I don't like them as much anymore."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, come on. Preston wasn't that bad."

"I'm sure he wasn't."

I grab a granola bar off the cooling rack where I left them and break it in half. "Like it or not, he was a big part of me getting my start."

My long-distance high school boyfriend Preston, who I met while visiting my dad in New York, was a trust fund kid with endless resources. After graduation, when I was finally ready to see the world, he would have paid my way to anywhere I wanted to go, then tag along just for the fun of it. My pride wouldn't let me freeload so blatantly, so I always insisted on paying my own way. But it was hard to refuse when we traveled to places where his family owned property. His father

is some sort of real estate mogul and has villas and beachside condominiums all over the world.

For a while, Preston thought himself a photographer, and so we worked together. He took the pictures, while I wrote the articles. But then my stuff started selling, and his didn't. That was the beginning of the end of our relationship.

"How did you guys break up?" Brody asks, his face so neutral, it can only be intentional.

I frown and take a bite of my granola bar. My relationship with Preston was going nowhere long before he called things off. We got comfortable with each other, interacting more like friends than two people who were actually in love.

"He called things off," I finally say. "But the fact that I didn't really care probably tells you everything you need to know about our relationship. The hardest thing was that he was basically my only traveling companion, and then, all of a sudden, I was alone. For pretty much the first time." I jump up and sit on the counter so my legs are dangling. "What about you? Any serious girlfriends?"

He gives his head an easy shake. "Not really. Well, one, sort of. Jill. We dated in college. It lasted a year, and then we broke up."

"Wow," I say, my tone thick with sarcasm. "Sounds like you really liked her."

He grins. "What do you want me to say? There just . . . wasn't anything there."

It shouldn't make me happy to hear him say it. I have no claim, no right to concern myself with his dating life, past, present, or future.

"I get it. That's how it felt with Preston too. Our relationship always felt like it had an expiration date. Still, I learned a lot. I think I have a better idea now of what I really want in a boyfriend."

Brody's body is very still, only his jaw moving as he chews the last of his granola bar. "Or a husband? Do you think you'll ever want one of those?"

An image of me walking down Piccadilly in London, arm in arm with a dapper British man wearing shiny dress shoes and a Burberry wool fedora dances through my mind. It's so ridiculous and wrong, I almost burst out laughing. I think I *do* want a husband at some point, but I don't think I'll find him in London. At least not one who looks like that.

"I hope so," I say.

Brody lifts his eyes to meet mine. He holds my gaze for one beat, then two. "I just hope when you do, you find someone who really sees you, Kate. I'm not sure Preston ever did that."

He's not wrong about Preston. I was always more of a convenience to him than someone he truly wanted to know. But nobody has ever seen me like Brody does. He's setting the bar pretty high. "Like you do?"

He shrugs. "You like to sell yourself short, but you deserve to be with someone who recognizes how great you are."

My heart squeezes uncomfortably. "More like how *needy* I am," I say with an eye roll. I clear my throat. "Speaking of, care to haul a bunch of enormous boxes out to your truck?"

I give myself an internal salute for steering the conversation away from the vulnerability Brody is so casually demanding. *Excellent deflection, soldier. Well done.*

Yes, I told him I'm working on being more vulnerable, and I am. But I'm *here*. Talking to Mom. Cleaning out Grandma Nora's house. My bandwidth is a little thin at the moment. I don't have it in me to tackle something as deep as "the happiness I deserve." Mostly because I don't know how to separate it from the happiness I *want*. Assuming I can even figure out what that happiness is. Or answer the question of whether those two things can even be the same thing.

"Just tell me what to carry," Brody says, pushing himself away from the counter.

I lead him into the living room where several boxes sit near the front door. I was up late last night after Brody left, packing up everything in the living room and hall closets, minus the

wooden moose for Fremont, and a stack of things I begrudgingly decided I can try and sell on eBay.

I also created a pile of things I think Mom will want to keep. Or I will if she doesn't. There's an entire shoebox full of photos from when I was a baby, and a box twice that size of photos of my parents, pre-divorce. I barely scratched the surface of that box, even after spending a solid hour sitting in the middle of the floor, pictures spread out around me.

I reach for a specific picture I left on top of the box. "Actually, I wanted to show you this first." I hand Brody the photo and watch as he studies the images of me, a year old or so, holding onto my mother's fingers and taking what looks like my first step. I'm smiling a toothy grin at whoever is holding the camera. Grandma Nora, probably. But there's something else I noticed about the photo, and I'm wondering if Brody is going to notice the same thing.

His face shifts, his brow furrowing. He *does* notice. He looks up. "This looks like my front porch." He points at the fuzzy tree line in the background. "See the trees? The way they're spaced? I mean, they're smaller. Obviously. But . . . that's weird." He hands the photo back.

"I thought the same thing. I'll have to ask my mom who lived there. Maybe they were friends?"

"Yeah, maybe. All the houses on this street are at least fifty years old, mine included. Someone had to live there."

I put the pictures back, making a mental note to call Mom and ask about the house in the photo as soon as I have the fortitude to do it. Which, let's be real. After our last conversation, it may be a while.

I point out which boxes need to go in the truck, and Brody grabs the first one. I follow behind him, then climb into the truck bed to shuttle the boxes into the back. None of them are particularly heavy, save the one holding the encyclopedias, so it's easy enough to shift them around and fill the bed.

"That's the last one," Brody says five minutes later, lifting the last box onto the tailgate.

I slide it forward, situating it next to the others, then move to hop down from the truck. “Looks like we had just enough room.”

Brody lifts his hands up to help me down, and I lean onto his shoulders, letting him guide my jump with his hands on my waist. Only, when I hit the ground, he doesn't let go.

And I don't let go.

We just stand there, arms around each other, staring into each other's eyes.

The afternoon sun is slanting low in the sky, hiding behind the trees. Birds are chirping overhead, cicadas are humming, a lawnmower is running somewhere in the distance. All of it fades to a distant hum, faint compared to the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

Brody was always the one who could read my mood just by looking at me, detect how I was feeling faster than anyone else. But right now, he's the one with his emotions crawling all over his face. He's just as conflicted as I am. Because let me tell you, I am *conflicted* with a capital C.

There is something deliciously right about being in Brody's arms. Here, I am safe. Comfortable. Completely at home.

But I also feel *charged*. Like all my nerve endings are on fire, except the heat is exhilarating instead of painful. I am aware of every inch of him, every place that he is pressed against me. I feel the touch of each individual finger, the gentle strength of his grip on my waist branding me, claiming me.

I *want* that. To belong to him.

But I also can't shake the feeling that I am not who Brody needs or deserves. Brody needs someone in Silver Creek. He needs someone reliable. Someone who isn't a flight risk. I've never stayed in one place long enough to know if I'm even capable of being reliable. I've come close a time or two. Stayed somewhere long enough for people to start needing me around. And that's generally my cue to start looking for my

next adventure. Leaving is easier than being needed. It's easier than *needing*.

Kristyn is always telling me that my parents' failed relationship doesn't have to dictate my own ability to have a successful one. But that's easier said than done. And Brody is too important to me to risk what we have because I *might* be capable.

*But you want this man.*

*And you can see it in his eyes. He wants you too.*

For a split second, I see myself in London, not with a Burberry-wearing Brit on my arm, but with Brody beside me. The image morphs, and I see us in Silver Creek. *Together* in Silver Creek.

*Maybe. Maybe it could work?*

Brody's expression shifts, a question clear in his gaze, and I breathe out a sigh. I close my eyes and lean my forehead against his chest. If I'm reading Brody right, and he's feeling as much attraction as I am, I can't give him false hope. I've made a lot of progress in the past year. I'm *here*. I'm *trying* to stop fleeing whenever things get hard. But I didn't anticipate what's happening with Brody right now, and I'm not prepared for the onslaught of emotion he brings. Even though I know it's a cliched line that people use too often, I really do feel like Brody is too good for me. He deserves *more* than me.

What we have—this friendship—is good and true and pure. Reliable in exactly the way it has always been. That's all I can trust right now. Anything else might risk hurting Brody, and that's the last thing I want to do. But I also can't pretend like this isn't different. We hugged all the time growing up. But we didn't stand like this. We didn't *hold* each other.

"Kate?" Brody's voice sounds close to my ear. He doesn't have to speak the question for me to hear it. He's wondering, questioning the meaning behind my sigh.

I step out of his arms. "We should get this stuff hauled away. Goodwill is going to close soon."

He stands perfectly still for a long moment, his arms hanging loosely by his sides. He turns away from me and runs a hand through his hair before clearing his throat. “Right. You’re right. Do you want me to just drive it over?” He pulls out his keys. “I don’t mind.”

“No, I’ll go with you. I can’t ask you to haul it all by yourself.” I don’t want us to part ways like this. With this weird tension between us. An idea pops into my head. “What if I buy you dinner as a thank you? Burgers and fries out on the ledge?” It was our favorite way to celebrate random accomplishments back in high school. Perfect scores on calculus tests for Brody. *Passing* scores on calculus tests for me. Brody’s swim team wins. My promotion to editor-in-chief of the high school newspaper. Our college acceptance letters, even though I turned down all of mine.

Brody smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “I would love that, but I have to meet with the school board tomorrow night. I need to get home so I can figure out what I’m going to say.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s so much more important.”

His jaw visibly tenses, but he doesn’t say anything in response.

“Come on. Let’s just go then. We can have dinner another time.”

We don’t talk much as we drive over to Goodwill, but at least the silence isn’t uncomfortable. It never has been between us, but after our *prolonged* hug, I’m surprised it isn’t. I’m also surprised Brody can’t hear my thoughts for how loud they are inside my head. We’re talking full-on bellowing. Punctuated with ringing cowbells and the off-rhythm snare drum that used to mess up every marching band performance at the high school.

My brain is replaying the hug on a repeated loop. The sound of his voice as he whispered my name. The way his hands held me snug against him.

A part of me wants to talk about it. Be the one brave enough to acknowledge that our relationship feels different than it ever has before.

But then, what would be the point?

Talking about it won't change anything.

Brody's life is here. And my life is . . . well, it's nowhere right now.

I'm a boat without an anchor. I used to love that sense of freedom, the ability to go wherever I please, but suddenly it feels like I'm missing my compass, too.

If there's nothing to hold me steady, and nothing to show me where I need to go, how am I supposed to feel anything but lost?

When Brody eases back into my driveway, he leaves the engine running and makes no move to get out of the car. I don't know what I expected, but I'm still sad the night is ending this way. I reach for the door handle but pause when Brody says my name.

"Kate," he says gently, tenderness in his voice.

I turn to face him.

"Sunday. Do you want to have breakfast with my family? We normally have dinner on Sundays, but Olivia has a thing Sunday night, so this week, it's breakfast instead."

Something in my heart flickers back to life. "I'd like that."

"And I was thinking we could go on a hike after? The Pulliam Creek Trail will take us down to the Green River, and from there we can hike the narrows."

I nod my agreement. I would stroll the grocery store aisles with Brody if he asked me to, but I would love to see the narrows, so this is an easy yes. In fact, I'd go just about anywhere he asked me to go. For the first time, I realize that if he asked, I might even be tempted to stay.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brody

THERE ARE MORE PARENTS than I expect at the school board meeting. More parents than I've ever seen at *any* school board meeting. The Carsons must have gone all out in rallying their troops. There are a few people I recognize as former students or parents of former students who are there in support of me, and my parents and Olivia and Perry are sitting near the door, but other than that, the room is mostly full of people who are looking at me like I make a regular habit of throwing puppies into raging waterfalls.

Dad called an hour ago while I was on my way over and reminded me that no matter what the other side claims, I have truth on my side. I want to believe it's enough, but these people look like they're out for blood.

Principal Talbot approaches me, a grim look on his face. He motions me over to the edge of the room and places a steadying hand on my shoulder. "All right. Here's what I know. Two school board members have kids in their extended families who have been a part of the kayaking program in the last five years and are behind it one hundred percent. Two more are neutral. But one—Nancy Shelbourne—she's going to be the one to cause the most trouble. She's got a list of questions a mile long, and every single one of them is going to try and discredit you."

“Why do I feel like I just stepped into the pages of a John Grisham novel?”

John smiles. “Look. You know no matter what happens to the kayaking program, you’re still a part of the Green River Academy family. Your job isn’t on the line here. You understand that, right?”

I nod along, though the idea of my job without the kayaking program isn’t near as fun.

“We’ll get through this. Just speak the truth. The Carsons talk a big game, but they live with their kid every day. They know how much of an idiot he is.” John winks and moves back to his seat just as the meeting is called to order. I move toward my own chair on the front row, but not before a flash of dark hair coming through the back door catches my eye.

Kate is here.

We make eye contact, and she smiles, warming me from the inside out. No matter the uncertainty of our current relationship, there’s no denying how much better I feel now that she’s here.

My phone vibrates as I sit down, and I pull it out of my pocket to see a text message from Kate.

*Kate: You’re going to be great. I believe in you like I believe in Cherry Coke and buttered popcorn.*

I chuckle as I slip my phone back into my pocket. Whenever I would help Kate cram for tests, Cherry Coke and buttered popcorn were our preferred study snacks. Right before her tests, I would always text her the exact message she just sent me.

I love that she remembers.

I love that she’s here.

But how much longer will she be around?

The first half of the meeting is routine stuff. A reading of the minutes from the last meeting, suggested changes to the annual budget for the upcoming school year, an update on the new science curriculum adopted by the state of North

Carolina, and now, finally, the concern of a number of local parents regarding the safety of the whitewater kayaking program at Green River Academy.

Diane Carson is given the floor first.

It takes all my focus to keep my breathing steady as she lists grievance after grievance regarding her son's "experience" in my program. His questions were ignored. He was constantly overlooked. He was belittled and made fun of by other students. And then his "very life was compromised when he was allowed in the water without supervision or instruction, in a boat that held him captive and inhibited his ability to free himself."

The board president thanks Mrs. Carson, then turns the time over to me. "Perhaps, Mr. Hawthorne, you could give us a rundown of what happened from your perspective?"

I stand and nod, then move to the podium Mrs. Carson just vacated. I clear my throat. "Thank you for the opportunity to be here. If I could, before getting into the events of the afternoon in question, I'd like to provide a brief summary of the safety measures in place within Green River Academy's whitewater kayaking program, as well as my qualifications as an instructor. I believe it's important context."

The board president nods. "Very well."

I grip the edges of the podium and launch into a recitation of everything that qualifies me to be on the water as an instructor. CPR certification. Level five senior instructor certification from the ACA. Certification in swift water rescue. Ten years' experience as a kayaker and five years' experience as an instructor. "It's also worth noting," I add, "that per industry recommendations, we maintain a three-to-one instructor-to-student ratio at all times. I take the kids out in groups of six, with one additional instructor present."

A woman sitting near the end of the table at the head of the room raises her hand. Her nameplate reads Nancy Shelbourne. "I'm sorry, there are *two* instructors? Does that mean the district is paying for an additional instructor to make this program functional?"

“The other instructor is a volunteer,” I say. “He is fully credentialed and certified, but he’s just a volunteer.”

She scoffs. “Seems like a big commitment for someone unassociated with the school. Could it be he isn’t as invested as he should be? Maybe he doesn’t always pay full attention?”

I clench my jaw. The only way out of this is to admit something I haven’t even admitted to Principal Talbot. It’s above board. On paper, anyway. I double and triple-checked to make sure. But he still isn’t going to like it. “The volunteer who works with me is Griffin Hughes. He’s the owner of Triple Mountain Paddling School, where I am employed during the summer months as a kayak instructor. During the two eight-week seasons when the academy program is active, I volunteer to cover one of Griffin’s weekend classes at Triple Mountain so he has the time to volunteer for me.”

Nancy Shelbourne purses her lips and huffs, but the board president holds up a hand, stopping her. “Let me get this straight,” the president says. “You teach for free at a business here in Silver Creek just so you can have an additional instructor present within your school kayaking program?”

“That’s correct.”

“Can I ask why? Is it required by law that your teacher-to-student ratio remain three to one?”

“Not required, but it is *my* rule. And Triple Mountain’s rule. In my experience, in order to keep everyone safe, one instructor shouldn’t be in charge of more than three kayakers at a time.”

“And you never approached the school about paying Mr. Hughes for his time?”

“With all due respect, ma’am, I’m not aware of any public education programs that are rolling around in extra funding. It already took a herculean effort to acquire the gear required to get the program launched through donations and other education grants. This seemed like a small thing I could manage on my own.”

She nods. “The point is, you sacrificed your personal time and energy *just* to keep the kids *more* safe?”

I almost downplay her claim, minimize what I’m doing, because, in my mind, it isn’t really a big deal. But that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t look like a big deal to everyone else. It can only help. “Yes,” I say simply. Might as well own it.

She smiles. “That’s what I thought.”

I spend the next ten minutes walking everyone through what happened the afternoon Dillon Carson *claims* he almost drowned. “There is inherent risk in any sport,” I say, my heart rate finally slowing down. “A football player understands when he puts on his pads and hits the field that he might get injured. But he also knows he’ll have a better shot if he listens to his coach instead of running at the biggest guy on the opposing team just because he thinks he can take him on his own. My kayakers understand that when they’re in the water, they might get hurt. And they’re more likely to get hurt if they get cocky or behave stupidly. But if they listen, if they pay attention, I will do everything in my power to keep them safe.”

At this point, I’m a little sad I’m *not* in a John Grisham novel. I’m ready to throw in a *Ladies and Gentleman of the jury* in my best Matthew McConaughey voice, slam my fist against the podium and declare my innocence. *Innocent, your honor! I am innocent!*

But nothing’s being declared tonight. They won’t hold a vote until later in the summer after they’ve had time to fully “deliberate and evaluate” the particulars of the situation. After Nancy Shelbourne launches half a dozen questions at me, everything from where I earned my teaching degree to whether I see myself as a lifetime citizen of Silver Creek—I still have no idea what that question is about—the meeting ends and that is that.

John Talbot gave me two thumbs up from across the room before offering a quick salute and disappearing out the door. He’s got kids at home, and the meeting ran long, so I don’t fault him for taking off. We’ll be in touch about everything soon enough.

My family surrounds me next, offering me hugs all around before Mom pulls me off to the side. “You did good, Brody,” she says gently.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I’m surprised that Nancy Shelbourne nutso didn’t ask for your ACT scores, though I kind of wish she would have.” She grins. “That would have shown her, wouldn’t it?”

I glance over Mom’s shoulder to where Kate is standing at the back of the room, waiting for me.

Mom follows my gaze. “Oh, I see how it is.”

I shake my head. “Sorry, I—”

“Oh, hush, child. I know I can’t compete. But I do wonder . . .” Her words trail off, and she tilts her head toward Kate. “How are things? How are *you*?”

She’s asking me a thousand questions with those three words. I try and infuse as much confidence as I can into my response. She’ll worry about me anyway, but I still give it my best shot. “We’re friends, Mom.”

She narrows her gaze. “I feel like there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

There’s a ton I’m not telling her. I tested the waters last night, gave Kate an opening, and she shut me down. I’m pretty sure she was feeling something, so I’m not ready to give up completely, but I’m also not ready to share what’s happening with my family. “There’s nothing to tell. I promise.”

She breathes out a sigh. “Oh, honey. I don’t believe you in the slightest.”

I lean forward and kiss her on the cheek. “Thanks for caring. And thanks for being here. It means a lot.”

By the time my family leaves, Kate and I are the last two people left in the room. I stop right in front of her. “Hey.” I slip my hands into the pockets of my khakis. “Thanks for coming.”

She nods and smiles. “I wouldn’t have missed it. You did great, Brody. Truly an A-plus performance.”

I grin. “I’ll take it.”

She loops her arm through mine, and we walk out to the parking lot and head toward her mom’s Subaru. “You look nice all dressed up,” she says. “I like your tie. And it’s nice to see your glasses again.”

“I thought they would make me look more like a teacher.” I take them off and slip them into the pocket of my dress shirt. “Did it work?”

She smiles. “Definitely. But for real, you were so good. So professional. I love that you didn’t back down when it came to calling Dillon out for his bad behavior.”

She’s still holding on to my arm when we reach her car, and I let her tug me over so we’re both leaning against the driver-side door.

“I only hope it’ll make a difference.”

“What will you do if it doesn’t?” she asks. “I mean, I think it will. I don’t think you’re going to get shut down. But . . . what if you do?”

“I’ll keep teaching, I guess. Griffin asked me a few months ago if I wanted to come on as a full-time instructor at Triple Mountain. It’s tempting, but . . . I don’t know. I feel like what I do at the school really matters. It would be hard to give that up.”

She leans her head against my shoulder, her hands tucked around my bicep. “You always shine brightest when you have the chance to really connect with people. It’s easy to imagine you building that connection in a classroom.”

Kate is close to me, as close as she was last night, but right now, the closeness only feels companionable. There’s no denying the chemistry that’s been crackling between us since she came back to town, but I also appreciate that she knows me well enough to support me like this, too. I want physical chemistry. But I also want friendship.

My heart stretches and aches. *I want her.*

“How did today go? Did you make any progress on the house?”

“A little,” she answers through a yawn. “I spent half the morning looking through pictures of my parents before I was born.”

“You haven’t seen them before?”

“Never. I honestly thought Mom threw away everything that reminded her of Dad. I mean, I’ve seen the photos that have me in them. She saved those. But these, the two of them are so young. And they look really happy, which . . . I don’t know. It wasn’t what I expected.”

“They did get married, Kate. They had to have loved each other at some point.”

“Logically, I know that. It’s just hard for me to imagine. I don’t have a single memory of them married, Brody. They’ve always been divorced. And Mom has *always* been angry about it.”

It’s not a wonder Kate has a hard time imagining her own happily ever after. “Marriage doesn’t always end like that,” I say.

She nods without picking her head up, and I feel it shifting against my shoulder. “I know.” She gives my arm a squeeze. “It won’t end that way for you.”

“What makes you so sure?”

She lifts her head and looks at me. “Because you believe it won’t.” She smiles. “It was your mom who told me that, and I think she’s right. Believing that love can last has to be half the battle.”

That sounds like something my mother would say. And she’s right. I do believe marriage can last. When I think about my future, it is always in the long term, from the here and now all the way to grand kids and great-grandkids, all with the woman I love beside me.



I'm not naïve enough to believe it *always* works out that way. Life happens. People die. We screw up. People betray us, lie to us, break our hearts. But call me an optimist, I'd rather believe that the good can happen. That the right love can endure any hardship.

"What about you?" I ask. "Do you believe love can last?"

She stares at her hands for a long moment. "I'm trying to," she finally says. Then, with a little more conviction, "I want to." She lifts her shoulder in a playful shrug and smiles. "If only all this baggage I'm lugging around wasn't so heavy."

"I think you've done a pretty good job carrying everything."

"That's just it. I *don't* carry it. I walled it up in Silver Creek and left it all behind. I already told you. When it comes to relationships, all I'm really good at is running."

She's saying the words like she's playing around, but I hear the truth in them. "Nah. I don't believe it. You don't have to run. And you *do* deserve to be happy. I'm going to keep telling you that until you believe it."

I only hope she eventually will.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kate

I AM NERVOUS ABOUT having breakfast with Brody's family.

I shouldn't be nervous. I love the Hawthornes, and I know they love me. But with my feelings for Brody changing by the minute, I worry his mother will see my confusion written all over my face. Hypothetically, if I did have feelings for Brody, would his family approve? They know pretty much everything there is to know about me. But loving me despite my flaws and wanting their son to be saddled with those flaws for the rest of his life are two different things.

I spend way too much time trying to decide what to wear. Picking an outfit that will both tell the Hawthornes I care about their invitation and want to look nice and also be comfortable enough to hike in is basically impossible. In the end, I settle for a pair of shorts and a lightweight denim button-down, cinched at the waist, and my Birkenstocks. I toss my sneakers into a bag. After breakfast, I can lose the button-down and hike in the tank I'm wearing underneath and change my shoes in the car on the way to the trail.

I stand in the empty living room while I wait for Brody. I've made two more trips to Goodwill since Brody helped me haul off the first load, and the same number of trips to the post office to ship the items I've sold on eBay. Someone even

bought the boob pillow and paid thirty bucks for it. The room is entirely empty now except for the furniture, and that's going to be hauled off first thing on Monday morning.

I'll move onto the kitchen next, then tackle the bedrooms upstairs.

What I didn't expect coming into this is that the more I haul away, the more I'm starting to recognize the house's potential. It has good bones. Mom didn't necessarily ask me to do any actual remodeling, but with just a little bit of updating, the house would probably sell for a lot more. The question is whether Mom will want to spend the money to do it.

I pull out my phone and send her a quick text, asking her what she thinks about a kitchen update before we list the house. Her response comes in faster than I expect.

*Mom: I think it's a great idea. But I'm surprised you're the one suggesting it. I was expecting you to do bare minimum and then get out of there as quickly as possible.*

I force myself to breathe before responding. She's not wrong. When I first agreed to come, that's exactly what I thought I would do. But sticking around, at least for a few extra weeks, doesn't feel so bad anymore.

*Kate: It hasn't been so bad. I'm happy to stay and take care of it. Want to give me a budget?*

We text back and forth about appliance prices and what a basic kitchen update will cost. I don't have the first clue about this sort of thing, but Freemont's real estate experience gives him a pretty good idea, so it doesn't take long for Mom to text over a few guidelines and suggestions about what and how to update. By the time the conversation is over, I'm pretty sure we've set a new record for number of consecutive texts sent without any bickering. But then Mom's last text gives me pause.

*Mom: Be sure to pick out things you really like. Don't just be economical. Make it beautiful, too. How you would want it if you were going to live there.*

It almost feels like mom *wants* me to live here. I think about the note she left. The way she prepared the house. Stocked it with groceries. For all her nitpicking, she paved the way for me to have a good experience. But why? Why would she want me in Silver Creek when she has no plans to be here herself?

I spend the last fifteen minutes before Brody picks me up sitting on the front porch, scrolling through Pinterest pins and looking for kitchen ideas.

I'm weirdly *excited* about a kitchen remodel, and I don't know how to feel about that. Yes, it sounds more fun than cleaning out closets and selling things on eBay. But it will also prolong my time in Silver Creek. By a month, maybe even two months. By then the summer will basically be over and November—and the Green Race—will be right around the corner.

Taking the job in London would of course be a factor. But *Expedition* has already told me the end of the summer won't be a problem. When I mentioned my time constraints, they encouraged me to come out in July to get a feel for the place, then once we're all sure we want to move forward, we can talk about an official start day. If I even want an official start day. The longer I'm in Silver Creek, the less sure I feel.

I turn off my phone and lean my head back against the rocking chair. For a brief moment, I close my eyes and think about what it would feel like to stay in Silver Creek indefinitely instead. A pulse of anxiety skitters through me, but I push it aside. For once, I try and pretend what it would feel like if I *wasn't* a complete mess full of doubts and hang-ups and fear. What would it feel like if I didn't have a job that required so much travel? What would it feel like if London wasn't even on the table? What would it feel like to just . . . *stay*?

A dream unfolds in my mind, slowly at first, but then with startling clarity. Hiking in the mountains. Picking apples in the Stonebrook orchards. Taking long walks on Sunday afternoons. Eating tacos from the stand next to Triple Mountain.

I can see it. I can almost taste it. At least the taco part of the dream.

But I won't let myself dwell on it.

It isn't practical.

It isn't even logical.

I don't realize until I'm climbing into Brody's truck that he was a part of every dreamed scenario.

"Morning," he says as I buckle my seatbelt.

"Morning," I say brightly. I haven't seen him since the school board meeting on Thursday night, and it feels good to be with him again.

"I hope you're hungry. Lennox is the one feeding us this morning."

"Does he ever get tired of cooking?" My stomach grumbles, making Brody grin, and I press a hand against my midsection.

"Not that I've ever seen," he says. "We're test subjects this morning. He and Olivia have decided to offer Sunday brunch at the restaurant, so he's been focusing on breakfast foods lately."

The conversation flows as we drive the short distance over to his parents' house. We don't talk about anything important. Not really. I tell him about my plans to update the kitchen. He tells me about a couple he had a kayaking lesson with yesterday, and an email he got from one of his former AP Chemistry students. It's all completely inconsequential. Just normal, everyday stuff. But I want to know it all anyway. I tell myself it's not all that different from how our friendship has always been. I've always cared about things going on in Brody's life. But now it *feels* different.

Even if it shouldn't, it does.

We don't use the main entrance to the farm but cut up a back road that leads right to the family homestead without meandering through the event and farm space. If the number of cars in the driveway is any indication, everyone else is already here.

“Do you guys really do this every Sunday?” I ask as I follow Brody to the front door.

“There’s always a meal,” Brody says. “But not everyone comes every week. Perry always comes. And I usually do. Tyler and Olivia go down to Charleston a lot to see his family, so they’re here maybe half the time. Lennox was never here until he moved back, so it’s been nice having him come.”

“And Flint?”

“Once or twice a year, maybe? He does the best he can. I’m honestly surprised he’s able to make it as often as he does.”

As soon as Brody pushes through the front door, I am quickly enveloped by the familiar bustle of a Hawthorne family gathering. Hannah hugs me first, then Lennox gives me a quick hug before darting back into the kitchen.

Olivia is standing off to the side with her husband Tyler, who walks forward long enough to shake my hand, but Olivia only waves, her smile tight and her expression wary. Perry is sitting in the corner of the living room reading a book.

“Come and see Ray,” Hannah says, ushering me away from my worries about Olivia and toward Mr. Hawthorne, who is already seated at the head of the enormous farm table in the dining room. “He’s been so excited to see you.”

Ray Hawthorne greets me with kind eyes and invites me to sit beside him and tell him about my latest adventure.

The first thing that pops into my head is kayaking the Lower Green with Brody, but I know that isn’t what Mr. Hawthorne means. Instead, I tell him about the time I spent in Ireland just before coming home.

Olivia soon joins us, sliding into the chair across from me, one hand resting on her baby bump. “You must be itching to get back on the road, Kate,” she says a little too sweetly. “You’ve been back in Silver Creek, what, a month? That’s long enough for a lot of people.”

There’s something about her assumption that rubs me the wrong way. The same uneasiness I felt when I first visited with Olivia and her mom wiggles its way into my mind. It

almost feels like she *wants* me to leave. “No, I’m enjoying myself. There’s still a lot of work to do to get the house ready to sell. That’s enough to keep my mind busy.”

She asks a few more questions about the house, and we chat back and forth, but as soon as the conversation shifts to something farm related, I get up to find Brody. He’s in the kitchen with Lennox, leaning against the counter while his brother pulls something that smells delicious out of the oven.

“Hey,” Brody says as he sees me approach. “You okay?”

I nod, but gesture for him to follow me into the hallway.

“What’s going on?” he asks once we’re alone.

“I don’t know exactly. But . . . I think Olivia doesn’t want me here.”

His eyebrows go up. “What? Like, here at breakfast?”

I shake my head. “No. Here in Silver Creek. I can’t explain why. She hasn’t said anything specific. I just get the sense that . . . I don’t know. That she’s worried, maybe?”

A flash of understanding crosses Brody’s face, but then he just smiles and squeezes my shoulder. “I’m sure it’s nothing, Kate. Olivia loves you.”

A knot forms in the pit of my stomach. There’s something he isn’t telling me. Still, it isn’t a conversation I want to have with half a dozen Hawthornes standing around, so I return his smile and nod. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Foods up!” Lennox calls from around the corner.

“Come on,” Brody says. “Let’s eat, and then we can get out of here.”

The food is amazing. A frittata with fresh tomato, arugula, and crumbled goat cheese. Thick slices of French toast with sliced strawberries and some sort of maple bourbon drizzle that makes me moan out loud. A tossed salad with baby greens, thinly sliced pears, candied walnuts, and a lemon vinaigrette that is somehow sweet and spicy at the same time.

By the time I'm finished with my meal, I've made a million mental notes for the article pitch I'm going to write about Lennox's new restaurant. Come to think of it, I could probably get two or three articles out of Stonebrook. The commercial side of the farm, the event side, and now the restaurant.

The thought starts a cascade of thoughts, likely prompted by my morning foray into considering a more permanent life in Silver Creek.

It only takes a moment for my brain to catalog half a dozen destinations I could write about in Western North Carolina. The food scene in Asheville is big, and the brewery scene is even bigger. Plus, there are multiple national forests, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Biltmore House. There are endless hiking trails and waterfalls. There's whitewater rafting and kayaking, and of course, the Green River Green Race.

I wouldn't find the same sponsored trips that have been the bread and butter for my mostly European-based career, and it would probably narrow my audience. The pay per article probably wouldn't be as good, but if I'm not living abroad, maybe making less wouldn't be such a big deal.

It's a risky thought. More of a career pivot than a subtle shift. But no less so than hanging up my suitcase altogether and moving to London to be an editor.

I carry a stack of plates into the kitchen, hesitating when I find Brody and Olivia standing next to the refrigerator talking. Or maybe arguing? Olivia's arms are folded, her expression stern, and Brody has his hands perched on his hips.

"I'm not the only one who is worried," Olivia says. Her words cut off when Brody's eyes cut to me.

She turns her back, and Brody immediately rushes over to take the dishes out of my hands.

"Come on," he says after setting them in the sink. "You ready to go?"

My eyes flit to Olivia, but she's turned away from us, rummaging through the cabinet above the stove.



“I was going to help your mom do the dishes.”

“Don’t worry about it. Perry will do them. Let’s hit the trail before it gets too hot.”

I offer the rest of his family a too-quick goodbye, then follow Brody to his truck. There *is* something he isn’t telling me, and he’s going to tell me what it is right now.

“What’s going on, Brody?” I ask as soon as he cranks the engine. “Why are we leaving so fast? And what aren’t you telling me about Olivia? She *doesn’t* want me in Silver Creek, does she?”

He blows out a sigh. “It isn’t that.”

“Then what is it?”

“They’re just worried about ... me, I guess.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of our friendship.”

“I’m still not following.”

He turns the truck onto Big Hungry Road. “Kate, it really doesn’t matter. You don’t need to worry about it. Olivia is being unreasonable about this.”

“About what? Please just tell me. I promise I can handle it.”

He huffs out a heavy sigh. “She’s worried that as long as you’re home, I won’t date.” He lifts his shoulders in a loose shrug. “Because I’ll spend all my free time with you.”

I sink back into my seat. Honestly, I can’t fault her the worry. It makes sense. “Oh.”

“It’s not a big—”

“No,” I say, cutting him off. “I get it. I guess I have been monopolizing your time.”

“It doesn’t feel that way. *I’m* not complaining, all right? I like spending time with you. I don’t mind not dating for a couple of months. It’s nice to have a break if I’m being honest.”

I don't know why his comment stings, but it does. Maybe because he's labeling the time he spends with me as *not dating*. Even though it isn't. There was the holding that happened the other night before we took things to Goodwill, and when we hugged in my grandmother's kitchen, I felt like my entire body was wrapped in a live wire.

But I could be making all of that up.

*Oh no*. What if I *am* making it all up?

What if this is all one-sided, and Brody isn't feeling any of the same sparks I am? He can handle not dating for a couple of months. Which is about how long I first told him I was going to be here.

I gave him a time limit. A deadline. And he isn't looking for anything beyond that.

"You can still date while I'm around, Brody. You don't have to spend all your time with me."

He smiles. "I know. But I want to."

My mind is a jumbled mess. Every time I think I'm starting to figure out what I want, something happens to shake me back up again. The idea of London sounds appealing because I really *would* love to have a job with more stability than what I have now. But I'm not sure I want to live in London. I've lived my entire life believing I'd never want to live in Silver Creek, but then I spent half my morning imagining what it would be like if I did, making mental lists of articles I could pitch that would keep me here.

But I can't stay in Silver Creek if I'm going to interfere with Brody finding the happily-ever-after I know he wants. Unless that happily-ever-after is with *me*. A tiny thrill shoots through me at the thought. Could he want that too? The more I think about it, the more I *don't* think I made up the attraction in his eyes when he helped me down from his truck. But physical attraction isn't all that matters.

The scariest thought of all pops into my head next. What if he does want it, we try, and I fail? What if my efforts to keep a career going locally aren't enough, and I only make it a year

before I have to start traveling again? What if I'm not really built for a slower, stabler life and pretending like I am winds up breaking us both?

Maybe it wouldn't happen, but maybe it would.

Am I truly willing to risk our friendship on a maybe?

"You okay over there?" Brody asks. "I can almost hear you thinking."

"Sure. Just enjoying the view."

The view really *is* amazing. Lush green trees and loamy earth and dense thickets of rhododendron line either side of the road. I roll my window down and breath in, the familiar smell of the forest tickling my nose.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do. But the longer we drive, the longer I breathe in the clean mountain air, the more certain I am about one thing.

I've missed this.

I never thought I would say it, and it only complicates things that I'm saying it now.

But I've missed ... *home*.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kate

THE PULLIAM CREEK TRAIL is a pretty easy hike, but when we leave the main path and head down to the narrows, I understand why Brody double and triple checked that I had good shoes to wear. The descent is steep—so steep there are ropes tied in between the trees for us to hold onto. At one point, it's easier to turn around and lower myself down the trail backward. Which of course makes me super excited about the return trip, when we'll be climbing up instead of down.

“The craziest thing is that during the Green Race,” Brody says, “spectators have to make this hike down to Gorilla if they want to watch. So just imagine this trail with two hundred people hiking down at once.”

“Um, that feels terrifying,” I say, though as soon as we reach the water, it makes sense why people are willing to do it. The river is gorgeous.

We follow the trail as it snakes along the edge of the water, the gorge cutting up steeply on either side. The river is full of massive boulders, some large enough for a dozen people or more to stand on at once, creating narrow channels of water and steep drops. I recognize what I'm seeing from the videos of the Green Race I watched online but seeing it in person is an entirely different experience. And thinking about Brody

paddling through these rapids in a kayak? It leaves me speechless.

“Oh hey, there’s Griffin,” Brody says, pointing off the trail to where Griffin and several other kayakers are maneuvering their boats out of the water.

“What are they doing?”

Brody tilts his head toward the river. “They’re portaging around Gorilla,” he says. “Walking their boats around the rapid instead of running it.”

“Do people do that a lot?”

“With Gorilla? All the time. It’s brutal to run. Unless you have people setting safety at the bottom, which can be an ordeal, it’s risky. Too risky for most kayakers.”

We say hello to Griffin, and Brody introduces me to everyone else, all friends of his, then we follow them down trail so we can watch them get back in the water. We can’t see much from our vantage point, but I still hold my breath when I see them disappear over a rapid. This kind of kayaking is very different than the baby rapids I ran on the Lower Green.

“This is crazy,” I say to Brody as we walk back toward Gorilla.

He only grins. “It can be.”

A huge rock overlooks the rapid, and we stretch out, the sun warming my bare arms and legs. The water is loud—I understand now why spectators at the Green Race ring cowbells—but it’s soothing too. I lean back on my hands and close my eyes. There are so many decisions in my future. But I don’t have to make any of them right *now*.

“Hey, I’ve got a favor to ask,” Brody says, breaking the silence.

“Okay.”

“I debated whether to ask you because I don’t want you to feel like you have to say yes. It’s not a big deal if you can’t do it.”

“Just ask. I can almost promise I’m going to want to say yes.”

He grins. “Don’t speak too soon.”

“Brody.”

“Okay, okay. So, the Fourth of July is next Saturday,” he says, “and I’ve got this kayaking trip planned with Griffin and a couple other guys. Actually, you just met one of them. Ryan. Anyway, we’re hoping to head up to Robbinsville to hit the Cheoah River, and we need a shuttle bunny.”

My brain temporarily hitches on the date. I’m supposed to fly to London late afternoon on the fifth—a trip Brody still doesn’t know about. But we can circle back to that. If it’s just a day trip, it shouldn’t interfere anyway. I raise my eyebrows. “A shuttle what?”

He grins. “A shuttle bunny. Someone who can drop us off at the put-in, then drive downriver to meet us at the take-out when we finish.” He runs a hand across his face, like he’s nervous I won’t want to do it. “It would pretty much be the entire day, so if you feel like you’ve got too much to do . . .”

“No, I’d love to do it,” I say. “Especially if there are places where I can watch.” A thrill shoots through me at the idea of watching Brody kayak.

“There are a few places. Are you sure you wouldn’t mind? It would eat up any chance of you having any kind of Fourth of July celebration, and it would just be you and . . . four guys.”

“You’re the only person in town I would spend the Fourth of July with anyway. I promise I don’t mind. And I can handle four guys. I promise I’ve handled worse.”

“Great. That’s awesome.” His obvious enthusiasm sends a little beat of joy to my heart. “We’re wanting to leave Triple Mountain around seven a.m. Can I pick you up a little before?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll be . . .” My words trail off when Brody tenses beside me, his eyes focused upriver.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Kayakers.”

“Are they doing the portage thing like Griffin did?”

He stands up and offers me his hand so I can do the same. “It looks like they’re going to run it. At least one of them is.”

“Do you know who they are?”

Brody hasn’t taken his eyes off the river. “I can’t tell from here.”

A couple of guys come running down the trail, stopping just past us, and turn to face the rapid. One of them is holding what looks like a rope tucked inside a bag.

“Did someone fall in?” I ask.

“Not yet.” Brody’s entire body is tense. “But if someone does, his buddy better not throw the rope from there.”

The kayaker crests the rapid, and I hold my breath. He disappears into the whitewater, but then his boat pops up, upside down. The water churns around the kayak, knocking it against a boulder. For all I know, the kayaker is still suspended beneath it, but then Brody swears and takes off running down the trail. “He’s swimming,” he calls to the guy with the rope. “Give me the rope, give me the rope!”

The guy must trust that Brody knows what he’s doing because he hands it over without question. Rope in hand, Brody keeps running. I follow as far as I can, but then he’s off the trail and cutting across the water, shimmying and leaping over rocks like a gazelle, and I don’t trust myself to go any further. Not without compromising my own safety, which would only complicate things for Brody.

Because he is obviously on a rescue mission.

A little further down the trail, the path turns, and I suddenly have a vantage point of Brody, crouched low and braced against a boulder, tugging the kayaker, who is holding onto the rope, toward the shore. The two other kayakers, who followed the same path I did, stop beside me. “That was wicked,” one of them mutters.

“Dude. I told him he shouldn’t run it,” the other guy says.

I can hardly focus on their conversation because I am too hung up on the fact that Brody just turned into a freaking superhero.

Listen. It's sexy for a guy to be really good at something. It's even sexier when being good at something gives said guy the kind of muscle definition that Brody has. But take that sexiness and then have that guy *save someone's life* in a perfect display of strength, knowledge, and masculinity?

I have never witnessed this level of sexiness before. Brody was magnificent. He *is* magnificent.

I stand off to the side while Brody gently chastises the kayakers for doing something as stupid as running Gorilla without proper precautions. He explains something about why the original guy with the rope shouldn't have thrown the rope bag from where he was standing, encourages all of them to take a swift water rescue class before *ever* kayaking the narrows again, then sends them on their merry way.

Or not-so-merry way based on their expressions. They seem to realize how lucky they were that Brody just happened to be nearby.

"You okay?" Brody asks me once we're alone again.

I am not okay. I am . . . overwhelmed. Buzzed on adrenaline and, let's be totally honest here, *desire*. It's the only explanation for what I do next.

I lunge across the trail, curl my hand around his neck, and kiss Brody Hawthorne right on the mouth.

I'm not talking a *hooray, you saved someone* kiss. I'm talking a *kiss* kiss. My hands on either side of his face, my lips pressed against his.

At first, he doesn't react—maybe he's too stunned—but then he wakes up, his lips moving against mine as he wraps his arms around me. I might have started the kiss, but I feel the moment he takes control of the situation. He keeps one hand pressed to the small of my back while he lifts the other to my face. His fingers stroke my cheek as he deepens the kiss, tasting me, tilting me toward him. My hands slide over his



shoulders, then down to his biceps. When I slip my hands under the sleeves of his t-shirt, he lets out a low groan and pulls me even closer.

That noise—it sends a bolt of fear crashing right through me. There is a fervency to his response, a depth I didn't anticipate—

*What am I doing?*

I break the kiss and step back. “Oh my gosh,” I whisper. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh.” My hand flies to my mouth, and I shake my head.

I take one giant breath and look up to meet Brody's gaze. His eyes are wide, his chest heaving.

“Brody, I shouldn't have done that.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Brody

IN ALL THE TIMES I have imagined my first kiss with Kate, I have never come close to imagining what actually happened.

First of all, Kate kissed *me*. Surprised me.

Maybe because I've been the one in love with her for so long, I always thought it would be the other way around. I would kiss her, wake up her feelings, show her what she's been missing all these years.

Instead, she's the one who woke me up. In the brief moments when her lips were on mine, my world switched from monochrome to full, blinding technicolor.

She's shaking her head and backing away, but I don't know how I'm supposed to go back after this. It was too fast. I didn't have time to truly process . . . and now it might not ever happen again.

"I just . . . you were so amazing with the rope and the guy," Kate says, "and I . . . I don't know what I was thinking. I got caught up in the moment."

"Kate," I say softly, reaching for her.

"I'm sorry." She takes another step back. "I'm really, really \_\_\_"

"Kate."

“Sorry,” she finishes, her voice a whisper.

“Please stop apologizing.”

“But I shouldn’t have done it. I mean, I wanted to do it. But I shouldn’t have wanted to do it. It isn’t fair. Especially not to you.”

I pause at this. *Especially* not to me? “Why isn’t it fair?” I ask. “If I told you I’m glad you kissed me, will that change what you’re saying right now?”

She closes her eyes, her lips pressed together, her breathing ragged.

“Kate, just talk to me.”

When she opens her eyes, there’s a storm raging behind them. “I’ve been offered a job,” she says simply. “That was the email I got right after we finished kayaking. It was a job offer. And it’s in London.”

All the air whooshes out of my lungs. Even knowing it would come to this—to her leaving—it’s still a gut punch to hear her say it. It’s too early for us to already be having this conversation. “A job?”

She nods and eases away, and for once, I’m grateful for the distance. I need space. Air. Clarity.

“A real one,” she says. “Not freelance work. Salary, benefits, all of it.”

I channel my inner calm. The deepest part of my love for Kate wants only what is best for Kate. Even if it sucks for me. “That’s . . . wow. That’s great.”

“I didn’t even apply for it. Didn’t expect it. It’s with this travel magazine called *Expedition*. They’re flying me out next week for a meeting.”

“Next week?”

“Just for a few days. I leave on the fifth.”

As my heart rate slows, my grip on reality returns, and I remember the things a friend would say in this situation.

True, *friends* wouldn't have been kissing two minutes ago, but Kate already labeled the kiss a mistake. I don't have any choice but to get on board. "That's really amazing," I say. I clear my throat and swallow. "Really."

She bites her lip. "Even though it's in London?"

There is uncertainty in her eyes. Does she want me to care? Does she want me to tell her to stay instead? Or is she simply worried about hurting me when she leaves again?

I . . . do not have the bandwidth to figure this out. My brain is too full of her, my body too charged from the kiss.

I turn from Kate and walk a few steps away, my hands resting on top of my head. I shouldn't feel so stunned. Except, Kate leaving to settle down somewhere else feels different than Kate just *leaving*. If she's willing to put down roots, why not put them down here? This doesn't feel like incompatible lifestyles, this feels like rejection.

"I still don't know if I'm going to take it," she says from behind me. "I'm not sure about living in London, but I do love the idea of something more stable. I never even thought that was an option for me, so I feel like I have to at least consider it."

I should turn around. Say something. Be the best friend she needs me to be. I would love for her to have something stable. To have the opportunity to truly settle down if that's what she wants.

A sharp pain snakes across my chest. Even if it isn't with me.

"I shouldn't have kissed you, Brody. Not when I don't know what I'm doing, when we don't know—"

Her words crack and tremble.

I have to dig deep to find what little composure I have left, but I slip it into place and turn around, moving back to where she's standing. I reach for her hand and pull her toward me, wrapping her into a hug that I hope feels brotherly. "You're right," I say into her hair. "It isn't fair. But you have to live

your life, Kate. If this is something you want, you have to go for it.”

She tilts her head up, her arms still wrapped around me. “But what if I don’t know what I want? What if all I feel is confusion?”

“You’ve always figured things out before, right?” I drop my arms and step away from her. I can’t keep touching her. Not if I’m going to get out of the gorge and back to the truck without completely losing it. I move toward the trail, and Kate follows. “Do you like London?”

She shrugs. “I guess so. I don’t love the cold. Or the rain. But I like the people. And I really like the editor who offered the position.”

I cock my head. “I’m not sure London is the place for you if you don’t like the cold. I was cold the last time I was there, and it was July.”

Her eyebrows jump. “You’ve been to London?”

“Twice. I did a semester abroad in school. England, France, and Italy.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten about that.”

“Then I went back with Griffin and a couple other guys last summer to do some kayaking. We were mostly in Wales, but we flew into London.”

She studies me, her eyebrows knit together, her expression saying the idea of me traveling outside of Silver Creek is a foreign concept. “Have you traveled anywhere else?” she asks, confirming my suspicion.

“That’s it outside the US. But I’ve been all over the states.”

“To kayak?”

I nod. “Oh, and Costa Rica, too. Last spring break.”

“But you . . .” Her words trail off, and she shakes her head.

“But I what?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing. I’m just glad you’ve gotten to travel some.”

I shoot her a knowing look. “It’s pretty tough seeing as how I have to use horse and wagon to go places, living in this here small town. We don’t have things like cars. Or airports.”

She rolls her eyes. “Shut up. That’s not what I meant.”

“Yes it is,” I say. “You look at me and think small town, small life.”

“I do not.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“At least, I don’t *now*,” she says. “There’s nothing about your life that’s small.”

We turn and move up the trail, both of us grabbing hold of the rope that will make it easier to haul ourselves up the mountain. Kate is walking in front of me, so I can’t see her face when I ask, “But it’s still too small for you?”

We climb in silence for a few minutes, and I wonder if Kate will simply let the question go. But as soon as we reach a level spot, she turns to me. “I never imagined a life for myself in Silver Creek, Brody. You know it’s never been a part of the plan.”

“Why?” It’s the first time I’ve ever challenged her on it. “Because you don’t want to be near your mom? That doesn’t work anymore, Kate. She left.”

She shakes her head, emotion filling her eyes. “Because I don’t want to *be* my mom. She wasn’t willing to leave, and it ended her marriage.” She turns and pushes her way up the trail, the muscles in her arms and shoulders flexing as she grips the rope and tugs herself up. I am momentarily distracted by the grace and athleticism that infuse her movements. She makes everything look natural, even hoisting herself up the side of a mountain.

I climb after her, quickly catching up. “Kate, you aren’t your mother. You’re never going to be your mother.”

She whirls around. “It’s more complicated than that. It will always be more complicated for me, because I’m the one with the screwed up family. I recognize it isn’t healthy that my feelings about Silver Creek and my feelings about my mom are so tangled. I do. Just . . .” She breathes out a weary sigh. “Just know I’m trying, okay? I’m trying to make sense of things, but most of the time, I can’t tell the difference between what I want, and what I *think* I should want, and what I think I can’t want because it’s what my mother wants.”

I almost ask her what category I’m in, but I’m afraid her answer will be none of them. And after that kiss, I don’t know that I could handle the blatant rejection.

We hike the rest of the trail in silence. Her brain is probably whirring just as fast as mine is, but what is there to say? Even with all the chemistry sparking between us the past few weeks, I’ve been afraid to truly let myself hope, convinced she’d never feel the same way.

Now, it’s possible she does feel the same way—she at least owned that she wanted to kiss me—and I still can’t do anything about it. I’m not sure if this is better or worse.

When we get back to the truck, I unlock her door first and open it for her.

She hesitates, one foot propped on the running board, and looks back. “I don’t have to go with you to Robbinsville on Saturday.”

Fear tightens my gut. I don’t want our relationship to end over this. “Do you still *want* to go?”

“I’d like to. But I don’t want to make it hard for you.”

It’s too late for that, but right now, the only thing that feels harder than spending time with Kate is spending time without her. “Kate, we’re still friends. This doesn’t have to change that.”

“So I can come on Saturday as your friend?”

“I invited you to come as my friend.” We’ve used that word so much lately, I’d like to retire it altogether. *Please* no more friend talk. I smile, sensing that levity might be the only thing

that pulls us out of whatever tailspin her kiss started. “You’re the one who kissed me and made things weird.”

She scoffs as she climbs all the way into the truck. “So that’s how you’re going to play it?”

I smirk and move around the truck bed to climb in. Once I crank the engine, I look at Kate and slip on my sunglasses. “I hope that kiss was worth it because I plan to get mileage out of this thing for *days*.”

Kate smiles and shakes her head, huffing out a laugh, and suddenly we’re back on solid ground.

At least for now.

At least until I can drop her off.

I can pretend that long. I can joke and tease. Act like one, amazing, life-changing kiss wasn’t enough to rip my heart out and place it directly in her hands.

But the reality is, with that kiss, Kate changed me. Claimed me.

I’ll never be the same again.

My only hope now is that somehow, she’ll reach the same conclusion. One kiss will never be enough.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kate

KRISTYN HAS CALLED ME four times in the past three days.

And I have been “too busy to talk” all four times because Kristyn will want to ask me about what’s happening with Brody.

I am not ready to talk about what’s happening with Brody. Or tell her I’m technically supposed to fly to London tomorrow, though honestly, the thought of bailing has been jumping into my brain with surprising frequency lately.

In between my trips to Hendersonville to visit appliance stores and pick out tile and countertops for the kitchen, I have seen Brody twice since our hike along the narrows. Once when he took me kayaking, and once when he brought by a basket of goat’s milk soap his mom put together for me. Both times, we did not talk about the kiss, and we did not talk about London, but Brody did give me long, lingering hugs that made me question everything I know about life. I don’t know what those hugs mean, especially after how we left things last weekend. But I know how they make me feel, and I do not want them to stop.

When Kristyn texted last night, she threatened to call Brody herself if I didn’t respond with an update.

I still haven't responded, but she wouldn't *actually* call.

Okay, fine. She totally would. But how would I even begin to share everything that has happened?

I sigh and tap my phone against my knee. If I respond right now, she probably won't get my text until I'm on my way to Robbinsville with Brody. I for sure won't be able to have a conversation *about* Brody while he's close enough to listen, which means I'll be able to delay the conversation at least another twenty-four hours.

I key out my message.

*Kate: Hey! Sorry to have missed you so many times. Ha. She'll see right through that one. I've been really busy. I'll give you an update soon!*

There. Vague but cheerful. I hit send and move to drop my phone into my backpack, but it immediately starts to ring, Kristyn's face lighting up the screen.

I swear under my breath, then answer the call. "Are you serious? What are you even doing up right now?"

"I'm a teacher," Kristyn responds. "My internal clock wakes me up whether I'm working or not. What are *you* doing up?"

"I'm waiting for Brody to pick me up."

"What? This early? Why?"

I lean back into the front-porch rocking chair and pull my knees up to my chest. "He's kayaking with his friends today, and I'm their shuttle bunny."

"Ummm, what?"

"A shuttle bunny. It means I'm driving with them over to Robbinsville so I can drop them off at the top of the rapids, then drive down and meet them at the bottom."

"Aww, how cute. And sexist."

"How is it sexist?"

"Do you think they'd call their shuttle driver a 'bunny' if you were a six-foot-four biker covered in tats?"

“Please don’t ever call them *tats* again.”

“I’m just saying. You’re a bunny because you’re a cute little girlfriend driving the big strong men to do their big strong activity.”

I huff and shift the phone from one ear to the other. “You literally just sucked all the fun out of my day. And I’m not anyone’s girlfriend.”

She finally laughs. “Then ignore me. But the urban dictionary says to be the best kind of shuttle bunny, you should have beer on hand when you pick them up at the end of the day.”

“Did you seriously just consult the urban dictionary?”

“I teach seventh graders,” she says. “If I didn’t consult the urban dictionary on a regular basis, I’d never survive. So are you going to give me an update or what?”

“I have no idea what update to give you. I’m making progress on the house. Most of the junk is cleared out except for what I’m saving for Mom and keeping for myself. I just ordered new appliances and countertops for the kitchen—it was desperately in need of an update—and most of the old furniture I can’t use for staging the house has been picked up and hauled away.”

“Wow. But how do you know anything about staging a house?”

“I don’t. But Freemont does. And so does the internet. Me and YouTube have been best friends the past few days.”

Kristyn sighs like I’m trying her patience. “I’m glad things are coming along, but you know that’s not really the update I want, right?”

“We’re friends, Kristyn.”

“Have you kissed him yet?”

“*Friends*,” I repeat.

“Have you *wanted* to kiss him yet?”

There is no way I'm telling her about our kiss. Kisses fueled by witnessing acts of heroism do not count. Especially when those kisses come very close to ruining a friendship nineteen years in the making. "Uggh, do you even realize what you're asking? Do you know what it would do to our friendship?" I ask, making at least half my point.

"Absolutely. It would make it *so. much. hotter.*" She has no idea how right she is about this one.

Headlights flash at the end of the road, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Hey, Brody is here. I gotta go."

"No!" she says. "You still haven't told me anything good!"

"That's because there's nothing to tell. I promise as soon as there is, you'll be the first person I call."

I hang up and move to the steps as Brody pulls into the circle drive in front of the house. I climb into his truck, where I am assaulted in the best way possible with the same clean manly smell I encountered when I found Brody fresh out of the shower, locked out of his house. Brody's hair is still damp, his t-shirt dotted with water like he tossed it on before he was fully dry.

"Hi," I say on an exhale as I settle back into my seat.

"Hey," he says. "Thanks again for doing this."

I smile. "Of course. I'm excited." Our interactions since last weekend have been brief, so I anticipate some sort of weirdness between us, but as Brody gives me a rundown of how the day is going to go, I start to relax. This doesn't feel weird at all. It feels like us.

My responsibilities aren't very complicated. For most of the day, I'll just be tagging along. The only time I really have to do anything is when they're on the water, and that can take as little or as long as I want as long as I'm at the take-out when they finish.

"Got it," I say after his explanation. "So, will I drive the whole way? Or . . ."

“Nah. Not unless you just want to. Griffin will drive on the way there, and you can ride in the back with me. Then you’ll hop in and drive once we’re on the water. I’m gonna warn you though. Griffin’s Suburban smells like a locker room. There’s wet gear going in and out all the time, and it can get a little musty.”

“I can handle musty.” And will do so gladly if it means two hours in the backseat with Brody, even though that’s *not* something I should be excited about. At least we won’t be alone. The car will be full of other men.

Turns out, we *are* kind of alone. Squeezed into the third row of Griffin’s Suburban because Ryan brought a friend at the last minute.

A *woman* friend, Aislynn, who is perfectly comfortable putting her hands *all over Ryan* despite the full car. The way she’s dressed, it looks like she’ll be kayaking too. Which, more power to her. If I had the experience and skill, I’d want to be joining in as well. But all the *touching*. We haven’t even been driving ten minutes, and she’s kissed him half a dozen times already. When I shoot Brody a questioning look, he pulls out his cell phone.

*Brody: I can’t be mad at the guy. He doesn’t date much, so this is a pretty big deal for him.*

*Kate: Check his body language though. I’m not so sure he’s down with all the PDA.*

His eyes dart to the seat in front of us, and I follow his gaze, watching as Ryan extricates himself from one of Aislynn’s side-arm hugs. Brody stifles a laugh, but he doesn’t do a very good job, the noise coming out of his nose in an awkward snort. He presses his lips together and looks back at his phone, but not before Aislynn shoots a look over the back seat. Except, her look isn’t directed at Brody, it’s directed at me, and she is clearly saying *this man belongs to me*.

My eyes widen. She thinks I might go after *Ryan*? The thought is only made more ridiculous by Brody sitting next to me. If there is any man in this car I’m going after, it’s him.

My phone buzzes with another text.

*Brody: She's staking her claim, temptress. You better not glance Ryan's way today.*

*Kate: Temptress?! I am nothing of the sort.*

*Brody: I hate to break it to you, but you only have to stand there to be tempting. You could have the whole car completely at your mercy if you wished it. Minus AJ, of course.*

AJ, the fourth kayaker in the group, has a wife and twin daughters at home.

I type out my next message, emboldened by Brody's flirting.

Maybe this part of today *does* feel different. We've always been close. He's always been attentive. But Brody has never flirted like this.

I know. *I know*. This is exactly the opposite of what I'm supposed to be doing. But he started it. And have I mentioned how good he smells? Or how good he looks today? I'm beginning to feel like resistance is futile.

*Kate: The whole car? Even you?*

Brody looks up from his phone and levels me with a look that can only be called a smolder. Like, an actual, straight out of the urban dictionary *smolder*.

*Brody: I might be the last to fall. But only because I have years of experience resisting.*

Resisting. Resisting me? And for years?

I don't look up from my phone for a long moment. Is he trying to tell me something? Has he . . . for me . . . for years?

There were a few times growing up when I suspected Brody might have real feelings for me. More than friendship feelings. But there were so many opportunities for him to tell me, and he never did. Brody was always so good at talking about things, the fact that he didn't convinced me I'd made everything up.

Griffin calls something over his shoulder, and Brody leans forward, slipping his phone into his pocket and joining the

conversation about the best rapids this side of the Mississippi. Or something like that. I don't know enough to truly follow along, and I'm too distracted anyway.

I lean my head against the back of the seat and close my eyes, thoughts running through my head a million miles a minute. Brody could have been teasing. Joking about how long we've known each other. Playing into Aislynn's erroneous assumption that I'm some sort of temptress trying to get her man.

Keeping my eyes closed, I do a breathing exercise to try and slow my thoughts. Stressing about the unknown isn't going to help me figure things out. Whatever happens next, it will be easier to sort through with a clear head.

After a few minutes of intentional breathing, the ridiculous hour I went to bed last night catches up with me, and I start to doze. I'm jolted awake when the Suburban hits a bump in the highway, only to feel Brody's arms around me, guiding me toward him. He's angled sideways, his back against the window, and . . . now I'm lying on his chest, my arms wrapped around his torso because there is nowhere else for them to go. His arms close around my back, one hand rubbing up and down over my shoulder blades as if to soothe me back to sleep.

Despite the heat coursing through me at his touch, it actually starts to work, and I sink into him.

*Take that, Aislynn, I think, hovering on the edge of consciousness. I have my own man.*

The thing is, I *don't* have years of experience resisting Brody. I feel almost powerless against whatever this is, this force that is drawing me to him. And the longer I'm around him, the more I'm realizing, I don't really *want* to resist. I *should* want to. There's so much at stake. So much to lose if things go badly. Even if I wanted to stay in Silver Creek, I don't know that I could. That I could find work enough to sustain me. But right here, right now, his arms around me, the sound of his steady heartbeat thumping under my ear, I can't

bring myself to care about any of that. I want to stay here forever. *I want . . .*

“Hey,” Brody whispers. “Wake up. We’re here.”

I shift, untangling my arms from around him, and sit up. Everyone else has already gotten out of the Suburban. I yawn and stretch my arms over my head. “Wow. I didn’t realize I was so tired.” I glance at his t-shirt, hoping I didn’t drool on him while I slept.

He grins and leans forward, folding up the seat in front of him so we can reach the door. “I promise I didn’t mind.”

He didn’t mind . . . holding me in his arms? I’m suddenly *very* awake. And a little turned on.

“So what happens now?” I ask as I climb out after him.

“We gear up and hit the water.”

The rest of the guys are already unloading kayaks and paddles off the trailer. Brody moves to the back of the Suburban and opens the hatch where spray skirts, helmets, PFDs, and other gear has been stashed. Leaving the hatch open, he grabs his bag, then steps off to the side where he drops his stuff and pulls his t-shirt over his head.

He should have warned me. Held up a big sign that says *KATE: BRACE YOURSELF FOR THE VIEW*. Because *good grief* the view is spectacular. I mean, *yes*, I’ve seen all this before. And a warning would have helped then, too.

Brody is not muscled like someone who spends hours and hours working the same muscle groups in the gym. He is not the kind of guy who can’t rest his arms against his sides for how enormous his biceps are. He’s muscled like an athlete—like someone who uses his muscles outside the gym. He is lean and lithe, with the perfect amount of definition in all the right places. I particularly appreciate the line of his shoulder curving into his bicep—

*Oh my word* now his shorts are coming off. He’s got compression shorts on underneath, but *still*. He quickly pulls on a pair of board shorts and a long-sleeved rash guard, then slips on a pair of bootie-looking things that must be specific



for kayaking because all the guys are wearing them. Aislynn steps out from behind the Suburban wearing a dry suit, her spray skirt already hanging from her waist.

She looks very serious about her sport. She holds her paddle in one hand and taps it against the ground. “Let’s do this, men,” she says as she walks toward the kayaks. “Ryan, you’re with me.”

I look at Brody, my lips pressed together to keep from laughing.

His eyes are dancing as he mouths the word, “*temptress.*”

I bark out a laugh, my hand flying up to cover my mouth.

Griffin walks over to give me the keys. “So, if you take this road downriver about five miles, you’ll see the take-out just past Tapoco Lodge. The river is pretty much roadside the whole way, so if you want to watch, you can drive ahead and watch us coming. There are multiple places you can stop the whole way down.”

“Got it.”

I take the keys and make my way over to Brody who is securing his PFD. His helmet is at his feet, and I pick it up, holding it until he’s ready to pull it on. “Have fun out there,” I say. “But be careful too, yeah?” A surge of anxiety pulses through me. The feeling is foreign and a little overwhelming. I really don’t want Brody to get hurt.

He reaches for his helmet, his gaze searing into me like it always does. “I’ll be careful,” he says, his tone serious enough that I know he isn’t mocking my concern. He gently tugs his helmet out of my hands. “I promise.”

I take a step back and push my hands into the back pockets of my shorts. “Okay. I’ll be watching as much as I can.”

He pulls his helmet on. “You be careful too, all right?”

I watch from the shore as the group moves downriver, my eyes on Brody the entire time.

Be careful? My heart tugs and pulls. We blew past careful the first time we kissed. I can only hope we aren’t heading for

a crash.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Kate

JUST AS GRIFFIN TOLD me, there are multiple places along the road where I'm able to pull over and watch the kayakers move downriver.

The feeling of watching Brody paddle through rapids that look like they could swallow him whole is difficult to describe. It's thrilling to see a display of his talent and skill, but it's also terrifying. I am an adventurer at heart and have a long list of risky activities filling my resume. Sky diving, cave diving, ice climbing. I even ran with the bulls in Pamplona. I shouldn't be worried about something I know Brody is qualified to do.

But I can't stop running scenarios through my head of things that might go wrong. I feel like I've only just gotten Brody back. What if I were to lose him again?

It isn't a rational thought. Not even a little bit rational.

I still can't chase it out of my brain. It's not that I don't *want* him to do it. But I am hyper-focused on his safety. I don't think I'll actually take a full breath until he's out of the water again.

The last stretch of rapids runs right behind a lodge where a dining area and patio sit at the water's edge. I contemplate getting a table, but I'm too anxious to eat, and the place looks

busy. I don't want to waste a table while others are waiting. Instead, I find a blanket in the back of the Suburban and spread it out on the grass where I'll have a good view of the kayakers as they approach.

Based on what Griffin projected before they left, I have another half hour before they make it downriver, so I kill time by reading through articles and online information about the Green Race. The editor I emailed at *Southern Traditions and Travel* expressed mild interest in a piece and asked me to send it over after I've attended and have something written up. But they weren't interested enough to offer me an advance. I still haven't found an angle, but that probably won't come until I've been to the race myself. I keep hoping something in my research will jump out at me. But so far, I haven't felt that tingle up my spine that tells me I'm on to the right story.

As I scroll through my Google search, my eyes catch on Brody's name, published in the newspaper one town over from Silver Creek. The town is still in the same school district, so I shouldn't be surprised to open the link and find a letter to the editor from yesterday's newspaper talking about last week's school board meeting.

The more I read, the angrier I get. This person's summary of Brody's remarks is so heavily biased, it almost feels like slander. I'm surprised the paper even ran it. Words have so much power, and whoever wrote this letter is doing their level best to use that power to shut Brody's program down.

I pause.

*That's it.*

Words *do* have power. And words are one thing I know I do well.

There's the spine tingle I've been missing. I've been looking for a story, and I've had one in front of me this whole time. I don't need to write about the Green Race. At least not yet. I need to write about Brody's whitewater kayaking program at Green River Academy.

It'll be a slightly harder sell getting a national publication interested in something that's so local. But if I broaden the scope a little bit, pull in the inherent risk involved in *all* school sports, maybe mention other outdoor experiential learning-based schools . . .

But that won't feel like travel writing. It will feel more like investigative journalism.

I bite my lip. I'm not sure I have the chops for it.

But I have to do something. Worst case scenario, I take whatever I write to the newspapers in Silver Creek, Saluda, Hendersonville, maybe even Asheville, and ask them to run it for free. I would love to do more, to generate some national attention on how beneficial programs like Brody's can be. A huge flux of positive national press attention would stomp out measly letters to the editor like this one in a second.

My mind starts racing with everything I'll need to do. I'll need to talk to some students who are in the whitewater kayaking program now. Or at least *were* at the end of the school year. Some students who have already graduated and moved on would also be great. Brody's principal—I think I saw him at the school board meeting. Griffin. Brody himself, obviously, but a part of me wants to do this without him knowing. I don't want to give him false hope. And it might be fun to make it a surprise.

A flash of red in the distance immediately ends my planning.

Brody's in a red kayak.

I stand up, hands on my hips as I watch the kayaker approach. It *is* Brody. I recognize the shirt he put on before he left. I take a few steps closer to the water, my heart racing as he nears the final rapid. I've seen a few other kayakers navigate this particular stretch, but it didn't feel like this.

My heart jumps into my throat when, at the base of the rapid, Brody's kayak spins and flips. But then seconds later he rolls back to the surface—I cannot imagine the hip action that made that happen—and he's cruising again, his paddling

slowing as he approaches the calm section of river where he'll get out of the river.

By the time I reach him, Brody is already out of his kayak, pulling it onto the shore. I move forward, driven by some inexplicable need to have my hands on him, to feel him solid and warm and breathing under my touch. He's barely out of his PFD when I plow into him, my arms wrapping around his waist. I don't even care that he's wet.

"Whoa, hey." He drops the paddle he still has in one hand so he can hug me back. Awkwardly, since he's still wearing his spray skirt. "You okay?"

"Yes. Sorry. I just . . . I don't know. You just ran some crazy rapids."

"And I'm okay," he says on a chuckle. "Great, actually."

I take another deep breath and take a step back. Whatever she-bear reaction I'm having to the idea of Brody getting hurt needs to chill. He's fine. I'm fine. Everything is totally *fine*. "Did you have a good time?"

The man is actually glowing, his skin flushed, his eyes bright.

"It was awesome," he says. "A little frustrating at first. A couple of beaters put in right before us and slowed us up, but once we got past them, everything was pretty smooth."

"Beaters?"

"Kayakers who don't have the skill to paddle the river they're on. They spend most of their time either swimming or getting beat up."

I wonder if I will ever pick up on all the lingo. "How did Aislynn do?"

Brody's face morphs into something like awe. "Dude. She can paddle. She totally killed it out there."

Despite Kristyn's teasing, I am plenty happy to be filling the role of shuttle bunny if only to see Brody doing something he really loves. But I'm glad Aislynn is here to represent women doing something other than spectating.

The rest of the group is showing up now, laughing and clapping each other on the back, buzzing with the same energy I see in Brody. Even Aislynn offers me a smile. Maybe seeing me cuddle with Brody the whole drive down convinced her I have no intentions of making any sort of move on Ryan.

Once everyone is changed and gear is loaded up, we grab a late lunch at the lodge.

I really like Brody's friends. I like Brody *with* his friends. Griffin is technically boss to two of the guys who are here—Ryan is also an instructor—but it still feels like Brody is the one who sets the tone and steers the conversations. He's the peacekeeper here just like he is in his family. I'm willing to bet he's the same way at his school, too.

"Okay, Kate," Griffin says, leaning toward me. We've all finished eating at this point, but we're sitting on the patio next to the river, and no one seems in much of a hurry to leave. "You know Brody better than all of us. Tell us something we don't know about him."

I study Brody, my lips pursed playfully. There are a million different stories I could tell, but the one with adorable video evidence seems like the obvious place to start. "Has he ever told you he was on the Ellen Degeneres show when he was a kid?"

Brody groans.

"What?" Griffin says. "You met Ellen Degeneres? Why?"

"He was on one of her segments highlighting little genius whiz kids or whatever. He was her human calculator."

"Dude, you are good at math," Griffin says. "But you can like, calculate stuff in your head?"

Brody shoots me a look, shaking his head.

I only grin. "Dance, monkey, dance," I say, and he rolls his eyes.

"Give me a math problem," Brody says to Griffin.

"Any math problem?" AJ asks.

“I mean, not *any* math problem,” Brody answers. “I can’t do calculus in my head. But your basic calculator stuff. Big numbers, small numbers, whatever.”

“Seven thousand, six hundred twenty-two divided by sixteen,” Ryan says, jumping into the conversation.

“Four . . . hundred seventy-six point three seven five?” Brody says. He made his answer a question, but he’s playing it down. He knows he got it right. I’ve never seen him get one wrong.

“You just made that number up,” Griffin says.

Brody chuckles. “Go ahead and use a calculator and check my math.”

Aislynn holds up her phone. “He’s right. I already checked.”

“No way,” Griffin says. “And you did this on the Ellen show?”

“And he was adorable doing it,” I say, handing over my phone. I already have the video cued up.

Brody shakes his head. “Oh, you’re going to pay for this later.”

I bite my lip, liking the idea of later no matter how he plans to make me pay.

On the ride home, I lean back into my seat, kicking off my shoes and dropping my feet into Brody’s lap. I’m wearing his hoodie—something he insisted on when I complained about being cold—and it smells like him in the best way possible. I feel like I’m snuggled in a Brody cocoon.

I don’t really expect to leave my feet in his lap—I’m more trying to tease him than anything—but then he wraps his big hands around my ankles, sliding them down until his thumbs are pressing into the balls of my feet with gentle pressure.

I let out a low moan. “Oh man, I was not asking for a foot rub, but if you’re offering . . .”

His lips lift in a soft smile as he shifts both hands to one foot and begins massaging in earnest.



I let out another whimper. “How are you so good at this?” I ask, my eyes falling closed. “And how did I not know you were good at this? Is this something your twenties taught you?”

He shrugs, his hands still on my left foot. “When I was a kid, I used to give my mom foot rubs whenever she spent a long day in the goat barn.”

I can’t even with this man. I shake my head and let out a laugh. “Are you freaking kidding me right now? Could you be any more perfect?” I drop my head back and close my eyes, draping an arm across them like a pair of oversized sunglasses. “It’s not even fair, you know that, right?”

It isn’t fair. So much about this situation isn’t fair. I’ve been eating up his attention all day, but do I truly think I can be what Brody needs? I’m supposed to get on an airplane in less than twenty-four hours for a job that’s a thousand miles away. How can I be thinking about a London job while simultaneously thinking about making a life with Brody in Silver Creek?

Brody shifts my feet off his lap and opens his arms in invitation, his fingers gesturing me forward.

Fear pulses low and deep, but I don’t let myself dwell on it.

I’m so tired of *thinking*.

Worrying.

For once, especially after the day we’ve just had, I want to lean into whatever this is and see what happens. Maybe it was all the time spent next to a raging river, or the thrill of seeing Brody conquer that river. But suddenly, I *want* to do something reckless.

I want to forget that I’m scared or that people might get hurt.

I want to let myself *feel* without worrying about the consequences.

I shift and lean into Brody, and his arms wrap around me, tugging me close. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes, but his hands never stop moving, tracing feather-light circles

on my back. I don't know if he actually sleeps, but by the time we make it to Triple Mountain, fire is pumping through my veins. I am aware of Brody's every movement as he helps unload the kayaks and the rest of the gear. As he shifts his own kayak from Griffin's trailer over to the back of his truck. As he says goodbye to his friends, bro hugs and back slapping all around. Soon, he's driving me home, the air so thick with crackling tension, there's no way he doesn't feel it too.

When he pulls into my driveway, he just sits there, his hands gripping the steering wheel like it's holding him up.

I swallow the ball of nerves pulsing in the back of my throat. "Walk me to my door?"

He closes his eyes, and his jaw tenses, and I almost regret asking. But then he cuts the engine and climbs out. I sit still long enough for him to make it around the truck and open my door for me. I don't expect him to. Normally, I'm out as quickly as he is. But my heart is pounding in my ears, my skin prickling with anticipation, and it's making my movements slow and unsteady.

I climb out of the truck, and we walk side by side up to the porch. I'm halfway up the steps, my keys in my hand, when I realize Brody stopped at the bottom. The evening light is fading fast, and his face is shadowed, so I can't quite make out his expression. "Do you . . . want to come in?"

He lifts his eyes to mine, desire flashing behind them before he runs a hand across his face and sighs. "Are you sure this is what you want, Kate?"

I know what he's asking. I was the one that, only a week ago, said I shouldn't have kissed him because I *didn't* know what I want.

I drop back down a few steps so we're only one stair apart, bringing us eye-level. "I'm tired of resisting, Brody. I'm tired of worrying about our friendship. I'm—"

He lifts a hand to my cheek, his thumb tracing a line over the edge of my bottom lip.

My eyes drift closed.

“Then stop,” he says. “Let’s stop worrying and see what happens.” He leans forward, the tip of his nose brushing against mine. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

His words sound like a prayer, and they fill me like one, curling into every corner of my heart.

He kisses me softly at first, the pressure light, but that’s all it takes for me to explode with desire. Goose bumps break out across my skin, and heat flows through my veins as my hands lift to his chest. He is warm and solid under my palms, his pulse pounding against my fingers. His free hand wraps around my waist and pulls me closer as he brushes his tongue along my bottom lip. It’s an invitation, and one I willingly accept as I tilt my head to deepen the kiss.

Somewhere in the distance, July fourth fireworks explode into the night sky, the sound bouncing across the mountains until it reaches us. I have been kissed in a lot of different cities by a lot of different men. But I have never been kissed like this. Soon, even the fireworks fade into silence. I only hear Brody. My name on his lips, his breath as it skates across my skin. I drop my hands to his waist, sliding my fingers under his t-shirt and pressing them against the warm skin at the small of his back. His muscles tense under my touch, and he pulls me even closer.

Slowly, we stumble up the stairs, still kissing as I scramble to get my keys into the front door. I drop them and they clink onto the wooden slats of the porch, but I don’t even care. We are wedged in between the storm door and the heavy wooden front door, and I’ll happily stay here forever, pinned against the wood with Brody’s big body hovering over me.

I watched him do incredible things today. Marveled at his strength, his control, his bravery. And now my hands are on him, sliding over those same muscles, feeling them flex under my touch.

A pulse of desire roars through me, quieting just slightly when Brody breaks the kiss and takes a step back, his hands resting on his hips as his breath comes in ragged gulps. He

stands there a good ten seconds before he comes back and bends to retrieve the keys.

He unlocks the door, leaving the keys dangling in the lock while he places his hands on either side of me, just above my shoulders. "I'm only going to kiss you tonight, Kate," he says gently. "I need you to know that." He closes his eyes for a beat and takes another steadying breath. "And I need you to not ask me for more."

I nod, warm relief unfurling in my chest. I wouldn't have asked. But I'm not sure I would have been able to stop, either. Not if *more* was what he wanted.

We might survive the uncertainty of a kiss. Even a thousand kisses. But more than that? *No*. There would be no coming back from that. Not unless we're ready to make a commitment. Unless we know there will never be anyone else.

Brody pushes the door open, and I intertwine my fingers with his, leading him into the living room where we drop our hands so we can both slip off our shoes. He places my keys onto the coffee table, then moves toward me with the grace of a giant jungle cat, agile and smooth. His hands cradle either side of my face, and he kisses me again.

The potency of the attraction that overwhelmed us on the front porch has dimmed to something more tender, but it is no less intoxicating. He sinks onto the couch, pulling me down beside him, his movements measured and intentional. There is nothing frenzied about his kisses, and I recognize this as his way of maintaining control. Of heeding the boundary he's drawn for himself.

My respect for him only grows, tugging my attraction right along with it. Minutes or maybe hours pass. I have no sense of time when I'm in his arms, only a desire to freeze it. To suspend the two of us in this moment forever.

The old mantel clock that sits above Grandma's fireplace sounds the hour, and I count the chimes, my head resting on Brody's chest. He's fully reclined on the couch now, a throw pillow behind his head, and I'm leaning into his arms, wedged

in between him and the back of the couch. “It’s midnight,” I say softly.

His hand brushes up and down my arm. “I could sleep here,” he says lazily. And I hope he does. A part of me senses the magic of whatever is happening will diminish in the daylight, taking us back to a reality full of jobs and families and uncertainty. But I won’t dwell on that now. Right now, there is only us. And it’s enough.

I lift my head up and prop my chin on Brody’s chest, my arms tightening around his waist. “Can I ask you a question?”

His eyes flutter open. “Sure.”

“Had you ever thought about kissing me before tonight?”

His hands have been tracing slow circles on my back and they still at my question, his body tensing under me. He is silent so long, I start to think he isn’t going to respond. But then he leans up and presses his lips to mine. The yearning in his kiss is so potent, so charged, it nearly takes my breath away. At first, I think it’s the only answer he’s going to give me. But then he closes his eyes again and folds his hand over mine, pressing my palm to his chest just above his heart. “Every day, Kate,” he whispers. “I’ve thought about kissing you every day.”

His words are a live wire to my skin. I take a steadying breath. “Since I got back?”

“Since ... forever.”

Intense longing swells in my chest. I could give in. Let it take over and whisk me away to a world where Brody and I might actually be happy together. But even sharper than the longing is the same visceral fear that’s been chasing me all week.

What if I hurt him?

What if I end up leaving?

What if I try to stay, and it doesn’t work?

It’s easy to imagine all the traveling my work requires driving a wedge between us just like it did my parents. I’m not

sure the volatility of my traveling life is something Brody would even want in a relationship. Honestly, it's not something *I* want. Leaving is always easier when there isn't someone you're leaving behind. There are so many uncertainties, so many possible outcomes, and too many of them end with pain. Especially if Brody has had feelings for me all this time.

A few hours ago, I wanted to be reckless. I wanted to *feel*. And for what? Will it have been worth it if it ends up hurting Brody? I could tell he was hesitant to get out of the car. He was probably trying to protect himself. But I pushed for this. I asked him to stay.

Tiny pinpricks of pain explode across my chest.

If I do leave Silver Creek, and odds are pretty good that I will even if I don't take the job in London, tonight will have been a terrible mistake.

It will mean I *used* him. Took advantage of his feelings, and for what? Because I wanted his arms around me? Because I think he's sexy, and I'm impressed with the way he handles a kayak?

I feel the falsity in my words even as I think them. There is so much more to how I feel about Brody than that. But I am also no closer to figuring out what the next chapter of my life is supposed to look like. And until I know, I can't toy with his feelings. I can't risk hurting him worse than I already have.

I fall asleep still curled in Brody's arms and don't wake up until weak sunlight filters through the front windows. I'm alone now, a blanket draped over my shoulders. I don't have to look out the window to know that Brody is gone.

A dull ache fills my heart, radiating outward. I already miss him. But the longer I'm awake, the more I remember. And the more I remember, the more the ache shifts into sharp discomfort.

My phone buzzes beside me, and I look over to find it charging on the console table beside the couch. I didn't plug it in last night, which means Brody must have. Found my

charger and left my phone where I would be sure to find it. My heart squeezes behind my too-tight ribs.

There's a text from Brody waiting for me when I pick up my phone.

*Brody: Had to go feed Charlie. Call me when you're up? I was thinking I could make us some breakfast. We have a lot to talk about.*

Does he remember I'm supposed to fly out today? Does he think I won't go after last night?

*Should I not go after last night?*

When I'm cocooned in his arms, it's very easy to imagine giving everything up. The London job. All of my traveling. I could just stay here with him. Let him take care of me. But for how long? The novelty of our new relationship will eventually wear off, and then what? I can't *only* be Brody's girlfriend. And I don't know how to be anything else in Silver Creek. If I stayed, could I still be a writer? Could I still be me?

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a tiny hope pulses to life. *You can, Kate. You can make it work.* But the thought only wakes up the fear I can't seem to escape.

I pull the afghan Brody draped over my shoulders a little tighter. It still smells like my grandmother, and tears suddenly pool in my eyes. Grandma Nora was stern, like my mother. She ran a tight household and had high expectations, but her edges were always a little softer than Mom's. No matter the state of things between me and Mom, Grandma Nora always found ways to make sure I knew I was loved.

Then I left her.

I ran away because it was easier than dealing with Mom. Because I was so terrified of turning into Mom and was too selfish to put anyone else's comfort over my own. Even when Grandma Nora died, and it felt like one of my guiding stars had fizzled out, I still didn't come home.

A fresh wave of shame washes over me.

I am not very good at loving people.

Brody might not realize it yet, but everyone else who is close to him does. That's why Olivia and her mom seem so worried about me being here. His family doesn't trust that I won't hurt him.

I look down at Brody's text. I don't want to hurt him. And I wouldn't. Not on purpose. Never on purpose. But if I can't love him like he deserves, wouldn't that be hurting him too? Brody doesn't deserve to compromise. He shouldn't have to settle.

I pull the afghan off my shoulders and slowly fold it before draping it back over the couch. I'm still wearing Brody's hoodie, and I pull that off, too, placing it on the cushion next to me.

I sit with my hands resting in my lap for a solid twenty minutes. Breathing. Thinking. Soaking up the stillness.

When my thoughts are finally clear, my resolve hardened, I leave my phone on top of Brody's sweatshirt and go upstairs to pack.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Brody

IT IS AFTER ELEVEN a.m. when I finally hear from Kate.

At first, I didn't worry. We were up early yesterday. I couldn't fault her a desire to sleep in. But as the morning stretched toward noon, I began to wonder.

Maybe I shouldn't have told her.

Maybe I should have waited.

Maybe asking her to breakfast, suggesting we talk was too forward. Too fast.

But none of that matters now.

I read her text one more time, trying to make sense of what she's telling me.

*Kate: Last night was a mistake, Brody. I want to be who you need, but I'm not sure I can ever be the person you deserve. And I love you too much to ruin our friendship by trying to be.*

I'm staring at my phone when a second message pops up.

*Kate: I'm headed to London for my interview. I hope we can talk soon.*

Her interview.

With everything that's happened, I completely forgot she was leaving for London today.

I've gotten very good at the mental gymnastics necessary to keep myself from dwelling on what a future with Kate might look like. But when I woke up this morning to the orange-blossom scent of her hair, her body still pressed against mine, I finally stopped fighting. I closed my eyes and let the thoughts come. And they did—like water rushing through the dam at Lake Summit. A wedding on the farm. Buying a house together. Starting a *life* together. Then ordinary stuff like shopping for groceries. Going on hikes. Planting a garden. I saw us raising a family. Taking the kids up to the farm to ride on the tractor or feed the goats or eat strawberries straight off the plant. I even thought of ways I might adjust my schedule so we could spend summers traveling or living in Europe so Kate could be closer to the parts of the world she's written about most.

Five minutes ago, I thought I would fix her breakfast, tell her I'm in love with her, and ask her to stay.

And now she's gone.

I run a hand through my hair. I have made a colossal mistake.

Monumental.

An earth-shattering, soul-splitting mistake.

Because even if I never see Kate again, she has ruined me for anyone else.

I should have agreed when she said she shouldn't come with me to Robbinsville. I should have arranged for Griffin to do her second kayaking lesson. I should have avoided her. Avoided *this*.

I pace around my kitchen feeling like a bomb about to explode. Perry warned me this would happen, and it didn't even take all summer. Kate's only been around a month, and I'm already here, desperate for her, overwhelmed by the reality of her leaving, furious that she won't stay. That she won't—

*Choose me.*

I grab the keys to the Gator and push out my back door. I take off down the narrow path that leads to the farm, driving fast enough that I can hear my mother's voice scolding me in my head. When I reach the farm, I keep driving, flying past the farmhouse and out toward the orchards. When I hit the east pasture, I cut right and head into the forest, winding through the trees until I reach the spring-fed creek we used to swim in as kids. But even this doesn't feel like an escape. Kate swam here, too. Everywhere I turn, there's something that reminds me of her.

I need to find my brothers. At least one of them is probably around somewhere.

I turn the Gator around and head toward Lennox's restaurant. Or, *almost* restaurant. Renovations still aren't finished, but Lennox is there most of the time anyway.

I pull to a stop right outside the back door. Would he be here on a Sunday morning? As far as I know, he's still living at Perry's place. If he isn't here, would he be there?

Before I can question further, Lennox appears in the back doorway of the restaurant. He's barefoot and shirtless, wearing a pair of sweatpants and eating a bowl of cereal. His hair is sticking up in so many directions, I have to assume he's only been awake a matter of minutes.

"I thought you might drive straight into the side of the kitchen," he says dryly. "Feeling a little blustery this morning?"

"It's almost noon."

He shifts his bowl to one hand and pulls his phone out of his pocket, glancing at the screen. "So it is." He holds up his bowl. "Cereal?"

For making some of the most incredible food I've ever eaten, when he isn't working, Lennox has a surprisingly simple palate. Cereal. Fruit. Ham sandwiches.

I shake my head. "What are you doing here? Are you living here?"

“The apartment’s empty. So yeah, temporarily. I was tired of living with Perry, and I still haven’t found my own place.”

“Julien moved out? Did he quit?” Julien has been the catering chef at Stonebrook as long as we’ve had a commercial kitchen on site.

I finally climb out of the Gator and follow Lennox inside.

“Didn’t quit, but he’s retiring at the end of the summer. He bought a house on Lake Summit.” I follow him up the stairs to the small apartment above the kitchen. “Where were you last night?” he asks. “I thought you might bring Kate.”

Kayaking was a convenient excuse to miss the family Fourth of July gathering, but I’m not sure I would have wanted to go regardless. Not with the way everyone has been watching and worrying about me and Kate. “I texted Mom. I was kayaking.”

He moves into the kitchen and drops his cereal bowl into the sink. “Sounds like a convenient excuse. Why did you leave early last Sunday?”

I slump onto the couch in the living room. “Olivia was being dumb to Kate.”

He sits down on the chair opposite me and leans onto his elbows. “She’s worried about you. And based on how you’re acting right now, I’d say she’s justified.”

“I’m fine,” I say. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Except you’re here, so you clearly want to talk about something.” He reaches forward and slaps the side of my knee. “Want me to call Perry? The fence at the back of the east orchard needs some posts replaced. Want to help?”

There are plenty of farmhands at Stonebrook who could handle this sort of thing. But this wouldn’t be the first time we’ve found something to do around the farm just for the sake of doing the work. When we were kids, whenever Dad wanted us to talk, he always found some chore for us to do, said working with our hands made it easier to work out our thoughts.

I sigh. “I could fix a fence.”

“Good. Perry was planning on showing up at your place in half an hour anyway. I’ll call him and tell him you saved him the trip.”

“You were already planning this?”

“How else would I know there’s a fence that needs repairing? I don’t pay attention to that kind of crap.” He disappears into the back room and emerges a minute later wearing jeans and a dark gray t-shirt, a pair of work boots in his hand. The image makes me grin. Lennox created a sleek and shiny existence for himself when he was working in Charlotte. After winning an episode of *Chopped* on Food Network, he turned into something of a local celebrity. He even did a few cooking segments on the morning news. He ate up the attention, his life—and his wardrobe—getting fancier by the minute. But all that glitz and glamour doesn’t change the fact that he grew up on a small-town farm, mending fences, feeding baby goats, and fishing in the creek every Sunday afternoon. He might look like he belonged in that fancy life—and maybe he did. But he belongs here too.

He drops into a kitchen chair to put on his boots. I look down at my own shoes. I’m dressed more for working out than I am farm labor, but I’ll manage.

“Perry and I worked it all out last night,” Lennox finally explains. “You’ve been dodging our calls, cutting out early on family meals, skipping annual family traditions. We figured somebody had to save you from yourself.”

“Why do I feel like I just walked into a trap?”

He grins. “You did. But don’t lie to yourself about it. You know you need us, or you wouldn’t have come over.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Brody

HALF AN HOUR LATER, the three of us are driving a Stonebrook Farm truck out to the fence at the east edge of the apple orchard that separates the fruit trees from the rolling pastureland where Mom's goats graze. Perry is driving, and Lennox and I are riding in the back with the fence posts, rails, and tools we'll need to replace the rotting posts with new ones.

Perry pulls the truck to a stop, and Lennox tosses me a pair of work gloves. "Let's get to it."

We work in silence for close to half an hour, the sun beating down on our backs. It's nice to feel like I'm doing something productive. This one small thing—fixing a fence line with my brothers—is something I can control. At least for now.

Perry and Lennox don't push me, but I don't miss the looks passing between them.

I finally drop the mallet I'm using to hammer a fence post into the ground and prop my hands on my hips. My brothers stop what they're doing as if sensing I'm finally ready to talk.

I use the back of my wrist to wipe the sweat from my forehead. "I kissed her," I finally say.

My brothers exchange a glance I can't interpret, then look back at me. "Okay?" Lennox says.

“I kissed *Kate*,” I say again. “Last night. Pretty much *all* night.”

Lennox frowns as his eyes dart to Perry who is looking unusually . . . smug? Why is he smug?

“And I guess this is a big deal because you’ve never kissed her before?” Lennox asks dryly.

My brow furrows. “Of course I haven’t.” Technically, *she* kissed *me* a week ago, but that feels like a minor detail after last night.

“I told you,” Perry says. “I *told* you.” He reaches out and shoves Lennox, his lips curving in a smile we almost never see. Lennox shoves Perry back, elbowing him in the gut, but it only makes Perry laugh and wrap his arms around Lennox from behind in an attempt to knock him off his feet. The only thing that keeps me from interrupting the scuffle is the fact that Perry seems to be enjoying himself. We haven’t seen too many signs of life in Perry the past couple years. It’s nice to think he might be waking up.

Then again, he can wake up on his own time, because right now, we’re supposed to be talking about me.

I clear my throat. “Can someone please explain what’s happening here?”

Lennox gives Perry one more shove before they finally drop their hands and stand next to each other like civilized adults. “Lennox was convinced you and Kate have had more of a friends-with-benefits situation going on.”

“What? *No*. Never. We’ve never—we’re just friends. We’ve only ever been friends.”

“Well, right,” Lennox says, “but sometimes friends—” He gives his head a shake, like he can’t make the words line up in his head. “Are you honestly telling me you’ve been best friends with someone that hot for all these years, and you’ve never even kissed her?”

“I told you, man,” Perry says. “Brody isn’t like you.”

Lennox rolls his eyes. “Come on. Every time she shows up, he drops everything for her.” He looks at me. “The only time I ever saw you in Charlotte was when she was passing through. And you’ve never had a serious relationship with anyone else. I mean, I guess I just figured . . .”

“Is that seriously all you think about?” I say. “*Friendship*, Lennox. You should try it sometime. Have a relationship with a woman that doesn’t involve sex.”

“That’s not what my relationships are about. You don’t know near as much about me as you think you do. And what, you think I should be more like you? Fall in love with someone who isn’t ever going to love me back? Waste *years* waiting for something that’s never going to happen?”

Perry holds out a hand. “Hey,” he says to Lennox in a voice that sounds so much like Dad, it almost pulls me out of the moment. “That’s enough.”

I move toward the longer fence rail that will stretch from one post to the next and pick up one end, waiting as Perry moves into position on the other end. “No, he’s right,” I say bitterly. “I *have* been waiting for something that’s never going to happen. Because right after I kissed her, she left for London.” We drop the rail into the pre-cut notches on the fence posts, settling it into place.

“Is she coming back?” Lennox asks. “Or is this it? She’s just . . . gone again?”

“No idea. I didn’t even see her in person. She sent me a text.”

“Ohh, ouch,” Lennox says. “That can’t be a good sign.”

“Why London?” Perry asks. “Did she just randomly pick a city, or—?”

“Who cares what city she’s in? She left. I kissed her, and her reaction was to flee the country.”

I’m not really being fair. Kate didn’t necessarily *flee*. She went on a trip she’s had planned for weeks, for a job interview she told me about. But somehow, after finally admitting my feelings, I hoped things might be different. Kissing Kate sent



my brain all the way to *and now I ask you to stay with me so I can love you forever*. But for Kate, the opposite happened.

“I’m just trying to understand her motive,” Perry says. “Didn’t you say she came home to get her grandmother’s house ready to sell? Is that done yet?”

“That’s not—” I reach for my phone. “She’s not gone for good. She’ll come back to finish the house, but that’s not the point.” I scroll to Kate’s latest text and hand Perry my phone. “She made her feelings pretty clear.”

Perry tilts the phone so he and Lennox can read her message at the same time.

Lennox winces. “That sucks, man. I’m sorry.” He pulls his t-shirt up to wipe the sweat off his forehead, then moves to the next rotten post. I step in beside him, and together we shift it back and forth until the ground around it loosens and it slides free, splintering and breaking apart where the wood is rotten.

Perry hands me my phone while Lennox shovels the broken chunks of wood out of the soil.

“Maybe it’s a good thing,” Lennox says while he shovels. “Now you know, right? Nothing is ever going to happen between you two, so you can put all this behind you and move on.”

“I don’t know, man,” Perry says. “How was the kiss?”

I shoot him a look. I don’t know why he thinks he even needs to ask.

“And she was into it too?”

I think of Kate in my arms, warm and responsive. “It definitely seemed like it.”

“I recognize this isn’t the advice you expect from me, but . . .” Perry shrugs. “Maybe you shouldn’t give up.”

I lift an eyebrow. “What?”

“That text message doesn’t say she doesn’t care about you, Brody. It says she’s scared.” He gives his head a weary shake. “Listen. I know I’m the last person qualified to give

relationship advice. But if my divorce taught me anything, it's that people have to do things for their own reasons."

Lennox's eyes dart to mine. Perry doesn't talk about his divorce. *Ever.*

"Let's say Kate didn't leave for London this morning," Perry says slowly. "Let's say you asked her to stay. For you. To be with you."

He's surprisingly close to exactly the conversation I imagined.

"If she loves you," he continues, "she might have said yes. She might have stayed because staying is what *you* want her to do. And it might have felt good for a while. For months, years even. But trust me, man. You don't want that. If Kate stays in Silver Creek, you want it to be because it's what *she* wants. If it takes her going to London to figure that out? Then let her go."

"But why London?" Lennox repeats the question Perry asked earlier. "Seems kinda far if she's just running scared."

"A job," I say. "She was offered an editing job with a travel magazine. She went to London for an interview."

"Ah," Perry says with a nod. "Then I mean what I said even more. She's got choices to make, and you can't make them for her."

"You read her text, Perry. She already made her choice. And she didn't choose me."

"But she did say she *wanted* to choose you," Perry says. "That's not nothing."

"So what do I do? Just sit around and wait? It feels like that's all I've ever done for this woman. I'm so tired of waiting."

He shrugs. "Then don't. Only you can decide what's worth it and what isn't."

I grab the post hole digger and thrust it into the dirt, digging with twice the force I actually need. I understand what Perry is saying, but I still feel like Kate didn't just leave, she left *me*.

Left without talking to me. Without telling me what's really going on in her head. It feels like she's giving up on something I would fight for no matter what.

Perry's hand falls onto my shoulder, stilling my frantic digging. "That's deep enough, man," he says, his tone gentler than normal.

I sigh and step away from the hole, watching as Perry and Lennox lower the new post into the ground.

Once it's in place, Lennox turns to me while Perry shovels dirt back into the hole to cover the base of the post. "All right, hear me out," Lennox says, palms up.

I can already sense where this is going, and odds are very high I will not like it.

"I've got this thing on Thursday night. Back in Charlotte. It's an awards thing, and Kitchen 704 is being honored for a few different things. They want me to be there since I was part of the team when the award was won." He waves his hand dismissively. "Anyway. It'll be long and boring, but the food will be good, and there will be a big party afterward with plenty of women in attendance." He eyes me. "You're tired of waiting around? Maybe you just need to get away for the weekend. Get a little drunk. Find a date or two." He smirks and lifts a shoulder. "Or ten." He glances at Perry. "Actually, you should both come."

Finding any number of dates with Lennox as my wingman sounds like a terrible idea, especially if he thinks plying me with alcohol first is an acceptable strategy. But I might need to go just to support him. "You're getting an award? Why didn't we know about this?"

"The restaurant is getting an award. I'll be mentioned as the head chef on staff when the award was given, but it's a more all-encompassing restaurant thing. The wine list, the food, the ambiance. I'm only going because I feel like it'll be good networking for opening Hawthorne."

"Will it help you find a new catering chef? We're going to need one of those in a few months," Perry says in his droll

business voice.

“Yeah, possibly,” Lennox says. “A lot of people in the industry go to these things.”

“It sounds like Perry has a good reason to go with you then.” I toss the post hole digger into the bed of the truck. Perry can go be Lennox’s cheerleader. As long as one of us is there, that’s good enough. “I hope you guys have fun, but I’m teaching on Thursday.”

“You’re missing the point,” Lennox says. “This isn’t about the award or the networking. Not for you, anyway. This is about getting Kate out of your head. And it isn’t until Thursday *night*. You can teach and still come.”

“Where’s Flint right now?” Perry asks. “What if we called him to see if he can come out for it?”

Lennox raises a finger like he’s considering. “That’s not a bad idea. Flint will draw media attention, and the media will naturally mention why he’s there. Might be a subtle way to get people talking about the restaurant without directly piggybacking on Flint’s fame.”

“Except that’s exactly what you’ll be doing,” I say.

“But it wouldn’t look like it,” Perry says. “It would look like Flint’s just there to support Lennox. If the media also happens to mention Lennox is about to open his own restaurant?”

“Which they will,” Lennox says.

Perry nods. “Then what’s the harm in that?”

My brothers have more reason to be invested in the success of Lennox’s restaurant than I do. I want it to be successful, but they both *need* it to be. The farm is putting up a lot of capital to make it happen, and Lennox’s reputation is on the line. “I don’t even know if Flint is stateside right now,” I say. “Wasn’t he filming in Brazil last week?”

“Bolivia,” Perry corrects. “But he talked to Mom on Friday. I don’t think he’s there anymore.”

“Here, I’ll call him.” I pull out my phone. “This is not a complicated question to answer.”

Despite his ridiculous schedule, Flint almost always answers when one of us calls. It's advice his agent gave him right after his first movie turned into an overnight sensation. *"Never stop talking to the normal people in your life—the people who aren't famous. They're the only ones who will keep you grounded."*

"Brody!" Flint yells into his phone so loud, I have to move mine away from my ear, and both my older brothers roll their eyes. This is classic Flint. He's been the loudest, brightest star in every room he's ever been in. Even before he was famous.

"Hey. Where are you?"

"Right now? On the beach behind my house in Malibu. Where are you?"

"We're fixing the fence in the east pasture. Me, Perry, and Lennox."

"Oh man," Flint says. "I'm so jealous."

"Yeah, I'm sure you are. How's your suntan?"

"I'm serious. I hate it when you guys are together without me." That, I can actually believe.

"That's why I'm calling. What are you doing Thursday?"

"Good question. Jonie!" he yells into the background to whom I assume is his manager. Or a personal assistant, maybe? "What am I doing Thursday?" he asks.

Even though it's been years, I'm never not surprised by how different my little brother's life is than mine.

"Jonie says I've got a photoshoot thing, but it can be moved," Flint says. "What's going on?"

I put the call on speaker and listen while Lennox fills Flint in. In a matter of minutes, we've made plans to meet in Charlotte for a weekend, just the four of us, in whatever house Flint's entourage can rent for us, which undoubtedly means something enormous and ridiculously expensive.

"But just to be clear," Flint says, "even though we're saying this is to support Lennox, the real reason we're all getting

together is so Brody can talk to us about Kate, right?”

I breathe out a sigh. I should have known better than to think Mom or Olivia hadn't already filled him in.

Lennox eyes me, his expression smug, as if challenging me to back out now. “Smart man,” he says to Flint.

He knows he has me. I'll go on Thursday. I'll spend the weekend with my brothers. I'll probably tell Flint everything. But it won't change anything.

Kate will still be gone.

I'll still be alone.

I want to believe what Perry said. I want to hope.

But I'm beginning to wonder if the price of that hope is just too high.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Kate

IT'S RAINY IN LONDON, and even though it's July, I wish I'd grabbed Brody's hoodie when I left the hotel this morning. Yes, Brody's hoodie. The one he loaned me a couple of days ago on our way home from Robbinsville. Yes, I still have it, and yes, I brought it with me to London, and no, I will not be judged for that fact, thank you very much.

Of course I brought his hoodie with me. The thing smells amazing. Trouble is, now everything else in my suitcase smells amazing too. Honestly, if I could figure out how to bottle *essence of Brody*, I could make millions. I can already picture the advertisements. Half-naked kayakers, rippling muscles, raging whitewater in the background.

Forget journalism. I should go into marketing. Women of the world wouldn't know what hit them.

That's how I'm feeling walking around London enveloped in Brody's scent. No matter where I am or what I'm wearing, I'm thinking of him, which is the exact opposite of what I wanted this trip to be about. I wanted to clear my head; instead, I can't get him out of it.

It doesn't help that every free moment I've had, I've been working on my article about Brody's whitewater kayaking program. So I'm not just smelling him all the time, I'm also thinking about how amazing he is. Writing about his altruistic

heart. The way he cares about each of his students. His dedication to their growth even while making their safety his top priority. Add in the pictures Griffin sent me of Brody kayaking the narrows in last year's Green Race? *Not* thinking about Brody is about as likely as saying no to a drink of water in the middle of the Sahara.

The article is finished now, which is a feat considering how much time I've spent at *Expedition's* offices. But I had to write fast. If this thing is going to matter, it has to be published sooner than later. It sped things along that there is so much scholarly research on experiential education, particularly regarding outdoor experiences and the positive impact these kinds of activities have on student performance.

And Griffin was an absolute lifesaver. With his help, I was able to network with several of Brody's former students, all of whom were happy to share their thoughts about Brody specifically and his program generally. Even the guy I called at two in the morning, not realizing he's stationed at Ramstein Air Force base and is on Central European Time instead of Eastern Time, had positive things to say.

I sent the finished article to James Wylie, an editor with *Beyond*, a national publication based in the US, early this morning. He's published my stuff before, and James has told me more than once he'll always be happy to read anything I send his way.

I'm done for the day at *Expedition*, but I still have two hours to kill before meeting my dad for dinner, and that's long enough for a nap snuggled up in Brody's hoodie.

I know. *I know*. I'm a top-tier hot mess.

I'm also pretty sure I'm in love with him. Sucks for me because loving him and being right for him are not the same thing.

As soon as I knew I'd be in London, I called Dad to see if he could fly over from Paris to meet me. It's been a while since we've had the chance to catch up, and with all the turmoil of the last month or two, I could use his steadying influence.



I cross the street and head toward my hotel, stopping at the corner when my phone rings. My breath catches when I see who's calling. Maybe I've managed to get one thing right, at least.

"Hi, James."

"You've saved me, Kate Fletcher."

I grin. The editor at *Beyond* has never been a guy for small talk. "Saved you?"

"I love the piece you sent over. It's different than what you usually send us, but I like your angle. The way you discuss the concerned parents in a way that makes them *not* seem like idiots even though it's obvious to anyone with a brain that they are, in fact, idiots. Very nuanced."

"Thanks? I think?"

"Did you send this anywhere else?" he asks.

My heart rate ticks up the tiniest bit. "Not yet. I wanted you to see it first."

"Excellent. I want it. We just had to pull our feature—what was that?" he says to someone in the background. "Absolutely no exceptions. There is no criminal charge that we would be okay with. No. As long as there is an active investigation, we aren't publishing anything about his brewery. End of story." His voice comes back on the line. "The nerve of these people," he says, then he sighs. "Where were we?"

"You were telling me you had to pull your feature story? James, what does that mean for me?"

"It means I get to be the hero because you've given me a story to replace the one that just got axed, and you go to press in ten days for our August edition."

I only *just* keep myself from squealing right there in the middle of Gracechurch Street. I had hoped to get something in print by early fall, but even that was going to be a stretch. August is perfect.

"Where are you right now?" James asks. "This is obviously going to get rushed through. Can you email me a list of your

sources? And whomever we need to contact about printing these photos. They look professional.”

“I’m in London, but I’ll be stateside by tomorrow night. And I can send all of that to you right now.” Assuming Griffin knows who took the Green Race photos. Or at least knows someone else who knows.

“Right *now*, right now,” James says. “In the next five minutes, if you can swing it. Can you vouch for all your personal sources?”

“Yes. Absolutely. I swear they’re all legit. And I’ll email over links to the research I cited as well as the transcript of the interview I had with the professor at Western Carolina University.”

*That* phone call was a shot in the dark, but it turned out to be hugely beneficial to get the perspective of someone who has made a career out of researching effective teaching methods.

“I owe you one, Kate,” James says.

“Let’s call it even. You have no idea what it means that you’re getting this published so fast.”

“Hmm,” he says. “This kayaker in North Carolina. He mean something to you?”

“Off the record?”

“It isn’t going to change my mind if that’s what you’re asking. Desperate times, and all that.”

“He’s a close friend,” I say. “I don’t want to see his program shut down, so I’m trying to get him a little bit of positive press.”

“This should do it,” James says. “It’s good writing. Send me the address of wherever you’ll be tomorrow, and I’ll overnight the proofs.”

We end the call just as I reach the front door of the boutique hotel *Expedition* booked for me. For a moment, I consider calling Brody to tell him about the article, but I’ll be back in Silver Creek tomorrow night, and by then I’ll have the proofs.

Not that he'll want to see me. He never did respond to my text. But why would he? I don't deserve a reply.

My dad meets me in a corner bistro right down the street from my hotel. He stands when I approach and pulls me into a big hug. "How are you, Katie? You look good. Really good."

With Dad's arms around me, the tightness in my chest loosens. It's good that I'm here. No one understands my lifestyle better than Dad, because it's always been his too.

We settle into a corner booth where he gives me an update on where he's been and what he's up to. "I'm over the entire European division now," he says. "It's a big deal."

"Still a lot of traveling?"

His shoulders lift and he grins, but there's an emptiness in his expression I've never noticed before. "You know me. Always going somewhere."

There are deep hollows under Dad's eyes. His hair is thinning, his skin a little looser than it was the last time I saw him. For the first time, he looks *older*. "Dad, are you seeing anyone?"

His eyebrows lift. "What, like dating?"

"Yeah. Or just, I don't know. Do you have friends?"

The question came out of the blue. But it's suddenly very important that I know.

Dad waves his hand dismissively. "Ah, Katie. You know I don't have time for stuff like that."

I have always felt a certain camaraderie with my dad. We're the world travelers. The ones Mom never understood. I'm not like her. I'm not small towns and boring routines. I'm like Dad. An adventurer. A free spirit.

And alone.

Tears prick my eyes, and Dad's face falls. "Hey, hey, what's going on?"

I shake my head quickly and use my napkin to dry my eyes.

“Is this about the job? How did your meeting go with them yesterday?”

“It’s not that. The meeting was great. They like me, they like my work. And I like all of them, too. If I want the job, they would love for me to start as soon as possible.”

“Well, that’s good news, isn’t it?”

“*If* I want the job.”

He takes a slow, deep breath. “And you maybe don’t?”

I lift one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug.

Dad takes a deep breath. “Why don’t we start at the beginning?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kate

I TAKE DAD ALL the way back to my last writing gig in Ireland—to the itchiness I felt there and how it made me more willing to say yes when Mom told me she was selling Grandma Nora’s house and needed my help sorting through everything in it. I tell him about how untethered I feel whenever I think about traveling, and how much it’s made me question whether I want to keep doing what I’m doing.

Then I tell him about Brody. *Everything* about Brody. Including our kisses and how confusing it is to feel things I’ve never felt before.

He looks on with kind, patient eyes, nodding in all the right places, not saying a word until I’ve said everything I could possibly say on the subject.

When dad finally speaks, his tone is gentle. “You’ve always been a woman to go after what you want. If this man is it, go be with him.”

I shake my head. “But it isn’t that simple. His life is in Silver Creek.”

He winces. “I did always think you were meant for bigger things than that small town. But men have done less for love. If you’re supposed to be together, maybe he’ll move to London with you.”

The wrongness of the idea is as potent as it is immediate. I would never ask Brody to leave Silver Creek. I can't imagine him living anywhere else, with or without me. "I don't even know if I want the London job, Dad. The only reason I considered it is because I loved the idea of having a steady paycheck. I'm tired of the grind, you know? And freelancing is never *not* a grind."

"So find a different steady paycheck," he says. "Do you want to work for me? I could find a place for you, I'm sure."

I can't keep my face from scrunching up at the thought. There's no way I would ever fit in Dad's business suit world. That's not the life for me anymore than London is the life for Brody.

Dad chuckles. "Okay, let's strike that option from the list."

"Sorry. I promise it isn't personal."

"What about another editing job?" he says. "There are other magazines just like *Expedition*. And they aren't all based in London."

"Dad, I have zero qualifications. I can't just apply to be an editor when I don't even have a bachelor's degree."

"You're right. It was probably your *zero qualifications* that made *Expedition* offer you a job in the first place. Come on, Kate. You're scrappy. You want an editing job? Get yourself one. You know writers and editors all over the world. Network. Make it happen for yourself."

His advice is surprisingly simple. It also feels impossible. In my head, *Expedition's* job offer has always been more of an outlier. It's never been something I'm qualified for. At least not on paper. The job offer was dumb luck. A one-off. But maybe he's right. Maybe . . . I could try.

"Now, you probably won't find an editing job in little old Silver Creek," Dad says with a condescending chuckle.

I am immediately defensive, and the feeling surprises me. What does he know about Silver Creek?

Then again, Mom's too-deep roots in her hometown played a part in ending his marriage, so maybe I can't blame him.

"I know you have reasons to hate that town, but it really isn't so bad. There are a lot of good people there."

"I don't hate Silver Creek, Kate. I enjoyed living there." He reaches over and squeezes my hand. "But the world is so big, honey. I want you to have it all, and I'm not sure you'll ever find it there."

Have it all? And what, be alone just like him?

It's always been exactly what I wanted, but somehow I never truly processed what it would mean long term. But seeing Brody with his family, his friends, *feeling* what it could be to share a life with him. If I'm choosing, I'm not choosing solitude.

My dad's words replay through my brain, and this time, they catch on something different. I look up. "Did you just say you lived in Silver Creek?"

He nods. "Of course I did."

"What? When?"

"Before the divorce. Just for a year or so. Almost two."

I shift in my seat, suddenly nervous to be talking about my parents' divorce. My dad and I are close, but I was so little when everything happened, it's always been a thing that was behind us. We've never truly talked about it.

"What happened, Dad? Why did you and Mom split up?"

He sighs wearily. "We were just too different people."

I shake my head. "No. That's not good enough. My whole life, Mom has been angry at me. Angry every time I leave town. Every time I travel to see you. She has resented me. And I've blamed Silver Creek and her ties to a place that was too small for the life you wanted. I decided it was too small for the life I wanted too. But now I'm wondering if there's more to the story."

Dad presses his fingers into his eyes for a long moment before finally bringing his gaze back to me. “Your mother was not angry at you for leaving. She’s angry because you *got* to leave when she didn’t.”

Something shifts in my brain as information tumbles and realigns. “What do you mean?” I need time to catch up, to process what Dad is telling me.

He leans his elbows on the table, a gravity to his expression that says he’s about to tell me something he’s never told me before. He gives his head a little shake, a sadness passing over his face that makes my heart lurch. “We were living in Atlanta when you were born.”

I nod. I know this much, at least.

“About the time I got the promotion that took me to Paris, your grandfather got sick. Sick enough that your Grandma Nora couldn’t take care of him on her own. So instead of moving to Paris, all three of us, like we originally planned, we moved to Silver Creek. Bought a house a few doors down from your grandparents. Blue, with white shutters.”

A wave of shock rolls through me. That explains the photos of me as a baby on Brody’s front porch. I *lived* in Brody’s house when I was a baby.

I can’t spend time on how weirdly coincidental it is because I’m too hung up on what Dad is telling me. In my head, Mom always *left* Dad so she could live in Silver Creek. Dad living there too doesn’t fit.

“Why don’t I know this? Why hasn’t Mom ever told me?”

There is a heavy sadness in Dad’s eyes, and he stares into his empty coffee cup for a long time before he finally answers. “It wasn’t a happy time for your mother, Kate. I still took the job in Paris. I didn’t prioritize our family like I should have, and your mother is the one who suffered for it.”

Talk about having the rug pulled out from under me. I just had the whole floor pulled away. I’m standing on rocky soil, the foundation of everything I ever believed about my parents’ marriage reduced to rubble around me.



“We did try to make it work,” Dad continues. “But traveling back and forth—it was hard on us. I started staying in Paris more and more, and then I . . .” He meets my gaze and breathes out a sigh. “I met someone. A woman. She’s the reason your mother and I are divorced.”

My skin flushes hot then cold, and a sheen of sweat breaks out across my upper lip. “You cheated on Mom?”

He closes his eyes, his jaw clenched, and slowly nods. “It was only once, and I immediately told your mother what happened. We’d been growing apart for so long, she didn’t even act surprised. We decided together that ending things was the best thing for us both.”

I don’t have words. Anger, hot and thick, coils in my gut, but it is dampened by a profound sadness for my mom. She gave up so much. And for what?

Except so many things still don’t make any sense. Mom really did seem to love Silver Creek. And I didn’t imagine all the times she dogged on my love of traveling, though come to think of it, it was always in the context of the traveling I did *with Dad*. Knowing what I know now definitely frames things in a different light. Especially when I remember how many times I told her I wished she were more like Dad, how much I wanted to live with *him* full time instead of her.

“I should have told you,” Dad says simply. “It was so long ago, I guess I thought it didn’t matter. But I see now that it does.”

I sniff, at least appreciating that he’s willing to acknowledge it. “Why didn’t *she* tell me?”

“Why did she move home to take care of her parents?” Dad asks. “She’s been putting other people before herself her whole life, Kate. It’s what she does. She put your relationship with me—your *feelings* about me—above everything else.”

Understanding settles in my gut with uncomfortable certainty. Mom sacrificed her own comfort to take care of her parents, and she did the same thing so I could have a positive relationship with my dad. She couldn’t stop herself from being

bitter about it though, and that's what leaked over onto me. Her disappointment. Her *hurt*.

It's not a wonder she moved to Florida right after Grandma died. It was the first time she'd ever been free to make a choice that only impacted herself.

"Say something, Katie," Dad says. "I know it was a long time ago, but I'm still sorry for what I did. For how it impacted you and your mother both."

A sudden desire to call Mom swells inside my heart like an expanding balloon. Which is saying something because most of the time, I avoid talking to my mother like I avoid center seats on airplanes. But this? This changes things. I'm not naïve enough to think it will change *everything*. But I do owe her an apology.

I study Dad closely, noting the deep creases around his eyes. His irises are a watery blue, a few shades lighter than mine. In the dim light of the restaurant, they almost look translucent. Colorless. "Dad, would you do anything differently if you could?"

He takes a long, slow breath. "I was never meant for settling down, Kate. It's not me. You understand what that's like."

Suddenly, all I can think about is what Dad missed. I loved all our traveling together. But he wasn't around when I learned how to ride my bike. He wasn't there to teach me how to tie my shoes or take pictures of my junior prom. He missed every single one of my birthdays.

I *do* understand what his life is like because it's been *my* life for the last ten years.

And I don't want it anymore.

I want a home. A family. A life with someone beside me. And I want that someone to be Brody.

Sharp yearning nearly overwhelms me. I feel trembly. A little nauseous. I'm hot and cold. Sweating and shivering. I'm . . . elated. Excited. So scared. I want to text Brody and tell him, but I don't even know what I would say.

A pulse of fear throbs in my gut.

Will he forgive me for running away?

Will he want me to stay in Silver Creek?

Will he want *me*?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Brody

I STAND ALONG THE back wall at the reception after Lennox's awards ceremony. Lennox was right. There are a lot of young, attractive women around.

Fortunately, Flint is diverting most of the attention.

Perry leans against the wall beside me. "It was a genius plan, right?"

I lift an eyebrow. "What plan?"

"Bringing Flint," Perry says. "Without his distraction, it'd be us having to entertain all the women Lennox would be thrusting our way."

Understanding dawns. "You mentioned Flint on purpose. When Lennox invited us to come. That was a calculated suggestion."

Perry takes a swig of his drink. "Yes and no. It was calculated, but only because I knew *you'd* only agree to come if Flint were here too. The fact that Flint is an attention hog and can deflect it off me? That's just a bonus."

"You know, you *are* going to have to start dating again at some point," I say, eyeing my oldest brother.

He eyes me right back. "So are you."

“I thought you were the one saying I shouldn’t give up on Kate. Which, you still owe me an explanation for that. Why the sudden change of heart?”

“It wasn’t a change of heart,” Perry argues. “I was never anti-Kate. I just didn’t like the way you obsessed over her when it didn’t seem like she was ever going to return your feelings. But I also don’t think she would play you. If she was willing to let the relationship progress as far as it did, it can only be because she feels something. That doesn’t mean it’ll necessarily work out. But it might mean the conversation isn’t over yet.”

I appreciate that Perry is trying, no matter how uncharacteristic his advice. But I’m too tired for his brand of encouragement. In my brain, the pendulum has already swung the opposite direction. I haven’t heard from Kate since she left. Not a text. A phone call. Nothing. I’m beginning to wonder if I ought to just cut my losses and move on. No more conversations with Kate. No more reading her articles. No more scrolling her social media accounts. No more late-night video chats or racing over to Charlotte whenever she flies through for a night.

No more dreaming of a life we’re never going to have.

Olivia was right. The sting of loving her and losing her is so much worse.

“I don’t think I can do it anymore, Perry.”

He eyes me, his lips pursed. “With Kate? Like, at all?”

I nod. “I think I have to be done.”

Well, Lennox did bring us here so we could move on.

I don’t actually want to meet anyone tonight. But there’s a part of me that wants to prove to myself that maybe, eventually, I will.

Perry tosses back the last of his drink and sets the glass on the table between us. “All right then, let’s move on.”

“What?”

Perry motions toward Lennox. “Let’s go. We’re here, aren’t we? Let’s go . . . do the thing. With the women.”

“Do the thing?”

He growls in frustration. “Talking. Flirting. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to start?”

I press my lips together.

“If you start to laugh at me, I’m rescinding my offer.”

I clear my throat. “Not . . . laughing,” I say. “Let’s go *do the thing*.”

We make our way toward Lennox who is across the room, his back against the bar, his ankles crossed. He almost looks the part of a movie star as much as Flint does.

I loosen my tie on my way over. I’ve been wearing a suit for close to four hours now, and that’s about three hours and fifty-nine minutes too long.

I’m five yards away from Lennox when three women approach, leaning on either side of the bar next to Lennox. Perry’s steps slow beside me. “Nope,” he says. “I changed my mind. I’m not ready for this.”

I grab his arm. “Lennox has already seen us,” I say. “If we turn away now, there’s no way it won’t look rude.”

“But there are three of them,” Perry argues. “I don’t care if we look rude.”

“There are three of us. One conversation,” I say. “You can do this. You don’t even have to say anything. Just stand there and try not to frown.”

Lennox introduces us when we stop in front of him, and the women shift to make room for us. The brunette closest to me slips her hand around my forearm. *One conversation*, I think to myself. If I can make it through one conversation, maybe hope isn’t completely lost.

“Lennox tells me you’re a kayaker,” she says.

My phone buzzes in my pocket before I can answer.

Could it be Kate?

Do I want it to be Kate?

That last one is a stupid question because of course I want it to be Kate. I may know I need to get over her, but I'm less than five minutes into this new life plan, and I'm only human.

But I'm also a gentleman, and I will not ignore this woman's question no matter what text pinged into my phone.

I nod. "I am."

She twirls her hair around her finger. "Will you tell me about it? When I think of kayaking, I imagine paddling around on placid lakes. But I'm guessing what you do is more than that?"

My phone buzzes one more time.

I run a hand across the back of my neck. "Yeah. It's . . . not on lakes," I manage to say.

She wrinkles her brow. "The ocean, then? Rivers?"

Another buzz from my phone, and then another.

"I'm sorry, can you just . . ." I pull out my phone. "Excuse me for one second?"

I'm the literal worst.

The grimace the woman offers me as I turn away confirms it.

I move a few yards away and pull up my text messages. The messages *are* from Kate. One right after another.

*Kate: Hi.*

*Kate: That's a dumb way to start.*

*Kate: Is it okay if I still text you?*

*Kate: I know I left without much explanation. And the fact that you didn't respond makes me think you probably don't want to talk to me.*

*Kate: Brody, there's so much I want to tell you.*

*Kate: For example. You remember those pictures I showed you of me as a baby? And you said they looked like they were taken on your front porch?*

*Kate: It's because they WERE taken on your front porch.*

*Kate: Before my parents split, my dad lived in Silver Creek for a couple of years when I was a baby. And SURPRISE WE LIVED IN YOUR HOUSE.*

I appreciate Kate's all-caps yelling. I can easily imagine the inflection in her voice if she were telling me this in person. But also, *WHAT ABOUT US?* There's my all-caps yelling. *WHAT ABOUT US?*

Another message pops up.

*Kate: So many things I thought were true actually aren't. Example two. My dad cheated on my mom. That's why they got a divorce. Can you even believe that? And I never knew.*

I run a hand across my face. I know Kate well enough to understand how much learning these things about her dad has impacted her. But I can't be the person she turns to for stuff like this if I can't be her person for everything. My heart can't take it. I can't just be her friend.

"Brody," Perry calls. "Come tell us the story about the bear sitting on your tent."

In other words: We are in this together, and you better get back over here so I don't have to handle this conversation alone.

I stare at Kate's text thread for another moment then close it out and silence my notifications so I won't even feel the buzzing if she texts me again. She can have her realizations, but she didn't have the most important one. The one I need her to have—that she loves me.

The woman who asked me about kayaking smiles as I return, and I smile back. It's forced, but hopefully she won't be able to tell. What is it people always say? Fake it until you make it? I'm definitely faking it, but it's all I can do at this point.



The conversation has moved on past Perry's Appalachian Trail stories, so I never do tell the story about the bear, but Rebecca—that's the woman's name—seems perfectly content to monopolize all my attention.

She's very nice. She's an accountant. She has a goldendoodle named Dragon. She runs marathons. She's great at maintaining eye contact. She can talk five consecutive sentences without needing any oxygen. And she seems genuinely interested in everything I have to say.

But that's the problem. I don't *have* anything to say. I'm trying my best to answer her questions, but I'm not thinking of any questions to ask in return and as hard as I'm trying, I just . . . don't care.

Rebecca is looking at me now, like it's my turn to say something, and I can't remember what she said last. I think back through our conversation, but she might as well have been speaking a different language. "I, um . . ." I run a hand across my jaw. "I'm not—"

She stops my words with a hand on my forearm. "Hey," she says gently. "We don't have to do this anymore. Your mind is clearly somewhere else." She cocks her head. "Maybe on *someone* else?"

I sigh. "I'm sorry, Rebecca."

She shrugs. "Don't worry about it. But leave the acting to your brother, okay? You aren't fooling anybody around here."

I grimace. "It's that bad, huh?"

"What it seems like is that it's been that bad for *you*." She smiles, and I am so grateful for her kindness. "Do you want to talk about it? I've been told I'm a good listener."

I consider her question, but it feels like all I've done is talk about Kate. I'm tired of talking. Tired of thinking. "I appreciate the offer, but it's . . . more than I feel like unpacking right now."

She nods. "Fair enough." She studies me, her lips pursed. It feels like she wants to help me, and she's trying to figure out how. "What if we dance instead?"

I raise my eyebrows. It isn't a question I'm expecting.  
"Dance?"

"Sure. It's a great way to stop thinking. Especially if you've got a few drinks in you."

When I don't respond, she stands up and extends her hand.  
"Come on. It's just dancing."

Over her shoulder, the party is picking up, the music thumping. Flint is near the center of the gathering, dancing with a blond woman who's smiling like she just won the lottery.

It's a very unBrodylike move. Which is exactly why I say yes.

Flint smiles when he sees me approach, my hand still holding Rebecca's. He lets go of the woman in his arms long enough to clap me on the back and pull me into a quick bro-hug.

Soon, Lennox is beside us too. Only Perry stays off to the side, leaning against the bar where we left him, his arms crossed, a scowl on his face. At least he tried, if only briefly. That's more than we've gotten from him before.

It takes me a few songs to really relax, but Rebecca was right. It is a great way to stop thinking.

Kate is never far from my thoughts. Every time I see a woman with dark hair pass through my periphery, I do a doubletake. When someone laughs, it's Kate's laugh I hear.

But I'm living anyway. I'm breathing. I'm smiling, laughing, enjoying being with my brothers.

I can do this.

I *have* to do this. It's the only choice I have.

One day at a time, I'm going to get through this. I only hope it gets easier.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Kate

I SIT IN MY grandmother's front porch rocking chair and stare at my phone. My mom and I have been texting back and forth since the conversation we had while I was in London.

As soon as I made it back home, I sent her copies of a few of the pictures I found, and she's been texting me stories about them. Little things she remembers. She even told me how she met Dad and what their early relationship was like.

Things still aren't perfect. Far from it. But they at least feel a tiny bit easier.

Things with Brody on the other hand?

I have no idea how I'm supposed to feel.

I pull up the news article I've visited approximately five hundred and fifteen times since it popped up in my newsfeed Friday morning. *Hollywood A-lister Flint Hawthorne returns home to North Carolina to celebrate brother's success.* I normally click on articles about Flint because it's crazy and weird to read about someone who is famous to everyone else but a childhood friend to me. But this one impacted me in ways I didn't expect. The article includes two different photos. One is of all four Hawthorne brothers, their arms around each other, their smiles wide. Lennox is in the middle, holding some sort of award. But the second photograph? It's of Brody.

Okay, fine. It's actually of Flint. He's on a dance floor, surrounded by people, but Brody is clearly the guy standing right next to him. He's in a suit, which is all kinds of hot, but he's also holding hands with a woman.

That? Not so hot.

His lips were on mine just over a week ago, and now . . . and now I don't know what. I don't know anything because he hasn't responded to any of my text messages.

He's home, at least. I know that much. It's possible I went for a long walk last night that may or may not have looped by his house multiple times, stopping only when his truck was back in his driveway at 7:04 p.m. You know. Give or take.

Honestly, I have no idea how he didn't see me. Or hear that I'm back in town.

I don't know the protocol for this situation.

I came home from London ready to tell him I'm pretty sure I'm in love with him. No, not just pretty sure. I came home ready to tell him I *am*. In love. The end.

But I can't do that if he doesn't want to talk to me. Which, obviously he doesn't, or he would have responded to my texts.

I hurt him, I know. Leaving like I did was cowardly. But I was scared. Scared and overwhelmed and . . . what if it's too late? What if it doesn't matter at all because he's already thinking about someone else? What if he spent the entire weekend with the nameless woman in the photo, and I'm not going to see him again until we randomly run into each other at the grocery store when we're both buying avocados?

I might be overreacting.

I was *definitely* overreacting when I did a deep dive into Flint Hawthorne celebrity gossip looking for any sliver of information about the Hawthorne brothers' weekend in Charlotte.

I'm not proud of how far down the rabbit hole I fell. I think I took celebrity stalking to a whole new level. I visited message boards I will never be able to unvisit. Saw posts from

women who literally know everything there is to know about Flint. And I mean *everything*. Shoe size. Favorite food. Favorite color. The name of his dog when he was a kid. They know about Stonebrook. Several of them have even been there. There were half a dozen different photographs of women standing in front of the big farmhouse or crouching in the strawberry fields, their smiles wide as they hold up the picking buckets labeled with the Hawthorne family name.

Brody has mentioned it to me before, that they sometimes have fans show up, but seeing the devotion up close and personal was disconcerting, to say the least. And completely fruitless.

In all that searching, the woman in the original photo, the one with Brody, didn't show up anywhere else.

The fact brings little comfort. They were *holding hands*.

Except, logically, I know even that could mean nothing. I've seen photographs capture the complete opposite of what's actually happening in real life. The right angle, a good crop, and the lens can easily distort the truth of a situation.

But my heart isn't feeling very logical right now.

It's only feeling jealous. Sick. Angry that I let it come to this. That I let Brody slip through my fingers. I'm the one who left. The one who *ran away*.

Can I really blame him for spending the weekend with someone else?

The proof for the magazine spread *Beyond* is publishing next month is on the wicker table beside me. It looks so great. A full-page photo of Brody surrounded by whitewater, his expression serious, fills the entire left half of the title page spread. He looks unbelievable. Like he deserves his own fan club. *Move aside, Flint. Your big brother is taking sexy to a whole new level.*

I should just get over myself and take the article to Brody. He deserves to know. And it's a good excuse to see him. Maybe having a reason outside of, say, a full-on love confession, will help me figure out what to do next.

I stand up.

I can do this. I'll go see him.

I sit back down.

*No, Kate. Be brave.*

I stand back up.

Clear my throat.

Grab the magazine proof and my keys from the table and walk purposefully toward Mom's Subaru. Brody is usually at Triple Mountain on Mondays. If I don't find him there, I'll probably have to cave and call him.

When I catch my reflection in the driver's side window, I pause.

I do not look like a woman getting ready to declare her feelings. I look tired. My hair is in a messy bun, my t-shirt is baggy, and even though I'm wearing my favorite jeans, they look more like bumming-around-the-house jeans than heading-out-on-the-town jeans.

I can do better than this.

I huff and head back into the house for a twenty-minute makeover. I put on a turquoise sundress with wide straps and a plunging back. It makes me feel pretty, but it also doesn't look like I'm trying too hard. I curl my hair into loose waves and put on a little more makeup, but not so much that I look like I'm wearing any.

It's ridiculous how much actual effort goes into looking *effortless*.

Still, I feel more centered now, more like I'm armed for battle instead of just running in flailing, nothing but emotions leading the way.

I give myself another pep talk as I drive the short distance to the paddling school. When I see Brody's truck in the parking lot, my heart lurches, and a wave of nausea rolls over me.

Why? *Why?* Why do emotions have to impact our physical bodies so drastically? I've been around Brody seven million

times. He knows everything there is to know about me. He's seen me at my worst, snot-nosed and crying. He's seen me hungover. He's seen me with food poisoning. He's held back my hair while I've thrown up in a hotel trashcan. He knows how much I've struggled to get along with my mom. How much I wish I have as many siblings as he does. He knows how much I love tacos. He knows everything.

This shouldn't be so hard.

Except, maybe him knowing everything is precisely *why* this is so hard. Because there's so much more at stake.

Griffin is at the counter inside the shop, just like he was the first time Brody brought me to Triple Mountain. He smiles when he sees me. I owe the man dinner. At least a drink. He's the main reason I was able to get Brody's article written and published in time.

"How's it going, Kate?" he asks.

"Good. Is Brody around?"

"He's out on the water, but he's just out back if you want to go watch. He isn't running rapids today. Just helping someone work on technique."

"Great. Yeah, I'll do that. But here." I pull out the magazine proof and hand it over. "I want to show you something first."

He flips through the pages, his smile growing the whole time. "You did it."

"We did it. I couldn't have done it without your help."

"This is amazing."

"It runs next month in *Beyond*."

His eyes go wide. "Next month? How did you even pull that off?"

"Honestly, I just got lucky. An editor friend of mine got word they had to pull their feature article. Something about an arrest and criminal charges? I didn't get the whole story, but it opened up a spot, and I had an article they could use to fill it."

"Has Brody seen this yet?"

“Not yet. I just got it myself. That’s why I’m here.” *You know. Among other reasons.*

“He’s going to freak,” Griffin says. “You think it’ll actually work? That it’ll save the program?”

“I don’t know. I hope so. But it definitely can’t hurt.”

He carefully tucks the proof back inside the folder it arrived in. “Thanks for doing this, Kate. Brody’s lucky to have you.”

I smile, unsure how much Griffin knows.

I clear my throat, willing my inner jealous voice to calm down. I can only control what I can control. My feelings are my feelings, and his feelings are his feelings, and I will approach this conversation like an adult.

“Kate?”

I look up. Griffin is still holding the folder, waiting for me to take it.

“You okay?” he asks. “You look like you swallowed a frog or something.”

I take the folder and give my head a little shake. “I’m good. Great. I’ll just wait for Brody outside.”

Waiting outside is not a smart move.

From the picnic table behind the shop, I have a clear view of the river. Brody is in the water, shirtless except for his PFD. There is a single kayaker in the water with him, a woman who is young and beautiful, at least from what I can tell through all her gear, and clearly enamored with Brody. She’s too far away for me to really tell, but she could absolutely be the woman he was with over the weekend.

I’m just about to turn and go when he looks up and sees me. *Great.* Now I’m stuck. And I’m too far away to read his expression.

I remind myself that I’m here to show him the magazine proof. And that won’t change even if he’s already asked the new girl to marry him.

Plus, I’m done running.



I will have this hard conversation.

I won't let fear keep me from being vulnerable anymore.

The lesson lasts about fifteen more minutes. Brody's teaching the woman how to roll her kayak upright after flipping upside down without getting out. I saw Brody do it when we were in Robbinsville and he was in the middle of churning whitewater, but it's almost as impressive to watch him teach the maneuver to someone else. I'm not close enough to hear what he's saying, but he's using his hands, gesturing to his hips, the boat, the paddle. The woman in the kayak appears to be listening intently. She nods whenever she's ready to give it a try, and then she rolls into the water. Over and over, her hand shoots out of the water and taps the bottom of the boat, which must be Brody's signal to roll her back up. But then, finally, she does it. She rolls herself back up, her smile wide, and drops her paddle onto her lap to give Brody a two-handed high five.

I'm a ball of nervous energy by the time Brody carries the woman's kayak toward the shed on the other end of the parking lot. His PFD is draped over his arm, exposing every inch of his toned, tanned, glorious chest. I watch as he puts away the rest of the gear and says goodbye to the woman, who, based on their interactions after the class, I'm pretty sure is *just* a student and not a personal friend.

That doesn't stop me from worrying over how much Brody might have enjoyed teaching her. I'm a complete mess. One stupid picture on the internet, and I've lost my grip on reality.

But it's more than that. I'm scared about the other woman because it's a surface-level thing that's easier to worry about than all the other fears pulsing through my brain. I don't truly think Brody went and found himself a new girlfriend since last week. There are a million different explanations for the photo. I know this.

I'm just plain scared.

Scared he doesn't feel the same way. Scared if he *does* feel the same way, I'll still end up hurting him. Scared that he'll

hurt me. Scared that if things don't work out, we'll lose our friendship.

I can't imagine my life without Brody in it. I don't *want* that life.

I'm still sitting at the picnic table when Brody slides onto the bench across from me. His expression is guarded—more guarded than I expect.

“You're back,” he says casually.

“Hi.”

“How was your trip?”

“Good. Long. How was your trip?”

His eyebrows go up. *That's right*. He never told me he was taking a trip.

I shrug. “You were with Flint. The internet knows everything about Flint.”

“Ah. Right.”

We sit there for what feels like an eternity, neither of us saying anything. It probably isn't more than forty-five seconds or so, but the way he's staring at me, the way the sunlight is catching on the drops of water still clinging to his shoulders, I am in literal agony, and it's making my brain jump all over the place.

“I texted you,” I say.

“I saw.”

He is not making this easy.

I press my palms against the picnic table and focus on the feel of the rough wood against my skin, letting it anchor me to the here and now of the moment. “Brody, I'm sorry I left without talking to you,” I finally say. “I know it might not matter anymore. That maybe you've already decided you don't want to take a chance on a flight risk like me. And I understand. If the woman in the photo is someone important to you . . .” I close my eyes, suddenly unable to finish the last part of my sentence.

“The photo?”

My eyes pop open. He hasn't seen it? But then, why would he have seen it? I doubt he reads celebrity gossip articles about his brother.

“It was a picture of Flint. But you're in it. On a dance floor, I think? You're holding hands with someone.”

He slowly nods, leveling me with one of those intense stares I know so well. “Would it matter to you if she does mean something to me?”

I drop my gaze, heat flushing my cheeks. So he *did* meet someone else. I force a slow, deep breath. “You're my friend, Brody,” I say without looking up. “I want whatever makes you happy.”

“Kate.”

I look up.

“You know that's not what I'm asking.” His words are careful and measured, so very Brody.

I shake my head, tears already gathering on my lashes. “What do you want me to say, Brody? Yes, okay? Yes, it would matter.” My hands start to tremble, and I slip them off the table, hiding them in my lap. “It would make me feel sick with jealousy and rage and irrational fury.” I wipe away a tear and bite my lip. “And it would make me so angry at myself that somehow, I let you slip away.”

His voice is smaller now. “You left, Kate. I told you how I feel, and you ran away. Do you know what that felt like?”

“I know. I know, and I'm so sorry,” I say, my voice quivering. “I wasn't trying to hurt you, I just . . . I got scared. This is a big deal. There's a lot on the line. But I want this. I want . . . *us*.”

Gravel crunches in the parking lot behind us, and Brody looks at his watch. “I've been waiting for you for so long, Kate. I've loved—” He shakes his head. “Even when you dated someone else. Even when you stopped texting me. When you stopped coming home and ignored my messages and

skipped Grandma Nora's funeral. I've been here. Trying so hard to convince myself I shouldn't wait for you. I shouldn't hope. But then every time I got close to letting you go, you'd show up again, stay just long enough to keep me on the hook."

Tears spill down my cheeks. "Brody, I didn't know. That wasn't what I was trying—"

"But you *did* know last weekend. I told you how long I've —" His voice catches. "And you still left."

I close my eyes. How did it take me so long to truly see him?

"Hey, Brody?" Griffin says from behind me. "The group is here and ready to get started. I need your help."

Brody nods and runs a hand through his hair. "All right. I'll be right there."

"Wait." I stand from the picnic table and grab the magazine proof. "Here." I sniff and hold it out. "This is for you. It runs next week in *Beyond* magazine."

Brody stays where he is, his hands propped on his hips, his face like stone. Every ounce of him is tense. He is a caged animal. A coiled spring.

I drop the proof on the table and take a step backward. I take a steadying breath, my eyes darting from Brody to Griffin, who is watching on, his eyes full of concern. "I'm so sorry, Brody," I finally say. It's the only thing I *can* say.

And then I turn and go home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Kate

“YOU KNOW,” KRISTYN SAYS, “this would have been a much easier conversation had you not saved everything up for one phone call.”

I lean back onto the quilt I dragged off my bed and stretch my arms over my head, looking up through the branches of the sugar maple in Grandma Nora’s backyard. The leaves are a deep rich green right now, but in the fall, they’ll turn a bright, vibrant yellow before dimming to burnished gold. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. It just felt like everything was happening so fast,” I say. “I think I knew I was falling for Brody, and I knew you’d be able to tell if we truly talked about it.”

“I get it. But sheesh. You got a job offer, spent a night sleeping in Brody’s arms, fell in love, and learned the true reason your parents divorced all in a month. Your friends-to-lovers story turned into a telenovela.”

“Don’t forget about finding a picture of the *other woman* on the internet.”

“Ohh, that’s right!”

“Is there a romance trope for friends that lose touch and never talk again? I think that one is mine.”

“Don’t lose hope, Kate. You’ll talk to him again. You guys will figure this out.”

I breathe out a sigh. “I don’t know, Kristyn. You should have seen his face.”

“Just give him a minute to process. And don’t go anywhere, for crying out loud. No more spontaneous trips across the Atlantic.”

I smile. “That’s good advice.”

“It is good advice. And I would have given it to you before had you paused for two seconds and asked for my opinion.”

“Fine. Lesson learned. From now on, I’ll pause all my major freakouts and consult with you before doing anything drastic.”

She chuckles. “And your life will be better for it. So what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. Finish Grandma Nora’s house, I guess. Start applying for jobs.”

“I bet that part will be easier than you think. Just email every editor you’ve ever worked with and let them know you’re looking.”

“Not every editor,” I say. “I want to be in the states. I want to see more of you. And I probably ought to see more of Mom and finally meet the husband she’s had for four years.” What I really want to see is more of Brody, but my heart won’t let me dwell on that right now. It only took two hours after I left Triple Mountain, but I finally stopped crying. I’m too wrung out to start up again.

“I would love to see more of you too,” Kristyn says. “You know, there are probably a lot of writing jobs in Chicago. You could always come up here.”

I groan and roll onto my stomach. “No, thank you. Chicago gets colder than London.”

Once I gave myself permission to acknowledge it, it only took a minute to recognize the home I’m craving can only be in Silver Creek. And not just because of Brody, though he’s obviously the biggest part of it. But I’ve enjoyed being back in the mountains. When I carve away the hard parts, the tension with my mom, the uncertainty of my life with her, there is still

a lot of good in this place. I haven't been very good at recognizing it. But I want to start. I'll look for a job based in Asheville. Or, if I have to, go back to my idea of freelancing the pants off of Western North Carolina tourist destinations. Whatever it takes, even if that means stocking shelves at the local Feed n' Seed, I'll find a way to stay.

But only if Brody will have me. The town is too small for us to peacefully coexist if he won't. If my future is going to require me to get over him, it will have to be living somewhere that isn't here.

"All right, I gotta go," Kristyn says. "Jake wants to leave for dinner, and he's tired of waiting on me."

"Go get dinner. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Or before if you and Brody work things out. Okay, love you, bye!"

The sun is almost fully set now, the first fireflies dancing in the yard. I could stay out here all night, but I haven't eaten since breakfast, and crying burns a lot of calories. I can't fill the emptiness in my heart, but I can at least eat.

I stand and shake out the blanket then carry it toward the house, stopping when I see Charlie ambling toward me.

My heart stutters then starts again, beating at triple speed as I bend down and scratch his ears. If Charlie is here, that means Brody is too.

Instead of going in the back door, I skirt around the side of the house to the front porch.

Brody is sitting on the steps. His truck is nowhere in sight, so he must have walked over. The magazine proof is sitting on the rough, wooden planks beside him.

I stop a few yards away from the porch, and Charlie drops to his haunches at my feet.

The night isn't silent by any stretch. Cicadas are humming in the trees, the sound rolling across the night like a wave, and frogs are croaking down by the creek. But the heaviness of *Brody's* silence is almost more than I can take.

I won't talk first though. He came here. It has to be because he has something he wants to say.

"Are you still leaving at the end of the summer?" he finally asks, his voice floating across the settling darkness.

I take a step closer. "No." My heart squeezes. "I don't ever want to leave again."

He doesn't respond for a long moment. So long that Charlie walks over and sniffs Brody's hands as if checking to make sure he's okay. "You want to live here?" Brody finally says. "Forever?"

"Honestly, the where is less important to me right now. I'm more concerned about who I'll be living with." I slowly walk to the porch and climb the stairs, dropping onto the top step beside him. We aren't quite touching, but he's close enough for me to feel the warmth of him. To catch his scent. "Brody, I love you. I mean, I've always loved you. But now I'm *in* love with you."

He closes his eyes and huffs out a laugh. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited to hear you say those words?"

For a split second, I tense up, wondering if there's a *but* at the end of Brody's sentence. *But you're too late. But you missed your chance. But it wasn't worth the wait.*

But then Brody looks up, and his eyes are so full of love and tenderness, my fears evaporate in an instant. "So I guess you aren't taking the job in London?" he says through a grin.

I smile. "No. I don't want to live in London. I want to live here. Or anywhere, really. As long as you're there too."

He holds out his hand, palm up, and I slip my fingers into his. He tucks it close to his chest, scooting me closer so my side is flush against his.

"I didn't meet anyone else in Charlotte," he says after a long stretch of silence.

I shake my head. "Brody, I don't care. It doesn't matter now."



“She was just a stranger who led me to the dance floor. That was it.”

“Okay,” I say simply, suddenly sensing that wherever he’s going with this, it doesn’t have anything to do with the nameless woman in the photo.

“Kate, I was so close to deciding the only way I could move forward was to cut you out completely. No more texting. No more reading your articles. That’s why I didn’t respond to your texts. Because I couldn’t be the guy you talk to about stuff like that if I wasn’t—if I’m not—anyway, I was done.”

I press my lips together. I came so close to losing him for good.

He looks at me, a seriousness in his gaze I’m not sure I’ve ever seen before. “If we do this, we’re all in, all right? Right from the start.” He reaches out and wipes a tear from my cheek. “I won’t lose you again. I can’t. And I can never go back to just being your friend.”

“You won’t. I’m not going anywhere, Brody. I promise.” As I say the words, a peaceful certainty blossoms deep in my gut. He’s it for me. He’s always been it.

He leans over and kisses me, and I arch into him, my hands moving to his chest. His hands are everywhere, on my shoulders, my back, running up and down my arms, tangling in my hair. It’s like he’s cataloging every inch of me, and I do not want him to stop.

“Seven thousand, one hundred, and forty-five days,” he whispers into my throat, his lips close to my ear.

I lean back, catching his eye. “What’s that?”

“That’s how many days I’ve loved you.”

“That ... is a lot of days.”

He scoffs, a smile in his voice. “Tell me about it.”

Tension drains out of me as the reality of what’s happening finally settles in.

I really did get my friends-to-lovers romance. Kristyn would be so proud.

I push against Brody playfully, like I'm going to get up, but he catches my hand and tugs me even closer. He nips at my earlobe with his teeth. "Don't even try it," he says, his teasing tone sending shivers down my spine. "You're never running away from me again."

"Is that a promise?"

His lips trace a slow line across my jaw, each kiss moving closer to my lips. "I'll promise you anything. Whatever you want, the answer is yes."

I'm not sure how long we kiss, but when my empty stomach grumbles, *loudly*, Brody is the one who pulls away. He chuckles. "Hungry, Kate?"

The familiar question immediately brings new tears to my eyes. "Oh my gosh, you have got to be kidding me." Stupid tear ducts. "That question is enough to make me cry?"

But it's more than the question. It's everything. It's how well he knows me. It's how much we've been through together and how completely I trust him to take care of me. To love me.

He lifts my hand to his lips and presses a kiss against my palm. "What are you hungry for?"

He shifts sideways so he's leaning against the stair railing, and I turn the same direction, settling against his chest. He pulls his phone up in front of both of us and pulls up a food delivery app.

I gasp. "Silver Creek has DoorDash?"

"We're moving up in the world," he says. "But we only have three choices, and there's only one guy in town who delivers, so honestly, it's pretty hit or miss." He scrolls through a few more screens. "How do you feel about burgers and fries?"

My stomach grumbles, this time even louder than the first time.

"Burger and fries it is," Brody says. "Oh hey, look at that. Rosco's delivering tonight. We're in business."

“His name is Rosco?”

“Are you really going to judge our only source of sustenance right now?”

“I was just . . . going to say how lovely the name is.”

Brody chuckles and pulls me more tightly against him.

We stay on the porch while we wait for our food. My ankles are mosquito bitten, but I don't even care. I could stay like this, wrapped in Brody's arms, the warmth of his solid chest behind me, forever.

“What are you going to do?” he asks. “About your job.”

I lift my shoulders. “I don't have a clue. I'll figure something out. Or maybe . . . we'll figure something out? Honestly, I'm kinda tired of figuring stuff out on my own.”

“We will,” he says. “I promise we will. I want to do this right. I want to take you on real dates. I want to hold your hand and walk you to your door and kiss you senseless whenever I get the opportunity. But I also want you to have whatever career you want. I don't want you to choose me at the expense of all your other dreams.”

“I know. I'm not. I promise. I *would* like to find something more permanent, even something similar to the job in London. But there are magazines in the states. Maybe I'll find a place that will let me work remotely. In the meantime, I've got a long list of things in Western North Carolina I can write about.”

He's quiet for a beat before he says, “I can teach anywhere, Kate.”

I shake my head. “You can't teach kayaking anywhere.”

“No, but there are other rivers.”

I turn in his arms so I can look at him. “I've never had a big family. I know you never thought you'd hear me say it, but I want to be close to yours. I want to live in Silver Creek.”

He responds with a kiss, this one potent with promise and hope.

Our food arrives a few minutes later and we eat it right there on the porch, Charlie lounging at our feet, eating the French fries that Brody drops and the ones that I toss at him when Brody isn't looking.

And Brody wonders why Charlie likes me so much.

While we eat, we talk about everything I learned about my parents and their divorce. Brody listens patiently as I process—*again*—working my way through all the ways my erroneous beliefs influenced my feelings about Silver Creek and my desire for a relationship.

Uncertainty still pulses through me as I talk. Trusting myself with Brody's heart feels like a giant leap of faith, but the alternative—living without him—feels so much scarier. I don't deserve him loving me. But I'm not sure anyone possibly could. That doesn't mean I won't try though. Every single day, I'll try to love him as well as I know he'll love me.

"We'll be okay," Brody tells me. "We'll move forward together. We'll work through everything together." And when he says it, somehow, I know we will be.

"So the woman you were kayaking with today," I say as I crumple up the wrapper to my burger.

Brody smirks. "Is my girlfriend jealous?"

*Ohhhh.* That felt good. I need him to call me his girlfriend again.

I raise my eyebrows. "Does your girlfriend have reason to be?"

He leans forward and plants a brief kiss on my lips, which is good because the intensity of his eyes on me was about to make me melt in between the slats of the porch.

"Her name is Jessica," he says. "And she was very excited today because she just learned how to roll her kayak, and her fiancé is going to be *very* impressed."

"I . . . am so happy for Jessica," I say through a wide smile.

"Kate, you managed to hold my heart captive when you were twenty countries away and not even trying. You really

think you need to worry? I'm at your mercy. All of me is yours." He tosses a French fry at me. "Not that I mind you being jealous. It's only fair. I did have to watch you with Preston for two agonizing years."

I gasp. "Oh my gosh. I made you listen to all the gritty details of my first kiss!"

Brody nods, his expression solemn. "Worst hour of my life."

I drop my head onto his shoulder. "I'm sorry! I swear I didn't know. I never would have said anything if I'd had any clue how you felt."

He pierces me with his steady gaze. "I know. And as ridiculous as it sounds, I'm glad you didn't know. I think we both had to grow up a little bit. Figure out who we were before we were ready for this."

"Is that why things have felt so different this time? Because they have. Right from the start, things have felt different."

He shakes his head. "I don't know. I just know I never really believed you'd love me back until I saw you standing there on Siler, waiting to surprise me. I guess it felt like you were looking for something you've never looked for before."

I smirk. "Honestly, it's the abdominal muscles, Brody. Once I saw you naked, I—"

"That's it." He stands up, not even grunting as he picks me up and leans me over his shoulder. He goes down the steps and heads around the house, Charlie up and nipping at his heels. "You're going in the creek."

I squeal and shift, trying to force him to put me down, but he only hoists me higher. I beat on his back, laughing until he finally drops me right beside the edge of the water at the back of Grandma Nora's property.

"You would never," I say as I back away.

His eyes sparkle in the moonlight. "I might."

"Even after I went to all that trouble writing an article about your program."

“Oh my gosh!” His eyes go wide. “I forgot the article!” He turns and jogs toward the house. I follow behind him, watching as he reaches the porch and retrieves the proof. He turns to face me, the folder pressed against his chest. “I can’t believe you did this for me,” he says.

I shrug. “Griffin helped.”

He opens it, flipping through the pages. “How long did this take you? And how did you possibly manage to get it published so quickly?”

I give him a quick rundown of all the tiny miracles that led to the article being published. His eyes move over every page, his fingers tracing the photos. “It wasn’t a miracle that made this happen, Kate. It was *you*.”

He holds out his hand, and I move to his side, settling next to him as he wraps an arm around my back.

“I don’t know if it’ll make a difference,” I say into his chest. “Maybe nothing will change. But I had to try.”

He squeezes me a little tighter. “I love you for trying.” He leans back and tilts my chin up. “I love you for so many reasons.”

“I love you too,” I say. “For so many reasons.” My hand snakes up to his stomach and slips under his shirt. “One,” I say playfully, digging my finger into his abs. “Two. Three. Four.”

He squirms away, yelping loud enough to make Charlie bark.

I laugh as he lunges for me and dart out of his grasp. I take off running into the house, hoping he’ll follow me, knowing he will.

I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. I don’t know what I’ll be doing for work. I don’t know where I’ll be living. I don’t know anything.

But I know who will be standing next to me.

And that makes anything—*everything*—seem possible.

# EPILOGUE

Brody

SIX WEEKS IS NOT a very long time by *general* relationship standards.

When your relationship is with someone you have known for nineteen years? Six weeks feels like a lifetime. Especially since we've spent every spare moment together, bouncing between Kate's house and mine, plus Sundays up at the farm for family dinner.

To say my family is excited for us would be a vast understatement. Mom cried. Olivia breathed a huge sigh of relief. Lennox wrapped Kate in a huge bear hug. Even Perry nodded his approval, making sure Kate knew he was the *only* Hawthorne sibling who never encouraged me to move on and put Kate behind me.

Kate only laughed. "Well, you're more generous than me. I would have given up on me long before Brody did."

Only Dad seemed unruffled when we walked in holding hands. He watched on silently as everyone else reacted to the news. Finally, he shook his head and grumbled, "I don't know what the big deal is. I always figured they'd get together in the end."

I stop and get tacos from the stand next to Triple Mountain, a celebration of sorts, since today I found out that an

anonymous and incredibly generous donation was made to Green River Academy—one to be used exclusively by the whitewater kayaking program.

My little brother will never admit it if I'm right, but I'd put money on it being Flint's doing.

Either way, the program will be up and running as soon as school starts, with the school board's official blessing and enough funding to pay Griffin and one other instructor for their time on the water.

Victory is sweet. Even sweeter because it was Kate's article that made all the difference.

I pull up to Kate's house, tacos in the seat beside me, but I forget all about them the second I see Kate sitting on the front porch, her phone in her hand. She looks . . . stunned. Confused, maybe? Whatever is going on, she isn't smiling.

My heart rate ratchets up as I race out of my truck. "What's wrong? What's going on?" I ask as I reach her. I crouch down in front of her, and she finally offers the smallest smile.

"Hi," she says faintly.

"Are you okay?" I reach forward and cup her cheek, needing the reassurance of her skin against mine.

"I'm okay. Sorry," she says, giving her head a tiny shake. "Everything is fine. I just . . ." She takes a deep breath. She looks at me, her eyes brightening, like she's finally stepped out of a fog. "Do you want the big news, or . . . the bigger news?"

I shift so I'm sitting on the stairs beside her. "Um, let's start with the big news?"

"I was hoping you would say that." She lifts her hands and presses them to her cheeks like she's still surprised by what she's saying. "I got the job."

My eyebrows shoot up. "With WNC Magazine?"

She nods and smiles. "I have to be in the office in Asheville once a week, but other than that, it's completely remote. It's perfect, Brody. I'm really excited about it."



I lean down to kiss her, still marveling, even all these weeks later, that I get to do this. That she's mine. "I'm so proud of you. And . . . I can't imagine what news is bigger than this."

She blows out a breath. "Oh, it's bigger. About two thousand square feet bigger."

"Um, what?"

"How do you feel about this house, Brody?"

"This house? Your grandmother's house?"

She nods.

Does she want to buy it? Maybe her mom offered to sell it to her? "I . . . think it has the best lot on the street? The backyard is great, and I like the creek. And I think the kitchen remodel looks really great."

She bobs her head in time with my words. "Right. Yes. All good things."

"Kate? How do *you* feel about this house?"

She bites her lip. "Well, um, it's mine now. So I think I . . . like it?"

I blink. "You bought it?"

She shakes her head no. "But I just talked to my mom." Another deep breath. "Grandma Nora wanted me to have it."

"Whoa."

She laughs. "Yeah. Whoa."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"Um, weird? A little conflicted? It's why Mom worked so hard to make me want to stay. You remember? The way she left her car and bought the groceries and had the bed made up? It's also the reason she kept it even after she moved to Florida."

"She was saving it for you."

"Exactly. But Grandma Nora only wanted me to have the house if I decided to live in Silver Creek. It was never in the will, but she told Mom what she wanted. So Mom just hung

onto it, waiting to see what I decided to do. She finally told me today.”

“That feels weirdly . . . manipulative? You only got the house because you decided to live in town? That’s why you’re conflicted.”

“Yeah. Because I actually think that’s what Mom *thought* she would do at first. Lure me here, then, I don’t know, bribe me to stay? But things have gotten so much better lately. Our relationship has gotten so much better. She told me I can do whatever I want with it. We can keep it if we want. Or we can sell it.”

My heart squeezes at the sound of her saying *we*. But this is her decision to make. No matter how perfect I think the backyard would be for a garden, or how easily I can imagine sitting on this front porch with Kate until we’re eight hundred years old and wrinkled and gray, I’ll support her no matter what.

“What do you want to do?”

“Do you want the unfiltered, I’m-not-worried-about-what-anyone-is-going-to-think truth?”

“Well, I’m nervous now, but yes. Lay it on me.”

She reaches over and squeezes my hands. “I want to marry you. And then I want us to live here so we can make this house our home.”

My lips fall on hers even as I’m laughing, my hands moving from her face to her shoulders and back again. “Did you seriously just propose to me?” I say in between kisses.

She laughs. “I’ll take it back if you want to be the one who asks.”

I kiss her again, this one longer, a little deeper than the last. “I don’t care who asks.”

“So you’re saying yes?”

“Kate, I’ve had a ring since the week after you got back from London. Of course I’m saying yes. Today. Tomorrow. As soon as we can. Yes. Let’s do it.”

She pushes me away from her, hands pressed to my shoulders. “You’ve had a ring all this time and you haven’t asked me yet?”

I squirm, suddenly feeling a little sheepish. “I was trying to be reasonable. It’s only been six weeks.”

She shakes her head, her hand moving to my cheek. “Brody, it’s been nineteen years. You could have asked me that first night when we talked about everything, and I would have said yes.”

My eyes drop. “But it hasn’t been nineteen years for you. I was trying to give you some time to, I don’t know. Make sure you really want this.”

She looks at me, the intensity of her gaze suddenly making me feel vulnerable. Exposed. She leans forward, kissing me softly at first, then with increased pressure. “I love you, Brody Hawthorne. I want this,” she whispers against my lips. “I want you.”

We kiss for another long moment before I finally pull away. “I guess it’s a good thing I said yes then, huh?”

She rolls her eyes and stands up, holding out her hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going? I have tacos in the truck.”

She pauses. “Mmm. Okay, fine. We can eat tacos first. But then we’re walking to your house.”

“What’s at my house?”

She scoffs like she can’t even believe I’m asking the question. “You did say you have a ring. You can’t expect me to know it exists and not want it on my actual finger.”

“I love a woman who has her priorities in order. Tacos first, *then* diamonds.”

“This feels perfectly reasonable to me.” She pulls me to my feet, and we walk together to the truck.

“What will you do with your house?” she asks.

“Let Lennox rent it, probably. He’s looking for a place.”

“Oh, I love that. But he’s looking *now*, isn’t he? That means you’d have to move in here pretty quickly.”

“True.” I shoot her a look. “After we go get the ring, we should probably head up to the farm and see how quickly Olivia can plan us a wedding.”

She rolls her eyes. “Olivia is less than two months away from having her baby.”

I blow out a sigh. “Then we’ll have to work even faster.”

“You’re ridiculous, you know that, right?”

I hand her the tacos. “Nope. Just been waiting a really long time to get what I want.”

“Says the guy who waited six agonizing weeks without proposing?”

“Agonizing, huh? I’ll just take back the dinner I bought you and go—”

“No! I’m sorry. You’re forgiven. Please don’t take my tacos. You can even keep the diamond an extra day.”

I let her have her tacos.

And then we walk, holding hands, down to my house where I pull her ring out of my nightstand, get down on one knee, and propose properly like I should have six weeks ago.

We get married the second weekend in September. School has already started, so we don’t have time for a honeymoon, but honestly, just coming home at the end of the school day knowing Kate’s waiting for me feels like honeymoon enough.

I sometimes wonder if the novelty will ever wear off. If I’ll ever stop marveling that I’m the man she chose.

When I hold her in my arms or fall asleep with her breathing beside me. When I find her in the kitchen making granola bars, her hair piled on top of her head, or stretched out on a blanket with a book under the sugar maple out back.

When she reaches for me in her sleep, her hand sliding over my chest like just feeling me next to her is enough to soothe a

bad dream. When she waves goodbye or kisses me hello or smiles for no reason except that we're together.

These ordinary moments with her, they are all I have ever wanted.

She is all I have ever wanted.

And not a day goes by that I forget it.

*— e l e —*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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HOW TO  
**KISS**  
YOUR GRUMPY  
**BOSS**



**JENNY PROCTOR**

 *Jenny Proctor Creative*



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*For Lucy*  
*Wait for it. I promise.*

# CHAPTER ONE

Perry

I DON'T HAVE A lot of experience sweet talking pigs.

Which is unfortunate, because I'm face-to-face with a three-hundred-pound behemoth armed with nothing but my charm, a bag of apples, and opposable thumbs.

Trouble is, I've never been very charming, and this pig might actually be smarter than I am. It's the only way to explain how she got out of her fully secure enclosure where there is no sign of escape. If she left through the gate, she closed it on her way out. And she *doesn't* have opposable thumbs.

Pig, one. Perry, zero.

"It's just you and me, Buttercup," I say, rolling an apple toward her snout. She looks up, one ear twitching. The look in her eye says I'm not nearly as interesting as the cabbage she's eating out of my brother's garden. "Come on. Apples are better than cabbage. Any fool knows that."

She snuffles and finally shifts toward the apple, and I wince at the snap and crackle of the crushed leaves and broken stems she's leaving in her wake.

It's a good thing Lennox is out of town. Though truthfully, I'd endure his scolding if it meant having his help. Or anyone's help. For being a commercial farm and event center,

my family's business enterprise, Stonebrook Farm, is unusually quiet. Well, this half of Stonebrook is quiet. There's a wedding reception just getting started over in the pavilion. All the more reason for me to corral Buttercup before she makes a break for it.

Forget Lennox's cabbages. A pig crashing a wedding reception will do permanent damage to our five-star Google review reputation.

Buttercup inches toward me, and I roll her another apple. I know from experience she'll bolt if I get too close. I also know she'll never wander back to her pen on her own, which means, at some point, the slip lead in my hand needs to make it around her neck. "I'm feeling pretty hungry, Buttercup." I crouch low and inch forward. "You know what sounds good right now? Bacon. Fresh, crispy, melt-in-your-mouth bacon."

My sister, Olivia, would be horrified if she could hear me right now. Buttercup is *her* pig, adopted a few months ago from a family who thought they were purchasing a miniature pig but got the exact opposite. When Buttercup outgrew their backyard, they reached out to see if we had a place for her on the farm. I wanted to say no, but Olivia's the softer side of our two-person executive team. We run the family business together. There's a lot of crossover, but generally, I handle the numbers. She handles the people. And the pigs, apparently. She immediately caved, promising the kids they could come and visit Buttercup whenever they wanted.

Which is part of the problem. Buttercup loves people. She hates that she lives outside like a normal farm animal with only the other pigs and—horror of all horrors—the chickens for company. She'd much rather chill on the back porch like she's the family pet.

Unless I'm on the porch.

She dislikes me just as much as I dislike her.

The fact that I keep threatening to turn her into pork chops might have something to do with it.

If Olivia were here, she'd call Buttercup's name, snap her fingers, and the stupid pig would probably trot right toward her with a smile on her face, carefully tiptoeing over the cabbages as she goes.

Unfortunately for me, my sister has a week-old newborn. I'm not mean enough to expect her to come corral a pig *now*.

I'd call someone else, but there *is* no one else.

Lennox is out of town.

My parents are at some school awards thing with Brody, my second younger brother, where he's being honored as teacher of the year at the high school where he teaches.

Our farm manager, Kelly, is on her honeymoon.

The farm hands are enjoying a rare night off.

I'm the only one standing between three-hundred pounds of portentous pork and a four-tiered wedding cake.

I take another step. "But you don't want to be bacon, do you, Buttercup? You're a good girl."

A chorus of laughter and applause drifts across the evening air, and my eyes dart toward the sound. I can't see the pavilion from here. The way the farm is nestled into the rolling hills at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains, you generally can't see more than a few hundred yards before a rising hillside or a stretch of forest obscures your view. But it isn't that far. If I cut through the pasture where Mom grazes her goats, I could be there in a matter of minutes.

So could Buttercup.

Another cheer sounds, this one louder than the first, and Buttercup's ears perk up.

"Don't even think about it," I say, inching closer. "There's nothing for you over there. You know all about the little piggy that went to market, right? I'm just saying. He wasn't there to do the shopping."

Buttercup stares, her porcine eyes looking alarmingly human, grunts as she swallows the last of the apple she finally

took interest in, then bolts.

I lunge after her, my hands raking over her enormous hide before she slips away and disappears into the shallow stretch of trees that line the garden. I belly flop onto the dirt with a thud, but quick as lightning, I'm back on my feet and racing after a pig that should not, by all logic, be able to run as fast as she's running.

I cut through the trees, heart pounding, and make it to the road in time to see Buttercup tearing down the hill ... heading straight for the pavilion.

*No. No, no, no, no, NO.*

I filter through my very sparse list of options for rerouting a charging pig away from a pavilion full of fancily dressed wedding guests.

One: Outrun. Body slam. Slip lead. Grunt and beat my chest in victory.

Two:

...

...

...

I've got nothing. I'm doing this thing WWE style or I'm not doing it at all.

I've only made it a few yards when the sound of a Gator, one of the four-by-four utility vehicles we use to get around the farm, draws my attention. I don't have time to slow down, but when Brody appears at the top of the hill, a surge of relief pushes through me. I point toward the pavilion. "Pig!" I yell as I point. "Go cut her off."

Brody looks down the hill and races after Buttercup while I cut across the pasture, channeling my high school hurdling days and jumping the fence in a move I wish someone could have caught on camera. I watch as Brody veers in front of Buttercup just before she turns into the field that holds the pavilion. Instead, she turns the opposite direction, heading straight toward me. There's one more fence between us, and I



barely clear this one, clipping my shin on the board and sending a shooting pain up my leg.

But when I launch onto Buttercup, my arms wrapping around her middle as I roll us into the irrigation ditch beside the road, I'm not thinking about my shin. I'm thinking that of all the ways to die, this might be the most embarrassing one.

I can see the headlines now. *Man Crushed by Giant Pig Saves Wedding as Final Act.*

Because that's what's going to happen. This pig is going to land on top of me and crush my lungs. I'm a decent-sized guy. A little over six feet. Two hundred pounds. Not as ripped as any of my brothers but cut enough not to be embarrassed when I'm standing next to them.

But Buttercup is massive. *Monstrous.*

The air whooshes out of my lungs when I hit the ground, and Buttercup squeals, feet flailing. The ditch is barely wide enough for both of us, and I use that to my advantage, pressing my back against the banked dirt and using it to brace myself while I pin the lower half of Buttercup's body with my legs.

The pig huffs and struggles, but that only makes me tighten my grip. After fifteen seconds or so, she finally stills, but the grunts she's making don't sound like she's very happy about it.

*Yeah, me neither, pig. Me freaking neither.*

"How're you doing down there?" Brody asks from the road, laughter in his tone. "That was a real ... *hambush.*"

"You did not just say that," I manage on a grunt. My lungs don't feel fully functional yet.

"Do you need me to call you a ... *hambulance?*"

"Brody. Slip lead. Do you see it on the ground anywhere?" I know I had it when I took off across the pasture, but the only thing I'm holding now is pig.

"Got it," he says. He steps to the edge of the ditch and slips the lead over Buttercup's head. Once the lead is secure, I shift again, rotating the pig enough for her to gain her footing. I follow, scrambling to my feet, only now realizing that the two

inches of muddy water in the bottom of the ditch have soaked into my shirt.

Buttercup stands placidly next to Brody like this is all perfectly normal. Like we're out for an evening stroll and didn't just have a life-threatening wrestling match.

Brody eyes my muddy clothes and presses his lips together. "She was running pretty fast," he says, barely containing his laughter. "We should enter her in the Olym—"

"Stop." I hold up my hand. "Don't say it."

He grins. "Olym ... pigs."

"I hate you so much right now."

I ride in the Gator next to Brody, holding onto Buttercup's lead while she trots slowly beside us. Now that she's had her adventure, she almost seems anxious to return home. "What are you doing here anyway?" I ask Brody. "I thought you had your thing at the school."

"I did." He reaches up and loosens his tie. "It didn't last long. I got a parking spot. And free coffee from the corner bakery for a year."

"And bragging rights."

He shrugs. "Those too, I guess."

"You here alone? Where's Kate?" It's unusual to see him without his wife. They're still disgustingly newlywed. Attached at the hip if not the lips.

"At Olivia's with Mom and Dad. She wanted to go see Asher."

"You didn't?"

He eyes me before slowing the Gator to a stop outside Buttercup's pen. "No, I did. I just ... felt like coming to see you, so I headed home to grab the Gator. Mom will drop Kate off later."

It's almost fully dark now, but not so dark that I can't pick up on the guilt in Brody's expression. Understanding dawns. "Olivia sent you here."

Brody holds my gaze. “So what if she did? She’s worried about you.”

I roll my eyes and climb out, tugging Buttercup behind me and toward the gate of her enclosure. Half a dozen other pigs snort and snuffle in what sounds like a ‘welcome home’ greeting, and Buttercup squeals in response. “I’m sure you’ll tell them all about it,” I say, rubbing at my ribs as the pig lumbers inside. I latch the gate behind her. “I’ll be sore tomorrow, thanks to you.”

Brody steps up beside me. “How did she get out?”

“Beats me. This is the second time it’s happened.”

He crouches down and studies the latch on the gate. “Could she be lifting this, you think? She’s tall enough to reach it with her snout.”

“And thoughtful enough to close it behind her on her way out?”

“I’ll come by and take a look after school tomorrow. Move the latch, maybe. I’ll figure something out.”

It’s a classic Brody response. He’s always been a problem solver. And a middle-child peacemaker—there are five of us, and he’s dead center—which is probably why Olivia sent him over. She has an idea she wants to spring on me and thinks it will come better from Brody.

We walk back to the Gator, and Brody drives us toward the farmhouse. Behind it, there’s a wide trail that cuts across the west side of Stonebrook Farm property, then winds through public land until it connects to the road where he and Kate live now, in the house Kate grew up in. Childhood best friends. And now they’re married.

A sharp pain shoots through my chest, this one not caused by lung-crushing pig wrestling.

I’m happy to see my siblings happy. Getting married. Having kids. But I’m the oldest. I always thought I’d be the first to start a family.

I managed the getting-married part well enough.

Then limped through a divorce. We lasted long enough to at least think about having kids, but the way things ended with Jocelyn, I'm glad it never felt like the right choice.

Brody stops behind the farmhouse that doubles as Stonebrook's offices and overnight accommodations for wedding parties and other event guests. Once upon a time, it was the Hawthorne family residence, but as the farm grew, our parents decided to build something on a more secluded corner of the farm.

"Want to go inside?" Brody asks. "Or we could head down to the kitchen and see if catering has any wedding food left over."

I look toward my truck. What I really want is to go home and shower off the pig smell still clinging to my clothes. "Or we could skip all the chit-chat, and you could tell me what Olivia wants you to tell me."

"I always forget what a great conversationalist you are."

"Why? Because I haven't been this way my entire life?" I *have* always been this way. But the past few years since the divorce, it's possible I've gotten worse, settling firmly into grumpy (not quite) old man territory. I can't even bring myself to care.

"Fair point." Brody takes a deep breath and cuts the engine of the Gator. "She wants to hire you an assistant."

"No," I say, not even hesitating. "I don't need an assistant."

I know how assistants work. I was a corporate consultant not so long ago, and I *had* an assistant. There are ten different ways that work relationship turned sour, which was part of the appeal of coming home. I could lose the assistant and work alone. Work outside. Manage my time how I want to manage it. This is a *farm*. It shouldn't be as demanding as the corporate world.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recognize that, by definition, Stonebrook *is* a corporation. And a multifaceted one. There's a farm store, the event center and catering kitchen, and now Lennox's farm-to-table restaurant that should

open—despite numerous delays—by the end of next month, just before the start of the holiday season. Not to mention the hundreds and hundreds of acres of apple orchards that gave my parents their start when they bought the place thirty years ago. We're now the second-largest apple wholesaler in the state of North Carolina and employ more than seventy-five full-time and seasonal staff.

“Perry. Stonebrook is growing,” Brody says, echoing my thoughts. “You can't do this by yourself. Not with Olivia on maternity leave and Mom and Dad stepping back like they are. You need help.”

“Then I'll hire more help,” I grumble. “But I don't need an assistant.”

“Olivia guessed you'd say that.”

Of course she did. “And how did she tell you to respond?”

He clears his throat and tosses his voice up a couple of octaves in a surprisingly accurate imitation of our little sister. “Perry, the *farm* doesn't need more help, you do. It's your schedule that's a mess. Your calendar. Your inbox. Hiring an extra farmhand won't solve those problems.”

“But it might solve the Buttercup problem.”

“I'll solve the Buttercup problem tomorrow. I just need to modify the latch.” He slaps me on the back. “Think about it, all right? That's all I'm saying.”

I shoot him a look, and he grins.

“That's all Olivia is saying,” he amends. “But I agree with her. You could use some help.”

I climb out of the Gator and push my hands into my pockets. “Hey, how's the baby?” I went to see Olivia and her husband Tyler in the hospital when Asher was born, but I haven't been by since.

Brody's expression softens. “He's great. Perfect.”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “Does it ... make you want one?”

“What, a kid?”

I nod.

He shrugs. “Sure. I mean, I did before. But yeah. It makes me a little more excited about kids. Not yet though. You?”

I wave a hand dismissively, a little too quickly judging by Brody’s expression. “Nah. You know me. I’m fine being the grouchy uncle.”

Brody raises an eyebrow, but he doesn’t contradict me.

I must be worse off than I thought.

“Maybe you wouldn’t be so grouchy if you weren’t so busy,” Brody says. “If you had someone to help organize your life. It’s a shame they don’t have people who do that sort of thing.”

I turn and walk toward my truck. “No assistants,” I yell over my shoulder. “End of discussion.”

It’s possible I’m being unreasonable, but even just having the conversation feels like picking at a scab. If I don’t have to open this wound, I’d rather not.

“Not every assistant will be like Ryan,” Brody calls after me.

I stop in my tracks, my jaw clenching no matter the years it’s been since the only assistant I’ve ever had ruined my marriage *and* my business all at once.

Fine. I’m being dramatic. He didn’t *personally* ruin my business or my marriage. But he *facilitated*. Chose sides. Betrayed my trust.

I turn around. It’s brave of Brody to bring him up. My family has gotten pretty good at pretending the *dark year*, as I like to call it, when my life imploded and I came limping home, didn’t happen. Mostly because whenever they bring it up, I tend to bark and growl and behave like an imbecile.

*Grouchy uncle. Yep. That’s me.*

“But that’s the trouble,” I say. “It doesn’t matter if *all* assistants aren’t like Ryan. It would only take *one*. And with

people like that, you never know until it's too late.”

Brody drops the subject, probably because he'd rather drive home to his wife than sit around and listen to me grumble. But I know better than to think this argument is over. If I know my sister, she'll hit me with round two before the end of the week.

Though, if I can battle it out with Buttercup and come out unscathed, surely I can fend off Olivia's attempts to meddle.

An early fall breeze stirs the first of the fallen leaves at my feet and presses my still-damp shirt closer to my skin. I shiver, wincing away from the chill, then wince again when a shot of pain radiates out from my ribs.

Maybe I'm not *completely* unscathed.

But Olivia isn't going to win this fight. I can manage my life—my business—without anyone else trying to tell me where I need to be and what I need to be doing.

My nosy sister can live her life and let me live mine.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lila

SO HELP ME, IF my child doesn't get his hind end into the car right this minute, I am legitimately going to lose my ever-lovin' mind. I pinch the bridge of my nose and force a deep breath. You'd think the child has rocks in his shoes for how slow he moves. So far, we've been late more than we've been on time. It's hard to be annoyed by it. He's so perfectly precious with his giant backpack and his fierce determination to do everything himself. But if I get one more patronizing smile from the lady at the desk while she hands him yet another tardy slip ...

"Jackson!" I yell one more time. "We've got to go!"

My adorable five-year-old comes strolling into the living room like he's got all the time in the world. He's only wearing one sock, his hair is sticking up in the back, and he's got two different shoes in his hands. "I was looking for my library book," he says. He plops down on the couch and collapses onto the back cushions with a sigh. "I can't find it *anywhere*."

My mom senses start tingling. I know that voice. He's trying to convince me of something, which means he probably hid his library book and is only pretending he can't find it.

I drop my purse by the door and walk over, grabbing the missing sneaker from under the ottoman and swapping it for the loafer I suppose he thought he'd wear in its absence. I put



on his shoes, tying them myself despite the mom guilt telling me that if I don't let *him* tie his shoes, he'll never learn how to do it.

"I guess you'll have to tell the librarian it's missing," I say.

"But then she won't let me get a new book," Jack says.

I nod. "Yeah. That's too bad. You sure you don't know where it is?"

His eyes get all shifty, and my heart squeezes. It'd be easier to stay mad over all his stalling tactics if he weren't so cute.

"What if I stay home with you?" he says, his voice a little smaller than it was before.

I expected my generally sunshiny outgoing kid to like school, but for whatever reason, he's having some separation anxiety. Maybe because as long as he can remember, it's mostly been the two of us. We've left the tears behind, and we're to the point now where he only needs a little encouragement to go. But he's a master negotiator. If he thinks there's a way out of kindergarten, he'll do his best to find it.

I finish tying his shoes and scoot onto the couch next to him, pulling him into my arms. "We've been over this, Jack. You gotta go to school. But I'll be here waiting for you when you get off the bus. I promise. If you're good, we can walk over to McFarlan's and get a cinnamon roll."

If we're embracing the mom guilt today, I might as well go all in. I've already got a truant child who can't tie his own shoes. What's a little bribery going to hurt?

Jack breathes out a weary sigh that makes him sound fifty instead of five. "Okay." He scoots off my lap and takes off down the hallway. "I'll be right back."

That child might look like his daddy, but he's all me on the inside.

There's nothing I won't do for a cinnamon roll either.

Plus, Jack is generally sweet like me. Optimistic. As tender-hearted as they come.

On the other hand, his dad was ... well, he was ... this part is always tough.

My Southern upbringing taught me not to speak ill of the dead, a rule doubly true when the dead in question was a fighter pilot in the Navy and died serving his country. Nobody speaks poorly of a military hero, especially not his widow, so I can't ever talk about the way things really were at home. But maybe that's better. I feel guilty enough even just thinking these thoughts, let alone saying them out loud.

We pull up to the drop-off forty-five seconds after the teachers close down the car-rider line. I jump out, waving at the gym teacher who is ushering the last kids through the big double doors that lead into the cafeteria. I gesture and point at Jack, hoping he'll come and open the gate for me so I won't have to walk him into the office, but he frowns and points at his watch.

"It's not even 8:01!" I call. "We're still on time!"

Jack tugs on my hand. "We could just go get that cinnamon roll now."

"Nice try, kiddo," I say with a sigh. "Come on. I'll drive around to the front and walk you in."

The front desk lady buzzes us through the door, then stares, her face set in a perpetual frown as I use a fancy touch pad to sign Jack in. I don't know why the woman and her judgy expression even need to be here. The computer's doing all the work. I offer a polite smile while the tiny printer next to the touch pad spits out a tardy slip with Jack's name on it.

The woman's frown only deepens. So much for being friendly. I want to tell her she ought to be careful. The older she gets, the more those frown lines are going to make her look like she has jowls, but I bite the comment back. Jack is too perceptive for me to fully unleash my snark in his presence. The child repeats everything I say. He's already smart enough without my sassiness added into the mix.

I hand the tardy slip to Jack and kiss him on the head. "Have a good day, okay?"

He nods and shuffles down the hallway. He only has to go a few doors down to get to his classroom, so I watch him the whole way, knowing he'll turn and smile before he pushes through the door. I hate that I know this. That we've been late enough times that *this* has become the routine.

"You know," the admin lady says to me through pursed lips, "it really does impact the functionality of the classroom when kids are continually late. And it diminishes the importance of promptness to our children when we allow tardiness to become the norm."

I know all this. *Of course* I do. But I'm doing the best I can, and I'm doing it alone. Putting on a brave face for my kid. Pushing through the never-ending exhaustion because I don't have another person to help balance the load. It's just me.

"Have you thought about putting Jack on the bus in the morning?" the woman continues.

*Ha.* That's a funny suggestion. Our house falls at the beginning of the bus route. We tried it a few times at the beginning of the school year, but Jack had to be at the bus stop by seven-fifteen. Which, if we can barely handle eight o'clock, we for sure aren't ready for seven-fifteen.

I force a smile. "The bus comes pretty early to our house. And things have been pretty tough since Jack's dad died."

The woman's expression shifts, the stony edges and stark lines of her features softening the slightest bit. "Well. Yes, I'm ... I'm sure." She presses a hand against her chest.

It's a common response. That hand right up against the sternum. Like people are trying to anchor their bodies to the earth.

I smile, this time a little more sincerely.

She'll be nicer to me now.

I give her a little wave on my way out. "Have a nice day."

It maybe wasn't completely fair. I mean, it has been hard since Trevor died. It's also been three years, and my feelings

surrounding the loss are more complicated than most. It's hard without Trevor. It was also hard ... *with* Trevor.

But no matter that, or how long ago it was, or whether the sharpness of loss has started to dim, I'm still alone. Parenting alone, trying to make ends meet alone. Sending my only child off to school alone.

We *should* get to school on time.

But if showing my hand earns us a little grace, I'll take it wherever I can get it. Lord knows I need it.

Back at home, I settle at my desk with an enormous coffee and two slices of thick, buttered toast and log in to the software that connects me with my clients. I only have two, and so far, their needs have been pretty low key, but I like to log in early anyway. It's only been a couple of months since I completed my training as a virtual assistant, but Marley, my trainer and the liaison who helps me find my clients, says we're being paid to be available as much as we're being paid to do the actual work. If we're inside our hours of availability, our clients should never have to wait more than a few minutes for a response.

Fortunately, my hours of availability are only during Jack's school hours. I'm lucky I can get by working fewer hours than a typical nine to five. My schedule is more like nine to two. Trevor's military benefits and insurance policies fill in the gaps, but I'd rather save the majority of that money for Jack.

A familiar twinge of guilt rises up like bile in the back of my throat, but I swallow it down. Jack deserves everything. Even if I'm not so sure that I do.

Either way, I like working. I don't necessarily like *the work*, but it feels good to be doing something to contribute toward Jack's wellbeing.

Maybe one day I'll figure out how to make work something I truly love.

In my wildest dreams, I'm teaching piano and voice lessons out of an at-home music studio. But I know better than to give that dream roots. I'm hardly qualified, no matter how much I

like to sing. And truly, answering emails and managing calendars from the comfort of my own home isn't a half-bad gig.

My inbox and task list are still empty, so I kill time by fiddling on my iPad, using a drawing program to finish the avatar I've been working on. The program Marley uses to connect us with clients has a "personal bio" section that contains a little information about me and has a place for a photo. When I first started, I put up a fairly recent photo and called it good. But after the experience I had with my first client—a fancy pants CEO who took less than a week to ask me if he could fly me to Chicago and pay me a thousand dollars a night for escort services—I pulled the photo down and haven't replaced it. Marley suggested I create a cartoon avatar, something that still looks like a representation of me but is a little less personal.

"You're young, Lila. And beautiful," Marley told me. "And most of your clients are going to be men twice your age. Unfortunately, the more distance you keep between them and your personal life, the easier this job is going to be." I'm not sure if I believe the beautiful part, but for Jack's sake, I'm on board with keeping things impersonal, even if it goes against my natural inclination.

I'm not a great artist by any stretch, but I still think my avatar is pretty cute. Her hair is up in a ponytail and is the same deep brown that Jackson and I share. She's featureless, but the way she's tilting her head makes her seem friendly. Approachable. But she also seems ... *young*. Maybe it's the ponytail? Struck with a sudden wave of inspiration, I make a few tweaks, changing the hairstyle and adjusting a few colors.

*There.* Now she's perfect. Gray hair. Glasses. Pearls and a dowdy sweater set. Not anything like me. But does she really need to be? These men I'm working for will never meet me in person. It's the magic of a virtual job. It really is all virtual.

I've just finished uploading my new and improved avatar when my phone rings and Marley's face fills the screen.

"Hey, Marley."

“Hey! I’m glad I caught you. I have news. Or, a job, really. Kind of a big one.”

“Excellent. I definitely have room for a third client.”

“Actually, this would be a solo gig. This client is okay with your shorter hours of availability, but they think they have enough to keep you busy and would like to pay for exclusivity.”

“So they’d be my only client?”

“That’s right. I’ll shift the two you currently have to someone else.”

I don’t love the idea of losing the clients I currently have. There was a learning curve when I started working with both of them, and I’m finally starting to feel like I’ve figured out how each client wants me to do things. “Why me?”

“A few reasons. One, exclusivity pays a little higher, so that will be a nice boost for you. It’s a higher rate, plus, instead of only getting paid for the hours you work, you get paid the same hours every day regardless of whether they have anything for you to do. Second, I actually know these people. Well, sort of. My cousin Rosie—have I told you about her? She’s married to the famous YouTuber.”

“Right. *Random I*. You’ve mentioned her.”

“Yes! So, I guess *Random I*—his name is Isaac—is best friends with a guy who married into the family that owns this farm down in Silver Creek. That’s close to where you are, right?”

“Yeah. About twenty minutes down the mountain.”

“So that’s another perk. It’s almost local for you. Not that I anticipate them needing you in person. I reiterated that you are a *virtual* assistant, and they get that, but they did like that your proximity to them gives you a working knowledge of the area. I guess they do a lot of wholesale with local retailers, and they have this festival coming up—”

“Wait, what kind of business is this? You said it’s a farm?”

“Oh, right. Stonebrook Farm and Event Center. So, a lot more than just a farm. Have you heard of it?”

“Shut. Up. Are you talking about the Hawthornes?”

“You know them?” Marley says.

“I know *of* them. But everyone around here does. They’re like North Carolina royalty. You know Flint Hawthorne? The actor? That’s his family.”

“Oh, that’s right! I remember Rosie telling me that.”

“They hold this enormous harvest festival every fall. It’s huge. Almost like another county fair. Though, I think half the people who go are mostly just hoping they’ll catch a glimpse of Flint.”

A memory pops into my mind. The last time I went to Stonebrook’s harvest festival, Jack and I had just moved home. Trevor hadn’t been dead more than a month, but I hadn’t seen my little boy smile in too many days. We needed to do something normal. Something to make him happy. I walked around the festival with a hollow chest, but Jack loved it.

“Olivia actually mentioned the harvest festival specifically,” Marley says. “I guess they’re way behind on the planning and are hoping you can step in and—”

“Olivia? Is she a Hawthorne?”

“Oh, right. Yes. And she’s the one married to Isaac’s best friend. But the most important thing for you to know is that Olivia and her brother run the farm together, and since she’s out on maternity leave, she wants to hire him an assistant.”

It’s not lost on me that Marley is saying *Olivia* is the one who wants to hire me. Which leaves me to wonder how the actual brother feels about me working for him.

“I don’t suppose Flint is the brother who’s running the farm now, is he? Good grief, can you imagine?”

Even just thinking about working for Flint’s *brother* feels crazy.

Flint Hawthorne is huge.

So famous.

Maybe not Tom Hanks or Tom Cruise famous, but definitely Chris Hemsworth famous.

“Not Flint. His name is Perry. Olivia didn’t tell me much about him, but I get the sense they’re all really good people. Genuine. Honest. I think this will be a good fit for you, Lila.”

“Maybe, but I’m still concerned about the hours. With Jack, will they give me the flexibility I need?”

Truth is, even living in the town where I grew up, I don’t have much of a support network. I live right down the street from my grandparents, who raised me, but for lack of a better way to say it, they’re *old*. They live in one of those assisted living neighborhoods where, even though they’re technically on their own, there are people on standby to help with the basics. Grocery shopping, doctor’s appointments. Neither of them drives, and they aren’t quite mobile enough to keep up with Jack, so even though we visit a lot, I can’t rely on them to help babysit or pick up the slack when I fall short.

I really *am* on my own.

“They’ll be fine with that,” Marley says. “I promise. I told Olivia about Jack, and she says it won’t be a problem. Family comes first.”

I take a deep breath. “Well, okay then. I guess I’m in.”

Marley says goodbye, promising to send over the digital agreement for my new client/assistant relationship. When it appears in my inbox minutes later, I read it over, my eyes catching on the name of the man I’ll be assisting. *Perry Hawthorne*.

I have so many questions. Does he look like his famous brother? Is he older? Younger? If he’s even half as handsome, I might have a hard time forming sentences around the man. Except, I won’t really *be* around him, will I? Email. Direct messages. Maybe a phone call every once in a while, depending on what he prefers.

My fingers itch to google him, but Marley’s counsel echoes in my mind. Keep things strictly professional. No social media



stalking. No deep-diving into decades-old MySpace photos. “*The less you know about things that do not pertain to your work, the easier it will be to do your job in a professional, unbiased way.*”

But it’s not every day you get a client who is related to one of Hollywood’s biggest stars.

Finally caving to the impulse, I pull up a new window on my computer and run a search.

*Flint Hawthorne brothers.*

And there they are. In all their FREAKING UNBELIEVABLE glory.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I say out loud as I magnify the picture. Four men stand together, arms wrapped around each other, in attendance at what looks to be some kind of fancy, black-tie event.

Flint is in the middle, his brothers standing on either side. And they’re clearly brothers. There’s a common thread that runs through all of them. An incredibly handsome common thread. I mean, talk about winning the genetic lottery. These men are *transcendent*. Their collective handsomeness is almost blinding. They should all be in the movies. Or at least decorating billboards modeling Calvin Klein underwear. I think I’d buy anything these men were trying to sell. Lightbulbs? *Why yes, yes I do think I need a year’s supply, thank you.*

There’s no caption with the picture, so I can’t know which brother is which, but my eyes are drawn to the one on the end. His hair is a little longer, he’s the only one with a beard, and he’s not quite smiling. There’s a seriousness about him that’s different from the other three.

*That’s Perry*, I think to myself, though maybe it’s just that I want him to be Perry. Why, I can’t say, but the impression is crystal clear.

It only takes one more search query to confirm my hunch. *Perry Hawthorne Stonebrook Farm.*

The image that pops up first is definitely the unsmiling man from the end. He isn't smiling in this photo either, but he's no less handsome. He's sitting on the steps of a white house—probably the big farmhouse at Stonebrook—his arms propped on his knees, his expression serious.

He is ... I let out a little groan. Five minutes ago, I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I think he's actually more handsome than Flint.

I don't know why I feel so out of sorts. I'm a *virtual* assistant. This will be a *virtual* relationship just like the ones I've had with my previous clients. There isn't a single reason for me to feel so much trepidation. But my hands are shaking right now. Like, actual, visible, shaking.

I force a deep breath. I'm being ridiculous. The guy is probably married anyway.

I lean forward and squint at the picture. His ring finger is bare, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Trevor hardly ever wore his wedding band.

I swallow away the discomfort that thought brings and focus on the picture. "Good morning, Mr. Hawthorne," I say out loud, in my best assistant voice. "Ready for your morning update?"

I flop back into my chair. *Ugh. I am going to mess this up.*

I sit up again and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Here are the files you asked for, Mr. Hawthorne," I say in a syrupy sweet voice. "Can I get you anything else? A candlelit dinner for two? A moonlit stroll?"

*Oh good grief. Definitely not that.*

I clear my throat. "Hey. Hawthorne," I say, my voice unnaturally deep. "Here are your files. If you need me, just light the bat signal."

If Jack were here, he'd be rolling on the floor laughing at my Batman voice, and that thought is enough to bring me back to earth and ground me in reality.

Jack is my priority.

This is just a job.

Perry will just be a boss. It doesn't matter that Marley knows his family personally or that he's only twenty minutes down the road. It doesn't even matter that I've been going to Stonebrook's harvest festival since I was a kid. This will not be a personal relationship.

And good thing too, because I wouldn't have the first clue how to have one of those.

I've been on exactly zero dates since becoming a widow. And since I met Trevor right after high school and married him when I was too young and much too stupid, I can't even rely on past dating experience to help me muddle through. I need Ryan Gosling's character in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* to come and teach me how to date. (Or maybe I just need Ryan Gosling?) Except the PG version where all he teaches me is how to have a conversation without using my Batman voice to break the ice.

I fidget my way through the rest of my shift, doing my best to keep my mind *away* from my new and exciting, one-degree-away-from-a-celebrity, very attractive client. But no matter how much I tell my brain this is NO BIG DEAL, the rest of me seems to be operating with some secret insider knowledge, because I keep waffling between feeling flushed with heat and prickled with goose bumps, like a cool breeze just blew across my skin.

I don't know what's going on, but I know I don't like it.

## CHAPTER THREE

Lila

MY INBOX PINGS WITH a notification the minute Perry Hawthorne signs his paperwork. I swear, it almost feels like something pings inside of me at the same time, waking up a flurry of nerves and excitement.

It's possible anticipation has made my reaction larger than it should be. I've been waiting three days for Perry to make our working relationship official.

Marley already shifted my previous clients to other assistants, so I've just been killing time. Granted, two of those three days, Jack was home with a fever (real, not faked, though I did question at first) so I was grateful for the time off.

But Jack's back in school today, so I'm ready to get back to work. And now I finally have a boss who needs me.

My fingers are only a tiny bit shaky as I key a "nice to virtually meet you" message into the chat box part of the integration software Marley uses, but why am I nervous? I shouldn't be nervous. He's just a client. Albeit a super-hot brother-of-a-movie-star client, but STILL. I'm not the fangirly type. I'm a dorky mom who mostly works in yoga pants and stretchy denim and makes her kid laugh by imitating superheroes.

I hit send, then copy and paste instructions that will walk Perry through giving me access to his email and calendar and give *him* access to my task list.

A solid hour passes before the chat box pings with a return message. Not like I'm counting or anything. (I'm totally counting. It's been sixty-two minutes.)

**Perry:** I'd like to keep our interactions as brief as possible. I've put together a list below of some tasks I need completed ASAP, as well as parameters for how I'd like you to handle my email. Let me know if you have any questions.

My chest deflates the tiniest bit at the chilliness of his tone. But that's stupid. Can direct messages really have a tone? Just because I read it one way doesn't mean that's how Perry would say it were he speaking to me in person. Then again, is there really a warm way to say *I'd like to keep our interactions as brief as possible?*

I clear my throat and sit up a little straighter.

**Lila:** Understood. Brief interactions. Like phone calls with the mother-in-law.

I wait for Perry to respond with a laughing emoji or even just a thumbs up. Brief doesn't have to be *boring*, does it? My hope surges when the dots at the bottom of the chat window flash for a moment or two, but then they disappear, and the green light indicating that Perry is online switches to an offline red.

I immediately second guess the joke, even if it was relatively harmless. Yes, Marley has told me to keep things professional, and I do. But I can be professional and *not a robot* at the same time. It only feels right to remind my clients there's a person behind my avatar.

But then, maybe the joke didn't land because Perry has a wonderful mother-in-law whom he talks to every Sunday afternoon.

Or maybe Perry is the actual robot.

For the rest of the week and all of the next one, I work every hour of Jack's school day, slowly plowing my way through

Perry's never-ending task list. It's easy work, but only because Perry is so thorough (and unrelentingly impersonal) in his requirements. A few things are so simple, I wonder if it took him as long to type out the instructions as it does for me to complete the tasks.

I feel guilty about those things. Does he really need to pay me to track down a missing invoice he could have found with a simple file search? But then I'll spend four hours chasing after the still-unsigned vendor contracts from the food trucks who want to be present at Stonebrook's harvest festival, and I don't feel guilty anymore.

Through it all, Perry is responsive to my questions and detailed in his replies.

He is also colder than a giant block of ice.

At first, I was intimidated. But now, it's become a bit of a game for me. A special challenge to see if I can get him to crack.

**Lila:** I've gathered the quotes you requested for the apple bushel boxes. Sending them in an email attachment now. It took some hard \*core\* negotiating, but I got every supplier to drop their quotes by fifteen percent.

**Perry:** Good work. Thanks.

— e e e —

**Lila:** All food truck and food stall vendors have confirmed and paid their fee for the harvest festival. I've staggered their arrival times to avoid congestion. I really had to \*peel\* back the layers to make it work, but they'll all be set up when gates open at eleven a.m.

**Perry:** Excellent.

— e e e —

**Lila:** I really apple-plied myself this afternoon, and now all the vendor bills from the Hamilton/Smith wedding are paid and filed appropriately.

**Perry:** Thanks.



Just when I think I need to abandon the puns and revert back to boring professionalism, a personal email shows up in Perry's inbox. I immediately wonder if this is the moment I've been waiting for. I finally have an in. A reason to make an actual phone call.

But then, by the time I've read the email, I'm not so sure. If I'm going to have a "first" conversation with my boss, I don't think I want it to be about whatever drama is behind this message.

The email is brief, and though it's clearly addressed to Perry's work email, it is *not* work related.

*Perry— I'm still awaiting your RSVP to the reunion. I hope we can be mature about this. Just because I'm in charge doesn't mean you shouldn't come. Have you blocked my messages from your personal account? They keep getting returned, which is why I'm emailing you here. I've attached the official reunion invite in case you haven't gotten it. Please RSVP. And please come. - JH*

My fingers hover over the chat box. When clients set up the parameters of their email accounts, they can specify a list of senders or even entire domains to filter into a private inbox that I can't see. Most prefer that all return emails go directly to them, or anything from existing contacts, leaving only new or general inquiries going to the VA. If anything slips through that looks like something the client should handle on their own, I can move it into their private inbox.

That's probably what I should do now. But if someone has been hounding Perry's personal email accounts, maybe he'd prefer I handle this for him, keep some level of distance between him and whoever this person is.

Perry is online and logged into the VA software, so I type him a quick message.

**Lila:** Good *applenoon*, Mr. Hawthorne ...

Oh good grief.

My brain is working against me now. I delete and try again. There's a time to be punny and a time to not, and I sense that this is definitely a time to not.

**Lila:** Good afternoon, Mr. Hawthorne. I've just received an email from someone regarding some sort of reunion for you. I don't want to overstep, but the email feels a little ... pushy? I'm happy to reply if you'd prefer not to hear from them again.

To my (too much) delight, he replies immediately.

**Perry:** Pushy? In what way?

Rather than move the email into his private inbox, which would cut off my access to the message, I go old school and simply forward it to him so that I can still reply should he need me to.

**Lila:** Just forwarded the email.

I drum my fingers against my desk, waiting for him to respond.

When five minutes go by with no new messages, I pull up Perry's calendar and check the date, referring back to the invitation attached to the email. "The Grove Park Inn," I say out loud. "Fancy."

I skim the remaining details. It's for Perry's high school graduating class. Fifteen years, which means he's only four years older than I am. *Interesting*. I'd always imagined him slightly older. The fact that he isn't sends a tiny thrill shooting through me. Four years isn't a very big age gap. If that sort of thing mattered, which, because Perry is my boss and also might be very married, it does *not*.

The reunion is an overnight event, which feels kinda swanky, but then, I don't really have anything to compare it to. My ten-year reunion was last year, and I skipped it. The idea of trying to find my place among the happily married couples and the still-single-and-living-it-up crowd sounded much too stressful. Plus, my senior class created a new senior superlative just for me: Most Likely to Be on *American Idol*. The fact that I didn't make it to Nashville to pursue a singing



career like I hoped did a good job of dampening my desire to go and reconnect with old classmates.

There's nothing on Perry's calendar that conflicts with the reunion. It's before both the harvest festival and the restaurant opening, so there's no reason Perry can't go. Though, based on the tone of the email, I'm guessing he probably doesn't want to. The message doesn't read like a "first contact" email; it reads more like a "you still haven't responded" email.

When another five minutes go by, I begin to think I should have just forwarded the message and kept myself out of it. But I already started the conversation. I type out one more message. If he doesn't engage after this one, I'll leave it alone.

**Lila:** Fifteen years! That's a big one. Would you like me to send in your RSVP? I checked your calendar, and it's clear on the dates of the reunion.

Perry's reply comes through almost immediately.

**Perry:** I'll take care of the email. Thanks for forwarding.

And ... our conversation is over.

When the three dots appear indicating that Perry is typing again, a surge of hope pulses through me.

**Perry:** I'm heading out early today, so you're welcome to do the same.

I breathe out a sigh. It was almost a conversation. But not really.

**Perry:** And Lila? I *apple-laud* your efforts this week.

I nearly gasp when I read his message.

He's alive! A living, thinking human! And he's noticed my attempts to add a bit of levity to his day.

Still, I sense a need to manage my expectations.

One pun does not a friendship make. In fact, "friendly banter" is written nowhere in my job description. Marley would even discourage me from engaging in such a thing, though she's reiterated multiple times it's up to me to set boundaries according to my own comfort level. And my

comfort level is a lot closer to “friends with everyone” than “professional and impersonal.”

I stand up and stretch, happy to be out of my chair after so many hours in it.

I look around my cluttered living room. I probably ought to spend a few hours cleaning the house once I get Jack from the bus, especially since he’s got soccer practice tonight, and there won’t be time later.

Our place has more than enough space for the two of us, but by general standards, it’s tiny—tiny enough that it ought to be easier to keep clean. But cleaning is one of those things that used to feel simple but now seems like an enormously complicated task.

The list of those things was a lot longer at first. Getting out of bed. Doing basic things like brushing my teeth or making myself a cup of coffee. Forget showering or going to the grocery store. I honestly don’t even know how we ate the first few months right after Trevor died.

Things are easier now. *Most* things, anyway. But it’s also been long enough that I’m finally sorting through the layers of complicated emotions I still haul around with me every day. Things like how much Trevor cared about the house (and Jack and me) always looking neat and tidy and at “our best.”

I never slacked off before. I half wonder if that’s why I’m more lenient about things now.

Because I can be.

Guilt, sharp and familiar, wells up, pushing against my lungs, making my chest feel tight. Trevor’s gone, and I’m relieved I don’t have to keep the house as clean?

I brush the thought into the corner with the dust bunnies and look for my shoes. It’s nearly time to walk to the bus stop to meet Jack. I’d rather do that than sweep the floors anyway.

Jack is all smiles and sticky hands when he climbs off the bus. He’s holding a giant sheet of posterboard in one hand and a ring pop in the other, the sticky juices dripping down his

hand and staining his skin blue. His lips have the same blue tint. Somehow, it only makes him cuter.

“Ughh, Mom. You’re squeezing me too tight,” he says when I scoop him into my arms.

I drop him back to the sidewalk and tug on his backpack until it slips from his shoulders. It’s only a hundred yards or so to the house, but the thing almost weighs as much as he does. I throw it over my shoulder and nudge Jack toward home.

“What’s on the poster?” I ask, and he unfolds it to show me as we walk.

“Our family,” he says. He points to the figure on the far left. “That’s you. And this is me beside you.”

“It looks so great, Jack. What’s that up there?” I point to an airplane-looking thing above the trees.

“That’s Daddy. He’s in his jet. Watching us from heaven.”

My heart squeezes. (*Will it ever stop?*) Jack was too little to remember his dad, but he’s heard the story enough times to know how he died. And that he was heroically serving his country when he did.

“So, if that’s Daddy up in the jet, who is this down here?” I point to the other figure standing on the opposite side of Jack.

“That’s my new dad.”

*Oh. Oh wow.*

I clear my throat. “Your new dad, huh?”

“Yeah. My friend Chloe at school says her parents got a divorce, and her mom moved out, but then her dad brought home a new mom. Now she has two. Her real mom and then another kind. A staimom.”

I press my lips together to stifle a giggle. “I think you mean stepmom, baby.”

“Oh, right. Stepmom. Am I getting one though? A new dad? Would he be my staidad? I mean, stepdad?”

We reach our tiny front porch, and I turn and sit on the step. Jack moves to the front yard and starts combing a patch of grass for four-leaf clovers. It's late enough in the season I don't think he's going to find any. The grass has mostly stopped growing—I doubt we'll even need to cut it again before spring—but I'm grateful he's occupied anyway so I can have a minute to gather my thoughts.

"Chloe said her dad found her stepmom at the bar," Jack says. He's stretched out on his belly, his legs kicked out behind him, his face close to the browning grass. "What's a bar? Is it like a people store?"

*Oh my heart. This child.* "It's a little more complicated than that," I say. "A bar is a place where grownups go to get fancy adult drinks. Sometimes they meet other people while they're there. But it's not like shopping. It's more like making friends. Deciding who you like and who you might want to spend more time with."

He looks up and studies me. "So if you went to a bar, would you meet a stepdad?"

I shrug. "Maybe. But I could also meet someone anywhere. It doesn't have to be at a bar."

He stands up and brushes off his shirt. "Should we go look?"

I narrow my gaze. "For a stepdad?"

He nods, his expression so earnest, it nearly kills me. "What's going on here, Jack?" I tug him forward and pull him onto my lap. "It's been just the two of us for a while now. Why the sudden desire to have a stepdad?"

He sniffs and picks at a scab on his elbow, his eyes down. His shoulder lifts in the tiniest of shrugs. "I don't know."

"Jack," I say softly. "You can tell me anything, you know that, right?"

He huffs. "I don't want to. Because you'll just tell me *you* can come with me, but that won't be the same."

"Come with you to what?"

He's fidgety now, squirming like he wants to get away from me. I loosen my hold, knowing him well enough to give him the space he wants when he wants it. He heaves out a sigh. "The father-son breakfast."

When I was little, I used to think heartbreak was only something you could experience one time. Once your heart broke, that was it. It was *broken*. But I know better now. Because in the past three years, my heart has broken a million different times.

Make that a million and one.

Just as I expected him to, Jack wiggles out of my arms and goes back to the yard.

"Would it be so bad if I came to the breakfast with you? I'm sure you aren't the only one who doesn't have a dad around."

"Ms. Kennedy says grandpas can go. Or uncles or big brothers." Jack looks at me now, hope in his eyes. "Could Grandpa Jamison go?"

"I don't think he's strong enough to leave the house, sweetie. But we can maybe see if your Grandpa Templeton can come up and take you."

Trevor's parents live two hours south in Columbia and are always asking me to bring Jack down to visit. Truly, if they had their way, I'd do more than visit. I'd move in and turn over Jack's parenting to them. We're talking private kindergarten for thirty grand a year, private tennis lessons at the country club, after-school tutors for Latin and elocution. All of it.

It isn't that Trevor's parents are unkind. I appreciate how much they care about Jack. But I'm not sure their life is the life I want for him. And as much as I want Jack to have every good and nice thing, I don't think I'd be capable of living a life where, every day, I'd have to pretend Trevor was as perfect as his parents still believe he was.

Jack shrugs and sighs, clearly underwhelmed by the idea. "Yeah. Maybe."

I stand up, recognizing that sometimes the only way to beat the melancholy is to distract yourself out of it. “Come on. Let’s get inside. If you can help me get the living room clean, we can have an early dinner, then pop some popcorn and watch a movie.”

Jack follows me inside where I clean up his sticky hands and face. Then we crank up the music, cleaning and dancing until the sparkle is back in his eyes. But hours later, after I finally tuck him into bed, I sit at the kitchen counter and stare at his poster, my eyes drifting from Trevor’s scribbled form floating high in the sky to the man drawn right next to Jack.

Logically, I’ve always expected that at some point far down the road, I’d meet someone. Fall in love. Get married again. But I don’t even know how I’d go about starting the process. How do you date when you also have a five-year-old? If Marley was concerned about me getting personal with business associates, how much more caution should I have when it comes to my personal life? Because it isn’t just *me* I have to consider. There’s Jack, too.

And that complicates everything.

I trace my fingers over the dark hair Jack scribbled onto the mystery man in his drawing. For the briefest moment, I imagine my overly professional, dark-haired boss.

The thought is completely laughable. Absurd to the billionth degree.

Me and Perry Hawthorne?

Me and *any* Hawthorne?

I should know better than to even consider it.

But that doesn’t stop me from going to sleep imagining Perry Hawthorne’s dark hair and the way he *apple-lauded* my efforts.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Perry

PRESTON WHITAKER WALKS ME back to my truck, carrying a bushel basket of apples like it's full of gold instead of fruit. I offered to carry it—Mr. Whitaker has to be pushing eighty—but he insisted, and I know better than to wound the old man's pride.

When we reach the truck, I take the basket and place it gently in the passenger seat. "Thanks, Preston. I'll make sure Dad gets them."

"Don't you tell him though," he says in his gruff voice. "This is a blind taste test."

I nod along as he speaks. "Understood. I won't tell him. And I'll call you the minute he's tried one to let you know what he thinks."

Preston is an old friend of my dad's. His orchard isn't big enough to be commercial; he makes a few trips to the farmers market every fall to sell his harvest, but it's more a hobby than it is a business. His real passion is apple pomology—cultivating new varieties of apples more resistant to disease or improved for taste or texture.

This new variety is supposed to be the perfect combination of crispness and tart sweetness. At least, that's how Preston described it. And dad has a reputation in the apple-growing

community. He's got a nose—or maybe a taste bud?—for the most marketable varieties of apples, and when he calls something a winner, he's pretty much always right.

Preston practically giggled when he called and invited me out to pick up a bushel of the hybrid fruit he's been working on for the past three years.

I climb into my truck and roll the window down. Preston moves up, leaning his arms on the driver's side door. "Tell him I still need a name," he says, nodding toward the apples. "And if you're interested in growing it out at Stonebrook, well, we can talk about that too."

"I'll tell him."

He pats my arm. "It's good to see you, Perry. I was surprised you came so quickly, as busy as you are."

"There's always time for you, Mr. Whitaker."

He offers one final wave as I pull down the gravel drive of his small farm. The Whitaker farm is one county over, near Hendersonville, but still ten miles outside of anything that resembles a town. This far out, it's just winding roads and trees in every direction. I wind my window down and breathe in the crisp, clean fall air. A row of sugar maples along the road blazes yellow, their leaves dancing in the afternoon breeze. It's the perfect kind of afternoon for a drive, and I have Lila to thank for the opportunity. If not for her efforts the past two weeks, I wouldn't have had the time to make the trip.

The thing is, I'm generally very organized.

On top of my life.

In control.

I actually pride myself on that control. On getting things done in a proper, orderly fashion. Some say it makes me grumpy, to be so ... *specific* about things. I say it makes me effective. Reliable. Efficient.

At least, I thought so before my run-in with Buttercup.

I haven't found the connection yet, but I'm convinced that stupid pig is directly responsible for the disintegration of my



organizational skills. Or maybe she was just the catalyst? Either way, that night marked the beginning of my decline into desperation. Things quickly went from bad to worse, so much so that I've started using Buttercup's name as a favorite swear word. Forgotten meetings. Missed opportunities because of my failure to respond. Delayed shipments. *Buttercup*.

I'm not sure I truly understood how much Olivia does around the farm, something I'm loath to admit because the *buttercupping* pig is her fault in the first place.

Or how much Olivia *did*, anyway, before she had Asher. I have a newfound respect for her ability to multitask.

It took a week for me to cave and agree to *limited* help from a virtual assistant.

But now, there's nothing limited about Lila's help. She's even scheduling my phone calls, which has somehow stopped me from feeling like all I do is put out fires other people started. *Believe it or not, boss, you can solve people's problems on your timetable instead of theirs*, Lila messaged me when she first set up the schedule.

The woman is a machine. Efficient. Competent. And a good communicator. She also has good intuition, often taking the tasks I've given her one step further. I think it must be her age. I don't know exactly how old she is, but the avatar she uses in the app we use to communicate is an illustration of a woman with graying hair, pearls, and glasses. Which tracks. Lila seems grounded in a way that can only come from years of experience. Though, her age is probably also the cause of her ridiculously *punny* sense of humor.

Brody would love her apple-themed jokes. Me? I'll tolerate them if it means she's getting her work done.

I reach over and grab an apple out of the overflowing bushel basket in the seat beside me. Windows down. A cool breeze. A bright sky edged with the smoky blues and greens of the rolling mountains in the distance. Fall colors in every direction. I bite into the apple and smile.

I might not be as experienced as Dad, but I know a good apple when I taste one.

For a short minute, I almost forget about all the stress waiting for me back at the farm. I forget the gnawing loneliness that's been consuming me since Olivia had Asher, and Brody got married. I even forget the annoyance of my ex-wife emailing me—repeatedly—about the stupid high school reunion happening next month. I can't figure out why Jocelyn cares so much that I attend. So she can gloat, probably. Parade her happy life in front of me and make me realize what I'm missing.

Or what she thinks I'm missing, anyway.

It took a few years, but I'm finally starting to accept that I'm better off without her. I loved Jocelyn. And I don't doubt that she loved me. Just not enough to be okay when I told her I wanted a different life—one that didn't involve the corporate games she wanted to play. I didn't expect it to end things. I thought she'd understand me wanting to go in a different direction. Instead, she begged me to hang on a little longer, then she plotted her escape.

The betrayal still burns—a thick coil of festering heat that lives deep in my gut, pulsing whenever I think about her. Whenever I realize how foolish I was, how many signs I missed.

My hand tightens on the steering wheel, but I force my grip to loosen, rolling my shoulders to shake out some of the gathering tension. It's over and done with. And I'm better for it. I realize that now.

Seconds later, I tense right back up when my truck lurches and jumps. I slow my speed, immediately recognizing the sound and feel of a blown tire. *Freaking buttercupping buttercup.*

I pull onto the shoulder and get out to assess the damage. The tire isn't salvageable, but luckily, I've got a full-size spare. I move to the back of the truck to get the tire and everything else I'll need and—*oh no.*

I search the truck bed. Every logical place and then every illogical place.

I do have a full-size spare. But thanks to my idiot brother who took mine and forgot to put it back, I don't have a jack.

*I'll put it right back, Lennox said. You'll never know it was gone.*

I climb into the truck and drop my head onto the steering wheel. Of all the stupid days to blow a tire. When I'm way out here in the middle of nowhere. Without the one thing I need to make changing a tire possible.

I call Lennox first, but he's right in the middle of a training run with his kitchen staff and can't leave for another two hours or more. Brody's phone goes straight to voicemail, which means he's probably on the river with his after-school kayaking club. Mom is at physical therapy with Dad. Tyler is in a meeting. I even tried calling Brody's new wife, Kate, but she's in Asheville doing an interview. She can stop by on her way home, but it'll be dinnertime before she's finished.

The whole situation feels like a strange and uncomfortable repetition of the night I battled Buttercup alone. Why does it feel like everyone has someone but me?

The only person I haven't called is Olivia. But all calling her would do is make her feel guilty that she isn't available to help. Or else it would make her put her month-old baby in the car and come to my rescue, something I won't ask her to do until I'm really desperate.

I'm looking up numbers for the nearest roadside assistance when Olivia calls me. It's a video call, which means I might get to see Asher. A glimpse of my nephew might be the only thing that could put a smile on my face right now.

"Hey, Liv," I say, answering the call. "What's up?"

"Mom just called. Have you found someone to rescue you yet?"

I shouldn't be surprised that word traveled so fast. Not when it comes to my family. "I'm looking up roadside assistance right now."

“If you’re still stranded in an hour, I’ll send Tyler, once his meeting is over. Or I could just come. Asher’s sleeping, but he’d probably stay asleep in the car.”

“Don’t wake your baby up. Isn’t that some kind of cardinal rule? You never wake a sleeping baby?”

Olivia yawns. “Sounds about right.” She perks up. “Ohh! You know who you should call? Lila. She lives in Hendersonville, right?”

I frown. “I’m not sure that falls under her realm of responsibilities.”

“Whatever. She’s your assistant. When have you ever needed assisting more than you do right now?”

“It’s not the same thing,” I say, shaking my head. “She’s a virtual assistant. She can’t send me a car jack in a direct message.”

“But don’t you have any desire to meet her in person? See what she’s like?”

“I know what she’s like.”

“You do?”

“Sure. She’s older. Gray hair. She likes to crochet.”

She yawns again. “She could still bring you a jack. Even little old ladies know how to drive.”

“Go take a nap, Liv. You look exhausted.”

“K, but promise you’ll call if you can’t find someone to help you. I’ll come, Perry. I don’t mind.”

“I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry about me.”

I hang up with my sister, my finger hovering between the app I use to communicate with Lila and the search I already started for roadside assistance. Better to start with that. If it’s going to be a while, or if I can’t find anyone close by, maybe I’ll consider calling my assistant. It just feels wrong to ask this of her, after her business hours, when she specifically said her availability is not flexible.

She could be caring for an ailing husband. Or ... I don't know, crocheting something.

It occurs to me that I probably ought to make an effort to get to know my assistant a little better. Olivia and Brody are right. This isn't like my situation with Ryan. She clearly isn't the same, and she's very good at respecting my boundaries. She only has access to what I give her, and she isn't even a little bit pushy.

I should try to be more friendly.

But do I really want to start that effort on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere?

Except, I really do need help.

Shoving aside the last of my hesitations, I pull up her number and hit *call*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Lila

JACK AND I ARE playing a game of Sleeping Queens—his favorite card game and one of the many sacrifices I make because I love him—when my phone rings, the screen lighting up with an unknown number. The city name attached to the number catches my eye because it reads Silver Creek, NC.

I only know one person who lives in Silver Creek.

It could be a coincidence.

A spam call from someone wanting to sell me an extended warranty on my car or asking for a donation to some political action committee. Maybe someone wanting to collect on imaginary debt or refinance the mortgage I don't have.

But my boss *does* have my number. And he's allowed to use it during business hours, should we ever need to communicate.

We never have. Perry is an expert DM'er and a total phone-avoider. At least so far.

It can't be him.

Can it? My palms are sweating, my heart beating so hard, I think Jack could probably see it pounding if he looked closely.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," I say out loud.

Then I answer the call. "Hello?"

“Hello?” a deep voice replies. “Is this Lila?”

My heart drops into my stomach, and a queasy feeling starts swirling.

I’ve never heard Perry Hawthorne’s voice, but somehow, I know it’s him anyway. And his voice is every bit as sexy as I imagined it would be.

What I don’t know is why my body is acting like “Is this Lila?” actually means, “Hey, beautiful. Want to have dinner with me?”

Can a voice really do that to a person—cause such a visceral response?

“Hello?” Perry repeats. “Are you there?”

I clear my throat. “This is Lila.”

There’s a long pause before he responds. “It is?”

“Well, who else would I be?”

“No, I know. You just sound ... younger.”

“Younger than who?”

“Your profile picture, er, avatar?”

*Oh. Right.* I fake a laugh as my hand flutters to my chest. I look at my hand as if some alien life form has taken over my body and turned me into a swooning Southern belle. Is it actually *fluttering*?!

“Oh, that. Right. I get that a lot,” I say, dropping my voice into a slightly deeper register. It makes Jack look up, his expression saying he’s as confused by my voice as I am by my inexplicable hand fluttering. “How can I help you, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Actually, I need a favor. I know this is completely inappropriate, and I promise I will compensate you for your time. But I’m stranded in Hendersonville with a blown tire and no car jack to help me change it. I’m hoping you’re close enough to give me a hand?”

“Oh, I don’t know anything about changing tires.” Apparently, I am both a Southern belle and a complete idiot.

I can change a tire. I can change ALL my tires if I need to.

I didn’t always love being a military wife, but it did teach me how to get stuff done.

“Right. I don’t need you to *change* the tire, but if you have a jack I could borrow, that would be great.”

“A jack.” I sit down. Stand back up. Sit down again.

“Mommy?” Jack says.

“You know what?” Perry says, backpedaling. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t think I’ll have to wait too much longer for roadside assistance to show up.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” I practically shout into my phone. “I can bring you a jack!”

“What?” Jack says, dropping his cards. “You can bring me where?” He stands up. “Who are you talking to, Mommy?”

“Not *you*, Jack, *a* jack,” I whisper to him, shooing him back into his seat.

“What was that?” Perry said.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine,” I say. “You need a jack. I have a jack.”

“Great,” he says after a long pause. “Should I, um, text you my location?”

“Yep. Perfect. I’ll be right there.”

As soon as the call ends, I bluster around the apartment, picking up couch cushions and folding blankets. Jack, clearly sensing that something is up, jumps up beside me, gathering his cards and putting away his backpack.

Wait. *Wait*. I’m not bringing Perry back *here*. Which means I’m just being a dummy. Cleaning because I’m nervous about coming face to face with my boss.

My hand does that stupid fluttering thing again, landing on my hair, which—*ohhhh* my hair! I dash to the bathroom,



checking my reflection. It is ... not awful? It could be worse, anyway.

Then I remember Perry's comment from earlier. *You sound younger than your avatar*. Maybe it doesn't matter what my hair looks like. Perry is expecting a pearl-wearing, gray-haired grandma. Maybe the surprise of seeing me instead will negate any judgment he might make on my less-than-stellar messy bun and almost completely bare face.

"Mommy?" Jack says again. "Do we have to go somewhere?"

*Oh man*. WE do have to go somewhere. Because Jack goes everywhere I go.

Which means my boss is about to learn that I'm not a grandma *and* that I have a kid all at once.

I don't know how I'm supposed to do this.

Logically, I recognize I'm being silly. Assistants and bosses work together in person all the time. They know about each other's families. Kids. Spouses. Even pets. It's not *weird* to know personal details about the lives of the people you work with. And I've been hoping for opportunities to get to know Perry better.

But the concept felt easier behind a mask of anonymity that allowed me to be bold without feeling vulnerable. That little gray-haired avatar lulled me into a comfort I didn't recognize I was enjoying until now, when I'm faced with the mask's imminent removal.

Truth is, my reality requires that I be more cautious, more vigilant in vetting the people I let into my very small circle. I'm all Jack has to protect him. I can't just let anybody in.

But Marley did say the Hawthornes are good people. And so far, Perry has been nothing but polite. Cold. A little stiff. But perfectly professional and respectful.

"We do have to go somewhere," I say. "I have to go help my boss with a flat tire."

"I thought your boss lived in the computer."

I smile. “He lives one town over in Silver Creek. We stay connected on the computer. Come on. Go grab your shoes.”

I walk to the garage and double check that my SUV’s jack is where it’s supposed to be in the back. When I see it tucked securely into the side compartment, I slam the hatch closed and call Marley. Partly because she’s my mentor when it comes to this whole virtual assistant job, and partly because right now, she’s the closest thing I have to a friend.

Which ... is *sad*. I grew up in this town. I know tons of people, many who have been friends for years. But I still feel weird hanging out with people.

Most of my friends from high school are married now, or at least in serious, happy relationships. I’ve tried to hang out with them a few times, but nobody really knows how to talk to me about being a widow. It’s bad enough being the single friend. Being the single, widowed, *parent* friend is a can of worms most people don’t want to open at all.

“What’s up?” Marley asks when she answers. “Everything okay?”

“Um, yes, I think? Perry just called me. He’s stranded with a flat tire and needs me to come help.”

“Okay,” she says, her tone even. “Is that something you’re comfortable doing?”

“I mean, you vouched for him, right? He’s a decent guy?”

“I’ve never met him personally, but after meeting Olivia and talking to her about him specifically, I feel pretty good about saying yes. But Lila, this isn’t in your job description. You don’t have to do this if you don’t feel comfortable.”

“No, no, it’s not that. I mean, it’s weird and all. That I’m meeting him in person. But not because I feel uncomfortable. At least, not for the reasons you might think.”

“Why else would you feel uncomfortable?”

I scoff. “Have you ever seen a picture of the Hawthorne brothers?”

She chuckles. “I’ve heard stories, and of course I know what Flint looks like, but I’ve never looked up the rest of them.”

“I’ll save you the trouble. They are all equally gorgeous. Every. Single. One.”

“I’m still not seeing the problem here.”

I sigh. I’ve been dancing around the problem myself, trying to figure out why I feel so out of sorts because my boss happens to have an attractive face. All at once, the truth crystallizes in my mind, and I say it out loud before I can chicken out. “Marley, I noticed.”

“Noticed what, honey?”

“That he’s handsome. And I didn’t just notice. When I saw his picture, I felt something.”

“What, like attraction?”

I lean against the back of the car, my arms folded over my chest. “Yeah. A glimmer of it, maybe. I don’t think it means anything. But it’s not so much *him* that’s significant but the fact that I felt anything at all. That hasn’t happened since ...” My words trail off, and I shrug. “Since Trevor.”

“Oh, Lila. That’s a good thing then, right? It’s been long enough. It’s okay for you to feel something.”

“But doesn’t this go against your *strictly professional* rules?”

“Technically, you’re an independent contractor,” Marley says. “My rules are only tips and guidelines to help you achieve success. But beyond that, the happiness and well-being of my assistants will always be more important than anything else. I would never want you to turn away from something—or someone—who truly makes you happy because of work. Do you think what you’re feeling is significant? That the glimmer of attraction could turn into something more?”

“With him? Shoot, no. I don’t even know if he’s single. Even if he is, men like that do not notice women like me. I guess I just feel woken up, you know? And that surprises me.”

Jack comes into the garage, his shoes on and tied, and a surge of pride pulses in my chest. “Hey! Great job, kiddo.” I open up his car door, and he settles into his seat. “I’ll be right back, okay? I’m gonna go grab my bag.”

“Perry *is* single. Olivia mentioned something about a divorce a few years back when she was talking about him,” Marley says as I hurry back inside.

Divorced. Interesting. *No! Not interesting. Not. Interesting.*

“Also, that whole *women like me* business?” Marley continues. “That’s utter nonsense, just for the record.”

I won’t argue with her, because Marley is paying me a compliment, and my grandmamma taught me it’s tacky to toss a compliment back in someone’s face. Still, Marley has only seen me on video calls from the waist up. She’s never encountered my generous hips in person, and let me tell you, they are a force. Even before Jack, I’ve never been one of those willowy, wispy people with long, lean limbs. I’m more draft horse than racehorse, and I always have been. Farm stock. Built to last.

Not that I mind. I’m happy in my own skin. (Another gift my grandmamma gave me with the positive affirmations she made me repeat every night before bed.) I recognize the strength and function of my body and do my best (most of the time) to remember its purpose is far greater than just *looking hot*.

But I’m also a realist. Experience has taught me exactly what kind of man will pick a racehorse over a draft horse. When a man looks like Perry Hawthorne, there’s no question. He will pick a racehorse every time simply because he can. I’ve got nothing to worry about when it comes to that man. Not a single, solitary thing.

“Thank you,” I say to Marley. “And thanks for talking me through it.”

“Anytime. Trust your gut, Lila. You’ve got good instincts.”

I end the call and climb into the car with Jack. “Is your seatbelt buckled?”

“Yep!” he says, his feet swinging.

Despite his turtle-slow pace getting ready in the morning, he’s a pretty easy kid, something I’m grateful for every single day.

I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror as I face forward and slide my sunglasses over my face. I can’t shake the feeling that something big is about to happen.

But that’s stupid. This will probably be nothing. A benign encounter in which I hand my boss a jack and then go on my merry way. Even if he is divorced. And single. And gorgeous.

“And completely out of your league, Lila,” I say out loud. “Get a hold of yourself, woman.”

“Who’s out of your league?” Jack asks from the back seat. “What’s a league?”

“Don’t worry about it, baby. I’m just talking to myself.”

With a deep breath, I shift the car into reverse and back out of the garage.

Ready or not, here I come.

## CHAPTER SIX

Perry

IT'S BEEN TWENTY MINUTES since I hung up the phone with Lila, and I'm still doubting the wisdom of calling her. Lila sounded distracted when we spoke. Like there was a lot going on in the background, and she couldn't fully focus on what I was asking of her.

I really *didn't* want to impose. And I don't want to ruin the dynamic of the professional relationship we've built. But desperate times, and all that.

When a blue SUV pulls up behind me and a woman climbs out, I start doubting for an entirely different reason.

If that's Lila, she is ... *not old*.

She's also beautiful. Dark hair piled on top of her head. Freckled skin. Curves for days.

Something deep in my gut ignites, and I run a hand through my hair. I've dated since my divorce. Mostly to appease my siblings who, at this point, probably think I'm broken beyond repair. But this feeling—a sharp, visceral attraction—is new.

But right behind the attraction is a sense of frustration. It doesn't *really* matter that Lila doesn't look like her avatar. But I've had this picture of her in my head, this idea of exactly who is on the opposite side of my messages. I was comfortable

with my imagined version of Lila. But that version just got turned on its head.

If the woman is even Lila. Could she be a daughter, maybe? A neighbor? A friend?

I watch through the rearview mirror as the woman moves to her trunk, likely to pull out the jack she drove out here to give me. I grip the steering wheel a little tighter. This interaction would be so much easier if the avatar-version of Lila had shown up.

This version of her? Or whoever this woman is? I'm not prepared to talk to a woman who is both young and hot. If the past is any indication, odds are pretty good I'm going to say something ridiculous or embarrassing.

My brothers are good at this sort of thing. At small talk with beautiful women. And if I have Lennox or Brody as a wingman, ready to fill in the awkward silences and expand on my monosyllabic answers, I can usually get by. But on my own? I'm too stiff. Too formal. Too direct.

The problem is, I'm also *very* self-aware, so the entire time I'm trying to converse naturally, I fully sense how poorly I'm doing, which puts me in a bad mood. So then I'm not just awkward, I'm also grouchy.

It's honestly a wonder I ever managed to get together with Jocelyn. I think the only thing that saved me was the fact that we knew each other in high school.

But this is Lila. My apple-pun-wielding assistant. (Probably?) Not a woman I'm trying to charm or impress.

Even if I *did* have any idea of her relationship status, which I don't, she's my employee. I just need to treat this like I would any other business meeting. Like she's Preston Whitaker giving me a bushel of apples. Or Calista, Stonebrook's event manager, giving me an update on the weekend's schedule.

I can do this.

I *have* to do this.

And right now.

I might still be awkward, but not as awkward as things will be if I stay in my truck.

I take a stabilizing breath, then climb out.

The woman smiles as she approaches, jack in hand, sparking another flare of attraction in my gut. *That smile.* My eyes flit to her SUV because otherwise I'm going to stare at her, and that would just be weird.

"I guess you're Perry?" she says as she holds out the jack. "I'm Lila. Nice to finally meet you in person."

So she *is* Lila.

Her accent is clearly Southern, but it isn't twangy like you often find along the Appalachians. Instead, her words are soft around the edges, rolling into each other in an easy, unhurried way. She's wearing jeans and a T-shirt cinched up at the waist, accentuating the curves that are, for the record, highly distracting. I am not a man who needs a reminder to keep my eyes up, but this woman is the ultimate test, and it's taking all my willpower not to fail. I fasten my eyes to her sunglasses, but that hardly helps. Now I can't stop wondering what color her eyes are.

Lila's expression shifts to one of confusion, and she pulls the jack back toward her. "You *are* Perry, right? Would you rather I call you Mr. Hawthorne?"

"Right!" I say a little too loudly. "I'm Perry. You can call me Perry."

She eyes me warily. "Okay."

We stand there awkwardly for what feels like a solid minute before I finally blurt out, "You aren't old." I cringe at the harshness of my comment and immediately wish I could take it back. My frustration with Lila has everything to do with me and nothing to do with her.

She presses her lips together. "Sorry about that. The avatar ..." She scrunches up her nose in a way that's almost adorable enough to make me forget my irritation. She shrugs. "It



seemed like a good idea at the time?” She gives her answer like it’s a question, like she already *realizes* it isn’t a good explanation, but she’s hoping I’ll buy it anyway.

“It was a good idea to give me the wrong impression?”

She winces. “Yes? I mean, no. But ...” She looks back toward her SUV. “I wasn’t trying to give you the wrong impression. I actually changed the photo before you hired me, so it was more a general thing. To be fair, I didn’t really expect to ever meet in person.” Her hands move to her waist, where she props them on her hips in a way that shouldn’t be so enticing. “Does it matter that I’m not in my sixties?”

“Yes,” I say reflexively.

*Because you’re beautiful. And I noticed. And I’m feeling things I haven’t felt in years, and now, every time you message me an apple joke, it’s going to land differently.*

“No,” I quickly amend. “No. Of course not. I just don’t understand the point.”

She sighs. “It was Marley’s suggestion that I make my avatar something a little less personal.”

She pushes her sunglasses up onto her head, revealing eyes the same blue as the autumn sky above us. I didn’t think it was possible, but her eyes make her even more beautiful.

“My first virtual client was *forward*,” she says, her eyes shifting to the side. “Pointed in his very personal questions. It only took a week or so for him to be so blatant, I immediately quit, and Marley severed his relationship with her company. But the whole thing made me a little more leery. Using an older woman as an avatar seemed safer.” Her gaze turns back to her car one more time, where it stays long enough that I half-wonder if she’s going to make a break for it. But then she looks back at me, her expression surer than it was only seconds before. She takes a deep breath. “I have a son. And I’m a single mom. I have to protect myself, but more importantly, I have to protect him. The reality is, an old lady avatar makes that a little easier.”

The unfounded frustration simmering inside me immediately quiets. She has a kid? He's probably with her. That's why she keeps looking at her car. And she's single?

This point, which matters to me much more than it should, is quickly eclipsed by a sudden and intense desire to find whatever "first client" she had and punch him for crossing a line, for doing anything to make Lila—or any woman—feel unsafe.

"That client was a jerk," I say, almost without thinking.

She nods. "He was."

"I'm not a jerk."

She cocks an eyebrow and grins. "I wouldn't be here if I thought you were. Marley vouched for you. For your whole family, really."

I grunt an acknowledgement and reach for the jack. "Thank you for coming."

Lila hands it over, her fingers brushing mine as she does. I move toward the opposite side of my truck, pretending like I didn't just feel her touch in every cell of my body. "So, are the apple puns part of the old lady facade?"

"Nah. They're all me. I was trying to *branch out* and try something new."

I freeze. "Branch out, huh?"

Lila fights a smile. "I had to do something! It isn't really in my nature to be impersonal, even when using a fake avatar. And you've seemed so determined to keep our interactions as brief as possible," she says. "I was just trying to lighten the mood."

I frown, which makes Lila bite her lip, a flash of trepidation crossing her features. Those are my words she's tossing back at me. I *did* want our interactions to be as brief as possible. Because I didn't want to have a stupid assistant in the first place. But how am I supposed to respond? I don't feel the same way *now*. She's helped me too much for me not to acknowledge her value.

I suppose I could just say that. But I'm not sure I trust myself to keep it professional because right now, I'm appreciating a lot more than just her work ethic, which is way more than she needs to know. Especially considering what she just told me about her first client.

Lila clears her throat when I don't respond. "But brief interactions are completely justified," she adds, likely assuming my displeasure based on my silence and my scowl.

Olivia has told me I need to work on my resting face, or I'll never meet another woman. *You look like you want to punch everyone*, she always says. *Just smile every once in a while!*

Lila takes a step backward, away from where I'm crouching beside my tire, loosening the lug nuts. "It's your right to set whatever boundary you're comfortable with, and I'll respect it. And of course, I'll stop the apple puns if they bother you."

This is not going well. I sink back onto my heels and look up, running a hand through my hair. "That's not it. I don't ... I don't mind them," I grumble.

Lila hovers behind me, her uncertainty clear from her body language. "Okay."

We're silent for a beat before a voice sounds from Lila's SUV. "Mommy? How much longer?"

She glances over her shoulder. "A few more minutes, okay? You're doing great, kiddo. You can grab my phone out of the front if you want to play a couple of games while you wait."

"How old is he?" I say on an impulse. "Would he want to help?"

I have no idea what possesses me to ask. Maybe just that it's the kind of thing my dad did when I was a kid. If there was work to be done, we helped. In hindsight, I realize how much more complicated we probably made things, but I'll never regret the learning I did beside my father.

A thousand thoughts flit across Lila's expression before she finally nods. "Um. He's five. And I'm sure he'd love to help. But I'm just warning you. He'll talk the entire time."

“Okay,” I say simply. I don’t have a ton of experience with kids. But I do okay when schools come out for education tours of the farm. I’ll even volunteer to lead the tours. Sometimes, kids are easier to talk to than adults.

Lila bites her lip, a gesture I’ve noticed twice now and liked both times, but then her shoulders drop, and she turns back to her SUV. A minute later, a little boy with dark brown hair and wide brown eyes is standing beside me.

“Jack, this is Mr. Hawthorne. Can you say hello?”

“Hi, Mr. Hawthorne,” the little boy says.

“Hi, Jack. You want to help? I could really use a little more muscle getting this tire changed.”

He nods, a smile creeping onto his face. “I’ve got pretty good muscles.” He curls his arms up to flex his biceps, and I grin.

“Whoa. You aren’t lying. All right. Stand back there beside your mom while I jack the truck up, then you can help me get the lug nuts off.”

Jack nods as Lila slips a protective arm over his shoulders and pulls him close to her. I quickly position the jack and slowly crank it up, double and triple checking it’s secure.

“Okay.” I pick up the lug wrench, guessing that since the lug nuts are already loosened, it won’t be too tough for Jack to twist them off. “Just like this, all right?” I show him the movement, but he stops me, reaching for the wrench.

“I know how to do it,” he says. “Mommy taught me when we changed her tire.”

My eyes immediately jump to Lila. I lift an eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t know anything about changing tires?”

Her cheeks flush the slightest bit, but otherwise, she seems unfazed by my question. She shrugs. “You put me on the spot.”

Her confidence only strengthens her appeal. I can maybe understand the allure of a “damsel in distress.” Playing the

hero. Riding in to save the day. But I'll take a strong, capable woman over a damsel in distress any day of the week.

Jack finally twists the first lug nut all the way off, and it drops into my waiting palm. "Great job. Want to do the next one?"

He nods, his face determined, and moves to the next lug nut. This one needs a little more muscle, so we work together, holding the lug wrench until the nut is loose enough for him to twist it off by hand.

"Mommy explained what a jack was on the drive over," he says as he works. "I was confused because when she said she needed to bring you a jack, I thought she was talking about me."

"That makes sense."

"How much do you think your truck weighs?"

My eyebrows go up. "I don't know. A few thousand pounds, probably."

"Is that too much for you to lift with your muscles?"

I take the lug wrench and position it over the next nut. "Yep. A little too much."

"What about the tire? Could you lift the tire?"

I look up and make eye contact with Lila whose expression clearly reads *I told you so*. "I could lift the tire," I say.

"Could I?" Jack asks.

"When you're my age, I bet you can."

He purses his lips like he needs to catalog the information. "How old is your age?"

"Jack. Come on," Lila says softly. "You're asking so many questions, Mr. Hawthorne can't get his tire changed."

I wink at Jack and motion toward the lug wrench with a tilt of my head.

He grips it in his hands and twists, letting out a little grunt that nearly makes me laugh. "Just turned thirty-three," I say as

I catch the third lug nut.

“Thirty-three?! You’re even older than my mom. You’re maybe as old as my grandpa.”

“Not quite,” Lila says, correcting him. “And he’s barely older than me, kiddo. Just four years.”

“Four years is forever,” Jack says matter-of-factly.

The questions don’t let up until the tire is fully replaced and the truck is back on solid ground.

Why do I drive a truck instead of a car? Is that the name of my work on the side of the truck? Do we grow apples? Is that why there’s an apple tree next to the name? Am I a dad? Do I have a wife? Do I have any brothers or sisters? Or a dog? Or a cat? Or a horse since I live on a farm, and horses can live on farms?

I do my best to answer with a straight face, but by the time I’m handing the jack back to Lila, I’ve been holding in the laughter so long, I’m ready to burst.

“Okay, little man. Back into the car with you. We’ve got to let Mr. Hawthorne get back to Stonebrook Farm.”

Jack looks up. “Is that far away from here?”

I shake my head. “Just a few miles down the road. About twenty minutes.”

“One *Paw Patrol* long?” he asks.

Lila smiles. “About that long.”

“Speaking of Stonebrook,” I say, before I can stop myself. The idea of inviting Lila out to the farm popped into my head a few minutes ago, growing more and more insistent the closer we got to finishing the tire. I have no idea what I’ll do if she agrees. But some part of me wants to see her again. I’m not really sure I’m ready to admit what that might mean, but I’m also not willing to let her drive away and disappear behind her old lady avatar. “If I were to, uh ... that is, if I had some things I needed you to do at the farm, in person, would you be willing to come out some time?”

I clear my throat, hoping it doesn't sound like I'm asking her on a date. Though, maybe that would have been a better idea. I have no actual clue what kind of work I'll have Lila do in person. If she even agrees to come.

Except, *I can't* ask her on a date. She just told me about a too-forward boss and how uncomfortable he made her. I can't be that guy.

"I suppose I could," Lila says. "If it's during Jack's school hours."

A thrill of victory shoots through me. She said yes. The feeling is followed swiftly by a wave of trepidation. Because *she said yes*.

I nod. "Great. Good. I'll keep you posted."

Jack tugs on Lila's sleeve. "Could I come too?"

"You'll be in school, baby. But we can go to the harvest festival at the farm next month. You loved it the last time we went."

Jack nods, even as he tugs on her arm, pulling her down until she's crouching beside him. He whispers something into her ear, but his whisper is hardly a whisper. "Can I ask him if he wants to be my staidad?"

"Staidad." Lila corrects him so quickly, it's clear they've had this conversation before.

She shoots me an apologetic look even as my heart drops into my stomach. The thought is ridiculous. Outlandish. And yet. Something in the back of my heart flickers. It's tiny. So tiny. Tiny enough that I know better than to think it means anything.

Lila pushes her sunglasses onto her head and squares Jack so she's facing him head on, one hand on either of his shoulders. "I know this is really important to you, Jack. But that's a question only grown-ups get to ask each other, okay?"

He shrugs away from her, his tiny hands balling into fists. "But he said he doesn't have any kids. Or a wife. Or even a pet. And I helped him, and he said I had good muscles and ..."

Tears are hovering in Jack's eyes now, and my heart nearly breaks for the kid, despite the awkwardness of the conversation. I don't know the whole story, but I can guess. Jack doesn't have a dad around, and he clearly wishes he did.

Jack's lip quivers, and he takes a shuddering breath. "I think he would like me if he got to know me."

Now tears are pooling in *Lila's* eyes. I turn and move a few paces away to give them some privacy, though I'm not so far that I can't hear her response.

I watch out of the corner of my eye as she runs a hand over his hair. "Oh, Jackson. Of course he would like you. I bet he already does. But Mr. Hawthorne couldn't be *just* your stepdad. He'd have to be my husband, too. Do you understand? We would have to get married. And people only get married when they've fallen in love."

He studies me for a long moment. "Is that what Chloe's dad did?"

"I'm sure it is. He met someone, they spent some time together, they fell in love, and then they got married. That all happened before she became Chloe's stepmom."

Jack sniffs. "Do you think if you spend time with Mr. Hawthorne, he'll love you?"

The same attraction that's been spiking every time Lila looks my way roars through me when Jack mentions love. If love were based on physical attraction alone, I'd say odds were pretty good of me falling for Lila. But I know better. Real love is so much more than attraction, and I'm in no position to have any opinions when it comes to this particular conversation.

"Honey, Mr. Hawthorne is my boss. And falling in love—it isn't really something you can plan. It just happens. Now listen, I promise we'll figure something out for the father-son breakfast, but I need you to let this go, okay?"

*Ah.* At least now I'm starting to understand Jack's motives. Honestly, I'm impressed with how Lila has handled the entire thing. She has every right to feel embarrassed, given that this



is our first encounter, and her kid is trying to play matchmaker. But if she *does* feel that way, she isn't letting it preempt what she's saying to Jack. She isn't dismissing him, silencing him. She's down on his level, listening, reassuring, explaining in a way he can understand.

Jack's eyes dart to me before he gives his mom a slow nod. "Okay."

She scoops him up into a hug, lifting him off the ground and swinging his legs back and forth until he starts to giggle. She finally lowers him back to the ground but keeps hold of his hand. "Can you say goodbye to Mr. Hawthorne?"

"Goodbye, Mr. Hawthorne," Jack says without looking up.

"Thanks for your help, kiddo."

Lila ushers him back to the car, then returns to pick up the jack she discarded to answer her son's question. "I'm so sorry about that," she says, avoiding eye contact. "He's got this father-son breakfast thing at school, and it's making him hyper-aware of his fatherless state. But to ask that was so totally inappropriate, and I really need you to know that I didn't put him up to it. Or even talk about the possibility. That was all him."

"I assumed it was. Don't worry about it. I'm flattered, actually. That he would consider me a worthy option."

She nods, eyeing me like my response has surprised her. "Even so, I'm not sure I've ever been so mortified."

"You played it off well," I say. "Jack's dad isn't ... around anymore?" I don't know what makes me ask the question, but I can't regret it because I really want to know.

Lila's hand falls to her side. "He died a few years back. It's just me and Jack now."

"Oh. I'm so sorry. I'm divorced." I close my eyes and wince. "It's not the same thing. I don't mean to make it seem like it's the same thing."

It occurs to me that blurting out my relationship status has everything to do with me wanting her to know I'm single. It's

a weird sensation. I haven't wanted *anyone* to know I'm single in a very long time. "I'm sorry," I say again. "I'm really bad at this."

Her eyebrows goes up. "At what?"

"At talking."

She smiles, and a pulse of desire fills my chest.

"It's okay," she says. "I wouldn't wish what we've been through on anyone, but I imagine a divorce isn't exactly a picnic."

I can't stop the scoff that pushes its way up. "Yeah. That's —" I push my hands into my pockets, unable to finish my sentence. My divorce was awful. Gutting both emotionally and financially. But to lose a spouse? The two don't even belong in the same category. "I should get back to work."

Lila nods. "Of course. We've got a date with *Paw Patrol* anyway."

I narrow my gaze and frown. "With *who*?"

"It's a television show. Jack's favorite, and they just released a movie that he's really excited to see." She cocks her head to the side. "No kids for you?"

"Ah. No. Didn't make it that far."

"Hmm. I wondered. You were so good with Jack."

Warmth spreads across my chest. "He's a good kid."

She smiles, love so evident in her expression, it sends a swell of sharp longing right to my heart. Not for her specifically. Just for *anyone*. For family.

"Enjoy your weekend, Mr. Hawthorne."

"Perry," I tell her again. "Please. Let's stick with Perry."

She nods. "All right. Goodbye, Perry."

I lean against the tailgate of my truck, watching until she pulls onto the road. She lifts her hand in a wave, and I return the gesture, my eyes on her until she disappears around the bend.

Back in the driver's seat, I pull out my phone and stare at the black screen, emotions swirling through me. I should have said thank you one more time. I should have let her know how much I appreciated her taking the time to drive out and help, how much I appreciate everything she's done the past couple of weeks.

But everything that happened with Jack, with the tears and the earnestness of his desire, with the thoughts and feelings it stirred up, I wasn't thinking when she left.

Now she's gone, and all I can think about are the things I didn't but should have said.

I wish I were better at this. At ... peopling. At not making everyone around me feel uncomfortable. Except I'm not worried about everyone right now. I'm worried about Lila.

The question is, why? Why does it matter so much?

I'm attracted to Lila. I'm not stubborn enough to deny that much. But the reasons for not pursuing a relationship with her are numerous.

She's my assistant, for one, and a good one. I don't want to do anything to screw that up.

She's also got a kid *and* a dead husband, and though it might make me cruel to say it, after my divorce, I'd rather avoid relationships that come with that kind of prepackaged drama. I *like* kids. But liking them and wanting one right out of the gate are different things.

So this feeling—it can't be about that. About anything personal.

But as her boss?

I *do* want her to feel comfortable working for me.

And I don't want her to think her boss is creepy or weird.

I crank my truck, liking where I've landed.

It's natural for me to be concerned about what she thinks and how she feels. That makes me good at my job.

That's all this is.

I'm her boss. She's my assistant.

End of discussion.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a little voice laughs.  
*That's all this is ... for now.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Perry

IRUN MY FINGERS through my hair a few times and roll my shoulders. This shouldn't be that difficult. It's just a picture. I just need to take it, post it, and be done.

I hold up my phone, force out a breath, and take the picture.

Annnnd I look like an ax murderer. Why are my eyebrows furrowed? And why do I look so angry?

“So I need to smile,” I say out loud.

I pose again, this time smiling in a way that makes me look like I'm smelling bad cheese.

I drop my phone onto my desk with a sigh and press my face into my hands. No smiling. I just have to make a serious look work. That can be attractive too, right? Broodiness? Not that I necessarily want to look attractive. This is for work. It's better that I look professional. Not smiling should be just fine.

I open up the camera app on my phone and flip it around to face me. Maybe with one hand on my beard, if I turn sideways and look back ...

“What on earth are you doing?”

I jump when my brother's voice sounds from my office door, and my phone goes flying, clattering to the wood floor beside my desk.

Lennox reaches it before I do and wastes no time pulling up my photo gallery. “Oh, man,” he says with a chuckle. “These are so good.”

“Shut up.”

“Why do you look like you’re smelling something?”

“Maybe I was. You were on your way here.”

Lennox drops onto the chair opposite my desk. He’s wearing casual clothes—jeans and a Red Renegade band T-shirt—and I realize how long it’s been since I’ve seen him in anything but his chef’s coat.

“You aren’t working today?”

He shakes his head, but his eyes don’t lift from my phone. “Gave the staff the day off. They’ve been working hard. They deserve a break.”

“Have you hired everyone you need?” The restaurant opening has been delayed twice now—mostly because Lennox is such a perfectionist—but the plan now is to be ready for a soft opening the weekend before the harvest festival.

“I’m interviewing pastry chefs tomorrow,” he says with an ease I’ve always envied. Lennox *is* a perfectionist, but he isn’t a *stressed* perfectionist. He’s very good at rolling with hiccups and setbacks, adjusting his schedule accordingly. Though I’m sure it helps that he’s got Stonebrook’s working capital backing his efforts, so his open deadline isn’t exactly do or die. I’ve told him if he doesn’t open by Christmas, he has to work the first three months for free to help offset the cost of paying his ever-growing staff when the restaurant has yet to generate any income.

“Relax. The restaurant will open by festival time,” he says, as if sensing the thoughts running through my brain. “It’s going to be fine.”

I lean into my chair. It will be fine. Olivia and Lennox have worked hard on the restaurant opening, and I trust them. They’re good at this. They’ve thought of everything. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a near-constant doomsday narrative

humming at the back of my brain. If there is any possible way to fail, my brain will think it up.

As long as I don't think myself into panic attacks, it's actually a pretty useful skill.

You need someone to preemptively troubleshoot your idea? Tell you all the ways it might possibly fail? I'm your guy. It's why my consulting firm did so well, back before Jocelyn cleaned me out, and I came back home to run the farm. I don't have problems shooting holes in things, though Olivia insists I could at least do it with a little more optimism and a little less glee. Pointing out someone's weaknesses is one thing. Projecting their imminent failure is another thing altogether.

"What about you? Is everything with the festival okay?"

I swallow the list of things that could still possibly (but probably won't) go wrong and nod. "For the most part. There's still a lot to do."

"What about taking bad selfies? Is that on your to-do list too?"

I drop my phone onto the desktop in front of me, suddenly too tired to be defensive. "Were they really that bad?"

"I mean, maybe depending on who you're trying to impress." His eyes narrow. "Who *are* you trying to impress?"

"No one."

"Liar. Try again."

I shift in my chair. "It's nothing. It's the software I use to communicate with my virtual assistant. There's a place for a profile picture, and I never put one up."

He nods his head, his expression inscrutable. "Your virtual assistant, huh?"

I turn to my computer and pull up my email. If I look busy, maybe Lennox will leave me alone.

"You met her, right? She's the one who helped you with your flat tire?"

"Thanks to you," I mumble. "Did you put my jack back?"

“Stop changing the subject. What does she look like?”

“Who?”

He rolls his eyes. “Your assistant. Don’t play dumb on purpose.”

I shrug. “She looks like a woman.”

He heaves out an exasperated sigh. “Young? Old?” He pauses. “Beautiful?”

My eyes lift to his, and he grins.

“So she is beautiful.”

“That isn’t what this is about.”

He chuckles. “Right. I’m sure it isn’t.”

“I just want things to feel a little more personal,” I argue, though I don’t sound very convincing. “It was nice of her to come out and help. I haven’t exactly been kind to her so far, and I’m trying to do better. I don’t want to lose her. She’s very good at her job.”

“All very respectable reasons for wanting to update your profile picture. I still don’t believe you.”

I breathe out a sigh. “Please don’t make this something it isn’t.”

“Okay. I won’t. But if you start to date her, I’m going to say I told you so.”

“I’m not going to date her. She has a kid.”

“So you *have* thought about it. Also, a kid is not a reason not to date someone.”

“She’s widowed.”

“Also not a disqualifier.”

“Maybe not generally, but for me? I don’t need complicated, Lennox. You know that.”

He studies me. “I hate to break it to you, man. But *life* is complicated. You avoid complicated, you might as well hang up the idea of dating altogether.”



“I’m not thinking about dating Lila. Can you please let this go?”

“Only if you admit that seeing her impacted your desire to add a profile picture.”

I eye him, hating his smirk. Mostly because I don’t want him to be right, and I’m afraid he is.

“I’m not saying I want to date her,” I grind out. “But seeing her *might* have influenced my desire to upload my picture.”

Lennox’s voice shifts, like he’s talking to one of those tiny yappy dogs people carry around in their purses instead of his older brother. “Cause you’ve got such a pretty face, Perry. Yes you do.”

“Stop it. She’s already seen what I look like. That’s not—I just want things to feel a little more personal.”

“I’m just saying. If you *did* want to date her, objectively, having your picture in your profile to remind her of your prettiness isn’t going to hurt. You’re prettier than all of us. Except maybe Flint, but he has a whole team of people to make him pretty.”

“Whatever. We all know Brody’s boyish charm wins.”

Lennox purses his lips as if considering. “True. It was probably better for all of us that he fell in love so young. Taking himself out of the game might be the only thing that made it possible for the rest of us to ever get a date.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah. You really struggle, Len.”

He flashes a smile. If Lennox has a superpower, aside from his abilities as a chef, it’s his confidence. Though I expect the confidence helps with the cooking, too. He’s never afraid to take a risk.

“Come on.” He reaches for my phone. “Let’s take a picture. I’ll help.”

“No. I can’t do it with you here. I’ll feel like an idiot.”

“When have you ever cared about looking like an idiot in front of me? Come on. You either let me help you, or I’m

calling Liv and telling her what you're doing." He holds the phone up to my face to unlock the screen, jumping back when I try and wrench it out of his hands.

He stands and backs away from my desk, grinning. "Okay," he says, holding my phone up like he's some hotshot photographer. "Maybe try swiveling your chair around so the mountains are visible through the window behind you. And like, lean forward, maybe? Your weight resting on your elbow?"

Somewhere deep in my gut, I feel like I'm going to regret this, but I also really want a good picture to post. "Like this?" I twist my body and lean onto my arm.

"If you want her to think you're a used car salesman, sure. Give us a thumbs up and a cheesy grin, and you're all set."

I let out a frustrated breath. "Then what? I did exactly what you told me to do."

Lennox sits back down in the chair across from me and mimics my stance. "*This* is what you're doing. You're stiff and awkward. Just relax." He loosens his shoulders and gives his arms a shake. "Make it more like *this*."

That *does* look better. I shift my body so I'm sitting exactly like Lennox.

"Yes! Better," Lennox says, jumping up. "Now, don't move. Except, maybe tilt your head down a little? And put your hand on your jaw like you're thinking."

"Should I smile? Olivia tells me I don't smile enough."

"Can you smile without the weird expression?"

"I don't know. Does my smile always look like that?"

"You never smile, so how would I know?"

"Never? I'm not that bad."

"You are that bad. The line between your brows says so. But yes. Let's try a smile."

I reach up and touch my forehead, frowning even deeper when I feel the deep crease between my eyebrows. I stretch

my forehead and try for an easy smile, but it feels so forced, I don't hold it for long. "This is stupid. There's no way I don't look stupid right now."

"You don't look stupid. Think of the moment when Lila first showed up to help you. What did you think when she got out of her car?"

My mind goes back to that moment, to the surprise I felt over her *not* being a little old lady. Then the moment shifts to when she first lifted her sunglasses, revealing the deep blue of her eyes. She has visible freckles, which I like, and a wide, friendly smile.

"Oh man," Lennox says, lowering the phone. "You like her."

I shake myself and relax my pose. "I do not. I hardly know her."

Lennox cocks his head. "You've been working with her for what, two weeks now? Three?"

"Almost three. But it's not the same thing. I've only seen her in person once."

Lennox sets the phone on my desk and slides it toward me. "All I'm saying is I haven't seen *that* expression on your face in a very long time."

I look at the picture Lennox just took. My expression is—I don't know what it is. I'm not quite smiling, but I still look happy. Or content, maybe?

"Post it," Lennox says. "You look hot. She'll eat it up."

"That's not the point."

I look at the picture one more time. It isn't half-bad. Good enough that I probably *will* post it. But not with Lennox watching.

"I didn't even ask what you were doing here," I say.

Lennox breathes out a sigh. "Just came to see what you were doing. You want to get food later?"

"You really don't know how to spend a day off, do you?"

“You’re one to talk. What do you say? Lunch? Dinner? I’ll take anything. I’m boooooored, Perry.”

“Fine. Dinner. Now go and let me work.”

It takes five more minutes to boot my brother from the room, which is honestly weird. Lennox has never struggled to entertain himself before, though to be fair, he lived in Charlotte for a long time, a city that has a lot more to do than Silver Creek. If you’re willing to climb the mountain, Hendersonville isn’t that far away, and Asheville is just beyond that, but here in town? There’s only a handful of restaurants, and a pretty much nonexistent social scene. Especially if you’re single.

A particular struggle for Lennox. He’s chronically and intentionally single, but he’s a master at playing the field. When he first moved back, he was always driving up to Asheville, dragging Brody and me—at least until Brody married Kate—along. But he hasn’t done that in weeks. Maybe longer?

I don’t have time to puzzle out what’s going on with my brother. Not right now. But that doesn’t mean I won’t ask him about it later. Especially if Brody comes to dinner too. He’ll have a harder time deflecting questions from both of us.

A notification on my phone alerts me to a new message from Lila, and a wave of anticipation washes over me. Which is stupid. It’s a message from my virtual assistant. *Calm down, Perry.*

Before I read the message, I take Lennox’s advice and post the new photo to my profile. When I pull up my messages with Lila, the tiny circle next to my messages has already updated with the new picture.

A sense of vulnerability tightens my gut. Lila was probably staring at the chat thread when the photo updated. Should I say something?

I should say something.

But what could I possibly say that wouldn’t look like I want her to notice the picture? Even though I really want her to

notice the picture.

Better to say nothing at all. Maybe she won't notice. Maybe she ... *oh man*.

In the seconds I've been staring at the screen, completely ignoring her last message because I've been obsessing over my stupid profile picture, *her* profile picture updated.

To a real picture.

Her hair is down and loose around her shoulders. She's looking directly at the camera, a knowing smile on her lips, and she is ... stunning.

My phone chimes with another notification, and a second message pops up under Lila's first.

**Lila:** Hey look. We're real people after all. ;)

I shouldn't be so excited about her message.

I rub a hand across my face.

I'm *very* excited about her message.

At least Lennox already left, so he can't see how much this is affecting me.

My fingers hover over the keyboard, and I clear my throat. I'm just going to keep it professional. Businesslike.

**Perry:** What does your day look like tomorrow? I have a pretty big project I could use your help with, but it would require you to come out to the farm.

It isn't a lie. I need to update last year's festival layout to reflect the vendors, food trucks, and attractions we're hosting this year. I probably *could* do it by myself, but it will be easier with her here in person to help me.

At least that's what I'm telling myself.

It takes over a minute for Lila to respond, which doesn't sound like a lot of time, but trust me, when you're living it, watching those dancing dots appear and disappear and reappear, a minute is eternal.

When her response finally comes through, I breathe out a sigh of relief.

**Lila:** Okay. I can do that.

**Lila:** This is going to sound like a dumb question, but what should I wear? Business attire?

I smile at her question. I don't know her all that well, and yet it still feels very Lila.

**Perry:** Come in whatever you're comfortable in. But it's a farm, and we'll be outside. Don't dress up on my account.

**Lila:** Noted. Just a reminder, I'll need to leave by two to get home in time to meet Jack's bus.

**Perry:** No problem.

**Lila:** In the meantime, did you see my earlier message? Sorry to be pushy. Just want to make sure you don't miss pertinent info.

I scroll back up to her initial message. It reads:

**Lila:** I've emailed over a list of diesel mechanics who do onsite repairs. Also, I got a second email about your high school reunion. Are you sure you don't want me to respond?

I pull up the email and look over the list of mechanics. We've been using the same garage in Silver Creek to service our work trucks and farm equipment for years, but the owner recently retired, and we haven't found a decent replacement yet. I was planning on researching myself, but the fact that Lila has already narrowed the list to the mechanics willing to come to us? It's like she knows what I need before *I* know what I need.

But the reunion email. I have no idea how to handle that one. Why does Jocelyn keep emailing? I mean, probably because I haven't responded. But I kinda feel like my lack of response should be a big enough clue. I don't want to go. End of discussion.

It doesn't help matters that Lila is the one getting the emails. Though, if I had just responded to Jocelyn's first message, I could have kept all of this from happening. It probably means

something that I'd rather Lila *see* the drama than endure the drama of opening up a line of communication with Jocelyn again.

**Perry:** Thanks for the list of mechanics. And yes. Respond about the reunion. Tell her I appreciate her invitation, but I have no desire to go.

**Lila:** Got it. But ... really? You have no desire to go? There isn't anyone you'd like to see?

A weight settles in my gut, a familiar discomfort creeping over me.

There are people who will be at the reunion who I would like to see. But not half as much as I don't want to see my ex-wife. No old friendship is worth the kind of drama Jocelyn is capable of. You'd think, since she's the one who left me, that she'd be willing to leave things alone. Let bygones be bygones and all that. But as burned as our divorce left me, I sometimes wonder if she's the one having a harder time moving on. She's no longer with the guy she left me for—big surprise there—and that's part of why I'm so uncomfortable with the idea of going. Why does she want me there? What is she trying to prove?

On the other hand, I have to wonder if she's actually trying for the opposite. If her goading is her way of scaring me away, of making sure I don't come. It could honestly go either way with her. With the way she's changed over the last ten years, morphing into a woman I hardly recognize, there's no telling what her motives are.

Either way, I don't need to know enough to endure the drama just to find out. I'd rather avoid the complication altogether.

**Perry:** Just respond, Lila. Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Lila

AFTER MY ENCOUNTER WITH Perry, I could have written a manual on how to scare off a man.

*Step one: Tell him you're a widow. Step two: Let him know you have a child who requires constant care and attention. Step three: Have that child announce you're in the market for a husband ASAP. For bonus points, have the child start calling him DADDY immediately.*

I won't lie and say watching the two of them together didn't make me think of the possibility. The man is handsome enough to make my toes tingle. And watching him change a tire while keeping my little boy engaged and entertained? A solid ten out of ten, would highly recommend. Add in the soft flannel he was wearing (Fine. I didn't actually touch it, but it *looked* soft.), those deep brown eyes, and the close-cropped beard that lines his jaw, and I could have watched him all afternoon. Pulled up a chair with a mug of coffee and watched like I was attending my own personal drive-in movie. Movie title: *The Hottest Hawthorne Brother*.

I mean, I can't be certain. He's the only one I've ever seen in person. I just can't imagine *anyone*, celebrity or not, being hotter than Perry.

But acknowledging that my boss is objectively attractive and believing anything could possibly happen between us are



two very different things. And I am nothing if not a realist. I mean, *yes*, he did ask if I would be interested in coming out to the farm. Adorably, in fact, in a way that almost seemed like he was asking me on a date. But that was before Jack showed his hand. He's in it to win himself a daddy, come what may.

For three whole days, I refused to let myself dwell on any *possibilities* or *fantasies* regarding my boss. The man is a *Hawthorne*. I know better than to set myself up for that kind of disappointment.

But then Perry messaged me at the end of work today and asked me to come out to the farm tomorrow.

Even after Jack practically proposed on my behalf.

Even after learning about my widowed status.

Even after seeing me in person. *All of me*. Hips and all.

It could just be a work thing. (It's probably just a work thing.)

But something in my gut tells me it might be more. (Maybe that's just indigestion?)

Something in my gut and *maybe* the fact that he added an actual photo to his profile?

I may or may not have spent more than a few minutes staring at the updated picture, because good grief, who wouldn't? But that's not the point. The point is, he added one.

But why? Why now? Was it because he met me in person and decided I was normal enough to trust me with his face? Or could it be because he *wants* me to see his face whenever we communicate?

As soon as the change came through, I felt guilty for leaving my old lady avatar up, so I changed mine too. It's an older picture, taken a year or so ago, but my hair is amazing in it, and I still look enough like that version of myself that I felt okay about using it. It looks more like me than a gray-haired lady in pearls anyway.

Whether it was or wasn't on purpose, whether I'm spinning all of this into something it actually isn't, I one hundred

percent did *not* expect him to follow through with the invitation, and now that he has, I'm a little bit of a mess.

First, what am I supposed to wear to work that is comfortable, cute, and farm appropriate? And yes, the cute part is absolutely essential. Because Perry didn't say he had a project for *me*. He said he had a project for us to work on *together*.

I'm more excited about this than I should be. But honestly, who am I kidding? It's not like I didn't see this coming. I saw Perry's photo. I felt the reaction. Then I met him in person, and he was everything I expected him to be.

Serious. Unsmiling. Generally grumpy, but not in a way that's off-putting. He just doesn't seem like a lean-his-elbow-on-the-truck-and-talk-all-night kind of guy.

But he was also kind. Especially when Jack was talking his ear off, though that part maybe did surprise me a little. Jack can be trying even for the people who love him most in the world. Perry was basically a stranger, and he took it all in stride, listening, demonstrating *so much* patience. He even smiled a few times—small ones—but they seemed genuine. (They also made me very anxious to see a real, full smile from the man, though it might be the end of me if I ever do.)

The point is, Perry intrigues me. Interests me. And despite the fear of rejection roiling in my gut, I want to show up looking my best.

Jeans? Jeans and boots? Flannel? Hair in pigtails and a straw hat?

Okay, that last one is probably too much. But SHEESH this is a stressful decision.

I settle on jeans and a flannel, cinched up and tied in a knot around my waist, and my plaid duck boots. They're comfortable enough that I'll be fine wearing them all day and they'll work no matter where on the farm we wind up. At least I hope they will. I don't have a ton of experience as an actual farmhand, though surely manual labor isn't what Perry has in mind.

I'm only slightly alarmed that if manual labor *is* what Perry asks me to do, I'll probably say yes. Assuming he'll be laboring beside me.

I drop Jack off the next morning (on time!) before making my way down the mountains to Silver Creek. I'm dressed to impress and possibly muck out goat stalls. Not exactly an easy balance, but I think I'm pulling it off?

The entire drive down to the farm, I work through everything I know about Perry's upcoming high school reunion. Not because I need to, just because I'm really curious. I responded to the email just like Perry asked. Without any puns or even a tiny bit of snark and immediately received a reply which made me wish I *had* been snarky.

The woman sending the emails—whoever she is—was more than a little snippy, going off on how “just like Perry” it was that he would have his assistant reply without dignifying her with a personal response. I hit reply and was halfway through typing a reply about how Perry was too busy hanging out with his super-hot assistant to give her a passing thought, but I finally came to my senses before actually hitting *send*.

She has to be an ex-girlfriend of some kind. But fifteen years later, she's still bitter enough to be this snotty? I think of the woman's initials in the first email. *JH*. Could the H stand for Hawthorne? Maybe the reunion lady is Perry's ex-wife? Regardless, I can't decide if it's in Perry's best interest for me to show him her reply or not. He isn't going to the reunion. It's over and done.

But that doesn't make me any less itchy to know the full story.

I'm ten minutes away from Silver Creek when it occurs to me that I'm alone in my car. Since I work from home, and it's only Jack and me, I'm almost never alone in my car. And everyone knows the car is one of the very best places to sing at the top of your lungs.

Before Jack, or before Trevor, really, I took just about every opportunity I could to sing in the car. Or in the shower. Or the

kitchen, or anywhere, really. There wasn't much that filled me up like music did.

I know that part of me still exists somewhere down deep, but it's been hard to find it lately. I haven't played the piano or sung anything real in years. Not since Trevor sold my piano.

A shot of pain slices through me, and I press my lips together.

I'm fine.

I weathered a storm, and now I'm standing on the other side of it.

I'm *singing* on the other side of it.

I crank up the music, *P!nk*, because *of course*, and sing like my life depends on it. And *oh*, it feels good. So good. I don't stop until I reach Silver Creek. I'm out of breath, and my cheeks are flushed when I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror, but I haven't felt this good, this much like myself, in longer than I can remember. An image of Perry pops into my mind. I'm not sure what it means that when I'm feeling this good, it's him I think about. Maybe it's that he feels like possibility, and for the first time in a long time, possibility doesn't feel so scary.

I wind my way through the tiny town until I reach the long drive that leads into Stonebrook Farm. The peace I felt moments ago immediately melts into nerves, and I grip the steering wheel a little tighter.

I can do this. I'm *ready* to do this.

I've never been on the property when it hasn't been filled with vendors and food trucks for the harvest festival. I always thought it was a pretty place then, but it's even more gorgeous without all the clutter.

Rolling pastures on either side of the tree-lined drive, surrounded by forests ablaze with fall color. White picket fences, and of course the massive farmhouse sitting up on the hill. I round the bend and pass the entrance to the restaurant opening next month. The exterior is stunning. Exposed beams,

fancy rock work, and a modern metal sign over the door that reads *Hawthorne*.

So far, the work I've done for Perry hasn't had much to do with the restaurant, but he did ask me to proofread the final menu, and oh my word, I was near starving by the time I got to the end of it. I know Perry's nervous, but there's no way this restaurant isn't going to succeed. People will drive anywhere for a menu like that one.

I park the car and will my heart rate to slow. I pull down my visor and check my reflection one last time. "There's no reason to worry," I say as I smooth my eyebrows. Do they look bushier than normal today? I lean a little closer. *Oh my word*. They need plucking something awful. I cannot face my hot boss with a unibrow.

Fine. It's not *really* a unibrow, but I do look like I lost my tweezers three months ago and never bothered to replace them.

I bite my lip, debating. I keep tweezers in my car because any woman worth her salt knows natural light is the best tweezing light. Also the best light in which to find horrifying inch-long hairs on my chin that *had* to have grown in overnight because HOW ON EARTH did I miss that thing yesterday?! But right now, seconds before coming face to face with Perry, is *not* the time to think about tweezing.

I snap my visor closed. "You can't pluck what you don't see, Lila. Now get on with it. Hotty Hawthorne is waiting for you."

A light knock sounds on my window, and I jump, a hand flying to my chest.

Apparently, Hotty Hawthorne is standing right outside my car door.

He steps back while I scramble out, tossing my bag over my shoulder, hoping against hope that he didn't hear me calling him *Hotty Hawthorne*. "Hi. Good morning," I say, a little too cheerily. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"Not at all. I was walking back from the barn and saw you. Sorry to startle you."

I wave away his concern. "Don't worry about it."

“Were you, uh ...” He pushes a hand through his hair. “Were you talking to someone?”

My gut tightens. “Why? Could you hear me?”

Perry doesn’t smile, but his mouth twitches just enough for me to think he *absolutely* heard me. “Um, no,” he says unconvincingly. “Not at all.”

Unconvincing or not, the conversation will end faster if I pretend like he’s telling me the truth. I mean, the alternative is coming right out and admitting I’ve been thinking of him as *Hotty Hawthorne*, and that is not going to happen. “You know. Just giving myself a little pep talk,” I say.

He nods. “Right. Absolutely. I do that sometimes too.”

He does not. I’m sure of it. But I appreciate him trying to make me feel better anyway.

Perry rocks back on his heels and looks toward the farmhouse. “Shall we go inside?”

“Yes! Absolutely.” I fall into step behind him, following as he curves around the house to what looks like a side employee entrance. He’s dressed casually, a lot like he was last weekend when he blew a tire. You won’t hear any complaints from me though. The man makes jeans and flannel look good. And those jeans make *him* look good.

He holds the door open as I walk into the back hallway of the farmhouse. “The main operational offices are all here on the first floor,” Perry says as he leads me down the hallway, pointing at different doors as we go. “Human Resources, Accounting, Event Management, Farm Management. That office at the end belongs to my sister, Olivia, who is out on maternity leave, and this one here is my office.”

Perry pauses in the doorway, and I peer inside. It’s a warm, comfortable space. A big desk sitting below enormous windows that provide a stunning mountain view, a leather sofa in the corner that looks butter soft, framed watercolors on the walls.

“It’s lovely.”

“You can leave your things in here if you want,” Perry says. “I don’t have an office, or even a desk for you, but you can use mine while you’re here. Or we’ll set you up in Olivia’s, since she isn’t using it right now.”

“Whatever is easiest,” I say, just barely managing *not* to squeal at the idea of sharing an office with Perry.

Perry shows me the rest of the farmhouse with methodical precision, detailing the way each of the bigger rooms on the main floor are used for weddings and other events, then launching into a summary of the guest rooms and lounge areas upstairs. Actually, summary isn’t the right word. Because Perry isn’t leaving *any* details out.

I can’t tell if he *really* thinks I need to know the square footage of every bathroom, or if he’s nervous and it’s making him ramble. Either way, I definitely don’t mind listening to him talk.

After the inside tour, we head outside and climb onto this golf-cart-looking thing that Perry calls a Gator. It has enormous tires and a sturdier frame, so a golf cart built for getting around a farm, I guess, which makes sense. We aren’t quite touching, sitting side by side like this, but I’m close enough to feel the warmth from Perry’s arm and catch faint traces of his scent. He smells exactly like I imagined he would. Like the outdoors and sunshine and pine trees and apples.

“How long would it take for you to show me the whole place?” I say, more out of curiosity than because I actually expect Perry to give me the grand tour. I’m not here on vacation, I’m here to work. Though, I’m also not here to ogle my boss, and I’m managing to do plenty of that. What would a little sightseeing actually hurt?

“Almost an hour, probably.” Perry looks my direction. “Do you want to see it?”

“Seeing as how you told me how many towel rods are hanging upstairs in the farmhouse, I thought there might be a quiz later. Do I need to see everything if I have any hope of passing?”

Perry's eyes widen, and his frown deepens. "No, no, there won't be—"

I reach out and touch his arm. "Perry, I'm kidding. I would love to see the farm if we have the time to spare."

His eyes shift to where my fingers are still pressed against his skin, just below the sleeves of his flannel, rolled halfway up his forearm.

I pull my hand away and curl my fingers into my fist. Did he feel that too? That spark?

His mouth twitches the slightest bit before he purses his lips, almost like he's fighting a smile. "Best hold on then. We'll be climbing some hills."



## CHAPTER NINE

Lila

IT ONLY TAKES A few minutes to drive around the public parts of Stonebrook. The giant field where the festival takes place. The restaurant. The farmhouse. I do my best to listen to what Perry is telling me about the farm, but the reality is, the best view around this place is sitting right beside me, and it's hard to focus on anything else.

At the end of a long drive lined with maple trees, we finally cross into an area I've never seen before. A giant barn—where the goats live, Perry explains—is to my right. On the left, there's an enclosure full of chickens, and a second barn, painted just like the first but much smaller. We slowly ramble past the chickens, Perry waving at several people working nearby. When we reach the second structure, Perry slows, pointing toward an enclosure that opens into it. The biggest pig I've ever seen ambles toward the fence, where she presses her giant nose up against the railing.

“Buttercup,” Perry says gruffly. “She and I don't get along.”

“You don't get along with a pig?”

He shoots me a look. “She isn't just any pig. She's smart. Wily. Conniving.”

I press my lips together. “Wily? A pig?”

“Trust me. She's meaner than she looks.”

We watch as a farm worker steps up to the railing and scratches Buttercup's ears, the pig leaning into the attention like she's really enjoying it.

"Oh yeah. She looks like a real menace," I say.

Perry only grunts, and I stifle my laughter. I really want to hear whatever story is behind Perry's opinions of Buttercup, and I almost ask him, but then we make a sharp turn onto a narrow path past the barn and climb a steep hill into an apple orchard. Suddenly, I'm too distracted by the view to think about anything else. The higher we go, the more my jaw drops open. The rest of Stonebrook is beautiful, but back here, away from the hustle, it's magical. Beyond the apple trees in nearly every direction, the mountains roll into the horizon, fading into the hazy blue sky.

At the top of the ridge, Perry eases to a stop. I lean forward, taking in the view, the fall colors sparkling in the sunlight. When I finally glance back at Perry, he isn't looking at the leaves or the mountains or anything else. He's looking at me.

*Really* looking. In a way that makes my breath catch and my heart jump.

I swallow. "It's beautiful up here."

Perry nods, his eyes finally shifting to the horizon. "I never get tired of it."

"Did you always know you'd work here? Growing up?"

He shakes his head. "I didn't really think I wanted to. Not at first. I got an MBA. Did some consulting." He runs a hand across his face. "But then when Dad had a stroke, he needed someone to come back, and I've been here ever since."

"And that's a good thing?" I ask, hoping I'm not asking too much.

Peace settles over his expression, and he nods. "I wanted to come back anyway. Dad's stroke just made it easier. It's where I belong," he says simply, and I believe him. Even more, I can tell *he* believes him.

“To be so lucky,” I say. “I mean, to belong to a place like this? I can’t even imagine.” A sense of longing fills me, reaching all the way out to my fingertips. I had a home growing up. But something like this? All this land. There’s a sense of permanence here that I’ve never experienced, and I suddenly wish for it. For myself. For Jack.

We start moving again, and I settle back into my seat, my shoulder pressing against Perry’s. I resist the urge to shift away, wondering what Perry will do.

He doesn’t shift away either. In fact, it almost feels like he shifts closer.

“What about you?” he says, even while I try and still my frantic heart. I’m out of practice feeling this kind of excitement. This kind of anything, really. “Where do you belong?” Perry asks.

“Me?” I shrug. “With Jack, I guess.”

“Any family anywhere else?”

“My grandparents are in Hendersonville, in an assisted living neighborhood, but they don’t get around as much as they used to. They raised me. No mom in the picture, and my dad and I aren’t really close.”

“So Jack really doesn’t have anyone to take him to his father-son breakfast?”

I appreciate the way Perry lets the conversation roll forward. A lot of people want to hem and haw and apologize over my semi-parentless state. But it is what it is, and I don’t feel sad about it. I had a happy childhood thanks to Grandma June and Grandpa Jamison. I’ve never lacked love or security, and that’s more than a lot of people can say.

“I’ve asked his other grandpa, Trevor’s dad, if he can come up and take him. Hopefully that will work out.”

A question hangs in the air between us. The one that’s always there whenever Trevor comes up around people who don’t know his story. *How did he die?*

I don't fault people for wanting to know. It's human to be curious, likely connected to some subconscious wish people have to protect themselves and their loved ones from whatever unfortunate fate befell someone else. The tricky part is that asking so that *they* can feel better isn't always what's best for the one who's mourning the loss in the first place.

Sometimes I feel like talking about how Trevor died.

Sometimes I really don't.

Perry doesn't ask. Instead, he points at a narrow trail that cuts steeply up the bank to our left, disappearing into the wood line. "There's a trail there," he says. "Up to the best view on the whole property. It only takes about ten minutes if you don't mind the hike."

It doesn't feel like a dismissal of the conversation we've been having. His invitation to hike feels more like he's putting the ball in my court. I can talk or not talk. Hike or not hike.

I want to hike. *And* talk.

I want to tell him everything.

And that's a realization that scares me more than the butterflies in my stomach or my racing heart ever could.

"A little bit of hiking sounds nice, actually."

He nods and cuts the engine. "Let's do it then."

I climb out after him, glancing at my watch. At this rate, we're barely going to start working before it's time for me to leave again. Not that I'm complaining. Who would ever complain about spending time in such a gorgeous place with someone as gorgeous as Perry?

The climb is steep and rocky, making it difficult to talk for all the focus it takes not to fall flat on my face. But the silence is easy and comfortable, which is a nice thing to notice. I get the sense that Perry is the kind of man who enjoys both silence and solitude, which I can appreciate. At least I can now. I've never minded silence, but with my naturally extroverted nature, I had to cultivate an appreciation for solitude.

As we approach a small clearing, Perry turns, offering me his hand to help me step over one final boulder in the middle of the path. Once I'm steady on my feet, he gives my fingers a tiny squeeze before dropping my hand. I'm so focused on dissecting the meaning behind that squeeze that at first, I don't even notice the view, which is somehow even better than the one down below.

"Seriously?" I say, looking at Perry. "Is this place for real?"

*And there it is.* A smile. A real, wide, genuine smile that is every bit as overwhelming as I expected it to be. There is pride in that smile. Pride and appreciation and gratitude.

Perry's eyes narrow. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because I can tell you love this place," I say. "And because you have a really nice smile." I bite my lip, hoping I haven't said too much. But of course I did. I always say too much. And you know what? That's me. Perry can take it or leave it.

Perry wipes a hand across his face, and the smile disappears, but the warmth in his eyes stays. "We called it the ledge growing up. We still do, really. I have a lot of happy memories up here. A lot of conversations with my brothers." His head tilts the slightest bit. "My first kiss. My first beer."

My eyebrows lift, and he smiles again, holding up a hand.

*"Not on the same night."*

"Glad to know you were clear-headed for that first kiss," I say on a chuckle, but honestly, we have got to change the subject, because the thought of Perry kissing someone is messing with *my* clear head.

We're standing side by side, our shoulders not quite touching, and I swear, despite the blue skies in every direction, you could convince me there was a thunderhead directly above us for all the crackling energy in the air. I want to lean into the feeling, but I also have a strange impulse to flee.

I've forgotten how to do this. How to *feel*.

"Trevor was a fighter pilot in the Navy," I blurt out, my eyes cutting over to Perry. "Or at least training to be."

There's nothing but warmth and understanding in Perry's gaze.

"It was a training exercise. Something went wrong with his ejection seat, and ... he didn't make it."

Perry is silent for a long moment. "I'm so sorry, Lila," he finally says.

It's gotten easier to say it out loud over the years. To think of the event as a tragedy that happened in my past that no longer has to define my present.

At the same time, I'm still working on letting go of the guilt that fills me whenever I think about my *marriage*, which is different than thinking about losing my husband. My grief counselor told me to expect the guilt to flare up when I start dating again, or even just start considering the possibility of happiness with someone new.

With my eyes still fixed on Perry, I hear my therapist's words repeat in my brain. *You deserve happiness, Lila. It's okay to want it.*

I take a steadying breath. I can do this. I can let the joy in.

I nod and give Perry a small smile. "Thank you. He was very good at his job. And the Navy has changed protocol as a result of his accident, so that's something at least."

"That's no consolation."

It isn't. Not even a little bit. But it's a fact I can easily repeat. More easily than admitting that had my husband not died when he was training in California, I likely would have filed for a divorce as soon as he came home.

"Not a consolation," I agree. "But I'm glad his loss will lessen the likelihood of it happening to someone else. I've taught Jack that his father's service to his country persisted even beyond his death."

"Still. It's a lot for a little guy to go through," Perry says.

I press a hand to my stomach and feel the rise and fall of my breathing. Time to wrap this conversation up, because if I start

talking about Jack, I *will* start to cry. I give my head a little shake and force a smile. “So. Where to next?”

The moment I back away like this—because that’s enough talking about my dead husband, thank you very much—is usually when people’s faces shift into that mournful expression I’ve grown to know so well. Hands pressed to chests. Fingers covering lips. Eyes turned down and sad. Those expressions are so hard because they can mean *I’m so sorry for your loss*, but they can also mean, *I’m so glad I’m not you*. And sometimes the line between one sentiment and the other is very thin.

True compassion is always welcome.

Pity, or someone making my pain about them, is not.

Fortunately, Perry’s guileless expression is only full of understanding. “Next, we get to work,” he says, and I relax the tiniest bit. Work sounds good. Work sounds like exactly what I need.

“You lead, I’ll follow,” I say.

And I do.

All over the north field, clipboard in hand, making notes while Perry walks through the logistical layout for the harvest festival, tape measure and flags to mark the distance between each vendor location in hand. Retail booths. Food stalls. Food trucks. Ticket booths for the hayride and petting zoo. There are so many things to consider. Foot traffic flow. Access to bathrooms. The length of food lines and how that might interfere with access to surrounding booths.

Perry is methodical, quick in his decision-making, and needs very little input from me. In fact, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t actually need me here at all. He could be jotting things down on this clipboard just as easily as I am.

“Okay,” he finally says after what feels like hours and hours of traipsing around the field. “I think that does it.”

My stomach growls as I look over the layout. It’s pushing one o’clock, and we didn’t stop for lunch. If we were still in

the orchard, I'd have grabbed an apple from one of the trees ages ago. "Are you open to suggestions?" I say.

Perry's eyes widen, like he's actually taken aback by the question, but he recovers quickly. "Does the layout really need suggestions? I feel like we covered everything."

"We did. And this will probably work fine. But as someone who's attended the festival with a small child, I might reconsider a few things."

He folds his arms across his chest. "Like what?" he asks, his tone sharp.

*Well, okay, Mr. Defensive. You don't have to have an attitude about it.*

Looks like the nice, easygoing Perry I spent the morning with got swallowed up by a grump.

I walk forward and hold out the clipboard, flipping the top sheet over to the map of the field printed on the back of the vendor list. "Look at these four things," I say, pointing to four different things on the map. "For anyone coming to the festival with children under five years old, these are the attractions they're going to be most excited about. The petting zoo, the hayride, the 'Make Your Own Caramel Apple' booth, and the face painting."

"Okay. I'm still not seeing the problem."

"Perry, none of these things are close together. It almost feels intentional. Like you're trying to make people walk far on purpose."

"But they'll be walking past craft booths and food stalls. People can shop on their way from one thing to another."

"You've clearly never been anywhere with a three-year-old."

His frown deepens, his hand moving to his jaw, but he doesn't respond.

"I know you can't move the location of the petting zoo," I say, "but you could shift the caramel apple booth and the face painting so it's on this end of the field, next to the ticket booth



for the zoo and the hayride. Parents with little kids are all about optimizing the brief, magical hours when kids are happy. And by happy, I mean not tired or starving. Don't make them walk all over everywhere. If they finish the kid stuff and everyone is still happy, then they can go browse and shop. But I promise parents with cranky toddlers aren't meandering through stalls looking for hand-carved cutting boards or homemade apple butter. They're just trying to get home without losing their minds."

Perry huffs. "You seem to know a lot about cranky toddlers, but I'm not sure that qualifies you to make decisions about something this big."

I take a step backward. "Are you implying my child is cranky? Because you've spent time with him, and you know how charming he is. But he's a *human child*, which means I do have more experience with cranky toddlers than you do, and as such, my opinion has some merit, whether you want it to or not."

Perry's expression is stern, like he can't quite believe I spoke so freely.

I bite my lip. He was the one who got defensive first. And my suggestion did have merit. Possibly I could have presented it with a little more tact. But that doesn't make me wrong.

*Whoa.* Speaking of cranky toddlers.

I don't know who's behaving worse right now. Me or Perry. "I'm sorry," I say, quickly backpedaling. "I haven't eaten since breakfast. I think I might be a little hangry." I give him a pointed look because, let's be real, I'm not the only one in this situation who might be hangry. I won't call him out directly, but if a lifted brow helps him make the leap himself, I wouldn't mind.

His face immediately shifts. "You haven't eaten?"

I glance at my watch. "When would I have? I packed a lunch, but it's back in my bag. In your office."

His shoulders drop, and he runs a hand through his hair, mussing it in a way that shouldn't be quite so adorable but

absolutely is. “Of course you wouldn’t have. I’m sorry. I’m—” He shakes his head. “Come on. We can be done here. I’ll drive you back to get your stuff, and you can head out for the day.”

Unease swirls through my gut. “I still have an hour before I have to leave,” I argue, not liking that I suddenly feel so dismissed.

Perry is already walking toward the Gator we’ve been driving all over the farm. “You’ve more than earned the right to leave early, Lila. Don’t worry about it.”

Perry is polite but distant as we make the short drive back to the farmhouse. He waits in the hallway outside his office while I retrieve my bag, and I think he’ll let me leave without saying anything else at all. But then he stops at the back door, a pained look on his face.

“Can we try this again tomorrow?” he says. “I promise I’ll let you eat. And take any other breaks you need.” He clears his throat. “I appreciate you being here today. It was—” He pauses, like he can’t find the right word. “Helpful,” he finally manages.

I didn’t particularly feel helpful, and the afternoon definitely ended on a more sour note than it started. But I find myself nodding anyway. “I can come back tomorrow.”

“Good. Good. I’ll see you then.”

I make my way to my car, making sure Perry is well and truly out of earshot before I grumble, “I bet you’ll confuse me tomorrow, too.”

I drop into the driver’s seat with a huff. “It was a good suggestion,” I say to absolutely no one. “He didn’t have to be so defensive.” Because he *was* defensive, his tone all judgy. Even his posture screamed his disapproval, like he couldn’t believe I would suggest there was a better way to do something than what came out of his own precious brain.

I shift the car into reverse and back out of my parking space. “And then to dismiss me like that,” I say as I pull down the winding front drive, not that I really mind the extra hour of solitude before Jack gets home. But I *don’t* like feeling

dismissed. Forget *Hotty Hawthorne*. Maybe I should start calling him *Grumpy Hawthorne*.

Still, there *were* moments with Perry today that weren't contentious. When we hiked up to see the view, for one. Did I imagine the energy crackling between us? Imagine him leaning the slightest bit closer so our shoulders touched?

Honestly, I'm so out of practice, it's entirely possible I did imagine it. But what if I didn't? What if there is a spark between us? Can I allow myself to hope for something more than professional, even more than friendship?

I suddenly picture Jack's face, asking me for a staidad, and my stomach clenches.

Instead of going home, I find myself driving over to Grandma June and Grandpa Jamison's house. I try to stop in a few times a week to say hello and make sure they don't need anything. Their assisted living community does a pretty good job of taking care of the basics, but I still like to be aware. Plus, my grandparents have a way of keeping me anchored, and after the day I've had, I could use a little grounding.

Grandma June greets me at the door, pulling me into a gentle hug. "No Jack today?"

"He's still in school," I say. "I got off work early. Just wanted to stop by and say hi."

She looks toward the living room, a ghost of something unreadable slipping across her face. "You'll make your grandpa's day."

"How is Grandpa?"

Her expression shifts again, and a knot of worry tightens in my gut.

"He's okay," she finally says. "The same, mostly. Just ornery because of all the things he can't do anymore. Yesterday, he grumbled for twenty minutes while the yard maintenance people were cutting our grass, criticizing every little thing. They were doing a fine job; he was just grouchy because it wasn't him doing it."

“I’ll go say hello,” I say. “See if I can cheer him up.”

Grandma June smiles and pats my hand. “You always do. But ...”

I pause, waiting for her to finish her sentence. “But what?” I finally prompt.

“Maybe just don’t mention Jack’s father-son breakfast. I haven’t told Jamison about it. He’ll want to go, but he really can’t. He’s not stable enough on his feet, even if he doesn’t want to admit it. But if he thinks you’re stressing about it, he’ll insist.”

I nod my understanding. “I won’t tell him.”

Grandma June studies me carefully. “Lila, have you thought about calling your dad?”

I barely contain my scoff. “What? No. Absolutely not.”

She presses her lips together. “He’s only down in Savannah. It wouldn’t be that far of a drive.”

“It’s not the drive I’m worried about. He hasn’t seen Jack since Trevor’s funeral. Jack wouldn’t be comfortable with it, and I wouldn’t be either.”

I hate the pain that slices across Grandma June’s face. My father is her only son, and the youngest of her three children, a surprise baby born fifteen years after her youngest daughter. Her daughters, my aunts, live over in Asheville, and each have two daughters a piece, all older than me, all happily married and living perfectly adorable lives.

My dad is happily married now too. To a woman barely older than I am with three kids barely older than Jack. She and I were in high school at the same time. She was a senior when I was a freshman, but still. It’s weird.

Grandma June thinks it’s good for him. That he’s finally grown up enough to be a good dad. He and my mama, who hasn’t been in the picture since my first birthday, were too young when I was born. Too foolish to really settle down. But he’s different now. *He’s changed.*

Which, fine. I'm happy for him. I had a happy childhood, thanks to Grandma June and Grandpa Jamison. Dad showed up every once in a while, but in my mind, he was more like a visiting uncle than he was my dad. That role fell squarely on Grandpa Jamison's shoulders, and he did a fantastic job.

But being happy for my biological father doesn't mean I feel any obligation to build a relationship with him. I've had the same cell number since I was thirteen. He knows how to find me if he wants to.

Clearly, he also knows how to ignore me, since that seems to be his preferred choice.

"Truly, I can't fault you wanting to keep your distance," Grandma June says. "I just hate to see you managing so much on your own."

I reach out and squeeze her hand. "I'm not on my own. I have you."

"You know that's not good enough. Not long term." She tugs me toward her so we're standing even closer and lifts a wrinkled hand to my cheek. "You're a fighter, Lila. You always have been. And you're more than enough for that little boy. All by yourself, you're enough."

I sense the *but* to her sentence and wait for it, even though I know exactly where she's steering the conversation.

"But you *can* start dating, honey," she says. "It's been three years. Have you thought about it at all?"

Perry's smile flashes in my mind's eye, and my gut tightens. "Maybe? Honestly, it still feels impossible."

She studies me, one eyebrow lifted. "Why do I feel like there's something you aren't saying?"

I wrinkle my nose. This woman knows me too well. "Fine. *Maybe* I'm starting to think it's time for me to try. I don't know. I think the whole breakfast dilemma has me recognizing how much I want Jack to have a father figure in his life."

Grandma June's eyes brighten. "Oh, honey. Of course you do. You know, my neighbor next door, she's got a couple of

granddaughters in high school, and she just mentioned the other day how much money they're making babysitting. I could get their number for you."

Babysitting? I guess it would be necessary if I were going on actual dates, which ... *oh man*. A wave of fear washes over me. The idea of *Perry* might feel a tiny bit enticing, but pick-me-up-on-the-doorstep dating? Dinners and movies and babysitters? Just so I can dive into the drama of awkward conversations and worry about whether my breath still smells like the onions that were on the cheeseburger I ate at lunch and whether I should expect a kiss at the end of the night? Am I really ready for all of that?

Except, wait—is that even what dating is when you're an adult? I might have a bigger problem on my hands than just the possibility of onion breath. Do people even think about kissing at the end of the night, or is it just assumed? And what about *more* than kissing? First date? Third date? Are there rules about this sort of thing?

Everyone referred to "bases" back in high school, but even back then, I never really figured out what they all were. When my best friend sat down at the lunch table and triumphantly declared she'd made it to second base with her boyfriend, I genuinely thought they'd gone to a baseball game and somehow snuck onto the field. It wasn't until weeks later that I finally figured out what she meant.

As for me, there's only one man who has ever gotten *more*, and I married him when I was nineteen. Needless to say, my experience is limited.

I offer Grandma June a smile I hope is convincing. "Yeah, maybe. I'll think about it."

She lifts an eyebrow, her expression saying she isn't buying my lackluster acquiescence. "Any man would be lucky to have you in his life, Lila. Maybe even that new boss of yours."

I roll my eyes. I've only had one conversation with Grandma June about going to rescue my stranded boss. It only took her about fifteen seconds to turn it into the opening

scenes of one of the Hallmark movies she loves to watch so much. “Don’t you start this again.”

“Start what?” she says innocently. “Stranger things have happened.”

Stranger things, maybe. But I don’t need Grandma June fanning the flames of whatever hope I’ve got regarding my very grumpy boss. If I let her or Marley or anyone else encourage me, I’m liable to fall, regardless of whether Perry is actually interested. And that feels like a very good way to both embarrass myself *and* lose my job.

“He’s my boss, Grandma. I’m not hoping for anything beyond that.”

“Fine, fine,” she says with a huff. “You’re lying, but I won’t push it.”

I shoot Grandma June a saucy look before moving into the living room, where I lean down and kiss my grandpa’s weathered cheek. “Hey, Grandpa. What’s the latest? How are your Spelling Bee numbers this week?” We’ve been playing the New York Times Spelling Bee online game for the past few months, comparing scores and keeping track of who scores the highest the most frequently.

He grunts a hello, his hand reaching for mine and tugging me onto the couch beside him. I nestle into his shoulder, pulling my feet up under me just like I did when I was a kid. This isn’t the house I grew up in, but it is the same couch, and the familiarity of the moment is a balm to my soul. Only the presence of the walker set just to the side of where Grandpa Jamison is sitting reminds me that all is not what it used to be. “I made it to genius level every day this week,” Grandpa says, his voice scratchy and thin. “How’d you do?”

“Every day? Are you serious?”

He chuckles. “Didn’t do that great, huh?”

I huff. “I only got to genius level once. What was the pangram yesterday?”

“Naïvely ,” he says, tossing me a knowing grin.

“Naïvely ? Really? How did I not get that one?”

“You’re too smart to be naïve,” he says, nudging me with his elbow. “The word wouldn’t come to your mind.”

Huh. I may not be naïve anymore, but I was naïve enough for a lifetime when I met Trevor. Naïve enough to think pausing my dreams and marrying him was a good idea. Naïve enough to miss all the warning signs for what they were. But there’s no point in hashing that out with Grandpa Jamison.

“You want to watch some baseball?” he asks as he reaches for the remote.

“Ugh. Not even a little bit,” I say, though even baseball would be better than stressing over my past choices. I just have to remember that Trevor brought me Jack, and he’s worth whatever else I’ve been through.

Grandpa Jamison chuckles. “Want to sit here with me and play Spelling Bee while *I* watch baseball?”

“Now you’re talking,” I say, tugging my phone out of my back pocket. We’ve had the same conversation hundreds of times. One of these days I’m going to change things up and say *yes* when Grandpa Jamison asks. Except then I’d have to actually watch baseball, so ... scratch that. Never mind.

Instead of pulling up the Spelling Bee game, I pull up my text messages. There’s a message from an unknown number. Except, it isn’t unknown. I’ve seen the number before. It’s *Perry’s* number.

He’s texting my phone directly instead of using the virtual assistant app, which somehow feels significant.

My hands start to tremble as I open the message, which is just. so. stupid. It’s a text! Probably about something very boring and business-related.

Actually, it’s *multiple* texts.

**Perry:** I’m sorry I didn’t give you a lunch break.

**Perry:** It was unreasonable. I’ll be more respectful of your time in the future.



**Perry:** Thanks again for your help.

I turn off my phone and drop it into my lap, trying not to feel disappointed.

I shouldn't be disappointed. His texts are fine. Nice, even. Perfectly professional. And he gave me an apology, which I have to appreciate.

Except, the tone of his texts is so ... not cold, exactly. But lackluster? Unenthusiastic.

*Impersonal.*

I scold myself for feeling frustrated. The fact that this bothers me is completely on me. I'm the one who filled my head with visions of Perry spending time with Jack, laughing like they did when they changed his tire. I'm the one who watched him on the farm, in all his soft flannel and denim, the one who admired the perfect amount of beard on his face and imagined his time with me as anything other than work.

It's good that Perry's texts feel like a bucket of cold water.

Clearly, I need it.

And now I don't need to worry about all those questions I have about dating, after all.

That should feel like a relief.

It *is* a relief.

I've figured out how to survive on my own. And I'm good at it. I'm making it. A relationship would only disrupt that, especially a relationship with my boss, of all people.

So why, knowing all of this very logical information, do I feel so disappointed?

# CHAPTER TEN

Perry

LILA DOES NOT RESPOND to my (admittedly lame) apology.

I don't know that I truly expected that she would. But I did ... hope, I guess?

I have a feeling that hope means something. That the irritability I'm feeling now means something.

*I like her.*

Which is just aggravating. I don't want to like her. Not because it's her, but because I don't want to like *anyone*. I already did this. Tried to make a life with another person and failed so spectacularly, I'm still suffering the consequences of the implosion. I don't like doing things poorly. I never have. If I can't do a relationship well, I'd rather not do one at all.

What's more, Lila has been through a lot. It seems entirely unfair to ask her to gamble on someone like me, someone saddled with all the baggage and heartache I carry around.

And yet.

I can't stop thinking about her. Every time my phone pings, I wonder if it's her, finally responding to my messages.

In all my poor attempts at dating the past few years, I've never met anyone interesting enough to challenge my

determination to remain single. Not until now.

Objectively, I recognized my attraction to Lila immediately. The first moment I saw her getting out of the car to bring me a jack, I felt that tug deep in my gut. It was easier to ignore when I thought it was just attraction, when I believed Lila did not return my interest. But then when she arrived at the farm this morning, I'm pretty sure she called me *Hotty Hawthorne* before she got out of the car. And when she left after our disagreement in the field, there was disappointment clear in her expression.

If she's interested back? I don't think I can keep ignoring the pressure that builds in my chest whenever she's around.

I shove away my phone, tired of checking my notifications every fifteen seconds.

I need a workout. Or maybe just a hard run. Something to distract me. Make me think about something other than the way Lila looked in the field this afternoon, clipboard in hand, her expression indignant as she told me all the reasons why I should listen to her.

She was right, of course. And I did listen to her. It only took me an hour after she left to realize she was right about the setup. I've already adjusted the layout to be more family friendly.

But it isn't her ideas that keep flashing through my mind. It's her eyes, bright blue in the afternoon light, sparking with fire as she spoke. It's the curve of her hips as she hiked up to the ledge. The vulnerability in her eyes when she finally told me how she lost her husband.

Seized by a sudden impulse, I grab my phone and google her husband's name. I have to pull up her profile on the virtual assistant app to make sure I get her last name right.

*Trevor Templeton.*

It doesn't take long to find a few articles about his death. I skim through them, the same words popping out over and over again. *Highly skilled. Highly decorated. Among the nation's best and brightest. An insurmountable loss.*

I drop my phone onto the sofa cushion beside me. See? I knew I wasn't good enough for her, and finding out how amazing her late husband was confirms it. She was married to a national hero, while my marriage was practically a natural disaster.

*Okay.* It's definitely time for a run.

It's too dark to hit the curvy mountain road I live on, so I settle for the treadmill in my garage. It came with the house when I rented the place, and it sounds like an airplane about to take off and smells like burning rubber if I go faster than seven miles an hour, but it's better than nothing.

I connect my AirPods to my phone and crank up my music, then intentionally leave the phone on the counter in the kitchen where I won't be tempted to look at it every five seconds.

If Lila were going to respond by now, she would have. I have to move on.

I'm ten minutes into my run when the volume on my music decreases and Siri's voice pipes into my ears. "Text message from *Lila Templeton*," Siri says in a measured, robotic voice. "Thank you for the apology, but it isn't necessary. You're the boss." I can't decide if the text feels cold and impersonal because Siri read it like she was reciting ingredients off the back of a cereal box, or if it really *is* just cold and impersonal.

I scramble to stop the treadmill, but I somehow miss the stop button, my fingers grazing over it without actually *pushing* it.

Problem: my brain already prepared my feet to STOP.

When the treadmill keeps going, it tosses me off the back, right into the concrete wall of my garage.

I pause long enough to make sure I'm not bleeding anywhere, yank the safety key out of the treadmill to stop the stupid thing, then run to the kitchen to grab my phone. I'm going to be bruised tomorrow in so many places. But I don't even care.

*Lila responded.*

She read my dumb apology and still decided to message me back.

I sit at my kitchen table and read her response for myself, imagining the words in *her* voice instead of Siri's.

**Lila:** Thank you for the apology, but it isn't necessary. You're the boss.

It isn't terrible, exactly. But it isn't good, either. I key out a quick response before I can overthink.

**Perry:** Being the boss doesn't make me right all the time, nor does it justify forcing you to work without breaks.

**Lila:** Well, that's a relief. Guess I don't need to fill my pockets with Lucky Charms before coming to work tomorrow.

I grin at her response, happy to move even this tiny sliver past the weird tension I created between us with my earlier stupidity.

**Perry:** Lucky Charms?

**Lila:** Of course. They're magically delicious.

**Lila:** They're also Jack's favorite. Sometimes I forget everyone doesn't have a pantry full of kid food.

Seized by an idea that could be brilliant but could just as easily be stupid, I type out my next message and send it before I can talk myself out of it.

**Perry:** I definitely prefer my cereal a little more *hardcore*.

**Lila:** Hardcore?

**Perry:** Apple Jacks, Lila. You of all people should applesolutely understand.

**Lila:** WAIT. HardCORE cereal? I don't know if I can laugh at that one, Perry.

**Perry:** Come on. That was a very a-peeling pun.

**Lila:** STOP. Is this what it feels like when I send you apple puns? I TAKE THEM ALL BACK.

**Perry:** Nah. They're starting to GROW on me. They always PRODUCE a laugh.

**Lila:** I've created a monster.

**Lila:** I've got to go put Jack to bed. Thanks again for reaching out. See you tomorrow?

**Perry:** I'm looking forward to it.

I send my last message and drop my phone onto the kitchen table before throwing my arms overhead in victory. I could be wrong, but that felt like a very good text exchange. Not flirty, exactly, but almost? And now I'm going to see her tomorrow, and I have no idea how to act.

All of my doubts come roaring back. Her military hero husband. My trash heap marriage. My complete inability to be charming, though I did just incorporate apple puns into a text conversation. Not exactly my MO, so maybe there's hope for me after all?

There are so many reasons why this could go badly, but this is the first time since my divorce that I've felt any real hope when it comes to the idea of a relationship.

Maybe I'll screw everything up.

Maybe she won't reciprocate.

Maybe we'll never date, *and* I'll lose her as an assistant.

But I think I have to try. Shelve my doubts and see what happens.

A new excitement pulses in my chest. I'm going to do this. Actually *pursue* a woman.

I put my phone down and rest my hands on my knees. The thought buzzing around in my brain annoys me. I don't want it to be true, even though I know it is.

If I want to stand a chance, I need help.

I reach for my phone again, swallow every ounce of my pride, and pull up the running text thread I share with my brothers.

"Here goes nothing," I say out loud before sending the first text.

**Perry:** Brothers. I need help. I met a woman, and I don't know what I'm doing.

**Lennox:** I KNEW IT. YOU LIKE HER.

**Brody:** Wait. Hold up. Why does Lennox know something the rest of us don't?

**Lennox:** It's his virtual assistant. He met her in person when he was stranded with a flat tire and no jack.

**Perry:** Huh. Stranded without a jack. I wonder how that happened? I feel like someone took it and forgot to put it back. I just can't remember who.

**Brody:** Lennox?

**Flint:** Lennox?

**Lennox:** I APOLOGIZED. And you met a woman because of it, so maybe you should thank me.

**Flint:** Right. Back to the woman. Name? Age? Family of origin? Aspiring actress? Willing to sign a nondisclosure agreement?

**Perry:** Flint. What.

**Flint:** Sorry. Those are the questions my manager makes me answer when I meet someone new. Just answer the relevant ones.

**Perry:** Her name is Lila. She's twenty-nine? I think? Not an actress. She's my assistant.

**Lennox:** I feel like there's something you aren't saying here. Something along the lines of LENNOX, YOU WERE RIGHT.

**Perry:** LENNOX, YOU'RE AN IDIOT. How's that?

**Brody:** I say go for it. Though it's been so long since you've been interested in anyone, you could tell me you wanted to date Ann down at the feed and seed, and I'd probably say go for it. So.

**Lennox:** Hey. No knocking Ann. I'm this close to getting her to share her sugar cookie recipe.

**Perry:** Can we please focus? I need a plan.

**Brody:** You can't just ask her out?

**Perry:** I don't think we're there yet. She came out to the farm today, and things didn't go so well.

**Flint:** Elaborate.

**Perry:** I forgot to give her a lunch break.

**Perry:** And we argued about something stupid.

**Flint:** ELABORATE

**Brody:** Agreed. This would be easier if you'd give us a little more information.

**Perry:** She had an idea about how to change the layout for the harvest festival, and I shot her down.

**Lennox:** This all tracks.

**Perry:** STOP. I'm trying here. I want to fix things, and I don't know how.

**Brody:** Maybe start with apologizing?

**Perry:** I already did that.

**Flint:** Did you apologize like a human? Or like a robot?

**Perry:** Hold on. I'll copy and paste. I said:

***Perry:** I'm sorry I didn't give you a lunch break.*

***Perry:** It was unreasonable. I'll be more respectful of your time in the future.*

***Perry:** Thanks again for your help.*

**Lennox:** So...

**Lennox:** Like a robot. Got it.

**Perry:** How was that robotic? I said I was sorry. That I'd try to do better.

**Brody:** It's a fine apology if all you want is to be her boss. If you want more, you have to up your game.

**Perry:** I realize that. That's why I'm texting you idiots.



**Lennox:** Okay. Let's get specific. What do you know about her?

**Perry:** That she works for me. And she has a five-year-old kid. And she drives a blue SUV.

**Brody:** That's it, and you know you want to date her?

**Lennox:** She's also beautiful. He's leaving that part out.

**Flint:** #hotmoms

**Perry:** She's also ... I don't know. She's happy. Even though she's been through stuff. I like that about her. And she smiles a lot and includes stupid apple puns in her messages.

**Brody:** I like her already.

**Flint:** When will you see her again?

**Perry:** At work tomorrow.

**Lennox:** You should send her to the goat barn with Mom. Women love Mom.

**Flint:** And baby goats.

**Brody:** This is a good idea. If she falls in love with the farm, she might be willing to tolerate you.

**Perry:** I don't know why I thought you guys could help me.

**Brody:** Wait, wait. I can be serious.

**Brody:** Make eye contact. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable. Tell her something personal. Compliment her, but not in a creepy way. Ask her questions about herself and listen with your whole body.

**Lennox:** And for the love, FEED HER. I'll leave a packed lunch in the back of the fridge for you.

**Flint:** This is good stuff. You should call me over lunch. I'd be happy to say hello.

**Perry:** Not helpful.

**Perry:** But lunch would be great, Len.

**Flint:** What? What woman doesn't want *People Magazine's* Sexiest Man Alive to tell her hello?

...

...

...

**Flint:** GUYS. Come on. I was kidding.

...

...

...

**Flint:** WHATEVER. Your jealousy is showing.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Perry

MY BROTHERS WERE MARGINALLY helpful. Scratch that. Brody was helpful. Flint was Flint. And Lennox—at least I got lunch out of the deal. Though it's still a question whether I'll have the nerve to actually invite Lila to eat it with me.

I rub my hands down the front of my pants and pace back and forth across my office. I'm being ridiculous. Lila is just a woman. A woman who works for me and is *only* coming to the farm for that reason. To work.

I need to relax.

If I happen to work up the nerve to invite her to a picnic lunch prepared by one of the region's greatest culinary geniuses? Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Odds are high I'll chicken out and eat the lunch by myself, hiding on the ledge where no one can report back to Lennox that all his efforts were for nothing.

I grumble and drop into my desk chair. It doesn't have to be this hard. I need to just work. To stop waiting for her and try and get something done.

It takes a few minutes, but I'm finally able to distract myself with an analysis of the farm's quarterly reports, so much so that Lila startles me when she knocks on my open office door.

"Knock, knock," she says lightly.

I look up to see her leaning against the door frame, and my breath catches in my throat. She looks as beautiful today as she did yesterday. “Lila. Good morning.”

She offers a reserved smile. “Morning, boss.”

Brody’s advice cycles through my brain. *Pay her compliments. Be vulnerable.* “You, um—you look nice today.”

Her eyebrows go up, then her eyes drop, like she’s looking over what she’s wearing. “Oh. Thank you.”

“I like your, uh—hair thing.” *Hair thing? What, am I seven years old now?*

She reaches up and touches her hair. “My braid?”

“Right. Braid.”

Her expression shifts again, like she can’t quite figure me out. “Thanks,” she says again slowly.

This is probably why Brody said not to compliment her in a creepy way. I have to do better than this.

*Ask her questions.*

I turn in my chair so I’m facing her fully. “How’s Jack this morning?”

Her face immediately brightens, and the tightness in my chest eases the slightest bit.

“As cute as ever. He told me at breakfast he’s figured out who he’s going to marry. She’s a fifth grader who rides his bus and, according to Jack, has cool hair that matches her shoes.” She smiles, her expression knowing, and lifts her hand to her temple. “I’ve seen her. She has a strip of blue right here.”

Note to self: The ultimate key to Lila is definitely Jack. “Ah. She definitely sounds like marriage material.”

Lila smiles. “I’m not sure how London feels about the match, but Jack is sold.”

“Her name is London? This girl keeps getting cooler and cooler.”

“Right? She definitely has a cool vibe, at least as far as fifth graders are concerned.”

I suddenly wonder what would make someone have a cool vibe to Lila. Owning a farm? Working in flannel? Does she think *Perry* is a cool name? It’s maybe not as hip as Lennox or Flint, but—*wait*. This is not relevant. *Focus, Perry*. She’s standing right in front of you.

*Make eye contact.*

I hold Lila’s gaze long enough for my heart rate to climb and my hope to build. This is going well. I’m smiling. She’s smiling. But then Lila shifts and looks down, and my hope fizzles. Am I making her uncomfortable with my questions? Have I waited too long to say something new?

I wish I were better at reading her. At reading *any* woman. Jocelyn always told me how terrible I was at understanding her emotions, at *sensing* what she needed without her having to explicitly tell me. Which sounds more like mind reading than understanding emotions, but what do I know? We wound up divorced so—nothing. Clearly nothing.

I clear my throat. “So, I’ve got some work you can do inside. Reviewing some reports from accounting, double checking for discrepancies. The event staff is using Olivia’s office for some bridal appointments, so if you’re okay with it, I thought you could work in here.”

She nods and moves into the office, dropping her bag onto the chair on the opposite side of my desk. “Of course. Whatever you need. But won’t I be in your way?”

“Not at all. I’ve got apple shipments going out today. I’ll be in the warehouse most of the morning.”

Something flashes behind her eyes, and her shoulders drop the tiniest bit, almost like she’s disappointed we won’t be working in the same space. “All right.”

I pull out the reports I need her to review and step away, making way for her to circle around the desk and settle into my chair. She pulls the reports closer as I move to the door.

Nerves prickle along my spine. *Ask her now. Just do it.*

“Lila,” I say, pausing with one hand on the door jamb. I can do this. *Eye contact. Be vulnerable.* “Would you like to have lunch with me today? I was thinking we could take a picnic out to the orchard.”

Her eyes widen the slightest bit, but she immediately smiles. “Okay. Sure.”

“Good. Great. I’ll be back at eleven-thirty to pick you up.”

I make my way out of my office, a lightness in my step that I haven’t felt in ages. For all that I have to get done today, I shouldn’t be this excited about taking a lunch break at all, much less a leisurely picnic out in the orchard, but I can’t bring myself to truly care. Because Lila said yes to lunch. And even looked excited about it. Maybe excited?

I swing by my parents’ house to pick up my dad before heading to the warehouse. Dad is almost entirely retired—a circumstance forced by the stroke he had a few years back. But when he feels up to it, he still likes to do a quality check on the apples before they’re shipped out.

Dad’s still finishing up his breakfast, so I lean against the counter in the kitchen, scrolling through my email while I wait. My eyes catch on the reunion invite from Jocelyn, but I keep on scrolling. Hopefully Lila has responded by now, and Jocelyn has finally gotten the message.

“What are you frowning about over there?” Mom says, looking up from the dishwasher she’s loading.

“Ah, nothing. Just—emails.”

“Hmm. Nice lie. Very convincing.”

I roll my eyes. Mom always has been annoyingly intuitive. I shove my phone into my pocket and cross my arms. “Jocelyn is throwing the high school reunion happening in a couple of weeks.”

Mom’s eyebrows go up. “Ah. And you’re invited.”

I nod.

“And you don’t want to go.”

“Definitely not. She’ll be there. And she’s being weird about making sure I’m there too. Why does she care so much?”

Mom shrugs. “Maybe she wants you to have a good time. Maybe she’s ready to let things go so you can both move on.”

“Sure. And maybe Flint will win an Oscar for the time travel movie he filmed last year.”

Mom presses her lips together, trying and failing to hold back her smile. “You be nice. Not every movie can be a hit.” She closes the dishwasher and dries her hands, then turns to face me fully. “You really think Jocelyn is up to something?”

“I have no idea. Regardless, I don’t really feel like risking it.”

“Want to know what I think?” Mom mirrors my stance, leaning against the counter with her arms folded.

“Always.”

“I think Jocelyn thought you’d fight for her. She thought you’d come groveling back. Then you didn’t. You finally gave her reason to question the power she thinks she has over you.”

“She doesn’t have power over me.” Relief pushes through me as I say the words, because I finally know they’re true.

It took me a long time to break whatever spell kept me from seeing Jocelyn for who she was. Our relationship wasn’t all bad, not until the end. But even when things were good, she still held all the cards. She had an idea in her head about how our life was supposed to look and didn’t want to give me an inch. It was her vision, or no vision. Needless to say, I chose the latter option.

“Not anymore,” Mom says knowingly. “Maybe you ought to go to the reunion to show her just that. That you’re absolutely fine without her.”

“Or I could just *be* absolutely fine without her. Reunion not required.”

Mom *tsks*. “That’s probably the more mature thing to do, but I sure do love the idea of someone giving that woman what for.”

I chuckle. "I'll keep that in mind."

Dad comes into the kitchen, his empty plate in hand, and mom hurries to take it from him. He still isn't as steady on his feet as he used to be. "Let me grab my jacket," Dad says to me before disappearing down the hallway.

"How are things with your new assistant?"

"Good. She's good. Great, even. She's helping me a lot."

"And it's all virtual? I swear, you young people and your technology."

"Mostly virtual, but she's actually here today. Working in person."

"Really? Olivia mentioned she was someone local. An older lady, right?"

Here, I need to tread carefully. If Mom already picked up on the Jocelyn vibes, she'll for sure pick up on whatever I'm feeling—starting to feel?—for Lila. "Um, no, actually. She's younger than me."

"Is that so?" She's trying so hard to play it cool, but I can practically see the questions buzzing around in her brain. "Is she married?" she finally asks.

"Not a relevant question, Mom."

She huffs. "Of course it's relevant. You never leave the farm, Perry. How will you ever meet anyone? The fact that a woman is coming here? Come on. You can't blame me for asking."

It's only a matter of time before one of my brothers—probably Lennox—mentions to Mom that Lila is very single, and I'm very interested. Better to let her find out that way than tell her right now. If she knew, she'd be over at the farmhouse in a minute, doing her own recon work.

"Ready," Dad says, stopping in the kitchen doorway.

I lean down to kiss Mom's cheek. "Bye, Mom."

"Child, we aren't finished with this conversation."



I look back over my shoulder, imagining for a split second how Mom and Dad would respond to becoming instant grandparents to a kid like Jack. I'm getting ahead of myself. *So far ahead.* But it still feels good to know that if it ever came down to it, they'd embrace him as their own without a second thought.

As Dad and I drive over to the warehouse, it occurs to me that it wouldn't just be Mom and Dad becoming instant grandparents. I would also become an instant *dad*.

It's not like I haven't known about Jack from the very beginning. I have. But thinking of Jack as *Lila's* son is very different from thinking about him as *my* son. But he would be, wouldn't he? My stepson, at least. Or my *stairson*. Jack's misspoken word flits through my brain, and I smile.

Smiles or not, it feels ridiculous to even be asking myself these questions when I still have no idea if Lila is even interested. Then again, it's not like the presence of a kid in her life is this changeable factor. Like a job or a living situation. Lila is a mom. She's always going to be a mom.

How do I *not* think about that?

It would be ridiculous—irresponsible—not to.

I sigh and try and swallow down the doubts rising like bile in my throat.

It's just lunch.

Just a woman.

Just a woman with a *kid*.

A woman with a kid whose real dad was a military hero.

Now I'm excited about and dreading lunch in equal measure.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Lila

A FREAKING PICNIC LUNCH in the apple orchard? Am I dreaming right now?

I lean back into Perry's desk chair, my hands sliding down the butter soft leather on the armrests. The chair alone probably costs more than all the furniture in my house, and yet, nothing about Perry's office feels opulent. The whole farmhouse feels nice, comfortable, but not excessive. I wonder if the office is designed to match Perry's preferences or if he inherited the space from his dad and didn't change anything,

Somehow, it *feels* like Perry, though that could be wishful thinking because I'm pretty sure I could live in this office with its tasteful simplicity and easy comfort. Slide a twin bed into the corner and give me a mini fridge, and I'll be set.

It took me hours to finally respond to Perry's text last night. Because my feelings were hurt that he dismissed my ideas and that even though he did apologize, his apology felt so sterile and businesslike.

Which, of course he should be businesslike. It was only that I'd allowed myself to hope, and his texts squashed that hope right into the ground.

But now?

Now I'm swimming in hope. Practically drowning in it. It's not lost on me that *drowning* isn't actually a good thing. That I am in very real danger of getting swept away. My hope might as well be a fast-moving current on a river after all the snow melts and comes flooding down. And I'm swimming—did I mention I'm not a very good swimmer?—with no life raft. No vest. And no one on the shore to throw me a rope and pull me to safety—*or* to stop me from making bad extended metaphors in my head.

But honestly, how can I not hope?

Perry asked about Jack. He complimented my hair. And last night, he texted me actual APPLE PUNS.

It only takes an hour or so to look over the reports, something which I could have easily done from home, not that you'll hear me complaining. I'll choose to work in a cushy leather chair that smells like my sexy boss any day of the week.

I notate the few discrepancies I find, then pull out my laptop so I can pull up my work email. I haven't checked it since yesterday, so there's probably enough to keep me busy for at least another half hour. I could check it on my phone but responding is so much easier on my laptop. Except, Perry didn't mention Wi-Fi before he left, which means my laptop is basically useless.

I look toward the door. Surely there's someone else close by who could help me get connected. I make my way out of Perry's office and head down the long hallway that leads toward the front reception area. There, I find a lovely woman with shoulder-length gray hair, a pair of glasses perched on her nose, her head leaning close to the computer screen on the reception desk.

She looks up when she sees me, her smile warm and wide. "Hello," she says, looking toward the hallway out of which I just emerged. "I don't think I know you."

"Hi. I'm Lila. Perry's assistant? I'm hoping there's someone who can get me connected to the Wi-Fi?"

“Oh. *Oh!* Well, of course. It’s been ages since I’ve used the Wi-Fi, but I’m sure there’s someone here who knows the password.” She stands and moves toward me, extending her hand. “I’m Hannah Hawthorne.”

“Hawthorne?”

She nods. “Perry’s mom.”

*That’s* why her smile looks so familiar. It’s Perry’s smile.

She takes my hand, engulfing it in both of hers.

“Mrs. Hawthorne. It’s so nice to meet you. I didn’t expect—but then, I guess it makes sense that you would be here.”

“Please. Call me Hannah. Usually you’d have to come to the barn to find me, but I needed a computer, and the one I have at the house has a broken power cord. This one I can’t seem to make work for me though.” She looks over her shoulder at the offending computer.

“Is it anything I can help you with?” I ask. “I’m not a computer whiz by any means, but I’m happy to try.”

“Oh. Well, sure, if you don’t mind. I just need to upload a few pictures into a shared google drive. But whenever I click on the link, it tells me I don’t have access.”

I follow her to the computer, looking over her shoulder as she explains further. “See, I’ve got the pictures here, in my email. And the link to the shared folder is here, in this message. It says it’s been shared with my email address, but when I click it—” I watch as she clicks the link and receives a message denying her access.

“Oh, I see what’s happening,” I say. “It’s defaulting to the Stonebrook Google account instead of yours.” I reach for the mouse, and she shifts to the side, making room. “But if we click here and switch over to *your* profile, it should let us right in.” Sure enough, as soon as I switch the profiles, the shared folder opens up. My eyes catch on the name. *Silver Creek High School Class of 2007 15-Year Reunion Slide Show*. “Is this for Perry’s reunion?” I ask.

“You know about it?”

“Only that he’s been invited,” I say, not wanting to insert myself into Hawthorne family drama. Maybe Perry’s mom doesn’t care that he’s not planning on attending the reunion, but maybe she does. “The invitation came to his work email. Do you want me to upload these photos for you?” I ask, gesturing back to the computer.

“Would you? I guess the slide show is supposed to be a surprise for everyone who attends. One picture from high school and one from childhood.”

I pull up the first photo. It’s Perry in a football uniform, a helmet under his arm, a wide smile on his face—the same smile his mother greeted me with when she first said hello.

“That was his senior year,” she says, her voice gentle. “That smile. He doesn’t share it very often, but when he does? It’s a million-dollar smile.”

If by million-dollar-smile she means a smile that makes my knees feel wobbly and my insides feel like Jell-O then the answer is *yes*. One-million times *yes*. I swallow. “I didn’t know he played football.”

“Quarterback,” she says. “He was a good one, too.”

I pull up the second photo, afraid that if I stare at this one too much longer, actual cartoon hearts might explode over my head. Call me crazy, but I’m guessing it wouldn’t be smart to be quite so transparent in front of Perry’s mother, of all people.

In the second photo, Perry looks close to Jack’s age. He’s standing next to a man who can only be his father. They have the same eyes, the same dark hair. It looks like they’ve been hiking, a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains stretching out behind them.

“He looks a lot like his dad,” I say.

Hannah nods. “He looks the most like his dad, really. He and Flint.”

“He has your smile though,” I say as I close out the pictures and add them to the shared folder. “I noticed that the moment you said hello.”

Hannah smiles slyly, and my cheeks flush.

*Abort! Abort!* Back away slowly from the mother of the man I'm not supposed to be crushing on.

When both pictures finish uploading, I close out the window and push away from the desk. "Okay. All done."

She breathes out a sigh. "Thank you. That's been on my to-do list for days, and you just made it seem so easy."

"I'm so happy I could help."

She cocks her head. "Listen. If your need for the internet is particularly urgent, then forget I asked, but if there's nothing pressing, would you like to walk out to the barn with me? I had a couple of late deliveries this year, so I've got some baby goats less than a week old that could use some loving."

Week-old baby goats? Oh, I am so in. Except, I'm not sure that exactly falls in my job description.

"Come on," Hannah urges. "It's an official Stonebrook Farm need. The babies need socializing if they're going to get along with people when they're grown. If it matters, I'll tell Perry I insisted you come with me."

*Well.* If she *insists*. I point back down the hallway. "Let me just go and message Perry so he knows where I am."

I race back to Perry's office and snag my phone so I can send Perry a quick text. I'm momentarily distracted by the notifications filling the screen. I have a new email. A new *work* email. That's not so significant. Except this one is another message from the high school reunion lady. I glance at the door, not wanting to make Hannah wait, but I'm too curious to ignore the email altogether. Especially after the conversation I just had with Perry's mom.

*Perry,*

*Listen. I think I've figured out what's happening. I know how hard things have been for you. I realize that by pushing you to attend the reunion, I was asking for more than you're ready to give. I should respect your need to heal, to recover from our split, no matter how long it takes. But I'll cover for you, all*

*right? I'll make up an excuse so no one else on the planning committee has to know that I'm the reason you won't come. You have to protect your heart. I understand that now. I'm sure seeing me again would only make getting over me that much harder. I wish you well, Perry.*

*Much love,*

*Jocelyn*

I read the email once all the way through, then read it again, my annoyance growing with each word. The reunion lady really *is* Perry's ex-wife. Email feels like such an impersonal way to communicate with her ex. Why not text? Or even just call?

Then again, if their divorce was as messy as this email makes it sound, maybe Perry blocked her number so she can't call or text.

If I had an ex this condescending, I'd probably block her too. Unless her email is genuine? Perry doesn't really seem like he's still nursing a broken heart, but we haven't exactly had a lot of conversations about his love life, so I could be entirely off-base.

Still, my instincts are telling me Jocelyn's message is meant to be patronizing, not genuine. I don't know the woman, so I can't know for sure, but to me, her *understanding* reads like thinly veiled presumptions and insults.

I'm tempted to just delete the message.

But a bigger part of me wants to convince Perry to GO to the reunion. Who does this woman think she is, assuming that Perry is still wallowing? Still pining after her? Still so wounded, he can't even bear to be in the same room with her? If I were Perry, I'd want to attend the stupid reunion in a million-dollar suit, with a million-dollar date, driving a million-dollar car just to show her.

It's possible I've read too many romance novels.

But COME ON. He can't let her waltz into the reunion telling everyone her poor ex-husband is still too brokenhearted to show his face.

I pocket my phone and hurry out front where Hannah is waiting for me. I wonder what *she* knows about Jocelyn. And if there's any possible way I could bring her up.

Except that would be meddling.

I shouldn't meddle.

I *really* want to meddle.

Mrs. Hawthorne smiles. "Ready?"

It occurs to me a moment too late that I still haven't sent Perry a message, but I'm not going to pull my phone out and do it now. "Yep. Good to go." I glance at my watch as we head down the massive front steps of the farmhouse. It's only ten-thirty. Maybe I'll be back before Perry comes for me, and it won't matter.

The farmhouse steps are decorated with pumpkins, tiny hay bales, and baskets of yellow, red, and orange mums. I don't remember noticing the decorations when I arrived, but Perry took me in through the back, so it's possible I missed it. "Everything looks so festive," I say once we reach the bottom. I turn and look back at the house. "It's honestly so beautiful out here."

"Decorating the porch is one of the few things I still like to do," Mrs. Hawthorne says with a chuckle. "It used to be my porch, after all."

"When did you move out of the farmhouse?"

She wrinkles her brow. "Perry was in middle school, so ... maybe twenty years ago or so? It's a much larger house now than it used to be. Everything to the left of the porch, all the offices, that was all added on after we moved out. We still live on the property though. On the backside, where I don't have to worry about customers wandering into my kitchen."

"Does Perry still live on the property too?"

She eyes me curiously, and I brace myself, wondering if she's going to question my reasons for wanting to know. But then she just shakes her head. "He's got his own place a few miles down the road."



I suddenly wonder what Perry's home is like. Does it have the same comfortable feel as his office? Does he have matching furniture? Throw pillows and art on the walls? Is his bedroom decorated, or is he more a mattress-on-a-frame kind of man?

A wave of heat washes through me at the thought of Perry's bedroom. His *bed*.

I pat my cheeks, feeling the warmth there as an image of Perry lounging around his home pops into my brain.

*Bad, brain! Now is not the time!*

But my brain doesn't care WHAT time it is or even that I'm standing beside Perry's MOM. It's too wrapped up imagining Perry in lounge pants and a plain white t-shirt—or shirtless—can we go with shirtless?—walking barefoot around his bedroom.

“What about you?” Mrs. Hawthorne asks, startling me out of my reverie. It occurs to me a moment too late that there was a first part to her question that I somehow missed.

The faint heat in my cheeks flames even hotter, which is stupid. Perry's mother is not a mind reader.

I clear my throat and glance over at her. Her eyebrows are lifted, the smirk on her face saying she maybe IS a mind reader.

“I, um, I . . . ” *Can't even remember what she asked me.* “I'm sorry. What did you ask?”

She chuckles again. “Do you live around here?”

“Oh. Um, not too far from here. Just up the mountain in Hendersonville. I've only been back a couple of years, but I grew up there, so that's home.”

We approach the barn, and Hannah slides open a massive door that leads into a dimly lit space. Stalls line either side of the giant barn, a wide corridor running from where we're standing all the way to the other end. There's a hay loft overhead, the smell of hay and leather and old wood heavy in the air. I follow Hannah to the first stall where she scoops up

the tiniest baby goat I've ever seen and, without any preamble, plops the goat into my arms.

"Oh my goodness," I say as the goat bleats and nibbles at my ear. "What is even happening right now?"

Hannah smiles. "Her name is Sweetpea."

I rub Sweetpea's soft ears. "Oh, Jack would love you. Will she be a part of the petting zoo at the festival?"

"Probably not," Hannah says. "I like them to be a few months old before they're exposed to all the noise and traffic of the festival. Who's Jack?"

"Oh! He's my little boy. He's only five—just started kindergarten actually." I hold up the goat so I can look into her face. "And he would love you, Sweetpea."

"You're welcome to bring him by anytime," Hannah says. Her gaze shifts, like there's something she isn't asking. Is she wondering if I'm married? If Jack's father is still a part of my life? Or do I *want* her to wonder because that would mean she's wondering if there might be something between Perry and me? But if that *isn't* what she's thinking, and I bring it up, will it make me look desperate and grabby? Like I'm trying to rope her son into liking me? I'm not wearing a wedding ring, at least. Maybe I ought to just let that speak for itself.

Or maybe I should stop thinking so hard and just cuddle this baby goat and forget about everything else.

"This feels like therapy," I say, nuzzling the goat a little closer.

Hannah laughs. "You aren't the first person to say so. They're pretty sweet. And they don't smell nearly as bad as the rest of the farm. This place makes a pretty decent sanctuary."

"Think Perry would let me move my office out here? I'll set up right here next to Sweetpea's stall."

"Will you be working in person from now on then?" Hannah asks.

“Oh. I don’t know, actually. I’m happy to do either. Whatever is going to be the most helpful to Perry.”

She nods. “He tells me you’re helping with the festival.”

“I’m trying. There are so many details to keep straight. I don’t know how Perry is doing it all.”

“He’s always been a details guy. Even when he was little, he was very exacting in the way he did things. It made him a little prickly and controlling when he was a kid—his siblings hated him for it—but as an adult, it does make him very good at his job. He’s managed to trim the farm’s expenses by close to twenty percent. He’s good at spotting the extra. At finding the bloat and cutting it.”

I think of the way Perry worked his way through the festival layout yesterday. “That definitely sounds like Perry.”

Hannah studies me. “I take it you’ve already discovered his exacting ways?”

I smile. “Maybe a little.”

“Well, you’re still working for him. Hopefully that means he didn’t hurt your feelings too badly.”

I shrug, my lips pressing together as I fight a smile.

“Oh, no. He did hurt your feelings?” She shakes her head. “That boy ...”

“No, no. It wasn’t that bad. And his apology was very convincing.”

Her eyebrows lift. “An apology is a good sign.”

“He’s even taking me out for a picnic lunch in the apple orchard this afternoon.” Sweetpea bleats. “And honestly, if I get to snuggle baby goats on a regular basis, I’m happy to handle his exacting ways.”

Hannah’s expression freezes, her hand lifting to cover her mouth.

My stomach drops. “What? What did I say?”

She clears her throat. “*Perry* is taking you out for a picnic?”

“Yes? Is that ... should I be scared about that?”

“No, no,” she rushes to say. “It’s wonderful. I’m sure you’ll have a lovely time.”

Sweetpea squirms, and I shift, leaning over the edge of the stall to place her back in the hay.

“Lila, honey, are you single?” Hannah asks. “You mentioned a son. I don’t want to presume, but ...”

“I’m single,” I say quickly. “Widowed, actually. Jack’s dad was a pilot in the Navy. He was killed in a training exercise a few years ago.”

Her expression softens. “I’m sorry to hear that.” She takes a step forward and reaches for my hands, holding them both in hers. “It seems especially unfair that someone as young as you are should have to weather such a storm.” She squeezes my hands, and I squeeze hers right back. I’ve only just met the woman, but it’s clear her kindness is genuine.

She reaches up and smooths my hair, a gesture that, from anyone else, might seem overly familiar, but from her, it just feels motherly.

“Life sometimes deals us sobering blows,” she continues. “Take Perry, for example. It’s true he’s always been exacting, a little grumpy, but it’s been so much worse since his divorce. That woman, she stole the light right out of him.”

I bite my tongue, wondering if I should mention the email about Perry’s reunion.

“But he’ll find it again,” Hannah continues. “That light. And when he does, he’ll make someone really happy. I truly believe that.”

My heart starts pounding in my chest. Is she telling me this because she senses I might be that someone? I barely keep myself from throwing my arm in the air and yelling, *I volunteer as tribute! Me! Pick me!*

Instead, I smile warmly, channeling my cool-as-a-cucumber inner zen. *Just kidding.* I have no inner zen. I might as well be

lapping at Hannah's heels like a lost puppy who has finally found home.

"I hope he does," I say, my tone oh-so-chill. "He deserves to be happy. We all do." I add this last part to make it clear I'm talking generally. I have no reason to be *specifically* concerned with Perry's happiness. Absolutely no reason at all.

Hannah eyes me. "You deserve it too, Lila."

*Oh my.* That did not feel general. Is she actually trying to tell me something? But *no.* She can't be. We just met. She wouldn't be thinking—

I almost jump at the sound of a new voice. A deep voice. A voice belonging to a man I can only pray didn't hear any of that conversation.

"I thought I might find you here," Perry says.

I spin around, tripping over Hannah's foot so that she has to reach out and grab me, her hands latching onto either shoulder to stabilize me. "Perry," I say, my eyes darting to Hannah.

She gives her head the tiniest shake as if to say I have nothing to worry about.

"The reports are finished," I say quickly, not wanting to look like I was slacking off. "And then I tried to get connected to the Wi-Fi so I could check my email and—"

"And then I stole her," Hannah says. "I had a computer issue she helped me sort out, then I thought little Sweetpea here could use some socializing."

"I'm sure it was completely coincidental that you made your way to the farmhouse this morning," Perry says, shooting his mother a knowing look.

I look from him to Hannah and back again, not entirely sure what's happening.

Hannah only shrugs. "I have as much right to be at the farmhouse as anyone else," she says with a casual wave of her hand.

“Mmhmm. I’m sure that’s all this was.” Perry crosses to where we’re standing and leans into the goat stall, scooping Sweetpea into his arms.

Because, you know, he needed something else to make him attractive. The hair and the muscles and the eyes aren’t enough. Now he’s going to carry around baby farm animals, snuggling them close to his chest, and—*oh my word*.

Did he just KISS the baby goat in his arms?! Does he *know* what he’s doing to me?

Hannah nudges me with her elbow. “You’re staring, honey,” she whispers under her breath. “Rein it in.”

I press my lips together and throw my eyes to the wood slats overhead, forcing a few slow, intentional breaths. I’m fine. *JUST FINE*.

“Are you getting hungry?” Perry asks over the top of Sweetpea’s head.

“Mmhmm,” I mumble, still not trusting myself with words.

Perry eyes me before his gaze shifts to his mom. “Do you need her for anything else? Or can I steal her back?”

*Oh, please steal me back. Steal me so we can ride off into the sunset like in those old Westerns Grandpa Jamison likes to watch.*

“Son, you need her a lot more than I do,” Hannah says, giving Perry a look that can *only* mean one thing.

This is not happening.

I am not standing here in the Hawthorne family barn, listening to Hannah Hawthorne joke about her oldest son *needing* me, of all people.

Perry shoots his mom a look I can’t read, his jaw tensing, before lowering Sweetpea back into her stall. He turns to me like nothing in the whole wide world is out of the ordinary. “Ready to go?”

Hannah smiles. “It was nice to meet you, Lila. Hopefully we’ll be seeing more of you around the farm.”

“Mom,” Perry says. “That’s enough.”

Hannah only chuckles and holds up her hands. “Enough of what?”

I follow Perry out of the barn, stopping next to the Gator he must have driven to find me. “Sorry to disappear on you,” I say as I climb in beside him.

“Sorry about my mom,” he says gruffly as he starts the engine on the Gator. “She means well, but she ...” His words trail off, and he shakes his head. “Anyway. I hope she didn’t say anything to make you uncomfortable.”

I lift my shoulders in what I hope looks like a casual shrug. “I think she’s wonderful.” I don’t even try to hide the wistfulness in my tone. I’d take a meddling mama over an absent one any day.

Perry pauses and looks at me, almost like he’s looking *through* me, and his expression softens.

Am I really so transparent?

The reality is, I’d do just about anything to have the kind of family that Perry clearly has. Parents who are still married and fully invested in the happiness of their children. Siblings who speak highly of one another, who are *friends* even when they don’t have to be.

I was loved. Cherished, even. But belonging to one or two people is different than belonging to a whole tribe. I want Jack to have siblings. To have a whole village of people he can lean and rely on.

“She is pretty wonderful,” Perry says. The words are simple, but his tone says so much more. He gets it. He understands the magic of what he has, and he won’t take it for granted.

“I’m beginning to sense it runs in the family,” I say lightly, shooting Perry a coy look.

His cheeks pink the slightest bit, and he clears his throat and looks away, but not before I see a tiny smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

It’s scary how much I want to see that smile again.

Even scarier how much I want to be the reason behind it.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lila

PERRY TURNS THE GATOR toward the orchard we drove through yesterday when we hiked up to the ledge. This time, instead of climbing, he keeps us closer to the level land near the bottom of the orchard.

After my conversation with Hannah, I am hyperaware of Perry beside me. The way he smells, the way the light catches on the copper hairs in his beard. The way the brown of his eyes looks lighter—more golden—out here than it does inside.

I curl my palms over my knees and force my eyes to the surrounding landscape. I have to think of something else. *Notice* something besides the man next to me, or I'm going to keep staring at him, and that will only make things weird.

We pass row after row of apple trees, moving deeper into the orchard until I can't see anything but trees in every direction. The farther we go, the smaller the trees get.

These trees are full of leaves, but they don't seem to hold any fruit. I can appreciate Perry's logic bringing us all the way out here. Apples are all picked by hand—a fact I learned yesterday that surprised me—and so the more mature half of the orchard is full of people working the harvest.

Perry cuts the engine, motioning to the trees around us. "The trees out here will start to bear fruit next fall. Cameo apples,"

he says as he climbs out of the Gator. “They’re my mom’s favorite.”

“Is there really much of a difference?”

Perry’s gaze narrows, but his expression stays light. “Those are fighting words out here.”

I grin. “I mean, I can tell a Granny Smith from a Gala, but beyond that ...”

Perry sighs and lifts a hand, stopping me as I move to get out of the Gator. “Nope. Sit back down. No lunch for you yet.”

“What?” I say on a laugh.

He climbs in beside me. “We’re making a slight detour first.”

I settle back into my seat and fold my arms across my chest. “You know, starving me yesterday didn’t work out very well.”

He tosses me a smirk. “I’ll take my chances. I know how to handle ... crab apples.”

“Oh man, Perry. That was really bad.”

His mouth twitches, but he doesn’t smile. “Come on. Buckle up. I’ve got a point to prove, and I can hear your stomach rumbling from here.”

“Then just feed me, you monster,” I say, swatting his arm, my fingers (conveniently) lingering just long enough to confirm that *yes*, his flannel is unbelievably soft.

“Nope.” Perry eases the Gator in between a row of trees, moving opposite the direction we originally came from. “You’re earning your lunch today.” He shoots me another look. “Boss’s orders.”

A surge of heat pulses deep in my gut, and a blush creeps up my cheeks. Maybe he didn’t mean to get me all hot and bothered combining his *bossiness* with such a heated look, but *good grief* I can’t think straight with him carrying on like this.

Perry stops the Gator between a couple of fully matured apple trees and hops out, grabbing an apple from the lower branches of each of the two trees. He jumps back into his seat

and pulls a small, folding knife from his pocket. He opens the blade and slices it cleanly into the first apple, cutting out a perfect wedge.

I had no idea cutting fruit with a pocketknife could be so sexy. But then, maybe it's not so much the pocketknife as it is the ownership. Perry knows this orchard. This farm. And that stirs something in me. Respect, but also longing.

Still, the fear in the back of my brain has me remembering Hannah's words from earlier. *Rein it in*. She meant my staring, but I probably ought to apply it generally. I could be reading this situation all wrong, turning what could be a very casual business lunch between coworkers into something it absolutely isn't meant to be.

But then Perry lifts the slice of apple to my lips. He doesn't just *hand* me the fruit. He feeds it to me, his fingers right next to my mouth, brushing my lips as he places the apple slice on my tongue.

"Close your eyes," he says gently. "Focus on the taste right when it hits your tongue."

I am *not* imagining things.

I can't be. Even with my limited experience, I recognize the warmth in Perry's eyes.

I focus on the very basic task of chewing, tasting, swallowing the apple. I keep my eyes closed, willing myself to focus on the taste instead of Perry's proximity.

"Okay, remember that taste. Think about it."

I open my eyes and nod. "Thinking. Noting. Okay. I'm good."

"Ready for the next one?"

I close my eyes again, parting my lips as he offers me a second bite.

Flavor explodes on my tongue, and I let out a little gasp, my eyes popping open. "It's completely different!"

He smiles, the creases deepening around his eyes. "Why?"

I'm still not used to the full force of that smile—it really is worth a million dollars—and it takes me a moment to answer. I swallow, bringing the flavor of the first apple back to my mind, which is a challenge considering all the other sensory things that are going on here. Perry's touch. His proximity. The heat of his gaze. *Apples, Lila. Think. Apples.* "It's sweeter," I say. "Not as tart as the last one."

He nods. "Good."

"Good?" I raise my brows. "I didn't realize this was a test."

He shifts into drive and moves us through the trees. "Tell me something you love. Something you're good at."

I'm not sure what he's getting at, but I'll play along. "Okay. Um, I like to sing. And play the piano."

"Really?"

"You sound surprised." A shadow of trepidation flits through me, but I will it away. Just because Trevor thought my love for music was silly doesn't mean everyone else will too.

"Not surprised. Just impressed."

*Impressed.* Such an easy thing for him to say. And he seems like he means it, too.

"Okay, so imagine you're hanging out with someone who insists that music is basically all the same. Genre is irrelevant. A song is a song. If you've heard one, you've heard them all."

I cringe, and Perry shoots me a knowing look.

"Fine, fine, you've made your point. But are you saying that if I try these apples and still feel like they all taste the same, you'll stop hanging out with me? Will I lose my job?"

He lifts his shoulders in a playful shrug as if weighing the pros and cons. "I'd *probably* let you keep your job. But virtual only. Definitely no picnics in the orchard."

"Well now you've told me too much. I love a good picnic. You've given me a reason to lie."

He stops the Gator. "Nah. I watched your expression when you tasted the last apple. I know genuine bliss when I see it."

*Ha!* Joke's on him. He could have been feeding me snail poop and I'd have had the same look on my face. The apples *are* delicious, but the bliss I'm feeling has a lot more to do with him.

Perry jumps out again, grabbing two more apples like he did before. I could watch him do this all day. *Apple. Knife. Slice. Repeat.* You know. As long as he's also *feeding* me the apples.

This time, he hands the apple slice to me, and a tiny pulse of disappointment fills my chest. But then he holds up a scolding finger. "Don't eat that yet."

I grin, not caring the tiniest bit that he's bossing me around. This is Perry's territory, and I'm happy to let him take the lead.

As he slices the second apple, I notice a scar on the back of his hand, running from the knuckle of his pointer finger past his thumb, nearly to his wrist. Without thinking, I reach out and trace my finger along the scar. "When did that happen?"

"The fourth grade," he says easily—so easily I wonder if the touch impacted him the same way it did me. "Dad was teaching me how to use a pocketknife, and I got cocky." He closes his knife and lifts his hand, flexing his fingers. "Thirteen stitches." He takes the first apple slice back from me so he's holding them both and lifts the first one to my lips. "Okay. Same drill. Eyes closed," he says, in the sexy, commanding tone I'm beginning to *really* love. "It's the first impression that matters the most."

I take a bite, my lips brushing against his thumb. *Focus on the fruit. Focus on the fruit. Focus on the fruit.*

"Okay, this one is the mildest of the three I've tasted." I open my eyes to see him studying me. "Almost no tartness. But it isn't overly sweet either. It tastes like honey."

"You're good at this." He pops the last half of the apple slice in his mouth. Like the two of us sharing food is no big deal. Like he has no idea how much he's affecting me. How close I am to unraveling.

I grin. "Give me the last one."

Perry lifts the last slice to my mouth. I keep my eyes open this time—a smart decision because watching him might be the most intoxicating part of this little game we’re playing. I immediately groan. “Oh. This one is my favorite.” I lift my hand to cover my lips as I chew.

Perry smiles. “I thought it might be.”

“What kind is it?” I reach over and grab the other half from his fingers, popping it into my mouth before he can eat it. Perry laughs before cutting another slice and handing it over.

“Mutsu,” he says. “It’s my favorite too.”

“Mutsu. I’ve never even heard of that one. What were the others?”

He uses the tip of his knife to point to the other three apples sitting on the dash of the Gator. “Cameo, Jonagold, Crimson Crisp.”

“Okay, so here’s a question for you, Mr. Apple Know-it-all,” I say. “If *you* were to close your eyes, and I made you taste these one by one, could you name them? Identify which is which?”

He doesn’t even hesitate. “Absolutely.”

“You sure you don’t mean apple-solutely?” I say through a smirk.

He shakes his head and folds his arms across his chest in a way that draws my eyes to his biceps. “Low-hanging fruit, Lila.”

I gasp. “*THAT* was low-hanging fruit!”

He only grins before shifting the Gator into drive and easing us forward. I slice up the rest of the Mutsu apple as we drive, handing a few slices to Perry, wishing it wouldn’t be awkward for me to feed him the same way he fed me. But I like this too. Eating in easy, comfortable silence.

Seeing Perry out here in the orchard, in control of his space, knowledgeable and passionate about his livelihood, it’s the last nudge I need to start falling.

Whether I think it's a good idea or not.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Perry

I DID NOT DRIVE into the orchard expecting to take a thirty-minute taste-testing detour. I *really* didn't expect to hand-feed Lila slices of apple. I'm not even sure what came over me. But I think she liked it. *Really* liked it. Not even Lennox could have written a better script for how things went. For a minute, it almost seemed like I have *game*.

Maybe I'm not as rusty at this whole dating thing as I thought.

But then, there's something about Lila that puts me at ease. I spent so much time trying to be exactly what Jocelyn wanted me to be. But with Lila—it's like she has zero expectations. She's just happy to be with me.

Once we're back to the lunch spot I originally picked out, we work together to spread out the picnic blanket, then I haul out the basket Lennox packed for us. "I actually have no idea what's in here," I say as I open it up, shifting it toward Lila.

"Did Lennox pack it?" she asks, her hope obvious.

"You ask that like you've met him."

"I haven't, but you did have me proofread his menu. Don't hate me for being a teeny bit excited about the possibility of eating his food. I mean, the man's reputation definitely precedes him."



Something like jealousy swarms in my chest, but that's nothing new. I'm never jealous of Lennox's ability to cook. I'm *usually* jealous of Lennox's ability to make and keep friends. To have women scrambling for the opportunity to even just talk to him. It's never been that easy for me to talk to people.

Not until now, I realize. Though I'm pretty sure that has nothing to do with me and everything to do with Lila.

"What do we have?" I say, as I watch Lila unpack the food.

"A couple of sandwiches, but they look fancy. Ohh! They're on croissants. And then—" She pulls a container out of the cooler and lifts the edge, holding it up to her nose. "Ohh, this smells delicious. Some kind of potato salad, maybe? And then some cookies?"

"Almond pillow cookies," I say, looking into the container Lila opens and sets on the blanket between us. "He's famous for those."

"Famous for cookies?"

She immediately lifts a cookie and takes a bite, leaving a tiny dab of powdered sugar on her lip that I immediately want to brush off. Or kiss off, which is a startling thought. That would be going way too fast, but feeding Lila apples was like a gateway drug, and now I can't stop thinking about *more*.

The fact that I'm thinking about anything at all feels big. I've been numb for so many years, but Lila is waking me up.

"Oh my word," she says on a groan. "These are ridiculous."

"Not worried about spoiling your lunch, huh?"

She takes another bite of the cookie and hands me the unfinished half. "I've always wondered about the logic behind that expression. It's not as if the nutritional value of the actual lunch diminishes if we eat our dessert first."

I polish off the last of her cookie in one bite. "I like your way of thinking. But here," I say, reaching toward her. "You've got a little ..." My hand hovers inches away from her lip. I *want* to touch her, but not if she doesn't want me to.

“What? What is it?” She leans toward my hand—that’s permission enough for me—and I brush the pad of my thumb across her bottom lip.

“Powdered sugar,” I say, my touch lingering a second longer than necessary. This close, I can see the flecks of navy that pepper her sky-blue eyes.

I hear her breath catch as she leans back, then see her visibly swallow, which somehow makes me feel better. Maybe I’m not the only one with fire coursing through my veins.

We dig into the food, which helps alleviate some of the tension brewing, something I think we both need. Chemistry or not, I’m not making a move on Lila—at least not more than I already did when I decided to hand-feed her apple slices. We’ve both got reasons to take things slow.

Every bite of lunch is delicious. I don’t care how much my brother annoys me; this food can only be helping my cause.

We don’t talk about anything too important while we eat. The conversation is comfortable and easy, which is becoming the norm with Lila. It helps that she’s so inquisitive, asking questions about the orchard (How do we choose what varieties of apple we grow? How long does it take for an apple to fully mature?) and what it was like to grow up in such a big family.

It isn’t until we polish off the last of the almond pillow cookies that Lila leans back onto her hands, her legs stretched out in front of her, and looks at me like she has something important to say.

“I need to tell you something,” she says.

“Now would be a good time. I’m full and happy. We’ve got about fifteen minutes before I remember to be grouchy again.”

She laughs lightly. “The thing is, I’ve heard you *say* you’re grouchy more than once, but you don’t really come across that way. Not to me.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Not ever?”

She purses her lips. “Okay. Our first online conversation, you were a little cold. And yesterday in the field, I wanted to

punch you in the nose when you dismissed my suggestions. But most of the time? You're a pretty nice guy, Perry. Like it or not."

"What is it they say about nice guys finishing last?" *Or losing the girl.*

My jaw clenches, but I shake the tension away. I don't regret losing Jocelyn. Not anymore.

Lila shakes her head. "It's not true. Not in the ways that truly matter."

My eyes are down, focused on the stitching in the picnic blanket Lennox left with the basket. It's the same one Mom used when we were kids. I don't know where he found it, but I'm glad he did. "Maybe ..." I say slowly, too nervous to lift my gaze to hers. "You make me want to be a nice guy."

She's shaking her head when I look up, but I don't miss the smile spreading across her face or the color filling her cheeks. "You hardly know me, Perry."

"Okay," I say boldly. Hopefully not too boldly? "What do you want me to know?"

She winces and bites her lip. "Um, hold that thought? Because I actually *do* need to tell you something. And it might make you change your mind." She barrels on before I have the chance to reply. "Remember when you asked me to respond to the woman emailing about the reunion? I did respond and declined the invite. But the woman emailed again this morning. And it's pretty personal. Personal enough that I know it's your ex-wife who has been writing the messages."

I heave out a sigh, but I'm not surprised that Jocelyn messaged again. I don't even need to read the email to guess at its tone, especially if it made Lila feel like she needed to tell me about it. Jocelyn has always had a manipulative edge to her. Which is the *nicest* way I can currently think of to characterize my ex-wife. I can think of a slew of other ways, none fit for any kind of company, especially the company of the woman I'm currently trying to impress. But I promised my therapist I'd stop dwelling on Jocelyn's more frustrating

qualities and try to leave the past in the past, appreciating the good times we had together and moving on from everything else.

Some days, it's easier than others.

"What did she say?" I finally ask.

Lila pulls out her phone. "Here. I can just let you read it."

She hands me the phone, and I skim over the email. By the time I get to the end of it, all I can do is laugh. I hand the phone back. "That's very Jocelyn."

Lila frowns. "You aren't upset?"

"At you? Not at all. I'm sorry you got roped into this drama. I shouldn't have asked you to respond in the first place."

Lila bites her lip. "But, it isn't true, is it? You aren't still wallowing and missing her? That's not why you aren't going to the reunion."

I run a hand through my hair. I don't mind that Lila asked, I just have no idea how to answer. Rehashing the reasons for a divorce isn't exactly first date material, and I'm not even sure I can call this a date. I'd really rather *not* talk about something that might keep an *actual* first date from happening.

"I'm not wallowing," I finally say. "I'm not going to say the divorce wasn't awful, but I don't have any regrets about our marriage ending. But you have to understand, this is how Jocelyn works. She tried to make my *attending* the reunion about her. When it became clear I wasn't going to, she decided she'd need to make my *not* attending about her. Either way, she controls the narrative, which has always been her end goal."

"Doesn't that make you mad?"

I shrug. "If I think about it too hard. Generally, I just don't. Which is why I don't want to go to the reunion."

Lila shifts so her knees are under her and she's sitting back on her heels. She looks poised for action, which makes me suddenly nervous. "No," she says. "I don't like this at all."

I lift my eyebrows.

“Perry, you have to go. She’s probably going to tell everyone all these lies about why you aren’t there. She can’t get away with that.”

I sigh. “You sound like my mom.”

Lila nods. “I knew I liked her.”

“Look. I appreciate the thought. I do. But trust me. It isn’t worth the effort. Not with Jocelyn. She always finds a way to twist things.”

“Are there other people who will be there who you might like to see?”

I think about all the guys from the football team. A few of them still live in town, but most have moved away. Silver Creek isn’t exactly a hotbed of business and industry. It’s hard for people to stick around. It would be nice to see them. “Maybe,” I finally admit. “A few.”

“Then you have to go.”

“It’s not that simple.”

She takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders, her lips pressed together in a show of determination that immediately impresses me. “What if I go with you?”

My heart jumps at the thought.

“As your date,” she finishes. “Then Jocelyn can’t say anything at all. Because you won’t be there alone.”

The idea is not a terrible one, but it’s possible I’m being unreasonably swayed by the fact that technically, Lila just asked me on a date. Her motivations are suspect—this could be altruism and nothing more—but maybe it *is* something more.

“My date, huh?” I ask. I’m totally digging, but I don’t even care.

She smiles. “Come on. Don’t pretend like you weren’t planning on asking me out at the end of today.”

Heat flushes my cheeks, though she's not wrong. I don't know why I feel embarrassed that she figured me out. "Am I really that obvious?"

"I mean, I can't really imagine you hand-feeding apples to your mom."

*This woman.* I chuckle and shake my head before rubbing a hand across my beard. "A high school reunion isn't much of a date, Lila. Especially since I know my ex-wife will be there. She'll try and talk to you, and there's no guarantee she won't be unkind."

"Perry," Lila says gently. "The first time I met you in person, my five-year-old asked me *out loud in front of you* if you could be his stepdad, and you didn't fire me. I think I can handle an encounter with your ex-wife."

Something about the set of Lila's shoulders says she almost *wants* to handle an encounter with my ex-wife. Like she's ready to be my champion, go in and slay all the dragons on my behalf.

Why is this mental image such a turn-on?

"It's an overnight thing," I say slowly. "Up in Asheville. An evening dinner party with drinks and karaoke, and then a breakfast the next morning. And it's next weekend. You have Jack, Lila. Please don't stress about trying to make this work."

She waves away my concern. "No, I want to. It'll be fine. I can take Jack down to see his grandparents in Columbia. Honestly, he's due for a visit anyway."

"And they'll be fine with you scheduling a visit this last minute?"

"Are you kidding? His grandmother literally texts every week begging me to bring him down. It'll work. I promise it'll work."

"You're sure?"

"Call me crazy, but I think it sounds like fun. I love karaoke, and if we happen to give Jocelyn a little taste of her own medicine? I won't complain."

Weirdly, it *does* sound like fun, which says a lot about Lila. Because if she can make me excited about a voluntary encounter with Jocelyn? That can't be anything but magic.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lila

I PACE AROUND MY living room with my heart in my throat and my overnight bag on the couch behind me. The house seems too quiet without Jack here, which isn't helping me feel any less anxious.

Jack is fine. With his grandparents in Columbia and probably getting spoiled rotten. He's stayed with them overnight before, so I know he'll be okay until Trevor's parents drive him back to Hendersonville tomorrow afternoon. I'm just not used to having so much silence to fill with my own thoughts.

And right now, my thoughts are *loud*.

A month ago, I was swooning over my new boss's picture and giggling over the idea of working for someone one very close degree of separation away from famous Flint Hawthorne.

Now, I'm pacing around my living room waiting for Perry to pick me up for an *overnight* date to an event at which his ex-wife will also be in attendance. (Yes, date. I'm wearing shapewear so no matter what Perry thinks about the reunion not counting—IT COUNTS.) There are so many things to process. So many reasons to freak out.

Seized by sudden impulse, I move to my kitchen table and pull out a chair, sitting down to evaluate the stretchability of



my shapewear. So far, I haven't done a solid sit test. I wiggle back and forth and try to imagine how this will feel after eating an entire meal. So far, so good. I'm really only wearing it to keep the underwear lines hidden in my—*ahem*—very curvaceous dress, if I do say so myself, and it's managing that quite nicely. Plus, it's moving with me pretty well, and sitting doesn't make me feel like I'm suffocating, so I'm calling this late-night Instagram impulse purchase a win.

I stand up and start pacing again, one hand pressed to my stomach. If nothing else, I can kill time reliving all the little moments that have consumed me over the past nine days. The picnic, of course, since that's where everything started, but there's been so much more since then. Long looks. Tiny, intentional touches across Perry's desk. Random texts that have nothing to do with work. It's all been very friendly. A little flirty, maybe, but nothing that would truly raise any eyebrows. At least not to anyone observing from the outside.

But between us? Every touch has felt like fire, every look so filled with anticipation, it's a wonder we managed to get any work done.

A knock sounds on the door behind me, and I spin around, my heart hammering even faster than it already was, which is saying something.

I force a calming breath.

I can do this.

Everything is *fine*.

"You've got this, Lila," I say as I move toward the door.

The sight of Perry on my doorstep does very strange things to my body. I've never seen him wearing anything besides work jeans and flannel. Now, he's dressed for a party. Dark dress pants and a slim-fitting button down, the top few buttons undone. He isn't wearing a tie, but he doesn't need one. His clothes are perfect. Like they were tailored just for him.

I suddenly feel shabby in the midnight-blue dress I pulled out of the back of my closet, no matter my fantastic non-constrictive shapewear. I should have bought something new.

Something that would make me look like I belong standing next to a man this impossibly perfect.

“Um, hi,” I finally say, my voice sounding stupidly breathy and light. I quickly step back. “Come in. Glad you found the place.”

Perry steps inside, making my very tiny house feel even tinier. I’ve never actually seen a fully grown man inside these walls.

His eyes skate over me, and panic starts clawing up my throat. He hates the dress. Does he hate the dress? “What’s wrong? Is it the color?” I ask, looking down at my dress. “Does it look like I’m going to a funeral? I wasn’t sure how fancy I needed—”

“Lila,” he says gently, taking a step toward me and shutting the door behind him. He pushes his hands into his pockets. “Your dress is perfect. You look beautiful.”

“Oh.” *Perfect. Beautiful.* I could get used to all these adjectives. “Okay. Let me just grab my—” My words cut off when my phone rings from where it’s sitting on the end table next to the couch. I glance at the screen to see Miranda Templeton’s name across the top. “Actually, I need to take this. This is Jack’s grandma. Just sit a minute.”

I motion to my couch, but then I look closer and immediately regret it. On one end, there’s a massive pile of Jack’s matchbox cars. On the other, there’s a *People Magazine* with Flint Hawthorne’s face on the cover. AWESOME.

I lunge for the magazine. Perry can work out how to sit on the matchbox cars on his own. The last thing I want him to think is that I sit around reading articles, or worse, staring at pictures of his famous (and famously handsome) brother. I grab the magazine and toss it into the narrow gap between the couch and the wall before answering my phone.

*Nothing to see here! Move along! Move along!*

“Hello, Miranda. Is everything all right?” I ask, watching Perry out of the corner of my eye.

His lips twitch as he shifts Jack's cars to the side, but otherwise, he doesn't react. Except, he's *going* to react if I don't—I shift my phone to my other hand and reach over to grab a miniature ambulance before Perry can impale himself with it.

I barely make it, his butt grazing my arm on his way down. I hold up the ambulance like it's some kind of trophy, then realize what I'm doing and toss it behind the couch with the *People Magazine*.

"Everything's fine, dear," Miranda says. "I just wondered why you didn't pack the tennis outfit I bought for Jack last month."

I cringe. "Oh, did I forget? You know, I think it's in the wash," I lie. "I'm sorry about that."

She sighs into the phone. "Well, I suppose I can just buy him a new set. Maybe I'll keep it down here for next time so we'll always have it on hand."

"Miranda, he grows so fast. I'm not sure that's a good idea. He can just play tennis in the clothes I packed for him."

"Not if he's ever going to be a professional," she says, and I almost laugh at how serious she sounds. "He has to dress the part, Lila. He'll take it more seriously if he's wearing the proper attire."

I roll my eyes. Jack is a lot of adorable things. A tennis prodigy is not one of them. I mean, he's only five, so I guess stranger things have happened. But the last time I watched him play, he wouldn't stop using his racket to catch the lizards crawling over the azalea bushes beside the court.

I know Jack's grandmother well enough to realize I'm not going to win this argument, and honestly, if it's not *my* money she wants to waste on overpriced tennis clothes for a completely uninterested five-year-old, do I really care? "Whatever you think is best," I finally say.

"Wonderful," Miranda says. "Jack, would you like to go get some ice cream? We'll do a little shopping on our way." *Ha*. Shopping with Jack? On the one hand, Miranda isn't going to

have nearly as much fun as she thinks she is. Jack likes shopping about as well as he likes going to the dentist. On the other hand, she's probably going to blame *me* if he misbehaves in the store. He might do all right if there's the promise of ice cream at the end. Either way, there's nothing I can do about it now.

"Thanks again, Miranda. You guys have fun."

I drop the phone into my lap with a sigh.

"That sounded like a fun conversation," Perry says.

"Did you know that five-year-olds who wear very special and expensive outfits while playing tennis are zero percent more likely to become tennis pros?"

Perry nods seriously. "I'm guessing Jack's grandma doesn't agree with your research?"

"Not even a little. But hey. It's her money."

Perry leans back, stretching his arm across my sofa and looking way too comfortable. "So. Should I be offended you threw my brother's face behind your couch?"

I wince. "I really hoped you didn't see that."

"I mean, at least you tossed an ambulance back there to keep him company. The EMTs can dress his wounds if anything happened to his very pretty face."

This last part almost feels like a dig. Like he's teasing me for having pictures of his brother in my house. Which, I can't really blame him. Except the only reason I have the magazine in the first place is because of him.

I press my lips together. "I bought that magazine because of you, you dummy."

He lifts an eyebrow.

"I don't generally read *People*. But I saw it right after I started working for you, when you were still responding to my messages with one- or two-word sentences. I was trying to learn a little more about you."

"Did it work?"

“Not at all. In a four-page spread, Flint didn’t mention his family a single time.”

Perry leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. “I’m sure it was intentional. The farm is a public place. We already have people showing up on a regular basis, just hoping to catch a glimpse of where he grew up. And that’s with him hardly talking about any of us.”

It’s funny. When I first started working for Perry, it was thrilling to think that at some point, I might have the chance to meet Flint Hawthorne in person. But that thrill has dimmed over the last few weeks. The more I get to know Perry, the more certain I’m becoming: he’s all the Hawthorne I need.

“Lucky for me, I don’t need magazine articles to get to know you now. I finally cracked your stony exterior with my sparkling wit and—”

“Ridiculous puns?” he finishes.

“I was going to say brilliant puns, but I’ll allow the substitution.”

I reach over and give his knee a quick squeeze. “What do you say? Should we get out of here? I hear there’s a happening party over in Asheville.”

He gives his head a little shake and chuckles. “I’m still not sure this is a good idea.”

“Come on. It’s going to be great.” I stand up and hold out my hand. “I poured myself into this dress, Perry. I can’t let all that effort go to waste.”

He takes my hand and lets me pull him up, but then he stops, tugging me back toward him. His hand slips around my waist, and suddenly, I’m standing against him, one hand holding his while the other is pressed against his chest.

He leans forward, his lips close to my ear. “Nothing about this dress has gone to waste,” he says slowly, *deliciously*.

His words send goosebumps skittering across my skin.

“Perry Hawthorne, I think you’re flirting with me.”

He lets me go and picks up my overnight bag, heading for the door. “You started it,” he calls over his shoulder.

I gasp. “How did I start it?”

He pauses and turns, the full force of his smile slamming into me like a truck. “You put on that dress.”



The Grove Park Inn is nestled into a mountainside in the heart of downtown Asheville. And it is stunning. Fireplaces big enough to stand up in. Luxurious lounge areas. Elaborate gardens and gorgeous hotel rooms and valet parking. It’s a lot. More than I’m used to.

I’m nervous when I climb out of Perry’s truck, but Perry looks cool as a cucumber. Like he’s done this a thousand times before. I even watch him slip a tip to the valet with so much smoothness that had I not been specifically watching, I would have missed it.

It suddenly occurs to me that I know very little about Perry’s life *before* he moved back home to Stonebrook Farm. When he was consulting, was this the kind of thing he did with Jocelyn often? Go to places where valet parking was the norm? Where they wore fancy clothes and drank fancy drinks and had important conversations with important people?

Dressed like he is now, Perry looks the part. But he also looks perfectly at home at Stonebrook wearing flannel and feeding me apples straight off the tree. I wonder if there’s a version of himself Perry prefers the most. If he misses his former life.

I wait while Perry checks us in and passes our bags to a bellboy who will presumably deliver them to our rooms, then we cross through the posh lobby and approach the ballroom where the reunion is taking place. There’s a table just outside the room where several women are checking clipboards and handing out name tags.

Perry’s steps slow, and I sense his entire body tensing beside me. I follow his gaze to a striking blond woman standing behind the table. She’s holding a clipboard and has an air

about her that says she's in charge. Combined with Perry's reaction, it's all the evidence I need to know that the insanely beautiful woman in front of us is Jocelyn.

Any confidence I've pretended to feel regarding Perry having fully and completely gotten over his ex-wife vaporizes into the air. Jocelyn is *stunning*. Tall. Slender. Shiny, frizzless hair. Perfectly contoured cheekbones. She's wearing a very small black dress revealing legs that reach all the way up to her armpits.

I ... cannot do this. My steps falter, and I grab onto Perry's arm, then tug him around a giant wooden pillar so we're hidden from view. "I changed my mind," I say. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Perry frowns. "What happened? What's wrong?"

I shake my head and lean it against the cool wood behind me. "Nothing. It's just ... the music feels really loud, don't you think?" The music *does* seem loud—the bass thumping through the ballroom walls and filtering out to the lobby where we're standing, though I've never been one to shirk away from a party before.

But this is different.

"You don't want to go because of the music?"

I don't want to go because his ex-wife looks like she could star in his brother's next box office hit. There's real-world attractive, and there's Hollywood attractive. And Jocelyn is one-hundred percent Hollywood attractive.

I peek around the corner, looking at her one more time, and Perry follows my gaze. "That's her, isn't it?" I ask.

He rubs a hand down his face. "That's her."

"Perry, she's not going to believe you're actually here with me. She's *stunning*. You were married to *her*, and now you're here with me? No. No one is going to buy it." I realize as the words come out of my mouth that I sound like I'm fishing for compliments.

"Lila—"

I hold up my hand. “I don’t need you to tell me I’m pretty, Perry. I’m just being a realist here. I know I’m not terrible to look at. But she is *exquisite*.”

Perry leans against the pillar beside me and folds his arms over his chest. “A couple things,” he says, “and I’m going to say them in order of importance, so you better pay attention.” He nudges me with his elbow, and I smile. “Are you listening?” he asks.

I roll my eyes, but secretly I’m loving that he brought out bossy Perry. “I’m listening.”

“First, you are so much more than *not terrible to look at*. You’re beautiful. And the more I’ve gotten to know you, the more beautiful you’ve become. Which is significant because Jocelyn—and this is point number two—is *only* beautiful until she opens her mouth. You get to know her? She gets ugly really quick.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks. It’s been a long time since someone has complimented me so openly. Not since before I started dating Trevor. Well, that’s not entirely true. There was a two-year stretch before I got pregnant with Jack when I mostly lived on saltine crackers and lemon water in an effort to fit into a dress Trevor encouraged me to buy for one of his military balls. I dropped twenty-five pounds and fit into the dress, high on the compliments my husband was suddenly delivering with unprecedented frequency.

I was also starving.

When I found out I was pregnant with Jack, I’d never been so happy to have a reason to eat like a human again.

Trevor tried, after Jack was born, to coax me back down to the size six I’d been for a very brief moment in time. But by then, I had someone else to live for. Jack needed me healthy more than Trevor needed me skinny.

“Now, if you want to leave,” Perry continues, “we can walk out of here right now, hit the burger joint down the street, and sneak back into the hotel and spend the evening watching bad



television and eating overpriced Peanut M&Ms out of the minibar.”

I chuckle. “That doesn’t sound half bad.”

“But if the only reason you don’t want to go in there is because you don’t think you measure up to that woman?” He shakes his head. “You’re wrong, Lila. So wrong. I’ll be the luckiest guy in the room tonight. And I won’t be the only one who thinks so.”

“Now you’re just talking nonsense.”

“I’m really not though. I don’t know how to—” He shakes his head like he’s trying to find the right word. “To schmooze. To be anything but honest with people. It’s why I’m so terrible at small talk. I’m not very good at pretending a conversation—or even a person—isn’t boring.”

“We make small talk all the time.”

He shrugs. “You’re never boring.”

“You do tell it like it is, don’t you?”

“Always.” He winces like he isn’t happy about his answer. “Even when it isn’t a good thing. But I’m trying to work on that. On being kind instead of always being right.”

“Nah, I like that I can take you at your word.” I take a deep breath and stand up a little taller, my insecurities yielding their grip the tiniest bit.

“You okay?” he says, reaching for my hand.

I nod and lace my fingers through his, letting him tug me out from behind the pillar and toward the welcome table outside the ballroom.

Jocelyn’s eyes go wide when she sees us approaching hand in hand. I want to run again, but Perry squeezes my fingers once like he knows exactly where my mind just went, so I throw my shoulders back and go with it.

“Perry,” Jocelyn says. “When you RSVP’d for two, I just assumed you were bringing one of your brothers.”

*Well, okay then. Now I see what Perry meant about her beauty fading as soon as she opens her mouth.*

“Hi, Jocelyn.” He drops my hand and slips his arm around my waist, tugging me into his side. “This is Lila. Lila, my ex-wife, Jocelyn.”

Jocelyn makes no move to shake my hand, so I just snuggle in a little closer to Perry. Might as well take advantage while I’m here. “Hello,” I say as sweetly as I can. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Her eyes narrow, and she purses her lips as she looks down at her clipboard. “Lila is your ... date?” Jocelyn asks, her pen poised as if this is some required question she has to ask. I almost laugh at her posturing. Does she really think we can’t tell what she’s doing?

Perry tenses beside me, his fingers pressing into my side, and I squeeze him back, hoping he knows what it means. *I’m here. She’s ridiculous. I’m still not opposed to cheeseburgers and overpriced M&Ms.*

“Not just my date,” Perry says. “She’s my ...”

He pauses, an uncomfortable silence stretching forward while Jocelyn’s look grows more and more smug.

*Girlfriend. Just say it, Perry. Better yet, tell her we’re engaged and wipe that snotty look right off her face.*

I slip an arm around Perry’s waist, tucking myself even closer.

“Girlfriend!” Perry finally says, a little too loudly.

*Yes. Well done.*

“My very serious girlfriend,” Perry adds.

Jocelyn’s eyes narrow.

*Very serious girlfriend* might be pushing it, but I’m all in to sell this thing if it means Perry doesn’t have to deal with Jocelyn’s patronizing smugness. I reach over and pat his chest, smiling up at him. “We’re practically engaged.”

Jocelyn drops her clipboard, and it clatters to the table, causing the woman sitting to the left of where Jocelyn is standing to swear. “Geez, Jocelyn, be careful.”

Jocelyn shakes her head, her eyes looking anywhere but at Perry, and for a moment, I almost feel sorry for her. But then she rolls her shoulders, and her shrewd gaze turns calculating. “A girlfriend just in time for the reunion. How *convenient*.”

She clearly doesn’t believe us. Or maybe she just doesn’t *want* to believe us? Either way, I’m going to do anything I can to sell this story.

*For Perry.*

If I happen to have the best night of my life pretending I’m *practically engaged* to Perry freaking Hawthorne? Well, *someone’s* got to do the job.

She turns her gaze to me. “Maybe we’ll have the chance to get to know each other a little better tonight, Lila. We can swap stories, have real girl talk.” She leans forward. “I could even give you a few pointers on how to handle *this guy*.” She points at Perry and rolls her eyes. “Trust me. You’re going to need them.”

*Oh, I hate her.*

I snuggle in a little closer. “That’s so kind of you to offer. But I think I know *exactly* how to handle him.”

Jocelyn openly scoffs but backs down when the woman sitting at the table shoots Jocelyn a wilting glare before leaning forward and offering us a wide smile. “We’re so glad you *both* could be here,” she says, her voice suddenly louder than everyone else’s. “Dinner and wine are covered. There’s a cash bar inside if you’d prefer something else. Karaoke starts at nine.”

“Thanks, Grace,” Perry says. “It’s good to see you.”

The woman’s expression softens. “Sure thing. Enjoy your evening.”

I don’t know who Grace is, but I want her to be my new best friend.

Perry keeps his arm around me as we move into the ballroom. Once inside, he settles for holding my hand as we weave through the tables. At first, I think Perry is just trying to get us to one of the still-empty tables in the back of the ballroom, but then he passes several empty ones, and I half-wonder if we're making a break for it. We do, in fact, go straight out a side door into a dimly lit garden. Only then does Perry stop and drop my hand.

He lifts a palm to his forehead before spinning around, his eyes full of anguish. "I'm so sorry, Lila. I don't know what came over me. She was just so smug and dismissive, and—"

"Hey," I say, stepping closer. "Whoa. Calm down a sec."

"I shouldn't have done that."

I breathe out a laugh. "Perry, I don't care."

"That I just lied and told my ex-wife you're my girlfriend?"

I shrug. "If you hadn't said it, I would have. So we pretend we're a little more serious than we are. Who cares?" I step closer and lift my hands to Perry's chest. His muscles flex under my touch, but then he relaxes into me, some of the fight draining out of his shoulders. "Put your arms around me," I say softly.

He immediately complies, his arms circling around my waist so his hands are clasped at the small of my back, but I still see the question in his eyes. "It's dark in there, but light out here," I say, "which means it's likely people can see us."

He nods. "Good thinking."

"This doesn't have to be a big deal. We already know we like each other. So we amp things up a little while we're here. It isn't a big deal."

"People might talk," he says gruffly. "Everyone here is from Silver Creek. Even if they don't still live there themselves, their parents probably still do."

I shrug. "If people talk, they talk. They're just words. Lucky for us, we get to decide what words mean something and what words don't."

He smiles the tiniest smile, and a surge of victory pings in my chest. I really like making this man smile. “I still feel stupid for getting you into this mess,” he says.

I reach up on my tiptoes and kiss the side of his jaw just in front of his ear. “I think I get to spend the entire night pretending I’m Perry Hawthorne’s *very serious* girlfriend,” I say, my lips still close to his cheek. “You know what that makes me?”

His hands shift from my back to my waist where they settle on the curve of my hips. “What?” he says, his tone low and gravely.

I smile. “That makes me the luckiest *woman* in the room.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Perry

LILA AND I WIND up eating dinner at a table near the back of the ballroom with a bunch of guys from the football team. They are the ones I wanted to come and see, and it feels good to get to talk and catch up. It feels a little weird lying to them about my relationship with Lila, but with Jocelyn making the rounds, “checking” on tables—I swear she’s been to our table five times more frequently than all the others—to make sure everyone has everything they need, we don’t really have much choice but to keep the story going.

Honestly, there are worse things. I *like* Lila. A lot. And seeing her next to Jocelyn only confirms how much I appreciate all the things that make her different. That make her *her*. It’s easy to imagine us like this for real. Talking, touching. *Together*.

The touching is a definite bonus of our spontaneous fake relationship. I have a ready excuse to keep my hands on her. My arm around her shoulder. A hand resting on her knee or on the swell of her hip.

And she isn’t holding back either. Earlier, when my friend James was telling a story about the homecoming football game our senior year, Lila curled her hand around my bicep, her fingers tracing mindless circles on my arm while she listened to James’s story.

The contact was maddening. Distracting. Tiny pinpricks of pleasure sending heat right to my gut where it's still simmering, ratcheting up my attraction to Lila at an alarming rate.

"Are you having fun?" Lila leans close as the waitstaff clear away our dessert plates.

I nod. "Thanks to you."

She smiles. "I like your football friends."

"I think they like you."

She shrugs. "It's my superpower."

"Getting football players to like you?"

"Just people in general. My Grandpa Jamison used to call me *Likable Lila*. At first, I thought it was great. That I was so good at making people happy. But then I went through this phase in high school where I worried that being *likable* really just meant being a doormat. For about six months, I became *very* opinionated."

"How did that go for you?"

"It was horrible. Turns out, when my friends would ask me where I wanted to grab dinner, I wasn't saying I was happy eating anywhere because I didn't *want* to assert myself by having an opinion. It was because I was genuinely happy eating anywhere. Most of the time, I just didn't care. Trying to make myself care was so much more stressful."

"I can't even wrap my head around what that must feel like."

"What did *you* say whenever your friends wanted to go get food?" she asks.

I look toward James. "Hey. Where did we eat whenever we went out after football games?"

James immediately rolls his eyes. "Like you ever gave us a choice. Tiny's Tacos every single week."

Lila laughs. "Why did you guys put up with him?"

“Nah, it wasn’t like that,” James says. “You want a friend who’s got your back? Perry’s got you.”

Loud laughter erupts across the room, and I look up, recognizing the sound.

Jocelyn is at the bar getting another drink, fawning over the bartender. Which isn’t like her. The fawning or the drinking. When she’s in charge of something—which happened a lot during the seven years we were married—she never drank until the event was over, and she no longer had to be her poised and polished self.

A shot of alarm races through me.

This is my fault. Showing up, flaunting a relationship when she had no idea I’d even started dating again was too much. Not that I owe her updates. But Silver Creek is a small town. Even without really wanting to know, I’ve stayed pretty up to date on Jocelyn’s romantic life.

I keep my eyes on her as she tosses back a shot, then motions for the bartender to give her another.

Lila’s gaze follows mine and settles on Jocelyn. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t look like it.”

Lila reaches over, her hand resting on my forearm. “Perry, it isn’t your fault,” she whispers.

Even distracted by Jocelyn, I still notice the burst of warmth that fills me over Lila reading my emotions so accurately. “I sprung our relationship on her,” I whisper back. “One that isn’t even real.”

“And she sent you half a dozen manipulative emails.”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t mean I have to stoop to her level.”

Lila squeezes my arm. “See? You really are a nice guy.”

We watch as Jocelyn downs another shot and leaves the bar, walking over to the stage. I hold my breath as she climbs the stairs and makes her way to the microphone. “Good evening,



Silver Creek High School Class of two thousand seven!” she practically yells.

A cheer erupts around the room before Jocelyn continues. “Now that we’ve had a nice, civilized, adult dinner, it’s time to really have some fun. Is everyone having fun?”

On the surface, there isn’t really anything wrong with what Jocelyn is saying. The crowd is responding, cheering whenever she wants them to cheer. But I know her too well not to sense how close she is to teetering over the edge.

“This isn’t good,” I say under my breath, and Lila slips her hand into mine.

“Okay!” Jocelyn yells. “Warm up those vocal chords, grab some liquid courage from the bar, and get ready for some karaoke!” She draws out the syllables of *karaoke* so it’s almost a song itself, and the crowd goes wild, likely motivated by their clearly drunk emcee. “But not yet,” Jocelyn says, holding up a finger. “Because I’m going to sing a song first.” She laughs. “Bet you guys can’t guess who I’m singing about.”

“Oh no,” Lila says as Jocelyn walks over to the deejay, leaning down as if to whisper in his ear. Seconds later, Jocelyn’s back at the microphone, the opening strains of a song I only recognize because of Brody’s crush on Taylor Swift blasting through the speakers.

“I guess she didn’t want to go for subtle,” I say under my breath.

James leans over and claps me on the back, but he doesn’t say anything. What could he possibly say? Every person in the entire room has to know Jocelyn would only sing “We are Never Ever Getting Back Together” to me.

Jocelyn doesn’t have a terrible voice, but she’s obviously drunk and emotional, and the performance quickly shifts from bad to worse. She keeps losing the lyrics, jumping in at the wrong moment, jumbling her words together.

“Come on,” Lila says, tugging on my hand.

“What?”

“We have to help her.”

Suddenly, Jocelyn gasps and stops singing. She presses her face into the back of her hand, still gripping the microphone, while the track continues to play.

People around the room are looking at each other, concern on their faces, but no one is making any move to help her or get her off the stage.

No one but Lila.

I nod and stand up, letting Lila lead me around the perimeter of the room to the stage. She waits while I climb the stairs and cross to where Jocelyn is standing. She hasn't sung a word in almost a full minute. I tug the microphone out of her hands and hand it back to the deejay. “Come on, Jos,” I say gently. “You don't have to do this.”

She sniffs and lets me guide her off the stage, my arm around her shoulders.

There's an empty table behind the stage where Lila is waiting with a clean napkin and a glass of water. Jocelyn drops into a chair. “I'm going to regret this tomorrow, aren't I?” she says, her voice small.

I nudge the water glass toward her. She probably will regret it. I'm not going to patronize her by telling her differently.

“I'm so mad at you, Perry,” she says. “Do you want to know why?” She looks up, tears pooling in her eyes. She doesn't give me the chance to respond before she says, “Because you're happy. And I'm still miserable. I'm miserable, and I ruined karaoke.” She chokes out a sob.

On second thought, I'm not sure she *will* regret this tomorrow. She probably won't even *remember* it. I've never seen her so drunk. “You didn't ruin anything,” I say. “Karaoke is fine.”

“It isn't fine,” she wails. “No one is singing. Someone needs to sing so people stop thinking about me looking so stupid.” She tries to stand up. “I'll just go up and do a different—”

“Nope. You aren’t going back up there,” I say, gently pushing her back into her seat.

“I can do it,” Lila says, stepping forward. “I can sing.”

Jocelyn turns her gaze on Lila, and I tense. “Of course you can,” she says with a defeated laugh. “And you’ll probably sound amazing too. Because of course you will.”

Lila looks at me, a question in her eyes.

“Are you sure?” I ask. She doesn’t owe Jocelyn anything. Someone else can save karaoke, and we can just leave. That’s pretty much all I feel like doing anyway.

Lila shrugs. “Why not? I did say I like karaoke.” Her eyes sparkle, and another shot of warmth fills my chest. How many times is that going to happen tonight?

She moves toward the stage, reaching out to squeeze my hand on her way. Then she’s climbing the stairs while my heart is climbing into my throat.

The deejay meets her with the microphone, and she whispers to him, probably giving him her song choice. “Okay,” Lila says into the microphone with exaggerated flair. “Who spiked the punch?”

The crowd laughs, and the tension in the room immediately eases. “Y’all don’t know me,” Lila continues, “but ... well, someone needs to sing, so why not, right? I’m only doing one song though, so somebody better be planning what they’re going to sing next.”

A few people whoop from the crowd, and Lila smiles.

I keep one eye on Jocelyn, who has dropped her head onto the table, then move so I’m better positioned to see the stage. I have no idea what song Lila will sing, but even just seeing her stand there in front of everyone, the way she’s joking and making everything feel easier—she’s amazing.

And then she starts to sing.

Lila isn’t just good, she sounds like a professional. Like this isn’t karaoke but an actual concert. She’s singing an easy,

stripped-down variation of “Can’t Help Falling in Love,” and she’s ... I’m genuinely speechless.

I try not to focus too much on the lyrics. It’s too soon to think she chose the song on purpose. That she’s trying to tell me something, but I don’t miss how much I *want* the lyrics to mean something. The crowd is silent when she sings, which never seems to happen in a traditional karaoke setting, but Lila’s voice demands the silence, demands the full attention of everyone in the room.

When she finishes the song, every single person jumps to their feet.

Lila said someone else better be planning to sing, but I can’t imagine anyone wanting to follow her performance.

“Thanks, ya’ll,” she says when the cheering finally stops. “But I meant what I said. Who’s getting up here next?”

Eventually, Todd Weston stands up, dragging a couple of his buddies from the basketball team onto the stage with him. Lila hands off the microphone, laughing as all four guys lift their hands and bow down to the ground as if to worship her.

Goosebumps break out along my skin as Lila descends the stairs and walks toward me. There’s a look of uncertainty on her face, like she’s not quite sure how I’m going to respond. How I might feel. But as soon as our eyes meet, there’s something else happening. Something stronger than uncertainty or fear or anything else. Some unseeable force, a living, breathing thing, weaves its way around us, pulling us toward each other.

The noise of the song Todd and his friends are singing falls away.

For all I know, we’re the only two people in the room.

The only two people on the planet.

*I’m going to kiss her.*

Lila slips into my arms like she’s always belonged there. Like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Her hands move

up to my cheeks, and then she's tugging me down, her body curving into mine as our lips touch for the first time.

Heat roars through me, racing out to my fingertips and down to my toes. I pull her closer, one hand splayed against the small of her back as if to anchor her against me. Only when she drops her hands to my shirt, clutching the fabric in her fists, do I remember where we are.

She pulls back, her breathing shallow as she lifts her eyes to mine. "Hi," she says lightly, her lips curving into a tentative smile.

I pull her against me, moving so my mouth is close to her ear, the floral scent of her hair filling my nose. I breathe deeply. "Should I expect this kind of greeting whenever you say hello?"

"Maybe not. I'm buzzed on the adrenaline of performing. You better take advantage while you can."

"Lila, your voice. That was amazing."

"I haven't done that in a very long time."

I haven't done *this* in a very long time.

I kiss her again, my hand lifting to cradle the back of her head. She breaks the kiss and leans into the touch, exposing the slope of her jaw, the long curve of her neck. If we were anywhere but in a room full of people ...

Jocelyn moans from somewhere to my left, and Lila and I both turn to face her. "We should get her to her room," Lila says. "It doesn't seem like she's here with anyone else."

I nod, knowing and hating that Lila is right. I begrudgingly release the woman in my arms and step toward my ex-wife.

"Up you go," I say to Jocelyn, tugging her to her feet. "We're going to get you to your room."

With her arm draped over my shoulder, we make our way out a side door and head toward the opposite end of the hotel, where the rooms are, while Lila finds Grace, the woman who checked us in, to ask about Jocelyn's phone and other belongings.

Jocelyn has sobered the slightest bit, but she still isn't steady on her feet. I want to know if she has a friend, someone who could stay with her tonight, but it for sure isn't a job I want to volunteer for, so I don't ask.

We're waiting at the elevator when Lila catches up, holding a phone and small purse that must belong to Jocelyn. "She's sharing a room with Grace," Lila says. "Grace says she'll check on her in a bit, even if the reunion hasn't wound down yet."

"Grace is a good friend," Jocelyn slurs. "And you, Lila. You're a good singer." She lifts her finger, pointing Lila's direction. "But that's no surprise. Bigger girls always have better voices."

I freeze, completely horrified. And furious. I think back on the moment right after we arrived when Lila said she didn't belong with someone like me. It's such a ridiculous thought, and I hate that Jocelyn's careless words probably reinforced it. An intense need swells in my chest—a desire to make sure Lila knows with one hundred percent certainty that she is perfect exactly as she is.

For Lila's part, she seems entirely unaffected by Jocelyn's rudeness. She smiles easily and lets out a lilting laugh. "I'll take whatever perks I can get."

It takes all my patience not to drop Jocelyn in a heap outside her hotel room door, but Lila insists on walking her in. "I'll just be a minute," she says. "I'm just going to help her get settled."

I wait for Lila in the hallway, feeling keyed up, almost jittery from everything that's happened. There is so much to process. Jocelyn's comment about being miserable. I don't *want* that for her—I wouldn't wish misery on anyone—but I'd be lying if I said there wasn't some part of me that feels vindicated. The woman was heartless in our divorce.

Then there's Lila's willingness to help Jocelyn. The way she saved karaoke, the way she's repeatedly shown kindness to someone who has done nothing to earn it. Jocelyn has even

done the opposite. She's been judging, critical, downright rude. And Lila has smiled through it all.

Then her performance. Her *voice*.

I've never heard anything like it.

Lila slips out of Jocelyn's hotel room and breathes out a sigh. "Okay," she says. "She should be fine until Grace makes it up to check on her."

I lean against the wall and push my hands into my pockets. "I don't even know what to say. Thank you doesn't seem like enough."

She shrugs and starts moving toward the elevator. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm more worried about you. That was a lot back there. A lot of unexpected—and then the way you just got up there and sang. Lila, you've been amazing tonight."

She pushes the down button for the elevator and chuckles. "For a bigger girl."

I sigh. "I'm so sorry she said that to you. It's not true. You aren't—"

She stops me with a hand to my arm. "Perry, it's okay. I don't need you to apologize on her behalf. I know who I am. I'm *happy* with who I am. Am I annoyed she felt like she had the right to say something? Sure." She shoots me a sly grin. "But I *did* get to make out with her ex-husband tonight, so maybe I can allow her one *tiny* dig."

The elevator doors ding and slide open, and Lila strolls on with easy confidence, looking at me over her shoulder, her expression inviting.

I practically scramble onto the elevator after her. "I don't know what kids are calling it these days, but I'm going to have to kiss you a dozen more times if you want to count that kiss as a makeout."

Lila shifts, her gaze turning to the opposite corner of the elevator. The corner I didn't even glance at for how focused I

was on Lila. Two teenage girls stand side-by-side in the corner, their expressions open and curious.

“A dozen, huh?” Lila says under her breath. “Is that a promise?”

The elevator goes down a floor, and Lila and I wait while the teens exit. Just before stepping off, the older one turns back to look at Lila. “*Kids these days*”—she says this part with a dramatic eye roll—“only call it making out if there’s tongue.”

“Got it,” Lila says, her tone genuine. “Good to know.”

“I don’t even know what is happening tonight,” I say with a chuckle as the elevator doors slide closed.

“I don’t either, but we’re alone, and I think you said something about a dozen more kisses?”

I step closer, my hands moving to her hips as I tug her against me. “Can I tell you again how amazing you were back there? How much I admire you for being so chill in the face of Jocelyn’s rudeness?”

“You know what? Let’s not talk about her anymore tonight. I only have eighteen more hours until I have to go back to being a mom. I’d like to enjoy them while I can.”

I lean down to kiss her, startled to realize that until this moment, I’d completely forgotten about Jack. It’s a weird sensation. There is an entire human that she has to think about all the time, cataloging his every need, prepared to drop everything and care for him literally every moment of every day. I suddenly feel selfish that it was so easy for me to forget the poor kid even exists.

A few seconds in, the sweetness of Lila’s kiss banishes all thoughts of anything but the taste of her, the feel of her hands pressing against my chest, the way her body so perfectly melds to mine.

We’re still kissing when the elevator doors open into the lobby.



I growl the tiniest bit when Lila pulls away, and she laughs even as she tugs me off the elevator.

I can already hear the music thumping from the ballroom, and my steps slow. Why did we come back down here again?

I look at Lila. “Do you want to go back to the party?” I try for an even, neutral tone, but I don’t think I have her fooled.

Luckily, she immediately sighs with what can only be relief. “Not even a little bit. I haven’t worn heels this long since Trevor’s funeral. I’m ready to call it a night if you are.”

I hesitate, a wave of insecurity washing over me at the mention of her late husband. I don’t feel threatened, exactly. Just inadequate.

A loud cheer erupts from the ballroom, followed by raucous laughter.

I’m definitely ready to leave the party. I’m *not* necessarily ready to leave Lila.

But we’re in a hotel. I can’t exactly invite her up to my room, not without giving her the wrong impression, and it would be the *wrong* impression. First and foremost, Lila will be the one to set the pace in this relationship—if we can even call it that yet. She has more reason to take things slow than I do, and I will not pressure her. But honestly, even if Lila *were* ready for more, I’m not sure I am. The last woman I even *kissed* before Lila was Jocelyn.

So. Now we know how sad and lonely my life has been the past few years.

Lila leans against the same wooden pillar we hid behind when we first arrived, her posture speaking of just how tired she is. I reach for her hand and press a kiss against her fingertips. “Let me go get you your room keys.”

“Didn’t you already check us in?”

“I checked *me* in. There was only one room on the reservation, but I’m sure it was just a mix-up. Did you reserve your room under your own name, maybe?”

“Both rooms should be under your name. Would the confirmation number help? It’s in your email.”

Huh. Well, this complicates things. “Let me go talk to them again. I’m sure they have an open room somewhere. I’ll go sort it out, then maybe we can grab a drink before we crash?”

“Or share the overpriced mini bar M&Ms?”

“Now that sounds like a plan.” I give her hand a quick squeeze. “I’ll be right back.”

She nods, her smile warm. “I’ll be right here.”

My heart thumps steadily as I move to the hotel’s front desk, warmed by the promise in Lila’s words and the memory of her lips on mine.

*I’ll be right here.* It occurs to me that I don’t just want her to be here. I want her to be everywhere else I am, too. Not that I plan on confessing all those feelings and driving us right into a DTR. I meant what I said about respecting Lila’s need to move slowly. But for the first time, the thought of spending my life with another person doesn’t scare me.

And that means something.

Maybe that Lila is magic.

Or maybe that I’m finally—*finally*—ready to move on.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lila

THE THING IS, I'M used to people appreciating my voice.

I've done enough singing in public spaces to have grown comfortable in my ability. But no amount of applause from the general public can compare to what I felt when I walked off the stage and into Perry's arms. There was real, raw admiration in his eyes. That alone felt like a shot of adrenaline straight into my veins. But I also saw hunger. *Desire*. And then he was there, and we were kissing, and ... I've never been kissed like that.

Not ever.

Not until he kissed me on the elevator, which was even a tiny bit better because we were alone.

The whole night feels like a dream. Well. Except the parts that read a little more like a nightmare.

I mean, I just tucked my boss's very drunk ex-wife into bed. Gave her aspirin. Pushed her still-perfect hair out of her eyes. Unstrapped her complicated heels—the kind with straps that go all the way up your calf and make your legs look ridiculously long. Or, they make *Jocelyn's* legs look ridiculously long. On me, they would only make my very sturdy legs look stumpy.

It's all about elongating when you're shaped like I am. Heels are great. The more neutral the tone, the better. But ankle straps? They're always going to be a no for me.

Which, *fine*. I'm happy to work with what I've got, and I've learned a lot about how to do it well. High-waisted anything to accentuate my tiny waist. V-necks to show off my great collar bones and broad shoulders.

*Bigger girls always have better voices*. I force the words out of my brain, not wanting Jocelyn's small-minded judgment to ruin my good mood.

Perry didn't seem to mind my size when he was kissing me like he wanted to have me for dessert.

My not-so-grumpy-anymore boss makes his way back from the front desk, his frown reminding me of that first day we worked together in person. It's only been a few weeks since then but considering how we've spent the last couple of hours, it feels like it's been so much longer. His smiles came so infrequently at first, but with every day that passes, I feel like I'm seeing more and more of the real Perry.

"No luck?" I ask when he finally stops in front of me.

He shakes his head. "They're completely booked. I showed them the confirmation number, but they're citing some sort of internal error. The good news is they're comping the one room they *do* have for us. But there's still only one." He glances toward the door. "Listen, it's not that far. I could just drive you home. Or you could stay, and I could drive home to sleep, then come back in the morning."

Neither option sounds particularly enticing. I really don't want to stay without Perry, but going home to my empty house? That just feels sad.

We could always go with Option C, the one he didn't mention: us sharing a room like two adults perfectly capable of platonically sharing a room. We'll just pretend like five minutes ago, we weren't making out like fiends.

The heat of the kisses we've shared rushes through me.

So, *fine*, there would have to be some guidelines. He can kiss me a thousand times, but I'm not ready for more. Even if my body feels tempted to think it is.

But then, there's probably a king-size bed inside our one hotel room. We could sleep with our arms and legs fully extended and not touch each other.

I bite my lip. "I hate for the room to go to waste. It's already paid for, right?"

He nods.

"So ..." I look up to meet his warm gaze. "What if we both stay? Would that be weird? If we share the room?"

He rubs a hand across his face, hesitating long enough that I immediately wish I could take the suggestion back. "*Just to sleep?*" he finally asks.

*Oh no.* Did he think I wanted more? So soon? Did I give him that impression?

I quickly backpedal. "What? Yes! Of course just to sleep. Only sleeping. Very appropriate boss/employee bed sharing only. No funny business." *Oh good grief. Funny business?* I sound like Grandma June.

Perry lifts an eyebrow, his expression shifting into an easy grin. "I'm not sure I need things to be *that* appropriate."

This, of course, makes me turn the color of Grandpa Jamison's July tomatoes.

Perry hooks his hands around my hips and tugs me toward him. "I would love for us both to stay, mostly because I'm not ready for the night to end."

I slide my hands up his chest. "So we treat it like a slumber party. Stay up all night. Play truth or dare. Share all our secrets."

"If we're playing party games, can we add in spin the bottle?"

I roll my eyes. "I don't think that works if you only have two people."

“It works if those two people really like kissing each other.”

I scoff and shake my head. “You’re terrible.”

And by terrible, I mean wonderful. Perfect. Wonderfully perfect.

“For real though,” Perry says, his tone serious. “No expectations.” He swallows, and I watch his Adam’s apple slide up and down. “Lila, I haven’t even kissed anyone else since Jocelyn. Not until you.” He flinches the tiniest bit. “Maybe don’t mention that to my brothers.”

I move my hands to his waist, then slip them around him. “I’m right there with you. Trevor was my first kiss, and then I married him. There’s never been anyone else.”

He nods. “So we take things slow. No pressure.”

The tension drains out of my shoulders. This man is impossibly good. “No pressure,” I repeat.

He kisses me, his lips soft and warm, before pulling away and tilting his head toward the elevators. “Come on,” he says lightly. “You better not snore.”

Our hotel room is stunning. Soft bedding. Overstuffed chairs. Huge windows that will probably provide gorgeous views of the Blue Ridge Mountains once it’s light enough to see them. Our bags are situated on the foot of the bed, brought up earlier by the bellman.

I change into my pajamas first, only stressing a little about whether my sleep leggings are thin enough to show the dimples in my thighs. But my sweatshirt is longish. It should totally cover me. Except, when I tug it down to cover my butt, the oversized neck slides down over my shoulder. Which is maybe not a big deal? I’m sleeping in a sports bra—obviously—so ... *whatever*. It’s all I’ve got, so it has to work. It’s not like I’m planning on cranking up the lights and doing yoga poses. I’ve seen those tests the yoga ladies in the legging infomercials do to prove how *not* see-through the fabric is. There will be NO downward-facing dogs happening tonight.

When Perry emerges from the bathroom wearing lounge pants and a plain white t-shirt, I almost choke on the water I’m

drinking, dribbling it down my shirt.

It's like he crawled into my brain and found the *exact mental image* I conjured up that day in the barn when I was hanging out with his mom. Except, it's so much better real and in the flesh.

Perry opens the fully stocked fridge. "Peanut or peanut butter?" he asks. "Or plain." He looks at me over his shoulder. "Does anyone ever choose the plain M&Ms?"

"Not me," I say with a shrug. "Peanut butter for me."

He tosses me a bag, and I open it, trying not to focus on exactly how many pennies each M&M will cost at the overinflated minibar prices. Though, doing math isn't a terrible distraction. It might keep me from staring at Perry. He did look amazing tonight, all dressed up. But I think I like this dressed down version of him best.

I'm sitting on the far side of the bed, leaning against the headboard, so I expect Perry to settle onto the opposite side beside me. Instead, he grabs a few pillows and situates himself so he's propped up, facing me, his head at the foot of the bed and his legs stretched out toward me. Oh, this is a *much better* view.

"Okay, spill it," he says, after popping a few M&Ms into his mouth. "When did you start singing like that?"

I wave a dismissive hand. "Honestly, I felt pretty rusty. I haven't done that in a very long time."

"*That* was rusty? Lila, you were phenomenal. Like, you need to be on stage at *American Idol*."

I roll my eyes. "That was actually my senior superlative. Most Likely to Be on *American Idol*."

"Yes. Definitely. I concur."

"I'm not sure *American Idol* would have me, but thank you. If nothing else, it felt good to be singing again."

"Why haven't you been singing? You should be. Everywhere. All the time."

His praise fills me up like steam filling Grandma June's tea kettle, except instead of whistling, I just want to squeal. And I *never* squeal.

"I sing *some*," I say. "In the shower. In the car. To Jack when I'm tucking him in at night. I'm just not performing like I used to." I take a steadying breath. We are inching toward very dangerous territory. I think I have to tell Perry. I *did* say we would share our secrets tonight, but—

A familiar swell of guilt pushes through me. My truth isn't very pretty, which is why I don't like saying it out loud. I never have. Not even to Grandma June. Only the grief counselor I saw for a year after Trevor's death has heard all the ugly inside of me.

But this thing with Perry feels *good*. Real. After watching him with Jocelyn tonight and sensing the layers upon layers of tricky history between them, somehow, I think he'll understand if I come clean.

He's watching me, as if sensing the telling of this story isn't easy.

I grab a pillow and tuck it against my chest. "I was actually singing in a club down in Columbia when I met Trevor. It wasn't anything big. But I had an agent and was starting to book pretty consistently in smaller venues around the region. Asheville, Greenville, sometimes down in Columbia. The goal was to get to Nashville." I shrug. "But then I met Trevor. He was handsome, charming. A man in uniform and all that. I was only nineteen when we got married, but he was twenty-five, already established in his military career. I moved down to Charleston where he was stationed, and I guess his life sort of swallowed me up. I didn't mean to stop singing, but Trevor didn't—" My words catch in my throat, and Perry reaches over, his hand slipping gently around my ankle.

It's so small. That simple touch, but it somehow grounds me.

"At first, he loved to hear me sing. But then, I think it became something he thought would take me away from him. Something that might impede his control. I didn't see it at first.



When you're in love, you *want* to be together all the time. I just thought he really loved me." I let out a laugh. "That I was so lucky to find someone so devoted."

Perry's thumb moves back and forth across my skin, his touch soft.

"After I had Jack, things got a little better. We had this beautiful baby, and of course, when you're a new mom, you just stay at home and breastfeed. Me not going anywhere suited Trevor just fine."

Perry's grip on my ankle tightens the slightest bit, and his expression hardens. "I'm really sorry you went through that."

I shrug. "He was always kind on the surface. It wasn't abuse anyone else could really see, not even the people close to me. It was just little things. Little comments. Digs about my weight. But he always dressed them up. Like, he'd sign me up for a gym membership or book me a day at the spa, but instead of it feeling like, 'Hey, you're a tired new mom. You should take some time for yourself,' it came across as, 'Maybe now you'll stop looking like a tired old hag.'"

"First things first, you do not now, and I'm sure you did not then, look like a tired old hag. But also, I know that feeling," Perry says. "Like just being yourself will never be good enough."

I nod. "A couple of months before he died, Jack and I were out of town visiting my grandparents, and Trevor had some friends over to play poker. He loved poker, and the longer we were married, the riskier he got. It seemed like he was always trying to scrape together the cash he needed to pay what he owed. While I was gone, he lost pretty big and had already tapped what little we had in our savings account. So he sold my piano."

Perry swears, something I've never heard him do. I appreciate the sentiment, but somehow, telling Perry is making the story hurt less than it does when I relive it on my own.

"That's when I decided I was ready to file for divorce. I was tired of feeling so beaten down all the time. But I never did

file. Because then he left for training in California, and he never came home.”

Perry sits up and runs a hand across his face while I breathe out a shaky breath.

“I’ve never told anyone that,” I say, my voice wobbly. “How do you say out loud that your military hero of a husband was actually kind of a jerk? Nobody wants to know that. Not now that he’s gone.”

Perry turns himself around so his back is against the headboard, and he shifts closer. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against him, my head resting on his chest just over his heart. He doesn’t say anything, which I actually sort of love. He just holds me.

“I don’t mean to sound heartless. It was still terrible to lose him. I loved him. I grieved his loss. But my grief was so complicated. All people wanted to do was talk to me about how amazing he was. And he was amazing. He really was an exceptional pilot. He just wasn’t very nice to me.”

“And you couldn’t say that out loud,” Perry says. “That must have been so hard.”

“For the longest time, I felt so guilty. I still get his military benefits. I’ll get them forever. And that feels wrong somehow. I’d already decided to leave him.”

“Lila, you more than deserve those benefits. You’re raising his kid.”

“I know. And that’s how I’ve been able to make peace with the whole situation. Those benefits *are* for Jack. And to his credit, Trevor was always a good dad. For Jack’s sake, I have to remember him that way.”

He slowly runs a hand down my back. “Have you thought about singing again? Like, really going for it?”

“Nah,” I say without any hesitation. “I’m all Jack’s got. And now that he’s in school, stability is important. Plus, it’s such a longshot. I don’t think it’s worth the sacrifice it might take to even try when there’s no guarantee it would work.” I lift my head and pull back the tiniest bit so I can look at him. “But I

will tell you what I've thought about doing. Someday, maybe. If I can save up enough cash to buy a piano and get started."

"What's that?" Perry says, his hand rubbing slow circles across my shoulder blades.

"I'd love to teach. Piano and voice lessons."

"I bet you'd be amazing at that," he says. "You should totally do it."

"I don't have the degree for it. Or any degree. But if I teach for cheap at first, prove to people that I know what I'm doing, maybe I can eventually raise prices and build up a studio."

"People just need to hear you sing, and they'll be lining up for voice lessons."

"Knowing how and teaching how are two different things, but I appreciate the vote of confidence." More than he knows. I got so used to Trevor dismissing the things I wanted, it doesn't seem real that Perry could be so supportive. So accepting.

"Do Trevor's parents know how he treated you?" Perry asks.

I sigh and drop my head back on his shoulder. "No. And I don't think I'll ever tell them. They're good with Jack. At least in small doses. And he has so few people in his life, I don't want to risk alienating them."

Perry is silent for a long moment, which gives me time to take stock of my feelings. It's a weird sensation to be both completely relaxed and completely charged at the same time. My mind is at ease, comfortable in Perry's presence, but my body is lit up, aware of every single place we're touching. My head against his chest, his hands on my back, my side tucked against his. Perry smells like sandalwood, a scent I only recognize because I bought Trevor some aftershave once—citrus and sandalwood—because of how much I liked it, and Trevor returned it.

"Lila, I want to tell you something," Perry says. "And I don't want you to think I'm just saying it to make you feel better. You remember what I said about not being good at

schmoozing. Please. I want you to take my words at face value.”

I sit up, sensing that I should face him for whatever he wants to say.

“No, don’t do that,” he says, tugging me back down. “This will be easier if you aren’t looking at me.”

I chuckle as I snuggle back into his chest. “So demanding.”

He gives my shoulders a squeeze before claspng his hands around my back. “When I first saw you, when you drove out to bring me a jack, of course I noticed how beautiful you are. But I also—” His words cut off, and he hesitates. “Now that I’m about to say this, it sounds a lot creepier than it did in my head.”

“I promise I won’t think you’re creepy.”

“I noticed your curves. Honestly, it took all my willpower to keep my eyes on your face because I *really* noticed. It made you *more* enticing to me. Not less.” He shakes his head. “After what Jocelyn said to you tonight, and then hearing how Trevor treated you, I just ... I want you to know how beautiful I think you are. Just as you are.”

*Just as I am?* This man cannot be real. If I wasn’t touching him, I might wonder if he were a mirage. Some fantastical figment of my imagination embodying everything I could possibly desire.

I shift so I can look at him—he can just deal with the eye contact—and smile at the warmth and sincerity I see in his eyes.

“I’m going to kiss you now, Perry Hawthorne.”

As I lean in, I think about that moment earlier this week when Perry fed me apples in the orchard. I sensed then that something was happening to my heart. If that day was the start of my falling, this moment might be the thing that propels me clean over the edge.

I should be nervous about that.

But I can't bring myself to feel anything but the thrill of Perry's lips on mine.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lila

THERE IS NOTHING FRANTIC or frenzied about this kiss.

Not at first. It's warm. Tender. A kiss that feels like acceptance and understanding.

My story—my truth—it's safe with Perry.

I reach up and thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, feeling my desire build with each passing second.

Perry's tongue skates across my bottom lip, a featherlight touch, and I willingly respond, giving as much as I get, wanting nothing but to be right here, touching him, tasting him, learning the smooth planes of his body, feeling the way he responds to my hands on his skin.

I've known for weeks that Perry is the kind of man I *could* fall in love with. But when I saw him gently lead his ex-wife off the stage earlier tonight, kind even in the face of her unkindness, I recognized that he's the kind of man I *want* to fall in love with.

But *wanting* to love him isn't enough. My life is complicated. Perry can't just love me back. He has to love me *and* Jack. He has to be comfortable pursuing a relationship with someone who will make him an instant father.

Being together *feels* good, but is that enough? For now, maybe, secluded in a private hotel room in a posh resort, miles

away from our real lives and responsibilities.

But will this hold up to real life?

I want to believe it will.

I lean into the kiss. I'm *going* to believe it will.

Perry's lips move from my mouth to the curve of my jaw, leaving a trail of kisses to my ear. I lean back, my eyes closed, and he continues the slow and blissful torture, pushing my hair out of the way and kissing his way down my neck and across the top of my exposed shoulder.

"You said it's been how many years since you've kissed someone?" I murmur.

He chuckles against my skin. "Almost ... four?" He leans back. "Man. That's hard to admit out loud."

"Nope." I pull him back to me. "That was not an invitation to stop. More like me marveling that you're still so good at this with so little practice."

He pauses, his lips only centimeters from mine, and smiles. "Like riding a bicycle."

Perry pulls me against him as we kiss, rotating us so that he's leaning against the headboard, and I'm leaning into him.

This kiss lasts longer than all the others. *And* tests my willpower more than all the others. Perry's hand slips under the hem of my shirt, his palm flat against the small of my back. I resist the urge to flinch and shy away from his touch. I will not let the fear of Perry noticing the softness of my body ruin this moment. He told me he thought I was beautiful just as I am. I have to believe him.

Too much more of this, and I'm liable to stop thinking. Even if I *want* to stop thinking, I have too many reasons to take things slow.

Perry is either reading my mind or feeling the same way, because he breaks the kiss with a low groan. "Okay. We should ..." His words trail off into a sigh.

"I know," I say softly. "We should."

For a long moment, we stay close, our arms still entangled, our foreheads almost touching.

Perry runs a hand down the side of my face, brushing my hair back. “I think we’ve checked all the required boxes to call this an actual makeout.”

I grin. “Even according to *kids these days*.”

He kisses me one more time, almost as if he can’t help himself, but he ends it quickly, shifting himself backward and putting some distance between us. “Okay. Enough of that.” He snuggles into the pillows, his head propped up on his elbow. “We should have a very boring conversation now.”

I smirk. “Boring, huh?”

“Yep. Baseball stats. Stock market fluctuations.”

“Mood killers. Got it. How about ... my grandmother’s Belgian waffle recipe?”

“That’d be pillow talk for Lennox, but—wait, see? Success. Thinking of my brother is a definite mood killer.”

“Mission accomplished.” I lift my hands up in a tiny mock cheer.

“All right, Lila Templeton,” Perry says. “Tell me something I don’t already know about you.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Hmm. Does it have to be something important?”

“No. Something unimportant,” he says in his boss voice. “I feel like we’ve covered enough heavy stuff for one night.”

I don’t tell him I’d do just about anything for bossy Perry. We’re trying to *kill* the mood, not heighten it. “Yes. Good thinking. Okay. I think olives are disgusting.”

“A worthy opinion. Even if you’re wrong. What else?”

“I love country music.”

He makes a face. “I’ll allow it. But only if you’re singing it. Wait.” His expression turns serious. “This is an important one. College basketball. Yes or no?”



“Yes. Definitely.”

“In that case, Duke or Carolina?”

“You mean Crapolina?”

His eyes go wide, and he presses a hand to his chest. “You wound me.”

“Seriously? You’re a Carolina fan?”

“I’m a Carolina *graduate*. That’s where I got my MBA.”

I shift like I’m climbing out of the bed. “This was fun while it lasted, but I think it’s time for me to—”

He pushes himself up, lunging across the bed after me. I squeal as he hauls me off my feet and playfully tosses me back on the bed. It’s not lost on me that he just picked me up like I’m a tiny sack of potatoes. “A Duke fan?” he says. “Seriously?”

I’m on my back, and he’s hovering over me, one hand on either side of my head.

I shrug. “A Duke fan. To my core, Perry. To my very ... *apple* core.”

He groans and drops his head. “Lila, you *didn’t*.”

I bite my lip, loving this playful side of him. If I wind up marrying this man, I’m going to write apple puns into my wedding vows. “Is Duke really a deal breaker?”

He pops back up and smiles wide. “I can’t believe I’m saying this when the blood in my veins runs Carolina blue. But it’s gonna take more than pukey Duke to get rid of me.”

I lean up and kiss him on the nose. “Your generosity knows no bounds.”

After we share a third bag of M&Ms, we spend another two hours talking about everything and nothing, finally circling back to Perry’s divorce.

We’re snuggled under the covers now, our faces no more than a foot apart, one of his feet draped loosely over mine.

His summary is brief, almost perfunctory, but I can see the hurt in his eyes. It doesn't take much imagination to fill in the gaps of what the whole ordeal must have been like.

"So your assistant was helping her the whole time?" I ask, still disbelieving an employee could be so disloyal.

Perry nods. "By the end, he wasn't just covering for her infidelity. He was funneling her information about what my business was worth, sharing pertinent information about key clients. It was all a part of building her case. When she filed for the divorce, she knew exactly how much to ask for in the settlement. She presented herself essentially as a partner in the business, and added in, on the grounds of her having finished her MBA six months before I finished mine and the effort she made to *support* me through my graduate program, that she was entitled to more than half of my business's net value."

"That's horrible."

He nods. "The judge sided with her, and I had to liquidate everything I had in my portfolio. Stock options, IRAs, all of it, just to pay the settlement."

I huff. "I should have spit in the water I left next to her bed."

When he smiles, I reach out to trace the lines that crinkle up beside his eyes as a result. "You have good lines," I say.

"Pretty sure those are called wrinkles."

I grin. "They aren't wrinkles! They're smile lines. And yours are very handsome."

"Jocelyn once suggested that I get Botox," he says.

"You're kidding."

"I wish."

"Okay, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but Perry, why did you marry her in the first place?"

"It's a fair question. But the answer is probably similar to why you married Trevor. I thought she was what I wanted. I probably ignored a lot of warning signs, but she also changed

a lot too. And I changed. Realized I wanted something different than she did.”

“It just goes to show, after all she put you through, money really can’t buy happiness. You’ve got your family. Your farm —”

“A really fantastic assistant,” he adds.

“A really fantastic assistant,” I repeat, wishing, even though I know it’s too soon, that what he had was a really fantastic *girlfriend*. “And what does Jocelyn have? She said she’s miserable.”

Perry sighs. “For her sake, I hope that was just the alcohol talking.”

“See? There’s that nice guy again. I think he’s completely chased the grump away.”

“Nah,” he says softly. “I think you chased the grump away.”

I smile, even as my eyes drift closed. No matter how much I wish I could talk to Perry all night, I’ve been waking up at six-thirty every single day since Jack was born—that child is the most accurate human alarm clock on the planet, no matter what time he goes to bed—and it’s after two a.m.

“Okay, sleepy head,” Perry says. “Time for bed.” He turns off the light, and I expect him to settle down on his side of the enormous mattress, but then the bed shifts as he rolls toward me and suddenly, he’s next to me, his hand on my cheek. There’s enough light coming in through the window that I can see the outline of him, but it’s too dark to make out any features. “Goodnight, Lila,” he says. His thumb traces my bottom lip before he leans in and kisses me, slow and tender.

“*This* is how I would like to go to sleep every night,” I say sleepily.

Perry stills, and I panic, the reality of my drowsy words waking me to full alertness. I wasn’t necessarily thinking about going to sleep next to Perry *specifically*. It was more just the kiss, the tenderness. Who wouldn’t want someone to love them off to dreamland every night?

I mean, *yes*. It would be better if that person were Perry. But it's probably a little too soon to make that kind of declaration.

Except I just did. *Sort of did?*

Perry's hand skims my cheek as he pulls it away. "You deserve to fall asleep like this every night. Now get some sleep."

Ha. Easy for him to say. And easy for him to do, apparently. Because he's asleep in what feels like seconds. I listen as his breathing slows and deepens. He's on his stomach, one hand stretched across the bed to rest on my wrist. Which naturally means I will stay in this exact position, even if my arm falls asleep and my fingers go numb, for as long as humanly possible.

If he thinks I deserve to fall asleep like this, well, there's a vacancy in the "Kiss Lila to Sleep" department, and he's more than welcome to fill it.

For a very long time, I thought I'd missed my opportunity for a true happily-ever-after. Guilt, shame, doubt, discouragement, some erroneous belief that we only get *one* shot at happiness in life. They all worked together to make me content with a slightly less happy life. I have Jack, and he's brilliant. I have a job, even if it isn't the one I always dreamed I'd have.

It's enough. It *was* enough.

But now, with a sleeping Perry beside me, I let myself revel in the possibility that maybe, just maybe, my life can have *so. much. more.*

And that is the thought that finally sends me off to sleep.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Perry

AFTER SPENDING ALMOST AN entire night getting to know Lila— *kissing* and getting to know Lila—I don't particularly want to go to the reunion breakfast this morning. I'd much rather drive Lila up to the Blue Ridge Parkway, take in the views, and enjoy the last few hours we're together before I have to take her home.

Logically, I know that if any kind of relationship between Lila and me is going to work, it has to work in our regular lives too, and not just when we're tucked away from everything. But that doesn't mean I want the magic to end sooner than absolutely necessary.

But we're here. And the food doesn't look half bad. And if I can swing it, I'd like to provide my ex-wife with the opportunity to apologize to Lila.

The crowd is a little more subdued this morning than it was last night, which isn't surprising. Lila and I left the party just after nine, and the alcohol was already flowing freely. I'm sure it didn't slow as the night wore on.

Lila and I make our way through the buffet line, then sit near the window where we have a nice view of the mountains. I probably ought to be more enthusiastic about talking and connecting with old classmates, but with Lila beside me, it's hard to be invested in anyone but her.

This thing between us is new, but it already feels bigger than anything I've ever experienced before. Anything I've ever *felt* before. That realization leaves me nervous and jittery. I don't know how to stop worrying that I'm going to screw things up, that I might lose whatever this is before it's even started.

"Did you get enough to eat?" I ask when she slides her plate away.

"Probably more than I needed. I don't usually eat a big breakfast."

"Me neither. That French toast was worth it though."

Over Lila's shoulder, I see Jocelyn finally enter the room next to Grace. She looks about as well as expected after the night she had; she's dressed casually, her hair pulled back in a simple ponytail.

I reach out and take Lila's hand. "Hey, will you be okay by yourself for a few minutes? I'm going to go talk to Jocelyn."

Lila squeezes my fingers, warmth in her eyes, and gives me an encouraging nod. "Of course. Take your time."

It occurs to me that Lila trusts me in a way I'm not sure Jocelyn ever did, even after years of marriage. Jocelyn wouldn't have stopped me from going to talk to an ex, but she for sure would have given me some side-eye and probably launched an inquisition after I returned, wanting a minute-by-minute recap of the encounter.

It's just another example of how different Lila is.

And a reminder of how unhealthy my marriage was.

"You okay?" Lila asks, probably because I'm still sitting here staring at her.

I stand up and move around the table, leaning over to press my lips to hers. "I'm good," I say. "I just really like you."

She reaches up and grabs my shirt, tugging me down for another kiss. "Well, that's good," she says. "Because I really like you, too."

When I stand and turn, Jocelyn is watching us.

I leave Lila and slowly make my way toward Jocelyn. I stop a few feet away from where she's leaning against the wall. "Good morning, Jocelyn."

"Is it?" Jocelyn says breezily. "I hadn't noticed."

I push my hands into my pockets. "You owe Lila an apology," I say. It's not like I came over here for small talk. Might as well get right to it.

Jocelyn's jaw tightens, but I can tell by the way she won't look me in the eye that she knows I'm right. "I don't remember much about last night," she says dismissively.

"Trust me. I remember everything about last night, and you owe her an apology."

Jocelyn sighs. "And I suppose you're her knight in shining armor, swooping in to make sure she gets it?"

I don't try to deny it. "I really care about her, Jos," I say, happy that, at least in this, I'm telling the truth.

Jocelyn studies me for a long moment before her shoulders drop the slightest bit. "Yeah," she finally says. "I can tell you do." She wraps her arms around herself, suddenly looking more vulnerable than I've seen her look in a very long time. "Does Lila like the farm?"

I know what she's really asking. Does Lila like this version of my life? The version Jocelyn didn't want.

"You could ask her," I say. "When you go over to apologize."

Jocelyn rolls her eyes, and I finally see a glimpse of the Jocelyn I *do* remember. "Fine," she huffs. She pushes off the wall and walks toward Lila. I stay where I am, watching as Jocelyn drops into the seat I left empty.

Their conversation only lasts five minutes or so, but from where I'm standing, too far away to hear, it might as well be five hundred minutes. Finally, Jocelyn stands and makes her way back to me, and I breathe out a sigh of relief.

She stops in front of me and shakes her head, her hands propped on her hips. "That woman is ridiculously likable."

I can't help the smile that breaks out across my face.

"I'm happy for you, Perry. I still hate you a little bit. But I'm happy for you."

I have imagined a lot of conversations with my ex-wife over the years. Conversations in which I rant and rave and blame and accuse. It's a relief to realize that I have no desire for that anymore. I appreciate that Jocelyn apologized to Lila, and I'm glad she's happy for me. But I don't need her approval. She really doesn't have power over me anymore.

We say our goodbyes, and I head back to Lila. "Ready to go?" I ask, holding out my hand.

She takes it, allowing me to tug her to her feet. I slip my arms around her, pulling her into a hug, and am immediately blown away by how right this feels. It's such a contrast to the interaction I just had, I suddenly feel desperate to hold on—to do whatever it takes not to lose this.

Lila leans in. "Ready when you are."

I say goodbye to a few friends, then we make our way outside, waiting in the chilly October air as the valet brings my truck around. We drive in comfortable silence until we're out of the city and on the interstate heading to Hendersonville.

"Thank you for asking Jocelyn to apologize," Lila says. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. She was rude. Apologizing was the right thing to do." Admittedly, it would have been better had Jocelyn felt motivated to apologize on her own, but something is better than nothing. "You deserve respect, Lila. Just because you're good at letting things roll off your back doesn't mean you should have to." I think of her late-night confession about her husband and the way he treated her. "I need you to know that I would never stand by and let anyone speak to you that way. Let alone speak to you that way myself."

She's quiet for a long moment. "That means a lot," she finally says.

After a few more minutes of silence, she asks, "Is it too soon to ask where we go from here?"



My eyes jump to hers. “What, like, *us*? Relationship-wise?”

She nods.

“I mean, I’d like to see you again, if that’s what you’re asking. And not just at work.” A sudden fear pulses through me. Does she think I might not? That this was just some sort of weekend thing? “Lila, I wasn’t messing around last night. I’m serious about whatever this is. I’d like to date you. I’d like to see if this can go somewhere.”

“No, I know,” she says quickly. “I didn’t think you were messing around. And I’d like that too. For us to date. It’s just ... dating is a little more complicated for me.”

“Okay,” I say slowly.

“Because of Jack.”

*Buttercupping Buttercup.*

Jack. Of course Jack complicates things. I’ve been so focused on Lila, I haven’t even thought to factor him into this new dynamic between us. Which can’t be a good sign.

“Right. Of course. We have to think about Jack. But I’m sure we can figure it out,” I say to convince myself as much as her.

“Perry, I don’t want to tell him yet.”

The hope that’s been filling my chest since last night deflates the tiniest bit.

“Not because you wouldn’t be great with him. You would be. You *will* be,” she says. “But you saw yourself how fixated he’s been on finding himself a stepdad. If he starts spending time with you, it’ll only get his hopes up. I can take risks when it comes to my own heart. It’s not as easy to risk his.”

Everything she’s saying makes total sense. And it’s better this way. We can find our footing first, *then* I can work on developing a relationship with Jack.

But that thought brings its own wave of mixed emotions.

On the one hand, a part of me is relieved that I won’t be expected to immediately jump right into figuring out dad

mode. For all I know, I don't even *have* a dad mode.

On the other hand, I don't love that this feels like a wall between Lila and me. She won't really let me in—not completely—until she's ready to let me into Jack's life as well.

“So we take things slow,” I say. “Spend time together at work.”

She nods. “And I can get a babysitter every once in a while, too. You just won't be able to come over to the house.”

I run a hand across my face. “Sure. No, that makes sense.”

“You sound disappointed.”

I reach over and wrap my hand around hers. “Not at all. Jack is your first priority. Of course you have to do what's best for him.” I give her fingers a quick squeeze. “But just so we're clear, between nine a.m. and two p.m., you're *all mine*.”

She smirks. “Whatever you say, boss.”

I pull into her driveway and park the truck, mostly happy with where we've landed. I'm not disappointed. And I do understand why she wants to take things slow.

But that doesn't mean I'm not worried about the giant question mark hanging over our relationship. If things progress—and I really want them to—there's no getting around it. Jack won't just be Lila's, he'll be *ours*.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Perry

THERE ARE A LOT of places on Stonebrook Farm fit for kissing.

The apple orchard.

Up on the ledge with mountain views stretched out in every direction.

In the goat barn.

Hiding in my office.

In the walk-in freezer in Lennox's restaurant kitchen. (Don't ask.)

I know it doesn't sound professional to imply I'm spending so much time at work making out. But Lila and I *are* getting work done. Maybe even MORE work done, since kissing has become a sort of reward for completing tasks. Besides, we have to take advantage of every spare moment. It's been two weeks since my high school reunion, and we still haven't managed to go on a real date.

We tried to schedule one last week, but the babysitter fell through at the last minute. We ended up Facetiming half the night anyway, after Lila put Jack to bed, but Facetime isn't nearly as fun as kissing in the apple orchard.

With the harvest festival coming up, plus the opening of Lennox's restaurant, it might be Christmas before we manage a real date.

I look up from the sales numbers from last year's festival when Lila appears in my office doorway, a giant box in her arms.

I stand up and meet her, taking the box and setting it down on the desktop. "What's all this?"

"Samples from the farm store bakery," she says, pulling the top of the box open. "In need of official boss approval."

I stand behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and nuzzling my nose against her neck as she unpacks the box.

"Mmm, are you trying to distract me?" she mumbles, even as she leans into me and tilts her head, giving me easier access to her neck. "This is very ... important ... business."

There is zero conviction in her voice, and I take full advantage, spinning her around to face me, tucking her securely into my arms. I keep waiting for this to feel old. But holding Lila, kissing her, it still feels like a revelatory experience. There is always something more to learn about her. To *love* about her.

Her brilliance, for example. She's self-deprecating when it comes to her qualifications, tossing around her lack of a college education like it somehow diminishes her overall impact, but she doesn't give herself enough credit. She's also funny. And optimistic and engaging and real. She makes people feel good about themselves. She makes *me* feel good about myself.

I kiss her slowly, drawing it out, then nip at her bottom lip until she whimpers.

"Perry Hawthorne, your office door is wide open."

I chuckle. "What's going to happen? No one is going to fire me, and the only person who can fire you is me."

"That makes you sound like an entitled jerk," she says, but her lips are grazing over my earlobe while she says it, so I'm

not sure I can take her seriously.

A throat clears behind us, and Lila jumps out of my arms.

“It also makes you sound like a hypocrite,” Olivia says from my office doorway. “Since you *do* have a no-fraternization policy for your employees.”

Lila raises a questioning eyebrow, peeking out from behind my shoulder. She immediately gasps. “You must be Olivia! Which means this is baby Asher!”

I finally turn and face my sister. Asher is strapped to her chest in a Baby Björn. “Olivia, Lila. Lila, Olivia,” I say with all the enthusiasm of someone who is no longer kissing his girlfriend.

*Girlfriend?* We haven’t talked about making things that official, but Lila wouldn’t have to ask me twice.

“The no-fraternization policy is for the summer staff living on site,” I say, more for Lila’s benefit than anything else. “This is different. And I don’t recall the policy stopping *you* from making out in Mom’s goat barn.”

She rolls her eyes. “Funny, I do remember you scolding me for it though.”

“No one should be scolded,” Lila says, too seriously for the conversation. “The goat barn is a *very* good place for kissing.”

Olivia laughs. “Oh, I like you. Sorry I haven’t been around to meet you before now. I’ve heard so many great things about you.” Olivia has been holed up at home while Asher fought off a case of RSV. It’s good to finally see them out and around again, even if she is going to make fun of me.

“You too,” Lila says. “Perry’s told me a lot about you.”

I reach out and let Asher grasp my thumb, his tiny fingers curling around it. He has his dad’s dark hair and wide brown eyes. But he somehow looks like Liv too. He’s also so much bigger than he was the last time I saw him.

Olivia starts to unstrap the baby carrier. “You want to hold him?”

I do kinda want to hold him, but that doesn't stop nerves from jumping deep in my gut. I've had exactly two experiences holding babies. And both times it was *this* baby. Once in the hospital, and once right after Olivia brought him home. I've seen him a lot more than that, but he sleeps a lot, and he eats a lot, and well, there are a lot of people in my family who love babies and are always willing to hold him.

I've never felt compelled to fight for my chance, though, when Olivia lifts Asher into my arms, I wonder if I should start fighting more. This is amazing. Asher wiggles the tiniest bit, his foot randomly shooting out, then he yawns, and my heart squeezes.

My eyes lift to Lila's. She's watching me closely, an expression on her face I can't quite read. She's done this whole parenting thing before. She knows what this is like. And maybe that's what her expression is saying. She gets it. She knows how magical this can be.

Asher grunts a few more times and starts to squirm like he's unhappy, letting out a few shrieks that feel a little too much like they could lead to crying. "Okay. Uncle time is over," I say.

Olivia drops onto the couch at the back of my office and closes her eyes. "Just bounce him a little. I only need a minute."

"Bounce him?" I immediately think of bouncing a basketball, but that for sure isn't right.

Asher squirms again, his cries growing more persistent, so I start bouncing. Except, I'm more ... squatting?

The baby immediately quiets though, so I keep it up. It's working! I calmed him!

I've got at least three more sets of these before my quads give out. That's ... five minutes of peace? I can give Olivia five minutes.

Olivia chuckles from behind me. "Perry, he's not a free weight. You don't have to do a full-on squat."

"Don't question what's working," I say.

Except seconds later, it *isn't* working anymore. Asher is crying even louder than before, and my quads are starting to shake. Now I look like a bad uncle and a guy who clearly needs to hit the gym more frequently.

Lila comes to my rescue, scooping Asher into her arms. "It's more like dancing," she says, holding Asher upright so his head is resting on her shoulder. She starts lightly bouncing on her toes, swaying back and forth.

Asher quiets, and Lila smiles, her eyes closing as she presses her face close to his tiny head.

I drop onto the couch next to Olivia, a little disappointed to be *so bad* at baby holding, but also content to watch Lila, who looks as natural with Asher in her arms as she did singing on stage at my reunion. I don't know if there is anything the woman can't do.

She starts to sing some sort of lullaby, and Olivia reaches out and squeezes my arm. "Um, are you in love with her yet?" she says under her breath. "Because I've only known her five minutes, and I think *I'm* in love with her."

When Asher's squirming kicks up again, Lila shifts his position and heads toward the office door. "We're going to walk the hallway for a bit. See if that helps him settle."

Olivia lifts a hand, giving Lila a thumbs up.

"She's pretty great, right?" I say.

Olivia nods. "I'm really happy for you, Perry."

My eyes flick away for the briefest moment, but Olivia is too sharp to miss anything, and she immediately zeroes in on my reaction. "Wait. What was that? You did an eye thing. Are *you* not happy for you?"

I glance toward the door, not wanting Lila to hear our conversation, but there's no sign of her. "It's not that. I'm happy. I really like her. But she's still keeping me at arm's length. Which is fine. She said she wanted to take it slow. But I'm seeing her every day, and I'm just ... I don't know."

"Your feelings aren't taking it slow?"

“She’s so different from Jocelyn, Liv. She fits. Not some fancy version of a life defined by jobs or cars or whatever. She fits *me*. I’ve never had that before.”

Olivia nudges my knee. “You should tell her how you feel, Perry.”

I quickly shake my head. “It’s too soon for that. What would I even tell her?”

“Ummm, maybe try something that starts with an L and ends in OVE? Is she coming to the restaurant opening? You could tell her there. The whole family will be around.”

“Even if I did have something to tell her, I wouldn’t want to do it in front of the entire family.”

Olivia shoots me a pouty look. “Well that’s not any fun for the rest of us.”

“The rest of you don’t need to have any fun. This is my relationship.” I hold up a finger in warning. “Don’t do anything, Liv. No pressuring Lila. No making public toasts at the restaurant opening.”

“So she *will* be there?”

I sigh. I walked right into Olivia’s trap. “Yes? I think? I haven’t invited her yet. I think I’m worried being with the entire family will overwhelm her.”

The restaurant isn’t big enough to invite the entire Stonebrook staff to the opening, or else there would only be employees present, so the entire thing has turned into this sort of “invitation only” affair, at least as far as employees are concerned. Most of the people in attendance will be restaurant critics and former associates of Lennox’s from when he worked in Charlotte. But my entire family will be there. Even Flint.

On the one hand, I’d love to have Lila with me. On the other, she’s met my family while she’s keeping me from her kid like I might give him the swine flu. Would coming to the opening fit into her definition of taking things slow?



“Hasn’t she already met the entire family?” Olivia asks. “I mean, not Flint, of course, but the rest of us? I thought I was the only holdout.”

“No, you are. Or were, I guess. But inviting her feels so official.”

Olivia looks at me with all the judgment only a sister can give. “I thought you wanted official. You were just talking about how much you like her.”

“But I don’t want to pressure her into something official before she’s ready.”

“But you’re perfectly fine kissing her in every corner of the farm?”

I run a hand across my face. “I guess people are noticing?”

“And talking about nothing else. Listen. Don’t pressure her. Just *invite* her. Let her decide if she wants to come or not.”

“That’s not—” I stop, because there isn’t actually anything wrong with Olivia’s suggestion. I should just invite Lila. I’m overthinking and making this too complicated. “Okay. That’s actually a reasonable suggestion.”

“Of course it is,” Olivia says through a yawn. “My brain cells haven’t *all* died from sleep deprivation. Just most of them.” She closes her eyes again, her head falling back onto the cushions. “Dad is completely smitten with Lila, by the way. I was over there before I came here, and he couldn’t stop talking about all the help she gave him when he was trying to name Preston Whitaker’s new apple variety.”

“Has he decided on a name?” I ask, suddenly curious.

Olivia scrunches up her face like she’s trying to remember. “Sunshine Crisp? Summer Honeysuckle? I can’t remember.” She stretches her arms over her head, then winces and drops them back down to fold across her chest.

“You okay?”

She nods. “Milk letdown. Time for Asher to eat.”

“Wait, does it—it hurts when that happens?”

Olivia shrugs. “A little? But just for a second.”

I watch as she moves to the doorway where Lila has reappeared. They talk for a quick second before Olivia takes the baby and scoops up the diaper bag she dropped by the door when she first came in.

“I’m going to my office to nurse and pretend like I actually know what’s going on around this place,” Olivia says. She smiles at Lila. “It really was great to meet you. Thanks for your help with Asher.”

Olivia jokes about not knowing what’s going on, but she’s surprisingly involved for still being out on maternity leave. It’s an easy enough work environment for her coming and going, dropping in and contributing when she can. I’d love to have her back full-time whenever she’s ready, but now that Lila’s around, it’s been easier to balance the workload. Hopefully, Olivia will adjust her schedule to whatever works best for her and her family.

Her *family*.

A swell of emotion tightens my gut as I watch Lila walk toward me. I want that. I *think* I want that?

The same worries and doubts I had on our way home from the reunion come swirling back, just like they do whenever I think about what will come next for Lila and me.

Lila has already done all of this, but I don’t know the first thing about how to take care of a baby. I was just doing full squats with Asher in my arms. It was probably all Lila could do not to laugh at me.

She drops onto the couch beside me. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to get any work done around this place,” she says. “If it isn’t you distracting me with kisses, it’s your mom distracting me with baby goats, and now Olivia distracts me with a baby? You Hawthornes. Giving me such terrible working conditions.”

“Yeah, it really looks like you’re suffering,” I deadpan.

Lila rolls her eyes. “Listen. Someone has to be responsible around here. And I do need to get the bakery numbers from

you by this afternoon. The supply order has to be in first thing tomorrow if we're going to get everything delivered in time for the festival."

I nod, filing away my Perry-doesn't-know-how-to-be-a-dad worries for another time. "I'm just about finished running the calculations. Almost everything sold out last year. We need to make more, it's just a question of how much more. Twenty percent? Thirty? I don't want to make too much and have the extras to go to waste."

"If it were me, I'd go for the higher percentage," Lila says. "Then if there's extra, you can donate it to the food bank and at least take the tax deduction."

"Huh. That's actually a really good idea."

Lila smiles. "Don't sound so surprised. I have one every once in a while."

That's an understatement. All of her ideas are good ones. But that's such an un-Perry-like sentiment, it's possible I'm heavily biased.

I reach over and grab her hand, recognizing that I have to act before my brain can talk me out of it. "Hey, I want to ask you something."

She laces her fingers through mine. "Okay."

"How would you feel about coming to the restaurant opening with me next weekend? Not to work. Not as my assistant. As my date."

Her eyebrows go up, but she doesn't respond right away.

"I know it's on a Thursday night, and that's a school night, which means you'd probably have to get a babysitter for Jack, but my whole family will be together—even Flint—and I just ... I want you with me."

Was that too bold? Too forward? Too official?

A million different expressions flit behind Lila's eyes before she finally smiles. "Did you really think I'd turn down the opportunity to eat Lennox's food?"

I breathe out an exaggerated sigh to mask the relief-filled real one. “You had to bring him up, didn’t you?”

“*And* I get to meet Flint? I’ll have to pull the *People* magazine out from behind the couch and brush up on my celebrity facts.”

“Sometimes having so many brothers is very annoying.”

Lila chuckles and shifts, one foot tucked under her so she’s sitting sideways on the couch, facing me.

“I promise you have nothing to actually worry about.”

“I don’t, huh?”

She smirks and leans close, close enough for her nose to brush against mine, but she doesn’t kiss me. “Yep,” she whispers. “I already picked my favorite Hawthorne.”

I reach out a hand, hooking it around her waist, and tug her a little closer. “Is that right?”

“Mmmhmm,” she breathes. “I mean, with that downy soft hair on Asher’s little newborn head, can you blame me?”

I freeze. “You are not funny.”

She chuckles, her shoulders shaking with soft laughter as she finally presses her lips to mine. “Kidding, kidding,” she whispers in between lazy kisses. “I promise you’re the only Hawthorne man for me.”

I lean into another kiss, wishing I could fully let go. I’m the only Hawthorne for Lila, but that’s not really enough, is it? She also needs me to be enough for Jack. To be a father. And if the last five minutes I spent with Asher is any indication, I am *ill-equipped*.

“Okay,” Lila says, breaking the kiss and patting my knee. “Back to work. I also need you to approve the budget for the temporary staff we need to hire to run the festival. And as far as I know, the truck that’s supposed to pull the flatbed for the hayride still isn’t fixed.”

“How did I ever do this job without you?”

Lila smirks. “I genuinely have no idea.”

I follow her to my desk and try to focus on the multiple decisions that need to be made. But in the back of my mind, one thought pulses steadily, like a giant yellow caution sign.

I *want* to be enough for Lila and Jack.

But wanting and *being* aren't exactly the same thing.

You don't win a race by *wanting* to be the fastest person on the track. You have to do the work. Earn the prize.

And what if I just ... *can't*?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lila

I STAND IN THE restaurant's newly paved parking lot and stare up at the shiny new building, all lit up from within, the sign that reads *Hawthorne* sparkling above the wide double doors. I've been inside before. But this is different. Now, the restaurant is full of people.

*And Perry's family.*

I take a few purposeful breaths and smooth down the front of my dress. I really did buy something new this time. An indulgence Grandma June convinced me was completely justified. It's red, off the shoulder, and fitted through the bodice in a way that makes my boobs look amazing without overdoing the cleavage. The A-line skirt hits just above my knee and would flare out a little if I happened to twirl—something I know from firsthand experience because I twirled a dozen times in my kitchen while Jack watched and laughed until he almost fell out of his chair. I might have kept going had the babysitter not shown up.

Rebecca, a high school sophomore and the highly recommended granddaughter of Grandma June's neighbor, immediately put me at ease with the natural way she engaged with Jack. When she had to cancel on me the first time I asked her to babysit, I wondered. But she apologized for that, and

since Jack took to her right away, it suddenly feels easier to try and sneak away a little more frequently.

I'm desperate for a real, bonafide date with Perry. Though this possibly counts as a real date. You know. One with Perry's entire family including his very famous younger brother in attendance. NO BIG DEAL.

I give myself one more once-over in the glow of the streetlights and head to the front door.

It took a lot of effort to convince Perry he didn't need to drive up to Hendersonville to pick me up for tonight. The man had enough going on, and I didn't want him to worry about me, but more than that, I just didn't want Jack to see him. While I was getting ready to leave, it quickly became obvious I made the right call.

I was honest with Jack about where I needed to go without him—to a restaurant opening for work—but of course, he wouldn't leave it at that. He asked a million questions. Would Mr. Hawthorne be there? Was there a bar? Would there be other men looking for wives and stepsons?

Poor kid. His pancake breakfast is only ten days away, but in his five-year-old brain, that's still plenty of time to find himself a new staidad. *Stepdad*. He's said it wrong so many times now, he even has me saying it.

Jack has at least resigned himself to going with his grandfather if a more favorable option doesn't present itself in time. But I can tell he's still hoping.

And maybe I should start hoping too. Trevor's dad still hasn't confirmed he can even make it. The man is about as married to his work as Trevor was. Leaving his law practice on a regular Thursday is a big ask, even if it is to spend the morning with his grandson.

Worst case scenario, I'll take Jack to the breakfast. He would hate it, but it would be better than going alone.

It has occurred to me, once or twice or five hundred times, that I could just ask Perry to take Jack to his breakfast, but I'm still scared to make that leap.

Inside, every table in the restaurant is filled. Servers are moving around the room with an ease and efficiency that does not scream opening night. In fact, it seems like a well-oiled machine. Though, Lennox started hiring waitstaff weeks ago. Everyone working tonight has been through dozens and dozens of practice runs. As my eyes dart around the room, I half wonder if everything is running so smoothly in the kitchen, but then I see Perry standing across the room, and all other thoughts float away.

He looks up and catches my gaze, his smile stretching wide as he begins to walk toward me.

*I think I'm in love with him.*

The thought catches me by surprise, but it shouldn't.

I've been falling in love with Perry since that first day all those weeks ago when Jack "helped" Perry change his tire and talked the poor man's ear off. So many tiny moments have led me here. Now, I just need the courage to accept them. To *trust him*.

"Hi," Perry says when he finally reaches me. He's rocking a look similar to the one he wore to the reunion—dark gray dress pants and a white button-down, sleeves rolled up, collar open—except his beard looks like it's been recently trimmed, and he might have even gotten a haircut.

Since this afternoon when I left work to go meet Jack at the bus stop.

Perry had a busy afternoon.

"You're looking particularly dapper this evening," I say.

He leans forward and kisses me softly, right there in front of an entire room full of people. "You're looking pretty beautiful yourself," he says, his hand on my waist, heat smoldering in his eyes like a banked fire. "Red is your color."

I'm still not used to the ease and frequency of Perry's compliments, and I immediately flush at his praise. "Thanks," I say, my voice catching. It feels silly to suddenly be so overwhelmed with emotion, especially emotion I'm not ready to say out loud. If I can't get my act together, Perry's going to



figure me out, I'll start babbling, and then I'll wind up blurting my emotions in front of everyone.

I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but Perry is too perceptive.

"You okay?" he asks, pulling me a little closer, his arm wrapping around me protectively. Maybe even a bit possessively? The realization does not help calm the flurry of emotions swirling in my chest or dampen the fire he's igniting with every touch.

I lean closer, breathing in the sandalwood scent I love so much, and press a hand to my stomach.

"I'm okay. Just nervous, I think?"

"Lila, my family already loves you. You don't have anything to be nervous about."

Funny. He thinks I'm nervous about his family. What I'm nervous about is *him*. About the growing certainty that probably, I have to tell him how I feel.

I nod, and we start weaving our way through the tables. "How's Lennox holding up?"

Perry looks over his shoulder. "I haven't seen him in a few hours, but I'm assuming no news is good news, and he must have everything under control."

As we approach the table, I spot Flint, sitting to the right of his mother, and my steps falter. I tug on Perry's hand, and he turns around, a question in his eyes.

I pull him closer. "Okay, I'm just reminding you that if I freak out the tiniest bit when I meet your brother, it has everything to do with the fact that he is *any* movie star and nothing to do with the fact that he is *Flint Hawthorne*."

Perry grins. "Noted. But I can't promise I won't always make fun of you for freaking out."

I swat at his arm, and he chuckles.

Hannah gets up when we close the short distance between us, immediately pulling me into a warm hug. Brody and his

wife, Kate, get up next, offering me hugs as they say hello. Olivia and Tyler are on the opposite side of the table, but they both smile and nod in my direction right before Mr. Hawthorne pulls me in for a hug. After he lets me go, he claps Perry on the back, squeezing his shoulder for a long moment while they exchange some meaningful glance I can't interpret.

Flint is the last one to stand and greet me. "Hey, Lila," he says easily. "I know we're strangers, but do you mind if I give you a hug?"

"I don't mind at all," I say easily. I almost want to run a victory lap around the table. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I AM HUGGING FLINT HAWTHORNE, AND I AM NOT FREAKING OUT. It is not lost on me that shouting imaginary all caps exclamations to no one might be considered its own form of freaking out, but at least it's a form Perry can't see.

Flint's arms fall away, and he claps Perry on the back just like his father did. "You're right, man," he says, looking back at me. "She is beautiful." He unleashes the smile he's famous for and winks at me before returning to his seat.

I turn to Perry, eyes wide. "Oh, he is shameless," I whisper, only loud enough for Perry to hear.

Perry chuckles. "You get used to him. Under all that sparkly Hollywood exterior, he really is a great guy."

"Who farts and burps and has smelly armpits just like the rest of us," Brody adds.

"Brody!" Kate says, her eyes cutting to me. "You'll eventually get used to the Hawthorne brother dynamic. For now, just focus on the great guy part."

I believe Perry, because Flint is a Hawthorne. And these people are *all* great. It occurs to me, as my eyes drift across the faces surrounding the table, that I am welcome here tonight because of how much this family loves Perry. They want him to be happy. They *care* about his life. They are all invested.

From down the table, Flint mumbles something about his armpits smelling like flowers, and everyone starts to laugh.

A bolt of longing, sharp and deep, pierces my heart, and I nearly gasp from the strength of it.

*I want this.*

I want *Perry*.

We settle into our seats, and I reach my hand under the table, sliding it over to grab Perry's knee. I give it a squeeze, holding on as if to brace myself against the emotion swelling through me.

Perry's hand finds mine, prying it off his leg and lacing my fingers through his. His other arm drops across my back. "Hey. You sure you're okay?" he whispers.

I nod, even as I choke back a tiny sob and laugh at the tears gathering in my eyes. "I just ..." I shake my head and drop Perry's hand long enough to grab my napkin and soak up my tears before they can ruin my makeup. "It's just your family. It doesn't even seem real."

"You get used to that part eventually, too," Kate says knowingly from the other side of me. "I was an only child growing up, so all this—" She motions to the table at large. "I've had a lot of moments just like the one you're having now."

I press my hands to my cheeks. "I feel ridiculous," I say, followed by a tiny sniff. Perry's hand rests calmly on my back, but he seems content to let Kate talk me down this time. "I'm an only child, too. It's pretty overwhelming to think of having all these people to love you."

"Overwhelming is a good word. But you *do* get used to it." She shifts her lips to the side and leans closer, her voice dropping in volume. "You might even get bothered by it every once in a while. But I'll give you the same advice Olivia gave me right before I married Brody."

Something stretches in my heart at the mention of marriage. It might be a little premature to give me *this* kind of advice, no matter how much I've decided that's precisely what I want, but I have no desire to discuss the specifics of those emotions at

the dinner table with Perry's entire family, so I just smile and nod. "Okay."

"There are going to be moments when you wish everyone would leave you alone."

Brody leans forward. "Just hang those hopes up now. It's never going to happen."

Kate rolls her eyes. "It truly isn't that bad. Well, okay, it can be that bad. Either way, when it does happen, and you need to go dark for a little while, your best bet is to let someone else in the family know so they can cover for you. Because if you just turn off your notifications? Or worse, turn off your phone? You have about two hours before someone will show up at your doorstep to make sure you're okay."

I laugh. "I don't know. That sounds kind of nice."

"Nice like a really heavy blanket," Olivia says from across the table. "It keeps you warm. And it might even be really soft. But if you're in the wrong position ..." Her voice drops into an exaggerated whisper. "It will absolutely make you feel like you're suffocating."

"I heard that, Olivia," Hannah says, her tone light and lilting.

"How come no one ever comes to make sure I'm okay if I don't respond to text messages?" Flint says.

Hannah puts a hand on Flint's cheek. "Sweetheart, I'd fly to Malibu in a skinny minute if I thought you needed me. And I text your assistant to check on you all the time."

"You do? Really?" Flint asks.

"What do you take me for?" Hannah says, smiling sweetly.

"She's playing it up now," Perry says, "but Mom is actually pretty chill. Dad, too. They're very good at letting their adult children *adult*."

I lean into him, suddenly curious about something. I drop my voice, hoping I'm speaking quietly enough for only him to hear. "Hey, what was that look about with your dad earlier?" I ask. "That seemed like it meant something."

Perry's expression softens. "Just a conversation we had a while back. Right after I graduated from high school. Ask me later, and I'll tell you what he told me."

"Or you could tell us all now," Olivia says. "I want to know what Dad said to you in your *time to be an adult* talk."

Perry shoots his sister a glare. "Seriously? Do you have supersonic hearing over there?"

"I'm guessing this is one of those times *Perry* wishes he was alone," Brody says evenly, and Kate and Olivia both start to laugh.

I press my lips together, trying to hold in my own laughter. I'm very interested in what Perry was saying, but I also really love the banter between his siblings. "We can talk later," I say to Perry.

"Can I come?" Flint says from down the table. "I want to know what Dad said. I never got a special talk after I graduated. What's up with that, Dad?"

"Seriously? Is *everyone* listening to our private conversation?"

"You did get a talk," Mr. Hawthorne says to Flint, holding up one slightly wobbly finger. I don't often see signs of the stroke Mr. Hawthorne suffered, but I'll occasionally hear a word slur or see a slight tremble in his movements. "Yours was about different things," he goes on to say. "Yours was for you. Perry's was for Perry."

"What was mine about?" Flint asks.

Mr. Hawthorne looks like he's trying not to roll his eyes. "Integrity. Restraint. Humility."

"Ohhh," Flint says, tapping the side of his forehead. "The don't-let-Hollywood-turn-me-into-a-garbage-human talk. I do remember that."

The banter continues around the table, all good-natured jokes and ribbing. As the night progresses, I make a catalog of all the things I love. The things I want for Jack.

Siblings who know him well enough to joke and tease, but only in ways that aren't hurtful.

Meaningful talks teaching him how to navigate the world without being a jerk or missing the moments in life that matter the most. Cousins who can be his friends.

By the time our server is clearing away my dessert, a lemon-raspberry torte that was just as exquisite as the rest of the food, the list has gotten more specific.

Apple orchards to explore. Strawberry fields to roam. Mountains to climb. Baby goats to play with.

Well. And most significant of all.

*Perry* as a father.

A part of me fears it is only the magic of the evening that has me wanting to take the next step in our relationship. But really, I was already feeling this way. Tonight only helped confirm it.

I'm not saying I'm ready to propose to the man.

I *am* saying I'd like him to start spending time with Jack.

We sit around the table, laughing and talking long after our meal is finished. Only Olivia and Tyler sneak away so they can get home to put Asher to bed. Eventually, the crowd thins enough that Lennox comes out of the kitchen. His family gives him a standing ovation and a round of hugs similar to the one they gave me when I arrived. When it's my turn to offer him congratulations, he accepts the hug, then snaps his fingers like he's just remembered something.

He turns to the closest server, saying something I can't hear, then turns back to me. "I have something for you," he says simply.

"For me?" I look at Perry, but he doesn't seem to know anything more than I do.

Lennox smiles but doesn't offer any explanation until the server returns holding a pastry box tied with shimmery gold ribbon that matches the interior decor of the restaurant. She passes it off to Lennox who hands it to me. "Almond pillow

cookies,” he says. “Someone mentioned that you really enjoyed them.”

“I did, but a whole box just for me? What did I do to deserve this?”

Lennox shrugs with an easy grin. “You tamed the grump.”

Perry and I don’t manage to steal a moment alone until he’s walking me back to my car. It’s a school night for my babysitter as well as for Jack. Even though I’m sure Jack’s already sleeping, I ought to get home for her benefit if nothing else.

When we reach the car, I unlock the door, and Perry hands me the cookies so I can put them inside with my purse. Once my hands are free, I melt into his embrace.

“That was a really wonderful evening,” I say, my words muffled against his chest.

“I’m really glad you could be here.”

“Your family is really great.”

He chuckles. “I think they really love you. But I know they can be a lot.”

“They can be. But I still love it. Growing up an only child, I don’t know. This all feels pretty magical to me.”

His hands slide up and down my back, warming me against the chilly fall air. I’m wearing a jacket, but my legs are bare. I probably shouldn’t stand out here much longer.

“Hey.” I lean back so I can look at Perry. “What was it your dad said? Can you tell me now?”

“It wasn’t anything groundbreaking. Mostly just stuff about my future. About the farm. My education. But he also gave me some advice about relationships. I remember that more than anything else.”

“What did he say?”

Perry’s arms tighten around me, tugging me a tiny bit closer. “He told me that when I met the right woman, I wouldn’t just know in my head or in my heart. I would know somewhere

deeper. He couldn't explain how I would know, he just said that I would."

I almost hate to ask the question dancing on my tongue, but I don't think I can stop myself. "Did you know with Jocelyn?" I ask, my voice sounding too small. Too needy.

Perry's hand lifts to cup my cheek. "I thought I did. But now, I realize I ..." His words cut off, and he shakes his head. He blows out a breath, like he's trying to work himself up to something. His hands fall away, and he backs up a half-step, turning away from me, his hands propped on his hips.

He's so clearly warming up for something, I half expect him to start bouncing on his toes and throwing a few fake punches.

"Hey," I say, stepping toward him and slipping a hand over his shoulder. "You okay?"

He huffs out a laugh. "Just trying to figure out how much I can say. How much I *should* say."

"Say it all," I say gently, hoping he senses how much I mean it.

"Lila, saying it all does not sound like taking things slow. You said that's what you wanted."

"I did say that. My heart hasn't done a very good job of listening."

His expression sobers as he picks up my hand. He places it against his chest, spreading my palm so it's flat against his heart. "I didn't know what my dad meant," he says. "Not until now. Not until you."

There are so many unspoken words hanging in the air between us, but for now, this feels like enough.

Do I love him? I think so. I would even say the look in his eyes says he probably loves me too.

But I can't say it out loud. Not until I know he can love Jack, too.

Maybe he's holding back for the same reason. Either way, it's time. We can't keep Jack out of whatever is happening



between us. Not anymore.

“So I was thinking,” I say slowly, my hands sliding up his chest to his shoulders. A tiny thrill of excitement flits through me. I’m still not used to the fact that this man is mine, that I get to touch him like this. “What if I brought Jack to the festival next week? I was thinking we could go together.”

“The three of us?” he asks. His voice is hopeful, but I don’t miss the fear lacing the edges of his words.

“The three of us,” I repeat, willing confidence into my voice. It’s the right move. Jack is a charming kid. Of course Perry will fall in love with him. Everyone does.

Perry pulls me into a kiss, his tenderness quickly melting into something a little more fervent. He presses his forehead against mine. “I feel like I’m going to screw this up,” he says softly. “I don’t know what I’m doing, how to—”

I silence his words with another kiss. “We just have to take it one day at a time, okay? Nothing has changed. I’m still me. You’re still you. Now there’s just an extra small person we have to consider in all our plans.”

He takes a slow, deep breath, and I wonder if I just scared him off. But then he gives his head one small, decisive shake. “Okay,” he finally says.

I smile. “Okay?”

He nods. “One day at a time.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Perry

I BOUNCE ON MY feet as I scan the crowd at the harvest festival, anxious to see Lila, but nervous about seeing Lila and *Jack*. It doesn't make a lot of sense. I've been around Jack once before, and I feel like I handled things pretty well.

But this is different. Now, there are very specific expectations.

I don't want to disappoint Jack.

Even more, I don't want to disappoint Lila.

Mom nudges me from where she's standing beside the barnyard gate, allowing kids to enter the petting zoo a few at a time. "She'll get here when she gets here, Perry," she gently scolds. "Just relax."

I shake out my shoulders. "What if I miss her? There are a lot of people here."

There's a lull in the crowd as the last few kids make their way to the farm manager, who is on hand to supervise the animals. Mom takes advantage of the moment and turns to face me. "Perry. You aren't going to miss her. She's coming to see *you*. Is she meeting you here? At the petting zoo?"

I nod, even as my eyes scan over the crowd again.

“Then just be patient. She’s wrangling a five-year-old. Her life is ten times more complicated than yours for that reason alone.”

Mom’s words are meant to be reassuring, but they only make me worry more. “I’m going to walk toward the parking lot and see if I can find her.”

Mom scoffs. “Perry, if you leave, then she’ll show up here, and you’ll be gone. Why don’t you just call her?”

I pull out my phone and hold it up. “I will.”

But I still walk away. I’m too full of nervous energy to stand in one place, too overwhelmed with the complexity of my emotions. I keep waffling back and forth between fear and inadequacy, and a driving need to be with Lila, to take care of her. Logically, I know there is a balance somewhere. That no relationship exists without *any* fear. But agreeing to spend time with Jack has had a bigger impact on me than I expected it to. It’s like it woke up some narrative in my head telling me all the reasons why I’m *not* going to be a good father.

Not so coincidentally, the narrative sounds an awful lot like Jocelyn.

I stop and take a steadying breath, closing my eyes against the whir and hum of the crowd. I don’t need my ex-wife in my head right now.

When I open my eyes, Lila is right in front of me, waiting in line at one of the tables selling Stonebrook Farm hot apple cider. My first impulse is to hide, to dive behind the vendor booth to my left, but I don’t think Ann from the Feed N’ Seed would appreciate me upending her tables of festively decorated sugar cookies.

Finally, Lila looks up and notices me. When she smiles, the narrative in my head, the fear, the doubt, it all quiets and stills, then fades away completely. Now, there’s only her.

I can do this for her.

Her eyes dart to Jack before she looks back at me. She’s nervous too. I walk closer, watching as she reaches out to take the cider, tucking one of the cups into Jack’s waiting hands.

She puts the other cup back on the table and reaches into her purse, but I jump forward, stopping her with a hand to her arm.

“These are on the house,” I say.

The teenager working the cash box at the table gives me a nod and turns to the next customer. I’ve never seen her before, but she clearly knows who I am, because she doesn’t question.

“Thanks,” Lila says as we step away from the booth. She looks down at Jack. “Can you say thank you to Mr. Hawthorne for the cider?”

Jack takes a slow sip, the resulting slurping noise making me smile before he offers me a lopsided grin. “Thank you, Mr. Hawthorne.”

“Oh hey, look at that. Have you lost a tooth since I last saw you?” I crouch down so we’re eye to eye.

Jack nods. “Yep. This one right here.” He points to his left front tooth, sticking his tongue into the hole the missing tooth left behind. “And this one is loose too,” he says, wiggling the other.

“Which is why we’re drinking apple cider tonight instead of eating caramel apples, huh?” Lila says.

“Mommy says I can have a caramel apple at home when she can cut it into teeny tiny pieces.” He holds his fingers up, his thumb and pointer finger creating a tiny bit of space, his little eyes squinting as he shows me just how small his pieces of apple will be.

“That sounds like a great plan.” I stand back up, my eyes skating over Lila.

I’m struck again by how effortlessly beautiful she is. Jocelyn used to talk about how much effort it *actually* took to look effortlessly beautiful, but there was never anything effortless about Jocelyn’s look, no matter what she called it. She was always perfectly primed and tweezed and polished to shiny golden perfection. It used to mesmerize me how beautiful she was all the time. Funny how little appeal it holds for me now.

“It’s nice to see you,” I finally say, self-conscious about how long I’ve been staring at her. “You look nice.” Somehow, we’re back to those first few days after the reunion, when we were still nervous around each other, still unsure. *Pull yourself together, man. This is Lila.*

Jack reaches up and tugs on my hand. “Do you want to come to the petting zoo with us?” He looks at his mom. “Mommy, can Mr. Hawthorne come to the petting zoo with us?”

Lila and I make eye contact, and she smiles.

“Please, Mommy?” Jack tugs one more time, the movement jostling the cup of cider in his other hand. It starts to tip, and I reach for it without thinking, steadying it, then taking it out of Jack’s hands. As soon as he’s free of the cup, Jack grabs *my* free hand instead, so now he’s standing between Lila and me, connecting us. “Please, please?” he says.

Lila smiles. “What do you say, Mr. Hawthorne? Would you like to join us?”

A lightness fills my chest as I look down at Jack. “Let’s do it.”

Jack cheers, jumping up and down without letting go of our hands, then tugs us forward. We walk as a trio toward the petting zoo where we bypass the ticket line, despite Lila’s protests, and head straight for Mom, who is still standing by the barnyard gate.

She ushers us in, fawning over Jack, making him feel just as special as I knew she would. She leads him through the petting zoo personally, giving Lila and me a chance to hang back the tiniest bit.

“Your mom’s a natural,” Lila says easily.

“Oh, definitely. She’s been counting down the days to grandmthood for years.”

“Why didn’t you and Jocelyn have kids? You were married for what, seven years? That’s kind of a long time.”

“I wanted to,” I say slowly. “At first. But then Jocelyn got so focused on her career. And on *my* career. She wanted money. Prestige. Kids didn’t fit into the picture for her. It was always something she said we’d take care of later. Once we were really established. By that point, I already felt our marriage unraveling, which made kids just seem ... reckless, I guess?”

She nods. “I think a lot of people have kids thinking it will save their marriage. Change things for the better.” She loops her arm through mine, and a tiny thrill shoots through me that she’s touching me this way even with Jack around. I like that we aren’t hiding. “Why did you stay married if you felt things unraveling?”

I shrug. “I made a commitment. A vow. I was taught to be a man of my word.”

She pulls me to a stop, one hand lifting to my cheek. “Perry, you’re a better man than she ever deserved.” She leans up on her tiptoes and plants a quick kiss on my lips.

“Mommy!” Jack calls from just up ahead. “Come and see this pig! It’s bigger than my bed!”

“*Buttercup*,” I grumble, and Lila laughs as she threads her fingers through mine and tugs me forward.

“You seriously have to tell me what that poor pig did to you,” she says.

We slowly walk toward the pigpen where Mom and Jack are reaching over the fence, scratching the top of Buttercup’s head.

“It isn’t much of a story. Just that she escaped her pen one too many times, and the last time, she nearly barreled through the middle of a wedding reception happening in the pavilion.”

“And you’re the one who had to stop her?”

“The way I heard the story,” Mom says as she gives Buttercup a particularly affectionate pat, “he body slammed her and rolled her into the ditch by the side of the main road.”

“You body slammed a pig?” Jack asks, his eyes wide with awe, which sends a surge of pride through my chest. It’s the

first good thing to come out of my wrestling match with Buttercup. I managed to impress Jack.

“I did *try* and coax her back to her pen with apples first,” I say. “It’s not my fault she wasn’t interested in cooperating.”

Lila smiles. “Now that’s something I wish I got to see.”

I nudge her elbow. “You would have appreciated the jokes Brody made right after it happened.”

She lights up. “Were they punny?”

“Something about the Olym-pigs?” I say.

“I always knew I liked Brody the most,” she says, laughter in her tone.

I raise an eyebrow, and she grins. “After you, of course.”

“I’ll let Lennox know he’ll have to go bigger than almond pillow cookies.”

“Oh! The cookies. I forgot about those. Okay. I take it back. Cookies trump puns.”

“Wait, so what’s the order again? Should I be writing this down?” I ask, and I’m only half-joking. When it comes to Lila, I want to remember everything.

After we leave Buttercup’s pen, Mom takes us inside the big barn away from the actual petting zoo so Jack can meet Sweetpea. She’s a lot bigger now, but still more of a baby than all the other goats who are outside.

I scoop Sweetpea into my arms and crouch down so I’m right in front of Jack. “Do you want to hold her?”

He nods, brown eyes wide, and holds out his arms.

I pass him the goat, keeping one hand under Sweetpea to help stabilize her, as Jack pulls her against his chest.

Sweetpea leans up and nuzzles his face, and he starts to giggle. “Mommy, can we get one?”

“Goats have to live in a barn, baby, where they have a big pasture outside that they can run around in. But I’m sure we can come visit Sweetpea and the other goats another time.”

“You’re always welcome,” Mom says.

After we visit a few more animals, go on a hayride, and pick up some apple butter for Lila to take to her Grandma June, I walk Lila and Jack back to her car, feeling a little more optimistic about things.

Jack is riding on my shoulders, too tired to make the long trek back to the parking lot. His arms are resting on my head, and my hands are holding loosely to his ankles. I’ve never carried a kid on my shoulders before, but this almost feels natural.

Lila walking beside me *definitely* feels natural.

Tonight has been fun. *Easy*.

We finally make it back to the car, and Lila reaches up, tugging Jack off my shoulders and depositing him in the backseat.

I reach out and muss his hair before Lila closes the door. “See you later, kid.”

Jack smiles through a yawn. “Are you going to take me to my breakfast now?”

My eyes dart to Lila, whose expression is filled with alarm.

“Now that you love my mommy, you can be my staidad, right?”

“Honey, it’s not—” Lila starts, but then Jack shakes his head. “Chloe said that’s how you know when people love each other. They kiss. And I saw you kiss Mr. Hawthorne. If you love him, and he loves you, then he can be my staidad.” He shakes his little head in frustration. “I mean my stepdad. That’s what you said.”

Lila sighs. “These things just take time, sweetie. It’s not that simple.”

“Why isn’t it simple?” Jack says, his lip quivering. “Why do grownups have to make everything so hard?”

Lila takes a slow breath. “Let me say goodbye, okay? Then we’ll talk on the way home.” She closes the door and looks at



me. “I’m sorry he put you on the spot like that. This breakfast has him so keyed up about not having a dad.” She presses a hand to her forehead. “I thought this was a good idea, but maybe we should have—”

“Hey.” I reach out and grab her arms, giving them a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay.”

She nods, but her expression is still pained, her eyes filled with worry.

“Lila, I could take him to the breakfast.”

She looks up, hope sparking in her eyes, but then she shakes her head, her lips pressing together into a thin line. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Why not? I want to.”

Her shoulders drop. “It’s big, Perry. Just the two of you? Are you sure you would even be comfortable? And if tonight gave Jack the impression that we’re—that you’re—” She huffs, but she doesn’t need to say the words for me to know the only way that sentence can be finished.

If tonight gave Jack the impression that we’re in love, that we’re getting married, then me taking Jack to a father-son breakfast will only drive that impression home. The thought should scare me. No, scratch that. The thought *does* scare me. But not as much as the idea of losing Lila.

“Does it scare you to think that’s where we’re headed?” I ask.

She bites her lip. “It scares me to think of how I’ll recover if we’re not.”

If not for Jack watching us through the window, I’d pull her into my arms right here, kiss her until her fears are gone, whisper promises into her ear. *I love you. I’m not going anywhere. Trust me. Trust us.*

I settle for taking both her hands in mine and threading our fingers together. “If you aren’t ready, I won’t push. But I’d love to take him to his breakfast. I’m ready to try, Lila.”

She takes a slow breath and closes her eyes. “Are you sure?”

I nod. “Apple-solutely.”

She rolls her eyes as she smiles and shakes her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Yes. But you started it.”

She glances back at Jack, then lunges up for a quick kiss. “Thursday morning. Next week. You have to wear a tie.”

“I have a few of those.”

“Can you pick him up at the house? Actually, it’s probably better if you just drive my car. Then we won’t have to move his booster seat.”

“Sounds good.”

She opens the driver-side door, offering one final wave before backing up and pulling away.

I make my way back to the festival, emotions swirling. The longer I walk, the less certain I feel.

Tonight was fun with Jack. But Lila was here. Whenever Jack asked for something he couldn’t have, she knew exactly how to say no and move him on to the next thing. When he whined about the hay on the hayride feeling itchy, she knew exactly how to distract him and keep him happy.

Am I really ready to spend time with Jack alone?

Ready or not, I just committed.

Time to dust off my ties and turn myself into a dad.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lila

I AM ONE HUNDRED percent positive I am going to be a stressed out, nervous wreck while Perry and Jack are at the father-son breakfast. Which is why booking a yoga class for the hour or so when they'll be at the school was such a good idea. It'll cut into my workday a little bit but seeing as how my boss will be at the elementary school eating pancakes and sausage links with my little boy, I'm banking on him not minding if I show up to work a little late.

The morning of the breakfast, I pull on my favorite leggings and a sports bra before heading to Jack's room to get him ready to go.

The child is *buzzing* with excitement. He's also supposed to wear a tie, which ... *okay*, I can value the importance of teaching little boys how to dress up and take care of themselves, but I'm not sure the school thought through the menu choices very well. All I can imagine is a whole bunch of kindergartners with ties dragging through the pancake syrup on their plates.

I get Jack mostly dressed, then send him to brush his teeth while I run a Google search on how to tie a tie. I *thought* I was ordering one of those kid-sized ties that adjusts with a zipper, but Amazon sent me an actual *tie* tie. And I have no idea how to make the thing work.

Halfway through a YouTube video walking me through the simplest knot for children's ties, I've paused and restarted the video almost a dozen times. *This* is simple? How on earth does anyone ever wear one of these things?

When Marley's face lights up my phone screen, I gladly click over to answer her call. She's a single mom with a son. Maybe she'll know how to help.

"Hey!" I answer. "Do you know how to tie a tie?"

"What?"

"A tie. Jack has to wear a tie to school today."

"Oh," Marley says. "I always just bought the zipper ones. Or a standard clip-on."

"Ugh." I groan. "That's what I thought I was buying. But now he has to wear one today, and this is all we have, and I have no idea how to tie the stupid thing."

I drop the tie onto the back of the couch and head back to my bedroom to grab my shoes. I'll have to leave just after Perry does in order to make it to my class.

"I think I read somewhere that it's easier if you're wearing the tie. So you like, put it on yourself, tie it, then widen the head hole so you can move it from your head to your kid's head."

"Oh, that's actually a good idea."

"Why does he have to wear a tie to school?" Marley asks.

I slip on my sneakers one-handed, hopping across my room to keep my balance. "It's a father-son breakfast thing. They're all supposed to dress up. Something about dressing for success or being their best selves. I don't remember."

"I think it sounds fun. Is Jack's grandpa coming up to take him?"

I pause. I've been so wrapped up in my new job, in *Perry*, I haven't given Marley an update. *Any* update. Which isn't all that weird. We're friends. It's easy to talk to her, to relate to her, and it always feels like we pick up our conversation like it

never really ended. But we aren't the kind of friends who text each other daily updates.

The last time we talked was the day I drove out to rescue Perry from his flat tire.

Since then, I've progressed from assistant to reunion date to exclusively dating, and now to this. To Perry taking my kid to an event designed for sons and their *fathers*.

I do not have time to summarize how we wound up here.

I also won't lie to her.

"Oh, um. Perry is taking him, actually."

There's a beat of silence before Marley says, "Perry, your boss?"

"Yes?"

"Girl, you better give me more of an explanation than that."

I sigh. "I will. I promise, but I can't do it right now. Perry will be here any minute to pick Jack up."

"You cannot drop a bomb like that and expect me to be fine with you explaining sometime in the vague and distant future. At least tell me whether you're dating."

I drop onto my bed. "We're dating."

Marley squeals. "Oh my word. Lila! You're dating Flint Hawthorne's brother!"

"I met Flint, actually. He was at a family dinner a few weeks back."

"Shut. Up."

A knock sounds on my front door, and my heart jumps. "Listen, I really need to go. Was there a work thing you needed to talk to me about? I feel bad for monopolizing the conversation talking about ties."

"No, no. It's fine. It can wait. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay because you haven't been logging in to the management software."

"Oh. Right. I've mostly been working in person."

“Understandably. If I were dating my boss, and he looked like Perry Hawthorne, I’d want to work in person too. Okay. Go be a mom. But Lila, you better call me and give me an update. And soon!”

“I will. I promise.”

I end the call and hurry toward the front door to let Perry inside, but I only make it around the corner before I stop dead in my tracks.

Perry is already inside, looking handsome as ever in a navy-blue suit. He’s standing in front of the entryway mirror, Jack perched on a chair in front of him. Perry’s arms encircle Jack from behind, his larger hands shadowing Jack’s smaller ones as he walks him through the steps of tying his tie.

“Like this?” Jack says, his little voice barely loud enough to reach my ears.

“Just like that,” Perry says patiently. “You’re doing great. Good. Now just loop it through that hole and slide the knot up.”

My heart in my throat, I watch Jack’s reflection in the mirror as Perry slides the tie into place. Jack’s eyes light up. “I did it!”

“Great job, kiddo,” Perry says gently. “Now let me see.” He takes Jack’s shoulders and turns him so they’re facing each other. He adjusts Jack’s tie, then smooths down his hair. “All right. Looking good. I think we’re ready to go.”

It’s hard to quantify what’s happening inside my heart right now. To see them together like this, to see Perry teaching Jack, guiding him, loving him like a father would. I resigned myself a long time ago to the possibility of muddling through all the parenting milestones on my own. I’m not the best person to teach Jack how to understand what’s happening to his body when he’s going through puberty. I don’t have any personal experience shaving my face or working up the courage to talk to a pretty girl. But I was willing to try. To arm myself with videos on the internet and a whole lot of gumption to do the best I could.

But to see Perry stepping up, voluntarily taking this tiny piece from me?

Tears fill my eyes as an ache fills my chest.

I want this so much.

I want Jack to have a dad.

I want us to be a family.

“Mommy, look!” Jack says, jumping off the chair and running over. “Perry helped me tie my tie.”

“That’s really great, Jack,” I say, my hands smoothing over him. “Go grab your backpack, okay?”

Jack hurries toward his room, and I finally lift my gaze to Perry’s.

“Jack let me in,” he says, as if I need him to explain his presence. “And I hope it’s okay that I asked him to call me Perry. I just thought, at the breakfast, it might be weird if he’s still calling me Mr. Hawthorne.”

“Of course. No, that makes sense.” I sniff and wipe my eyes, turning away from Perry.

Which is stupid. There’s no way he didn’t notice my tears.

He steps closer and reaches for me. “Hey. Come here.”

I shake my head as I fall into his arms. “I’m being ridiculous.”

“I don’t think you are.”

“Sometimes I don’t realize how hard it is to do everything by myself until I’m not anymore.” I pat his chest. “I’m glad you’re here,” I say simply. “Thank you for being here.”

Something like fear flashes behind Perry’s eyes, but then he’s tucking me into his chest, his hands sliding up and down my back.

My *exposed* back. Because I’m still only wearing a sports bra.

“Oh no,” I say, stepping away and spinning around. I grab a folder off my desk and hold it in front of my stomach.

Perry narrows his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I say a little too quickly.

He lifts an eyebrow, his expression saying just how much he doesn’t believe me.

I look down at the folder, then back to him, and bite my lip. “Hiding,” I finally say.

“Your stomach? Why?”

Jack barrels into the room, his backpack on. “Mommy’s stomach looks like a road map,” he says matter-of-factly. “Cause when I was in her tummy, I stretched her skin big, *big*, *big*.” He stretches his arms out in front of him and starts walking around the room like a marshmallow man.

Or maybe that’s just what he thinks women look like when they’re pregnant?

Perry turns, his back to Jack so his broad body is shielding me from my son’s view. He grabs the folder and tugs it from my hands. “Don’t hide from me,” he says in the same bossy, commanding voice I hear him use at work.

I close my eyes, but I don’t resist.

I love my body. I do.

It is strong and capable and beautiful in its own way. I do not spend a lot of time looking at it and hating it. I don’t have time for that kind of self-loathing. But I know what the world’s beauty standards are. And they are a lot closer to the woman Perry *used* to be married to than they are to me. She probably doesn’t have a single stretch mark on her.

Perry presses his palm flat against my stomach. “Lila, open your eyes.”

I shake my head no.

“Lila,” he says again. It is NOT fair when he pulls out bossy Perry.

I huff out a breath, then finally comply.



His gaze is soft. Warm. “At some point,” he says so quietly, there is no way Jack can hear, “I am going to kiss every single one of these stretch marks.”

Oh. *Oh*. I take a stuttering breath.

“They’re a part of you. They make you real. *Human*.” He smiles. “I tend to like humans.”

Real? We’re talking about being real? Because this man feels anything but real. Like a dream come impossibly true. How did I ever think he was just my grumpy boss?

“Perry, come on,” Jack says from the doorway. “The clock says we’re going to be late if we don’t leave right now.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” I say to Jack. Literally word for word. Jack has probably heard me say that exact thing a hundred different times.

Jack grins goofily.

“I’ll see you when I get back?” Perry asks.

I nod. “Yes, please.”

I follow them outside and pause on the front porch, making a conscious effort *not* to fold my arms across my midsection.

*Don’t hide from me.*

That’s a moment that’s going to stay with me for a *very* long time. I think about him kissing the road map that zigzags across my skin, and a shot of heat pulses through my veins.

Jack waves through the back window as Perry backs out of the driveway, his smile so wide, I almost start to cry again.

I’ve got a week’s worth of emotions rolling around inside me, and it’s barely eight in the morning. Forget yoga. With the way my heart is pounding, I’m burning more calories just standing still, letting all these feelings work their way through my heart and mind.

I drop onto my couch and let the thoughts come, filtering through the fears and doubts I should ignore and holding onto the things that feel more certain. Or one thing, really. One unwavering certainty that beats louder than everything else.

I am definitely in love with Perry Hawthorne.  
And I'm going to tell him today.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Perry

I AM OVERWHELMED BEFORE we're even out of the car, which can't be a good sign.

I thought I did well with the tie thing, and things were good with Lila and me. But then Jack and I got in the car, and the radio was on, tuned to NPR. I figured Jack wouldn't like news radio, so I tried to find another station, stopping when I landed on a pop song I didn't recognize. Do kids listen to pop music at age five? The song ended, and the deejays started talking about the song, but by that point, we were already approaching the elementary school, so I completely missed what the deejays were talking about until Jack yelled from the backseat, "Perry, what's twerking?"

So. At least now I know. Kids *definitely* don't listen to pop music at age five. At least not *this* pop music.

The entire time I'm circling the elementary school parking lot, Jack talks constantly. I'm trying to listen—is he going to quiz me later on all the random things he's telling me?—but I'm also trying to focus, and doing both at the same time is not easy. I wind up slamming on my brakes more than once to keep from rear-ending the cars in front of me.

"There's my friend Maddox," Jack says, pointing out the window.

I can't tell which kid he means. There are dads and grandpas and little boys everywhere, most of them already streaming into the school cafeteria.

Meanwhile, I can't even find a place to park. I leave the parking lot and head back out to the street in front of the school. People are parking along the curb, but with all the traffic, I can't stop imagining getting Jack out of the car and *into* the flow of traffic and spending the rest of the day at the hospital. Or worse.

How do parents do this? All day long, make decisions about how best to keep their kids safe?

I finally settle on flipping a U-turn and parking on the other side of the street, then I make Jack crawl across to the opposite side of the car to get out so we aren't standing in the road.

After all that effort, we're five minutes late for the breakfast, and we miss the instructions on how and where we get our food. I usher Jack into line, assuming we'll just do what the people in front of us are doing, but then we figure out that we're supposed to be going through the line *by class*, and Jack's class hasn't been called up yet.

"Should I put my pancakes back?" Jack asks, his expression worried.

I shake my head. "We're already here. Let's just get through the line. They'll have to forgive us for going out of order."

Jack nods, but I can see how uncomfortable he is. He keeps tossing glances over his shoulder, like other kids are going to be mad at us for cutting.

Finally back at the table, we sit down only to realize I forgot to get us silverware.

"Perry, I don't have anything to drink," Jack says. "Did you get me some milk?"

So I forgot silverware *and* milk.

"I didn't. Can you sit right here while I run and grab us some?"

Jack nods, and I hurry back up to the line, cutting to the end to grab the things we missed.

When I get back to the table, several of the other dads are chuckling. I narrow my eyes and look at Jack, who has poured at least twelve servings of syrup onto his plate. It's full to the brim. One more drop, and we'll have a waterfall of syrup pouring off his plate and onto the table.

"Hey, whoa, that's a lot of syrup," I say, lifting the bottle out of Jack's hands. There is no way he's going to be able to eat without getting syrup all over everywhere. I slide his plate away.

"Hey!" Jack says. "Those are mine!"

"These are yours now," I say, moving my plate in front of him. "Let's see if we can get a normal amount of syrup on them, okay?"

Jack sighs and frowns, but he doesn't protest as I butter and syrup his pancakes. "There. All set."

Jack looks at me like I've just grown a third head. "Why did you put butter on them? I don't like butter."

*He doesn't like butter.*

"Jack. You probably won't even taste the butter. Try a bite."

"I don't want to try a bite. I have pancakes with Mommy all the time, and she never puts butter on them because she knows I don't like butter."

I look back up to the line which has tripled in size now that more classes are being called up. I can't go get him more pancakes. But I also can't take the butter off of *these* pancakes.

"Hey," a dad says from the other side of Jack. He holds up an empty plate that he pulled out from underneath his own. "Do you mind if I help?"

I hold my hands up. "Please. I clearly need it."

The man forks Jack's original pancakes out of the syrup soup they're swimming in and drops them onto the empty

plate. “Here you go, little man,” the guy says, swapping the new plate for Jack’s. “Pancakes, no butter.”

This guy makes it look so easy. I tell myself to calm down. It *is* easy. It’s pancakes. Just breakfast. I have to *breathe*.

“Here, I’ll take that,” I say, reaching for the syrup-filled plate. The dad hands it over, and I carefully carry it to the trashcan in the corner.

And I almost make it. Until somebody’s kid runs past me, bumping into me from behind and sending a cascade of syrup down my pant leg and into my shoes. MY FREAKING BUTTERCUPPING SHOES.

I swallow the less polite swear words threatening to erupt and take a slow, even breath. I am a grown man. A CEO of a thriving business. I can handle this.

I lift my foot, hearing the squelch of syrup in my sock.

I cannot handle this.

Back at the table, the hero dad who saved Jack’s pancakes gives me a knowing look. “Divorced?”

It takes me a moment to process his question. Do divorced guys have a certain look? But then I realize he’s assuming I’m divorced *from Jack’s mom*. And probably swooping in to attend a breakfast when I am not the full-time parent. Because clearly, I do not look like a full-time parent.

“No, I’m just ...”

I’m what, exactly? I don’t think there’s really a title for hopeful, almost-boyfriends.

“He’s my staidad,” Jack says in between bites.

“Stepdad?” the dad says.

“Not quite. I’m dating his mom.”

“Ah. You’re a good sport then. Events like these can be tough even for the seasoned pros.”

I nod. “Thanks for your help with the pancakes.”

“No problem,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m Dave.”

He reaches over and shakes my hand.

“Perry.”

“Good to meet you. My oldest refused to eat anything with cheese on it until he was ten. We had to get creative to feed that kid. Pizza? Tacos? Mac and cheese? He wouldn’t eat it.”

“Mayonnaise over here,” a dad says from across the table. “Or any condiments, really. No ketchup, mustard, barbecue sauce.”

“Dry foods only,” the kid sitting next to him says. He picks up a bite of plain pancake and shoves it into his mouth.

I shift and cringe at the feel of syrup still sliding around my shoe. Dry food is cleaner, at least.

The dads at the table keep talking, laughing as they compare picky-eater horror stories. I know these guys are trying to make me feel better by pointing out their kids’ weirdo tendencies, but it’s only making me feel worse. How do they even navigate all these different opinions and preferences? How do they remember? What if they have more than one kid, and they forget which one hates mayonnaise and which one hates ketchup?

Once everyone has finished eating and our plates have all been cleared away, the kids gather on the stage to sing a couple of songs they’ve been working on in their music class. While we wait for them to get situated, I’m distracted (again) by a conversation happening between two of the other dads at our table. Now that the kids are gone, their subject material has taken a significant shift.

“It’s been weeks,” one guy says. “She’s always too tired or too stressed or too overwhelmed with the kids.”

“I feel you. Then when you finally think you’ve got a minute alone, there are kids knocking on the door or waking up because they wet the bed or lost their blanket, or—”

“Hey,” Dave says, cutting off their conversation. He motions toward me. “You’re scaring the new guy.”

“New guy?”

“He’s dating the kid’s mom,” Dave says, waving his hand toward the stage where the teachers are still working to corral fifty five-year-olds onto the risers.

The loudest of the two guys raises his hands and shapes them into a megaphone around his mouth. “Get out while you still can!” he whisper-yells before laughing at himself like he’s just told the funniest joke.

The guy sitting next to him hits him on the arm. “Don’t listen to him. Single moms, am I right?”

I force a polite smile, but I honestly can’t decide which one of these guys I hate the most.

“Sure, single moms,” the first guy says. “Then they become *married* moms, and you’re strapped with a kid. No privacy. No honeymoon period ...” He shakes his head. “You’re a better man than I am, dude.”

Right now, I don’t feel like a better man. I feel like I’m in way over my head, doing things I’ve never had to do, with syrup matting my leg hairs and a stain on my probably ruined leather shoes.

The songs help.

Five-year-old voices are very sweet.

But the longer I’m in the school, the more uncomfortable I feel. I tug at my collar, a cold sweat breaking out across my neck. It’s been almost an hour. We have to be done soon, right?

The principal stands up, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. She’s going to thank us all for coming, and then I can get out of here. “Let’s give another round of applause for our kindergartners,” she says. Once the applause dies down, she pulls out a sheet of paper. “If you could all remain seated while our teachers take the students out of the cafeteria, we’ll then dismiss you to the following locations, where you can say goodbye to your sons”—she holds up a finger—“and grandsons and pick up a very special craft they’ve been working on this week before you head out. If your student is in Ms. Callahan’s class, you can find them in the media center. If



your student has Mr. Joy, they'll be in the gymnasium." She continues down the list, but it hardly matters if I'm listening or not.

I have no idea who Jack's teacher is.

I pull my phone out of my pocket. I can at least text Lila and ask. Except there is no cell signal inside the school. I can't decide if it would be faster to go out into the parking lot to get a signal, or find a teacher or administrator *inside* the school who might be able to help.

My *cold* sweat feels like it's turning into a hot one. An anxious one. An I'm-going-to-melt-out-of-my-suit-and-self-destruct one. I hold my phone up, trying again to see if I can get a signal. Maybe if I lean toward the window?

Dave leans closer. "Dude. You all right, man? You look a little green."

"I don't know who Jack's teacher is," I admit. "I don't know where to go."

"Honestly, you probably aren't the only guy here who doesn't," Dave says. "When I was here two years ago with my middle kid, there was an admin lady by the door helping people out. I'm guessing she'll be there again."

I nod and take a deep breath.

"Now, a room full of moms?" Dave says with a chuckle. "You wouldn't have this problem."

Dave shakes my hand when it's time to go, patting me on the back in a fatherly way, even though the guy doesn't look like he's much older than I am. And yet, he's been my lifeline for the past hour.

I stand in line behind half a dozen sheepish-looking dads to ask the admin lady where I need to go to find Jack. The whole time, I can't stop thinking about Dave's words. About a room full of moms knowing their kids' teachers better than dads do.

I don't want to be that kind of dad. I want to know things. Teachers' names. Birthdays. Whether my kid likes butter on his pancakes.

But I also don't know *how* to be that dad. Surely it feels easier when it's something you ease into. Olivia and Tyler, for example, are learning about Asher together. They're figuring things out. Cataloging every day.

Can I really just step in and be what Jack needs?

If this morning is any indication, the answer is a resounding *no*.

Exhibit A: Syrup in my shoes.

Jack's class is gathering on the playground. But not the *regular* playground. Apparently, there's a special playground just for kindergartners.

I'm the last dad—*stairdad? Boyfriend dad?*—to arrive.

Jack comes racing over and throws his arms around my legs. "I thought you weren't coming," he says.

I crouch down in front of him, swallowing away my hesitations. At least for now. "Of course I came."

"I have something for you," Jack says. He turns and hurries over to a table next to the back wall of the school. There's one lone gift bag still sitting on the far corner.

He carries it over, gripping the handle with both hands, his face serious. The sight tugs at my heart. This kid deserves a dad. He deserves everything.

I sink onto my heels when he reaches me.

"Open it," Jack says.

I dig through the tissue paper and pull out the ugliest mug I have ever seen. It's obviously handmade and hand painted, and I love it with my whole soul. "This is pretty amazing," I say.

"I painted it like an apple tree," he says.

And then I see it. The globs of red dotting a green background, a rim of brown circling the bottom of the cup. "I can see that. I really love it, Jack."

"K. I'm gonna go play."

He takes off for the swings, and I lower the mug back into the bag.

I *do* love the mug.

I just don't know if I deserve it.

I drop onto a bench at the back of the playground. A few dads are still standing around, talking, watching as the kids play. I'm ready to leave, but I'm also afraid to go before everyone else does. Will it make me look selfish? Lazy?

I don't know what I expected this morning to be like. How I expected things to go. But I didn't expect to feel so defeated. I didn't expect to be so *bad* at this.

I'm going to sound very arrogant for saying this, but I'm not generally bad at anything. I do things right, and I do things well.

Except for my marriage. I don't think I did anything right when it came to that particular relationship. So maybe it's just people I'm bad at. *Relationships*.

"Perry!" Jack comes barreling into my leg, tears streaming down his face. "It's my turn on the swings, and Grant says it's his turn, but he's already had a turn to one hundred, and he won't get off. And we have to go inside soon because Ms. Kennedy just gave us a five-minute warning, and I'm not going to get my turn."

He looks at me, eyes expectant. Like this is a problem I should know how to solve. "Um, can you just find something else to do? Go down the slide or something?"

Jack's lip quivers. "I don't want to slide. I want to swing."

"And you're sure Grant's turn is up?"

He nods.

A thought pops into my head, and I reach for my wallet and pull out a five-dollar bill. "Here," I say, handing the money to Jack. "Tell Grant he can have five bucks if he gets off the swing now."

Jack's face lights up. "Awesome!" He grabs the money and runs back to the swings where he offers it to Grant. Grant immediately hops off the swing and takes the money.

Jack jumps into the swing and starts pumping his little legs back and forth. When he looks up and catches my eye, he gives me a big thumbs up, his toothy grin reaching me all the way across the playground.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm guessing bribery probably isn't an acceptable parenting strategy. But I'm out of my depth here.

A few more minutes pass before Jack's teacher claps her hands and calls the kids back to the classroom. Jack waves as he lines up, sending me another big grin, but then my eye catches on Grant, the swing thief, who is showing the money to his teacher.

*Uh oh.*

She calls Jack over who, of course, turns and points at me. Ms. Kennedy is frowning as she leaves her class with another teacher and walks toward me. There's a gate out to the parking lot right behind me. I half consider making a break for it. It's been a very long time since I've been scolded by a teacher. With the mood I'm in, I'm not sure I'm up for the experience now.

"Hello," she says primly, stopping right in front of me. "I'm Ms. Kennedy, Jack's teacher."

I nod. "Nice to meet you."

"You're a friend of the family?"

She has to know I'm not Jack's actual father, and for the purposes of this conversation, I'm okay with us leaving it at that.

I nod. "Something like that."

"Yes, well, I am glad that you came to be with us today, but we don't generally condone bribes as a way to motivate children to behave." She holds out the five-dollar bill. "I think this belongs to you."

I clear my throat and take the money. “Yeah. Sorry about that. Jack put me on the spot. I wasn’t sure how else to respond.”

“An honest mistake,” she says gently. “I always tell parents success with children is about steady, consistent discipline.” She eyes me, her gaze catching on the bottom half of my pant leg where the syrup is still clinging to my skin. “But don’t worry too much about it. Everyone has a bad day every once in a while.”

She turns to leave, but then stops and looks at me over her shoulder. “It took me a moment to figure it out, but you look just like that actor. Flint Hawthorne. Has anyone ever told you that before?”

I force a smile. “A few times.”

I head back to my car, Jack’s apple tree mug in hand, feeling more dejected than I have in a long time.

Jack needs steady, constant discipline? Do I even know what that means? I couldn’t even make it through a pancake breakfast line without falling apart. I gave him *money* to bribe a kid into giving him what he wanted. That’s not even behavior I would condone in adults.

But hey! At least I look just like my super famous, successful, little brother.

I drive back to Lila’s overwhelmed and frustrated. And *confused*.

I thought I could do this. That I could step up and be a dad to Jack. But now I’m not so sure.

I sit in Lila’s driveway a long moment before slowly heading to her door. I’d hoped I could spend a few hours with her before heading back to Silver Creek, but I’m feeling a need to lick my wounds in private.

She swings the door open, her expression hopeful. “Hey! How did it go?”

I force a smile I hope she can’t see through. I can’t explain. Not yet. Not now. “Great. Great. I think Jack had a good

time.”

She narrows her eyes, too perceptive. “And you?”

I nod, focusing on the one part of the day I can call a win. “He made me a really cool apple tree mug.”

“I’m sure it’s amazing. But tell me how you’re *really* feeling right now.”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. “I uh, well. I have syrup in my shoes, so that feels awesome. And you maybe need to have a conversation with Jack about twerking?”

Her eyes widen. “He was twerking?”

“No! Not him. He just heard about it on the radio and asked what it was.”

She presses a palm to her chest. “Oh. Phew. That I can handle.” Her eyes drop to my shoes. “How did you get syrup in your shoes?” She pushes the door open. “You want to come inside? I can help you clean up.”

I grimace. I have to get out of here before she can pull me in and make me forget how I’m feeling. “Actually, I’ve got to get back to the farm. Something came up.”

“Oh. Okay. Something I can help with?”

Of course she would ask. She works for me. It’s her job to know about things at the farm. “Nah. Just need to touch base with my dad before the pest control people visit this afternoon.” It’s not quite a lie. I *do* need to touch base with Dad before this afternoon; I just don’t need three hours to do it.

I step forward and give Lila a quick kiss on the cheek. “I don’t know if you were planning on working today but take the rest of the day off. I’ll call you later?”

She nods, but I don’t miss the disappointment flashing in her eyes.

It can only be a direct reflection of the disappointment flashing in mine.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lila

TAKE THE REST OF the day off.

Is the man crazy?

Does he think that's actually going to make my day easier?

Something went down at that breakfast, and I need to know what it is.

But Perry clearly isn't ready to talk about it. Or talk about anything, apparently. Because he hightailed it out of my driveway like he was running from the police.

Or just running from me.

The thought makes me sick. The entire time he was gone, I was practicing an *I love you* speech. And now this?

I can't stop myself from imagining the worst. Maybe I really was being too optimistic. Maybe he really *is* too good to be true.

I get to Jack's bus stop fifteen minutes early, which does not make the time go by faster. After I use up all my Candy Crush lives, I start pacing, walking up and down the sidewalk.

Could Jack have said something that offended Perry? Not likely. The man is intelligent enough not to take anything a five-year-old says seriously.

Could someone else have upset him? A dad? A teacher? Or maybe he just had a really bad time and decided he doesn't want to be a part of Jack's life after all?

"Oh, this is stupid," I say out loud, pulling my phone out of my back pocket. I pull up Perry's number and call him before I can overthink it.

After five rings, the call goes to Perry's voicemail. But then, it's three o'clock. He's probably still out in the orchard with the pest control people.

Or he's ignoring me.

I'd much rather believe it's the pest control meeting, so I'm going with that.

"A perfectly reasonable explanation for not answering my call," I say out loud.

My heart starts to race as Jack's bus pulls up. Will he look sad? Disappointed?

But Jack tumbles off the bus all smiles. His tie is crooked, and there's definitely a syrup stain down the front of his shirt, but otherwise, he looks unscathed.

"Hey!" I say, pulling him into a hug. "How was your day? How was the breakfast?"

"Good," he says simply.

*Good?* That's all I get?

"Did you have fun with Perry?"

"He didn't know I don't like butter on my pancakes."

"Well, that's okay. He wouldn't know since he's never had pancakes with you before."

"Yeah, another kid's dad had to help him. But then we sang our songs, and my class went to the playground. And Perry gave me five dollars to give to Grant so Grant would get off the swing. But then Ms. Kennedy made Grant give it back, and she gave it back to Perry."



“Perry gave you money?” Oh, the poor man. Solving playground fights on his first day of solo parenting? He was probably so overwhelmed.

“And it worked, too. It was stupid Ms. Kennedy’s fault that Grant didn’t get to keep the money. And then he was mad at me because he had to give it back.”

“Don’t call your teacher stupid, Jack.”

“Sorry. But I still think it’s dumb she wouldn’t let Grant keep the money.”

“I can see how you might feel that way. But what would it teach Grant to get money when someone wants him to do something? When we’re sharing, taking turns, we do it because it’s the right thing to do, not because we’re getting paid to do it.” I reach down and pat his little chest. “We do what feels right in here. In our hearts.”

He nods as he drags his backpack up the front steps. “Do you think Perry is going to move in with us soon? Chloe says I can’t start calling him Daddy until he moves in.”

I pause at the bottom of the steps, a hand pressed to my heart, and do my best to fend off the worry his question ushers in. “I don’t know, sweetie. We’re still getting to know Perry. And these things take—”

“Time,” he says with a huff, cutting me off. “But how much?” He drops his backpack on the floor inside the entryway and starts to tug at his tie.

I pull him closer, loosening the knot so we can slip it over his head.

“Like a week? Or twenty days?”

“I’m not sure there’s a specific number, kiddo. We just have to see how things go. What if we invite Perry over to watch a movie with us tomorrow night? Would you like that?”

He nods. “Can we watch *Coco*?”

“We sure can.”

This seems to appease Jack, at least temporarily. But it does nothing to make *me* feel better.

What if Perry won't come? What if he doesn't respond? I definitely need a few of the holes in Jack's story about the breakfast filled in, but it doesn't sound like it went all that terribly.

I fix Jack a snack, then turn on some cartoons for him while I try to reach Perry one more time. I text this time, though his meeting should long be over by now.

**Lila:** Hey. Jack is home and says he had a great time. Thanks again for taking him. Was thinking you might want to come watch a movie with us tomorrow night. Double feature? One with Jack, then one without?

I'm making dinner when Perry finally responds.

**Perry:** Glad he had fun. Thanks for the invite, but I don't think I can make it. I'm doing a thing with my brothers.

A thing? That feels vague. Is he blowing me off?

I know I've only known Perry Hawthorne for a few months, but he is not the sort of man to blow someone off.

Except, he *did* blow off his ex-wife when she was trying to get him to RSVP to the reunion.

Fear grips my gut, but I will it away. That was different. Jocelyn was hounding him. Pestering him. Making him feel horrible about himself.

I haven't done any of those things.

I think myself in circles all the way through dinner and Jack's bedtime. I haven't texted Perry back, and he hasn't texted me either. So, do we just leave things like this? Is he expecting me to show up to work tomorrow? Work virtually from home? Take another day off?

A part of me wants to feel angry. Why isn't he responding to me? Talking to me about the morning he spent with my kid? But a bigger part of me is just straight up worried.

I need to see him. Talk to him.

And I need to do it face to face.

Rebecca the babysitter, bless her, is at my house by nine, a stack of homework to keep her busy.

‘Thanks so much for coming last minute,’ I say. ‘He’s totally zonked, so you shouldn’t hear a peep from him.’

‘Sounds good! Take your time. I’ve got enough homework to keep me busy till midnight.’

A quick text to Olivia from my driveway gives me Perry’s home address. I’ve never actually seen his house, but I’m too stressed to be curious.

I just want to see him.

Make sure he’s okay.

Make sure *we’re* okay.

As I drive down the mountain, all I can think is that the only thing worse than a breakup conversation with a man I think I’m in love with would be having to explain that breakup to Jack.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lila

PERRY'S PLACE IS MORE cottage than house, nestled into the woods at the end of a narrow, paved road. There are flowers on his porch and ivy climbing up a trellis toward the second floor, and a birdhouse sign bearing the house number and the words "Home, Sweet Home" next to the front door.

I can't be in the right place. Nothing about this house says Perry. Not even a little bit.

I pull out my phone and double check the address Olivia sent over. The house numbers match, but could I be on the wrong road? I send Olivia a quick follow-up.

**Lila:** Are you sure you gave me the correct address?

**Olivia:** It's right. He's renting. Saving up to buy a place.

I think of what Perry told me about Jocelyn gutting him in their divorce, and my heart squeezes.

Sliding my phone back into my pocket, I step up to the door and knock.

I hear movement inside, but no one answers, so I try again. If he doesn't come this time, I'll text him and tell him I'm standing on his porch, and I'm not leaving until he comes out to talk to me.

I channel the frustration I felt this morning when he brought the car back and then high-tailed it out of town. I think of the moment before he left for the breakfast, the way he touched me, *promised* me.

I think of how much I wanted to tell him I love him.

And *now* he thinks he can ignore me?

I pound on the door a third time, this time like I really mean it.

Finally, the door swings open. “Brody, seriously, I’m not in the mood to—”

I jump back at his tone—grumpy Perry is definitely back—and press a hand to my chest.

“Lila.”

“Geez, Perry. You scared me.”

“I thought you were Brody.”

“I gathered.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry I scared you. I didn’t—I wasn’t expecting you.”

I shrug. “You know what Kate said about what happens when you go dark for a couple hours. Someone’s liable to show up on your porch.”

He lets out a little huff of laughter. “I guess I should have seen that coming.”

Perry is wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt, and his feet are bare, and he is so achingly handsome, I almost want to forget why I drove all the way over here and throw myself into his arms. “Can I come in?”

He nods and pushes the door open, and I cross through the entryway into the living room.

The inside of Perry’s house is more the house I expected to find. Simple, modern furniture. Clean lines. It has the same elegance of his office, and I recognize how easily I could feel at home here, even if it isn’t exactly his house.

“I texted Olivia to get your address. I hope that’s okay.”

Perry runs a hand through his hair. “Of course. I guess it’s weird you haven’t been here yet, but ...” He holds his hands out the slightest bit. “This is it.”

“When I pulled up, I thought I’d found the wrong place. The outside looks like a gingerbread house.”

This makes him smile the tiniest bit, and the tension around my heart eases. Still, it would ease more if I could go to him. Feel his arms around me. Take whatever is making him distant and throw it out the window.

“Can I get you anything? Something to drink?” he asks.

I shake my head no. “I’m okay.”

“Do you want to sit?”

This is stupid. We both know I didn’t come over here to sit and chat. He just needs to talk to me. “Perry, can you please tell me what happened this morning? I know something happened. You got so quiet, and then you gave me a lame excuse about going back to the farm, and I can just tell something’s wrong. I’ve been worried about you all day.”

Perry’s gaze drops to the floor, his hands propped on his hips. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” he finally says.

“Start with the breakfast.”

He looks up but doesn’t move closer. “What did Jack tell you?”

“Bits and pieces? Something about butter on his pancakes and bribing a kid on the playground? I’d love to hear your version though.”

He scoffs. “No, that about sums it up.”

“Perry, come on. What’s going on?”

He’s quiet for so long, I almost wonder if he’s forgotten I’m here. He’s turned away from me now, his arms over his head and gripping the top of the door frame leading into what looks like his bedroom. It’s not a bad view, what with the way his

muscles are bunching under his shirt, but I'm too distracted to enjoy it for long.

Finally, Perry turns around. "Lila, I'm not sure I can do this."

I close my eyes and press my palms flat against my legs, forcing air into my lungs and out again. I'm suddenly afraid I might actually *stop* breathing if I don't think about doing it. "I think I need you to explain a little more than that," I say simply.

And then Perry is across from me, sitting on the ottoman, his expression serious. "It was awful. *I* was awful. We got there late because all the empty parking spaces were on the street and that felt too dangerous for Jack. And then I forgot to get him silverware and milk, and I buttered his pancakes, and I got syrup in my shoe, and I didn't know who his teacher was and had to wait in line with all the deadbeat dads who didn't know so I could ask the admin lady where to find him. And then a kid was bullying him on the playground, and I didn't know how to help. I didn't know how to stop it from happening."

He stands up and starts pacing around the room. "Jack needs steady, consistent discipline, Lila, and I don't know anything about how to provide that. How can I discipline a kid if I can't even stay married?"

*Okay.* So there's a lot to unpack here. But first of all, Jack needs steady, consistent discipline? I'm guessing that isn't something Perry came up with on his own.

"Were you talking to someone about Jack's discipline?" I ask, already feeling defensive.

"Only Ms. Kennedy. When she scolded me for suggesting Jack bribe a kid to give up his swing."

That explains *that*, at least. That's one of Ms. Kennedy's favorite lines.

"Perry, I'm sure it wasn't that bad. Today was the first time you've ever been alone with Jack. You can't expect to know how to do everything on day one."

He drops back onto the couch. “The dads at our table were talking about how they never get to have sex. Or even just be alone with their wives. And the busy schedules. And weird food things. Like kids who won’t eat cheese, even on pizza.”

“Yeah, some kids are like that. Usually they grow out of it.”

“See?” Perry says, holding up a hand as if to emphasize his point. “You know that because you’re a mom. But I’m not a dad, Lila. I don’t know anything.”

I have had enough freak-outs as a parent, positive I have done and will probably *keep* doing everything wrong, to recognize one when I see one. On the one hand, it means Perry cares. He doesn’t want to disappoint Jack, or me, and that matters.

On the other, I *can’t* decide that I don’t want to try. That being a parent is too hard. Jack is mine, for better or worse, which means I have to keep muddling through, doing the best I can.

But Perry *can* choose. And that’s the thought that has nerves swirling in my gut and a thin sheen of sweat breaking out across my lower back.

“Do you know what Jack asked me when he got off the bus this afternoon?”

Perry is leaning forward, his elbows propped up on his knees. I hate how achingly handsome he is right now, tension tightening all the angles of his body. He lifts his eyes to meet mine.

“He asked when you were moving in. If he could start calling you Daddy.”

Perry scoffs. “I don’t know why you think that’s supposed to make me feel better.”

I scoot closer and slip a hand onto his leg. “Because, Perry, ninety percent of the stuff you think you screwed up today, Jack didn’t even notice. He had a great time. And the other ten percent? I mean, welcome to the club. I’ve made a million bad calls. And I’ll probably make a million more. No parent knows what they’re doing all the time.”



“Then how do you make it look so easy?”

“You’ve only spent one evening with Jack and me. I promise. I have my moments.” Even as I say the words meant to reassure Perry, I wonder if they’ll have the opposite effect and scare him away even more. I also realize with utter certainty that I never should have allowed Perry to take Jack to the breakfast in the first place. Talk about throwing someone into the deep end. Navigating the school—why didn’t I tell Perry who Jack’s teacher is?—handling a buffet line in an elementary cafeteria. Those school events can be a challenge for anyone.

It was too much, too soon, and that’s on me.

I open my mouth to say so, but before I can, Perry says, “When people fall in love, Lila, they get to date. Get to know one another. Build a life together. *Then* they have kids. They ease into it.”

Anger flares in my chest. “Yeah, I know. I already did that once,” I say sharply. “So you’re saying single parents—they only get the one chance at happiness, and then they’re done? Alone for the rest of their lives?”

“That’s not what I mean. But maybe you date *other* single parents, who already know—”

“Oh my word,” I say, standing up. “Do you even hear yourself right now? Perry, you *knew* about Jack from minute one of our relationship. I never hid him from you.”

“I know that. *I know.*” He runs his hands through his hair and stands up. “Gah, I’m doing this badly.” His broad shoulders drop, his head shaking like all the fight has drained out of him. “I just wish we could go back to when it was just the two of us.”

Tears pool in my eyes, and I look up, willing them to stay where they are until I get in the car and cry without this idiot man watching me.

“But it isn’t just the two of us,” I say. “It never has been.” I walk toward the door. “But I hear you loud and clear, Perry.

That's too much for you. And I guess it's better we figure that out now than later."

I make it all the way to the front door before Perry calls me back. "Lila, wait."

I turn around, and he rushes toward me, grabbing me by the elbows, his expression pained. "I'm not saying I don't want this. That I don't want *you*." He pulls me against his chest, and for a selfish moment, I let him. Feel his arms slide around me, lean into the solid warmth of his body.

But I can't. *I won't*. My heart can't take this for too much longer.

I press my palms against his chest and push away. "Perry, I love you. I was ready to tell you that after the breakfast. I practiced how I was going to say it all morning." Something flashes in his eyes when I say the words, but he doesn't say them back. And maybe it's better that way. "*I love you*. But you don't get me without Jack. We're a package deal."

"I know that. *Of course* I know that," he says softly. "But what if I can't do it?"

"What if you can't do it?" I ask. "Or what if you can't do it *perfectly*?"

"You deserve perfect," he says, frustration in his tone. "Jack deserves perfect."

"Wasn't it you this morning who told me our flaws make us real? I don't want perfect, Perry. I just want you."

I lean up and press my lips to his, and he cradles my face in his hands, kissing me with a fervency that only makes the tears fall faster.

It could be a kiss that says I love you.

It could also be a kiss that says goodbye.

I break away and back up until I'm pressed against his front door. He's said too many hard things tonight for me not to be crystal clear.

“I know it’s a lot,” I say. “Asking you to be a part of Jack’s life is a big deal. I won’t try to convince you, no matter how much I want to, because it has to be your choice. But I do want you to make that choice with all of the facts.” I wipe my tears away with the heel of my hand. “Perry, I love you. And I promise you, if given the chance, I will spend the rest of my life loving you like you deserve.” Even just saying the words out loud—owning them—makes me feel steadier on my feet.

“Jack has a soccer game on Saturday morning,” I continue. “Ten a.m., at Fletcher Park. His team wears light blue. I can’t compromise when it comes to Jack, so if you’re in, you have to be all in. Take a couple of days to think about it. If you come to the game, I’ll know you want to try.” I take a steadying breath. “If you don’t? Then I’ll understand where you are and what you want. And I won’t be at work on Monday morning.”

His eyes lift to mine like this last part surprises him.

I shrug. “I can’t be in love with you and still work for you. Not if you can’t love me back. Love *us* back.” I lean up and kiss him on the cheek. “Goodbye, Perry.”

As I walk out to my car, fresh tears streaming down my face, I can only hope it isn’t goodbye forever.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Perry

“LET ME GET THIS straight,” Brody says, leaning forward. “She told you she wanted to spend the rest of her life loving you like you deserve, and you let her walk away?”

I drop my empty glass onto the bar in Lennox’s restaurant. “It’s not that easy.” It’s late enough that Hawthorne is mostly empty. Brody and I are the only two people at the bar. Another half hour or so, and Lennox should be able to join us. Which means I’ll get to hear it from TWO brothers instead of one.

Tyler drops onto the barstool on the other side of Brody. “Sorry I’m late. Did I miss it? Did you convince him?”

Oh great. Make that two brothers *and* a brother-in-law.

“Seriously? You’re ganging up on me now?” I say, eyeing Brody.

He shrugs. “Tyler’s the only one of us with a kid. His opinion holds more weight.”

“His kid is only five minutes old,” I argue. “It’s not the same thing.”

“He’s almost three months old, actually, but—” I shoot Tyler a look that immediately silences him. “You know what, I can just sit here and listen. Without talking.”

“I still say you’re overcomplicating things,” Brody says. “She told you she loves you. Just say you love her too, kiss her like you mean it, then ride off into the sunset.”

I roll my eyes. “And I say you’re oversimplifying things. Don’t forget. Before we can ride off into the sunset, we have to stop and pick her kid up from the babysitter.”

Brody doesn’t respond, which is almost worse. I’d rather he scold me. Insult me. *Something*. Anything would feel better than my own incriminating thoughts and a silence heavy with his judgment.

“That kind of attitude doesn’t look good on you, man,” he finally says. “I don’t understand. You’ve always wanted kids. Are you really willing to let a woman like Lila get away because she already has one? Are you weirded out that he isn’t yours? Is that what this is?”

“That’s not it,” I say quickly. “I don’t care about that.”

“Then what is it?”

I twist my empty glass in a slow circle as I think about how best to explain. I’ve been thinking since Lila left my house last night. Thinking so hard that I stayed home from work—something I haven’t done in years—and didn’t leave my house until Brody showed up and strong-armed me into coming down to Hawthorne. All that thinking, and I still don’t feel any closer to an answer.

“Lila makes me feel like living,” I finally say. “I don’t even know if that makes sense. But when I look at her, everything is brighter somehow. It just feels right. I’ve never felt that rightness. Like my body, all the way down to the cellular level, knows we’re supposed to be together.” I look up. “Is that how you always felt with Kate?”

Brody smiles and drops a hand on my shoulder. “From the very beginning.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how you did this for so many years.” Brody was in love with his now-wife for a very long time before she moved him out of the friend zone. I’m not sure most men would have been so persistent.

“Love can make you do crazy things, man.”

The bartender comes over and offers me another drink, but I slide her my empty glass and decline.

“So, if we’ve established you want to be with her, we’re back to Jack,” Brody says.

“Not just Jack. I think I’m afraid that if I have to love them both, I won’t be able to love Lila like I should. With Jocelyn, I did everything I could think of to try and make her happy. And it was never enough. Now I have to make two people happy? What if I can’t do it? What if Lila winds up miserable just like Jocelyn was?”

“Hold up,” Brody says. “Your relationship with Lila is nothing like your relationship with Jocelyn. Is that seriously what you’re scared about? That you might fail *Lila*?” He runs a hand across his face. “Man, your ex-wife really did a number on you.” He takes me by the shoulders and turns me to fully face him. “Listen to me, all right? What you have with Lila is so much more than what you had with Jocelyn. We all saw that after five minutes of watching the two of you in the same room.”

“Everyone who saw you making out all over the orchard would agree,” Tyler unhelpfully adds.

“Jocelyn made you miserable, Perry,” Brody says. “You know she did. This is different. You have to trust that this is different.”

Lennox drops onto the barstool on the opposite side of me. “What’s different? Who’s different?”

“Lila is different from Jocelyn,” Brody says.

Lennox scoffs. “You can say that again. Why are we talking about *her*?”

“I only brought her up as a comparison. Perry has until tomorrow at ten a.m. to decide if he loves Lila enough to become her baby’s daddy.”

“An ultimatum? Way to boss the boss, Lila,” Lennox says. “I should bake her another box of cookies.”

“That’s not—” My words cut off. Lila didn’t mean to give me an ultimatum, but it feels like one anyway. And it should feel like one. I can’t play around with her feelings. Or with Jack’s.

“I don’t understand the hold up,” Lennox says. “Are you in love with her?”

“Yes,” I say, admitting it out loud for the first time. “Yeah. I am.”

Lennox takes a swig of the drink the bartender slides in front of him. “Then what’s the problem?”

“He wants to be *enough* for her,” Brody says knowingly.

“And Jack,” I say. “I want to be enough for both of them.”

“And he isn’t sure he can be because he wasn’t enough for Jocelyn,” Brody finishes.

It’s painful to hear my brother distill the doubts and hang-ups I’ve been struggling with for years into one very concise sentence.

But then Lennox shakes his head. “Nah. This isn’t about Jocelyn. I mean, she’s a piece of work, but right now, this is all about you.” He looks me head on, and something deep in my gut shifts, like I know before he even says it that what Lennox is saying is true. “Jocelyn had high expectations, sure. But the only person who has ever expected you to be perfect is *you*. And I’m willing to bet that isn’t at all what Lila expects.”

The words Lila promised me last night float into my mind. *I don’t want you to be perfect, Perry. I just want you.*

“Can I say something?” Tyler says.

We all turn to face him, but he keeps his gaze focused on me. “I know I’ve only been a father for five minutes, but I do know a little about feeling inadequate. Honestly, I don’t know how *anyone* could look at Asher, knowing you have to raise him and teach him everything he’s supposed to know about life, without feeling inadequate. But honestly, what’s the alternative? If I don’t want to fail him, the very best thing I can do is be here.”

“But it’s not the same thing. Asher is your son.”

The words feel flimsy on my tongue. Jack could be my son if I wanted him to be.

Tyler shrugs. “Okay. Then walk away.”

I’m already shaking my head. “I don’t want to walk away.”

I understand what he’s doing. The reverse psychology he’s pulling on me.

“Why not?” Brody asks, leaning into Tyler’s point.

Lennox nods. “Face it. You’re already invested, man. You’re too far in.”

So far, I haven’t framed it this way. I’ve thought about how overwhelming it might be if I stay and commit. I haven’t really considered the bleakness of what it would feel like if I didn’t. And not just because I’d be walking away from Lila. I’d be walking away from *Jack*, too.

Shock roils through me.

I haven’t spent enough time with Jack to love him in the same way I do his mom. But he belongs to Lila. He’s a part of her.

Which means, he’s a part of me now, too.

I think of the apple tree mug sitting on the kitchen counter back at the house, and the way Jack so easily announced over his pancakes that I was his staidad. My heart pulls and stretches, and I lift a hand to my chest, rubbing the spot.

“Let go of your doubts, man,” Brody says. “Just go for it. Trust that love is enough. That you are enough.”

Lennox coughs loudly, the noise shifting into what sounds a little too much like a chicken. Then he makes the sound again. “Bwak, bwak, bwak.”

Is he actually making chicken noises at me? Are we in the third grade?

“Bwak, bwak,” he whispers.



Brody and Tyler join Lennox's chorus, their arms flapping like tiny wings. "Bwak, bwak, bwak."

I stand up from the bar. "Okay. That's my cue to leave."

Their chicken noises follow me all the way to the door.

"You're all idiots," I call back to them just before pushing my way outside.

"You're welcome," they call back in weirdly synchronized unison.

As I drive home, a new sort of peace settles over me. Idiots or not, my brothers are right. I *am* too invested. I don't want to fail. But walking away would be the biggest failure of all.

Which means I have to figure out how to swallow my doubts and dive in.

And then get myself to a soccer game first thing tomorrow.

*— e l e —*

Cabbages.

I can't believe CABBAGES are going to make me miss my chance with Lila and Jack.

An entire semi of them, turned over on I-26 and blocking both lanes of northbound traffic.

I'm only a mile outside of Silver Creek, at a standstill because of *cabbage*.

I glance at my watch. It's been twenty minutes already, and I haven't moved an inch.

A pang of sympathy runs through me. That's somebody's harvest on that truck, representing months of work down the drain. But my *life* is going to be down the drain if I can't figure out how to get around this mess.

When an errant cabbage bounces past my window, I give up and call my brother.

"Hey, are you busy?" I ask as soon as Brody answers.

"No, but shouldn't *you* be busy?"

“I’m on my way to the game, but I need you to come pick me up. I’m on the interstate, and there are cabbages everywhere. Traffic is blocked.”

“Did you just say cabbages?”

“Details aren’t important, man,” I say. “The clock is ticking. Can you come?”

“You’re just going to leave your truck?” Brody asks.

“Yes! I’ll come back for it. This is more important.”

“All right. I’m on my way. Where can I meet you?”

“Just go to the Silver Creek exit on I-26,” I say, already pulling over onto the uncomfortably narrow shoulder. I park and unbuckle my seatbelt. “But don’t get on the highway. We’ll have to take 176 into Hendersonville.”

“Got it,” Brody says. “I’ll be there in ten.”

I climb out of my truck, lock it, say a little prayer for its safety, and then I start to run.

Brody is already waiting at the shoulder when I make it to the top of the on-ramp. His double cab truck is easy to spot because it almost always has his bright red kayak loaded into the back. As I approach, Kate jumps out of the front seat and climbs into the back, where it looks like several other family members are already crammed inside.

So this is going to be a family affair. *Fantastic.*

“This is so exciting!” she says, squeezing my arm as she passes me.

“For real, cabbages?” Lennox says from the back as I climb in.

Olivia leans forward. “And you said the entire highway is blocked?”

“Seriously?” I say to Brody. “You all had to come?”

“We’re happy for you,” Olivia says. “Plus, the most exciting thing I’ve done in the past two months is pump seven ounces

out of each boob in one sitting. I need more adventure in my life.”

“Too much information, Liv,” Lennox says.

“You just don’t like it when I say boob.”

“Because you’re my little sister. You aren’t supposed to have boobs, let alone talk about them.”

“So the boobs are a problem, but the baby isn’t? Got it. Very mature of you, Len. I suppose you think I found Asher in a cabbage patch.”

“Speaking of cabbages,” Kate says, her voice rising enough to calm the bickering between Lennox and Olivia. “Were there really cabbages blocking the entire highway?”

“Piles of them,” I say. “Here, give me your phone.” I hold my hand out to Brody. “I’ll plug in the address of the park.”

He hands it over. “We were at Olivia’s visiting Asher when you called. Then Lennox showed up, and they all wanted to come. Sorry if it’s overwhelming.”

I wave a hand dismissively. What’s overwhelming is realizing that even if we hit every green light between here and the soccer field, I’m not going to make it on time.

“At least I left Asher with Tyler and Mom,” Olivia says. “Can you imagine if we had a baby with us too?”

I run a hand across my face. This isn’t at all how my morning was supposed to go.

“Hey,” Brody says. “She’s going to understand. You’re trying. You’ll get there.”

I shake my head. “I wanted to be there when the game *starts*. If I’m not there, she’s going to think—”

“Hey,” Lennox says. “Let go of the *perfect* idea you have in your head and just roll with it. This is going to work out. Lila loves you. She’s going to understand an overturned semi full of cabbages.”

I nod. He’s right. Of course he’s right.

“Just call her,” Kate says. “Or text, at least. If you don’t want her to worry, let her know you’re on your way.”

I nod and quickly pull out my phone. I wanted to be there. To show up next to her, hold her hand while we cheer for Jack together. But there’s no way I’m making it in time.

Lila doesn’t pick up, so instead of leaving her a voicemail, I end the call and send her a text.

**Perry:** I’m coming, Lila. Don’t give up on me. I’m coming.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lila

*I WILL KEEP MY eyes on the field. I will keep my eyes on the field. I will keep my eyes on the field.*

In the ten minutes that Jack is warming up, it takes all my effort not to constantly turn and scan the parking lot behind me.

Will he come?

Does he love me enough to come?

It's been a long thirty-six hours since I gave Perry an ultimatum, but I don't have any regrets. We can slow down, ease into him spending time with Jack when the three of us are together, but we can't go backwards. If he wants me, he has to want us both.

Jack waves at me from the field as the referees blow the starting whistle.

Perry isn't here.

The game is starting, and Perry isn't here.

I itch to check my phone, see if I've missed something, but I accidentally left it in the car, and now that the game has started, I don't want to go back for it for fear I'll miss something.

*I could* go back for it. If I run, maybe?

But then Jack has the ball, and he's taking off down the field, and I have to keep my eyes on my boy. What could my phone possibly tell me anyway? Perry is either here, or he isn't.

And he isn't.

When we break for halftime, I decide to leave my phone in the car. At this point, I don't even want to see any explanation Perry might have sent for why he isn't here. Better I focus on Jack. Enjoy the game. Still, in the back of my mind, I keep hoping. Keep imagining that at any moment, he'll show up.

My hope doesn't fully flicker out until the last few minutes of the second half. Jack has done great. He scored a goal, which, considering we started the season just hoping he wouldn't trip over his own feet, is pretty impressive.

And I was the only one here to see it.

I didn't tell Jack Perry might come today.

So this burden—this painful disappointment—I will bear on my own. I wipe tears out of my eyes, hoping the other parents think I'm only emotional because my kid is a soccer rockstar and scored a second goal.

At some point, I'm going to have to tell Jack he won't be seeing Perry anymore. Maybe now that he's already had his father-son breakfast, he won't be so consumed with the idea of getting a new dad.

The final whistle blows, and Jack comes running over, all smiles. "Mommy, did you see me score?"

"I did, buddy. You were amazing."

"Hey, good game, Jack," his coach calls.

Jack runs over to the mom handing out snacks and water bottles to all the kids while I gather up my camp chair and the rest of my things. We head back toward the parking lot, my eyes scanning for Perry's truck the whole time. I dig deep for the determination to force them forward, straightening my spine, making my steps intentional as I lead Jack back to the

car. I can't keep doing this to myself. I can't keep looking for him.

Perry made his choice.

And it wasn't me.

I unlock the car, helping Jack into his booster seat before hauling my camp chair to the back of my SUV. I drop everything inside and turn and sit on the back bumper. I close my eyes and press my hand to my chest. Here, just for a minute while Jack can't see me, I let myself feel the full weight of my disappointment. The ache is bone deep, the sadness sharpened by the contrast of the bliss I experienced just a few days ago when I still believed Perry was mine.

"Lila!"

I look up.

Perry is running across the parking lot. Not driving. *Running.*

What on earth? My heart lifts at the sight of him, but then I remember our conversation the other night, and uncertainty fills me all over again.

If he wanted to be here, why didn't he come on time? Did he show up late to give me a *thanks, but no thanks*? Then again, he *is* running. Maybe something happened to his truck, and that explains why he's so late?

He stops a few feet away from me and drops his hands onto his knees, his breathing labored. "I'm here," he manages between breaths. "I'm so sorry I'm late, but I'm here."

He's here. Peace settles over my heart. *He's here.*

"Um, did you run the whole way?"

He stands fully upright and holds up a finger, like he's really struggling to catch his breath. I turn back to my car and pull out one of the extra water bottles left over from the last time I had to bring snacks to one of Jack's games. I take a few steps forward and offer it to him. It's mid-November, so the temperatures are in the upper fifties, but he's stripped down to his t-shirt and sweating like he just ran a half-marathon.

Perry grabs the bottle, twisting it open and draining it in a matter of seconds.

“Better?” I say, reaching for the empty bottle.

He nods. “There were cabbages all over the interstate,” he says. “So I had Brody come pick me up, and we drove up 176 to get here, but there was a parade happening in Flat Rock and then an accident that stopped traffic, so I just got out and ran.”

Oh, my heart. “How many miles?”

He glances at his phone. “Four-ish? I think? I tried to call you.”

“I left my phone in my car.”

His expression shifts. “So you thought I wasn’t coming?”

Tears well in my eyes, and I look away. He’s here now. That’s all that matters.

“Lila, I love you.” He takes a step forward. “I’m so sorry I put you through all this. That I freaked out. You were right about what you said. About me wanting to do it perfectly. But then I realized the thought of walking away from you—and from Jack—it hurt too much. Somehow that kid has worked his way into my heart almost as much as you have.”

The words feel too good to be true.

“I don’t really know how to be a dad,” Perry continues. “And I can’t promise I won’t screw up. In fact, I should probably promise that I *will* screw it up. But I promise I’ll do my best. I won’t ever stop trying to be my best for you. And for Jack, too.”

I launch myself into his arms, not even caring that he’s sweat-damp and smelly. My lips find his as I cradle his face, and he tugs me closer, his hands pressed against my lower back. We kiss until a cheer erupts beside us, and we break apart to see Brody, Kate, Lennox, and Olivia hanging out of the windows of Brody’s SUV as they cheer and clap.

“Somehow, it feels very appropriate that your family is a part of this moment,” I say.



Perry chuckles. “They’ll be a part of everything if we let them. Soccer games. School plays. Birthdays. Random holidays no one really celebrates.”

I snuggle a little closer. “As long as we can close the door on our wedding night, I’m in.”

“Our wedding night, huh?”

“Oh, come on. You just talked about being Jack’s dad. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

“I thought about it that first day. When Jack asked if I could be his staidad, something tugged in my heart. Like a part of me already sensed that’s where we were headed.”

“How poetic. You were seeing our future while I wanted to crawl under my car and disappear. I was so embarrassed.”

Perry grins, so different from the grumpy, frowning man I first started working for. “I was enchanted,” he says softly. “Still am.”

I kiss him again—because honestly, after that line, how can I not?—not stopping until Jack is out of the car and tugging on our hands. Perry drops down and scoops him up so he’s resting in the circle of our arms.

“Hey, Perry,” Jack says like it’s perfectly normal he’s here with us, holding us like we’re his family.

“Hey, kiddo,” Perry says simply.

“I scored two goals. Did Mommy tell you? I was super-fast.”

“I bet you were.”

“Do you want to come and watch *Coco* with us tonight?”

Perry looks to me, and I nod my approval of Jack’s impromptu plan.

“I’d love to. Think I could bring us a pizza?”

Jack’s eyes go wide. “With extra cheese!”

Perry gives me a knowing look. “You have no idea how happy that answer makes me.”

I laugh as he leans in to kiss me one more time.

“Hey,” Olivia calls from the SUV. “I’ve got to nurse my kid before next Tuesday. Are you coming back with us?”

Perry holds up a finger, asking them to wait. “I’m going to go get my truck,” he says to me. “And take a shower. Then I’ll come back. Is that okay?”

I nod. “I would love that.” I look at Jack. “*We* would love that.”

He kisses the side of my head, then kisses the side of Jack’s head before putting Jack down and backing away. “I’ll see you tonight?”

I nod, not even attempting to curb my smile. “We’ll be waiting.”



Later that evening after a movie with Jack, bedtime with Jack, and another movie just for us, we’re snuggled on the couch in my tiny living room, our feet resting on the ottoman, my head resting on Perry’s chest.

“Hey, Lila?” Perry asks sleepily.

“Hmm?”

“Would it be weird if we don’t wait long to get married?”

I lift my head, somehow not surprised that we’re circling back to this topic. “No, but I think you’d have to ask me first.”

“Marry me,” he says, nuzzling the side of my head with his nose.

I smile and roll my eyes. “You’re asking me right now? Like this?”

“You want a big production with my whole family watching? I’m not much of a showman, but I can call Flint and get his input—”

I cut him off with a kiss. “I don’t need a big production,” I say. “This, right here, just the two of us, is perfect.”

“Does that mean you’re saying yes? You’re actually going to marry ...” He hesitates and grins, like he can hardly get the next words out without laughing. “You’re going to marry *Hotty Hawthorne*?”

My eyes go wide at the name I once uttered, then convinced myself he hadn’t heard. “Wow. You’ve been holding that one in your back pocket for a long time.”

“Just waiting for the right moment.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you decided your *proposal* was the right moment to make fun of me. How nice.”

“It was so hard to keep a straight face after I heard you. The way you were psyching yourself up, and then—”

“You know what?” I sit up and reach toward the side table where our phones are both sitting. “If I’m marrying Hotty Hawthorne, I should call up Flint and see if he’s interested.”

“Nope! That’s out of the question.” Perry wraps his arms around me from behind and hoists me off the couch, spinning me around and putting me down so he’s standing in between me and our phones. And then he drops to one knee.

“You still haven’t said yes, Lila. Please marry me. No jokes this time. Just me. Telling you how much I love you. How much I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I tug him to his feet and answer with a slow, deliberate kiss, my hands sliding over the smooth planes of his body. We kiss until the tenderness melts into hunger, each kiss deepening, tugging us closer together. Heat races across my skin, collecting in my fingertips, scorching me wherever we touch. And I want to touch him everywhere. Catalog him. Remember the freckle on the back of his hand and the curve of each bicep and the exact shade of his deep brown eyes.

I want to know everything.

I want to *be* his everything.

“I would love to marry you, Perry Hawthorne, but we best be quick about it. Because I’m ready to make you mine in all the ways that matter.”

Heat flashes in his eyes, and he kisses me again, this one sweeter than the last because this one holds the promise of forever.

# EPILOGUE

Perry

I MEET LILA AT the door of her SUV as soon as she pulls into my driveway. We're getting married in the morning, a New Year's Eve wedding, but I can't wait any longer to give her her wedding gift.

I look into the backseat, but if Lila followed my instructions, she already dropped Jack off at Mom's house. Sure enough, she's the only one in the car.

I tug her car door open before she can.

"Hi," I say, leaning in to kiss her hello. This part of our relationship still hasn't gotten old, and I'm tempted to just stay here, enjoying a prolonged greeting before we go inside. But then I remember why she's here, and I pull back, tugging her out of the car.

"What on earth are you so excited about?"

I grin. "Just come inside. I have something for you."

On the front porch, I stop her and pull out a blindfold.

"Seriously?" she asks, but she doesn't resist when I slip it over her eyes.

"There's a certain order to this surprise. I can't risk you peeking. Okay. Can you see?" I wave a hand in front of her face.

She shakes her head. “Not a bit. Perry, what is this about?”

“Okay, come inside with me.”

I tug her gently forward, guiding her through the door and into the living room where we cross to the dining room. Or, what used to be the dining room. My dining room table is currently in my garage, where it will stay for the foreseeable future.

I turn Lila so she’s facing back toward the door. “All right. I’m going to take the blindfold off. But *don’t* turn around. Just look straight forward.”

She nods, even as she bites her lip, just like she always does whenever she’s nervous. “Okay. No turning. I promise.”

I slide off the blindfold. “Open your eyes.”

I hold my breath as she looks over the enormous poster board leaning against the back of the couch. “What is it?” she whispers.

I pick up the poster and bring it closer. “It’s a house. There’s this piece of property I’ve been looking at, and I’ve *sort of* been talking with an architect, going over different house plans. Nothing is set in stone. We can still change everything so it’s something you like too. But the reason I loved this design is because if you look right here”—I point at the left side of the house—“there’s an outside entrance that goes right into what I thought you might use as a studio.”

Lila is silent for a long moment. “For music?”

I nod. “That way, if you start teaching, your students could just go in and out, without having to walk through the rest of the house. I did a lot of research, and I guess teachers who work from home suggest an outside entrance makes it easier ...”

Lila still hasn’t said anything, and I suddenly start to doubt.

“But this is only if you want to, Lila. You don’t have to teach. You can keep working at the farm as long as you want to.”

She finally smiles and reaches up to wipe away a tear I'm just now noticing. "You researched?"

"Of course I did."

"So I can have a music studio?"

"If you want one."

"Perry, this is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me." She reaches for my hand.

The hope in my heart swells and surges like a building wave finally breaking on the shore. I thread her fingers through mine. "You like it?"

She nods. "I love it."

I breathe out a sigh. "Good. Because there's actually one more part of the surprise."

I drop her hand and reach for her shoulders, slowly turning her around to face the grand piano that was delivered just this morning.

She gasps, her hands flying to her mouth. "Perry, you didn't!"

"It's a Steinway, which, I don't know what that really means, but the appraiser said it was the best kind. And the guy who was here tuning it said it has a really nice sound."

She steps forward, running a hand across the smooth, black wood. "Perry, this piano is worth more than my car. More than my car and your car put together. Maybe more than my house."

I shrug. "I got it on sale."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm serious. As the future Mrs. Hawthorne, I need to know the specifics. How are we paying for a new house and this piano?"

"I'm serious. I really *did* get it on sale. At an estate sale. It needed some restoration work, but all told, I still only spent a fraction of what a new one would have cost."

“A fraction of what a new Steinway costs is still a lot of money.”

“I’d have bought you a new one, Lila. I was ready to.”

She presses a hand to her forehead, her eyes closed, her breath trembling. Finally, she looks up, tears coursing down her cheeks. “It’s too much. I didn’t—I don’t have anything to give you.”

I step closer, wrapping my arms around her. “Lila, you gave me everything. You gave me a family.”

“I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you, too.”

When she sits down and starts to play, it only takes a moment to decide I would have paid four times what I spent on the piano.

Anything for her.

Anything to see her this happy.

She looks up and catches my eye without lifting her fingers off the keys. “What are you thinking?”

I walk over and bend down to kiss her. “I’m thinking this is the”—I pause and clear my throat—“the *apple-y-ever-after* I’ve always wanted.”

**\*\*Keep reading for a Bonus Epilogue!\*\***



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# BONUS EPILOGUE

Lennox

I LEAN AGAINST THE back wall of the farmhouse, still decked out in Christmas finery for Perry's New Year's Eve wedding reception, and watch as Perry and Lila have their first dance. Halfway through the song, Perry crouches down, motioning to Jack, who has been sitting with Mom. Jack shimmies out of Mom's lap and runs across the dance floor. Perry scoops him up, and Lila smiles as they continue the dance, this time, with Jack braced between them.

Slowly, other couples move onto the dance floor, led by Brody and Kate.

Two brothers married in six months.

That has to be some kind of record.

It isn't that I'm not happy for them. Of course I'm happy for them. But the entire family has basically been consumed with worry over Perry the past couple of years. Now that he's settled and happy, all that familial love and attention is going to have to go somewhere. Flint's on the other side of the country, but I'm right here.

Living. Working. Right under everyone's noses.

The thought makes me itchy. Like my collar is too tight.

There is no shortage of opinions on my dating habits when it comes to my family. The jokes about my "flavor of the month"

or the trail of broken hearts I leave wherever I go have almost become second nature. And fine. I may have been a player in high school, but I was a stupid kid. I'm better than that now. I don't use women, and I don't pretend to be anything that I'm not.

If a woman goes out with me, she knows from the very start exactly what she's going to get. Nothing serious. No commitments. And there's nothing wrong with that. Just because the rest of my siblings want to settle down on their front porch rocking chairs, holding hands and drinking lemonade, doesn't mean that I have to want that too.

My life isn't exactly conducive to regular relationships anyway.

My girlfriend right now is my restaurant kitchen. She demands laser focus and long hours, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Olivia makes her way toward me, Asher propped on her hip. "Hey. Want to say goodbye? Tyler's mom is taking Asher back to the house to put him to bed."

Asher leans toward me, and I scoop him into my arms. "Asher, my man. What's the word, huh? You ready to hit the bottle and get some sleep?" I make a funny face, and Asher immediately breaks out in a toothless grin that makes my heart squeeze. So maybe *this* part of having married siblings isn't so bad.

Tyler's mom appears moments later, and Olivia takes Asher back, shifting him over to his grandma.

"He's a cute kid, Liv," I say as she leans against the wall beside me.

"Yeah, he's pretty perfect," she says. "But that doesn't mean I'm not thrilled to spend the next two hours with *only* my husband." She shoots me a look. "What about you? I'm surprised you didn't bring a date."

I shrug. "Hawthorne is keeping me busy. I haven't given dating much thought."

She perks up. “Oh! Speaking of Hawthorne. I’ve been meaning to tell you, I just heard back from the catering chef I was telling you about, and she’s totally in. She wants the job.”

“Really? That’s great.” Stonebrook Farm’s long-time catering chef retired a few months back. The first guy we hired to replace him hasn’t been a good fit, so Olivia has been holding interviews for the past month. Technically, I was supposed to be sitting in on those interviews. My restaurant and the catering kitchen that services events at Stonebrook Farm are totally different ventures, but we do share kitchen and storage space, so it’s in my best interest to make sure whoever Liv hires is someone I can work with. Or at least work *around*. But I’ve been wrapped up in menu tweaks the past couple of weeks, and I’ve missed more interviews than I’ve attended.

I’m not too concerned. I trust Olivia. She’s got incredible intuition when it comes to people, and she knows food. I’m sure whoever she hires is more than qualified.

“It’s totally great,” Olivia says. “In our last conversation, Tatum had some great ideas about seasonal modifications to the catering menu. And she just has this really cool vibe. I think you’ll like her.”

“Wait, did you say Tatum?” Alarm bells sound in my head. Tatum isn’t that common of a name.

Olivia scrunches her brow. “Yes? Why?”

I swallow. “What’s Tatum’s last name?”

“Elliott. Did you not read the resume I sent over?”

I’m already shaking my head when Olivia finishes her sentence. “No. Not her. Absolutely not.”

“What? Why? You know her?”

“Yes, I know her, and we can’t work together.”

Her eyes narrow. “Lennox, I already hired her. It’s a done deal. HR sent over her paperwork yesterday.”

This is ... unacceptable. I’ve worked with a lot of chefs since I graduated from culinary school. Adapted to a lot of

different kitchens. But Tatum Elliott is not just another chef. She's an irritating, pretentious, kiss-up of a chef who has only ever made my life miserable.

I rub a hand across my face. "Then UNhire her. Trust me. You don't want me and that woman working in the same kitchen."

"*That woman?*" Olivia frowns. "Lennox, did you date her? Is that what this is about? Please tell me she isn't raising your secret baby, and that's why she's willing to move to the middle of nowhere to take this job."

I scoff. "Ha! Me and Tatum Elliott dating? That's almost as ridiculous as the idea of us working together. I'm serious, Liv. This won't work."

Olivia folds her arms across her chest, her expression indignant. "Maybe, if you had such strong opinions, you should have *read the resume* that I sent over before I hired her. Or, I don't know, come to the actual interview. Then you could have shared your feelings when I was still open to hearing them."

"So you're saying you aren't open to hearing them now?" I shoot back.

"I'm saying it's taken me a solid month to find someone who has the vibe and feel that we want, *and* who is willing to relocate to Silver Creek. How do you even know her? Because I really like her, and we desperately need her. For what it's worth, she didn't seem to care at all that she'd be sharing a kitchen with you."

"You told her?"

Olivia looks at me like I have two heads. Of course she told her. Which ... *interesting*. I would have put money on Tatum Elliott tucking tail and running the minute she heard my name on Olivia's lips.

I roll my shoulders, willing the tension out of them. I just have to convince Olivia this is a bad idea. "We went to culinary school together."

"And what, you were rivals or something?" Olivia asks.

*Or something.* I'm not sure how to even begin to unpack the complicated history between me and Tatum. The more I think about it, the more questions I have. Why is she in North Carolina and not Los Angeles? Why is she working a catering kitchen at an event center when her dreams always seemed so much bigger? Most importantly, after what happened between us, why would she ever agree to work with me?

"Something like that," I finally say. "It's ... complicated."

Olivia sighs. "Look, I understand complicated. But Lennox, I've been interviewing chefs for weeks. Her food is great. Her references are great. We need someone here full time, and she's willing. Unless your definition of *it's complicated* is very compelling, I'm pulling my executive card here and hiring her anyway."

I frown, but Olivia has every right to do it. She's in charge of the event center. She gave me the opportunity to have a say. The fact that I didn't take advantage is on me.

Tyler shows up beside Olivia, his arm slipping around her waist. "Dance with me?" he asks, already tugging her toward the dance floor.

"Yes, please." She smiles up at her husband, and something twists in my gut. Whatever it is, I shove it down. I don't have time for this. For feelings. For *complications*.

"We aren't done talking about this," I call after her.

She looks back over her shoulder. "Culinary school was a long time ago, Len."

I huff, crossing my arms as Olivia's focus shifts fully to her husband.

Tatum *freaking* Elliott. Working in my kitchen. Living in my town.

This is *never* going to work.

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# HOW TO KISS YOUR ENEMY



**JENNY PROCTOR**

 *Jenny Proctor Creative*



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*For Kirsten ...  
because you saved this book!*

# CHAPTER ONE

Lennox

TATUM *freaking* Elliott. Thousands of chefs in America, and my sister hires *her*:

I'd like to think I've grown up over the years—that since I graduated from culinary school, I've left behind petty rivalries and schoolyard competitions.

But as I watch a black SUV slowly meander down the main drive of Stonebrook Farm, nerves swirling in my gut, I'm beginning to wonder.

I've prepared myself for this moment. I've talked it through with my brothers. I've insisted to my sister, over and over, that, despite my initial freakout when she hired *THE* Tatum Elliott to be the new catering chef at the commercial farm and event center my family owns, I would be fine.

*Fine* with a capital F. Because I'm totally chill. A fully grown adult who is perfectly capable of leaving my history with Tatum in the past so we can get along like mature, civilized adults.

I reach up and run a hand across my beard, then stick a finger under the neck of my chef's coat, pulling the fabric away from my skin. Has it always felt so tight? So stiff? I might as well be wearing the too-small snowsuit my

grandmother gave me for Christmas the year I turned seven. I had nightmares about that thing suffocating me for weeks.

Outside, the black Mercedes S-Class SUV rolls to a stop. It figures she's still driving a Mercedes. She had one back in school, too.

With the winter sun shining down on the windshield, the glare keeps me from actually *seeing* whoever is driving the car, but it has to be Tatum. The U-Haul trailer hitched to the back of her SUV and the California license plate affixed to her front bumper are evidence enough.

I can't believe she's really here.

Not that I have any room to argue. Olivia gave me the chance to sit in on the interviews and offer opinions about who I thought would best fit the Stonebrook Farm culture.

I'm the idiot who was too caught up in my own stuff to bother. But how was I supposed to know the chef who, nine years ago, snarkily signed my graduation card "so happy to never see you again" would apply for a job *here*, of all places?

Whatever her reasons for taking a job far below her pedigree, the farm needs a catering chef, and Tatum is whom my sister hired. Olivia and my oldest brother Perry run Stonebrook together, and they do a good job of it, so I have no choice but to get on board and keep my petty complaints to myself.

"What's cooking, Chef?" Zach, my sous chef, appears beside me, his gaze following mine to the SUV outside. "Who's that?"

I run a hand across my jaw and give my shoulders a roll, a lame attempt to release the tension building there. "The new catering chef," I finally say. "She's moving in today."

Adding an apartment above the catering kitchen was a strategic decision my parents made twenty years ago, hoping the free housing would lure quality chefs out to Silver Creek.

Bet they never guessed they'd get someone as famous as Tatum Elliott. Or, sort of famous, anyway. I can't imagine

what she's going to think of the place after the lifestyle she grew up with.

When I first moved home, the apartment was vacant, so I crashed there for a few months. It isn't a bad place to live by any stretch. It's small, but it's clean and recently updated. I would have happily stayed longer had it not been *on* the family farm. Living at work when work is a family-run business? Let's just say that was a lot of *togetherness*.

Another minute goes by without Tatum getting out of her car, and I half-wonder if I should go out and greet her, but I quickly dismiss the thought. This is Olivia's deal, not mine.

I promised my sister I wouldn't get in the way of Tatum doing her job, but that doesn't mean I have to go out and give her some grand welcome. That would require me to pretend like I'm happy she's here.

My watch vibrates with a text, and I glance down to read it.

**Olivia:** Tatum has arrived! On my way to meet her now. Can you make sure her kitchen is ready?

I ignore the request, only because this is Olivia being Olivia, worrying like only she can. Tatum's kitchen is fine. Cleaned yesterday after the sous chef and the rest of the catering staff prepared a farewell breakfast for a group of Asheville yoga instructors who booked the farm for a three-day retreat. There aren't any events today, so Tatum will find her kitchen empty and exactly like her staff left it.

That's one point I can be happy about. Tatum and I won't be sharing a kitchen, even if we are working in the same building. The only overlap between Stonebrook's catering kitchen and my farm-to-table full-service restaurant is an enormous walk-in refrigerator, a little bit of shared pantry space, the loading dock and dumpsters out back, and a staff locker room.

Outside, Tatum finally climbs out of her car. She's wearing street clothes—jeans and a light blue sweater—which immediately strikes me as odd. In my memories, she's always wearing chef's whites. Her hair is down, dark curls wild and cascading over her shoulders, another contrast to the way I

remember her. In school, she always had her hair slicked back in a tight, no-nonsense bun.

Zach whistles beside me. “The new catering chef is a smoke show.”

I scoff at his reaction, but he’s not wrong. She’s still the same Tatum, but she looks different somehow. More mature. More *beautiful*. A pulse of attraction flares in my gut, catching me by surprise. If this wasn’t Tatum Elliott, and I didn’t know better, I’d already be thinking of ways to ask the woman out.

Fortunately, I do know better.

“Maybe on the outside,” I mumble under my breath.

Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t *dislike* Tatum when we were in culinary school. But we were from two different worlds. We still are. And she doesn’t belong on Stonebrook Farm.

Zach eyes me curiously. “What’s that supposed to mean? Do you know her?” His gaze shifts back to Tatum, almost like it’s hard for him to look away.

There’s a hunger in his expression that ignites something primal, deep in my gut, and I find myself resisting the urge to bodily move in between Zach and the window to block his view.

The impulse doesn’t make any logical sense. I have no claim on Tatum, nor do I want one. Zach can look all he wants.

“We went to culinary school together,” I say, proud of how evenly neutral my words sound.

Olivia pulls up in a Stonebrook Farm Gator, one of the oversized utility vehicles staff use to get around the hundreds of acres of farm property. She climbs out and welcomes Tatum, pulling her into a hug like they’re long-lost friends.

They talk for a few moments, then Tatum moves to the back of her SUV and opens the hatch. A giant, black and white dog jumps out, tail wagging. Tatum crouches down and scratches the dog’s ears, her smile wide as she says something to Olivia over her shoulder, then they both start to laugh.



“Yeah, I see it now, boss,” Zach says, his tone dry. “This woman looks like a real monster.”

“I never said she was a *monster*. I just don’t—” I bite my tongue. I promised my sister I wouldn’t say anything to taint my employees’ opinions of Tatum. They won’t have to work with her directly, but it’s still important they respect her. Which means I’ve already said too much to Zach. “Anyway.” I clear my throat. “She’s basically culinary royalty.”

“What does that mean?” Zach asks.

Olivia and Tatum move toward the door, the dog falling into step beside her, and I feel a sudden need to flee. To look busy. To be doing something other than gawking at them through the dining room windows when Olivia brings her in to show her around.

“It means Christopher Elliott is her father,” I say as I turn and head to my office.

I pass the prep cooks already at work in my kitchen. Griffin and Willow are standing close to the saucier station, clearly arguing about something, but I don’t bother to intervene. In another half hour, I’ll gather the staff for a pre-dinner service meeting, and I have every confidence they’ll bring up their frustrations without me chasing after them.

Zach is quick on my heels. “Hold up. You’re telling me you went to culinary school with Christopher Elliott’s daughter? Did you meet him? What’s he like?”

I refrain from saying any of the words that pop into my head at his question. My feelings about Tatum’s father definitely won’t help my staff maintain their respect.

I lift my shoulders with feigned indifference. “He’s exactly what you might expect of a celebrity chef.”

Apparently, Zach’s expectations are different than mine, because he’s practically beaming with starry-eyed wonder. “Man. *Christopher Elliott*. That guy’s amazing.”

Sure. *Amazing*. If amazing means entitled, arrogant, and condescending.

Zach follows me to my office, pausing in the doorway while I drop into my chair. “I still don’t get it. What’s the punchline?” He leans against my door jamb, his arms folded.

I lift my eyebrows.

“Come on,” he says, like the question is obvious. “Christopher Elliott’s daughter? In the middle of nowhere running a catering kitchen that serves farm-style weddings and family reunions?”

I don’t like that Zach so easily landed on the question that’s been plaguing me since Olivia hired Tatum in the first place.

“Don’t forget the corporate retreats,” I say.

Zach shakes his head. “Is she any good?”

“She’s good enough to work in her father’s flagship restaurant in L.A.”

“She worked at Le Vin?” Zach asks.

I nod. “That’s where she was before coming here.”

That she started her career working with one of America’s most famous chefs only highlights how different we are. Tatum was always my biggest competition in culinary school. Every exam. Every evaluation. We might as well have been the only two people in class for how focused we were on beating each other. But it never felt like a fair fight. While she was doing unpaid internships shadowing chefs at the finest restaurants in Atlanta, I was *working* my way through school in chain restaurants—washing dishes, prepping vegetables, doing whatever I could to be in a kitchen. *Any kitchen.*

She didn’t just have better knives—which she totally did—she had better *everything*. Better resources. Better opportunities. Extra time with professors. More exposure.

All I had was grit.

My parents helped a little, but I have three brothers and a sister, and back then, the farm was still growing. They didn’t have the resources that they have now, so all of us found ways to work our way through school, to fight for what we wanted.

But Tatum Elliott didn't need grit. With her father paving the way in signed cookbooks and celebrity appearances, why would she ever need or want a job like this one?

Zach moves closer, leaning against the edge of my desk. "I still don't get it, but I'm not complaining. It can't be a bad thing to have a woman with those kinds of connections hanging around. Especially not one who looks like *that*." He nudges my shoulder, a grin splitting his face. "Be honest. Did you guys ever hook up? She looks like your type." He lifts his hands and mimes the curves of a woman. "And by type, I mean she—"

"Knock it off," I say, offering him my sternest look. "We don't have that kind of history, and I'd rather you not make other people think we do."

"Um, Chef?" Willow appears in the doorway, her eyes wide.

I'd be happy for the distraction—and the end of Zach's insinuations—if Willow didn't look like she'd swallowed an onion whole.

"Hey. What's up?"

She glances over her shoulder, wringing her hands. "Um, there's a goat in the kitchen."

I stare, dumbly trying to process what she's telling me. "What?"

"A goat. White? Red bandana? It kinda looks like the one your brother-in-law is always putting on TikTok. I guess the back door was left open—the seafood guy was just here—and she just wandered up the loading dock. We tried to shoo her back toward the door, but she doesn't seem like she wants to listen."

I breathe out a sigh. There is a *goat* in my kitchen.

Sometimes I wonder why I ever left Charlotte. The city had nightlife. A foodie culture. And *never* livestock in my cooking space unless it was on the menu.

"I'm sure it's Penelope," I say. "Tyler's out of town. She always wanders when he's gone."

Olivia's husband is a videographer by trade, so his TikTok videos featuring the newborn goat he rescued when her mother rejected her are next level. Penelope has a fan base as big as my little brother, Flint's, and Flint has been nominated for a Golden Globe Award.

Regardless of Penelope's fan base, she doesn't belong inside.

Definitely not inside my restaurant.

I'm halfway down the hallway when I hear the *clop-clop* of Penelope's hooves, followed by a loud bark, then an enormous clatter.

I sprint the remaining distance just in time to see Penelope running a lap around the large silver island in the center of my kitchen, Tatum's dog quick on her heels.

My staff is in disarray. Griffin is holding a tray of what looks like pork chops high over his head, and another cook beside him is pressing an armful of cabbages against his chest. All over the room, food and knives are lifted as the animals bump and jostle their way through the kitchen. My soup chef barely manages to steady a jostled pot when the dog cuts a corner too closely and slams full body into the stove.

I stand frozen, scanning the chaos.

There is a goat in my kitchen. There is also a dog in my kitchen, and right now they're playing what looks like a full-contact game of tag.

I don't even know what my life is anymore.

Whatever it is, it violates all kinds of health codes, so I need to do something *fast*.

Penelope lets out a concerned bleat, then makes a sharp right turn, cutting down the hall and heading for my office.

I motion for Zach to follow the goat, then move around the outside of the kitchen toward the dining room, hoping I can cut off the dog before he chases them both.

This dog is not slowing down though. His attention is laser-focused on Penelope and nothing or no one is getting in his

way.

I'm in front of the dining room door when Tatum comes barreling through, too fast for me to move out of the way before she collides into me with a grunt. Her hands slam into my chest, and I stumble backward before wrapping an arm around her waist to stabilize us both.

Our eyes lock, and for a fraction of a second, all of the chaos around us melts away, and I lose myself in the gray-blue of her eyes.

But then Zach yells from the hallway, and Tatum blinks and steps away from me. She raises her fingers to her lips and lets out an ear-piercing whistle.

The dog immediately skids to a stop, trotting over to Tatum like he doesn't have a care in the world. A door slams down the hall, Zach yells, "I've got the goat!" and just as suddenly as the chaos broke out, all is calm.

Calm ... and a complete disaster.

A trashcan is on its side, its contents spilled. Utensils litter the floor. A pan of marinating chicken breasts is upside down on the tile, though it looks like most of the marinade hit Willow's chest before it landed at her feet.

Olivia is beside Tatum now, her eyes telling me if I'm not on my best behavior, she'll never let me forget it. She may be younger, but my little sister is a fierce boss.

Tatum steps forward. "Lennox. I'm so sorry. I had no idea—I don't think he's ever even seen a goat before. He's never behaved like this."

Her hand sinks to the dog's head, whose tongue is lolling in a way that makes him look like he's smiling. The image almost makes me laugh, but not in a *hahaha-this-is-funny* kind of way. More in a maniacal *barely-keeping-it-together* way.

The stress of her being here in the first place, mixed with an unexpected tug of attraction is a lot on its own. And now my kitchen is in shambles, and it's too much. I'm feeling too much.

My chef's coat is no longer an ill-fitting snowsuit, it's a straitjacket, and I need to escape.

Olivia clears her throat. "It was an accident," she says to Tatum, her voice smooth. "I'm sure Lennox sees that as well as I do."

"An accident," I echo. I run a hand through my hair and force a slow, deep breath. "Look at my kitchen. That chicken has to marinate for at least six hours, and now it's all over the floor. It'll have to be off the menu for tonight, and that—"

"I can figure out a new chicken dish for you," Tatum says. She steps forward, her expression earnest. "I can help."

*She can help?* Because she's so much more qualified than I am?

The urge to be *away* for a minute—away from this situation, from her—washes over me again. I hold my hands up. "I think you've done enough. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a kitchen to put back in order."

"Lennox, I'm really sorry."

I step forward, closing the distance between us until I'm only inches away. I catch the scent of her, something floral and light that reminds me of Stonebrook's apple orchards in the fall. She lifts her eyes to meet mine, and I hold her gaze for a long moment. I told Olivia I would try, that I could be mature about this whole situation, but it already feels like I'm back in time, complete with all the insecurities and uncertainties that plagued me when I had to compare myself to Tatum every single day.

Whatever transfixed me before has lost its hold.

I don't need Tatum's help in my kitchen.

I don't *want* Tatum's help.

"Just stay out of my kitchen, Chef," I say, my tone cool. "And I'll stay out of yours."

## CHAPTER TWO

Tatum

I HEFT A BOX out of the U-Haul and carry it toward the restaurant's back door, nudging Toby ahead of me. "Come on, boy. This way." If only I could strap a box onto *him*, then he could help instead of just getting underfoot. If he were half as good at hauling boxes as he is at destroying kitchens, we'd finish in no time.

But it's fine. I'm a strong, independent woman. Carrying all these boxes by myself is no. big. deal.

I *loaded* the trailer by myself, after all, though then, I was warmed by the California sunshine and fueled by a healthy dose of righteous indignation. Funny how strong *not wanting to look weak* can make you. With Dad looking on, expecting me to change my mind at any moment, strong was my only option.

A bead of sweat trickles down my face, despite the cold outside, and I will myself to ignore it. My nose twitches with the effort, but the box is too heavy to shift. If I stop and lose my momentum, I'll never make it up this narrow stairwell.

How many steps even are there? Eighty? Eight hundred? This has to be longer than a normal flight of stairs. My biceps are seconds away from giving out when suddenly, I'm at the top, standing on a small landing next to Toby. I drop the box to my feet with a grunt then fish a key out of my pocket.

Olivia planned to show me the apartment, but then she was called back to the farmhouse to handle a disgruntled future bride, and she left me to my own devices, promising she'd be back tomorrow to introduce me to my staff and give me an official tour of the farm. Not that I'm in any hurry to see *any* of the Hawthornes again, after making such a memorable first impression.

I insert the key into the lock, a wave of trepidation washing over me. For the first time, I'm doing something all by myself, *without* my father standing beside me.

"I'm here," I say to myself. "I'm here, and it's *fine*." If I keep repeating it, maybe I'll start to believe it.

I take a steadying breath, and Toby stands, like he senses how monumental this moment is.

The door swings forward, creaking on its hinges, and I take a tentative step inside.

The small space could fit inside my last place fifteen times, but overall, it isn't half bad. The kitchen looks like it's been recently remodeled, and the furniture is clean if a little dated. Everything has a sort of rustic, mountain charm that makes me feel surprisingly at home, even though this place couldn't be more different than what I'm used to.

Above the couch, a double window reveals the rolling pastures of Stonebrook Farm, then just beyond, the Blue Ridge mountains melting into the distance. It's an incredible view, but I'm not sure there's a *bad* view anywhere on Stonebrook. The place looks like it belongs in a movie.

I press my palms into the small of my back and arch backward, relishing the stretch of my tired muscles. Toby nudges against my leg then nuzzles my hand with his cold, wet nose until I shift and start scratching his ears.

"This trick, huh?" He leans in, and I tangle my fingers in his silky golden doodle coat. He needs a trim—I can hardly see his eyes, his hair has grown so long—but I left California so quickly, I didn't have time to get him in to see the groomer before I was tossing things in a U-Haul.



Moving slowly wasn't an option. My father can be very persuasive, so I had to strike fast, before I lost my nerve, or I never would have made it out of the state.

After my run-in with Lennox this morning, I'm wondering if I should have gone a little slower. Would it have been so terrible if Dad had managed to convince me to stay home?

Home was safe. Predictable.

But it was also a life that didn't feel like mine. At least not at two a.m. when I chased a wild hair and actually applied for this job, though I've second guessed myself a thousand times since then. Sheer momentum carried me forward, but I'll admit there's a certain comfort in knowing that if I go back to California, Dad will be waiting for me with open arms.

In fact, I think he probably expects it, something that makes me all the more determined to make this work. I love my dad. I'm grateful for everything he's done for me, but it's thrilling to be doing something—anything—without him holding my hand.

Even if my *new and independent life* isn't exactly off to an auspicious start. Honestly, I don't think my first day at Stonebrook could have started any worse.

I leave Toby lounging on the couch like he's king of the apartment while I head back down the stairs to get another load of stuff from the U-Haul. I stop halfway down, my way blocked by a giant box moving *up* the stairs.

"Hawthorne complimentary moving service coming through," a deep voice says.

I backpedal until I'm in my apartment, my eyes wide as the box follows me, held securely in the arms of—is that Lennox?

No, it's only someone who *looks* like Lennox. Same jawline. Same eyes. He's a little lankier, his hair a lighter brown, and he doesn't have a beard like Lennox does, but still. He has to be a brother. Especially since he just called himself *Hawthorne moving service*.

The man shifts the box onto the table, but before I can say thank you, or even hello, another man appears in the doorway,

also carrying a box.

If it's even possible, this man looks even more like Lennox than the first. His features are a little darker, and he's maybe a little more broody? Though I could just be noticing the contrast between him and the other brother, who hasn't stopped smiling since he walked in.

Either way, Hawthorne family genetics are *strong*.

With the invasion of so much testosterone into my tiny space, Toby is immediately by my side, his body tense.

I drop my hand to his ears, giving him a good scratch and shushing him so he knows he doesn't need to worry.

"Sorry to barge in," the first guy says. "Olivia said you were moving in and thought you might need some help." He extends his hand. "I'm Brody Hawthorne. This is my brother, Perry."

I smile. "Right. Lennox's brothers." It's hard not to be overwhelmed by the sheer manliness that has just entered my very tiny kitchen. Both of these men are married, wedding bands clearly visible, but that doesn't keep me from noticing they are both *gorgeous*.

Like, put them on a calendar and hang them in my kitchen *gorgeous*.

Almost as *gorgeous* as Lennox *gorgeous*.

You know. In a strictly observational, not at all interested because that would be delusional kind of way.

Once, back in culinary school, I briefly entertained the possibility of Lennox being *more* than just my publicly declared enemy. Or, I don't know. Maybe *enemy* is a strong word. It's more like we were rivals. We both wanted to be the best, and I was the one standing in his way, and he was the one standing in mine.

He was just as handsome back then, not to mention charming, frustratingly brilliant, and clearly interested in dating because he always had women with him or around him or even just following him around.

But it didn't take long to discern that Lennox never looked at *me* like he did the numerous women he dated. I could have been a robot with arms made out of rolling pins and spatulas for hands for all the attention he paid to my physical appearance.

In hindsight, I think the fact that he *didn't* notice me in that way might have fueled my indignation and resentment, making me want to beat him even more.

But then, for a split second, when I burst into the kitchen and tumbled into Lennox this afternoon, our eyes locked and something sparked, heat growing and filling my limbs like some inexplicable force.

The thought seems ridiculous now, Lennox's dismissal echoing through my mind.

*Just stay out of my kitchen, Chef. And I'll stay out of yours.*

Me and Lennox?

*Ha. Good joke, Tatum. Good freaking joke.*

Another set of footsteps sounds on the stairs, and this time it *is* Lennox. The sleeves of his chef's coat are pushed up, his forearms flexing with the effort of holding an enormous box in his arms. The box is bigger than both the ones his brothers were carrying, the word BOOKS written across the side in thick, black Sharpie.

Somehow, I know Lennox picked that box on purpose.

To show me that he could—to demonstrate that if this were a competition, *I* couldn't have carried my heaviest box up the stairs by myself.

And that smug look on his face. I know that look. I saw it every time he scored higher on an exam or managed to garner the highest praise in kitchen evaluations. It's a look that says, *You can't touch me, Tatum Elliott.*

My jaw tightens reflexively. So this is how he wants to play it.

When I took this job, I hoped we'd be able to move past whatever tension kept us at each other's throats and get along

like professionals, if not friends. I hoped we might be able to laugh about how immature we were, how silly our competitiveness made us.

Back then, if I'd had a choice between being second to Lennox's number one or tenth to Lennox's number eleven? Oh, give me tenth place, baby. Winning wasn't nearly as important as *beating him*.

But I can't keep up that dynamic now. I just walked out on my entire career—all the connections, the opportunities. I didn't exactly burn bridges, but I'd rather avoid crawling home with my tail between my legs, thank you very much. Especially since that's exactly what my father expects me to do.

Like it or not, I *need* this job to work out. At least for now.

If Lennox is still gunning for a fight, I just have to choose to react differently.

Because *I'm* different now. More mature. More self-aware.

I almost have myself convinced when Lennox lowers my box onto the floor like it's filled with feathers instead of books. And there's that look again, his lips tilting up into a sly, taunting grin.

That's when I open my big, stupid mouth.

“So, I have to stay out of your kitchen, but you get to waltz right into my apartment uninvited?”

I have no idea where the retort comes from. Old habits die hard, I guess.

Lennox lifts an eyebrow. “The way your dog waltzed into my kitchen uninvited?”

I scoff. “Can you blame him, really? I think you might be taking the idea of *farm-to-table* a little too seriously, Lennox.”

He smirks and folds his arms across his chest. “Maybe it's just that we do things a little differently ... *out here in the sticks*.” He says this last part pointedly, and I immediately recall the number of times I insulted him based on where he grew up.

*Where I come from*, I always said, all full of sanctimony and condescension. Like I had so much more experience than he did.

It's not lost on me that even though I *did* have more experience, even though I was the one given more opportunities after graduation, he's the one who has the career I envy.

I saw press releases about Lennox's restaurant online. I scoured the internet for anything I could find about him after accepting this job, and that included reading his menu at least a dozen times.

But I wasn't prepared to see the place in person.

Before Toby turned into Satan's minion and demolished Lennox's kitchen, I stood by the bar, open-mouthed, and gawked. Hawthorne is perfect. Gorgeous rock work lining the entryway, a tasteful, casual elegance in the dining room. And if OpenTable reviews are any indication, it isn't just the atmosphere that makes it that way.

I shake my head, irritated that I still find his success so irritating. I should be over this by now. When I decided to take the job, I thought I *was* over it.

Still, it's oddly thrilling to be doing this with him. My pulse is racing, adrenaline coursing through me like it always did whenever we sparred back in school.

I take a step toward him. "You're saying a goat in your kitchen is a regular occurrence?"

He steps forward too, bringing us close enough to touch. "I'm saying Penelope wasn't a problem until your dog showed up."

I bark out a laugh. "The goat has a name? This keeps getting better and better. And how could I have possibly prepared for that? *Hold on, Olivia. I better put my usually perfect dog on a leash in case there happens to be a large farm animal hanging out at Lennox's salad station.*"

Lennox's jaw tightens, fire flashing in his eyes as he steps even closer, his folded arms close enough that I feel the

warmth of him radiating off his skin. He's so much taller than I am, I have to look up to keep my eyes on him—probably the whole point of him stepping so close.

“You could have left your dog outside,” he says, his deep voice sliding from his lips like smooth caramel dripping off a wooden spoon.

I roll my eyes. “But I *live* inside, which means so does he. How else was I supposed to get him into my apartment?”

Brody clears his throat and steps forward, laughter dancing in his eyes. “Should we give you two some privacy for whatever this is?”

Lennox's gaze darts to his brothers, and the tension building between us snaps and dissipates. He takes an enormous step back, his expression suddenly guarded.

“We're happy to keep moving boxes if you need some time to *catch up*,” Perry says, his words thick with double meaning. The smirk on his face tells me he thinks this thing happening between me and Lennox is some sort of playful, flirty banter.

Which it absolutely is not. Is it?

My face heats, and I press my palms to my cheeks to cool them.

What just happened? What is *still* happening?

“We should all get more boxes,” I say a little too quickly. “Right now. I'll go first.” I dart out the door, not even looking to see if any of the Hawthorne brothers are following me.

I'm only halfway down the stairs when I hear them scuffling behind me, their whispered voices almost as loud as their footsteps.

I'm too far away to understand them, at least for the most part, but I do catch Lennox whispering a hurried, “Stop it. Don't even think about it,” to one of his brothers.

I can't know exactly what they're discussing, but even just the possibility of it being me makes my stomach flip-flop.

When we reach the trailer, I step aside while Perry and Brody grab the only piece of furniture I brought—my favorite, overstuffed reading chair. The apartment is already furnished, but Olivia assured me there would be room under the window in the living room. It'll be a little tight now that I've seen the space, but I'm still glad I brought it.

With his brothers out of the way, Lennox steps up beside me, reaching for the closest box. My hands are already on it, so I pull it toward me.

"I've got it," he says as he tries to tug it out of my hands.

This particular box isn't heavy at all because it's filled with my underwear and a Harry Styles throw pillow my sister gave me as a gag gift.

*Thanks, but no thanks, Lennox Hawthorne. This box, I'd like to carry myself.*

I pull it against my chest. "Don't you have somewhere else you need to be?"

He tsks. "Touchy, touchy. You know, I agreed to help my brothers unload your stuff because I thought it might give me a nice chance to apologize, but now? I've changed my mind."

I drop the box onto the edge of the trailer and press a hand against my heart with dramatic flair. "Lennox Hawthorne apologizing? May I live to see the day."

Lennox takes advantage of the moment and grabs the box like he's won some kind of victory, but I immediately grab the opposite side, tugging it toward me. "Seriously, Lennox. Go clean your kitchen or something."

"My kitchen's already clean. I have a very efficient staff."

I roll my eyes and yank a little harder, but he doesn't let go. So help me, I will battle like this all day if it means keeping my underwear out of his hands. "Are they well-practiced in cleaning up after farm animals? Is that a routine part of training this far out *in the sticks*?"

His gaze narrows. "You should try the food before you knock the restaurant, Tatum. Otherwise, you just look

jealous.”

“Ha! Jealous. That’s a good one.” And a little too close to the truth.

“Just let me carry the box,” Lennox says, that same silky voice wreaking havoc on my insides.

“It’s fine. I can get this one.” I motion toward the back of the trailer. “That one over there is heavier anyway. You can carry that one.”

Lennox’s expression shifts, like he’s finally figured out what I’m up to. He tilts his head to the side, shifting the box just enough for him to read the upside-down label scrawled across the side.

He smirks. “You afraid I’ll see your granny panties, Tatum?”

I scoff. “Wouldn’t you like to know what kind of panties I wear.” I wrench the box away from him, the force of the movement jostling the box enough that the top pops open, and (can you SEE where this is going?) my underwear go flying *everywhere*.

I stare stupidly for five solid seconds before I move, but Lennox isn’t moving either.

Which, maybe that’s understandable. He’s the one who has a lacy black thong on his shoulder.

And—*oh geez*—is that my bra draped over the azalea bush right next to the truck?

*This. Is. Not. Happening.*

The goat chase through the kitchen wasn’t enough? The universe needs to humiliate me by tossing my underwear around too?

Lennox clears his throat, startling me out of my stupor, and I jolt into action, grabbing the thong from his shoulder and the bra from the bush before turning my attention to the ground around us.

*Oh my word.* They are everywhere. Like tiny, lacy flags of humiliation.



*Look.* I have to wear the same thing to work every single day. It's a small thing, but having fancy underwear is one way that I can feel pretty when my work wardrobe is so lame. I wear them for me, but I'm still more than a little satisfied that the underwear Lennox is seeing are definitely *not* granny panties.

He's holding the top of the box open for me when I return with the last armful of underwear.

"Like what you see?" I say saucily as I close the box and take it from him. He lets it go easily this time, and I head toward the stairs.

"Careful, Tatum," he says as he comes up behind me, the heavier box in his hands. "You're sounding a little flirty."

"*I'm* sounding flirty? You're the one who—"

Perry appears in the open doorway ahead of us, and my words immediately stall in my throat.

My eyes dart to Lennox. Olivia gave me an overview of the farm's management structure during the interview process and made it clear she'd be the one overseeing my employment. But Perry is CFO to her CEO. They work together. Impressing him is *just* as important as impressing Olivia.

And I've been bickering with his brother like I'm a middle schooler with an ancient bone to pick and an impulse control problem. And now we're talking about my *underwear*?

"Is everything okay?" Perry asks, his gaze shifting from me to Lennox.

"Perfect!" I say a little too quickly. "We're just, um ... talking about cookbooks. I collect them."

Lennox chuckles as he moves past me and starts up the stairs. "Sexiest cookbooks *I've* ever seen," he mumbles under his breath.

"Seriously, Lennox?" I say to his back.

I turn to see Perry studying me closely. Did he hear Lennox? Do I need to explain?

“Perry, I’m—Lennox was just saying—and I—”

Perry holds up his hands, cutting me off. “Nope. Don’t say anything. I’m not your boss today. Just a guy unloading some boxes.” He pauses before moving toward the truck. “Besides, I know how Lennox can be. It’s kinda fun to see him up against someone who knows how to handle him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lennox yells down the stairs. “How can I be?”

Perry shoots me a knowing expression, like Lennox has proven his point by even opening his mouth, then goes to grab another box.

The thought of *handling* any part of Lennox sends another wave of heat to my cheeks, and I hurry up the stairs, willing the color to fade before I have to turn around and face him, or either of his brothers, again.

I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’m a professional. Here to work.

Less than five hours on site, and Lennox is already messing with my focus enough that other people—including my boss—are noticing. No matter what reassurance Perry just gave me, this isn’t the first impression I wanted to make.

It takes all my effort, but I manage to ignore Lennox’s taunting expressions while we move everything else upstairs. Twenty minutes after the four of us began, the trailer is empty, and my living room is a sea of boxes. I still have a lot to do, but the hardest part is done, and it would have taken me three times as long had I been doing it alone.

Brody offers to drop the U-Haul off at the rental place up the road on his way home, assuring me he knows the guy who works the counter, and he won’t care if I don’t bring it back myself. It’s more kindness than I expect, though I’m getting the sense this is just how the Hawthornes operate.

I watch as the three brothers work to unhitch the trailer from my SUV and hook it up to Brody’s truck. The three of them move with and around each other in a way that makes it seem as though they’ve done this countless times. Not unhitched a

trailer, necessarily. It's just clear they're used to working together. Which makes sense. They grew up on a farm, probably doing all kinds of farm things. Mending fences. Driving tractors. *Tending goats.*

A mental image of Lennox, not in his chef's whites but in a pair of ratty jeans and a faded T-shirt, dirty and sweaty from a day of manual labor, pushes into my mind's eye. I swallow against the sudden dryness in my throat, and a tiny sheen of sweat breaks out across my forehead. I wipe it away with a grunt of frustration.

"Okay," Perry says, clapping his hands together and snapping my attention back to the present. "You've got Olivia's number if anything comes up. And Lennox is almost always around the restaurant. I'm sure he'd be happy to help you with anything you need," he says, shooting his brother a questioning look. "Won't you, Lennox?"

"So happy," Lennox repeats, his voice thick with sarcasm. "*Enormously* happy."

I frown. Lennox is having way too much fun tormenting me.

Perry looks from Lennox to me, then back again. "Right. Okay," he says, his amused tone implying he has no idea what to make of us.

*Well that makes two of us, Perry. I don't have a clue either.*

The thing is, even though it was a late-night, possibly wine-induced impulse that made me apply for the Stonebrook catering job, I can't pretend knowing Lennox was here didn't play into my decision. I'd just had a horrible argument with Dad, and the idea of working on the other side of the country sounded blissful. But I was also tired of feeling like everything in my life was so ... I don't know. Fake? Scripted? Like I was just some set piece Dad could move around at will.

Back in school, Lennox was the one person who didn't seem to care that I had a famous father. He was never afraid to be honest, and right now, I'm craving honesty like it's water, and I'm stranded in the desert without a canteen.

Perry heads up the hill toward the giant, white farmhouse looming in the distance—I assume this is where the main offices are—leaving me alone with Lennox.

“Thanks again for your help!” I call to Perry’s retreating figure, hoping again that I haven’t already done irreparable damage to my reputation in the eyes of my employer.

Lennox leaves too, heading toward the opposite side of the building and the front entrance of his restaurant. He turns and takes a few backward steps. “See you around, Elliott,” he calls.

*Elliott?*

I might as well be right back in the kitchen at the Southern Culinary Institute, watching him saunter off with his flavor of the week while I’m working harder and longer to get my flambé perfectly torched.

“Not if I see you first, *Hawthorne*,” I yell to his retreating form.

He turns around. “Hawthorne. Sounds familiar. Almost like it’s the name of a *very* successful restaurant.” He makes a show of looking at the wood and metal sign overhead, the name *Hawthorne* gleaming in the late afternoon sun. “Oh wait. Is that the name of *this* restaurant?” He grins wide. “Dinner’s on me if you want to come in tonight. I’ve heard the filet is delicious.”

He disappears into the restaurant, and I barely keep myself from shaking my fists with a frustrated harrumph.

The nerve of that man. The gumption. The stupid sexy arrogance.

“*No*,” I amend as I stomp toward the back door. “He’s *not* sexy. Definitely, definitely NOT sexy.”

# CHAPTER THREE

Tatum

I PACE AROUND THE oversized pantry at the back of my kitchen and take slow, even breaths, a lame and completely ineffective way to calm my racing heart. Just outside, my staff is gathering, ready to meet me for the first time.

I was standing *in* the kitchen until five minutes ago when a sudden bout of nerves had me darting into what I thought was my office to hide.

To be fair, my office door is only a few feet away from the pantry, so it was an honest mistake. But there are already so many people here, I can't correct it now. My only option is to stay and hope everyone thinks I came in here on purpose.

There *is* something soothing about the familiar, earthy smells filling the enormous room. I've never worked in a restaurant with a pantry storage this size, though this one makes sense since it serves two kitchens. Crates of fresh produce line one entire wall. Potatoes, onions, leeks, mushrooms. Brussels sprouts still on the stalk hang from a shelf nearby, and bunches of garlic adorn hooks near the door. There are nuts and grains of every kind. Oils and vinegars, and every spice you can imagine.

There's something magical about the possibilities that fill this room. Maybe it isn't such a bad place to hide after all.

I pick up a perfectly ripe tomato, sliding my thumb across the tender flesh. I haven't toured the gardens yet, but Olivia gave me the impression during one of our many conversations that almost all of the produce used on the farm is grown on location, either in the expansive kitchen garden just behind the restaurant, the greenhouse on the other side of the farmhouse, or in one of the many commercial fields that feed the wholesale side of Stonebrook's operations.

I suppose that's the whole idea of *farm-to-table* dining, though most restaurants who make the claim aren't actually located *ON* the farm. That's probably part of Hawthorne's charm. That, and the restaurant's incredibly annoying chef.

Annoying.

Irritating.

Presumptuous.

*Sexy.*

That last thought pops into my head unbidden for the second time since I've arrived, and I shove it aside. *Again.* I'm here as a professional. Remaking my career on *my* terms. Fraternizing with the enemy is *not* on the table.

But that doesn't stop me from wanting to eat his food.

There are at least a dozen things on Lennox's menu that I would love to sample, but after his snarky invitation to have dinner on him, I'm going to hold off as long as humanly possible. I definitely couldn't give him the satisfaction of going in last night. Mature of me, I know, but I am the one hiding in a pantry right now, so maybe maturity isn't really my thing.

In the end, I drove to the grocery store, stocked up on the basics, and went home too tired to cook but happy to have a bowl of cereal before collapsing into bed. Not exactly the dinner of champions, but it tasted better than humble pie, so I'm not complaining.

My phone buzzes with a text, and I pull it out of my pocket, smiling when I see the message from my older sister.

**Bree:** Hey! Did you make it? Are you safe?

My sister and brother are eight and ten years older than me, so we've never been particularly close. They were mostly grown and out of the house when Dad's fame really took off, so in most ways, it feels like Dad lived two lives. One with Mom and Bree and Daniel, and one with his fame ... and me.

But lately, I've been texting Bree more. Mostly since deciding to quit Dad's restaurant and move to the other side of the continent. When I called to let her know my plans and ask if I could stop in St. Louis to see her on my drive across the country, she cheered like I'd just told her I won the lottery.

"It's about time you get out from under his thumb," she said. "He's been using you for too long, Tatum. I'm so proud of you."

Her words gave me pause. Was that really how my sister saw my life? Like Dad has been using me? She probably just doesn't understand. Because we share the same profession, my relationship with Dad probably looks different to people on the outside. But we have something special.

Or, we *did* have something special.

Until I panicked and fled and moved myself across the country. But who's keeping score?

In the time it takes to pull up and read Bree's message, two more pop up.

**Bree:** I want to hear all about the farm. Do you love it? What do you think?

**Bree:** Also, did you see this Instagram post yesterday?

A screenshot pops up of a post from *@therealTylerMarino*. The photo features a bandana-wearing goat—the very same one Toby chased around Lennox's kitchen yesterday. The caption reads: *Penelope's regular Tuesday: a stroll to the on-site restaurant to say hello, a slightly scary dog chase, and a midday snack with the chef. #specialprivileges*

The fact that Tyler heard about the dog chase makes my stomach tighten. I have to hope it was Olivia who filled her husband in, and not Lennox. Somehow, Lennox telling an embarrassing story about me—or my dog—feels so much worse.

Before I can respond, yet another text pops up. I'm beginning to expect these one-sided conversations, and that thought makes me happy. I like that my sister has enough confidence in our relationship that she'll bombard me with messages even if I don't respond.

**Bree:** When I read dog chase, I wondered if it was Toby. Please tell me it was. I want your dog to have chased the world's most famous goat!

I glance at the like count on the post. It's already over a million, and it can't be more than twenty-four hours old. Penelope probably *is* the world's most famous goat, which, admittedly, makes Lennox mentioning her by name yesterday a little less weird.

**Tatum:** It was Toby. He deserved one very serious timeout.

**Bree:** Um, HELLO. You should put him in timeout and post a picture! And tag Tyler. I bet he would share! Toby could become internet famous too! He totally has the look for it.

My older sister has a degree in social media marketing, so this is not a surprising suggestion from her. I spent two nights crashing on her sofa on my trip out, and she walked me through an entire plan she created for launching my *own* brand without the overshadowing influence of Christopher Elliott.

I appreciate her efforts, but I'm beginning to think I'll like my life a lot better when people forget Christopher Elliott even has a daughter. I always thought I wanted Dad's life. The TV show. The branding deals. But now? I'm not so sure.

**Tatum:** I don't want my dog to be internet famous. Also, I think it's weird that you know so much about Lennox's family.



**Bree:** I only know a lot about *Tyler*. And only because of Penelope. You know how I feel about adorable animals on the internet.

I do know this. I've also learned, from the steady stream of shared TikTok videos she's been sending since we reconnected, that she is particularly moved by dog adoption videos, children with unexpectedly mature singing voices, and cats who eat weird people food. (I have no idea.)

**Bree:** So how are you feeling about things? Was it weird to see Lennox again?

**Tatum:** Very weird.

**Bree:** Is he totally hot? I mean, I remember the picture you showed me. But in person?

I hesitate, because how can I possibly answer that question? Lennox was *hot* back in culinary school. But now, with the broader shoulders and the closely trimmed beard, surrounded by tangible evidence of his brilliance and success? *Hot* doesn't even begin to cover it.

But I'm not saying that to my sister.

**Tatum:** It's not particularly relevant, is it?

**Bree:** OF COURSE IT IS. Just answer the question and stop trying to be so diplomatic and mature for a second.

**Tatum:** Fine. Yes. He's incredibly handsome. He's also incredibly irritating, and clearly, he feels the same way about me.

**Bree:** Shut up. You're the sweetest. If he doesn't see that, he's crazy.

**Tatum:** I'm not sure sweet is a word Lennox would ever use to describe me.

Seconds after I hit send, my phone rings with a video call, the screen lighting up with Bree's face.

"What," I groan, as I answer the call.

“I don’t even want to hear you talking like that,” Bree says, using a big sister bossy voice I didn’t know she had. “You’re the sweetest, Tatum. The literal sweetest. Also, where are you? Are those brussels sprouts hanging behind you?”

“You’re biased,” I say. “And yes. I’m in the pantry.”

“Why are you in the pantry?”

“Because I thought I was going into my office, but I wound up here instead and now there are too many people to—you know what? Don’t worry about it. The point is, you used to call me sassy pants when we were growing up. Which is it? Am I sweet or sassy?”

She scoffs. “You were so sassy when you were little. But now? I’m not buying it.”

“That’s the trouble. The minute I saw Lennox yesterday, I immediately turned into Sassy Pants. But that’s not really how I want him to see me.”

“This is an easy problem to fix,” Bree says. “You just have to show him how you’ve grown up.”

I glance toward the door. Olivia won’t be here for another ten minutes or so, but I still don’t want anyone barging in on my conversation. Especially this one. “How would I even do that?”

Bree almost cackles. “Oh, honey, that’s the easy part. You live above his restaurant, right? Just wait until everyone has gone home and he’s working late, pounding some bread dough or something, and then go downstairs to get a drink of water in your sexiest pajamas. Shorty shorts. A breezy top. The girls free and loose ...”

“Bree!” I say, cutting her off. Something thuds behind me, like a shoe bumping into the wall, and I spin around. There’s no one there, but I drop my voice anyway. “I thought you were going to give me real, actual advice! It’s not going to be like that. No free and loose anything. And pounding bread dough? Where are you getting these things?”

“It’s all inside my brain, baby. Scary, right? Have you met any of his brothers? Have you met Flint?”

I roll my eyes. “Flint doesn’t live here. But the other brothers helped me unload the moving trailer.”

She sighs. “Every time I watch Flint Hawthorne in a movie, I’m going to pee a little thinking about you living on his family farm with all his sexy brothers.”

“Seriously. The genetics in this family. I’ve never seen anything like it.” I glance at my watch, sensing the need to wrap things up so I’m fully available when Olivia shows up. “Hey, I should go. Olivia is going to be here any minute to introduce me to my staff.”

“Oh, awesome. You’re going to do amazing. But first, I actually had a point in calling.”

“Oh. Okay. What’s up?”

“I just got a box full of Mom’s things. I guess her brother sent it from France?”

A pang of sadness flits across my chest, squeezing my heart. I wasn’t close to my mom. She moved to Europe when I was twelve, right after she and Dad split, and I only saw her once a year after that, even less once I graduated from high school and started college. When she died last year—breast cancer, aggressive and resistant to treatment—I think that distance made my mourning more complicated. Because mingled in with my sadness was a deep sense of regret.

“What kinds of things?” I ask.

Bree shrugs. “Um, kitchen-y things, I think. A rolling pin, a corkscrew, a whole bunch of other utensil-looking things I can’t name. Oh, and there’s a set of wooden spoons that are gorgeous. I don’t remember what else. Some cookbooks, maybe? Anyway, I was thinking you might want them.”

“Oh. Um, yeah, I guess. Sure. But only if you or Daniel don’t.”

Bree scoffs. “You know how I am in the kitchen. And I already checked with Daniel, and he agrees with me. You’re the one who loves cooking like Mom did. I think she would want this stuff to go to you.”

“Not Dad?” I ask, which earns a derisive laugh from Bree.

“Definitely not Dad.” She’s quiet for a beat before she says, “I’m sorry you didn’t get to know her better, Tatum. And that she didn’t get to know you.”

I shrug. “Yeah. Me too.”

“You’re a lot like her, you know?”

“Am I?”

“Definitely. You have her spunk. Also her boobs, which I’m still in favor of you using to impress one particularly irritating chef.” She grins saucily into the phone, and I roll my eyes.

“Oh my gosh. How old are you, Bree?”

“Seventeen for the rest of my life.” She tosses her hands over her head. “It’s the only way to be.”

“I really have to go now.”

“K. Don’t forget to breathe. You’re going to be great. And text me your address so I can send you this box!”

I end the call and breathe out a long slow breath, trusting that at least this advice from Bree is worth taking.

I smooth my hands down the front of my chef’s coat and move toward the door. As I round the corner into the narrow hallway, I stop, startled, because Lennox is standing directly in front of me, his arms folded while he leans against the wall, a devilish smile on his face.

My hand flies to my chest. “Gah. You scared me.”

“Sorry. I heard you were on the phone. Didn’t want to interrupt.”

I freeze. He *heard* that I was on the phone? As in, he heard the general noise of muffled, unintelligible voices? Or he *heard* heard me on the phone? I can only hope it’s the former.

“Oh,” I say as casually as I can. “That’s, um, thanks for that. I was just talking to my sister.”

“Ah.”

*Ah? What does that even mean? Ah, I already know this because I heard you talking? Or ah, that's nice. Thanks for letting me know? I wish I knew this man well enough to be able to interpret his noises.*

We stand there, locked in some kind of staring contest until he finally lifts an eyebrow. The air crackles between us, so similar to all those times we faced off in SCI's student kitchen. Only, there's something new here—a sexy undercurrent of tension that I don't remember feeling then. I suddenly wonder if it was there all along, and I was just too inexperienced to recognize it for what it was.

“Can I go into the pantry now?” Lennox finally asks.

I shift to the side, too distracted by the possibility of him having heard my conversation to protest. He lightly touches my elbow when he passes by, then looks down at me with a familiar smirk. “Hey, Tatum? If you get thirsty later, I'm going to be working pretty late. You know how it is. *Pounding* that bread dough.”

*Ohhhh, I hate my sister so much.*

Lennox disappears into the pantry while I close my eyes, one hand pressed to my forehead.

Because it's definitely going to help if I just stand here stupidly, not moving, not saying anything, not—

“Tatum. There you are,” Olivia says. She pulls her fiery red hair over her shoulder. “Hey, whoa. You okay?”

I open my eyes and force a breath out through my nose, wiping any lingering irritation from my face.

*Get control of yourself, woman,* I think as I clear my throat.

“Yep! Great. Ready to go.”

Lennox reappears, a giant bag of basmati rice in his hand, and Olivia looks from him to me, then back again, her brow furrowed like she's solving a logic problem.

“Lennox,” she says slowly.

“What’s up, Liv?” he says casually, but I’m not sure Olivia buys it. Her forehead stays furrowed as Lennox asks, “What are you doing here?”

“Just here to introduce Tatum to her staff.” She looks at me and smiles. I don’t know her well yet, but Olivia Marino has very expressive eyes, and right now they’re asking me, *Are you okay? Did he say something to you? Do you need me to punch my brother on your behalf?*

Her concern is just the boost I need to forget about Lennox and dive into work.

But in the back of my mind, I can’t help feeling like Lennox Hawthorne just got the best of me.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Lennox

“CHEF?”

I turn to see Brittany, one of my line cooks, standing a few feet away, her hands on her hips and a furrow on her brow. “What’s wrong?”

“I got this,” Zach says, motioning toward the counter where I’ve been expediting orders. When I’m acting as expeditor, I don’t cook. Instead, I oversee everyone who is, calling orders as they come into the kitchen and making sure everything is prepared correctly and served efficiently. “Things are slowing down. You can see what she needs.”

I step aside, letting Zach take my spot, and walk toward Brittany.

“I can’t find the parmesan,” she says as soon as I reach her.

“It isn’t in the fridge?”

“It *was* in the fridge, but now it’s *not* in the fridge, and three plates are waiting for parm.”

I follow her to the walk-in, immediately seeing the empty spot on the shelf where the giant wedge of parmesan used to be. It was there as recently as this afternoon—something I know because my pantry chef is out on maternity leave, so I was the one checking on inventory.

The fact that it isn't here can only mean one thing.

I sigh and leave the fridge, making eye contact with Brittany who's waiting for me right outside. "Go do a quick walkthrough and double-check it isn't somewhere else in the kitchen."

She nods and disappears, and I turn away from my kitchen, heading toward the cavernous space where the catering staff works. The room is almost empty, which means everyone is probably up at the farmhouse providing a dinner service to whatever event is scheduled for the evening.

Tatum's voice sounds behind me, and I spin around to see her hurrying into her kitchen. "No, I'll grab them," she says to someone out of sight. "You go on and I'll be right behind you."

She slows when she sees me, her lips lifting in a smile as she turns and walks a few backward steps. "Are you lost, Hawthorne?"

It's not an unreasonable question. It's been two weeks since Tatum moved in, and we've seen each other around plenty. We've even had the chance to argue about: one, the frequency with which her dog pees in my garden; two, the way we organize the shared walk-in fridge; and three, who has first dibs on the produce that comes out of Stonebrook's greenhouse. But generally, we stay out of each other's way when we're at our busiest. There's too much work to be done to do otherwise.

Before I can respond, one of Tatum's cooks steps up beside her, a tray holding four covered dinner plates in her hand. "The specials, Chef."

"Perfect, Jessie. Thank you. And you double-checked for pecans?"

"Double and triple-checked," Jessie says.

Tatum lifts the lid covering one of the plates and peers under it before replacing it and picking up the tray. "I want you with me at the farmhouse, all right? It's your job to make sure the servers get each of these specials to the right people. Nothing



like ruining a wedding by sending Aunt Edna into anaphylactic shock because the catering staff ignored her nut allergy.”

Jessie laughs. “Understood. I’m on it.”

It’s not the first time I’ve noticed the way Tatum interacts with her staff. They all love her—*really* love her—and it’s easy to see why. She’s firm but fair, and she talks to them like they’re real people with real lives outside of work. I’ve been around the catering kitchen enough to know how stressful it can be to manage so many people’s individual needs, from food allergies to finicky couples with weird tastes. But Tatum makes it look easy. I respect that about her.

“Hey Elliott, can I get a minute before you leave?” I ask, proud of myself for sounding so normal. Yesterday, Olivia caught us bickering over a bushel box of celery hearts and scolded me until I promised I would try harder to communicate with Tatum like a professional and not a caged animal.

I couldn’t quite explain to my sister that even though Tatum and I might sound like we’re arguing, our interactions don’t have the same edge that they did in culinary school. I can’t speak for Tatum, but it almost seems like we enjoy them. At the very least, we’re both energized by them.

Tatum glances at me, eyebrow raised, then turns back to Jessie. “Take this out to the van, and I’ll be right behind you.”

Jessie hurries out of the kitchen, but Tatum moves at a slower pace, sauntering toward me like she’s got all the time in the world. “What can I do for you?” she asks when she finally reaches me.

“Where’s my parmesan?”

“You’re holding up Aunt Edna’s plate to ask me about cheese?”

“I’m sure Aunt Edna will be fine for two more minutes. My parm is missing, and you or your staff are the only ones who could have taken it.”

Tatum starts toward the walk-in. “I know which side of the fridge is mine, Lennox. I didn’t take your cheese.”

“Somebody did,” I say, following after her.

“Has Penelope visited lately?” Tatum says, her eyes flashing with laughter. “Maybe she ate it.”

“All twenty pounds of it?”

“Two weeks ago, she was wandering through your kitchen like she owned the place. You can’t tell me it isn’t possible.” She opens the heavy door of the walk-in, and I follow her inside.

“Possible, maybe. But not probable. The cheese was here this morning.”

Tatum frowns as she makes a slow circle, her eyes quickly scanning the shelves.

“This is where my parmesan *was*,” I say, pointing to the empty spot on the shelf.

“Ah,” Tatum says. “I see what happened.” She steps forward and hefts a quarter-wheel of parmesan out from behind a giant block of cheddar. “Here.”

I glance at the label. “This isn’t mine.”

She sighs. “I know. It’s mine, and apparently, my staff couldn’t find it and accidentally grabbed yours instead. It was an honest mistake, and I’m sorry it happened.”

I’m already shaking my head. “I can’t use this. The parm I use is aged over a hundred months. This won’t have the same bite.”

“You’re right. But what can I do about it now? Call back every plate from the wedding reception so I can scrape off your fancy cheese and replace it with something else?”

She presses the cheese wheel against my chest, which is no easy feat. The thing has to weigh at least twenty pounds. “Do you have plates waiting?” she asks, pushing the parm back into my chest. “Just use this. It’s better than nothing.”

I don't like that she's right, but she *is* right. I do have plates waiting, and slightly less bitey parmesan is better than no parmesan at all. *Barely* better, but still better.

"Fine," I concede. "But we aren't done talking about this."

She presses a hand to her chest with mock enthusiasm. "I am giddy with excitement at the thought," she deadpans.

As I turn back to my kitchen, the snarky sarcasm in her tone stays with me, except this time, it feels more challenging than annoying. And I've always been a man who loves a challenge.

No one complains about the subpar parmesan, and I make it through the rest of the night without any major mishaps, though my staff seems more tired and disgruntled than normal. I need to figure out why, but it can wait until tomorrow when I'm not bone-deep exhausted and my brain doesn't feel like whipped meringue.

I turn off the lights in the main kitchen and head to my office where I shed my chef's coat, dropping it into the laundry bin that will get picked up in the morning. The t-shirt I'm wearing underneath is damp with sweat, and I pull it away from my skin. I need a shower. And about twenty hours of sleep. Which is impossible, seeing as how I have to be back at the restaurant in less than twelve.

"You're still here," Tatum says from behind me.

I turn to see her standing in my office doorway, clutching what looks like the rest of my parmesan in her hands. She looks as exhausted as I feel.

"I could say the same about you." I drop into my desk chair, which bumps the mouse connected to my laptop and wakes up the screen. "You getting the hang of things?" The question feels normal—*neutral*—and I almost wonder what's wrong with me.

Tatum eyes me, like she doesn't quite trust that we're having a regular conversation either, then she shrugs. "For the most part. Moving food all over the farm is a little different, but I'm learning." She leans against the door jamb. "Some things are the same. Like how exhausted I feel at the end of the night."

I nod toward the cheese in her hands. “Did everyone rave about the incredible parm?”

She rolls her eyes as she moves into my office, setting the wrapped cheese on my desk. “It annoys me to admit it, but *yes*. Three different people mentioned how delicious it was.” She sticks her empty hands into her pockets. “I’m sorry about the mix-up. I talked to my staff and reminded them that borrowing from the Hawthorne kitchen isn’t acceptable crisis management.”

Okay, now things are feeling *really* weird. We’re having a calm, reasonable conversation. I don’t even know what to make of it. But also, I maybe, sort of, like it?

“Whoa, what’s that?” Tatum says, her eyes on my laptop. “Is that Stonebrook?”

I look at my laptop screen, open to the live feed coming from the various game cameras positioned around the farm. I don’t normally have the feed open, but Dad messaged me earlier, saying something about deer in the apple orchard visible from his back porch. He and Mom live on a secluded corner of the farm, and after his stroke a few years back, he isn’t so great at getting around. But he’s quick to reach out to one of us if he feels like something needs to be done. It’s too early for there to be fruit on the trees, but deer in the orchard means a breach in the fence, and I was hoping activity on the cameras might help me figure out where that breach might be.

Ultimately, it’ll be the farm manager’s job to fix the problem, but there’s no getting away from the *family* nature of a family-run farm. Even Brody pitches in, and he’s a chemistry teacher at Silver Creek High. His job doesn’t have anything to do with the farm, but he’s still here almost as frequently as the rest of us.

“It *is* Stonebrook,” I say, answering Tatum’s question. “We’ve got game cameras set up everywhere. Helps to keep an eye on the wildlife.”

She stiffens, her hands curling into fists. “Wildlife?” she says, her voice a little softer than before.

*Huh. This could be fun.*

“Sure. Bobcats. Bears. Wild boar. They can get pretty aggressive.”

Her eyes widen. “And they’re just ... *on* the farm? Should I not let Toby out?”

I bite my bottom lip, trying not to smile. “Probably not. It’s pretty wild out there. I heard there was a crocodile in the pond the other day.”

“A croc—*wait*. You’re messing with me.”

I finally grin. “Tiny bit.”

Tatum huffs. “I hate you so much right now.”

“The cameras are mostly to keep an eye on the deer,” I say. “They’ll eat whatever they can get to. It helps if we track their movements, stay ahead of them.”

She nods. “That makes sense. So all those other animals. Bears. Bobcats. Those don’t live around here?”

There’s real fear in her voice, and I suddenly feel guilty for teasing her, especially since now, I have to tell her the truth, and I don’t want to give her actual reasons to worry.

“They do,” I say carefully, “but you don’t need to worry about them. Bobcats are more scared of you than you are of them. And the bears, too. We only have black bears around here. We see them pretty frequently, but they’ll stay away if you have Toby with you.”

“But like, not *now*, right?” she says. “They’re all still hibernating.”

I almost smile at the hope in her voice. “It’s pretty much spring, Tatum. It’s still cold, but nature’s waking up. It knows what’s coming.”

“Oh good. Great. Love that.”

“I promise you’ll be fine. We’ve never had a bear attack at Stonebrook.” I nod toward the parmesan sitting on the desk, sensing a change of subject might do her some good. “Did you try it?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t.”

I stand and pick up the parmesan, then carry it into my kitchen where I unwrap the cheese, grab a knife, and slice off a chunk.

Tatum follows behind and takes the cheese when I hold it out to her, her fingers brushing against mine as she does.

I watch as she lifts the cheese to her mouth, already knowing how she’s going to react. Still, I’m unprepared for the way my pulse speeds when she closes her eyes and a low moan escapes her lips. “Oh my word. That’s ...” Her words trail off as she finishes the bite. She picks up the cheese and studies the label. “Where did you get this again?”

“I know a guy in Italy. He does small batches. Ages it twice as long as most.” Any authentic Parmigiano Reggiano is only going to be produced in one very small region in Italy, so having an Italian supplier isn’t all that surprising. But my source isn’t just any supplier. “His name is Gianni Rossi. His family has owned a farm in Emilia Romagna for centuries. He mostly sells to restaurants in Italy, but there are a few of us in other places. I’m the only one in the US.”

“How did you even find him?” Tatum asks. “For real. That’s the best parm I’ve ever had. I’m suddenly so sorry to have wasted it on a bunch of thankless wedding guests.”

“Dumb luck, mostly. I was vacationing in Italy, and I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “Right place, right time? There’s got to be more to the story than that.”

I carve off another few slivers of cheese, taking one for myself and offering the other to Tatum. Her fingers brush against mine, slower this time, almost like she’s lingering on purpose.

It takes me a minute to respond because then she’s lifting the cheese to her mouth and I’m watching as her tongue darts out to catch a crumb that’s stuck to her bottom lip.

*Focus, Lennox. FOCUS.*

“I, uh ...” I clear my throat. “What can I say? I was in this tiny Italian bistro, Gianni stopped by, and we struck up a conversation—”

“He just randomly started a conversation with you? Then discovered you were a chef and offered to fly his artisanal, small-batch, world-class parmesan halfway across the world because he liked your smile?”

I grimace and run a hand through my hair. She isn’t going to let me off the hook, and I *really* wish she would. “It’s possible I was dating his daughter at the time.” I breathe out a sigh, slowly lifting my eyes to meet hers. For reasons I cannot define, I don’t want to talk about my dating history with Tatum.

“Ahh, there’s the catch,” she says. “I knew there had to be one. And knowing what I know of your dating history, this totally tracks.”

The comment about my dating history cuts, but I ignore the sting as I slice off another piece of cheese for Tatum. I can’t argue about the impression she has of my dating history because it’s the right one. I dated *a lot* in the four years I attended culinary school, never settling down with any one woman. At least not after my first year when Hailey Stanton carved my heart out of my chest and ran it through a meat grinder.

Gruesome imagery, I know. But in this instance, it totally fits. And I’m still not over it. Whenever I think about getting serious with someone, my body breaks out in a cold sweat, a visceral reaction I never see coming and can’t prevent.

I don’t *want* to be a player. And in the sense that most people mean the term, I’m not. I might go on a lot of dates, but I never lead women on. But defending my reputation would mean talking about why I keep everything so casual in the first place, and that’s not a conversation I want to have. At the end of the day, it’s easier to take the label and let people think what they want to think.

“Must be nice walking around the world so handsome and charming, people just waiting to lavish you with shiny, fancy

things,” Tatum says.

I push the negative thoughts away and focus on Tatum. “Are you telling me you think I’m handsome?”

She reaches for the cheese and I pull it back right before she can grab it. She frowns and tries again, this time wrapping her fingers around my wrist and sending a burst of sensation up my arm. She holds my hand steady as she takes the parmesan out of my fingers. “I’m telling you I think you’re ridiculous,” she says. “The cheese is delicious. But *you* are ridiculous.”

“Better watch it, Tatum. If you’re nice to me, I could probably hook you up with your own artisanal parmesan.” I really *could*. It wouldn’t be hard to order enough from Gianni to cover the catering kitchen’s needs as well as Hawthorne’s.

“I don’t need your handouts to be fabulous, Lennox,” Tatum says saucily.

The air around us shifts just slightly, and I hold her gaze for a long moment. She really *is* fabulous.

The thought feels foreign in my brain, especially when I slide it in next to all the *hating* we did to each other back in school, even next to the bickering we’ve been doing since she arrived at Stonebrook.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” I ask on impulse.

She must sense I’m being serious for once because her playful expression fades. “Sure.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I know everyone here is happy to have you. But why did you take this job?”

The light in her eyes fades the slightest bit, but then she shrugs dismissively, like the question is no big deal. “Why not?”

I narrow my eyes. “Tatum. Come on. Your father is—”

“Not in charge of my career,” she says, cutting me off. “I needed a job. This seemed like a good one. I don’t ever want to be a chef who thinks *any* job is beneath me. Catering is a new challenge that I was excited to try. It really isn’t more complicated than that.”



Pretty sure it's *a lot* more complicated than that, but I'm not about to push Tatum for an explanation she isn't ready to give.

"Fair enough," I say, and her shoulders relax the slightest bit.

She might not have answered my question directly, but she told me plenty anyway. I've met her father, after all. It isn't hard to guess what the gaps in her story might look like.

Tatum says goodnight and heads toward the back door while I wrap up the last of the cheese and return it to the fridge, then grab my keys and lock up my office.

When I make it outside, Tatum is on the landing beside the loading dock, her eyes following Toby as he makes his way across the grassy lawn to the left of the restaurant.

"Oh hey, he isn't in my garden. What a nice surprise," I say.

"I tried to send him there, but he just wouldn't listen," Tatum says without missing a beat.

I chuckle as I walk to my car. Toby runs over to greet me, and I give his ears a good scratch. Despite my grumbling, he's actually a pretty great dog.

"So I *don't* need to worry about bears, right?" Tatum calls.

"You don't need to worry about bears."

She nods, but there's an uncertainty in her eyes that says she doesn't completely believe me. "You promise?"

"I promise," I say. And then, because I think she needs the distraction, I add, "Better rest up, Elliott. I'll be here early in the morning, and I'm willing to fight for the best bell peppers."

"You won't have the chance if I get here first," she says. "Since I live right upstairs, I'm thinking my odds are pretty good."

I open my car door and rest my hand on the top of the window. "But *I'm* the one who gets personal text messages from Shelton."

I've been spoiled without a catering chef on staff, getting first pick of whatever Stonebrook's produce manager brings over and leaving the rest for catering to work with. But Tatum is serious about her vegetables. Last week, she shoved four entire endives into her shirt just to keep me from snatching them out of her hands.

"How do you know he doesn't text *me*?" Tatum asks.

I let out a dramatic scoff. "Are you *flirting* with Shelton to get first dibs on produce?" The thought of *anyone* flirting with gray-haired, mild-mannered Shelton is hilarious. The poor man would probably quit his job if he even thought it was a possibility.

"Absolutely not. But if I was, would it be any different than you flirting to get parmesan cheese?"

"I didn't *flirt*."

"You say to-may-to, I say to-mah-to."

"Now you're the one being ridiculous."

She calls Toby and he trots toward her. "Goodnight, Lennox," she sing-songs.

I climb into my car, shaking my head as I pull out of the parking lot onto the long, winding drive that cuts through the farm.

I don't realize until I pass the wide stone sign at the Stonebrook entrance that I've been smiling the entire time.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Tatum

“YOUR BUTTER’S TOO SOFT, Tatum.”

I flush at the sound of Lennox’s voice somewhere over my left shoulder, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

What is he doing here? I swear, since our conversation last week about his stupidly delicious parmesan, it almost feels like he’s been finding reasons to be in my kitchen.

Not just running into me around the farm, but *here*, in my space. Making me feel all flustered and out of sorts.

I wish I could say I didn’t like it.

I set a bowl onto my food scale and zero it out before dumping in several scoops of almond flour. “My butter is *not* too soft,” I say without turning around. “Are you lost *again*, Lennox? Do you need me to draw you a map so it’s easier for you to stay in your own kitchen?”

“Just here to preserve the reputation of the farm. If you make pastry with butter that soft, it’s going to be flat.” He reaches over my shoulder and nudges the still-wrapped butter with his knuckle. “Flat pastry? Unhappy wedding guests. Unhappy wedding guests? Bad reviews. Bad reviews?”

I spin around, cutting him off. “I get the point. But it’s a *moot* point because my butter is *not* too soft. It’s room temperature. It’s fine.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Room temperature works if it’s seventy-two degrees. But what if it’s seventy-three?”

His eyes spark with humor, and I press my lips together as I wipe a bead of sweat from my forehead. It might actually be a little warmer than seventy-three degrees, which is unusual considering I’m the only person here. The only thing we served today was breakfast for a family reunion up at the farmhouse.

We have a wedding tomorrow night, but all the prep work is done, so I’m here alone, finishing up a small batch of gluten-free pastries for the bride’s gluten-intolerant siblings. My pastry chef worked late last night finishing up the regular pastries, so I told her I would handle these.

With no ovens on, no cooking happening anywhere in the vicinity—it shouldn’t be so warm in here.

I take a step closer, my arms folded across my chest. I’m only inches from Lennox now, who is mirroring my stance. If I weren’t so much shorter than he is, our arms might be touching. Instead, his arms are more in line with my collar bone. “You seem awfully concerned about the temperature, Lennox. Makes me wonder if someone turned up the heat on purpose.”

“Are you accusing me of sabotage?”

I’m suddenly aware of his delicious body heat, of the smell of his clean chef’s coat mingled with something woodsy and uniquely Lennox. It’s completely disconcerting. I didn’t come to Stonebrook with any thoughts or hopes about a relationship with Lennox Hawthorne. Did I hope we’d be able to co-exist peacefully as co-workers? Sure. Does that mean I want to flirt—argue?—my way into something more? Absolutely not.

Which makes this interaction feel a little like smelling an apple pie in the oven when you’re allergic to apples. It might smell delicious, but if you actually eat it, you’re going to break out in hives.

I’m not *positive* Lennox will give me hives. But I just made a drastic life change. Changed jobs. Moved across the country.

Logically, this should not be something I'm ready for.

Still, the way he smells—it's all I can do not to breathe in enormous lungfuls of Lennox-scented air whenever he's close by.

"You brought up sabotage first," I say, my voice alarmingly breathy.

*Why am I breathy?*

If Bree were here, and I told her I wasn't flirting, she would laugh right in my not-flirting face.

"I didn't sabotage anything," Lennox says, his voice low. "But I did see one of your chefs messing with the thermostat yesterday. You might want to check on that."

I prop my hands on my hips. "Oh. Well thanks, then. I'll do that."

Lennox reaches forward and tugs on a curl that's come loose, stretching it down before it springs back into place. "If I were you, I wouldn't make your pastry until you do," he says. "Because that butter is too soft."

"You're too soft," I grumble, smacking him in the stomach and leaving a trail of almond flour on his chef's coat.

Except ... *oh. Oh my.* His stomach is *not soft*.

It takes exactly three seconds for me to realize my hand is *still* on his abdomen. Sliding down the ridges of muscle like they're there for my amusement.

"Find something you like?" Lennox says with a smirk, and I pull my hand back like I've touched a flame.

"Ha!" I say, a little too quickly. "You wish." I clear my throat, resisting the urge to lift my hands to my fiery cheeks. It would probably only draw more attention to them. "I was ... only trying to dust off the flour," I say.

The laughter in his eyes says he senses the lie in my words as well as I do, but I'm not about to back down. He raises an eyebrow. "That's all, huh?"

*Fine. Yes. Call me a liar. It's better than admitting I was just feeling up Lennox's abs.*

When his expression doesn't shift, his grin cocky and sure, I use both hands to playfully shove him away. "Uggh. Just go. Take your muscles and let me get back to work."

He chuckles lightly as he saunters off, stopping in the doorway long enough to say, "I'm going to remember this, Elliott."

I wait until he's well and truly gone to pick up my butter, testing its softness with the pad of my thumb. I swear under my breath, hating that he's right. Butter that's too soft makes flat, gummy pastry that isn't light and flaky at all. I really *can't* make pastry with this.

I carry the butter back to the fridge, stopping on my way to check on the thermostat. It's set to seventy-six, which is entirely too warm. I make a mental note to talk to my staff about it, then abandon the pastry and head upstairs to take Toby for a walk. I'll come back later when the kitchen—and the butter—are both a little cooler.

Before I make it more than a few feet, shouting from Lennox's kitchen draws me in the opposite direction. I tiptoe down the hallway and peek around the corner to see two of his cooks locked in some heated exchange, a giant bin of sliced onions on the counter between them. Lennox is standing off to the side, his forehead pressed into the heel of his hand.

"I hear what you're saying," Lennox says, dropping his hand. His tone is measured, like he's fighting to maintain control. "We can talk about it. But right now is not the time to hash out—"

I duck back into the hallway, feeling suddenly guilty for eavesdropping and not wanting Lennox to see me.

I can't know exactly what's going on in Lennox's kitchen, but this isn't the first time I've seen some of his staff locked in disagreements like this one. I've also noticed a few things about his set up that are making things more complicated than they need to be. The flow of a professional kitchen can make

or break the way a team works together, and his could use some tweaking.

I peek back around the corner, my eyes scanning the space. If the island in the center of his kitchen is modular, he could turn it ninety degrees and create larger pathways for the chefs moving from prep to the grill. That would also open up a little more space for the sauté cooks, who, based on Lennox's menu, are probably the busiest in the kitchen. It would mean chefs would have to take a slightly longer walk to get from the pantry to the prep counter, but the improvements would be worth the sacrifice.

Still, it's not my place to tell Lennox he isn't running his kitchen the right way. Every chef does things a little differently, and my opinions are just that—opinions. Unless he were to specifically ask for my help, I'd never feel comfortable volunteering any suggestions. At least not with our relationship like it is now.

I move back down the hall to my apartment steps and make my way upstairs. I truly feel for Lennox. He has a hard job—especially since he's building an entire operation from the ground up.

When I started as head chef of my father's restaurant, Le Vin, the staff was already highly trained with refined systems and procedures in place. They hated working with me—I was basically there for show—but I worked my tail off anyway, and I learned. I grew. I got better at the job.

I may not have deserved the leadership position my father prematurely foisted upon me, but I tried to make the most of it anyway, and eventually, my staff begrudgingly accepted me. Most of them were better chefs than I was—than I *am*. But they learned to trust my strategic brain, and I discovered I am very good at helping chefs maximize their efficiency.

It's probably why the transition to catering hasn't been too bad for me. Event catering, especially for larger events, has a lot of moving parts. The logistics matter almost as much as the food, so it's been nice that my brain seems to be wired for the kind of problem-solving the job requires.

What I'm not loving about catering? My obligation to come up with new seasonal entrees every couple of months. It's not that I can't do it. I can. I have the training, the knowledge. But I've always felt more overwhelmed by menu creation than inspired by it.

*I know.* Daughter of the famous Christopher Elliott, graduate of the acclaimed Southern Culinary Institute, former head chef of Le Vin, a world-renowned restaurant, and I'm intimidated by creating some new catering menus. I realize how ridiculous it sounds. That doesn't make it any less true.

When I reach the top of the steps, there's a photo taped to the center of my apartment door.

*What the?*

Someone actually came all the way up to my apartment door to give me a picture? Am I going to find a message made out of magazine clippings next?

But then I really look at the picture.

It only takes a second to recognize it.

Our last year of culinary school, Lennox and I represented the Southern Culinary Institute at a Christmas fundraising event for the Atlanta Arts Foundation. They had a British Baking Show-style bakeoff with eight participants ranging from pastry chefs at Atlanta's finest restaurants to TikTok-famous home chefs and, of course, to students from SCI. The event had three rounds, with two chefs eliminated in each of the first two rounds until only four of us were left for the final segment of the competition.

Lennox and I both made it to the final round, but then he nailed his gingerbread man cupcakes and my peppermint cake totally flopped. *Literally.* Like, the entire thing collapsed in on itself seconds before it was my turn to present to the judges.

The photo Lennox taped to my door—because who else could have possibly done it?—is the one the Atlanta newspaper printed in their Sunday edition featuring the young phenom chef who won the bakeoff and would surely “take the culinary world by storm.” Lennox is smiling wide, holding up



a cake-shaped trophy while standing next to a table featuring his prize-winning dessert.

The picture is creased along one side, a third of the photo tucked under, so I unfold it to its original size ... and burst out laughing.

Because *I* am on the other side of the photo looking absolutely furious. My arms are folded across my chest, my hip is cocked, and I'm frowning, my eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

I am the picture of poor sportsmanship—a textbook definition of what NOT to do when someone else wins and you lose.

The Motion Picture Academy should take notes. They could do an entire workshop on how actors should and shouldn't react when their rivals win Oscars using just my face.

I have no idea why the paper didn't print the entire photo—the version that went to print definitely cropped me out—but I'm so glad they didn't. The media would have had a heyday over Christopher Elliott's daughter exhibiting such classless behavior.

I laugh again as I let myself into my apartment and greet Toby, who meets me at the door.

If this were a competition—it's not, but let's just say, hypothetically, if it were—Lennox is winning a billion to zero. Granny panties. Pounding bread dough. Crocodiles in the pond. And now this photo, which is admittedly hilarious, but STILL. He has made so many jokes at my expense, and I've been too busy learning how to do my job to push back at all. (You know. When I'm *not* feeling up his abs.) Of course, I've also been trying to be professional—to make a good impression. I've never had to rely on my own merits like I do now. I haven't wanted to do anything that might screw that up.

But now that I have my feet under me, it's time I start to push back a little.

And I think I know just the way to do it.

## CHAPTER SIX

Lennox

I PULL ANOTHER ORDER off the ticket machine and read it over. The board is already full, and this order isn't going to make my sauté cooks happy. They've already got six items on the board, and I'm about to give them three more. "Ordering," I call. "Two scallops, one halibut, and a filet, medium rare."

I listen as my cooks echo back the order, then turn my attention to another ticket. "Plating one tenderloin, one chicken pot pie, and a pork belly," I call.

Off to my left, Griffin swears as a pot clatters to the stove.

"Griffin, how are we on that sauce?"

"Working on it," he calls.

Two plates slide into the window ready to go, so now we're only lacking the tenderloin. Zach is at the grill, but the apple brandy reduction is what makes the dish, so without Griffin's sauce, we're at a standstill on the whole table.

"Behind you!" another cook calls out, followed by a string of expletives.

I frown. The energy in the kitchen is good, but our rhythm is off. Cooks are tripping over each other, getting in each other's way. Twice, plates have made it out of the kitchen before I put eyes on them which isn't supposed to happen. When things are working like they should, I'm the last one to see every plate

and guarantee that every single person in my dining room is getting the best possible meal.

But when I'm having to fix an oversalted she-crab soup—a staple and a favorite on our menu—or fill in for Zach because he's filling in for my salad chef who called out for the fourth time in two weeks, it's hard to keep things running the way they should.

Zach slides the tenderloin onto a plate, then adds the charred broccolini and the mushroom risotto.

Griffin swoops in, ready to ladle the sauce over the tenderloin, but the sauce looks thin. I lift a hand, stopping him just in time. “Wait.” I dip a pinky into the sauce and taste it. It *is* too thin. And not sweet enough. “What is this?”

Willow appears beside Griffin. “I told you it didn't reduce enough.” She reaches for the sauce pan. “Here. I'll fix it.”

“We don't have time to fix it,” Griffin barks. “Reducing takes time.”

“No, but I can thicken it with a *beurre manie*. It won't be perfect, but it's better than what we've got.”

Griffin hesitates, his grip firm on his saucepan and his jaw tense.

“Let her do it,” I say. I look toward a line of cooks working at a long silver counter across the room. “You go help Brittany with prep. Willow, you're *saucier* for the rest of the night.”

“You want me on prep?” Griffin asks, his tone incredulous.

“You're off your game tonight, man, and we can't afford another mistake. Go. We'll talk about this later.”

“Yes, Chef,” Griffin grumbles as he moves aside, leaving Willow alone at the sauces station.

I grab another ticket and call the order, hesitating when I see Tatum standing near the back door. I'm not sure what she's doing in my kitchen at this time of night, but her eyes are roving over everything, almost like she's cataloging the way I'm doing things. A surge of discomfort—or maybe defensiveness?—rises in me, which feels strange, considering

how much our old rivalry has recently shifted into something a little more enjoyable. I haven't felt a real sense of competition with Tatum in weeks. Still, Hawthorne is my heart and soul right now. Criticism from *anyone* would probably make me defensive.

"One salmon, one filet, rare," I repeat, when my cooks don't call back the order. Still nothing. "Zach, one salmon, one filet, rare."

"One salmon, one filet, rare," Zach calls back, "but I'm swamped over here, Chef."

I hear Zach's frustration, but there's not much I can do to help him. The orders won't slow for at least another half hour. "Willow, we're out of time," I say. "I need sauce now."

"Here. It's here." She steps across the counter and holds out her saucepan. I taste it and lift my eyes to meet hers. "Well done."

She smiles. "Thank you, Chef."

She ladles the sauce over the tenderloin, I wipe away a few extra drips from the rim of the plate, then pass it off to the server waiting behind me.

I allow myself one more glance in Tatum's direction before grabbing the next ticket, but she's already gone.



Long after the last dinner guest has left, I sit in the center of my clean kitchen, notebook open in front of me, and review the night's feedback—a long list of notes I took during my final check-in with my cooks and waitstaff.

The night was all right over all. Customers were happy, which is most important. My cooks aren't compromising on the quality of the food they prepare even when they're stressed and stretched thin. But I see how tired they are, how much they're getting on each other's nerves, and that's not how I want them feeling at the end of the night. I need to tweak our process, but I'm not sure how to do it.

Then there's the problem with Griffin. It could be he just needs more training. It could also be that he isn't up to the job.

A knot of anxiety tightens in my gut. I haven't had to fire anyone yet, and I don't relish the thought.

I sigh and read the last few items at the bottom of the list. The waitstaff mentioned two different complaints about the salmon being too salty. And there were at least that many about the she-crab soup.

Zach appears beside me. "I'm heading out," he says, his bag slung over his shoulder. "See you tomorrow, man."

I nod slowly, not looking up from the list in front of me.

"Hey, you all right?" he asks.

"Just trying to decide if we have a *salt* problem or a *staff* problem."

"Ahh," he says. "Good question."

A door creaks across the room, and I look up to see Tatum walking toward us, a small dish in her hands. I didn't see her again after I spotted her in my kitchen during the dinner rush, and her kitchen has been quiet for a long time, so it's a surprise that she's here now.

Not an unwelcome one, though, and I suddenly find myself hoping whatever is in that dish is something she's bringing for me.

Tatum's chef's coat is gone, revealing a black tank that's hugging her in all the right ways, and her curly hair is loose around her shoulders. I ... *do not* remember her having those curves back in culinary school.

Zach makes a low sound of appreciation which immediately irritates me, and I grunt my disapproval.

"Hands off, Zach," I say under my breath.

He lifts an eyebrow. "So it's like that, then?"

I don't know how to answer him—I'm not even sure where the warning came from. "Nope," I say, though Zach doesn't look convinced. "But it's not like that for *you*, either."

Tatum pauses directly across us.

“I’m not giving back the broccolini, Elliott,” I say. “You better not be asking.”

We didn’t quite come to actual blows last time we divvied up the weekly produce, but had I not sacrificed ten pounds of brussels sprouts in exchange for the broccolini, we might have.

“You can keep your broccolini,” she says. “I came to return this.” She pulls out the picture I stuck to her apartment door the other day and tosses it onto the counter. “I found it stuck to the bottom of my shoe and thought you might want it back.”

“Come on,” I say. “You can’t tell me you didn’t laugh.”

Her lips twitch, her eyes dancing, but she doesn’t crack. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She clears her throat and lets her gaze slide away from me. “Anyway, I’m actually here for Zach.” She smiles at my sous chef, her expression warm and friendly. “I’m so glad you’re still here.”

Wait, what? Zach? She’s so glad *Zach* is still here?

Suddenly, I’m back in middle school, watching April Henderson give my best friend Beau a valentine instead of me.

“Oh yeah?” Zach shoots me a look, then steps forward and crosses his arms, his biceps flexing. Tatum reaches out and touches his arm, and I barely restrain myself from standing, pulling Zach away from her, and tossing him out the back door.

“I was hoping you could help me,” Tatum says. “I’ve been experimenting. Trying to come up with a new salad dressing to use for the bridal luncheon next month. I need to make a good impression, and I *really* want everyone here at Stonebrook to like me.”

Tatum’s eyes dart to me for a split second before they zero back in on Zach. She wants everyone to like her? Why do I wish she were only talking about *me*?

“Will you try this for me and let me know what you think?” She extends the dish she’s been holding in her hands.

“Of course.” Zach puts down his bag, takes the salad dressing, and lifts it to his nose.

I watch on, my irritation growing by the second. When, in just a few weeks, have the two of them had the opportunity to get so friendly? It’s not like our schedule allows for tons of free time where we get to just stand around and make friends. Especially not Tatum’s schedule because she’s often serving three meals a day—breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner.

Nothing about their chumminess makes sense unless they’ve been hanging out *outside* the kitchen. My hand curls into a fist and I press it into my thigh, the slight discomfort keeping me grounded. I am *not* jealous of Zach. I have *no reason* to be jealous of Zach.

After a more thorough sniffing than Brody’s basset hound trailing a rabbit, Zach dips a finger into the dressing and lifts it to his lips.

His expression sours as he tastes it, his eyes scrunching up. “Oh man,” he finally says. “That’s—” He clears his throat and swallows. “Is it—could it be—?”

Tatum presses her lips together, watching Zach with wide, innocent eyes.

“I think you might be using a little too much lemon,” Zach finally says, rubbing at his jaw.

“Really?” Tatum says. Her gaze finally shifts to me. “That’s funny. I used a recipe I got from Lennox.”

*From me?* When would she have gotten a recipe from me?

Zach looks at me, eyebrows raised. “Really?”

Okay. I’m so over this. I reach for the salad dressing. “Let me see.”

“It got him all kinds of attention back in culinary school,” Tatum says as Zach hands me the dish. “I’m sure Lennox remembers.”

I taste the dressing, her words catching up with me a beat too late. I wince as the overly sour flavor makes my jaw clench and my face contort.

The salad dressing tastes terrible. But it isn't just terrible. It's also *familiar*.

*I should have known.*

Nothing about Tatum asking Zach for an opinion on her salad dressing felt right. And the way she was looking at him, all wide-eyed and innocent, it's almost like she was *too earnest*.

I lift my gaze to Tatum who is smiling wide, her bottom lip caught between her teeth and her hands propped on her hips.

No, I take it back. She isn't smiling. She's *smirking*, her eyes glittering with mirth.

I have one hundred percent been *played*.

"Ha, ha, ha. Very funny," I say dryly.

"Wait, what? What's funny?" Zach asks.

Tatum leans forward onto the counter and props her chin in her hand. "What do you think? Does the dressing have too much lemon? I was going for subtle."

The lemon in the vinaigrette is about as subtle as a semi-truck barreling down the highway. Exactly as it was the one and only time I completely bombed an assignment in culinary school. I don't know what possessed me to add three lemons' worth of juice to the simple dressing. I was trying to be bold, probably, prove that I could buck the rules and still come out shining. But adding enough sweet to combat that much tartness would have turned the dressing into lemonade. By the time I realized as much, the damage was already done.

My instructor used me as an example of what not to do for weeks.

I slide the dish back onto the counter. "How did you even remember the recipe?"

"Honestly, with that much lemon juice in it, does the rest of the recipe really matter?"

I roll my eyes. "I'll never forget the way you looked that day," I say, a slight challenge in my voice. "Almost as smug



and condescending as you look right now.”

“I still need someone to explain what’s going on,” Zach says.

“I was not *smug*,” Tatum says tartly, and I’m weirdly happy she doesn’t break our gaze to answer Zach’s question.

I scoff. “You took an actual victory lap around the kitchen after our instructor declared it a catastrophe.”

She leans forward. “Maybe I was just happy to see the great Lennox Hawthorne knocked down a peg or two.”

“Hello?” Zach says. “Do either of you want to clue me in?”

“The great Lennox Hawthorne?” I say. “That’s rich coming from Christopher Elliott’s golden child. How is daddy dearest?”

She rolls her eyes. “Golden child? Says the guy literally working on his family’s farm?”

I stand up and lean over the counter, bringing my face level with Tatum’s, and place my palms flat against the cool stainless steel. “Hawthorne might be sitting on family land, but it’s still my restaurant. I’m the one doing the work and making it successful.”

The bravado sounds false to my ears, especially after the night I just had, but I won’t equivocate in front of Tatum.

She breathes out a chuckle. “It must be so exhausting,” she says. “Doing all that work while lugging around *such* an enormous ego. The muscle definition in your shoulders is probably something else.”

It’s finally my turn to smirk. “I’ll show you my shoulder definition if you show me your granny panties.”

“Okay, I give up,” Zach says as he backs away. “I’m going home unless either of you still needs me here?”

“We don’t need you,” Tatum and I say in unison.

Zach mutters something unintelligible on his way out the door, but all I care about is that he’s gone.

Tatum crosses her arms and gives me a saucy look. “Still dreaming about my underwear, are you? Maybe you should get out more, Lennox. Get your mind off of something that is *never* going to happen.”

The *never* hits me differently than it would have two weeks ago. I don’t know exactly what it means. I just know Tatum Elliott is getting under my skin.

I lean even closer, close enough to see the flecks of gold in Tatum’s gray-blue eyes. “It’s *never* going to happen?” I repeat. I tilt my head like I’m studying her. “Do you promise?”

Her expression hardens—all but her eyes. Those stay bright and flirty, like she’s enjoying this exchange as much as I am. “A promise, a solemn vow, a guarantee,” she says. “Whatever you want to call it.”

My eyes drop to her lips, but I force them back up. Because she said *never*. Because there is *nothing* happening between us. Because I am definitely *not* thinking about kissing Tatum Elliott.

Kissing her would be madness.

Ridiculous.

*Reckless.*

I shift and lean back, clearing my throat and making a mental note to never stare into Tatum’s eyes.

“Well that’s a relief,” I finally say.

“Definitely a relief,” she echoes. She mirrors my posture, standing opposite me across the counter. “So glad we’re on the same page.”

I swallow. It *does* feel like we’re on the same page, but I’m not sure it’s the one we’re admitting to out loud.

“So, you and Zach?” I ask on impulse, wanting to know why they seemed so familiar with each other, but still regretting the words as soon as they’re out of my mouth. Mostly because I sound jealous, and I’d rather not give Tatum that kind of satisfaction.

“We’re just friends,” she says. “Not that it’s any business of yours.”

I shrug like I’m only mildly interested. Like this doesn’t feel like the most important conversation I’ve ever had with Tatum. “It’s my business if you’re distracting my sous chef.”

“By being his *friend*? Is this the rule you have with your employees? No friendshipping allowed?”

I purse my lips. She’s got me there. I don’t really care if people on my staff date, so long as it doesn’t interfere with their work, so I have zero grounds for questioning her.

“I don’t care who you’re friends with,” I say. “I was just curious. You can do whatever you want.” I look at the discarded bowl on the counter between us. “Just as long as you don’t actually serve *that* anywhere.”

Her gaze follows mine, but it skates right over the bowl and lands on the list of notes I was reviewing before she and Zach interrupted me. She leans sideways like she’s trying to read the list, and I snatch it away from view. I close the notebook and drop it onto the stool beside me.

Tatum’s tone shifts and her eyes soften. “I used to do the same thing,” she says, like she’s already forgotten our previous conversation. “Go over complaints at the end of the night.”

“More like compliments,” I say a little too quickly.

She nods, but then she tilts her head, considering me for a long moment. “Lennox, if you ever want to talk about anything work-related, I’m happy to listen.”

I lift an eyebrow. We talk about work-related things all the time, which means she’s hinting at something specific.

Apparently, an eyebrow lift is all the encouragement Tatum needs.

“I’m not saying you need my help,” she says, wringing her hands in a way that makes me think she’s nervous. “But I did spend five years running a kitchen twice the size of yours, and I know a few things about efficiency. And it’s possible I *may*

have noticed a thing or two that might make things easier on you.”

I think of her standing at the back of my kitchen, her narrowed eyes taking everything in.

“Is that what you were doing earlier?” I ask. “Spying on me?”

“No! Not at all,” she says. “I was just passing through.” She gives her head a little shake. “And it was just a few casual observations. It isn’t really a big deal—more of an *only if you’re interested* kind of thing,” she says. “I’m sure what you’re doing is working just fine.”

My pride flares, making me itchy and annoyed. So every time she passes through my kitchen, she’s looking for weaknesses? Ways she could swoop in and make everything better?

At the same time, I was just thinking about what I could do to improve things in my kitchen. It’s hard not to be curious about what her “casual observations” might be.

Still, this is Tatum Elliott we’re talking about. Tatum *freaking* Elliott. I may be willing to tease her and joke about who gets the bigger brussels sprouts, but that’s surface-level stuff.

My kitchen? my livelihood? That’s real. I’m not sure I’m ready to go there with Tatum, even if we are getting along.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I hear myself say. “I’ve got things under control.”

I *do not* have things under control. But I’ll figure it out. I’ve got the experience. The knowledge. I have a few problems to solve, but I’ll solve them. I’ll fix things.

Tatum studies me for a long moment, like she can somehow see the battle playing out in my mind. “It’s okay to ask for help, Lennox,” she finally says, her tone soft.

As gentle as they are, her words still make me queasy.

I’m not supposed to need help. I told my family I could do this—I could make this restaurant work.

And they invested in Hawthorne because they believed me. They *trust* me.

And I'm not going to let them down.

I push away from the counter. "I appreciate it, Tatum. I do. But I'm good. Things are running fine."

She nods, taking a step away from the counter. "I'm sure they are," she says simply, but the dancing light in her eyes is gone, and it's that worried expression that stays with me for the rest of the night.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tatum

HONESTLY, I SHOULD PROBABLY buy a winter coat. It's technically almost spring, but it doesn't feel like the weather has gotten the memo. Either way, March in Western North Carolina is a very different experience than March in Southern California.

I pull on my warmest leggings and a base layer, then add another long-sleeved shirt and a hoodie. It makes me a little bulkier than I like, but at least I'll be warm.

Finally bundled up, I grab Toby's leash and we head down the stairs for a late afternoon walk. I might not even use the leash—as long as we don't see any goats, Toby should be fine—but I like to have it on me anyway just in case. Especially since Lennox freaked me out with all the bear talk.

I pause at the base of the stairs and look toward my kitchen. The light is off, and I relax knowing now, I'm truly off the clock. We had both a breakfast and a lunch service today, but we only served twenty-five people, so I worked with less than half my regular staff and we had a pretty chill day overall. I left my dishwashers finishing up the last of the dishes, and Jessie scrubbing down the stove when I went upstairs, so I'm glad it didn't take them long to finish.

I felt guilty cutting out early, but Toby has been holed up inside a lot the last few days. We both need a nice, long walk

around the farm.

Outside, we walk past Lennox's garden, and Toby pauses to pee in his new favorite spot.

"Toby!" I whisper yell, though honestly, I'm still feeling a little salty about the way Lennox dismissed me the other day, when I offered to help with his kitchen. Maybe I don't really care if Toby pees in his garden.

Maybe I don't care about Lennox at all.

Stupid, prideful man. It's not like I meant to insult him. Honestly, I didn't plan to offer at all. But then I saw all his notes, and I just—I remembered what that was like.

He has a really hard job. I just wanted him to feel like he had someone on his team.

But no. Lennox doesn't need anyone. Especially not me.

"Come on, Tobe," I say, ushering him out of the garden and back onto the path. We walk a little further, looping around the giant pasture below the restaurant, passing the pavilion where, when the weather warms, we'll hold outdoor weddings and other events.

Olivia told me about a trail that cuts through the woods on the opposite side of the main drive, so we cross over and find it, then take it past a little spring and up a hill steep enough to make my quads burn before the trail spits us out next to the goat barn. From there, we head over to the farmhouse, then catch the trail meant for guests who want to take a more scenic route to get down to the restaurant.

When I'm hauling a dinner service up to the prep kitchen at the back of the farmhouse, I use the main drive. But the meandering path through the woods is storybook perfect, right down to the gazebo lit with twinkle lights year round. I can only imagine the hundreds of wedding photos that have been taken in this spot.

Maybe it's the way the whole farm is nestled into the mountains, but it feels like there are all these little pockets of solitude, places where you might be minutes from a restaurant

full of people or a barn full of goats or an orchard full of workers, but you still feel like you're completely alone.

This is exactly what I needed when I took this job. It's not that running the catering kitchen isn't stressful. But the pressures feel completely different. Nothing is quite as personal as it was when I had Dad observing every single decision I made, micromanaging my career in every way I would let him.

I drop onto the gazebo steps while Toby wanders off to sniff around the trees. On my phone, I scroll through half a dozen texts from my father—all sent in the past twelve hours.

So far, I've ignored every single one. But if I keep that up too much longer, he might do something drastic. Like actually *call* me. Or worse, fly out here to talk to me in person.

That's probably not a fair assessment. I'm sure he's just worried about me. But if I talk to him, he's going to try to convince me to come home, and that's not a battle I feel like fighting. Before responding to Dad, I distract myself by texting my sister. A dose of Bree's humor and optimism should go a long way to give me the courage I need to stand up to Dad's coaxing.

**Tatum:** Tell me I can respond to Dad's text.

Instead of texting back, Bree calls me.

"Of course you can," she says when I answer the call. "You're a strong, independent woman who doesn't need him *or* his money."

"I am," I repeat. "I am those things."

"Yes you are," she says through a grunt that makes my eyebrows rise up my forehead.

"Bree, what are you doing?"

"Yoga," she says, her voice still strained. "My doctor says working on my core will help me stop peeing on myself every time I laugh."

"Oh, geez. That's—wait, is that a thing? That really happens?"



“Welcome to motherhood, baby,” Bree says. “The twins wrecked my body. Sweet of them, right?”

“It’s the gift that keeps on giving,” I say. “I won’t keep you. Just needed to hear you tell me I’m tough.”

“You are so tough,” she says. “Don’t let him manipulate you, Tatum. You’re living your life. Just say no to his guilt trips!”

A surge of gratitude for my sister and all her quirky weirdness fills my heart. “Thanks, Bree.”

I hang up the call and pull up the thread of texts with my dad.

**Dad:** Did you see the revised offer I had the studio email over? Note the salary. I pushed them to double it, and they agreed. Let me know when you’re ready to sign.

**Dad:** Double, Tatum.

**Dad:** Did you see that part?

**Dad:** You know, offers like this don’t come along every day.

**Dad:** It’s a primetime slot, too. They’re really excited about it. We just need you on board.

In his last message, his positivity finally starts to crack.

**Dad:** The studio won’t keep waiting for you, Tatum. I need your thoughts on this ASAP.

I sigh and tap my phone against my hand.

I recognize that having a major television network offer me a primetime cooking show is a big deal—the kind of thing chefs all over the country dream of. This particular show would be something my dad and I did together—some sort of father/daughter bake-off thing featuring us both.

But when the offer first came in? All I felt was *suffocated*. It was just another thing in the long line of things Dad has pressured me to do over the years. Open my own restaurant.

Sign onto his merchandising deals. Be head chef at Le Vin. And now, become a television star right next to him.

It was three days after he told me about the offer that I applied to be Stonebrook's catering chef.

Still, I haven't told the network *no*. Not explicitly. I've just told them I'm not ready to say yes.

Dad's patience is wearing thin, but I'm not going to cave.

I have never, in all of my life, made a decision about my career without Dad's opinions weighing heavily in the conversation. Maybe I will do the tv show, but if I do, it's going to be because I want it, not because Dad wants it for me. And I'll take whatever time and distance I need to figure it out.

Fortifying my nerves, I key out a response to Dad's messages.

**Tatum:** Dad, if they don't want to wait for me, then don't wait for me. I'm not ready for this. I'm not even sure I want it.

His response comes through with lightning speed, like he's been sitting and waiting for my reply since he sent the first text late last night.

**Dad:** You're being silly, Tatum. Eventually, you'll get over this little farm life you're playing at, and you WILL change your mind. But by then, it may be too late.

His words sting more than anything else he's sent. It isn't like him to be so harsh with me.

Toby barks somewhere in the distance, and I look up, scanning the wood line for his familiar black-and-white form. I don't immediately see him, but he never stays out of sight longer than a moment or two, so I don't stress as I type out a response to my dad's last message.

**Tatum:** I guess that's on me, then. I like where I am, Dad. I like what I'm doing. I'm sorry that's not the answer you want.

*Now leave me alone about it.*

Toby barks again, only, this time, it sounds a little more urgent. I still can't see him, and a pulse of alarm snakes through me. I slide my phone into the pocket on the side of my leggings and stand up. I lift my fingers to my lips to whistle, but then I freeze, my eyes locked on a black bear standing at the edge of the woods.

An actual. Real. Living. Bear.

I swear and take a step backward, climbing onto the first step of the gazebo.

Lennox said the bears wouldn't come around if I had Toby with me.

He *said* the bear would be as afraid of me as I was of it.

Or did he say that about the bobcat?

Either way, he made it sound like what's happening right now would absolutely *not* happen.

That's when I see the cubs playing at the base of a tree a few yards away.

*Oh geez.*

Cubs mean the bigger bear is the mama, and I'm pretty sure the expression about *mama bears* is rooted in real, actual science. Meaning, that mama isn't going to let anything—or anyone—harm her babies.

Maybe, if I stand here silently long enough, she'll wander back into the woods and take her babies with her.

Maybe—

Toby comes charging out of the trees, barking like the crazy fool he is, and completely evaporates my hope. My stomach drops to my feet.

"Toby, no," I say, and his barking cuts off, his eyes lifting to me for the briefest second. But then the mama bear ambles forward a few steps and lifts onto her back legs.

Toby backs up, a low growl sounding from his belly.

*Think, Tatum. Just think!*

There has to be a way to scare the bear away. With grizzly bears, you're supposed to play dead—something I know thanks to the closed captions on the nature documentary my seatmate was watching the last time I was on an airplane—but this isn't a grizzly bear.

What are you supposed to do with black bears? Still play dead? Yell and scream and scare them away? Whatever the answer, what I *really* don't want to do is see my dog get into a fight with *any* kind of bear. Brown, black, polar, grizzly, smoky. NONE of the bears are preferable. I want ZERO bears.

Behind me, the sound of a gun cracks through the air. I flinch and turn to see Lennox walking toward the gazebo, what looks like a long hunting rifle in hand.

I shake my head and close my eyes, like I'm in some kind of dream and sharp movement might jostle me out of it. But when I open my eyes, Lennox is still there.

Nothing about the sight of him makes sense. It's close to dinner time, which means Lennox should be in his kitchen. Instead, he's outside, still in his chef's whites, scaring off a bear with a rifle.

My eyes dart back to the bear who has dropped back down on all fours. Her cubs are closer to her now, but there's a low sound rumbling in her belly, not all that different from Toby's growl, that makes me think she isn't quite ready to give up the fight.

Toby inches forward and lets out a snarling bark. I've never heard him make that kind of sound.

"Tatum," Lennox says slowly. "Walk behind me and cross over to the big oak tree. Do you see it?"

I manage a jerky nod. "I see it."

"From there, call Toby and see if you can get him to come to you."

"I'm not ..." I swallow. I understand what he's telling me to do, but I'm having a hard time moving my feet.

“Tatum.” Lennox’s voice is calm and steady. “Listen to my voice, all right? *You* are the reason Toby isn’t backing down. He thinks you’re in danger. If he can get to you without going through the bear, he probably will.”

This, finally, logs in my brain, and I’m able to propel my feet down the step and behind Lennox to the massive oak tree across the lawn.

“Toby!” I whisper-yell. “Here, boy!”

Toby looks my way, then looks back at the bear.

“Come on, boy,” I call, my voice quivering.

Toby barks one more time, a short, growling yelp, then darts over to me.

I drop to my knees and wrap my arms around him, curling my hand around his collar as Lennox fires another shot into the air. Toby flinches at the sound—he would probably bolt if I wasn’t holding onto him—but I tighten my grip and he settles, leaning his weight against me.

The bear jerks, shaking her head before heading into the woods, her cubs following close behind.

Lennox is in front of me in a second, the gun dropping to the ground beside him as he pulls me to my feet. His hands wrap around my shoulders and slide down my arms, then lift to my face like he’s cataloging every inch of me, making sure I’m whole and well.

“You’re okay,” he says softly as his thumbs slide across my cheeks, wiping away the tears I didn’t even realize were falling. “You’re okay,” he repeats.

I fall against him, taking a deep breath as his arms wrap around my back. His embrace is warm and strong and stabilizing in all the best ways.

“Just breathe,” Lennox says, his voice close to my ear.

Toby nuzzles my palm with his nose and lets out a soft whimper, and I keep my hand on his head, as much to steady myself as to steady him.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I sense that later, I will remember things about this moment—about Lennox—that I’m unable to process right now.

How good he smells.

The feel of his strong arms around me.

The concern reflecting in his green eyes. But right now, I’m only repeating one thought.

*I’m safe. Toby is safe. We’re safe.*

Also. Lennox knows how to fire a gun.

Listen, it’s not like I sit around and dream about being a damsel in distress. But I *was* in distress, and seeing Lennox come to my rescue? It’s an experience I didn’t know I needed until right now.

And I’m not sure I’ll ever be the same again.

I slowly lift my head and meet Lennox’s eye.

“How—” My words catch, and I clear my throat and swallow, then try again. “How did you know I was out here?”

Lennox’s hands are still pressed against my back, slowly rubbing up and down as if to soothe me. I hope they stay there if only to hold me up.

“I didn’t,” he says. “Not until I got out here. Perry saw the bear on the game cam. He called me.”

I nod at his explanation, but I still have questions. “You said no bears, Lennox. You promised.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Usually, there aren’t any.”

“But *you promised*,” I say, suddenly feeling borderline hysterical as the adrenaline coursing through me starts to wane.

“*I know* I promised,” he fires back, “but I saved you, didn’t I? I’m here. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

I breathe out a gasp at his protective words, a surge of heat coursing through me at the admission I didn’t expect.

The surprised look on his face says he didn’t expect it either.

The words hang between us for a long moment before Lennox's grip on me loosens the slightest bit. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asks, his voice soft.

When I nod, he drops his arms and takes a step back, pushing his hands into his pockets.

So this is where we just *forget* that he turned all *knight in shining armor* on me, declaring his protection with a certainty in his voice that nearly melted the bones right out of my body.

*Fine.* There are other things we can sort out. Like when Lennox turned into some sort of wilderness superhero.

"You fired a gun," I say stupidly, as if it hadn't been obvious.

"I did," Lennox says, like my statement amuses him.

"How do you know how to fire a gun? You're a chef."

He chuckles. "A chef who grew up on a farm."

"Well, right. But still. I was here, and the bear, and then you were just ... *here*. With a gun."

He nods along, a smile playing at the edges of his mouth. "I keep it in my office."

*In his office?* "For what?!"

He shrugs. "Target shooting with my brothers, mostly. *Annnd* to scare off the occasional bear."

I press my palms against his chest and give him a tiny shove. We already had this argument but now I feel like we need to have it again. "Why didn't you tell me that the other night?"

He frowns. "I'm sorry I didn't do a better job preparing you. But honestly, had the bear not had cubs with her, Toby's bark probably would have frightened her away."

This argument makes sense—logically I know I can't really blame him—and I slowly release the breath I'm holding. "Would you have shot her?"

Lennox shakes his head. “It’s against the law without a permit. I was just trying to scare her.”

I hold his gaze, suddenly wishing he still had his arms around me. “You saved me.”

He grins. “More like I saved your dog.”

I drop my eyes to Toby, who is sitting at my feet, tongue lolling out of his head like he doesn’t have a care in the world. A sick feeling creeps over me at the thought of something happening to him. “You saved my dog,” I repeat.

Lennox crouches down and picks up the gun. “I need to get back. I don’t think the bear is coming back, but just to be safe, you should probably put Toby on a leash and stay a little closer to the restaurant.”

I nod. “Yes. Good idea.” I retrieve the leash from where I left it on the gazebo steps and hook it to Toby’s collar. Lennox waits for me, and we walk toward the restaurant together.

I’m surprised when he reaches over and takes my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

I’m even more surprised when he doesn’t let go. Except, the gesture doesn’t feel like he’s making a move. It just feels like *comfort*, and it sends warmth up my arm and right to my heart.

We pause at the base of the stairs that lead up to the restaurant’s back door.

Lennox drops my hand and shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

Suddenly it feels like we’re on a date and this is the awkward moment where we try to figure out how to say good night. A handshake? A hug? A kiss on the cheek? A full-on back-against-the-door make out?

“Not going to finish your walk?” Lennox asks and the make-out imagery floating in my brain disappears.

“I think Toby’s had enough excitement for one day.”

*Me. It’s me who has had enough excitement.*



“Fair enough,” Lennox says. Then he just stands there. Staring at me. Like there’s something he can’t quite figure out.

“Hey, look at us,” I say breezily. “This is the first conversation we’ve had where we haven’t argued about something.”

He wrinkles his brow, his lips pulling to one side. “Haven’t we though? I think we argued about bears a little.”

“That one is totally on you,” I say. “But ...” I hesitate and bite my lip. “But the walk back was nice.”

Heat warms my cheeks at the blatant admission—why, again, was I so blatant?—but Lennox smiles easily like he doesn’t notice.

“Don’t get used to it,” he says. “I expect everything to go back to normal tomorrow.”

“Hey, Lennox?” I say, stopping him before he can leave me alone. “I’m sorry about the other night. It wasn’t my place to say anything about how you run your kitchen.”

He pushes his hands into his pockets. “The great Tatum Elliott apologizing? May I live to see the day.” His words echo the ones I said to him the day I moved in, right down to the inflection and tone of my voice.

I gasp, though I can’t keep from smiling. “I did not deserve that! I just gave you a really sincere apology!”

“You did, you’re right,” he says. “And I appreciate it. But you don’t need to apologize. You were only trying to help.”

I *still* want to help. But I won’t say another word about it until he asks me.

“So we’re good?”

He nods. “See you around, Elliott.”

“Not if I see you first, Hawthorne,” I say to his retreating form, though my words are so soft, I’m not sure he even hears me.

I turn and head up the stairs, a new unsettling thought taking root in my mind.

Lennox said he expects everything to go back to normal tomorrow, but what he's asking is completely impossible.

Because I'm pretty sure I'm actually starting to *like* Lennox Hawthorne.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Lennox

“YOU KNOW IT’S WEIRD that you’re standing here staring, right?” Zach leans against the wall beside me, his arms folded, and follows my gaze into Tatum’s kitchen.

I’m not *in* her kitchen, necessarily. I’m more standing just outside it, in an area that I could, technically, also be standing in if I were on my way to the pantry.

“I’m not staring.”

“You’re definitely staring.”

“I’m observing. That’s different. Also, I’m working on inventory. Getting an order ready.” I look over my shoulder into the pantry where I am not, actually, inventorying anything.

“Uh-huh, that’s why you haven’t written a single thing down.”

I look down at the still-blank paper on my clipboard.

Whatever. Zach can call me out if he wants.

I motion toward Tatum with my chin. “Her staff really like her, don’t they?”

“Ahh, so we’re here about Tatum. That makes this way more fun.”

“Shut up and just answer the question.”

“I’d say hero-worship is more like it,” Zach says. “They’re always gushing about her.”

“Why is that, do you think?” I’ve been noticing the same thing lately. As well as how cohesive her team seems to be—more than they were before she arrived. And she’s only been here six weeks.

Zach shrugs. “She’s good with people. Makes them feel seen. And I heard Jessie talking about some changes Tatum made to their order of operations that I guess made a big difference? I was only half-listening. But I’m sure Jessie would tell you about it if you asked her.”

Or I could just ask Tatum about it.

I run a hand through my hair. It still rankles my pride, but the reality is, I *do* need help. Last night wasn’t terrible, but it wasn’t great either. Griffin is still giving me trouble, and for mostly stupid reasons, we had three plates returned to the kitchen with problems.

One is too many. Three is absolutely unacceptable.

I told my family I could do this on my own, but I’m not too proud to ask for help when I need it.

I’m *almost* too proud to ask Tatum Elliott for help, but for Hawthorne, I can get over myself.

Tatum is *here*, and she offered. Worst case scenario, I hate everything she suggests, I don’t make any changes, and I’m no worse off than I was before.

Tatum walks toward me, heading for the pantry, probably. She lifts an eyebrow when she passes by. “You’ve been staring into my kitchen for a long time, Lennox. Do you have a purpose, or do you just think I look cute today?”

Zach chuckles, and I reach out a hand, stopping him from trailing me when I follow Tatum into the pantry. I stand behind her while she sorts through a bin of apples, setting aside the ones she wants. “Can I help you with something?” she asks without looking up. “I’m a little busy right now. I’ve got apple

pie to make, and my butter will be the right temperature *any second*.” She shoots a teasing look over her shoulder that makes something in my chest flutter to life.

“How are you feeling after last night?” I ask.

“You mean how am I feeling after I almost got eaten by a bear? I didn’t sleep very well, for all the worst-case scenarios running through my mind, but I’m sure my brain will settle down eventually.”

After I closed the restaurant and went home, it took all my willpower not to text Olivia and ask for Tatum’s number. I wanted to make sure she was okay—that the bear encounter hadn’t freaked her out too much.

Honestly, it freaked me out, and I grew up here.

But begging Tatum’s number off my little sister would have given Olivia the wrong impression, and she would have passed that wrong impression on to Mom, and then the whole family would start talking about something that isn’t even a thing.

*Maybe* isn’t a thing? Do I want it to be a thing?

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I say. Because it’s true, and because it feels safe. As a fellow Stonebrook Farm employee, I *am* glad she’s okay.

She looks up. “I’m glad you were there to make sure I was okay.”

The feel of Tatum in my arms pops into my brain, making my neck flush with heat.

I need a subject change, but my brain is not making it easy.

I have to say something though. I *followed* her into the pantry. I could probably start taking an actual inventory, but something tells me Tatum would see right through me.

“Your staff really like you,” I blurt out. *Okay*, I guess we’re doing this now then.

She drops a few more apples into the bin on the shelf beside her. “I hope so.”

I scratch my jaw. “And your kitchen—you run it well.”

She props her hands on her hips. “Thanks.”

“And I guess—I guess what I’m saying is that if you have any suggestions for how to make the Hawthorne kitchen run a little smoother, I could use the help.”

She cocks her head. “What happened to *thanks but no thanks*?”

I sigh. “*Thanks but no thanks* came from an overly cocky guy who didn’t want to admit to his college rival that he could use some help. But then he had another bad night in the kitchen, and he decided his business was more important than his pride.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Keep talking.”

“I can’t let Hawthorne fail. But I think I must have some blind spots, and I can’t fix a problem that I can’t see.”

She presses her lips together and takes a few steps forward, bringing herself close enough that I could reach out and touch her. She smiles playfully. “That was really hard for you to get out, wasn’t it?”

I breathe out a little laugh, grateful that somehow, she knew lightening the mood would help. “You have no idea.”

“So, you want my thoughts just right off the top of my head?”

I nod. “Bring it.”

“Okay, first you need more room for your sauté cooks. They’re getting in each other’s way, and since your menu is so sauté heavy, you need to make their workspace as efficient and comfortable as possible. You can’t move the grill, but you could move your saucier. Give sauté a little more elbow room.”

I nod along as she talks. It’s a relatively easy change, but I can see how it might make a difference.

“Okay, that’s actually a good suggestion.”

“Do you really have to sound so surprised?” she says, her tone teasing.

“Sorry. You’re right. What else?”

“Your prep counter is modular, right? You can break it up? Move it around?”

I nod. “Yeah. For the most part, anyway.”

“I’d turn it ninety degrees if I were you. It’ll create a wider path from prep to your busiest stations and keep people from bumping into each other so much.” She reaches down and picks up the apples. “And fire Griffin. He’s rude, and he doesn’t listen to you. And he talks a lot of trash. I overheard him in the parking lot the other night, and it wasn’t pretty. If he were a genius in the kitchen, it might be worth keeping him on and seeing if you could temper his attitude, but he’s not. I’d let him go.”

“Sheesh. Who knew Tatum Elliott was such a cutthroat?”

She pauses at the door and looks back. “Um, do you remember *anything* about culinary school?”

Okay, fair point. But this seems different somehow. Culinary school didn’t always feel real. We were isolated, working in practice kitchens, and spending *a lot* of energy trying to one-up each other just for bragging rights. But this is real life, and she just synthesized three ways I can improve my kitchen in less than five minutes. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but this is the first time I’ve had all of Tatum’s sharp wit working for me instead of against me.

“Thank you,” I manage to say. “I appreciate the suggestions. I can’t promise I won’t ask for more.”

She shifts the bin of apples to one hip, holding it against her body, then lifts her free hand to pat my chest as she passes by. I swear it feels like her hand lingers, her fingertips pressing into my chest for an extra-long moment. “Anytime, Len.”

*Len.* It’s mostly my family who uses the nickname, but there’s something right about hearing it coming off her lips.

Zach is still waiting outside the pantry when we emerge.

He raises his eyebrows at me, but then Tatum captures his attention. “Zach, how’s your mom? Is she feeling better?” she

asks as she passes by.

“Much better. Thanks for asking,” he calls to her retreating form.

She lifts a hand in a backward wave. “I’ve got a little more of that soup if you decide she needs it!”

Zach and I turn and make our way back to the Hawthorne kitchen. “Your mom is sick?”

He nods. “She flew down to visit and must have picked up something on the airplane. Tatum made her some chicken noodle soup.”

I ... don’t even know what to say about this. I thought I knew Tatum, but here lately, every conversation I have either with her or about her just shows me more ways that I was wrong.

“In other news,” Zach says as we approach my office, “can we talk about how Tatum actually *is* your type, you really *do* have a thing for her, and when you told me I better keep my hands off, it was *absolutely* because you’re into her?”

I step into my office, turning my body to block the way so Zach can’t follow me. I do get *some* privileges as the boss.

“We aren’t going to talk about any of that.” I hold up a finger. “But the hands-off rule still applies.”

I shut the door in his laughing face, then move to my desk, anxious to have a few minutes of solitude before our pre-dinner service team meeting.

I’m glad I talked to Tatum, and I think her suggestions will help, but I need to have a conversation with Perry and Olivia about the restaurant anyway. They deserve to be in the loop, especially if I wind up firing Griffin.

I drop into my desk chair, hesitating when I see a small gift box on top of my closed laptop. I untie the ribbon and tug off the lid to reveal a hand-carved black bear about the size of my palm. The variegated colors of the wood swirl together like marble, and it’s been polished to a glossy sheen. The



craftsmanship and artistry of the carving are next level. At the bottom of the box, there's a handwritten note from Tatum.

*For the hero I didn't know I needed. Thanks for saving me. I'll never forget it!*

I set the bear on my desk and stare at it for a long moment.

I like Tatum.

I like that she's so thoughtful. That she gets to know people. That she's so smart and perceptive. I like that she pays attention and *sees* things others miss. Details. Nuances. People.

I like her, and that scares me. I don't usually give myself enough time to like someone before I cut things off.

But Tatum is here. Around me every day.

I couldn't cut that off even if I wanted to.

And I *really* don't want to.

So now what am I supposed to do?

## CHAPTER NINE

Tatum

I BOUNCE UP AND down on my toes, the cold concrete of the loading dock behind the restaurant seeping through my fuzzy socks and chilling me all the way to my bones.

I keep my eyes on Toby, watching as he wanders around the small lawn beside the restaurant. This early in the morning, he shouldn't venture far, and we aren't close enough to the woods for there to be bears—at least I don't *think* we are.

When Lennox said the bears wouldn't come back, did he mean they wouldn't come back *ever*?

I'm going to tell myself *yes*. Otherwise, I might never come outside again.

A sharp wind blows, and I rub my hands up and down my bare arms. I should have grabbed a hoodie on my way down the stairs. But Toby was anxious to go out, and I keep forgetting how cold it is outside until I get there. I'm too used to Southern California where the weather is pretty much hoodies optional three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

At least there's no one else around. Which is good because I'm wearing tiny pajama shorts you can hardly even see underneath my oversized T-shirt. My fuzzy socks complete the look, branding me, if nothing else, as an idiot who has no idea how to dress appropriately for the weather.

Even worse, my outfit is uncomfortably close to what Bree suggested I wear in front of Lennox to try and grab his attention—a realization that makes me all the more anxious to get inside before he randomly shows up and sees me. The last thing I want is for him to think I'm wearing this outfit on purpose. I may be growing more comfortable with whatever *feelings* are happening, but I'm not going to woo him *like that*.

Gravel crunches behind me, and I turn to see Lennox's dark sedan pulling into the parking lot.

*Oh, fabulous.* This is exactly what I need. It's like I wished him into existence with the force of me *not* wanting him here. The universe clearly has a sense of humor. Or it hates me.

With the way the evidence is piling up, it's probably that one.

I glance down at my ridiculous outfit and scowl.

What is Lennox even doing here so early? He *never* comes to the kitchen this early.

"Toby!" I call, quickly moving toward the stairs. "Come on! Let's go inside. You want breakfast? Let's go get breakfast!"

Toby woofs and moves toward the edge of the parking lot, crouching low in the grass like he's a mountain lion stalking his prey. With a playful wag of his tail, he leaps forward, landing on a fallen leaf.

"Toby!" I call again, but it's pointless now. Lennox is already out of his car and walking toward me.

I fold my arms across my braless chest—it's cold outside and the girls are in full salute—and act like it's absolutely no big deal for me to be standing outside in the freezing cold in nothing but my pajamas.

Lennox eyes me as he approaches, his expression neutral. He totally caught me off guard when he asked me for help yesterday. When he followed me into the pantry, I'd expected some sarcastic remark, but then he'd asked for my opinions and offered a real and genuine thank you.

I almost fell over on the spot from the shock of it.

Now that we aren't trading barbs all the time, I have no idea what to expect from him. Will he still needle me and tease me? If I start flirting more openly, will he reciprocate? Do I want him to reciprocate? Do I really, truly want to pursue something with Lennox Hawthorne?

It isn't why I came out to Stonebrook at all. But as I take in how good he looks—even at this ungodly hour—and think of how safe I felt in his arms, it's hard to remember any of the reasons why I wouldn't.

He pauses across from me and takes a long sip out of the travel mug he's holding. I catch a faint whiff, and my stomach grumbles. Whatever coffee he's drinking, it smells delicious.

"Tatum," he says by way of greeting. His eyes drift over my outfit, and his lips quiver like he's fighting a smile, but he doesn't say anything.

I lift my chin and give him my haughtiest glare. "Lennox."

He looks down his front, surveying his own outfit, which is fabulous, even in its simplicity. Jeans. A dark wool pea coat. The man can wear anything, apparently. Chef's whites. Jeans. All of it looks equally delicious.

"It's a little cold outside," Lennox says.

I shrug casually. "Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty comfortable." Another breeze cuts through the air, lifting my hair, and I suck in a breath.

"Tatum, come on. You're freezing." Lennox holds out his coffee cup. "Here. Hold this."

I take the mug, loving the warmth that seeps through to my fingers.

Before I can fully process what's happening, Lennox pulls off his scarf, and steps closer, close enough for me to feel the heat of his body and catch his clean, masculine scent.

He drapes the scarf around my neck and ties it loosely at my throat. "I don't know how they do March in California," he says softly, "but out here, it usually means cold."

*Oh my.* WHAT is even happening right now?

Who needs a scarf to feel warm? All I need are Lennox's words delivered with that smooth baritone, and I could stand out here in the cold all day.

"I must have missed the memo," I say. "You should have Olivia add a section to the employee handbook."

Feeling bold, I lift his mug to my lips and take a slow sip. The coffee is delicious, warm, and perfectly creamy.

Lennox watches, eyebrows raised, but makes no move to stop me. In fact, the way he's tracking my movements makes me think he doesn't mind at all.

I don't know what to make of it. *Of him.* A month ago, I thought Lennox Hawthorne would barely tolerate my existence when I showed up on his family's farm. But now he's looking at me with bedroom eyes while I drink his coffee, making my body feel warm all over.

What does he really think about me being at Stonebrook?

What does he really think of *me*? Not just as a chef, but as a person?

In my periphery, I see Toby pounce on another leaf, chasing it when it catches on the breeze and swirls into the air.

Lennox follows my gaze. "He seems to really like it here."

I let out a little laugh. "You mean minus the bears?"

He grins. "Speaking of bears. Thank you for the gift."

I bite my lip, suddenly feeling shy. "I hope you like it."

He holds my gaze for a long moment. "It's perfect."

*Nope.* He's perfect. Ridiculously, perfectly perfect.

Another sharp wind blows, and Lennox looks to the sky. "They say a snowstorm is coming next week."

I wrap my arms around my middle and sink down a little further into Lennox's scarf, which—*oh, mercy*, it smells so much like him. A little herby, with hints of citrus and sandalwood. I could breathe this in all day and never get tired of it.

“Is snow in March normal?” I ask, wanting to prolong the conversation despite the golf ball-sized goosebumps popping up on my legs. I shift my feet and take another sip of Lennox’s coffee. “There are blooms on the apple trees—I saw them when I was walking Toby the other day. I guess I thought it meant spring was pretty much here.”

“It’s a little late for snow, but it’s happened before.” He moves to the door, his hand resting on the handle. “Come on. Even with my stolen coffee to warm you up, your teeth are going to start chattering if we don’t get you inside.”

I don’t miss the way he says *we*, or the way it makes my insides flop around when he does. I really like the sound of *we*.

“The coffee is delicious, thank you.”

“Yeah,” Lennox says on a laugh. “I know.”

I whistle for Toby, who, as if sensing his audience, takes the long way back to the steps so he can pee in Lennox’s garden one more time.

Lennox eyes me, a dubious expression on his face.

“Oh come on, it’s not like he’s peeing on actual vegetables,” I say. “It’s just dirt. How much harm can he really do?”

“It isn’t about the vegetables,” Lennox argues. “Eventually, he’ll impact the pH of the soil, which will matter when we plant next month.”

“We, huh? You do the planting yourself?” The remark comes out snarkier than it should because it absolutely wouldn’t surprise me if Lennox does the planting. Especially not after seeing him wield a rifle like some mountain wilderness version of Jack Ryan. The man grew up here. Of course he knows how to garden.

Before Lennox can answer me, another car pulls into the parking lot, and Toby darts off the landing like he’s the official Stonebrook employee welcoming committee.

“Oh geez,” I say, casting another glance down at my wardrobe. “I really don’t want anyone else to see me like this.

Why is everyone getting here so early today?"

"It's deep cleaning day," Lennox says. "The rest of my staff will be here soon. Here." He opens the door for me. "You go on in. I'll get Toby and bring him up to you."

I don't even hesitate as I dart inside and into the stairwell as Lennox closes the door behind me. I'm halfway up the steps when I hear Lennox's laughter ringing just on the other side of the exterior door. I pause. As long as whoever comes inside doesn't lean over and look up the stairwell, they won't see me when they enter the building. And I really want to know who made Lennox laugh.

Another few seconds pass before the door creaks open and voices float up the stairs.

I don't recognize the woman's voice, but it's definitely a woman, and not one who is on my staff, so she must work for Lennox.

The woman laughs—a light, breathy, flirty sound—and my jaw clenches.

I turn and flee up the remaining stairs, throwing myself into my apartment and shutting the door behind me, my back pressed against the worn wood.

*I'm jealous.*

The feeling is as clear and potent as it is annoying.

I don't want to be jealous. I'm just getting used to the idea of possibly, maybe sort of liking the man. It's one thing to observe his sexiness, to bask in the warmth of his scarf or enjoy his scent or banter with him over bushels of vegetables.

Those things are all surface level.

To feel real, actual jealousy?

That feels deeper. More significant.

But the way that woman was talking to him—*laughing* with him—all I want to do is storm back down the stairs and punch her right in her pretty-sounding throat.

A knock sounds on the door behind me, and panic spikes in my chest.

I can't face Lennox.

Not now.

Not now that I've realized how I'm actually feeling.

I worried I *might* like him after the bear attack—bear encounter?—but now I'm certain of it. Why else would I feel so irrational?

I drop Lennox's coffee mug onto the counter and back away from the door, putting as much space as possible between me and it.

"Come in!" I call, hating how shaky my voice sounds.

The door swings open, and Toby trots in, tongue lolling to the side, and jumps up on the couch. Lennox hovers in the doorway, his eyes going wide as soon as he takes in my expression.

"Whoa. You okay?"

I prop my hands on my hips, forgetting that they were the only thing shielding the very free and loose situation happening under my t-shirt.

Lennox's eyes drop for the briefest moment, and I immediately regret my decision, but to his credit, he zeroes back in on my face lightning fast.

The fact that he was laughing with some other woman seconds before he's *noticing* me only fuels the (admittedly irrational) fire coursing through my veins.

"Fine. I'm totally fine," I say, trying—and failing—to sound casual. "Are you done with all the flirting that was happening?" I ask with a dramatic wave of my hand.

He frowns and glances down the stairs, then steps into my apartment and shuts the door behind him.

"I wasn't flirting with anyone."

"You were. I heard you. I heard *her*."



“Tatum,” Lennox says calmly. “I don’t know what you think you heard, but I run my kitchen with professionalism, and I never cross lines with my staff. I had a two-minute conversation with Brittany—who is married with two kids, by the way—and then I came up here.”

“Then what did I hear? Why did she sound so ... so breathy and *trembly*?”

He shrugs, like he can’t even believe we’re having this conversation.

Honestly, I’m not even sure why we still are. It’s only my pride driving me forward now—pride I’d like to take downstairs and run through the trash compactor.

“She was probably nervous,” Lennox finally says. “She’s new. We don’t know each other all that well yet.”

“Nervous because you’re so intimidating?” *Oh my gosh, WHO AM I? WHAT AM I SAYING?*

“Yes,” he says firmly. “My family owns the whole farm. Sometimes people are intimidated by that.” It’s the first time he’s ever raised his voice, though he’s not even close to yelling. Still, the passion he’s feeling is evident. And also *sexy*.

Lennox props his hands on his hips, his face turned away like he’s pondering the world’s problems and carrying the weight of them on his shoulders. His unbuttoned coat falls open to reveal a navy blue henley that looks soft enough to touch. I suddenly remember I’m still wearing his scarf, and I lift my hands to hold onto it. It’s a flimsy anchor, but I’ll take anything I can get. Because this conversation doesn’t feel like banter anymore.

It feels like ... like *feelings*.

“I realize you’re probably coming to this conversation with ideas about the kind of man I was when we were in school. And I get that. But that’s not who I am anymore. It hasn’t been for a long time. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your wild accusations to yourself so you don’t give anyone else the wrong impression.”

His words are deadly serious, which makes my heart feel tight with regret.

He thinks I lashed out because I was judging him. *Accusing* him.

“You’re right,” I say, quickly backpedaling.

I can fix this, right? I just have to tell him I was wrong.

“I’ve seen you with your staff, and you’re right. You’re never anything but professional.” I lift my shoulders in a resigned shrug. “I’m sorry I freaked out.”

*There. Done. See? That was easy.*

Lennox studies me closely, tilting his head to the side. “What’s really going on?” He takes a slow step forward. “What are you not telling me?”

I take a step backward, erasing the ground he gained, and breathe out a little laugh. “Nothing is going on. I was wrong, I admitted it, end of conversation.”

“Nope. That’s not all of it,” he says, taking another step closer. He folds his arms across his chest. “Want to know what I think?”

I back up another few steps until I bump into the living room wall. I press my palms flat against the smooth surface and squeeze my eyes closed, peeking one open to look at Lennox who is moving toward me like some sort of wild animal stalking its prey. “Something tells me I really don’t.”

He grins as he presses one hand against the wall behind me and leans close. “I think you freaked out because you got jealous.”

I scoff. Just because he’s right doesn’t mean I have to admit it. But two can play at this game. “As jealous as you were when I was talking to Zach the other night?”

He smirks, his expression completely shameless as he says, “Maybe not that jealous.”

*Ohhh man.* So he *was* jealous of Zach.

What does that mean?

What do I want it to mean?

“So ... I’ve been thinking,” Lennox says, his smooth voice completely melting my insides.

I cross my arms over my chest even as I start to plot my exit strategy. “Oh yeah? What about?” I could hover in the warmth of this man’s intoxicating gaze all day, but in my currently braless state, I’m feeling the need to escape sooner rather than later. It’s hard to have any kind of serious conversation when my arms are acting as permanent nipple shields.

Lennox holds my gaze. “I was just thinking ... maybe we could try getting to know each other *without* arguing.”

My eyebrows go up. “What, like ... be friends?”

He shrugs. “Something like that.” He steps back and pushes his hands into his pockets. “What do you think? I could make dinner for us.”

There is a measure of boyishness to Lennox right now that is doing strange things to my heart—a vulnerability I’ve never seen but really like.

Do I want to have dinner with Lennox? A tingle of excitement sparks in my chest, radiating out to my fingertips. I’m thinking that means *yes, yes I do*.

“Dinner here?” I ask.

He immediately shakes his head no. “Come to my place. We both spend too much time here as it is.”

*Oh my.* Dinner at his place sounds like a date. Does he think this is a date? I said *friends*, and he said *something like that*, which could mean *YES, friends*, but could it also mean *more than friends*? I almost ask him, but I bite back the words before I can. One, because I’m spiraling, and two, if he *isn’t* thinking date, asking will only imply that I am, and I’m not ready to make that kind of a declaration when I don’t know where he stands.

I manage a nod. “Dinner at your place sounds great.”

Once we pull up the farm’s event calendar, we have to count out nine full days before we both have a night off at the same

time.

There are other ways we could swing it.

We could have a late dinner in the restaurant kitchen after closing. Or we could change our plan to have breakfast or lunch when we both have an hour to spare. But now that Lennox has put the idea of dinner at his house in my head, I don't really want to settle for anything else.

It's also possible I'm happy to buy myself a little time. I could use a minute to breathe, to think, to figure out what kind of headspace I'm in. I just upended my entire life and moved across the country in an effort to find myself and figure out what I want. Will those efforts get cloudy if what I decide I want is a man? What if that man is Lennox Hawthorne?

I need to get my head on straight before I expose myself to a private meal prepared by the hands of America's sexiest chef.

Once we have a plan in place, Lennox leaves me with the last of his coffee *and* his scarf, insisting I can return them both the next time I see him.

Note: having Lennox's scarf in my possession is absolutely *not* going to help with my getting-my-head-on-straight efforts.

Also note: I'm going to wear it for the rest of the day anyway.

# CHAPTER TEN

Tatum

I STEP OUTSIDE AND wave as Olivia pulls up in a Stonebrook Farm Gator.

The restaurant is closed on Mondays, and I don't have any events until the evening, so the place is pretty much abandoned, but I notice Lennox's sedan parked in the corner. I didn't see him when I passed through his kitchen to get outside, and I tell myself not to even wonder where he is. His office, maybe? Or maybe he was in the deep freeze when I walked past?

*Or—no. Not thinking about it. Don't care. Don't care. Don't care.*

I mean, of course I care. But I'm trying not to obsess. So we're having dinner next week. It's *just* dinner. There is no reason to act differently.

"Hey! You look adorable," Olivia says.

I look down at the cashmere cardigan I splurged on just before leaving L.A. I mostly put it on because it's the warmest thing I brought with me, and I'm pretty sure spring is on permanent vacation in North Carolina. But as a bonus, when paired with my favorite jeans and a fitted tank, it's an outfit that makes me feel cute in an easy, casual way. Which somehow felt important for lunch with Lennox's mom.

Yes—yes, I am having lunch with Lennox’s mom. But as far as I know, this lunch has everything to do with me being the new catering chef and nothing to do with me being the woman whom Lennox just invited to dinner. (A work dinner? A strictly platonic friend dinner? I WISH I KNEW.) Regardless, whether justified or not, I’m feeling extra anxious about making a good impression. I want Lennox’s mom to *like me*, so it eases a bit of my nerves to hear Olivia’s compliment.

If nothing else, at least I’ve managed to get my outfit right.

“Are we not leaving the farm?” I ask as I climb into the Gator, tugging my sweater close against the chill in the air.

Olivia shakes her head, making no move to start the engine. Instead, she pulls out her phone. “Mom doesn’t like to leave Dad for too long, and her studio is right by their house, so we’re meeting there. You already know Brody’s wife, right? Kate? She’ll be there. And Lila, too. She’s Perry’s wife. I hope that’s okay.”

*Oof.* So I’m having lunch with *all* the women in Lennox’s family? That ... doesn’t feel like pressure at all.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Sure, of course,” I say. “I do know Kate, and she’s great. But I’ve never met Lila.”

“Lila is the sweetest. You’ll love her, too. Oh, hey,” Olivia says, “before I forget, that box back there is yours. I guess the UPS guy couldn’t find your place, so he just left it at the farmhouse.”

I turn back to see the box, recognizing my sister’s name and address on the return label. “Oh, awesome. Thanks for bringing it down.” It must be the box of my mom’s things Bree said she’d be mailing over.

A beat of uncertainty pushes through me. Maybe going through Mom’s things will be good for me. It’s been so long since she was a regular part of my life, sometimes I go days, even weeks, without thinking about her. But since she passed away, she’s been on my mind more frequently, and I think it might do me some good to have a reason to spend some time processing what I’m feeling.

I lift a hand to my sternum and rub the spot just over my heart, as if I can rub away the ache, then file my thoughts away for later when I can sort through the box *and* my feelings in private. Definitely not *today*, when I'm already feeling the pressure of meeting Lennox's mom and spending time with his sisters.

"Seriously, where is Lennox?" Olivia asks, her gaze trained on her phone.

"Is he coming too?" I glance at Olivia, sounding way more chill than I feel.

"Definitely not." Olivia types something on her screen while I breathe out a relieved sigh. "I just need him to bring out the food."

"Wait. Lennox is feeding us? Isn't today his day off?"

Olivia meets my gaze, clearly sensing my incredulity.

"I know it sounds like a big ask, but if there's one thing that will *always* hold true for Lennox, it's his desire to take care of his mom. All she has to do is ask, and he'll make her whatever she wants."

*Oh my word. Lennox loves to feed his mom?*

This is so great. Exactly what my heart needs.

"Trust me, if *I* asked," Olivia continues, "he'd laugh in my face. Or agree and then make me a liverwurst sandwich."

"Who's making liverwurst sandwiches?" Lennox says from behind us.

Olivia turns and looks over her shoulder, but I intentionally keep my eyes forward. I wasn't expecting to see him, and now I feel like I need a minute to put on my armor.

"*You* would make liverwurst if I were the one who asked you for lunch," Olivia says. "I was just telling Tatum that only Mom gets the good stuff."

In my periphery, I see Lennox drop a picnic basket in the back of the Gator. "Don't go knocking liverwurst," he says. "In the hands of the right chef, it's not that bad."

I scoff without even realizing it, my hand flying to my mouth as if to stop any more errant noises from escaping.

“Hey, Tatum,” Lennox says, a playful note to his voice. “You don’t agree with me?”

I finally lift my eyes and turn to face him. And *oh, good grief*. He’s wearing a pair of joggers and a fitted running shirt, the long sleeves hugging every curve of his trim, muscular arms.

I couldn’t school my attraction to this man even if I wanted to. When he looks like *that*? Resistance is futile.

I lift a shoulder in what I hope looks like an easy shrug even though on the inside, my internal organs are melting into goo. “I mean, it’s not foie gras,” I say. “You don’t exactly see *liverwurst* on fine dining menus across the country.”

“Probably because it’s called liverwurst,” Olivia adds. “Who would ever order it?”

“I don’t know that I’d order it somewhere else,” Lennox says. “But could I make it taste good in my kitchen?” He offers that cocky grin I’ve seen a few times since arriving at Stonebrook, his hands lifted as if weighing the imaginary odds.

I don’t doubt that he could, but I’m still glad when Olivia snarkily says, “You should bake it into some *humble pie*. See how that tastes.” She cranks the engine on the Gator and shifts it into reverse. “Are you seriously going to run in this weather?” she asks, looking back at her brother one last time.

“It’s perfect running weather,” he says. “Race you to the studio?”

“Oh, you’re on,” Olivia says, and then we’re squealing out of the parking lot, gravel flying behind us.

Surely Lennox can’t *actually* beat us when we’re driving and he’s running. But as we round the bend toward the east apple orchard, I see him hop over a fence and cut across the goat pasture, which, if my sense of direction is worth anything, will take him right to the orchard while we’re driving around the barn and the rest of the outbuildings to get there.



I hang onto the hand grips, shutting my eyes as Olivia rounds another curve, this one sharp enough that I'm surprised two of our wheels don't come off the ground. I'd ask if this kind of thing is normal, but by the way she's driving, it has to be.

Finally, we crest the top of the hill, and I see a white building trimmed with dark shutters in the distance. Just beyond it, Lennox is sprinting through the orchard, closing in on what must be Hannah Hawthorne's studio.

"Gah!" Olivia yells, as she increases our speed, but it isn't enough.

Lennox is standing in front of the studio, hands resting on his knees, when we finally skid to a stop.

Olivia's eyes are wide as she turns off the Gator. "He's never done it before," she says. "He's never actually beat me." She looks at me, a smile playing on her lips. "I wonder why he tried so hard *this* time."

She climbs out of the Gator and grabs the picnic basket, leaving me to wonder what she meant by *that* comment.

Does she think he was trying to impress me?

Was he? If so, then mission accomplished. Not that I needed yet *another* reason to be impressed with the man.

"Well done, Len," Olivia says as she passes by. "In honor of your win, I'll make sure we only tell Tatum *some* of the embarrassing things we know about you instead of *all*."

Lennox frowns, and I press my lips together to keep from smiling.

I'd like to know *all* the embarrassing stories about Lennox, please and thank you.

But also, Olivia is talking like Lennox and I are a thing. Like I've just come over to meet the parents and they're about to slide out his baby pictures.

Does she know we're planning to have dinner? Did Lennox tell her?

Is that why she invited me to eat lunch with half his family in the first place? Because she knows we might be a thing?

Or maybe she knows nothing and she's just hoping?

Or ... *maybe* it's time for me to get my wayward brain under control and stop with all the questioning. I can almost feel myself spiraling, which absolutely isn't like me.

Also, it's incredibly presumptuous for me to be asking these questions in the first place.

Dinner with Lennox is *just* dinner. Not even a date.

And this is probably *just* a meal to welcome me to the farm as catering chef.

I lift my hand and offer Lennox a little wave, then follow Olivia to the door of the studio. She disappears inside, but I pause when Lennox calls my name.

"Hey, Tatum?"

I turn to face him.

"Make them go easy on me?" He props his hands on his hips, accentuating the breadth of his shoulders and his tapered waist. "And don't believe everything they tell you, all right?"

I bite my lip, suddenly liking this power I have over him. "Oh, I'm going to believe every word."



I love Hannah Hawthorne's studio almost as quickly as I love Hannah Hawthorne.

Despite the chilly temperatures outside, inside the studio is light and bright and full of warmth. Art supplies and a variety of easels and differently sized canvases fill one half of the space, and beyond that, it looks like there's a kitchen, but the back corner feels more living room than studio.

An overstuffed sofa is pressed against the back wall, a striped afghan in every color of the rainbow draped over the back. Several mismatched chairs sit opposite the couch, all in funky colors and textures, and piles of throw pillows are stacked in every corner.

The room has the same easy, welcoming vibe as Hannah herself. Everything about her seems to say she's happy in her own skin—in her own life. Her soft gray hair hangs in easy waves to her shoulders, framing her face and accentuating her warm, friendly eyes. An ache forms deep in my chest. I want this for myself. I want to belong somewhere like Hannah belongs in this room, surrounded by her art, her family, and so many other reminders of her place in the world.

After a round of introductions and a hello hug that makes my heart squeeze, Hannah motions me toward the couch. “You come sit with me, Tatum. I want to know everything about how you're settling in.”

“Start with the bear attack,” Olivia says as she unloads the picnic basket. “I want to hear your perspective.”

“Perry told me something about that,” Lila says, leaning forward, her dark hair cascading over her shoulder. “Were you terrified? I would have been so terrified.”

It's a dangerous subject, because I can't talk about the bear without talking about Lennox, and I'm not sure I can talk about Lennox without my crush bleeding through.

“Forget the bear,” Kate says. She pulls her legs up and folds them crisscrossed in her chair. “I want the dirt on what Lennox was like in culinary school.”

Olivia looks at me, a question in her eyes. She has to know something of the tension that existed between me and Lennox because she was there the day we met and Toby chased Penelope through his kitchen. But we haven't really talked about it since, so I have no idea how much she truly knows—how much any of them know.

“Ignore that question, Tatum,” Hannah says. “I didn't invite you up here to grill you about my son. I just want to get to know you.” She eyes the other women around the room. “That's what we all want, isn't it?”

I smile gratefully, appreciating the course correction, and easy conversation carries us through lunch. The women talk easily—about their lives, their jobs, their kids. Olivia's son,

Asher, just started walking, and we all ooh and aah over the video she has on her phone, then Lila shows us a video of her son, Jack, at his first piano recital. All of it feels effortless and natural. These women really like each other. Like, I'm pretty sure they would be friends even if they weren't related.

And the food—it's absolutely delicious. Thick slices of ham and gruyere cheese on soft sandwich bread, with fresh greens and some kind of homemade honey mustard that is bright and flavorful. There's also a winter vegetable salad with sweet potatoes, brussels sprouts, and pecans, with this balsamic glaze dressing that makes me want to cry.

I hate to admit it, but Lennox probably *could* make liverwurst taste delicious.

After we polish off half a plate of almond pillow cookies—these make me cry *for real*—I don't miss the way all three of the younger women shift in their seats, leaning forward the slightest bit when Hannah's questions turn more personal.

"So, tell me, Tatum. Did you leave anyone special back in California?" she asks. "A boyfriend, maybe?"

"Oh." I hold up my hands. "Definitely not. My schedule was too crazy. I dated occasionally, but nothing ever really stuck."

Hannah reaches out and pats my knee. "Well maybe the move will be good for you in that respect, too. Sometimes, we need to shake things up a bit. Get a change of scenery, if you know what I mean."

"Well I definitely managed that. This place couldn't be more different than L.A., and I mean that in the best way possible."

I think of my last interaction with Dad, and I have to fight the urge to cringe.

"Do you think you'll ever go back?" Olivia asks. "Is that totally rude of me to ask?"

"You should probably clarify if you're asking as her employer or as her friend," Lila says gently. "Otherwise, you're kind of putting her on the spot."

Olivia's eyes widen. "Oh. Oh my gosh. You're right. I'm totally asking as a friend," she says to me. "I mean, as your employer, I want you to stay forever. But even when I hired you, I doubted that would happen. You're Christopher Elliott's daughter. I thought we'd be lucky to hang onto you for a year, two tops."

When Olivia first interviewed me, she hinted at the possibility of highlighting me as a part of the farm's marketing. After all, having the daughter of the famous Christopher Elliott cater your wedding would be an easy sell. I awkwardly explained that I was actually trying to distance myself from my famous father, and Olivia immediately shifted gears and told me that was totally fine. It's not like the farm's hurting and needs the extra marketing.

But she's still looking at me like I'm special—assuming some level of greatness that I don't deserve, that I don't feel like I ever truly earned. It's not Olivia's fault, but there's no way I can explain all of that without making her doubt her decision to hire me.

And she shouldn't doubt. I might not be the star Olivia thinks I am, but I can still do this job at least as well as your average catering chef. What I lack in passion and innovation, I make up for with scrappiness and efficiency. I might not love everything about the job, but I'm not going to let her down.

"I appreciate your transparency," I finally say, "but I'm not sure I can give you an answer either way. I don't really know what happens next or even how long I'll stay at Stonebrook."

I think of the television show still hanging over my head. Dad's been more persistent with his texts lately, but the longer I'm here, the less I want to even think about going back to California.

I curve my hands over my knees and press my palms against them, suddenly feeling bold. "But I'm pretty sure I don't ever want to go back to California."

A tiny thrill pulses through me as I say the words out loud. Could I really just *not* go back? Stay here longer than a year or

two, or move on and make a name for myself somewhere else? *I could*. I can. The realization fills me like a deep breath of air.

Bree would be proud of me for owning my future like this—even if I have no idea what it's supposed to look like. Who am I really if not Christopher Elliott's daughter?

I might not be sure about who I *am* just yet, but I *am* sure about who I'm not. And that's as good a place to start as any.

Olivia and her mom exchange a look. "Well you know you're welcome here as long as you want," Hannah says. "We're thrilled to have you." She reaches for another cookie. "And I wouldn't worry too much about what happens next. I've often found the thing we're looking for is right under our nose, even if it takes us a while to figure it out."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lennox

I MAKE IT THROUGH six reps before my arms start to tremble. Seven, and I'm struggling to get the weight all the way up.

Brody's hands tighten around the center of the bench press bar. "Okay, you need to be done. Your muscles are toast."

"Not yet," I manage to say. "Three more."

"Three more? Dude. What are you trying to prove? You're pushing it twice as hard as you usually do."

"I'm fine. I've got this."

Brody lets go of the bar, but he keeps his hands close. I groan as I crank out one, then two more reps, but on the third, my muscles completely give out, and Brody has to grip the bar before it falls onto my chest. He lifts it enough to keep me from hurting myself, but *not* enough for me to get it back onto the rack.

"Brody, what are you—"

"Will you tell us what's going on with Tatum?" he asks, cutting me off, and suddenly, I realize what this is.

My idiot brother is holding me hostage under two hundred and fifty pounds of iron while Perry watches from the sidelines.

Most of the time, I'm grateful to have brothers who know so much about my life.

But today? I'd rather they take a long hike and leave me alone.

I suddenly wish I'd used the impending snowstorm as an excuse not to work out with my brothers. We get together to lift in Brody's garage every Saturday morning since that's the only time that works with our schedules.

But I should have skipped this morning. My brothers think they know why I'm feeling off, but they're wrong. And the real reason is not a conversation I feel like having.

Trouble is, I also don't want to stay here all day, and there's no way I'm getting this weight up without Brody's help.

"Come on," I say on a groan.

"Will you talk?"

"There's nothing to talk about. Perry, are you seriously going to let him do this to me?"

"Sorry, man," Perry says. "You've been sullen and silent for the past hour, working out like you're training to go pro. You'll feel better if you talk."

"Ugh, fine," I finally say, and Brody immediately pulls up the bar, helping me reposition it on the rack.

I sit up and tug my shirt over my head, then use it to wipe the sweat from my forehead. It's unseasonably frigid outside, but space heaters are running to make things a little more tolerable in the garage. If the weather forecast is correct, it'll start snowing within the hour.

"Okay," Brody says, handing me my water bottle. "Start talking." He grabs a folding chair from where it's leaning up against the wall and flips it around so he can sit backward, straddling the chair with his arms resting on the back.

I take a long drink of water and try to organize my thoughts. My brothers think I've got Tatum on the brain, and I do. It's been almost a week since we made plans to have dinner, and



I've spent more than a little time thinking about how that's going to go.

But she isn't the reason I'm feeling off this morning. That honor goes to my restaurant, which suddenly feels like it's on a slippery slope sliding into chaos, and I have no idea how to fix it. I've made the changes Tatum suggested, and they're helping, but when I fired Griffin, the conversation devolved into him basically railing on me for an hour, questioning my leadership and management abilities, insulting Zach and other cooks in my kitchen. He even said something hateful about Tatum.

*Annnddd* that's when I almost punched him.

Had Zach not walked by at just the right moment, stepping between us and stopping me, I would have created one enormous pile of paperwork for Stonebrook's HR guy.

I owe Zach for that, and I ended up having a long conversation with Olivia just in case Griffin decides to file a complaint anyway. I told her everything—minus the insult Griffin tossed at Tatum. No one's ears need to hear those words ever again.

Olivia was understanding, but she made me promise I would talk to Perry and fill him in. Pretty sure that's why I'm in such a foul mood. I'm here. I need to do it.

I just don't want to.

If I were only talking to him as my brother, it wouldn't be a big deal. But he isn't just my brother in this situation. He's the financial brains of the farm, and he was the slowest to get on board with the idea of an on-site farm-to-table restaurant. Olivia finally convinced him the idea was worth the risk, giving me the opportunity to live my dream and build my own place, which just means there's no way to have this conversation without making Perry think he made a bad call.

I don't think Perry made a bad call, but jerk that he is, Griffin still managed to get in my head. And now I'm questioning everything. I don't know what the answer is, but I'm finishing every night feeling like I've run back-to-back

marathons only to get up the next morning and start all over again.

“Lila had lunch with Tatum the other day,” Perry says, clearly still thinking Tatum is the source of my low mood. “Well, not just her,” he continues. “Mom, Lila, Olivia, and Kate had lunch with Tatum. They had sandwiches at Mom’s studio.”

“I *made* the sandwiches,” I say, “so I know.” And I’ve been wondering what Tatum thought of the women in my family ever since. I’m also curious to know what she thought of the food. As far as I know, she still hasn’t eaten at the restaurant, and I find myself wishing she would just so I can ask her what she thinks.

“Are you feeling weird about her eating lunch with the family?” Brody asks.

I run a hand across my beard. Olivia did make it seem like they had every intention of talking about me, but she could have just been messing around. And it isn’t so crazy to think that Mom just wanted to invite Tatum over for lunch to make her feel welcome. Still, knowing Mom, she could definitely have some ulterior motive. “Should I feel weird about it? Did Kate say anything to you?”

“Only that Liv and Mom seemed to be dropping a lot of hints about you. Is that actually something that could happen? Are you guys even getting along?”

I don’t *hate* the idea of Liv and Mom dropping hints but admitting that would derail the conversation I *need* to have with Perry. It’s smarter to do it here, while Brody is around to play peacemaker. He’s the middle kid in the family. Peacemaker is a role he knows well.

I breathe out a sigh. “I’m getting along with Tatum,” I say. “But that isn’t what’s on my mind.”

Brody lifts an eyebrow. “What is it then?”

My gaze slides to Perry. “Things are not great at the restaurant right now,” I finally say.

My older brother's eyes narrow. "What are you talking about? The financials look great."

"I know. Money, reviews. Everything looks good on paper, but my kitchen is floundering. I just lost a chef, and I'm running myself ragged trying to keep up with everything, and it's only a matter of time before the chaos behind the scenes starts to trickle outward. How I'm running things right now isn't sustainable, but I don't know how to fix it."

"Can you just hire someone new? To replace the chef you lost?" Brody asks.

"I can, but I'm not sure that's the right call. I'm not maximizing the people I already have on staff."

Perry's quiet for a beat before he leans forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "This is a solvable problem," he says, in the voice he must have used when he was a high-profile corporate consultant. His tone leaves no room for argument or equivocation. "We know there isn't a problem with the food. Your location is solid, and your employees are making competitive wages for this part of the country."

"So what is the problem then?" Brody says.

"It's workflow," I say. "Training. My kitchen isn't running efficiently. I know enough to see the problems, but I'm having a hard time figuring out how to solve them. Tatum made a couple of suggestions, and they've helped, but it's not enough."

"You need a consultant," Perry says. "The restaurant business has those, I'm sure. People who are trained to come in and maximize your efficiency."

"But wait, didn't you just say Tatum made some suggestions?" Brody says. "Can she be your consultant? She's already here. And we're already paying her."

"She's good at what she does," I say. "And she said she's happy to help. I can ask her if she has any other suggestions."

Brody and Perry exchange a look.

"You'd be good doing that?" Perry asks.

I frown. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Uh, because just over a month ago, you guys were fighting over who got to carry the heaviest moving box. You hated Tatum Elliott when you were in culinary school. What happened?”

“I didn’t *hate* her.”

“Right, you just wanted to beat her at everything, blah, blah, blah. Either way, it’s still surprising you’d be comfortable asking *her* for help,” Brody says.

I shrug as casually as I can manage. “It’s not really like that anymore though. We’re getting along. It’s actually been a lot easier than I thought it was going to be.”

Brody’s expression shifts, like he’s got a million follow-up questions to ask, all of them of the relationship-defining sort, but Perry beats him to it, and his question is all business. “Can we trust her?”

“Why couldn’t we trust her?” Brody asks.

“I’m not saying we can’t,” Perry says. “I’m just saying that on paper, someone like Tatum Elliott shouldn’t be running a catering kitchen in Silver Creek, North Carolina. With her connection to her father and the experience she’s had working with him, she could work anywhere. Why here? Are you sure she doesn’t have an ulterior motive?”

“What, like, she’s spying or something?” Brody asks. “I don’t really get that vibe. And why didn’t that come up when Olivia hired her?”

“Olivia trusts her,” Perry says. “And we probably can. But having her run the catering kitchen as an employee is different than pulling her into Lennox’s circle of trust and giving her access to all of his trade secrets.”

My *lack* of trade secrets is more like it.

Also, circle of trust? I’m not sure we need to make this so serious.

I hold up a hand, stopping before Perry can start drafting a nondisclosure agreement. “It’s not like I’m in danger of going

bankrupt. I don't need to tell her any secrets. I just need help sorting out some management stuff."

Perry nods slowly, as if considering. "Okay. Well, if you think she has the experience, and you're comfortable asking her, I say go for it."

"She has the experience," I say. I swallow the last shreds of my tattered pride. "I'll talk to her."

"Has she told *you* why she came to Stonebrook?" Brody asks. "Now that you bring it up, it is kind of weird how she wound up way out here. Did she know this was your family's place when she applied for the job?"

"She hasn't told me. But—" I hesitate, rubbing a hand across the back of my neck. "Maybe it'll come up when I make dinner for her next week."

I guess all I needed was a *tiny* crack in the dam for all my secrets to come tumbling out.

I roll my eyes as my idiot brothers erupt in a chorus of cheers and guffaws, pounding me with good-natured backslaps.

"Stop," I say, though I can't hide my grin. "It's just dinner."

"When you're cooking, it's never just dinner. You could probably propose after the appetizer, and she'd say yes," Perry says.

The sincerity in Perry's words gives me pause. Lila has *really* done a lot to counter his grumpiness. But even though I appreciate his vote of confidence, it doesn't give me the same boost it usually would.

If only amazing food were the only thing you needed to run a restaurant.

"So do you really like this woman?" Brody asks. "Is she planning on staying in Silver Creek long term?"

The question of how long Tatum will stick around has occurred to me, but I've tried not to focus on it too much. I don't want to get ahead of myself or make Tatum feel any pressure when we don't even know what this is between us.

My brothers—they're the kind of guys who are thinking long term seconds after they learn a woman's name. But that isn't me.

"I like her," I finally say. "But I'm not trying to rush into anything. Our relationship has changed a lot in the past few weeks. I just want to see what happens. Get off my back and let me have dinner with the woman."

"You know what they say about the line between love and hate," Brody says.

"True," Perry adds. "Imagine channeling all the passion you guys put into arguing into something else."

*Annnnd* that's my cue to leave.

"Okay, time to go," I say as I stand. If I don't bail now, the jokes and jabs will only get worse from here.

"Oh, Lennox, you're the macaroni to my cheese." I hear my brother Flint's voice behind me, which doesn't make any sense because Flint is in L.A. The voice is pitched high in an exaggerated falsetto, but it's *definitely* him. I spin around to see Brody holding up his phone, Flint's face filling the screen in a video call.

I shake my head even as I start to laugh. Flint just illustrated exactly why I want to bail, but it's Flint, so I can't really bring myself to care. "How long have you been listening?"

"Long enough," Flint says, his grin wide, though he's looking a little bit ruffled. I lean forward and look closer. "Dude, were you asleep?"

He yawns. "Maybe. But you know how much I hate it when you guys are together without me."

"You could always move home," Perry says.

"Actually, I've been thinking about doing just that. But right now I want to hear Brody's best food-themed pick-up line for Lennox to use on Tatum."

Brody immediately brightens, and Perry groans. "Not this again."

“Ohh, I’ve got it!” Brody says with the boyish enthusiasm only he can pull off. “Are you full of jalapenos?” He pauses and bites his lip like he can’t contain his own laughter. “Because you’re making my heart burn.”

I make eye contact with Perry. “Has he been talking to Lila?”

“They never stop,” Perry says. “He texts her with new puns at least twice a week.”

“But these aren’t just puns,” Brody says. “They’re pickup ... *limes*.”

Flint’s groan dissolves into laughter, but Perry only scowls. Must only be Lila’s puns he’s willing to smile for.

“But for real, man,” Flint says. “Keep us posted on how dinner goes. I won’t even care if you leave me behind as the only lonely sibling.”

“You should make that the name of your next movie,” Perry says.

I laugh at Perry’s joke but make a mental note to text Flint later. That’s the second thing he’s said in this conversation that has given me pause. He’s thinking of moving home *and* he’s lonely? That’s worth a follow-up conversation.

“I’ll keep everyone posted,” I say, “but none of you say anything to Mom, all right?” I hold up a warning finger. “Or Dad. They’ll start in on their whole-life happiness stuff, and I don’t need them getting any ideas in their head.”

Whole-life happiness is a Hawthorne family term, coined by my parents and used to measure how they think their children are *really* doing. It never has anything to do with how much money we’re making or whether we’re successful in the world’s eyes. It’s all about the stuff that *truly* matters.

In other words, until I settle down, find a wife, and have a couple of kids, or, at the very least, get a dog, my parents will never believe I’m *whole-life happy*.

Kate appears in the garage doorway. “I hate to break it to you, but your mom is already talking about your whole-life

happiness. *Regularly*. And fair warning—she *really* likes Tatum.”

I sigh. Why did I move home again?

Kate turns her attention to Perry. “Hey, the snow is really coming down now. Lila just texted and said it’s time for me to kick you out.”

“On my way,” Perry says. He claps me on the back as he slides past. “You’re not going to open tonight, are you?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want employees to risk coming in.”

“Enjoy the night off then. It sounds like you could use one.” Perry yells a final goodbye to our youngest brother as he disappears out the door.

“All right, I’m out too,” Flint says. “I’ll be waiting for those updates, Len!”

Kate disappears back into the house after Flint hangs up, leaving me alone with Brody. He stays silent while I put my shirt back on, then pull my sweatshirt over my head.

“Hey, should we be worried about Flint?” I say as my head pops through the neck of the hoodie, mussing my hair. I smooth it down again. “You think he’s serious about moving home?”

Brody shrugs. “Nah. He’s too restless to live in Silver Creek.”

I grab my keys. “Maybe, but you used to say the same thing about me.”

“That’s true.” He follows me out the front door and onto his porch. The air around us is heavy with the silence that only a snowfall can bring, the ground quickly disappearing under a blanket of white. Brody shoves his hands into the pocket of his hoodie and hunches his shoulders against the cold. “So, this thing with Tatum,” he says, studying me closely. “Do you feel like things are different with her?”

“Different how?”



He shrugs. “I don’t know. I just—” He pauses and clears his throat. “I’m just saying. Tatum doesn’t seem like some random woman you picked up at a bar.” He scratches his neck like he’s nervous. Or maybe just trying really hard to be tactful. “She seems ... different.”

“So I better not be messing around?” I ask, saying what he clearly *wants* to say but won’t because he’s too nice of a guy.

He nods like he’s relieved I owned up to the possibility. “If things went south and it impacted her job, you’d be answering to Olivia, so I’d be careful if I were you.”

I don’t feel like I’m messing around with Tatum, but Brody’s words send a jolt of uneasiness through my chest anyway. Brody’s concern is valid because my track record is ... not great.

I’ve never been very good at explaining my feelings about relationships to my brothers—especially not Brody, who has been in love with the same woman since he was old enough to realize what love was. Brody was built to be in love—to be committed—so he’s never understood my serial dating habits—though those dried up about the time I opened Hawthorne.

But even when I *was* serial dating, I was always up front with women about what I *wasn’t* looking for. Nothing serious. No commitments. No expectations.

But now that I’m home, living in Silver Creek, it’s harder to live that life. And not just because the dating scene is so dismal. I’m constantly surrounded by my siblings and all their devoted *marriedness*, which is making my reasons for keeping my relationships so shallow look a little flimsy.

I don’t really want to stay casually single forever, do I?

“It’s only dinner,” I say to Brody. I look him right in the eye, somehow wanting to reassure my brother that he shouldn’t worry about me, even if I’m worried about myself. “But I get it.”

The front door opens, and Kate pops her head out, her gaze zeroing in on her husband before they dart to me. “Oh. You’re still here,” she says, like she’s disappointed.

“On my way out though,” I say slowly, like I’m stating the obvious.

Because I *am* stating the obvious. I look at Brody. “You got somewhere you need to be?”

“More like something we need to *do*,” Kate says.

“Whoa. Right now?” Brody says. “Like, *now* now?”

“*Now* now,” Kate repeats. She disappears inside, and Brody moves to the door to follow his wife. He lifts his shoulders in a sheepish shrug, a small smile lighting his face. “We’re trying for a baby,” he says simply.

“Whoa. Really?”

He nods. “I know it’s kind of fast, but it doesn’t really *feel* fast.”

“You’ve known each other your whole lives,” I say. I run a hand across my face. “I’m happy for you, man.”

“Thanks. But don’t say anything, all right? We don’t want people to get excited when we have no idea how long it’s going to take.”

I nod. “Of course.”

Brody opens the door. “Be careful heading home, all right? If you wind up needing to drive anywhere later, come borrow the truck.”

“Will do. Thanks man.”

He disappears inside, the click of the front door sounding loud in the heavy silence of the falling snow.

Brody is trying for a baby.

Perry is running home because his wife is worried about him driving on the roads.

And I’m ... standing alone on an empty porch.

*Geez. Who’s the only lonely sibling now?*

It’s been a decade since I was in a serious, committed relationship, and that one ended badly enough that I can still conjure up the sting of Hailey’s betrayal.

If something really is happening with Tatum, can I be different with her?

And if I can't, is it fair for her to get caught in the crossfire?

I don't know the answer. I only know Brody's right. Tatum *does* feel different. And I think that means I have to try.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Tatum

THERE IS SNOW FALLING outside my window.

Real, actual snow! I mean, it's not like I've never seen it before. I've been to ski resorts. I've traveled to places where snow falls regularly. But I've never lived anywhere where it can just happen, so this feels momentous.

And also *freezing*.

The heat is turned up inside my tiny apartment, but multiple people at work yesterday said that when it snows around here, the power frequently goes out from downed trees and power lines. Brody's wife, Kate, already assured me that they have wood-burning heat at their house, and if we lose power, she'll send Brody to pick me and Toby up, but I'm still going to bed with extra blankets in case it goes out in the middle of the night.

Out my living room window, Stonebrook Farm looks picturesque and perfect. I pull out my phone and take a couple of photos, debating whether I want to put them up on Instagram.

My account has remained mostly dormant since I made the move across the country, which is fine with me. Most of the people who follow me only do so because of my connection to Dad, so it's never really felt like my account anyway.

A handful of friends follow, but short of a few DMs and text messages sent right after I left, I haven't really stayed in touch with anyone back in L.A. The longer I'm gone from the entire scene, the more I think there really wasn't *any* part of my life that felt like mine. Even my friendships.

I slide my phone into the back pocket of my jeans without posting anything.

My photos of Stonebrook can be just for me.

I may not be one hundred percent sold on catering, but I *am* starting to love Stonebrook. It feels right somehow, while I'm still parsing together a new life for myself, to hold it close.

I cross my tiny living room, where Toby is lounging on the sofa, and pull leftovers from last night's dinner out of the fridge.

I finally took the plunge and ordered dinner from Lennox's restaurant. Because I couldn't decide between two entrees, I ordered them both which, obviously, was a brilliant decision and one I'm particularly grateful for now.

I ate most of the filet mignon last night, but I was too full to eat more than a few bites of the pork tenderloin, so that's what I warm up now. Even ordered to go—which can be trying for some dishes—both entrees were beyond delicious. The fried green tomato appetizer I ordered was just as amazing. Bright, balanced flavors, perfect textures and consistencies, sauces that complimented and heightened the dishes without overpowering them. A good sauce can easily be used to mask all kinds of sins, but none of that is happening at Lennox's restaurant. At least not that I've found so far.

Somehow, he knows how to use every ingredient to its fullest potential—something I remember noticing even back in culinary school. The way he sees food—it's a gift I'll never stop envying.

I move to the kitchen table and drop into a chair, then take a bite of the tenderloin. I moan as the flavors explode on my tongue. Apples, brandy, brown butter. It shouldn't still taste

this good warmed up on the second day, but *man*, it's the best thing I've eaten in weeks.

It only tastes better when I imagine Lennox's hands preparing it, his bright green eyes looking over my order—even if he didn't know it was for me. Would he have done anything differently if he had known? Would he have wanted to make it extra delicious just for me?

The thought warms my cheeks, and I push it away. These are the thoughts that will drive me crazy if I let them. For all I know, Lennox would have laughed and squirted extra lemon juice all over my meal as payback.

Toby moseys over and drops his head on my thigh, his unobtrusive way of asking for a bite. I cut off a tiny piece of pork and hold it out to him.

The fact that Lennox's food is so good when his kitchen seems to be falling apart is only further testament to how brilliant he is—or maybe just how hard he's working. I don't think I've seen him take a day off since I got here.

He's probably loving the snowstorm. The restaurant is closed tonight and probably tomorrow too, along with the catering kitchen since all the events scheduled to happen this week have been postponed due to weather.

I'm happy to enjoy the break, but I think Lennox really needs it.

My phone buzzes from my pocket and I pull it out to see a notification from the weather app warning of below-freezing temperatures and recommending that all pet owners make sure their animals are safe and protected indoors.

I glance over to see Toby back on the sofa, already snoring.

A beat of trepidation passes through me. I'm not nervous, exactly. But I do feel like hunkering down to wait out a snowstorm would be more fun if I had someone besides my dog for company.

I turn on the most recent Harry album—it always puts me in a good mood—and clean up my dinner dishes, then move to the tiny closet in my entryway to get the extra blankets I

shoved onto the top shelf when I moved in. I reach up, my fingers grazing over the edge of the blanket, and I let out a groan. I'm not *that* short—a hair over five foot four—but it's still short enough that most things on high shelves are just out of reach. I jump up and manage to wrap my fingers around the corner of one blanket, giving it a hard tug as I land back on my feet.

The blanket comes tumbling, followed by something else much less forgiving. A shoebox I've never seen before hits my head with a thunk, then tumbles to the ground, its contents spilling all over the floor of the entryway. It must have been left by whoever lived here last.

I crouch down to gather everything up, pausing when I pick up a picture of Lennox. I shift and sink onto my butt so I'm sitting on the floor, my legs extending toward the front door.

I study the picture closely. It's definitely Lennox, but a much younger version of him. More like the Lennox I knew in culinary school. He's got an arm around a woman I recognize but can't quite place. She was in school with us for a little while, but I don't remember her graduating with us. Kailey, maybe? Or something close to that. Regardless, the way she's looking at him makes me think he definitely meant something to her.

I gather up a few more pictures. They are *all* of Lennox and the same woman. There are also ticket stubs, playbills, a random slip of paper that looks like some kind of dry-cleaning receipt.

So it's *that* kind of box.

The date on the receipt gives me a timeframe—our first year in culinary school.

I barely knew Lennox then. We didn't really start clashing until our third year when our identical degree programs dropped us in most of the same classes. Southern Culinary Institute has multiple tracks and degree programs, but Lennox and I were in the same one, getting bachelor's degrees in culinary arts and food science.

I look through the contents of the box, curiosity building, only pausing when I get to a couple of handwritten notes in a swirly, feminine hand. I drop the letters into the box like they're on fire, suddenly uncomfortable with this weirdly personal window into Lennox's life.

I shouldn't be doing this, pawing through his old memories like they don't matter.

But then ... maybe they don't. They wound up *here*, after all.

I purse my lips to the side and stare at the box.

I would not want Lennox reading my old love letters.

I *can't* read them.

I shouldn't.

But I really, *really* want to.

"I am not going to read these letters," I say out loud, as if voicing my commitment to the universe will make me more accountable somehow.

But then I turn, checking to make sure I've picked up everything that fell out of the box, and I see a card lying open on the entryway rug.

I wouldn't even have to unfold it to read it.

Curiosity too strong to ignore, I pick it up and glance at the name at the bottom.

*Hailey.*

Her last name immediately comes to me. *Hailey Stanton*. She lived a few doors down from me, but we didn't talk much. My eyes rove over the card, catching on a few key words and phrases.

This is a breakup letter.

There must be ten different *I'm sorrys* filling the page. Along with *I didn't mean to hurt you*, *I hope you can forgive me*, and, my personal favorite, *It's not you, it's me*. Not very original, but at least she didn't send a text. A surge of



protectiveness rises in my chest. Who did this woman think she was breaking up with Lennox like this? It was a long time ago, I know, but I still find myself wishing I could ease the hurt somehow, soothe whatever wound might be leftover.

Hailey didn't come back after our first year. I remember that clearly now, though that's not all that uncommon. A lot of people change majors or change degree programs or drop out of school all together. But now I'm wondering if her breakup with Lennox had something to do with her disappearing act.

I close the card and drop it into the box before pushing the lid on top, wishing I had some masking tape to keep it from ever falling open again.

How did it even get here? Did Lennox live in this apartment before I did?

It wouldn't be all that weird if he did—it's his parents' farm, after all. Maybe he lived here while he was working to open the restaurant.

A pulse of heat moves through me at the thought of Lennox occupying this space. Sleeping in my bed. Using the shower. Lounging in the living room after a long day of work. It's a dangerous thought because it makes it all too easy to imagine the two of us lounging around the apartment *together*, and those are exactly the kinds of thoughts I'm trying to avoid.

Outside my apartment door, footsteps sound on the stairs, and my heart rate spikes. I stand up, picking the box up with me, and take a step away from the door.

Toby sits up, his ears perked.

Who could possibly be coming to see me now? In the middle of a snowstorm? Or, more like the *beginning* of a snowstorm, but still. An hour ago, the parking lot was empty except for my SUV, so to suddenly realize I'm not alone is a very uncomfortable feeling.

A knock sounds on the door. "Tatum?" Lennox calls. "Don't freak out. It's just me."

Oh. *Oh*. Maybe I can stop freaking out over the possibility of a masked murderer being at my door, but how am I

supposed to stop freaking out over *Lennox* being there?

I hurry forward, composing myself as best I can in the three steps it takes me to reach the door. “Hey,” he says easily. He’s all bundled up in a winter coat and scarf, a wooden milk crate in his hands. “Sorry if I scared you.”

“Nothing like heavy footsteps slowly moving up the stairs to get your heart racing.” I step back to let him in. “What are you doing here? Should you be driving in this weather?”

He steps inside, and I shut the door behind him. “I borrowed Brody’s truck,” he says. “And the roads aren’t too bad yet.” His eyes drop to the box in my hands—*his box*.

*Oh no.*

What do I do now?

Do I give it to him? Put it back in the closet and pretend like it’s mine?

It’s an old Nike box—orange with a white swoop—so it’s not like it’s unique. Unless he recognizes the particular way this box is worn, he could just think it’s *my* old shoebox.

I spin around and put it on the kitchen table like it’s no big deal. Like I have no reason to hide it from him. Like I didn’t just spend half an hour digging through the remnants of his love life.

“Are you a Harry Styles fan?” Lennox asks. *Harry’s House* is still playing in the background, but the song that’s playing right now is one of the lesser known tracks. I’m impressed Lennox recognized the artist.

“Is anyone *not* a Harry Styles fan?”

He chuckles. “You know, he and Flint are friends.”

“Ohhh, don’t tell me things that will make me obsess about the degrees of separation between me and Harry. It’s cruel.”

He smiles. “Noted. So, uh—” Lennox clears his throat like he’s suddenly nervous. “I brought you some things to help you get through the storm.”

He sets the milk crate down on the table not far from the shoebox.

*Oh, this is awkward. Please, please, please, just don't ask me about the box.*

"A flashlight, a few candles. Some snacks," Lennox says. "And an extra blanket just in case you need it."

*Oh, my heart.* He brought me snacks? I lean forward and look into the box, my eye catching on a thermos in the corner. Wait, no. *Two* thermoses.

"There's soup in that one," Lennox says. "And the coffee you seemed to like so much in the other." He shoves his hands into the pockets of his coat, and I get the sense that he's nervous.

He shouldn't be. If he was hoping to charm me, he has succeeded. I'm charmed. Fully. Completely. All-in *charmed*.

I still have the travel mug I stole from him last week when he found me outside in my pajamas. And his scarf, too. I've been meaning to give them back, but I keep forgetting. Maybe because subconsciously, I like having things around that belong to him.

My eyes dart to the shoebox. Better a scarf and a coffee mug than *that*.

Lennox must follow my gaze because he reaches for the box, sliding it into the center of the table. "Is this what I think it is?" he asks slowly.

I frown, and then words tumble out of me like water bursting through a dam. "I'm so sorry, Lennox. I didn't know what it was. I pulled something out of the closet, and it fell off the top shelf and all the stuff inside went everywhere. But I didn't read anything. Or, I didn't read *everything*. And I put it all back."

He lifts the top of the box and pulls out one of the pictures.

His face is impassive, his expression completely unreadable.

"Did you live here? In the apartment?" I ask if only to break the tension building in the awkward silence. Obviously, it isn't

the most relevant question, but I'll do anything—*anything*—to avoid talking about the contents of the box. Or the fact that I was just pawing through his stuff.

Lennox nods without looking up. “For a few months. Before the restaurant opened.”

If I could rewind time five minutes and put the box back in the closet before opening my front door, I would.

Lennox brought me soup. And coffee. And a blanket to get through a cold night. And now he's looking at pictures of his ex-girlfriend and *not* making eye contact with me.

Fantastic.

If I had a fireplace, I'd torch the entire box of Hailey memories on the spot.

You know.

If Lennox wanted me to.

“If it matters, her break up letter was total trash,” I say.

He finally looks up, the subtle lift of his smile easing the pressure around my heart. “I thought you said you didn't read anything.”

“But then I clarified that I didn't read *everything*. I read some. Enough to know that one more *it's not you, it's me*, and I might have poked my eyes out with an oyster fork.”

Lennox chuckles and drops the photo back in the box. “I can't believe I saved all of this stuff. I'd forgotten it was even here.”

I study him closely. His words are light, like it doesn't bother him at all to look through a box of his old memories, but there's a tightness around his eyes that makes me think it's impacting him more than he's letting on.

Maybe that just means it's time for him to move on. “Hey.” I nudge his arm. “In the mood for a bonfire?”

“That's actually a really good idea,” he says through a grin, and I wonder if I imagined his earlier discomfort. But then he glances at the door. “I've got to get going though. I still need

to check on Mrs. Sprinkles, and I don't want to be out on the roads too much longer."

Is he telling me the truth? Or is he just looking for a way to escape so he can nurse his Hailey wounds in private? But also ... *Mrs. Sprinkles?*

"Hold up. Who do you need to check on?"

"She was my seventh-grade math teacher. She lives alone just up the road. I want to make sure her generator's working in case the power goes out."

"And that's her real name? Mrs. Sprinkles?"

He chuckles as he moves to the door. "If you say it a few more times, you'll get used to it."

Okay. This does not sound like he's feeding me an excuse. So maybe he's fine. Maybe we're fine?

"It's really nice of you to check on her, Lennox."

He shrugs like it's no big deal. "I don't mind."

I might get used to Mrs. Sprinkles's name, but I will never get used to him.

To think I wasted all those years in culinary school thinking this man was some stuck up, full-of-himself, womanizing jerk. Talented, yes. But still a jerk.

But no. Now that I'm truly getting to know him, he's nothing like I thought he was. He's a man who feeds his mom and grows vegetables and checks on little old ladies who live alone. A man who just brought me snacks and coffee and didn't get bent out of shape over me clearly violating his privacy.

Lennox holds my gaze for a long moment, his green eyes sparkling, before he reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "Stay warm, all right?"

I nod, but as he pulls away, I stop him, reaching up to grip his wrist. "Lennox, wait."

He stills, his other hand falling from the doorknob. I suddenly get the sense that if I were to ask Lennox to stay, to

share the soup he brought and hang out with me through the storm, he'd probably say yes.

If not for Mrs. Sprinkles and her generator, I might ask him to.

"I still don't have your number," I say instead. "If something were to happen, can I call you?"

Outside, a gust of wind rattles the shutters and we both turn toward the window.

"It's on a sticky note stuck to the outside of the box of crackers," he says. "Text me so I have your number too."

"Okay. Be safe, all right?"

He nods, then disappears down the steps.

I run across the room to the window, peeking through the blinds to see him climb into Brody's truck and slowly pull out of the lot. I watch him until he makes it down the main drive and turns out of sight.

*Well.*

How am I supposed to relax after *that* interaction?

I immediately grab my phone and text him a quick hello, then program his name into my contacts, a little thrill shooting through me at this new connection.

After retrieving the blanket—which smells so much like Lennox it makes my knees feel wobbly—and the coffee he brought over, I settle on the sofa and turn on Netflix.

There has to be something mind-numbing and ridiculous to get my mind off of the man. I pick a romcom I've seen a hundred times that will not require me to work too hard because honestly, my mind is pretty preoccupied at the moment.

No matter how hard I try, I can't stop thinking about how much I'm starting to like it here.

The scenery. The entire Hawthorne family.

*Lennox.*

There are still worries hovering at the back of my mind. The uncertainty about my future and whether I see myself working in catering—in culinary anything—long term. My relationship with my father. Whether I could truly leave California for good.

But just for a moment, I let my worries go and allow my thoughts to unspool unchecked.

Maybe ... I don't care if I'm a good enough chef to have my own TV show or run a five-star restaurant.

Maybe it's fine that my strength is in management instead of innovation.

Maybe I can just *stay here*, live in this tiny mountain town and be content.

Maybe Hannah Hawthorne is right and what I'm looking for really *is* right under my nose.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lennox

MY PHONE RINGS JUST after two a.m., but I'm too sleep-confused to figure out how to answer it. The call ends, but I can't stop staring at the screen. Why did Tatum call me in the middle of the night? Before I make any progress in sorting things out, she calls me again.

This time, I manage to answer. "Tatum?"

"Hey. Did I wake you?" There's a slight tremor in her voice that immediately starts my heart pounding.

"That's a stupid question. I did, didn't I?" she says.

"What's wrong? Is everything okay?" I finally manage.

"That depends on your definition of okay. A tree just fell on the catering kitchen."

"What?"

"A tree. The big one at the corner of the employee parking lot."

I immediately know which tree she means. There's a mostly dead red oak that Dad has been telling us to take down for years. "Tatum, are you safe? Is Toby safe?"

"We're safe," she says quickly. "It missed my apartment, though I think the roof above the stairs might be damaged. And my office is completely crushed."



“That doesn’t matter. As long as you’re okay.” I glance around my very still and silent house, missing the hum of working electricity. “Is the power out over there?”

“Yeah. My nose is already cold.”

“I’m on my way, all right? Just stay warm. I’ll be right there.”

I spend the next five minutes calling Perry and Olivia and filling them in. I can’t get Brody to answer his phone, but he only lives a few doors down, so I’ll just drive over and wake him up. If we’re cutting up a tree, he’ll want to help.

I grab my chainsaw out of the garage, then hurry out to Brody’s truck which I conveniently didn’t return last night. Outside, the wind from earlier has died down, leaving the air still and peaceful—a sharp contrast to the stress and urgency I’m feeling. It’s also colder than I expect, and there’s a thick sheet of ice underneath the snow that makes walking treacherous. The snow isn’t deep enough to shovel before I back the truck out, but the roads are going to be *slick*.

I pull out and head toward Brody’s, my mind on Tatum the whole time. *Is she warm? Is she safe? Is Toby okay?* Of course, I’m worried about the catering kitchen too. And the restaurant. But those worries pale in comparison.

It only takes a minute to get to Brody’s even driving in the snow. I stop on the road, not wanting to bother with pulling the truck in and out of his driveway, then hurry toward his front door.

This far south, this kind of weather won’t last long. It’ll be fifty degrees by the weekend, and all of this will melt, but the next forty-eight hours will be terrible. I pull my coat more tightly around me as I ring the doorbell, then follow up with a sharp knock.

I wait for what seems like an eternity, banging one more time before Brody yanks the door open. He’s holding a camping lantern, his eyes wide, and his pajama bottoms are on inside out.

“Hey,” I say a little too cheerily. “Did I wake you?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “What are you doing here?”

“Sorry to yank you from your cozy slumber, but a tree fell on the catering kitchen. I’m headed to the farm to clean up. Want to put some real pants on while I grab your chainsaw?”

“Is everyone okay? Is Tatum safe?”

“She says she is. But I’ll feel better when I’ve seen her for myself.”

He nods. “Give me two minutes.”

While I wait for Brody, I go to his storage shed out back and pull out a couple of tarps and Brody’s chainsaw, adding them to mine in the back of the truck. By the time I finish, Brody is already coming out of the house. He heads to the driver’s side, which is fine by me. He has more experience driving his truck in this kind of weather than I do anyway.

I climb into the passenger seat, and Brody’s eyes cut to me as he shifts the truck out of park and engages the four-wheel drive.

Brody tries to make small talk as we drive, but I can’t focus on anything but getting to Tatum.

I suddenly wonder if this is what it’s like. To have someone in your life who you care about more than anything else.

I’m not even in a relationship with Tatum, and yet, since the minute she called and I learned what happened, I’ve been consumed with thoughts of her wellbeing.

That has to mean something, right?

The farm is completely dark when we arrive, all but the restaurant parking lot which is lit up by the headlights on Perry’s truck and Tyler’s SUV.

Perry motions for Brody to back his truck up enough that the beam of his headlights projects onto the roofline of the catering kitchen just like the others.

I get out of the truck and survey the damage.

All I can see is tree.

It's everywhere. Giant, snowy limbs block the back entrance and poke through the back windows.

Perry and Tyler are deep in discussion about how to best go about removing the tree and Brody quickly jumps in. They'd do well to just let Brody take the lead—he's the problem solver in the family—and do whatever he says. Either way, they don't need me, so I make my way around the building to a side entrance and let myself inside.

Light reflecting on the snow outside made it easy to see, but in here, it's pitch black. I reach for my phone to turn on the flashlight, but then something—someone?—bumps into me, knocking the phone from my hand and falling against my chest.

*“Ooof. Ow.”*

I reach out and steady Tatum—there's no one else who could be wandering around the kitchen in the middle of the night, at least no one else who smells this good—and wrap my hands around her shoulders. “Hey, you okay?”

Her hand presses against my chest, then moves to my face. “Lennox?” Tatum whispers. “Is that you?”

“Who else would I be?” Her hand is still cupping my cheek, and I barely resist the urge to lean into her touch and press a kiss against the palm of her hand.

“I thought you might be a burglar.”

“A burglar? Right now? While half my family is in the parking lot outside?”

She huffs. “When you put it that way ...”

“Tell me—are you more or less comfortable with the idea of groping a burglar than you are groping me?” With my hands on Tatum, hearing the sound of her voice, the tension I've been carrying around in my shoulders drains away. She's okay. She's safe.

She drops her hand. “I wasn't groping you. I was trying to make sure it was you in the first place.”

“Pretty sure you were groping me.”

“Shut up. I was not—whatever. Do you have a flashlight on you?”

“I did, but then someone bumped into me and knocked my phone out of my hand.”

“Oh. I did do that, didn’t I?”

“Do you have your phone?”

“I put it down when I grabbed the rolling pin.”

“You’re holding a rolling pin?”

“I needed a weapon!” she says, as if this explains everything.

“Right. For the burglar.”

“Exactly.”

I’m still gripping her shoulders, and I let one hand slide down her arm until it reaches the rolling pin she’s still holding tightly in her fist. I wrap my fingers around it. “Maybe I’ll just take this?”

“Right. Yes,” Tatum says slowly. “And I’ll just get my phone ...” She steps away from me, and I immediately miss the warmth from her closeness. She stumbles around for a second, at least by the sound of the clanging and bumping I hear, then her flashlight turns on. Silently, she moves toward me, shining the light across the floor until she finds my phone.

She bends down and picks it up, dusting it on the front of her hoodie before she hands it back to me. “Looks like it survived the fall,” she says. “Sorry about that.”

Side by side, with our phone lights lifted and aimed in front of us, we move silently into the main part of the kitchen, then cross to the back half where the tree’s skeletal arms have poked a giant hole in the ceiling. Tatum’s office is completely crushed and filled with the bulk of the tree’s trunk, but the damage doesn’t look like it’s extending too far into the actual kitchen space.

“I guess it could be worse,” I say as I shine my light over the damage. “At least it missed your apartment. And you’ll

still be able to cook.”

“It could definitely be worse,” she says. “How long do you think it’ll take to repair?”

“I have no idea. We’ll get the tree out tonight, at least, so we can get some tarps covering the hole in the ceiling, then we’ll have to wait for the weather to clear up and for the power to turn back on. Then find a crew who can replace the wall in your office and fix the roof. Best guess, a week? Maybe two?”

She bites her lip. “Two weeks. That feels like a very long time.”

“At least the kitchen is functional. I’m happy to share my office with you if you need a place to escape every once in a while.”

Tatum’s eyes lift to mine, her expression playful. “I’m sorry, what was that? Did I just hear Lennox Hawthorne offering to help me?”

I roll my eyes. “You better get used to it. I have a feeling it’ll be happening a lot more frequently.”

She grins. “Does that mean I’ll get all the best asparagus?”

“I won that asparagus fair and square, Elliott. It’s not my fault you’re terrible at Rock, Paper, Scissors. I did offer to cook for you though. I think that was pretty nice.”

“I still think you cheated at Rock, Paper, Scissors.” She tucks her hands under her arms and shivers the tiniest bit. “And actually, you already cooked for me.”

“Sandwiches at Mom’s don’t count.”

“Those were delicious sandwiches, but I didn’t say they did. I ordered a couple of entrees from Hawthorne the other night. The filet mignon and the pork tenderloin.”

“Smart choices,” I say, sounding more chill than I feel. Tatum ate my food? Did she like it? Was she impressed?

Had I known I was preparing something for her, I would have taken extra care. “Those are two of my favorite dishes.”

“I guessed they probably were,” she says.

Nerves tighten my throat as I ask, “What did you think?”

She holds my gaze for a long moment. “Everything was perfect, Lennox. *Of course* it was perfect.”

There is nothing but sincerity in her words, and the praise fills me with a sense of pleasure and satisfaction I’ve never experienced before. It’s always rewarding to know people enjoy what I create. But this feels different somehow—more meaningful.

I lift my hand and finger the edge of Tatum’s scarf—*my scarf*. It’s wound loosely around her throat, but she still looks cold, her nose tinged pink and her cheeks flushed. “Tatum, where is your coat?”

She shrugs. “I don’t have one.”

“You don’t have a coat? Any coat?”

“It doesn’t get cold like this in California. And you said yourself this weather is unusual for Spring. I figured I’d get something in time for *next* winter.”

I slide my hand down her arm and grab her hand, lacing her fingers through mine. “Come on,” I say as I tug her toward my office.

I leave her standing by my office door while I go inside and pull my black puffy jacket off the hook on the back of the door. I prop my phone up on the bookshelf and angle it toward the floor so we still have some light, without it shining right in our eyes. I hold out the jacket. “Here. Put this on.”

She makes no move to take it. “You promise you don’t need it?”

I look down at my heavy wool coat. “This one has me covered.”

“Right,” she says, looking a little flustered. “Of course it does.”

I open the jacket and motion for her to turn so she can put it on. “I hike in this one,” I say as she slips her hands inside. “It should keep you plenty warm.”

She turns back to face me, and I pick up the hem of the jacket to zip it up. It's ridiculously big on her. Her hands don't show through the sleeves, and it hangs well past her waist. But she looks cute in it anyway, and not just because I like the look of her in my clothes.

"Thanks," she says softly. "It *is* warm." She lifts a hand and reaches over to touch me, her hand sliding down the front of my chest, and my breath catches in my throat. I've never been so irritated to be wearing so many layers.

"I like this coat on you," she says slowly, her fingers lingering over the buttons.

My heart races at the contact. This is ... different. *Good* different. More intentional than any of the other times we've touched. Excluding the whole bear episode, but I'm not sure that counts because she was freaking out and I was comforting her.

Now I'm the one freaking out.

"Lennox!" Perry calls, and Tatum and I jump apart. "We need your help."

"Be right there," I respond. "I'm just checking on the generators."

Tatum breathes out a tiny gasp. "Did you just lie to your brother?" she whispers through a grin.

I hold up my thumb and pointer finger, holding them an inch apart. "Tiny lie," I say. "I'm *about* to check on the generators." I grab my phone off the shelf and hold out my hand. "Come with me?"

She bites her lip, only hesitating a moment before slipping her fingers into mine.

Holding hands makes it slightly more difficult to navigate our way through the kitchen in the dark, but I don't care, and the tightness of Tatum's grip tells me she doesn't either.

Together, we check on the generator which is, gratefully, humming away, keeping the fridge cold and the freezer even colder.

“What does the generator power?” Tatum asks.

“Just the walk-in fridge and the freezer. It was too costly to get something for the entire building. And I didn’t see the point in keeping an empty building warm. It’s not like we’re going to open when we have no power.”

“You mean the empty building that I live in?”

I grimace. “Fair point.” I touch the tip of her nose with my free hand. “I guess you’ll have to turn into a popsicle like the rest of us.”

She will absolutely *not* be turning into a popsicle, but I need to check with Brody before I offer his house as a refuge. I’d invite her to my place, but she’d be no better off there than she is here.

Tatum follows me to the door, dropping my hand before we step into view of my brothers who are already working to cut away the tree.

We pause at the edge of the parking lot. “You’ll be okay here?”

She burrows down into my coat and nods. I reluctantly move toward my brothers to help, but my eyes keep going back to her. Every time I look, her eyes are focused on me.

Perry is already using my chainsaw, and Brody has his, so Tyler and I become the muscle, moving the logs away as they shave away at the massive trunk, chunk by chunk.

We haul the pieces to the edge of the parking lot, leaving them in a haphazard stack. By the time we finish, my biceps are screaming, I can barely feel my fingers, and my nose is numb from the cold.

We use several enormous tarps to cover the opening into the kitchen, anchored and angled in a way to keep snow from accumulating on top. It’s not a great long-term solution, but it should hold until the snow stops, and we can get some professionals out to do the needed repairs.

At some point in the process, Tatum disappears inside—something I sense more than I see—and I become almost



obsessive about looking over my shoulder to see if she's reappeared. But she doesn't show. Not even when Tyler and Perry are pulling out of the parking lot and Brody is cranking the engine on his truck, ready to leave as well.

Maybe she went inside and got back in bed? Which I can understand, but I don't want her to have to stay here. She won't be warm here. And neither will her dog.

Dawn isn't far off. The sun is still low behind the mountains, but the sky is lightening, casting a bluish glow over the falling snow. But it could be hours before the power is back on. And even in daylight, the temperatures aren't supposed to get above freezing.

"You okay?" Brody calls from his open window, his arm resting on the truck door.

I scrub a hand across my jaw and move toward Brody's truck. "I just need to check on Tatum. She went back inside, but I don't want her to stay here. Do you—" I hesitate. "Do you mind if I invite her to your place?"

Brody gestures behind me. "One step ahead of you, man."

I turn and look over my shoulder to see Tatum crossing the parking lot, still wearing my jacket, a bag hitched over her shoulder and Toby on a leash beside her.

I push away the sudden disappointment filling my chest. I'm glad she's coming, but I'm sad I wasn't the one who got to invite her.

"Kate invited her," Brody says. "I assume this means you're coming over too?"

I don't have time to answer before Tatum opens the back door of Brody's truck and climbs into the extended cab. "Come on, boy," she says, scooting over and motioning for Toby to jump in beside her.

I climb into the passenger seat and look over my shoulder, my eyes meeting Tatum's for the briefest second.

"Thanks for this," she says to Brody, her gaze sliding away from me. "My apartment already feels freezing."

“No problem,” Brody says. He slowly eases the truck out of the parking lot. “The wood stove in the living room does a great job of keeping the house warm. At least the first floor. And Kate loves it when the house is full of people.”

“Will the power stay out long?” Tatum asks.

“Not more than a day or two,” I answer. “Depends on how long it snows.”

“Tyler told me he’s taking Olivia and the baby over to Mom and Dad’s,” Brody says. “And Perry has a fireplace at his place, so I’m sure he and Lila will stay home.” He shoots me a questioning look. “So that means it’ll just be the four of us?”

Tatum shifts in the back seat, and I look over my shoulder to see her gaze on me—something like anticipation—maybe even excitement?—dancing in her eyes.

I raise my eyebrows in question, and she shrugs the slightest bit. “I think it sounds fun.”

Brody eases his truck to a stop outside my house. “It’s your call, man.”

I unbuckle my seatbelt. “I’ll walk down in a bit,” I say. “I’ve just got to get a few things together first.”

Get a few things together ... and shower. And trim my beard and put on clean clothes and do my best to *not* look like I just rolled out of bed and spent two hours fighting with a giant oak tree. The water will be ice cold, but if I’m spending the day with Tatum, holed up by the fire in my brother’s living room, that’s a price I’m willing to pay.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tatum

THE SUN IS BARELY up when we pull into the driveway at Kate and Brody's house, but Kate is awake anyway, standing on the front porch to greet us as we climb the steps.

She pulls me into a big hug. "I'm so glad you're safe and everything is okay."

The comment takes me by surprise, only because I hadn't considered the possibility of anyone being worried for *my* safety. It was snowing inside the kitchen, which felt like more than enough reason to be concerned. But they were worried about me, too?

"Come on," Brody says, nudging Kate toward the door. "Let's get inside where it's warm. I'll build the fire up."

Less than ten minutes later, I'm wrapped up in a blanket sitting next to the fire, Toby curled up at my feet. Pale morning light filters into the room, but it's still dim, giving the entire space a sleepy, cozy feel. Considering how long I've been awake, I should probably nap—I'll never make it through the day if I don't. But that would require me to stop obsessing about when, exactly, Lennox intends to show up.

He said he'd walk down in a bit. Does that mean in an hour? Two hours?

The power is off at his house too, so if he waits that long, won't he be cold?

I groan and grab a book off the side table. Lennox is a grown man who can regulate his own body heat. I don't need to worry about him.

Still, as I open the book and flip to the first chapter, I can't stop thinking about the way it felt to walk through the dark catering kitchen holding Lennox's hand. I don't *need* to worry about him.

But maybe I *want* to.

"That's a good one," Kate says as she settles into the chair opposite me. She motions toward the book. "I just finished it."

I turn the book around and look at the cover, which I barely noticed when I picked it up. It's romcom-y and cute and looks exactly like the kind of book I would enjoy. "I was trying to decide if I should read or sleep," I say, stifling a yawn.

"Brody just went up to sleep for a few more hours. You're welcome to stretch out on the couch if you want. If you can get Charlie to move."

The basset hound taking up the left half of the couch thumps his tail against the cushion when he hears his name, but otherwise, he doesn't stir.

I pull my feet up under me and extend them toward the dog, nudging him to the side. "I'm used to sharing a couch with Toby," I say. "I can make this work." Honestly, I'm surprised Toby isn't up here with me too, but I'm glad he's opting to stay closer to the fire. That would be a lot of dog on one couch.

"Try and sleep," Kate says as she stands up. "After the night you've had, I'm sure you could use it."

I nestle down into the couch and read a few pages, but I must doze off at some point, because when I startle awake, the book has fallen to the floor, bright light is streaming through the window, and both dogs have abandoned the room.

I hear them though, collars jingling, paws tapping against the floor like they're excited about something. The front door creaks open, and suddenly, I understand. Either Brody or Kate must be taking the dogs outside.

I stretch my arms over my head to stretch, then glance at my watch. It's already eleven a.m.? *Dang*. I didn't just nap, I *slept*.

"Hey, you're awake," Kate says, appearing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

I rub a hand down my face, still trying to wake up. "I am. Is Toby okay? Did Brody take him outside?"

"Lennox, actually."

I sit up a little taller and lift a hand to my probably sleep-crazy hair. "He's here?"

"He walked down a few hours ago, but he and Brody drove up to the restaurant to get us some lunch and they just got back. Lennox made hot chocolate earlier though. Do you want some?"

In any other circumstance, I might have asked for coffee instead, but if Lennox made the hot chocolate, I'm all in. "That sounds amazing."

She disappears, returning moments later with a sky-blue mug with the words *I once made a chemistry joke, but there was no reaction* printed on the side.

She holds it out to me. "The mug was a gift from one of Brody's students."

"Punny," I say as I take the mug, and Kate smiles. "How do we even have something hot?" I say as I take my first sip. *Oh. Oh my word*. I let out a low groan. "Is this even for real?"

"Delicious, right? Brody got out his propane camp stove and set it up on the back porch."

The hot chocolate is perfectly creamy with a hint of something on the backend that I can't quite identify. Whatever it is, it's absolutely delicious. "Honestly, is there anything Lennox hasn't perfected?" I take another sip. "What does he put in this?"

“Mascarpone cheese,” Kate says. “And nutmeg.”

As soon as she says it, I recognize the acidic sweetness of the mascarpone. But I never would have thought to add it to hot chocolate. It’s brilliant and delicious and somehow very Lennox.

I take another long sip just as the front door opens and Lennox himself steps inside, the dogs dancing around his feet. He’s wearing the same wool pea coat he had on this morning, the black fabric speckled with snow. His scarf is a deep blue, and unlike the wool one of his I’m *still* currently wearing, this one looks handmade, like something his mother or a grandmother could have knitted for him. I watch as he unwraps it from his neck, then slips out of his coat, revealing a thermal henley the same color as his scarf. It fits him well—like it was made for him, and I ... am paying way too much attention to Lennox’s clothes.

But how can I not? He could be a model for one of those overpriced clothing companies—the ones you want to buy from if only to make your life as serene and peaceful as all the beautiful lives they depict in their advertisements.

Charlie moseys over and plops down next to the fire, but Toby stays next to Lennox, his tail wagging as he leans his head into Lennox’s thigh. It’s Toby’s way of asking for attention, and something stretches in my heart when Lennox crouches down and gives it to him, talking to him in a ridiculous voice. “That’s a good boy, Toby-Tobers. Who’s a good boy?”

Everyone says the way to a chef’s heart is through a really good knife, and it’s true. But more true for me? The way to my heart is through my dog, and seeing Lennox like this is striking all the right chords.

I’m suddenly filled with a desire to stand up and wrap my arms around his waist, press myself against him and feel his arms circle around me. He’d probably run one of those strong hands up and down my back. He might even lift it to my hairline and tangle his fingers in my hair. Or brush his thumb across the edge of my jaw—

“Tatum?” Kate says, her voice slightly louder than normal, like she’s trying to get my attention. All at once, my brain catches up with my ears, and it occurs to me that this isn’t the first time she’s said my name.

“What? Yes? Hi. Sorry.”

She eyes me, her expression saying she knows exactly why I was distracted. “I just asked if you were hungry.”

“Oh. Sure. Absolutely. Food sounds good.”

“And Lennox asked you a question, and you didn’t even flinch,” she says, laughter dancing in her eyes.

My eyes jump to Lennox, and he lifts his shoulders in a tiny shrug. “I just asked if you’ve finally warmed up.”

“Sorry. I was ... thinking ... something. About something. But yes! I’m warm. So warm.” And clearly a master with words.

“Okay then,” Lennox says on a chuckle, and my cheeks flame. “I have leftover Bolognese from the restaurant, if that sounds good. Brody can boil some water on the camp stove, so we can even have pasta to go with it.”

“I’m using my jetboil,” Brody says, appearing in the entryway with all the enthusiasm of a boy scout. “Boiling water in one hundred seconds or less.”

Kate rolls her eyes. “I think he lives for power outages because he gets to use all his survival gear.”

I smile as Brody and Lennox disappear down the hall, their voices fading as the back door opens and closes.

If there is ever a zombie apocalypse, I definitely want the Hawthorne brothers on my survival team—a thought I first had early this morning while I watched the three of them, as well as Olivia’s husband Tyler, cut the splintered tree into haulable pieces and stack them on the opposite side of the parking lot. They were too bundled up against the snow for me to see any muscle in action, but it wasn’t hard to imagine it with all the heavy lifting and grunting that was happening.

Now, I'm warm and safe even though outside, it is cold and snowy.

I'm about to be fed even though presently, there is no functional kitchen.

And my phone is charging using a portable charging block Brody gave me when I first arrived even though there's no power.

Zombies? Yeah. I'm not worried about them at all.

"I've heard Brody is quite the outdoorsman," I say, turning my attention back to Kate.

She nods. "They all are. They grew up hiking and camping. But forget that." She scoots the ottoman closer so it's just opposite where I'm sitting on the couch and sits down on it, pulling her knees up to sit cross-legged. "I want to talk about what happened to you when Lennox walked in."

My heart starts pounding, and I take a long sip of hot chocolate, hiding behind my mug. "I don't know what you're talking about," I finally say.

"Oh come on. Tatum. You were practically undressing him with your eyes. It was so obvious."

I set the mug down on the small side table next to the couch and cover my face with both palms, still warm from my hot chocolate. It's debatable whether my cheeks or my hands are warmer. "I was not!"

"You totally were," Kate says. "I'm good at reading people, and there is definitely something happening here. It's too late for you to deny it."

I spread two of my fingers, creating a tiny window for one eye to peek out. "Was I really so obvious?"

Kate giggles. "When he said your name, you were staring at him like some kind of starry-eyed middle-schooler. What's going on?" she asks. "You were pretty evasive at lunch the other day. Is this why? Are you actually starting to feel something for him?"



“Maybe? I mean, we were bickering like children when I first got here, but the past couple of weeks, it’s been ... different somehow.”

“Good different?”

I sigh. “Definitely good different. He’s supposed to make me dinner next Monday. It was the first day we both had a night off.”

“Gah. That’s forever from now. Chefs and your stupid schedules. But still! It’s something. And maybe a little something *else* will happen while you’re here.” She lifts her hands in a tiny cheer and lets out a squeal.

I shoot Kate a look and glance toward the kitchen, not wanting Lennox, or even Brody, to hear, but she waves away my concern. “They’re still outside. I promise they can’t hear us. But honey, if you keep staring at him like you just were, it won’t matter *what* he hears. You might as well be wearing a sign for how obvious you were.”

“Honestly, he’s a Hawthorne brother. How can I *not* stare?”

“True,” she concedes. “You should have been at the restaurant opening. Flint came, so all four of them were together for the first time in I don’t know how long. The sheer magnetism. It was a little overwhelming for all of us.”

Lennox’s younger brother wasn’t famous when we were back in culinary school, so it was a surprise to me when I Googled the farm, found the information about Lennox’s restaurant opening, and made the connection to the very famous actor, Flint Hawthorne, who attended the event. Now that I know, it feels obvious because Flint looks as much like his brother as the other ones do.

“I saw pictures,” I say. “I can only imagine the impact it had in person.”

Kate nudges my knee. “They’re all just as good on the inside, Tatum. I mean, I’m obviously biased, but if there’s something happening with you and Lennox? I’d hang on to him.”

“Do you know anything about Hailey?”

Kate's forehead scrunches up. "Was that the girlfriend he had in college?"

I nod. "I found a box full of pictures and letters and stuff. He left it behind in the apartment."

"I don't know much. I remember liking her, though. She was really sweet."

"Wait, you met her?"

"He brought her home to the farm a couple of times. Brody and I were still in high school then, so we were around."

"So they were pretty serious then." I mean, he saved a box of their memories. Of course they were serious. But bringing her home to meet the family feels even bigger than that.

"Yeah. And he was messed up for months after they broke up. He won't talk about it, but I've always assumed that's why he—" Her words cut off, and she purses her lips like she isn't quite sure how to finish.

"Why he turned into a total womanizer?" I say for her, filling in the gap.

She winces, but she doesn't contradict me. "I swear, he hasn't been like that since he moved home—I don't think it's who he really is."

"He's never been serious with anyone else?"

"Not that any of us have known about." She bites her lip. "Does that scare you?"

I lean back into the sofa cushions and consider her question. It maybe should scare me, but somehow, it doesn't. I don't know what's happening with Lennox, but it doesn't feel like I'm getting played. Maybe because we haven't actually started dating yet. At least not officially. And most of our conversations have involved teasing and good-natured arguing, which makes it seem like whatever is happening is happening *despite* our efforts to irritate each other.

"Honestly, I don't think it does. I mean, there are all kinds of other things that scare me, but not that."

“Because it feels real?”

I shrug. “I don’t want to get ahead of myself. We haven’t spent a ton of time together outside of work. The dinner really could just be *dinner*.”

Kate gives me a knowing smile. “It doesn’t feel like it though, does it?”

I bite my lip. “It *maybe* feels like ... something.”

“I like the sound of *something*.” Kate winks as she stands. “I’m going to check on the guys. Do you need anything?”

“Nah, I’m good,” I say as I reach for my phone, but then I glance at the screen and immediately regret the action.

I have a text from my dad, and right now my world is too perfect and comfortable to ruin it with a message from him. I hate that I feel this way. But with how his messages have sounded lately, it’s getting harder and harder to convince myself he has my best interests at heart. Still, if I don’t respond now, he’ll keep texting, spamming me with a string of messages, each one more antagonistic than the last.

**Dad:** I hear there’s weather where you are. Skies are blue and temps are warm here. I can have a car meet you at the airport whenever you come to your senses.

Another message pops up while I’m reading the first, this one with a winking emoji as if the whole suggestion is just a silly joke.

Dad is definitely not joking.

**Tatum:** I’m enjoying the weather so much. The snow is beautiful!

I put my phone back on the table, face down, determined not to touch it for the rest of the day. A part of me wishes I didn’t even have a portable charger. Then I’d at least have an excuse.

*Sorry! Phone died. No power. I’ll be off the grid for the next ... three weeks.* Do snowstorms last that long in North Carolina? Can I order one that will?

I drop my head back and breathe out an audible sigh that brings Toby right to my side. He lifts his paws and drops them onto my lap, burrowing his head into my shoulder.

My friend once told me her golden doodle gave good hugs, and I thought she was just being silly. Dogs don't have arms. They can't give actual hugs. But I ended up eating those words as soon as I had my own doodle because Toby totally gives hugs—especially when he knows I need one.

I scratch his ears and look into his deep brown eyes. “That’s a good boy, Tobe. We’re going to be okay, yeah? We’re going to make it?”

The back door opens, and Kate’s laughter rings through the air, then it sounds like they all move back into the kitchen.

Moments later, Lennox leans around the corner. “Food’s just about ready if you want to join us.”

I nod and smile. “I’ll be right there.”

A golden doodle hug can go a long way. But it doesn’t quite fill the loneliness I’m feeling right now.

What I’m craving is *human* connection, and not the kind I have with my father, full of judgments and expectations and passive-aggressive criticism.

No, hanging out with the Hawthornes has shown me that I want more.

Acceptance. Love. Support. Kindness for the sake of kindness, even when nothing is received in return.

It all feels incredibly foreign when I compare it to what I’m used to with Dad. I’m sure he loves me in his own way. But our relationship has only ever felt contractual.

I’m not sure I’ve ever thought about the possibility of it being something different, something more like what the Hawthornes have.

But maybe it’s time I start.

I want something better.

I *deserve* something better.

I just have to figure out how to get it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lennox

“BACON, RIGHT?” TATUM ASKS as she gathers the plates off of Brody’s dining room table. “What else is in it? It tasted too mild to be beef.”

I carry the empty saucepan that I used to warm the Bolognese over to Brody’s kitchen sink. Tatum steps in beside me and sets the plates on the counter.

“Yes to the bacon,” I say. “But no ground beef. I use ground pork loin. The leanest cut I can find. Anything else overpowers the flavor profile of the vegetables, and I wanted them to be the star of the dish.”

I reach for the giant pot of water Brody warmed on the camp stove outside. There’s running water—Kate and Brody have a well—but it’s ice cold, which won’t do much good when we’re washing dishes. Hopefully, there’s enough here for us to get things cleaned up. Brody wouldn’t care if we just left everything in the sink, but doing the dishes feels like the least I can do.

Apparently, Tatum agrees because she volunteered to help me the minute the words were out of my mouth. Brody and Kate disappeared into the living room to build up the fire and set up some sort of trivia board game they’re very excited about playing with us. Kate and Brody are big board game players, and they seem very enthusiastic about having new

people to play against. Normally, I might find this irritating—the two of them are merciless, especially if they’re playing on the same team—but they can beat me a dozen times in a row if it means I’m playing with Tatum, too.

“The vegetables,” Tatum says, pulling my attention back to the meal we just finished. “Celery, carrots, onions?” She runs her finger along the edge of the mostly empty saucepan and lifts it to her mouth. “No, not onions. Shallots?”

I manage a nod—I’m entirely too distracted by the sight of her lips as she tastes the sauce—but I’m impressed she’s able to tell. The difference is subtle enough, not everyone can.

“The sweetness though,” she says as she plugs up one half of the sink. She steps back while I pour in half of the boiling water, then turn on the tap to cool it down enough for us to use it without burning our hands.

“It feels like it’s something beyond the wine. It feels deeper. Nuttier, maybe?” She adds a little soap to the sink and swirls it around with her fingers before grabbing the first plate and slipping it into the water.

It almost feels like Tatum is having a conversation with herself, walking through the different flavors in the Bolognese, trying to pinpoint what went into it. It’s a fun game for any chef—deconstructing, trying to figure out why something works so well, and I’m flattered she’s putting so much thought into my dish. It has to mean she likes it—or at least appreciates its complexity.

She holds up the first plate. “I wash, you rinse?”

“So your hands stay warm and mine stay cold?”

She sticks her fingers into the soapy water and flicks a few bubbles my way. “Precisely.”

I let out a little grunt as I take the dish, my fingers brushing against hers. When we touch, her eyes dart to mine, fire flashing in their depths.

“Gah, you have to just tell me, Lennox. I can’t figure it out.” She hands me another dish, her expression open and curious.

“I roast the carrots first,” I finally say. “It brings out their natural sweetness more than sautéing them does.”

Her face brightens. “Roasting them. That’s—” She smiles for the briefest moment before it melts into a frown, her shoulders dropping the tiniest bit. The shift happens so quickly, had I not been watching her closely, I might have missed it. “That’s brilliant,” she says. “I never would have thought of that.”

The comment gives me pause. It’s a level of humility I wouldn’t have expected from the Tatum Elliott I knew in culinary school.

Back then, she knew all the answers to every question all the time. But she hasn’t had that same edge since coming to Stonebrook. She’s been openly complimentary of my food, inquisitive about ingredients.

She hands me the last plate and pauses, her hands resting on the side of the sink. “How did you know to do that?” The sincerity in her question catches me off guard. “I’ve read a hundred different recipes for Bolognese, but I’ve never seen —” She gives her head a little shake. “But it made a difference. Yours is different. *Better*. How did you do it?”

The compliment sends a burst of warmth racing through me, but I’m not sure how to answer her question. “I don’t know, really. Or maybe I just don’t know how to put it into words?” I’m silent for a beat while I dry the last plate. “Will you laugh if I tell you I let the ingredients speak to me?”

She tilts her head and studies me closely, but for a moment, it looks like she’s somewhere else. Finally, her gaze drops, and she steps away from the sink. She reaches over and steals the dish towel that’s draped over my shoulder, using it to dry her hands. “I think this is something that makes us different.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I don’t think about food like that. I follow recipes. I do what I already know is going to work—what others have already proven works. I don’t take risks.”



“I’m sure that’s not true. I mean, look at you. Look at the career you’ve had.”

She scoffs. “The career I’ve had was handed to me by my father. I wasn’t qualified for it, and the only reason I survived is because I had an amazing sous chef and a staff who probably knew if they didn’t tolerate me, they’d lose their jobs.”

“Tatum, I’ve seen you working. You’re good at what you do.”

“No, I know,” she concedes. “But you don’t get to be head chef at a restaurant like Le Vin by being *good*. I’m not fishing for compliments here. I’m a good chef. But I don’t know how to *innovate*. Not like you do. Not like the sous chef at Le Vin who replaced me when I left—the one who *should* have had the job all along.”

“Is that why you left California?” I pick up the pot of hot water and pour it down the sink, then take the towel back from Tatum to dry my hands. As soon as her hands are free, she pushes them into the front pocket of her hoodie.

Tatum knows how to rock her chef’s whites, but there’s something about this casual version of her that I like even more. Her guard is down, her demeanor open and curious, and she seems happy to just be here. Hanging out. Talking about food, opening up about her life.

Her lips lift into a small smile. “I thought I was getting dinner at your place in exchange for all my secrets.”

I step closer, resting my hand on the counter beside her. I lean forward the slightest bit, holding her gaze as I breathe her in. She smells like Carolina jasmine in spring, which is now, officially, my new favorite scent.

“I’ll feed you whenever you want, Tatum. With or without the secrets. You just have to ask me.”

She bites her lip, her expression coy. “What if I get hungry at two a.m.?”

“I’ll send you to bed with snacks just in case.”

“What if you just finished the longest shift of your life, and you’re bone-deep exhausted, and I feel like eating a steak?”

“If you ask me with the expression you’re wearing right now, I’d probably go out and kill the cow myself.”

Tatum stills, her eyes widening the slightest bit. The tone of our conversation has been pretty playful, but that last line might have pushed things a little too far. Not that it wasn’t true, but still. That doesn’t mean I should have said it out loud.

I clear my throat and step backward, running a hand through my hair.

Tatum grabs a dish towel and folds it, then shakes it out and folds it again, a slight tremble in her hands.

The fact that she’s as nervous as I am sends a surge of emotion right to my heart.

I’m starting to care about this woman.

*Really* care.

With anyone else, I would have moved on long before now. Cut ties before anything *real* started to develop.

But Tatum snuck in on the sly. I was so busy pretending to be annoyed by her presence, I missed how quickly that annoyance turned into something else entirely.

And now it’s too late to do anything about it because there’s no way I’m walking away now.

Brody’s words echo in my mind. *She seems different.*

He’s right. Tatum *is* different. And I don’t want to lose the possibility of whatever this might be.

“Hey,” Brody calls from the living room. “Everything’s set up. You guys ready to play?”

Tatum meets my gaze, a small smile lifting her lips. So she thinks I’d kill a cow just to get her the steak that she wanted. This is no big deal. We’re chill. Everything is *chill*.

“We should probably go,” Tatum says softly. “Your brother seems very enthusiastic about this game.”

“He’s the nerdiest of us all,” I say, happy to have something—*anything*—to contribute to the conversation that won’t make me look more stupid. “And I’m warning you now, he’s hard to beat. Especially if he and Kate are on the same team. She’s a travel writer, so she knows everything about everywhere.”

Tatum’s eyebrows lift. “So that’s how we’re playing? Us against them?”

I nod. “I’m sure that’s what they’ll want to do. Are you good with that?”

She props her hands on her hips. “You said they’re hard to beat. Has anyone ever done it?”

“We change up teams sometimes to make it more fun, but with the two of them on the same team? They’re undefeated.”

“Hmm.” She smiles playfully. “Good to know.” She grabs my hand and tugs me toward the living room. “But just for the record? I play to win, and I have a feeling your luck is about to change.”



Tatum *definitely* plays to win.

The woman is a machine. Confident. Bold. A few times, she even tosses out an answer before Brody has even finished reading the question.

I recognize the competitive edge she had back in school, but now instead of finding it irritating, it’s sexy as all get out.

At the same time, she’s a really good sport. Talking, joking, playing down her success in a way that keeps the game fun and easy.

“Okay, last round,” Brody says. “If you guys get three questions correct, you’ll win the game, and Lennox will have beaten me for the first time in the history of forever.”

“And I bet you aren’t bitter about that at all,” Kate says easily from her place beside him.

“If you get a question wrong,” Brody continues, “we have the chance to steal the win by answering the question you

missed, plus two more.”

My eyes shift to Tatum who looks relaxed and comfortable, not even a little bit nervous.

Not that she should be. Me? I’ve been here for moral support. And the odd question about football, golf, or Grand Theft Auto, which I played with religious dedication while I was in school. But even without my help, Tatum would still be winning.

She cracks her knuckles and leans forward. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“First category is literature,” Kate says, holding one of the trivia cards.

Literature is good. Tatum has gotten every one of the literature questions right so far.

“What nineteenth-century author tried to have his wife committed to an insane asylum so he could live with his eighteen-year-old mistress?” Kate looks up from the card. “Dang. That’s cruel.”

“If it’s any consolation, it didn’t work,” Tatum says. “The doctor who reviewed the case declared his wife in fine health and refused to send her away. Except, the ending of the story still sucks. Charles Dickens ended up sending his wife away himself when the doctor wouldn’t help. He put her up in a house at the edge of town, kept her from her children, and spent the rest of his life living with his mistress.”

“Um, Charles Dickens sounds like a jerk,” Kate says. “Also, that’s the correct answer.”

“How did you even know that?” I nudge Tatum’s knee with mine.

She shrugs. “I went through a British lit phase in high school.”

“Okay, next question,” Brody says. “The category is sports.”

Tatum reaches over and squeezes my knee, but then she leaves her hand there, resting it on my leg like it’s perfectly normal for us to touch each other, to sit this closely.

I stare at Brody, willing myself to focus on the question and not the warmth of her fingers searing me through my jeans.

“What NFL football team holds the record for most points scored in a Super Bowl match-up?”

Tatum’s grip tightens, and I drop my hand to rest on top of hers. “San Francisco Forty-Niners,” I say. “In 1990, playing against the Denver Broncos. They won fifty-five to ten.”

Brody sighs. “You and your stupid football brain.”

“Okay, last one,” Kate says. “For the win. The category is science and technology.”

This one could go either way. I keep my eyes trained on Kate even as Tatum pulls her hand away. I miss the contact immediately, but then her leg brushes up against mine, and I wonder if she wants the connection as much as I do.

“Okay,” Kate says. “What element on the periodic table has an atomic weight of 1.00794?”

Brody grins at his wife as if already anticipating the steal. He’s a high school chemistry teacher, so if anyone knows the answer, it’s him.

“We can just guess,” I say to Tatum, but she shakes her head.

“I think I know it. Is it hydrogen? I think it’s hydrogen?”

Brody groans as I shoot my hands up in victory. “We did it! We won!” I stand up and tug Tatum out of her chair, wrapping her in an enormous hug that lifts her feet off the floor. She laughs as I spin her around, her hands sliding down my arms as I lower her back down.

It’s just a hug.

But the feel of her against me, the way her hands linger at the top of my biceps, the way she’s holding her bottom lip in her teeth as she looks at me.

It feels like so much more.

“Pretty sure *Tatum* won,” Brody says. He shoots me a questioning look before his gaze shifts to Tatum. “Great

game.”

She steps out of my embrace and presses her hands to her stomach, almost like she’s trying to calm herself. “Thanks,” she says. “As it happens, I was California state quiz bowl champion my senior year of high school. Trivia has always sort of been my thing.”

“Seriously?” Brody says, his tone light. “That didn’t feel like an important thing to disclose before the game started?”

“What would you have done about it if she had?” Kate asks.

Brody doesn’t miss a beat. “I would have put Tatum on my team and made you play with Lennox.”

Kate laughs and punches Brody in the shoulder. “Dude. So rude.”

“Don’t worry,” Tatum says to Kate. “I wouldn’t have defected. But next time, you and I should absolutely be on the same team.”

“Oh, I’m so down for that,” Kate says.

As I watch the way Tatum and Kate easily banter, I think about the only other time I’ve brought a woman home to meet the family. Hailey joined us for Thanksgiving my first year of culinary school.

It was fine. She was nice to everyone, and everyone was nice to her.

But there’s a certain rightness about having Tatum here. She fits in like she’s one of us. Like she’s *always* been one of us.

“How did I not know you were quiz bowl champion?” I ask.

She lifts an eyebrow. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Lennox.” She says it like it’s a challenge—or maybe an invitation?—and suddenly, I’m all in.

I want to know it all. Everything there is to know about Tatum Elliott. How she works. What she likes. What makes her happy and sad and excited. I want to see the different pieces of her and understand how they all fit together.

A month ago, I was certain I *did* know her. I thought I had her all figured out. But I was wrong—dead wrong—and I've never been so happy to admit it.

Now I just have to figure out what to do about it.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lennox

“HOW DOES IT FEEL to officially end your winning streak?” I ask Brody as I gather the trivia cards from around the table.

“I think I’m doomed,” he says easily. “With Tatum in the family, I’ll probably never win again.”

My eyes dart to Tatum, and we both freeze, a very pregnant pause filling the room until Kate says, “Umm, Brody? Did you just say *in the family*?”

Brody’s face blanches. If not for my worry over Tatum’s discomfort, I might enjoy watching him squirm. But then I look at Tatum, and all she seems is amused. When her gaze meets mine, she almost looks like she *likes* the idea.

“No, that’s not—” Brody finally says. “I mean—I only meant *working* for the family.” He looks at Kate, his expression desperate, but she seems way too amused by her husband’s blunder to offer him any rescue. “I wasn’t saying Tatum was going to—with Lennox, but—I mean, she could. That would be great. But she doesn’t—you know what? I think I need to walk down the street to check on the Wilsons. Make sure they’ve got enough wood to keep their fire going.” Brody clears his throat and looks at me. “You want to come?”



“Don’t take Lennox,” Kate says a little too quickly. “I’ll come with you. I feel like getting out of the house anyway.”

They hurry off, pausing in the entryway long enough to put on coats and hats and boots. Kate shoots a furtive glance over her shoulder, and then they disappear out the door.

“Pretty sure this is her leaving us alone on purpose,” Tatum says, humor in her voice.

“I’d put money on it. I used to think having so many brothers was annoying, but it’s not near as bad as having so many meddling *sisters*.”

She smiles. “They love you.”

“They irritate me.”

“They just want you to be happy. I’m getting the sense that’s the way the Hawthorne family works.”

There’s a wistfulness to her voice that immediately sobers me. Having so many meddling siblings and now siblings-in-law *can* be irritating, but mostly, it’s pretty amazing. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am to be so close to my family.

I fold up the game board and drop it into the box. “Any siblings for you?”

“An older brother, Daniel, and an older sister, Bree. But they’re eight and ten years older than me, so we didn’t really grow up together. Not like you and your siblings did.”

“Do either of them work with your dad?”

“Not even a little bit. Daniel is a doctor in Chicago, and he doesn’t get along with Dad at all.” She hands me the lid to the game, and I place it on the box. “He and Bree do okay, but I think she keeps stuff surface level on purpose just to make it easier. She runs her own marketing firm in St. Louis.”

“What about your mom?”

Tatum is quiet for a long moment. “She died last year,” she finally says. “We weren’t really close. She and my dad split when I was twelve, and she moved home to France.”

I lean forward the slightest bit, one elbow propped on the card table Brody set up for the game, and brush my fingers across her knee. “I’m sorry. That must have been tough.”

She lifts her shoulders. “We weren’t close. Which makes it easier in some ways, but harder in others. It’s like this weird combination of loss and regret, all mixed in with questions I always thought I had time to ask. But now I don’t, so I just have to reconcile *not* having answers, and—” She breathes out a sigh. “Yeah. That part’s hard.”

I nod my understanding, wondering if it would be weird to offer her a hug. Tatum and I are doing this weird dance where we inch closer, leaning into opportunities to touch, then swing apart again. I *think* she’d want a hug, but all of this still feels so new, I can’t be sure.

I get up and add a couple of logs to the fire, then move to the couch and sit down, happy that Tatum quickly joins me. She sits sideways and pulls her feet up onto the couch, wrapping her arms around her knees and tucking her feet under my thigh like she’s trying to warm her toes. Even if that’s all she’s trying to do, I’m still happy to have her close enough to touch. The longer we’re together, the more I’m feeling the tug to be close to her.

“Did you ever go see your mom in France?”

She nods. “Every summer while I was in high school. She cooked, too. Not like my dad. Just for friends, mostly. But she did a little bit of catering every once in a while.”

She sinks back into the cushions, almost like she’s falling in on herself, and her eyes turn distant and sad.

I reach down and loosely wrap my hands around her ankles. “Hey. You okay? You want to talk about it?”

“I was just thinking about how Mom was always asking me to cook with her whenever I went to visit, and I never wanted to. I think a part of me was mad at Mom for leaving. Cooking was Dad’s thing—something he and I did together. I didn’t want it to be something she did, too.”

“That’s understandable,” I say. “Twelve is a hard age to have to go through a divorce. Especially when one of your parents winds up on the other side of the world.”

“Yeah, maybe so,” she says, her tone reflective. “But I wonder now what I was missing out on. What could I have learned from her, you know? I don’t remember much about why they got divorced, but if my father treated her anything close to how he’s been treating me lately, it isn’t hard to imagine what they could have been.”

“What does that mean? How is he treating you now?”

“Like I’m a business asset,” she answers quickly enough that I know she’s had this thought before. She frowns. “That sounds bad. Probably worse than it is. But I’ve only ever worked *with* my father, so he tends to see me for what I can offer as opposed to *who* I am. He’s constantly pressuring me, wanting to pull me into branding deals and merchandising—into the fame side of it all.”

“And you don’t want that? The fame?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I used to think so. But it’s been really nice to be away from it all.”

She nestles a little deeper into the couch, and I pick up her feet, dropping them into my lap. “Was it tough growing up with a famous father?”

She scrunches her face like she’s considering. “Yes and no. Dad likes to be Christopher Elliott—more than he likes being *Dad*. In retrospect, I think I tolerated a lot because his life was so glamorous. There were a lot of perks, though it makes me feel shallow to admit it now.” She scoops her hair up and lifts it away from her neck for a moment, shaking it out before it falls back into place. “I’m starting to wonder if that actually had something to do with why Mom left. Pretty sure if Dad had to pick between fame and family, he’d pick fame.”

“You’re making me think working with him wasn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.”

She shrugs. “I mean, I’m living in North Carolina, running a catering kitchen instead of doing what he wants me to do, so

take your best guess.”

I’m suddenly struck by how different this version of Tatum’s life is from the one she projected while we were in culinary school. Back then, she was always talking about the trips she’d taken with her dad, constantly bringing stuff to school—stuff her dad sent—and giving it out to people. New knives, hand mixers, pots and pans. Whatever was the latest and greatest in the Christopher Elliott exclusive line of kitchen tools and cookware.

I never took anything from her because it seemed like she was trying to buy friends. But hearing about her mom, how alone she probably felt, maybe she was just trying to *make* friends.

Our conversation abruptly ends when Brody and Kate come bustling back through the front door, bringing a blast of cold air with them. “We ran into the power company guys down the road,” Brody says. “They’re saying they’re hoping to have everyone on this side of the valley up and running by tomorrow morning.”

“Which means you both have to stay here,” Kate says as she unwraps her scarf. “It’s still frigid out there. You’ll be miserable if you try to go home.”

“If you’ll have me, I’d love to stay,” Tatum says. “Toby is a big wimp when it comes to the cold.”

“But you aren’t a wimp, Miss I-don’t-have-a-coat?” I tease.

She smirks. “Now that I’ve got yours, I’ll never get my own.”

“What about you, Lennox?” Kate asks, her eyes darting between Tatum and me like she’s *very* happy to see us looking so cozy on the couch.

I look at Tatum. Her expression is open and easy. She isn’t communicating with words, but her eyes are telling me she wants me to stay.

“Yeah, I’ll stay too,” I say, swallowing against the dryness in my throat. “That would be great.”

We lounge around for a couple more hours until it starts to get dark, then we eat a cold dinner—crackers, cheese, and whatever snacks we can find in Brody and Kate’s pantry. It isn’t much, but it feels like plenty after the heavy lunch we had earlier.

After we eat, Brody and Kate bring every pillow and blanket in the house into the living room and pile them up on the floor in front of the fireplace. We all settle in, Brody and Kate in a giant, overstuffed chair that was clearly made for two people while Tatum and I sit on the couch, Toby stretched out on the floor below us. In addition to the fire, Brody sets up a lantern on the coffee table and a couple of lit candles on either end of the mantel.

The room is cozy and comfortable, but I’m still having a hard time relaxing if only for my body’s hyperawareness of Tatum’s proximity. We’re both sitting sideways, our backs against the armrests and our feet extended outward, which means her feet are snuggled up against my thigh, and my feet are snuggled up against hers. It’s not particularly sexy, feet touching thighs, but it’s still *touch*. It’s still her body heat next to mine.

She looks beautiful in the firelight, her face framed by the wild curls that are loose around her shoulders. When she throws her head back and laughs over a story Brody is telling about one of his students, something tightens in my chest, like my heart just grew the tiniest bit and now everything has to shift around to make room.

But just watching her like this—it isn’t enough.

I reach my hand under the blanket that’s covering us both and wrap it around Tatum’s socked foot. Her eyes lift to mine, but she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she stretches the tiniest bit, pressing her foot into my hand like she wants the contact as much as I do. I trace my fingers up the bridge of her foot, and she smiles, biting her lip like it tickles, but she doesn’t flinch away. I keep moving until my fingers hit the top of her sock. I trace a slow circle on her ankle, and her eyes flutter closed.

“Okay, I’m beat,” Brody says, stretching his arms over his head. “What do you think, Kate? Want to sleep upstairs?”

Kate yawns. “I was up there before we ate, and it wasn’t that bad. I think a lot of the heat from down here has risen. If we use the down comforter, we should be fine.”

I shouldn’t be so excited that Brody and Kate won’t be crashing on the floor like this is some sort of co-ed slumber party, but I am absolutely excited.

“So, there’s an extra bedroom upstairs,” Kate says as she lets Brody help her to her feet. “It’s in the back of the house though, farther away than our bedroom, so I’m worried it’ll be too cold to be comfortable.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’m happy to stay down here close to the fire,” Tatum says. “Your couch is really comfortable.”

“Absolutely,” Kate says. “Wherever you want to sleep is totally great. And you know where the bedroom is if you decide you want it, Len.”

Brody drops a hand onto my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “You’ll keep the fire going a while longer?” Even though his words ask a very simple question, I feel him saying so much more in the gesture. *Are you okay? Do you need me? I’m here if you do.*

It’s funny. I’m the older brother here, but Brody has grown up so much in the last year. It’s as though the certainty of his future has grounded him in a way I can’t fully understand. It’s not that I don’t have anything to live for. I have my restaurant. My family. But I don’t have *this*. A true home. A relationship.

My eyes flick to Tatum.

“I’ll take care of the fire,” I say.

Brody nods. “You know where to find me if you need me.”

The fire crackles in the hearth as Kate and Brody make their way upstairs. They take the lantern with them, and the candles have burned themselves out, so we’re left with nothing but the fire to see by.

My hand is still wrapped around Tatum's ankle, and I tug it toward me, using both hands to press my thumbs into the ball of her foot.

She moans softly and closes her eyes. "Oh man. That feels ..." Her words trail off and she lets out a little whimper as I move up and down the arch of her foot.

"It's almost like you work on your feet all day," I say.

She chuckles. "Right?" After a beat of silence, she says, "Sometimes, I don't know why I do it."

My hands still. "What, cook?"

She gives the tiniest nod. Her eyes are cast in shadow, and I can't see her expression, so I just wait, my fingers working on her foot, and hope she'll add something to clarify.

"I used to love cooking," she says, her voice soft. "When I was really little. But then when Dad got the cooking show, and everything changed so fast ..." She shifts, and I give her foot a squeeze before letting it go and reaching for the other one. "I don't know," she continues. "I could be remembering things wrong. But it just feels like once Dad was working with the network, he no longer talked to me about *food*. He only talked to me about my career. And those aren't the same things, are they?"

"No, they definitely aren't," I say softly. "I get what you're saying."

"Lennox, I don't think I ever figured out how to cook just for the sheer joy of it." Her voice sounds farther away, and I think she might be falling asleep. "That's terrible, right? I should love what I do. What if I never love what I do?"

At this point, I'm not even sure she's talking to me. It feels more like I happened to overhear a question she's asking herself.

When her breathing evens out and deepens, I'm even more sure.

I keep my hands cupped around her foot and lean my head back, shifting so I'm more fully reclined on the couch. I can't

sleep like this long term, and Tatum won't sleep comfortably with my big body taking up most of the couch, but hopefully, she'll be okay for a few minutes more.

I don't know what to make of Tatum's words.

She doesn't love to cook?

I always imagined growing up with Christopher Elliott had to be such an incredible privilege, but now I'm not so sure. I've had a lot of conversations with Flint about what fame can do, about how hard he has to work to keep himself grounded, to refuse all the fawning and free stuff and catering to his every whim.

But cooking isn't really about fame. For me, it's about love, as cheesy as that sounds. About serving and caring for the people around me and making people happy with something I create. And of course, it's about the food. About recognizing bounty and magnifying it in ways that honor the earth and the many things it gives us. Money, attention, praise in travel magazines or from food critics, those things are like icing. They can help, of course. Make it possible to keep doing what I love doing. But it's never been *why* I do what I do.

My eyes close, and I feel myself drifting off, but my left leg is fully asleep with the way Tatum is leaning against it, which can't be any more comfortable for her than it is for me. My ankles are bony, and it feels like my left one is currently digging into her ribs.

I shift and pull my legs back, slowly inching away from Tatum without waking her up. It takes some effort, but eventually, I'm on my feet.

Toby lifts his head and looks at me, but he flops back onto the floor with a snuffly breath.

Tatum is curled into a ball at the end of the couch, her head tilted at an awkward angle that she'll regret in the morning.

I move toward her and slip one hand under her back and the other around her shoulders to try and shift her down a little. I lift gently, and suddenly Tatum is moving, her arms lifting and



wrapping around my neck. I pause, hovering over her, unsure what to do.

“Where are we going? Are you taking me somewhere?” she asks sleepily.

“Just moving you a little so you can be more comfortable.” I shift her down until her head is resting more fully on a pillow. “How’s that?” I ask.

“Mmm, that’s better,” she says.

I have my doubts as to whether Tatum is awake enough that she’ll remember this conversation in the morning, and I have half a mind to ask her something ridiculous just to see what she’ll say. Flint used to talk in his sleep all the time, and Brody and I would take turns trying to coax him into saying stupid stuff. We still have an audio recording of him confessing his love to one of Mom’s milk goats—with her silky brown fur and soulful eyes.

I don’t want to manipulate Tatum, but I also don’t want to let her go, which is good because her arms are still wrapped around my neck. I can’t stand like this forever though—my quads are already burning from my half-crouched, half-standing position.

I shift one hand out from under her and slide it up her arm. “Hey, are you going to let me go?” I whisper.

She lets out a tiny moan that ignites a pulse of fire deep in my gut. “Mmm, nope,” she says a little too sleepily for me to trust her. “You should stay here. You should—”

Before I can fully process what’s happening, Tatum slides her hand from behind my neck, tracing my collarbone until her fingers hook over my shirt. She tugs me closer, even as her hand slides up to my cheek, one thumb grazing across my bottom lip. She tilts her head up the tiniest bit, and then her lips are on mine, fire-warm and feather-soft.

Her hand moves into my hair, her fingers pressing into my scalp, and this time, I’m the one that lets out a groan. But I can’t do this.

She's too asleep for me to know if *she* knows what she's doing, and I know better than to push when I'm not sure this is actually what she wants.

It takes all of my willpower, but I pull back, grasping her hand with mine and easing it away. "Easy there, tiger," I say. "How about you just get some sleep for now?"

She doesn't answer, which only makes me feel better about my decision to back away. I tuck her hand under the blanket and pull it up to her chin, then move to the other end of the couch and tuck it under her feet.

There's nothing else I can do to make her feel comfortable, and it feels weird to just stand here and stare at her, so I grab a pillow from the pile Brody and Kate left earlier and stretch out on the floor next to Toby. He scoots closer, lifting his head and dropping it on my stomach.

I don't know how to make sense of what just happened.

I kissed Tatum.

*Tatum.*

Or, Tatum kissed ME.

Sort of kissed me?

Is a sleep kiss the same thing as a drunk kiss? Can I even trust it as something that Tatum wanted, at least subconsciously, or is this more of an impulse thing that, had she been remotely cognizant, Tatum would have overridden and tossed out as a horrible idea? Will she remember and think it was a dream? Or worse—a nightmare?

Tatum shifts the slightest bit. "Lennox?" she says softly.

I push up on my elbows. "Hmm?"

She says my name one more time, except *not* like a question. "*Lennox.*"

I smile as I settle back on the floor. So maybe *not* a nightmare.

If she's dreaming, I'm glad it's about me. Because whether she remembers it or not, my first kiss with Tatum Elliott is

something I'm never going to forget.

Our *first* kiss. But I'm determined it won't be our last.

And next time, I'll make sure it's one *she'll* remember.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tatum

THE POWER IS BACK on when I wake up. The lamp in the corner of the living room bathes the room in soft light, and I can hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

Lennox is stretched out on the floor beside the couch sound asleep. He's on his stomach, one arm tucked under his pillow and the other draped over Toby, who is snuggled in beside him. The sight of my dog nestled against a sleeping Lennox Hawthorne does serious things to my heart. I thought it was bad yesterday when Lennox talked to Toby in a silly voice, but this is ten times worse. If yesterday was a gentle nudge to my feelings, this is a seismic shift. Toby has been the sole occupant of my heart for some time now, but apparently, the rebellious organ is more than happy to grow an extra chamber for Lennox.

And that scares me more than I can say.

Toby's head pops up, like he somehow sensed that I'm awake, and when he moves, Lennox moves. I hold my breath, not wanting to intentionally disturb him. It's barely light outside. It can't be much past six a.m., and we were up late. Just because I'm an incurable morning person doesn't mean everyone else has to be too.

Toby settles back down, and I feel around on the couch, knowing my phone is around here somewhere. I find it tucked

under my pillow, still connected to the portable power block Brody gave me yesterday. I unplug it and set the charger aside, then snuggle a little deeper into my blankets. Without really thinking about what I'm doing, I pull up Instagram and find Lennox's profile. He doesn't post much—I discovered that when I saw the Stonebrook job posting, impulsively applied, then cyber-stalked his entire family until I got the job. But the Stonebrook Farm Instagram account is full of gorgeous pictures of the farm, including several from the restaurant opening that feature Lennox in all his gorgeous glory.

In my favorite photo, he's standing in his restaurant kitchen, a pan of vibrantly colored vegetables sautéing on the stove in front of him. I can't tell what he's making, but that doesn't matter. The picture isn't about the food. It's about Lennox and the light in his eyes—the sheer joy on his face.

My heart squeezes for the millionth time in the past twenty-four hours.

Lennox loves what he does.

I love that he loves what he does.

But the contrast to how I feel about my work is too blatant to ignore.

I definitely *don't* love what I do. Not like this.

When I ran away from California, I was mostly running away from Dad. But I'm starting to wonder—maybe I was running away from Le Vin, too. From being a chef.

The catering kitchen has been exciting because it's been new, a challenge for me to figure out and problem solve. But now that it's starting to feel easy, or at least *easier*, I'm already feeling ... I don't know. Itchy, maybe?

I don't know what that means, but I do know I need to figure it out.

I scroll through a few more pictures of Lennox. The man is stupidly photogenic. I'm pretty sure I dreamed about him last night. Which honestly, how could I not? The heat of him next to me on the couch. The press of his thumbs on the sorest parts

of my feet, the whisper of his touch across the skin on my ankle.

Every new brush of contact felt like a question. *Do you feel this? Do you want this?*

*Yes, yes, and extra yes.*

A memory pushes to the surface. Oh. *Oh*, I think I dreamed about *kissing* Lennox last night. I can conjure up exactly what it's like to feel his mouth pressed against mine.

I lift a hand to my lips and close my eyes.

*Good job, brain. Excellent, excellent work.*

I scroll Instagram for a few more minutes until I can no longer ignore my need to pee. Which is a shame because I am warm and comfortable, and even though the power is back on, the air still feels cool outside the enormous comforter I'm covered up with. I need to get myself one of these. If I'm going to live in the mountains, clearly, I need blankets that provide mountain-level warmth.

The wood floors creak beneath my feet as I make my way down the hallway to the tiny bathroom next to the kitchen. After I finish, I stare at my reflection, wishing I'd grabbed my bag on my way in. I haven't had makeup on since arriving; it was basically the middle of the night when Kate texted and insisted I come back with Brody, so I didn't think to put any on then. And we were all just sitting around in our sweats all day, huddled by the fire.

But now? After how things went with Lennox last night—the camaraderie during the game, the secret, small touches—I feel a sudden need to try a little. To make sure I look my best. I sneak out to the hall and grab my bag, tiptoeing back to the bathroom. So far, it doesn't sound like anyone else is awake.

First priority? The riot of curls on my head. I use a little water and finger comb them as best I can, then tame them into a messy bun. There are still wispy ringlets sticking out around my face, but I need product to control those, and I didn't bring any with me, so this will have to do. I brush my teeth and put on a little bit of tinted lip balm and a light coat of mascara. It

isn't much, but it's enough to make me feel slightly better about facing Lennox.

I take a deep breath and press a hand to my stomach. I'm nervous, but it's a good kind of nervous.

When I make it back to the living room, Lennox is nowhere to be found. Someone's making noise in the kitchen though, so I follow the sound, finding Lennox standing at the back door, holding it open for Charlie and Toby.

"You're awake," I say.

He turns. He's wearing the same joggers he had on yesterday and a navy-blue hoodie that looks warm and soft and comfortable. "Your dog woke me up." He lifts his hand and rubs it across his beard. "A tongue bath is a very effective alarm clock."

I wince. "Oh man. Sorry about that."

"He's a dog who knows how to get what he wants. He led me right to the door as soon as I was on my feet. You want some coffee?"

"I'd love some."

He moves to the coffeemaker sitting on the counter. "How did you sleep?"

I lean against the island across from him. "Good, I guess. I was warm, so there's that. How about you? Sorry you had to sleep on the floor."

"Being close to the fire was worth it," he says. "And Toby seemed like he needed the company."

Or maybe *I* seemed like I needed the company? It's probably too much to hope that he stayed downstairs to be close to me, but a girl can dream.

"I saw you snuggled up together when I woke up." *And it made my heart climb out of my chest to fall on the floor at your feet.*

He turns and folds his arms across his chest, studying me closely. He clears his throat. "So, do you remember anything

weird happening last night? Anything ... different?"

I narrow my eyes. "Should I? Why? What happened?"

He grins. "How about we start with what you *do* remember?"

"Oh no." A beat of panic flits through me. "Lennox, did I talk in my sleep? Please tell me I didn't say anything stupid." I press my hands to my cheeks, feeling them warm against my cool palms. "I used to do it all the time. My college roommates had way too much fun with some of the things I said."

I can see the smile playing on Lennox's lips, but he doesn't cave, just keeps those deep green eyes trained right on me. Finally, he unleashes his smile in all its overwhelming glory. "You talked a little."

I groan. "Was it bad? Tell me it wasn't bad."

He turns around and pulls a couple of mugs out of the cabinet, setting them on the counter next to the already gurgling coffee maker. "Depends on who you're asking." He lifts his shoulders in a playful shrug. "But I didn't mind it."

I squeeze my eyes closed and move my hands up so they're covering my entire face. "Just tell me," I say. "Can you repeat it? Am I ever going to be able to look at you again?"

He's quiet for a beat, then I feel him move closer. His hands close around my wrists, and he gently tugs them away from my face. He places a warm mug of fresh coffee into my hands. "Stop stressing. All you said was my name."

A surge of relief washes over me. "Oh. That's not too bad, I guess."

"I mean, it definitely sounded like you were trying to seduce me. A little sexy, a little breathy—" He opens the fridge and pulls out the cream, offering it to me.

I swat at his arm before setting my mug on the counter and taking the cream. "I did not sound like I was trying to seduce you."

He smiles. "You kinda did."



Something tugs at the back of my consciousness, and the kissing part of my dream pops into my mind in all its vivid glory. *Was* I trying to seduce him? But I was *SLEEPING*. It couldn't have been that bad.

Either way, Lennox is enjoying this way too much.

"I think you must have mistaken *frustration* for interest." I pour a splash of cream into my coffee and leave it on the counter, turning to face Lennox fully. "I was probably dreaming about you taunting me with dry pastry or expensive cheese."

"Dry pastry?" he says with a smirk. "I wouldn't know where to find any of that." He steps toward me. "Besides, I know what you sound like when you're frustrated. And *this* was not that." Another step. "This was softer." He reaches forward and hooks a finger around my pinky, tugging me toward him. I go willingly, my breath catching when his free hand slips around my waist and pulls me against him, our bodies flush. "You sounded like you wanted me."

Outside the back door, Toby barks, startling us both. I jump away from Lennox, one hand pressed to my heart, and look at Toby who is staring at us through the glass.

Seconds later, Brody and Kate come downstairs, then Lennox is making everyone breakfast, and I'm left to process one of the most emotionally charged moments I've ever experienced while we're all laughing and talking over pancakes.

*You sounded like you wanted me.*

Well, that's not hard to imagine, because I definitely do.

— e l l e —

I did not think about the downside to unexpected days off.

Now that the snow is mostly gone and we're up and running again, I'm playing catch up, and it is *not fun*.

The wedding scheduled for the day after the snowstorm only had to be postponed one day, which, great for the bride and groom, but it means I have to handle a wedding dinner *and* a

corporate retreat dinner on the same night. Both events were supposed to happen in the farmhouse dining room, but Lennox has agreed to have the corporate retreat people use a corner of his dining room for one meal, leaving the farmhouse open for the rescheduled wedding. That just means I have to figure out how to have staff in two places—up at the farmhouse serving a wedding, and here, serving thirty corporate attorneys on a week-long restorative mountain getaway. Olivia brought in extra waitstaff, and Lennox offered to let me use a couple of his line cooks, so everything should run smoothly.

But the situation is still less than ideal, and it's made even more complicated by the tree-sized hole in the ceiling of my office. Every time we shuttle food out the back door to the van we use to transport it up to the farmhouse, we're walking through a construction zone which does exactly nothing to soothe my already frazzled nerves.

Meanwhile, whenever I see Lennox, all I want to do is forget I even have a job and run into his arms. What else could I possibly do after that last moment between us?

I can't stop thinking about the way he looked at me, his finger hooked around mine, a fire burning in his eyes. He wanted to kiss me. I'm absolutely positive about that. And had we not been interrupted first, by Toby, then by Brody and Kate, I'm pretty sure he would have.

So that's fun. An unrealized kiss hanging between us, and zero time to actually make it happen. We're both thinking about it though. I can tell every time our eyes meet across a crowded kitchen or our fingers brush, lingering a little longer than necessary whenever we're close enough to touch.

It's just past ten when I finish for the night, but Lennox's kitchen is still hopping. On the one hand, I hate that he's still on his feet. On the other, if his staff is still cooking, I'd do anything for some apple brandy pork tenderloin right about now.

Lennox finally sees me, and motions for Zach to come take his spot as expeditor before he makes his way over. As soon as I see the tired lines etched into the side of his face, I quickly

change my mind about asking him for anything. I'm half-tempted to offer to cover for him so he can go home and go to bed.

"You guys are working late."

"About to plate the last orders," he says. "I guess this big extended family is in town for a funeral, and they all came in together. There's something like twenty of them."

"Do you need any help?"

"Nah, we're through the worst of it. But can I ask your opinion about something else?"

My stomach growls. "Is my opinion worth some apple brandy pork tenderloin?"

He grins. "I'll see what I can do," he says, then he turns and looks over his shoulder while Zach calls an order.

"Plating two tenderloins, one salmon, two filets, one rare, one medium rare, and four southern chickens," Zach says.

The cooks around the room echo back the order, and Lennox nods once before he turns his attention back to me.

"Then you can have all my opinions," I say. "What's up?"

Lennox quickly walks me through what he calls a staffing problem. But to me, it just sounds like a training problem. The hardest part about running a kitchen is how frequently people call out, leaving everyone else to pick up the slack. If there aren't enough people left who can do what needs to be done, the few who can are stressed and stretched too thin. And that creates ripples that eventually hit your dining room.

From what it sounds like, Lennox has enough cooks, he just doesn't have enough cooks who are trained to do more than one thing. Ideally, every station should be at least two deep with people who can handle every single dish on the menu.

"So hiring someone to replace Griffin will probably help, but I still don't feel like it's going to be enough," he says. He pushes his hands into his pockets.

“I heard what happened with Griffin,” I say, remembering the conversation I overheard a couple of his waitstaff having. It was more than a little sexy to think of Lennox nearly punching a guy, though I never found out what Griffin actually said to set Lennox off.

“Don’t remind me,” he says. “Wasn’t my finest moment.”

“What did Griffin say?” I ask before I can think better of it.

Lennox’s jaw tightens. “Don’t worry about it.”

*Oh*, now I want to know even more. “That bad, huh?”

One of Lennox’s dishwashers crosses behind Lennox, a girl who can’t be more than eighteen or so. She looks at me, eyes wide, almost like she’s trying to tell me something. I furrow my brow. *Is she trying to tell me something?*

Lennox follows my gaze, making eye contact with her, and she quickly turns away from us, but then she spins back around like she can’t help herself. “Griffin said something about you!” she blurts out, then her hand flies to her mouth like she can’t believe the words actually escaped. She peels her hand away to reveal an innocent smile. “He was defending your honor,” she says, motioning to Lennox, her tone dreamy and sweet. I suddenly feel like I’m in a scene from a Jane Austen novel. Lennox *defended* my honor? *Well, yes please and thank you.*

“Thanks for that, Paige,” Lennox says. “Really.”

“Sorry,” she whispers before scurrying off.

Lennox looks at me, his expression almost bashful. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Sorry for nearly punching a guy who said something rude about me?”

“Sorry you found out it happened at all.”

I appreciate him wanting to protect me. But does it hurt my opinion of the man to know he nearly lost his cool over me? *Absolutely not.*

Also noteworthy: fancy head chef Lennox Hawthorne knows the name of a random dishwasher.

Every time I think it's impossible for me to like him more, I learn something like this, and my heart stretches a little bigger.

"Listen," I say, stepping closer to Lennox, "I don't think you need to hire someone to replace Griffin. Willow is great, and she's anxious to learn. Train her. And then keep training. Make every station two or three deep so when people call out, you have a backup, and a backup to your backup. If you have a commis chef who's anxious to learn, train them."

He shakes his head. "But I can't pay everyone like they're all chef de partie."

"You won't have to. I'm not saying you have to train everyone down to your dishwashers. But you're covering too much. And Zach is too. Two or three more people who can pinch hit when you have a station chef call out would mean Zach wouldn't have to step in and cover for people, leaving him free to be expeditor, and you free to breathe every once in a while so you can focus on bigger picture stuff."

He nods. "That sounds pretty nice, actually." He props his hands on his hips. "So three people trained at every station."

I nod. "That's what we aimed for at Le Vin. Remember, they won't all work at once. More trained chefs will also give everyone more breathing room in their schedules. That means less burnout."

He finally smiles, and my heart flops into my stomach. "Pretty smart, Elliott. Pretty smart." He holds my gaze, the air crackling between us before his eyes drop to my lips.

*Annnd* here we are again—the *wanting* almost tangible enough to touch.

"Hey Chef, can I get your thoughts on this?" Zach calls from across the kitchen.

Lennox looks over his shoulder, and he breathes out a sigh before turning back to me.

“Go work,” I say, even though it pains me to say it. “I can text you later.”

He shakes his head, and his eyes flash with heat. “No, don’t leave. I’ll be right back.”

*Well, okay then.* I kind of like it when Lennox gets bossy with me.

I watch as he talks to Zach, looking over several plates spread across the counter. He nods once, claps Zach on the back, then he’s striding toward me with purpose. He doesn’t even pause when he reaches me. He just scoops up my hand and tugs me across his kitchen, then down the hall toward the back door.

At first, I think he must be taking me outside, but then he turns into a little alcove holding a small storage shelf full of to-go coffee cups, prepackaged plastic cutlery, and the cardboard boxes catering uses to make boxed lunches. There’s an old chest freezer in the corner I’m pretty sure no one has used in years.

There isn’t a door on the space, so technically anyone could walk by at any moment, but this late, with my kitchen already shut down for the night, it’s unlikely, making this the closest thing to alone we’ve been all day.

Lennox stands apart from me, his hands propped on his hips. “I know we’re supposed to have dinner next week,” he finally says.

I nod. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too,” he says. “And I thought I could wait—that we could talk and have a nice meal and then ...” His words trail off, and he takes a step toward me, hunger flashing in his gaze, but then he retreats again, like he’s fighting to restrain himself. “I don’t think I can wait, Tatum,” he says, his voice low. “I know what I’m feeling. Do you—are you feeling it too?”

I nod, barely holding back.

“Good,” he says. “Then we understand each other?”

I lick my lips, my heart pounding. “Yes, Chef.”

And then he's on me, his strong arms circling my back as he presses his lips to mine. The kiss is frantic, arms and hands scrambling as we practically claw at each other. I cannot get close enough—though part of that problem is that he is tall, and I am short, and I really *can't* get close enough.

But then Lennox reaches down and hoists me up so I'm sitting on the freezer, and he steps into the space between my knees. *Oh my*. He made that look easy, and this definitely improves the height difference.

I tilt my head, deepening the kiss and eliciting a low moan from Lennox that sends a fresh wave of desire coursing through me. I hook a hand around his neck and tug him even closer, suddenly hating that the chef's coats we wear are so thick—so *present*. I want to feel his skin, rub my hands up his arms and feel the steady beat of his heart under my palm.

Eventually, Lennox breaks the kiss, dropping his head on my shoulder as his hands rest on either side of my waist. His chest is still heaving, and we breathe together for several moments.

Finally, he looks up and we make eye contact. “You smell like herbs de Provence,” he says as he presses a gentle kiss just in front of my earlobe.

“I was brining chickens in buttermilk,” I say, my voice soft and breathy. This is an absolutely ridiculous moment to be talking about chicken, but he's the one who brought it up. “The herbs kick it up a notch.”

He chuckles as he trails kisses across my jaw. “Hmm, I bet,” he murmurs.

“This—what you're doing,” I say, my voice raw with desire, “is entirely unfair.” Still, I can't stop myself from arching my neck, exposing more of my skin like an offering. “But also, please don't stop,” I whisper.

He seems all too happy to comply, moving down my neck before he shifts and finds my lips one more time. This kiss is more tender, less frenzied than the first, and the heat coursing

through me settles to something more like a banked hearth instead of a raging forest fire.

If someone had asked me, the week I started at Stonebrook Farm, if I could ever imagine something like this happening with Lennox Hawthorne, I would have laughed myself sick.

And yet, here I am. Here *we* are. And nothing has ever felt so natural.

I slide my hand over Lennox's beard, cradling his face as we pull apart. "Not bad as far as first kisses go," I say.

Lennox smiles, and my hands fall away. "Technically, that wasn't our first kiss."

My brow furrows. "What do you mean *technically*?"

"The first was at Brody and Kate's house. But we don't have to count it," he says saucily. "Seeing as how you were asleep."

I gasp. "You kissed me while I was *sleeping*?"

"Absolutely not," he says with enough conviction that I immediately believe him. "What do you take me for? But after you fell asleep, I shifted you down so you would be more comfortable, and *you kissed me*."

"I didn't."

He laughs. "You did. Reached up, tugged me down by the shirt, and planted one right on my lips." He leans a little closer. "*Like you wanted me*."

I gasp. "I did not." My hands fly to my face, fire already pooling in my cheeks.

Lennox grins. "You're blushing, Tatum."

"Seriously, Lennox?" I shift my hands so they're covering my eyes, too. "You aren't supposed to point it out."

"What should I do instead?" he asks, his tone playful.

"You should pretend like you don't notice at all. Celebrate on the inside if you want, but don't make me sit here feeling all embarrassed because now I know that *you* know how much you ... make me feel," I say softly.



He's quiet for a beat, then he unbuttons the top of his chef's coat and reaches for my free hand. He tugs it toward him and slips it inside the coat, pressing it against his heart. His chest is warm under my palm, and I feel the *thump thump thump* of his racing heart.

"Now we're even," he says softly. "Now you know what *you* do to *me*."

*Oh, he's good*, I think, but when I look into his eyes, there's a certainty there that makes me think he isn't just feeding me a line. I'm not being played. Whatever this is, it's *real*.

He smiles. "I should go help Zach finish up."

I bite my lip and nod. "You know he's going to guess exactly what you've been doing."

Lennox leans forward and brushes another kiss across my lips. "I hope he does," he says, a hint of possessiveness in his tone. "I want him and everyone else to know that I'm the *only* one around here who gets to think about kissing you."

"Just around here?" I lean up and kiss him again.

His grip on me tightens. "Anywhere. You're mine now, Tatum."

"How very caveman of you," I say, my tone teasing.

He leans back and makes eye contact, his expression giving me the choice his words lacked. "I *want* you to be mine."

"Better," I say. "And there's nothing that I want more."

He helps me off the freezer and walks me to the bottom of the stairs that lead up to my apartment. He touches my elbow, his expression so full of warmth and tenderness, it's all I can do to stay upright. "I'll text you later?" he says.

I nod. "I would love that."

An hour later, after I've showered and put on my pajamas, a knock sounds on my apartment door.

I open it to find one of Lennox's waitstaff holding a to-go container. She holds it out to me. "Compliments of the chef," she says.

I don't even have to open the container to know what it is.

Halfway through my meal, a text message from Lennox pops up.

**Lennox:** What was the first food eaten in space?

A trivia question?

Before I can type in the answer, another message pops up.

**Lennox:** Also, hi. 😊

**Tatum:** Sorry, can't talk right now. I'm eating the best pork tenderloin ever.

**Tatum:** Also, applesauce.

**Lennox:** You're eating applesauce?

**Tatum:** Nope. But that was the first food eaten in space.

**Lennox:** New goal: stump Tatum with a trivia question.

**Tatum:** Challenge accepted. Does this mean you're going to text me ALL THE TIME?

**Lennox:** Definitely.

**Tatum:** Thank you for dinner. I really didn't expect you to cook for me after the night you've had.

**Lennox:** What did I tell you about cooking for you?

**Tatum:** Yes, yes, all I have to do is ask. As a thank you, here's a link to the quiz bowl finals the year I won. You have my permission to laugh at my very bad hair.

I pull up the link on YouTube and send it over.

It's five or so minutes before Lennox responds.

**Lennox:** I approve of this form of payment. I expect baby pictures in exchange for the next meal.

**Lennox:** Your hair was EPIC.

**Lennox:** Hey, also, thanks for your thoughts earlier. I talked to Zach, and I'm already excited about what this could mean for us.

**Tatum:** Of course! I'm so happy to help.

**Lennox:** Can I see you tomorrow?

**Tatum:** You see me every day.

**Lennox:** Maybe I want to do more than see you.

My heart starts pounding, and I let out a little squeal that makes Toby sit up and woof.

**Lennox:** What time do you work tomorrow? Are you free in the morning?

**Tatum:** Tomorrow is slammed. But I am not opposed to accidentally on purpose running into you in the pantry a time or two.

**Lennox:** That is not going to be enough to satisfy me. Meet me in my office for coffee at nine?

**Tatum:** If you're bringing the coffee, I'm there.

**Lennox:** Perfect.

I put my phone down and pick up my fork.

The plan does sound perfect. Almost too perfect? Or maybe it's Lennox who seems too perfect.

I want to be an optimist. I really do. But I can't help but worry that when something seems too good to be true, it usually is.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lennox

**Flint:** Hey. Anyone have an update on Lennox and his new woman?

**Brody:** They're definitely a thing. They're almost as bad as Perry and Lila were.

**Perry:** We weren't bad.

**Brody:** You were definitely bad.

**Perry:** We were falling in love. Also, you're one to talk. We watched you pine after Kate for YEARS, Brody. YEARS.

**Flint:** He's right. It was pretty painful.

**Brody:** You think it was painful for you? Imagine how I felt.

**Flint:** So, is Lennox actually serious about this woman? Am I the only one sensing how big of a deal this is?

**Brody:** Agreed. It's a big deal.

**Perry:** She seems good for him though. This is a good thing.

**Lennox:** Should I step out so you guys can talk about my love life more openly?

**Flint:** YOU SAID LOVE LIFE. DO YOU LOVE HER?

**Lennox:** Stop. It's a figure of speech. No overreacting.

**Lennox:** But also, I maybe ...

**Flint:** DETAILS, MAN. SPILL THEM.

**Brody:** WHY ARE YOU YELLING AT US FLINT

**Flint:** Sorry. Caps lock was on. Didn't realize.

**Lennox:** I don't know what happened. She annoyed me. I annoyed her. Then all of a sudden, we didn't anymore.

**Perry:** Does she know how you feel?

**Lennox:** Pretty sure, but we haven't explicitly said anything or made it official.

**Perry:** But you think she feels the same way?

**Brody:** Kate says she thinks the feelings are definitely mutual. Based on her observations and conversations with Tatum.

**Flint:** DUDE. You know the rules about letting wives read the text thread.

**Brody:** Sorry, sorry. She was reading over my shoulder. She says she's sorry.

**Flint:** I can't even with you. Hi, Kate. NOW GO AWAY.

**Brody:** She says she loves you. And she loved the interview you did with Vanity Fair.

**Perry:** And by that she means she knows exactly how to stroke your ego so you'll let her off the hook.

**Brody:** Perry speaks very fluent Kate.

**Flint:** Tell Kate THANK YOU because the interview WAS amazing. And I'll let her off the hook anyway because she has to share a bed with Brody and we all know how terrible he smells.

**Brody:** Are we twelve again?

**Flint:** All I'm saying is the last time I was home and I rode in your truck, it smelled like the river died and rotted in your back seat.

**Brody:** That was the kayaking gear. Not me.

**Perry:** Sometimes it's you. Essence of river. Don't worry. We're all used to it.

**Brody:** Help me out here, Len. Do I smell?

**Lennox:** Yes. Hazards of the job. I usually smell like onions and garlic, though Tatum seems to like this about me. Not sure Kate is ever going to love river rot.

**Perry:** I think I win when it comes to smells.

**Flint:** Wrong, big brother. Because I smell like money, money, money.

**Brody:** Money ... and loneliness. How's it working for you, man?

**Flint:** Shut up.

**Flint:** Also, point taken.

**Perry:** Lennox, if you and Tatum care about each other, that's all that matters.

**Lennox:** I think we do. But everything is still uncertain. I think Tatum likes Silver Creek, and she loves the farm, but I don't think she loves catering. I don't see her doing this long term.

**Perry:** Um, is that something Olivia needs to be aware of? Tatum might be leaving?

**Flint:** Perry. Stop being CFO and be a brother for a minute.

**Perry:** Right. Sorry. That wasn't cool.

**Lennox:** I'm sure she'll communicate with Olivia when she knows more. But even if she doesn't love the job, she'd never leave us hanging. She'll stay as long as we need her to stay.

**Brody:** With or without the job though, I don't see the trouble. She could still be with you even if she isn't working for the farm.

**Lennox:** True. But it's not like Silver Creek is a hotbed of job opportunities. I want her to be happy, to do something she loves, and I'm not sure she can living here.

**Perry:** So you're worried she might leave.

**Lennox:** And if she does, I'll be left with all these ... FEELINGS.

**Flint:** Awww. Look at our Lennox all sick with love.

**Lennox:** I seriously hate you so much right now.

**Brody:** I mean, I hate to state the obvious here, but the damage is already done, right?

**Brody:** If you've already fallen for her, your feelings are a moot point. You can't change them even if you want to.

**Perry:** True. Falling backwards is pretty much impossible.

**Lennox:** So that's it? I'm just doomed?

**Flint:** Love is pain, man.

**Perry:** Until it isn't. Then it's amazing. But you never get to the amazing part if you don't take any risks.

**Brody:** Yes. True.

**Flint:** Says the man who waited a thousand years to take an actual risk when it comes to love.

**Brody:** Also true. I have regrets.

**Perry:** You just have to trust, Len. Something will work out. If you're supposed to be together, you'll figure out a way to be together. Here, or somewhere else.

**Brody:** Just keep being your charming self. Show her what it feels like to be loved by YOU. You've got this, man. And you know we're here for you if you need us.

**Perry:** Full stop.

**Perry:** Also, Lila says I smell like apples. It's part of why she fell in love with me so fast.

**Flint:** I just threw up a little in my mouth.

**Lennox:** You guys are idiots.

**Lennox:** But also. Thanks.



# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tatum

I AM IN LOVE with Stonebrook farm.

Spring has finally sprung in the mountains, and I couldn't be happier. Flowers are blooming, trees are greening, temperatures are warming, and I am doing *lots* of kissing.

In the pantry? Check.

The walk-in fridge? Check.

My (finally repaired!) office? Check.

The storage room? The gazebo outside? The outside landing? Check, check, and check.

We finally had the promised dinner at Lennox's place, which was definitely a date since it involved kissing during all stages. Before dinner. During dinner. *After dinner*.

We've also had coffee at my place. Breakfast in the apple orchard. We've even had lunch with his parents.

We've exchanged a billion text messages, including countless trivia questions that I have gotten right at least ninety percent of the time. We've even managed to squeeze in a movie, a scheduling miracle that proved totally pointless because we both fell asleep halfway through.

But my favorite place to be with Lennox is in his restaurant kitchen after hours. Preferably while he's cooking something.

Tonight, he's working on a new special for Hawthorne's menu, so I've turned cooking into a spectator sport, and taken a seat on the counter to watch while he creates.

We're *weeks* into whatever this thing is between us, and let me tell you, I still haven't gotten tired of the view.

Lennox already lost his chef's coat at the end of his dinner service, so he's cooking in a t-shirt, the sleeves snug around his sculpted biceps, and he's wearing a striped chef's apron around his waist.

"Okay, try it now," Lennox says, lifting his spoon to my lips. He's been trying to perfect a sauce for a new salmon dish for the last half hour, not that I have any complaints. I could watch him do this all night long.

I taste the sauce, the flavor bright and bold as it hits my tongue. "Wait, where's the lemon?" I ask.

"Gone," he says, his eyes sparkling.

"This is sweeter. And better." I lick the last few drops off the spoon, finally catching the full flavor profile. "You went with the mango."

He grins. "It works, right?"

I nod. "It definitely works. So, a creme fraiche sweetened with mango puree? Will that be enough?"

"Not quite, I don't think. I want to use fresh mango in the dish, too. Maybe a chutney of some kind. Are you hungry? I think I'm ready to put it all together."

I stifle a yawn. "It's after midnight, but sure. I'm hungry."

He immediately stops and spins around. "Wait, no, Tatum, you should totally go to bed. I get like this sometimes, but ... you don't have to wait up with me." He steps closer, slipping his arms around my waist as I lift my hands to his shoulders.

I smile and shake my head. "I want to wait. I really am hungry. And I'm pretty sure this dish is going to be amazing. Cook. We'll eat. *Then* I'll go to bed." This is my new normal. Pushing aside sleep, chores, anything deemed nonessential to be with Lennox as frequently as possible.

He leans forward and presses a kiss to my lips. “You’re good to me.”

I catch him before he can retreat, pulling him back for a longer, more intentional kiss. I run my hands down his shoulders and over the curve of his biceps as I arch toward him. He lets out a low moan and deepens the kiss. “Maybe I don’t need to cook tonight,” he says against my lips.

I nudge him away. “Yes, you do. You know you want to. Also, I really am hungry.”

He smirks. “I’m hungry, too.”

I laugh as I push him away. “You’re shameless. Now, go. Feed me.”

He steps away, his grin wide as he heads toward the fridge. “Feed me?” he says over his shoulder. “And you’re calling *me* shameless?”

A bonus to all of the obvious benefits of spending so much time with Lennox: I’m also learning a lot about myself. Observing his process, hearing him deconstruct a dish, talking about what flavors are working and what flavors aren’t—I’m recognizing that his brain works in magical and amazing ways that I cannot, in any respect, fully comprehend. It feels a little like watching one of those videos where an artist paints an entire canvas upside down and it looks like a lumpy potato until they flip it over, and suddenly you’re looking at a sketch of Harry Styles, a knowing grin on his face.

The point is, Lennox’s genius in the kitchen is unparalleled. Maybe it’s because I’m finally growing into myself, owning what makes me talented in my own right. Maybe it’s because his kisses make everything easier. But the jealousy I used to feel back in culinary school is completely gone.

Now, I just admire him. Respect him. And possibly feel ... *more* than that. Though I’m not sure I’m ready to admit as much out loud.

“Hey, random question,” I ask as he heads back into the kitchen, salmon in hand.

“Shoot,” he says.

“What made you want to run your own restaurant?”

His eyebrows go up. “Like, just generally?”

I nod.

He sets the fish on the counter and pulls out his knife, slicing it into two generous portions. “I mean, practically speaking, cooking is what I’m good at, so it makes sense.”

“That’s it?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything else. “It’s all very practical and reasonable?”

He turns around and wipes his hands on his apron before folding his arms. “You’ll laugh at me.”

“I absolutely will not.”

He hooks a hand around the back of his neck like he’s nervous, which is, not going to lie, absolutely endearing and adorable. “Okay, I guess I just feel this sense of responsibility. Food has always meant a lot to my family because it’s the source of our livelihood. The bounty of the earth has given *us* bounty. So cooking feels like a way for me to fuel us and feed us and give us the energy to give back to the earth. It’s a relationship—which is why I try to use every part of an ingredient, wasting as little as possible.” He drops his hand and turns back to his fish. “That probably sounds really weird.”

*Oh my word.* This man has no idea how sexy he is when he talks about cooking. “I don’t think it sounds weird at all,” I say, my voice soft. “I think it sounds brilliant.”

He walks over to the stove and pours some oil into a pan. “What about you? What made you want to cook?”

“My father,” I answer without hesitation. “But not for the reasons you think.”

A lightness fills my chest as I realize I’m going to tell Lennox the truth. Unfiltered. Uninfluenced by what Christopher Elliott or anyone else actually thinks.

“So ... not because you were inspired by his very impressive career?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Then why?”

I shrug. “It was the only option. The only topic of conversation. The only dream I was ever allowed to have.”

He lifts the pan, swirling around the oil so it fully coats the bottom. “But was it ever actually *your* dream?”

“Who knows? The lines were always pretty blurry between what *I* wanted and what my father wanted for me. But I will say this. I probably dream about *not cooking* every day a lot more than most chefs.”

He lowers the fish into the pan, the familiar hiss and sizzle sounding loud in the otherwise quiet kitchen. Lennox looks over his shoulder and shrugs. “So quit.”

I immediately scoff. “I can’t *quit*.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have a job, first of all, and a very important one. And I like working at Stonebrook even if I don’t love everything about catering. Second of all, I don’t know how to do anything else.”

“Tatum. You’re brilliant. You could do anything you want.”

The easy way he’s listening, talking to me about options, is a stark contrast to the way these conversations always go with my father. With Dad, there is only *one* path. And it’s his.

Still, Lennox is making it sound too easy. I can’t just quit something. Until I stormed out of Le Vin in a blaze of fury and indignation, I’d never quit anything in my life.

I wave my hand dismissively. “I don’t know. It’s probably just the exhaustion talking.”

Lennox looks at me again, a flash of worry passing over his features, but then he schools his expression into something more neutral. “Hey, did I tell you I officially promoted Willow to saucier this week?”

“What? That’s amazing,” I say, happy for the subject change. “I bet she was thrilled.”

Lennox nods. “And I’ve moved two additional cooks over to be commis chefs for sauté and grill, and they both seem really excited. I can already tell it’s going to make a difference.”

“You’re deepening your bench. It’s smart, Lennox. I’m so glad.”

He drops the fish into the sizzling pan. “Was that a sports metaphor?” he says, grinning over his shoulder.

I roll my eyes. “What can I say? I know how to make you happy.”

The salmon dish is delicious—sweet and light and tropical and perfect for spring.

Lennox declares it an official special for next week’s menu, and then it’s time to call it a night.

By the time we finish eating and cleaning up, it’s almost one in the morning, though that’s not so unusual for chefs who start work so late in the day and finish so late at night. Trouble is, my schedule includes breakfast service as frequently as it does dinner, and keeping Lennox’s hours is starting to catch up with me.

We walk to the back door together, stopping at the foot of the stairs that lead up to my apartment. I lean into him for a hug, and he tugs me close, resting his cheek on top of my head. I close my eyes and sigh, allowing my body weight to sink into him. “Okay, sleepy head,” he says, kissing my forehead. “Off to bed with you.”

I yawn as I pull away. “Are we still meeting in the morning?”

“I’d like to, but let’s make it ten instead of nine so you can get some sleep.”

I lean up on my toes and give him a lingering kiss. “See? You’re good to me, too.”

I haul myself up the stairs, ready to tumble directly into bed, but I’ve barely made it inside my apartment when my phone rings. This wouldn’t be the first time Lennox has called me

seconds after saying goodnight just so he can say it again, so I answer the call without even glancing at the screen.

“Couldn’t live without me, huh?”

“Tatum?”

*Oh, crap.* “Dad?”

“I’m glad you’re still up.”

I drop onto the edge of my favorite chair, my body tight. Since Lennox and I started seeing each other, I’ve been ignoring Dad’s texts like it’s an Olympic sport, so I can’t exactly be surprised that he’s calling. But I don’t like that he caught me by surprise—that I had no time to prepare.

Toby ambles over and drops his head into my lap, and I curl my fingers through his fur, immediately grateful for his comforting presence.

“I just got home, actually. How are you?”

“Good. You know. Busy as always. How’s the weather out there?”

I furrow my brow. So we’re just going to small talk? A tiny bit of the tension in my shoulders drains away.

“Finally starting to warm up,” I cautiously say. “The Hawthornes told me the farm is beautiful in the spring, but it’s been amazing seeing it for myself. You wouldn’t believe it, Dad. This place looks like it’s straight out of a fairytale.”

“Sounds charming,” he says, sounding utterly *uncharmed*.

*Ah. There he is. There’s the Dad I expect.*

“It *is* charming,” I say, the bite in my words surprising even me. Apparently, I’m too tired to be careful. And I’m just ... really over him making everything so hard.

Dad scoffs, and I brace myself. “Really now, Tatum. Can we please just stop with all this? When are you coming home? I miss you. I *need* you here.”

I breathe out a weary sigh. “You don’t need me, Dad. Your restaurant is fine. Suki should have had the head chef job a

long time ago.”

“This isn’t about the restaurant,” he barks back, his tone harsh. “I don’t care about the restaurant.”

I sit up a little taller, a sense of unease building in my chest. Dad is often disagreeable, but it’s usually in a very passive-aggressive way. He’s rarely short-tempered. “Then what is it about?”

He’s quiet for a long moment before he lets out a frustrated breath. “Tatum, the network isn’t renewing my show. That’s the truth of it. If you don’t sign on for the show featuring us both, I’m off the air.”

I stiffen, a wave of shock moving through me. “Wait, what?”

“They don’t want me anymore,” he reiterates. “I have no contract unless I sign a new one with you on board.”

I sink back into my chair, letting his words percolate in my brain. Suddenly, everything makes so much more sense.

“So me coming back to L.A. has never been about me,” I say slowly. “It’s always been about you?”

“Tatum, you know that’s not true. Of course it’s been about you. I want what’s best for you. I want what’s best for us both.”

His words sound sincere, but I know Dad too well not to hear what he isn’t saying. He won’t tell me I’m throwing away his career along with my own, but he’ll think it, and knowing that is as heavy and oppressive as it would be if he simply said the words out loud.

“How can the network do this to you, Dad? After all you’ve done for them.”

“I’m an old man, Tatum. And there are countless younger, better-looking chefs anxious to make their mark on the world. But you—you’re young. Beautiful. You have the *something* they’re looking for.”

“Lucky for you, I happen to be your daughter.”



“Lucky for us both. Don’t pretend like you haven’t enjoyed the perks of growing up with everything my fame has given you.”

I run my hand over the butter-soft leather on my chair’s armrest.

Dad loves to remind me of this—everything his career has given me. But all I can think about right now is what it would take away.

Because if I go back to California to do a show with my father, I would have to leave Stonebrook.

*Leave Lennox.*

Staying together would be impossible. His life is here—his family is here. There wouldn’t be any compromise that could possibly work for us both.

Still, if I stay in Silver Creek, what would I do?

I’ve been real with myself the past couple of weeks, and I’m just about ready to admit out loud that catering—or really any kind of full-time cooking—isn’t what I want for my future. In that sense, a tv show might be a better fit. It would have better hours, anyway. And there would be a whole team of chefs and consultants available to do the heavy lifting. I’ve seen the way Dad’s show works. He doesn’t have to come up with *anything* on his own if he doesn’t want to. Everything is scripted, even if it’s made to look spontaneous.

But that would land me right back where I was when I fled to North Carolina in the first place. I would be playing a role. Pretending to be someone I’m not.

I may not love being a chef, but at least out here, it’s been *me*. It’s been real.

And at least out here, I have *Lennox*.

It’s not lost on me though that if I stop catering, if I’m not interested in cooking at all, there isn’t much else for me to do in Silver Creek. But that’s not a thought I want to dwell on after the euphoria I just experienced in Lennox’s kitchen.

“I know I have a lot to be grateful for, Dad. But I’ve given this a lot of thought, and not just since coming to North Carolina. It’s been on my mind a while. I don’t *want* to be on television. The fame, the attention—it isn’t what I want anymore. I don’t want that life.”

He scoffs. “You sound just like your mother.”

Pain slices into my chest, and unexpected tears pool in my eyes. “Is that such a bad thing?”

His voice is soft, his tone pleading when he says, “Of course not, Tatum. I shouldn’t have said that like it was an insult.” He sighs, sounding older and more tired than I’ve ever heard him sound. “Will you just think about this, please? We’re family. For so long, it’s only been you and me against the world. Think of everything we’ve done together. The traveling, the cooking. This could be another chapter for us. A *great* chapter for us.”

It’s my turn to sigh. “Dad, I just ...”

I don’t even know how to finish my sentence.

“I’ve done a lot for you, Tatum,” he says. “Everything you have is yours because I gave it to you. You owe me this much.”

An aching hollowness fills my chest. Do I *really* owe him? He’s my father. He *has* given me everything I have—worked hard to give me every opportunity. And he’s right—for a long time, it was just the two of us, conquering the world together. But love shouldn’t feel so contractual. If this isn’t an opportunity I want, would he really want me to sacrifice so his career can benefit?

“I’ll think about it, all right? But I’m not making any promises.”

“You’re being foolish,” he says sharply.

“I know you think that. But I’m a grown woman. I still get to make my own choices.”

“Did you at least look over the contract I sent you? Just read the terms. A couple of years, five max. And branding deals.

Tatum Elliott Cookware has a nice ring to it.”

“I said I’d think about it,” I say, my patience running out. “I have to go. I’m exhausted. I really need to get some sleep.”

I hang up the phone before he can say anything else.

*Tatum Elliott Cookware?*

It’s hard to imagine there was ever a time when that might have swayed me.

Still, Dad is family. And family is supposed to stick together. Isn’t it?

I stand up and pace around my tiny living room. It isn’t fair. Not even a little bit. But ... could I give him two years? Five years max, he said. Could I give him five? And if I don’t, will his career really be over? Do I want that hanging over my head?

I am no closer to an answer when I finally settle into bed, my heart aching with an emptiness I haven’t felt in months. It’s only when I think of Lennox that I’m able to relax and drift off to sleep, the warmth of his kisses and the strength of his arms carrying me into my dreams.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Lennox

IT'S 9:53 WHEN TOBY comes bounding down the stairs to greet me. I don't see Tatum, but she can't be too far behind.

I crouch down and give Toby a good scratch, his tail thumping against the wall.

"I swear, too much more of this, and Toby's going to love you more than he does me," Tatum says as she reaches the bottom of the stairs.

I stand up and meet her eyes, a pulse of concern immediately seizing my thoughts. Tatum looks exhausted. Still beautiful but *worn* in a way I haven't seen before.

Maybe I'm being too selfish keeping her up late so many nights in a row. It's hard not to want her company every second I can have it. But she has to take care of herself. *I* have to take care of her.

"That works out for me because I'm pretty crazy about Toby's owner." I lean down and place a light kiss on her lips, one hand wrapping around her waist.

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes, and I get the sense there's something she isn't telling me. Or maybe she's just tired?

"You ready to get out of here?" I say softly. I heft the small pack at my feet onto my shoulders and hold out my hand.

“Sure. Where are we going?”

I lace her fingers through mine and lead us outside into the warm spring sunshine. “Just on a walk. I want to show you my favorite place on the farm.”

A smile blooms across her face, almost pushing away my earlier worry. She would tell me if something was amiss, wouldn't she? “That sounds amazing,” she says.

We start off toward the east orchard and the trail that will take us up to the ledge, Toby bounding between us.

“He never got to be outside like this in L.A.,” Tatum says. “I think he's ruined for any other kind of life.”

“It's a common problem when people come to the mountains. Once you live here, it's hard to want to live anywhere else.”

Her eyes dart to mine, but she looks away too quickly for me to read her expression. “Yeah, I can imagine,” she says softly.

*Crap.* That sounded like a loaded statement, and I did *not* mean for it to be a loaded statement.

“Did you do a lot of hiking growing up?” I ask, hoping to steer the conversation to safer territory.

She nods. “Some. In Santa Monica, mostly. And when Dad took me to Palm Springs for Christmas. Just day hikes, though. Probably nothing like what you've done. Kate made it sound like you guys are all pretty big hikers.”

“Perry does more of the long-distance stuff. He hikes a section of the Appalachian Trail every summer and stays out for a week or two. But we've all hiked in most of the national parks and know the trails around here as well as we know the farm. Whenever Brody travels for his kayaking, we try to go with him and hit a few trails wherever he is, too.”

“Kate told me about his kayaking.” She looks over and smiles. “You Hawthornes are a bunch of overachievers. Must be a family trait.”

I grin. “All but Flint, maybe. He's the lazy one.”

“Right. Yes. His career definitely indicates he’s the lazy one,” she jokes.

This is good. *Better.*

“You know, I didn’t even know he was your brother until I applied for this job,” she says. “It was kind of a crazy thing to discover.”

“So you did know *I* would be here?” I ask. “That Stonebrook was my family’s farm?”

“When I applied, yes,” I say. “But not when I saw the job posting. I did a little digging as soon as I saw it, and that’s when I figured it out.”

We pass the farmhouse and continue toward the barn, winding down a footpath that skirts the main drive. A row of massive sugar maples, their leaves a vibrant spring green, cast dappled sunlight over us as we walk. “I’m surprised it didn’t scare you away—knowing I was here,” I say, my tone light.

She huffs out a laugh. “Honestly, it kinda did the opposite.”

“I *knew* you’d been harboring a crush all this time.”

She rolls her eyes. “Very funny. It definitely wasn’t that. Do you remember the peer review you gave me during our last year of school? It was in our sauté class.”

“Oh no. I wasn’t very nice to you, was I?”

“You were honest, Lennox. My entrée was as bad as your salad dressing.”

“Nothing is as bad as that salad dressing,” I say, and she grins.

“Fine. It was *almost* as bad as your salad dressing. And yet, no one said anything negative.” She meets my eye. “No one but you.”

“Okay, and I’m sensing that was a good thing?”

“Of course it’s a good thing. You never cared about my father being famous. No one wanted to insult the daughter of the great Christopher Elliott. But if people had been honest

with me sooner, maybe I wouldn't have wound up ten years into a career that I'm not even all that great at."

I would argue that she's *definitely* great at being a chef, but I still understand her point.

"In L.A., *everyone* cares who my father is. About what he might do for them. About how the connection might *serve* them. And I get it. Everyone wants a leg up, and it's hard to make it in this business if you don't know someone who knows someone. But that rat race—it's exhausting. When I left, I think I just wanted to be around people who would shoot straight with me. It was the only way I could think of to clear my head."

We stop at a gate that leads into the orchard, and I unlatch it, holding it open while she passes through, then shut it behind us. "I think I know a little of what fame can do," I say. "Not firsthand, of course. But when Flint's career first took off, he really let it go to his head. We didn't really like him for a couple of years. He's grown up a lot, but he's had to figure out ways to stay grounded, to keep his head clear. I think it's great that you've done the same thing."

"It's hard to imagine any Hawthorne not being grounded, with how close your family is," she says.

"Yeah, that's a big part of it. And Flint stays really involved, even if he's not here in person. He invested in the restaurant, backed Brody's kayaking program at his school. And he covered Dad's medical expenses after his stroke a few years back."

"Has he ever thought about moving home?" Tatum asks.

"Actually, I was just talking to him about that the other night. I never thought it would happen, but he's looking for property, talking about building something out here, so maybe so."

Tatum's quiet for a long moment, her eyes on the ground as we move through the apple trees.

"Lennox, you have a really amazing family," she finally says. "I love the way you show up for each other."

The wistfulness in her voice makes me think she must be thinking about her father, and a pang of sadness pushes through me, followed by an intense longing to give Tatum the kind of family she deserves. Not everything she's told me about her father is negative, so I recognize the man must have some admirable qualities. But I don't like the way he's pressured her since she moved to Silver Creek. And I don't like the idea of her feeling like she's second to his career.

Tatum shouldn't be second to *anything*.

We finally reach the trailhead, and I pause at the bottom. "It's only about a quarter mile up," I say. "But it's pretty steep."

She nods, her eyes dropping to Toby. "Will there be bears?"

"I know better than to promise anything," I say, "but there shouldn't be."

Once we're on the trail, our conversation dwindles, as it takes pretty much all our concentration to watch our feet and not trip on the rocks and roots that litter the trail. Toby does great, leaping over obstacles like he really was born to live in these mountains.

After about ten minutes of hiking, we step into a small clearing.

Tall trees rise up on either side, but in front of us, there's only open air, the ground giving way to an impressive view of the rolling mountains, their hazy blues and greens blending into the morning sky.

Toby tugs toward the dropoff, and Tatum calls him back. "Hey, you stay close to me, boy," she says.

"It looks steeper than it is," I say. "We called this place the ledge growing up, but on the other side of the dropoff, there's plenty of scrubby rhododendrons and an easy enough slope that even if he got away from you, there isn't anywhere for him to fall."

She nods, relaxing her hold on the leash as her eyes scan the expansive view in front of us.



“Look,” I say, stepping up behind her. I put my hands on her shoulders and turn her gently, loving the feel of her back against my chest. “If you look down this way, you can see the farmhouse. And the orchards out next to Mom and Dad’s house.”

“Oh, I see it,” she says. “It looks so small from all the way up here.”

“Are you hungry?” I move to a smooth stretch of rock in the middle of the clearing and pull a blanket out of my pack. “Want to sit?”

“I could definitely eat,” she says as she lowers herself onto the blanket. “What did you bring us?”

I pull out a couple of breakfast burritos and some bottled orange juice. “It isn’t much,” I say, handing her one of each. I pull a third burrito out of the bag and toss it over to Tatum. “This one is for Toby. It’s just eggs and sausage. I left out the cheese sauce because the internet told me it might make him sick.”

Tatum pauses, looking down at the extra burrito, her jaw slack. When she looks up, her eyes are shining. “You made a burrito for my dog.”

I shrug. “I thought he might get hungry.”

She puts both burritos on the blanket and crawls toward me, shifting onto her knees when she reaches where I’m still leaning over the pack. She cradles my face with her hands and kisses me softly.

She shudders, her breath catching, then a drop of moisture trickles into my beard. *She’s crying.*

“Hey,” I say gently. I tug her away so I can look into her eyes. I don’t care what she says. There’s no way she’s only crying over an extra burrito. “What’s going on? Tell me what’s wrong.”

She shakes her head, and I shift so I’m sitting on the blanket, pulling her down beside me, my arms wrapped around her shoulders.

But Tatum doesn't want to be held. She tilts her head, catching my lips with hers, a sudden heated urgency to her movements that almost blocks every one of my rational thoughts. I recognize the impulse to feel *in control* of something, so I let go of the reins and let her set the pace. I yield when she asks me to yield, give when she asks me to give.

I've kissed this woman countless times over the past few weeks, but the sensation never weakens, heat flaring to life between us just as quickly every time.

I am teetering on the brink of losing control, debating whether I want to give in here, on a rocky ledge in the middle of the mountains, when I feel another tear fall down Tatum's cheek.

*Okay.* Whatever she's feeling, this isn't going to solve the problem.

I ease away, tugging her hand from my face and pressing a kiss to her palm. "Just sit with me a minute," I say gently.

She nods and tucks herself into my side. I don't know what she isn't telling me—what battle is raging in her heart. I can't make her tell me what's going on, but if I can be vulnerable, maybe she will be too. Maybe she'll trade her secrets for mine.

I look out across the valley and take a deep, calming breath, letting the silence settle around us. When Tatum's tears have stopped, I lean down and press a kiss to her temple.

"Tatum, I broke up with Hailey because I caught her cheating on me with my roommate."

Tatum lets out a tiny gasp before she sits up and looks at me. "Why would she do that to you? There is no number of *it's not you, it's me's* that makes that situation okay."

I manage a sad smile. "I recognize now that I was probably more serious about her than she was about me—"

"That doesn't make cheating acceptable," Tatum says, cutting me off, and my heart warms at her defense of me.

“I know. I just mean that because I was *all in*, the breakup really messed me up for a long time. I was scared of getting close to anyone. Because Hailey knew me, and it turned out I wasn’t enough. She wanted someone else—someone different. That made me afraid to trust what might happen if I let someone else see the real me.”

“So that’s why you dated so much.”

I nod. “I kept it all surface level. Cut things off as soon as I thought I might start feeling something real. It worked for a long time.” I shrug. “And then you showed up.”

She gives my hand a squeeze, her thumb tracing slow circles on the back of my wrist.

“You blindsided me, Tatum. I’ll be totally honest—I’m scared out of my mind. But I don’t want to lose this. I want to be with you. I want us to be something.”

Tears well in her eyes, and she shakes her head. “Don’t, Lennox.”

My gut tightens. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t give me your heart,” she says, her voice shaky. “Because I think I might have to break it.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lennox

OKAY, SO . . . not exactly the words you want to hear after laying your heart on the line. But my brothers said you can't get to the good part of love without taking any risks, so I steel my nerves and place a hand on Tatum's quivering back.

"Gosh, I'm a mess," she says, wiping at her eyes. "This is just so stupid."

"Tatum, just tell me what's going on. Has something happened?"

Toby is standing beside her, looking at her like he can't figure out why she's so upset.

You and me both, man. *You and me both.*

Finally, Tatum takes a stuttering breath. "Lennox, my dad called me last night."

*Oh no.*

My gut tightens. "Okay."

"His network wants to bring me on for a show—one that would be my dad and me together. They actually pitched the idea to me a long time ago, but I told them I wasn't interested. Only, Dad just told me they aren't renewing his contract for *his* show. So if I don't do this one—the one we're supposed to do together—he's done. Off the network."

A sick feeling spreads through my gut, and I start to understand Tatum's tears. Being on a show with her dad means not being *here*. It means losing her.

"But he's Christopher Elliott," I say, not wanting to understand what she's telling me.

She shrugs. "Who they think is getting old, apparently."

"But you *aren't* old," I say. "They want you to keep the brand alive."

She nods, her eyes sad. "Something like that."

There is a huge part of me that wants to make this conversation about me. About us. But I know enough about Tatum's history with her father to guess the kind of pressure he's putting on her. I also know she feels an incredible amount of loyalty to him which has to make this decision fraught, regardless of what it means for our relationship. I can't make this more complicated for her. And I definitely don't want to say or do anything to drive a wedge between her and her dad.

"Do you want to do it?" I ask, my tone gentle. *Neutral*.

She looks up and meets my eyes, her expression pained. "No. I mean, I don't think so. But Lennox, he's my family. Your family is always showing up for each other, supporting each other. Isn't this the same kind of thing?"

I'm not sure how to answer her. My family *does* show up for each other. But we also respect each other. Olivia never would have pressured me into opening Hawthorne if it wasn't what I wanted, and I never would have expected my family to back my restaurant if they didn't think it was a good idea.

We sacrifice for each other, sure. But we don't sacrifice who we are.

But Tatum hasn't had those kinds of healthy familial relationships in her life. All she knows is the selfish toxicity her father has conditioned her with.

"Tatum, he shouldn't even ask this of you if it isn't something you want. He shouldn't prioritize his own needs over your happiness."

“Logically, I know that. But he’s given me so much. Paid for my education. Given me a career. Don’t I owe him this?” She shakes her head, another round of tears welling up. “But I want this, Lennox. I want you. I don’t want to leave and lose what we have.”

“Hey. You’re not going to lose me.”

“That’s just it. I’ve been thinking about catering—about being a chef. Lennox, I’m not even sure I want to cook anymore. I love Stonebrook, and I love Silver Creek, but what would I even do if I didn’t run the catering kitchen? There’s nothing else out here for me, and I hate that because I would love to stay.” She presses a hand to her forehead, then shakes her head as she takes a stuttering breath. “I didn’t want to have to worry about any of this when we’re still trying to figure out what we mean to each other, and I didn’t want Olivia to worry because I’m fine running the kitchen for now. But with Dad’s job on the line, I feel like I have to think about it. And honestly, it feels kind of foolish to turn down such a lucrative job offer when there’s nothing else on the table.”

Her chest heaves as she breathes out a sigh, her shoulders falling like she’s collapsing in on herself. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

She’s supposed to do what she wants and not let her idiot father govern her life like some kind of overlord.

But it’s not my place to tell her that.

If I pressure her into making the decision I want, then I’m no better than he is.

I’m almost sick with anger that her father would even put her in this position. How can he not see how selfish he’s being? How careless it is to put this burden of responsibility on her shoulders?

Has he never asked Tatum what she wants?

Quick on the heels of wanting to pulverize her father is a desperation to grab Tatum and beg her to stay. To just *be* with me. Love me like I’m suddenly realizing I love her.

But deep in my gut, I know loving her means letting her make the choice herself.

I reach out and wipe the tears from Tatum's cheeks, then tug her forward, placing a gentle kiss on her lips. She's salty with tears, her lips trembling, which only makes me want to kiss her again and again until the tears are gone, along with everything else in the world that might ever hurt her.

I wrap her in my arms, one curving around her back. My butt is numb for how long we've been sitting on this rock, but I don't even care.

"What do I do?" Tatum whispers, her voice as soft as the breeze blowing across the mountain.

"I can't tell you what to do, Tatum."

I *won't* tell her, even if something in me is screaming to do just that—to tell her to stay with me. Here. Forever. *Mine*.

"No, but you can tell me what you want. Your opinion matters to me, Lennox."

I'm quiet for a long moment, torn over how to answer her question. "I already told you what I want."

"I know. But tell me again."

Emotions surge, words tumbling out before I can stop them. "Okay. I want you. I want us. I want you to beat my brother every time we play board games, and I want to feed you your favorite meals, and I want to take your dog for walks around the farm. I want to kiss you before I fall asleep every night and wake up with you in my arms. I want to know everything there is to know about you—learn the person you are so well that I can anticipate how you feel and what makes you happy and what makes you sad." I sigh and shake my head. "But I'm not supposed to tell you any of that, because I also respect you. I want you to be happy. I want you to have a career you love, and I want you to have relationships with the people who are important to you. And I can't decide what those relationships look like. Even if I want to."

She sniffs. "You know, you could have just been a jerk about it. Said something selfish and made my decision easier." I

don't tell her that under the surface, I'm feeling pretty jerky—like a raging caveman ready to keep her here by force.

I let out a weary chuckle. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

She leans up and looks at me. “I'm not even a little bit disappointed.”

We settle into silence then, watching the birds swoop and glide over the trees and the clouds moving across the vibrant blue sky. The view is beautiful, but part of the beauty is having Tatum beside me. What will this place be like if she leaves? I have memories of Tatum all over the farm. Thinking of Stonebrook without her feels like turning down the lights, leeching the color out of the sky and the trees and the mountains in the distance. This place will never be the same.

*I will never be the same.*

“Lennox, where does this leave us?” Tatum eventually asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know what I'm supposed to do, but I know I want to be with you.”

I hold her a little tighter. “Then be with me. Whatever time we have, let's take it. Whatever happens next, we'll figure it out.”

She sniffs. “You promise?”

I feel the stupidity in the risk I'm taking, but I can't help it.

I'm so far gone for this woman, there's only one way to answer her question. “*I promise.*”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tatum

IT'S LATE WHEN I find Lennox in his office—late enough that we're pretty much the only two people still around. I've had enough time since I ended my shift to go upstairs and shower and change into leggings and an oversized hoodie, but Lennox is still dressed for work.

"Hey," I say, leaning against the door jamb. "What are you up to?"

He looks up, the smile that spreads across his face warming me from the inside out. "Just finishing the books," he says.

"How are things?"

"Good. Great, actually. The warmer weather must be helping. Revenue is up."

"That's amazing."

"*And* my kitchen is running better than ever." He stands and moves around the desk, approaching me with easy confidence. He slips an arm around my waist and leans down to kiss me. "All thanks to you." He nuzzles my neck. "You smell good."

"Mmm. You smell like kitchen grease and onions."

He chuckles as he steps away and starts to unbutton his chef's coat. "Okay. Point taken." He sheds it and drops it into the laundry bin in the corner. "What are you up to? I thought

you'd be asleep by now." He peels his t-shirt off next, and it follows the chef's coat into the bin before he rummages through a bag sitting by the door, presumably looking for a clean shirt.

My eyes rove over the smooth planes of muscle, the dips and hollows that make up Lennox's body, and my throat goes dry. Whenever I look at him, I feel like I have to memorize him, catalog every inch in case I wind up saying goodbye.

Lennox and I haven't talked about the network's offer since I first brought it up. It's been just shy of two weeks, and I can tell he's avoiding the subject on purpose. I appreciate that he's giving me space, that he isn't trying to pressure me. But a part of me wishes he *would* pressure me—call my father a jerk and beg me to stay with him instead.

Still, I have to respect Lennox for recognizing that this needs to be my choice. He's a good man—possibly the *best* man I've ever known. And that's tricky. Because I aspire to be as selfless and loving as the Hawthornes. And I'm afraid that means stepping up to be there for my dad.

Of course, I also wouldn't mind if Dad happened to call with a good-natured, "Just kidding!" and made this whole nightmare go away. At the very least, that would buy me some time to figure out what I want to do next.

"I was hoping you could help me with something," I say to Lennox.

He stands up, shirt in hand. "Of course. Anything." He pulls the shirt over his head.

I sigh over the loss of the view, but honestly, if we're going to have *any* kind of reasonable conversation tonight, it isn't going to happen as long as Lennox is shirtless. "So, I have this box," I say.

"Mysterious."

Mysterious is an acceptable word, but *haunting* feels more fitting. It's been sitting on my kitchen table for weeks, taunting me, almost like my mother herself is in the room and waiting for me to get over myself and open it already.

I've used work as an excuse. And Lennox as an excuse. And drama with Dad as an excuse. But I don't want to put it off anymore. A part of me hopes that doing this one hard thing will make it easier for me to do another.

"My sister sent it last month, and I've been putting off going through it because it's going to make me feel stuff."

"Even more mysterious," Lennox says.

"It's full of my mom's things."

His eyes soften. "Ahh. Got it."

"Bree mentioned some cooking utensils, some journals and recipe books. I think I'm ready to finally look through it, but I don't really want to do it by myself."

"Let's do it together, then. Where is it? At your place?"

I nod. "If you come up, you can borrow my shower, then we can open the box?"

He props his hands on his hips. "Are you telling me a wardrobe change wasn't enough? I still smell?"

I press my lips together to hide my smile. "So bad."

He lunges forward and envelopes me in an enormous hug, squeezing me until I squeal and burst into laughter. I fake a gagging noise. "I'm dying, Lennox. Can't. Breathe."

"Fine, fine, you win," he says, letting me go. "I'll shower first. Then we can open the mystery box."

He grabs his gym bag from the floor and follows me upstairs. He heads to the bathroom while I take Toby outside for a quick break, then I settle in the living room with the box at my feet. It's still sealed shut with packing tape.

I rest my hands on the top and take a deep, cleansing breath. I can do this.

I *want* to do this.

A thought suddenly occurs to me.

I've been struggling with my definition of family, with my understanding of what it's supposed to look like and feel like.

But my mom is my family too. Maybe connecting with her will help me figure out what I'm supposed to do about Dad.

The water in the shower turns on, and I pull out my phone to text Bree while I wait for Lennox. I've done a decent job of keeping my sister in the loop regarding all the current parts of my life. She knows about Lennox, and she knows I've been putting off opening Mom's box. But I haven't told her about the network's offer. That's a secret I'm keeping on purpose because she wouldn't understand why I'm even considering it.

But Bree doesn't have the relationship with Dad that I do. She doesn't feel the same kind of pressure, but she also hasn't enjoyed the same kinds of perks. I can't even get in my car without remembering the conversation Dad had with me when he gave me the keys for my twenty-eighth birthday. "We've worked for it, Tatum," he said. "We deserve to treat ourselves."

I remember feeling thrilled that he'd said *we* had worked for it. But I wonder, now, if it wasn't just a way to make me feel beholden to the Christopher Elliott brand.

**Tatum:** I am about to commence going through the box.

**Bree:** You are BRAVE and you can do this.

**Tatum:** Lennox is with me. Or he will be momentarily. That's going to make it easier, I think.

**Bree:** I love that. How are things between the two of you?

**Tatum:** Too good to be true. I know it's early. That this thing has only just started. But when my mind wanders, it wanders *here*. I can't stop imagining a life with him.

**Bree:** Then stay, honey. It's obviously what you want.

**Tatum:** It feels a little early to be shifting my future plans around for him.

**Bree:** Okay, so take him out of the equation for a sec. Do you like running the catering kitchen enough to keep doing it?

**Tatum:** That's part of the problem. I don't think I do. I love the farm, but the hours are brutal. And I don't love the cooking enough to make the sacrifice feel worth it. I don't think I can do this for years on end, but Lennox's life is here. It's not like he's moving anywhere else.

*Especially not to California.*

**Bree:** Tatum, if he's the right man for you, you'll figure it out. You'll compromise. You'll come up with a future that works for the both of you. Could you just work with Lennox?

**Tatum:** He doesn't need me at Hawthorne. Especially not since we worked out his staffing issues. Everything is running smoothly now.

**Bree:** Uh, yeah. Cause you're brilliant.

**Tatum:** I was happy to help him. I like to feel useful. And the problem-solving is fun.

**Bree:** Huh. Can you turn that into a career? Fixing other people's kitchen problems?

Her question gives me pause, a tiny jolt of electricity rushing through me.

*Could I?*

There are paid consultants in every other area of business. Surely they exist for restaurants, too. It wouldn't matter if I wind up going back to L.A., but if I don't, and I don't want to do catering forever, could I be a restaurant consultant?

When the shower water cuts off, I send Bree one more quick message.

**Tatum:** Hey, gotta go. Lennox is almost out of the shower. I'll check in later.

**Bree:** I am going to be the BEST big sister and refrain from making a joke about your man in your shower. Byeeeee!!

Lennox emerges looking fresh and clean and smelling like my jasmine body wash. Somehow, it smells different on him, the essence of him still rising through.

He drops onto the floor beside me and leans in for a kiss.

“Better?” he whispers against my lips.

“So much better. I smell good on you.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, and I probably won’t be able to sleep tonight for the distraction of smelling *you* all over my skin.”

The kiss lingers long enough that I’m half-tempted to shove the box aside and pick a different activity for the evening, but I’ve put this off for too long as it is.

I slide my hand down Lennox’s chest. His T-shirt is warm and slightly damp from his shower-fresh skin, which somehow makes this moment feel more intimate. Not just anyone has access to Lennox in this state, and I suddenly feel incredibly overwhelmed with the privilege.

I let him kiss me for five or ten or ... one hundred more seconds before I break the kiss with a little groan. “Okay, time to do this. Time to be serious.”

He nips at my bottom lip. “I am being serious.”

I huff out a breath. “*Lennox.*”

He grins and sits back, leaning on his hands. “Sorry. Sorry. I’m behaving,” he says, then he hops up and retrieves a pocketknife from his bag, opening it and handing it to me hilt first.

*Of course* he has a knife on him.

“Boy scout,” I mumble as I take the knife.

“Eagle scout,” he says with a smirk, and I roll my eyes.

When we tease like this, I almost forget that there’s a giant question mark hanging between us. But the more time I spend

with him, the harder it is to ignore. We can't keep this up forever. We can't keep ignoring the possibility of there being an *end*.

I scoot onto my knees and slice through the tape holding the box closed.

The contents of the box smell a tiny bit musty, but mostly they smell like herbs and spices and olive oil. I pull out the kitchen utensils first. A manual hand mixer with a faded turquoise handle. A set of wooden spoons with leaves and vines carved into the handles. A rolling pin. I hold the rolling pin and close my eyes, a sense of deep loss washing over me.

I didn't know this woman like I should have, and I'll always regret it.

Lennox picks up the spoons. "These are beautiful," he says, running his hands over the intricate carvings.

"I remember those," I say softly. "Her grandfather made them for her."

At the bottom of the box, there's a stack of notebooks. I pull them out, opening the first one and flipping through the pages. I recognize my mother's slanted handwriting. A lot of what's written is in French, but there's English, too. Notes written in the margins, measurements, conversions. There are also illustrations of food—beautiful drawings.

I run my fingertips over a bunch of strawberries sketched below a recipe for *frasier*—a traditional French sponge cake. "I had no idea she could draw like this."

Lennox holds out a hand. "May I?" I hand him the book and pick up the next one, and we fall into an easy silence as we flip through the pages.

Half an hour later, we've moved to the couch, Lennox sitting on one end while I lay with my head in his lap, my feet propped up on the armrest on the opposite end.

There are some beautiful recipes in Mom's notebooks, but aside from those, my mother is also an incredible storyteller. My heart is swinging from one emotion to the next, stretching,

aching, longing for a relationship I can't have back, and yet somehow still grateful that I at least have this part of her.

"Hey, Tatum?" Lennox shifts, and I look up to see his expression marred with concern.

I sit up. "What is it?"

"Did your parents ever cook together?"

"Yeah. All the time when I was little."

"But your mom was never involved in your dad's show? Or his restaurant?"

"No. The restaurant didn't come until *after* the show. But I don't think she was involved with either. I feel like I remember her not liking the idea of being on camera. Why?"

"Um." Lennox clears his throat awkwardly. "I mean, I could be wrong. But this recipe—it sounds like your dad's bouillabaisse." He holds out the notebook.

I take it, my eyes quickly scanning the recipe. They still serve Dad's bouillabaisse at Le Vin, so I immediately recognize the ingredients and ratios. "I mean, that's not that weird, right? They were married. They probably made it together a hundred times."

Lennox runs a hand across his face. "Okay but turn the page."

On the next page, there's a recipe for sole meunière that's also identical to what we serve at Le Vin.

"There's a few more," he says gently.

I scoff. "What, did you pull up the menu?"

When he doesn't answer, I look up and see his phone sitting on his knee. He *did* pull up the menu.

"Look, it just seems a little coincidental," he says. "You could be right though. They were married. Maybe she shared all her recipes and was totally fine with him taking them on the show and serving them in his restaurant."



“Of course she was okay with it,” I say, but doubt is already niggling at the back of my mind. I toss the notebook onto the floor in front of me. “Maybe she wrote the recipes down *after* she and my dad discovered them together.”

Even as I make the argument, I know it isn’t true. Many of the recipes contain pages and pages of notes—stories about where they came from, who Mom learned them from. The recipes themselves aren’t necessarily dated, but the stories are, and they all predate me, even Bree and Daniel.

I do some quick math. They predate my parents’ marriage, too.

Lennox watches as I flip through the pages looking for something—anything—that might prove otherwise. But there’s nothing.

I sit back with a huff, my heart pounding.

“So she must have been fine with him using them,” I finally say.

“That’s one possibility,” Lennox says.

Something about the tone of his voice sets me on edge. It’s kind and gentle—almost too gentle, like he’s placating me. I glare at him. “What are you trying to say?”

“Tatum, it wouldn’t be the first time a chef has claimed a recipe or an idea that isn’t actually theirs.”

I stand up, dropping the notebook onto the couch and stalking into the kitchen. “No.” I turn around, my hands on my hips. “No. My mom was more French than my dad is, but his grandmother was from Nice. He has just as much right to the recipes in those pages as she did.”

I don’t really know why I’m arguing the point, except that somehow, it feels like admitting that Dad’s career is a sham would, by extension, make *me* a sham.

After all, I am only as good as Dad has made me.

Lennox holds up his hands. “I’m just saying. It seems like there’s a pattern here. You, yourself, said you thought your dad

would choose fame over family. He did it with your mom, and took her recipes with him—”

“You don’t know that’s what he did,” I say, my voice trembling.

“And now he’s willing to do it with you—forcing you into a job you don’t want so you can keep his star shining a little longer.”

I shake my head. “You can’t say that. You don’t even know him.”

He leans forward, his elbows propped on his knees. “You’re right. I don’t. But you do.”

Tears well in my eyes, his words hitting me like a punch to the gut. “You know what? I think it’s time for you to go.”

“Tatum—”

“No. I don’t need you sitting there judging him. Judging *me*. He’s my family, Lennox, and I’m all he has left. It’s easy for you—with your picture-perfect family and your passion-filled career. But you don’t know him. Maybe you don’t even know me. For all you know, I *do* want the job in L.A.”

These last words come out like a curse, and Lennox flinches.

Toby hops off my reading chair where he’s been lounging this whole time and walks to Lennox, dropping his head on Lennox’s knee.

I don’t miss that even though we’re both clearly upset, Toby doesn’t come to *me*.

It only makes me angrier.

I’m self-aware enough to sense that I’m overreacting, that I’m *really* not being fair to Lennox, but the confusion churning inside me is so sharp, so palpable, it’s blinding me to everything else.

Lennox closes his eyes and rubs Toby’s head for a moment before slowly getting up. He crosses to where I’m standing in the kitchen, pausing just in front of me. His hands are on his

hips as his chest rises and falls with one, then two steady breaths.

“Tatum,” he says gently, and he reaches for my hand.

I take it and let him pull me against him. He wraps his arms around my back, and I collapse into his chest, tears pouring down my face.

He holds me while I cry, one hand rubbing up and down my back until the sobs subside. “I do know you, Tatum.” He leans down and kisses my temple. “I know you”—he tenses the slightest bit, his hands tightening their grip around my waist —“and I love you.”

I suck in a breath, Lennox’s words echoing in my mind. *He loves me.*

*He loves me.*

*He loves me.*

“That means *all* I want is for you to be happy. If you tell me you want to go to L.A.—that doing the show with your dad will make you happy—I’ll believe you, and I’ll let you go.” He sniffs and he lets out a frustrated groan. “It would kill me. But I would do it. I wouldn’t ask you to trade your happiness for mine.”

He leans back, his arms moving from the small of my back to my shoulders. He lifts a hand to my cheek, wiping the tears away before cupping my cheek and kissing me. “I’m going to go,” he says.

I nod, my eyes on the floor. If I look into those green eyes, shining with unshed tears for more than a second, I’m going to start to ugly cry even worse than I already am.

He steps away and picks up his bag, pausing when he reaches the door. “Tatum, I think I need to keep my distance for a bit.”

“Lennox, I don’t want you to do that.”

“I don’t want to either. But you have to figure out what you want, and that’s going to be easier for you without me hovering. Plus, now that I know how I feel, I don’t think my

heart can take the *not knowing* much longer.” He opens the door. “You know where to find me though, all right? I’m here. Whenever you need me. I’m here.”

He disappears out the door, his footsteps receding down the stairs as I slump to my kitchen floor.

Toby comes to *me* this time, draping himself over my body like a warm blanket, his head leaning into my chest. We sit there for a long time.

Until my tears are dry.

Until my breathing has evened out.

Until logic has finally blown away my storm cloud of emotions.

When my feet are numb, my butt cold from the kitchen tile, I shift and stand up, then move to the stack of notebooks still sitting in the living room.

I give Toby a reassuring pat, then I gather up the books and head downstairs to my kitchen, stopping in the pantry long enough to grab a bottle of wine.

If I can’t think myself into an answer, I’m hoping I can cook myself into one.

Not my usual M.O. But if I’m going to make the decision I need to make, I need my mother’s strength to do it.

And maybe her recipes will help me find it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lennox

I HAVEN'T TAKEN A sick day since opening Hawthorne.

But today, I'm almost tempted.

I'm just not in the mood. I barely slept—worry for Tatum keeping me up most of the night. That, and white-hot rage whenever I thought about her father.

But sitting around doing nothing isn't going to help.

Plus, if I don't show up to work, Tatum will think it's her fault. I told her I'd keep my distance, but I can still work. I can still *see her* at work.

A sharp ache fills my chest. I *want* to see her. I want to make sure she's okay.

I push through the back door of the restaurant, pausing when I see a group of people crowded around the entrance to Tatum's catering kitchen, concerned expressions on their faces.

A surge of panic fills me as I hurry forward. "What happened? What's going on?"

"We don't actually know," Tatum's sous chef says. "It was like this when we got here."

I push past them into the kitchen, willing my heart to slow as I take in the scene before me.

The kitchen is a mess—the countertops covered with what looks like every pot, pan and bowl in the entire place. There are cutting boards, knives, piles of vegetable peelings. Any chef learns how to clean as they cook, and I've seen how efficiently Tatum runs her kitchen, so nothing about this particular situation makes sense. On the counter beside the stove, there are seven different dishes, all perfectly prepared and plated, and an empty wine bottle resting on its side.

My eyes rove over the space one more time. Make that *two* empty wine bottles.

And that's when it hits me.

Tatum made her mother's recipes.

And it must have taken her all night to do it.

Zach comes up beside me and places a steadying hand on my shoulder, then he motions toward Tatum's office.

I find her curled up on the floor in front of her desk, a chef's coat balled up under her head as a makeshift pillow.

I look at Zach who is hovering in her office doorway.

"Get her staff out of here, would you?"

He nods and disappears.

There's a wine glass on the floor next to Tatum, and I pick it up, setting it on the desk behind me. Then I crouch down and shift her into my arms. She groans as I stand up, redistributing her weight, but she doesn't wake up, and she doesn't fight me.

I don't know where Zach took everybody, but I don't see another soul as I carry Tatum down the hall and up the stairs to her apartment. Fortunately, she left the door unlocked, so I'm able to get inside.

Toby stands and woofs—clearly alarmed at the sight of us coming through the door—and follows us into the bedroom. I lower Tatum onto the bed, then tug off her sneakers and shift the covers out from under her so I can cover her up. I grab a glass of water and leave it by her bed, then turn to take Toby outside. It's almost noon, and I'm guessing he hasn't been out since last night, but then Tatum calls my name.

“Lennox?”

I’m back by her side in a second, crouching down beside her. “Hey.” I lift a hand and smooth her hair out of her face.

She closes her eyes at the touch. “I drank too much,” she says, her voice soft.

“I know, baby. There’s water here if you want it. Then you should go back to sleep.”

“Nuh-uh, I need to work. I need—” She tries to sit up but only makes it a few inches before she frowns and winces, one hand lifting to her head.

“You aren’t working today,” I say, easing her back onto her pillow. “We got it covered, all right? I’ll send Willow over to help out. You just rest.”

She nods, her eyes closing again as she relaxes into her pillow. “I cooked all night.”

“I saw.”

“I made a mess.”

“That’s okay. We’ll get it cleaned up.” I brush my hand down her cheek one more time.

“*I’m a mess,*” she whispers.

My heart shifts and stretches, a sharp ache turning into a sudden heat that spreads through my torso, then out to the tips of my fingers and toes.

So this is what it feels like—this sudden certainty that I would do anything—*anything*—for this woman.

I swear under my breath and let out a chuckle.

Even move to California.

A tightness fills my chest at the thought of leaving Hawthorne—of leaving the farm, my family, the mountains. But one look at Tatum, and I know she’s worth it.

I’d do it. I’d leave it all behind.

I lean down and kiss Tatum’s cheek just beside her eye. “You’re my mess,” I whisper.

She reaches up and catches my hand, pulling it to her chest. “Lennox, I love you.”

Another wave of warmth washes over me. “I love you, too. Now rest.”

I take Toby outside for a quick walk, then return him to Tatum’s apartment, pausing inside the open doorway. I crouch down so we’re eye to eye, my hands on either side of his fluffy head. “We’re in this together now, all right? We’ve got to take care of her together.”

I unhook his leash, and he makes a beeline for the bedroom. The door is open just enough for me to see him jump onto the bed and snuggle in next to Tatum. “Good boy,” I say under my breath.

I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But she loves me, and I love her, and we’ll figure it out together.



My confidence lasts until Christopher Elliott shows up at Stonebrook Farm.

“What do you mean, he’s outside?” I say as I stalk toward the dining room, buttoning up my chef’s coat as I go.

“I mean exactly that. Christopher Elliott is *outside*. Standing in the parking lot, talking on his phone,” Zach says. “What else could I mean?”

“But *why* is he outside? Has anybody talked to him?”

“Not so far. He has people with him. Business-y people, but nobody has tried to come in or knocked on the door or anything.”

I pause before we reach the front door. Tatum is in no condition to see or interact with her father right now and protecting her is my first concern.

Most of the catering staff should be up at the farmhouse by now, serving hors d’oeuvres at a cocktail party at the farmhouse, but if there’s anyone around who might inadvertently reveal that Tatum is sleeping upstairs, I’d prefer they be warned into silence.



I turn to Zach, grateful that he's here, again, willing to help however I need him. "Listen. As far as Christopher Elliott is concerned, Tatum is *not* on the premises. At least not until I can warn her he's here and find out what she wants to do. Can you make sure everyone understands?"

He nods. "Yep. Got it."

I run a hand across my face, wishing I'd taken the time this morning to trim my beard. After last night, I don't particularly care for Christopher Elliott's good opinion as a *chef*, but I am in love with his daughter. And that's a better reason than any to make a good impression on the man.

I take a fortifying breath, then unlock the front door and push it open.

"Mr. Elliott?" I step outside and let the door fall closed behind me. The azaleas beside the entrance are fully in bloom, and the air is warm and comfortable.

Tatum's father turns around. "Ah. Hello." He smiles, his straight, white teeth a nearly blinding contrast to his tan skin. His blue-gray eyes—Tatum's eyes—are warm and friendly as he takes me in.

I extend my hand. "Lennox Hawthorne." He might remember meeting me back in culinary school, but I'd rather not assume.

His eyes lift to the restaurant name stretching across the sign above the door. "Ah. This is your restaurant?"

"It is. We aren't open yet, but I'm guessing you're here to see Tatum?"

"To *surprise* Tatum," he says.

I manage a smile. "Ah, that's great. She's not actually here right now though. She wasn't feeling well this morning and didn't come into work." I move to the restaurant door. "Do you want to come in? Have a drink? I can check in with Tatum and see when she might be well enough to see you."

He smiles tightly, and I get the sense he doesn't like my suggestion, but he follows me inside anyway, his little

entourage of people coming in behind us. Mr. Elliott makes no move to introduce the people with him, which strikes me as a bit pretentious. It makes me appreciate Flint. My brother is more famous than this guy, and he always travels with an army of people. But he makes sure we know who they are, where they're from, and why they matter to him.

Mr. Elliott stops by the hostess stand. "I was under the impression that Tatum lives *here*. Upstairs, I believe? Above her kitchen?"

"Yes," I say slowly. "That's true."

He lifts his hands in an expectant gesture. "Maybe I could go see her at home then? You only need to point me in the right direction."

"Sir, I know you're probably very anxious to see her, but she had a long night. She's resting. I don't think she'd want to be disturbed."

He lifts an eyebrow. "You seem awfully familiar with my daughter's well-being, Mr. Hawthorne."

He looks me up and down with a cool, calculating gaze, and every muscle in my body tightens. I don't know exactly what Tatum has or hasn't told her father about our relationship, but instinct is telling me to give this man as little information as possible.

"You know what? What if you text her? Let her know you're here? Then she can come down when she's ready." I glance at the bar where my bartender, Cassandra, is unloading a new shipment of wine. "In the meantime, you're welcome to make yourself at home. Have a drink on me. I could even bring out a few appetizers if you're hungry."

Mr. Elliott's jaw tightens, his gaze growing more shrewd.

I fold my arms over my chest, but I don't break eye contact.

I will not kowtow to this man, not when it feels like doing so would be like throwing Tatum to the wolves.

He finally blinks and offers a thin-lipped smile. "How generous."

I turn and step away, but then Mr. Elliott clears his throat, and I swing around to face him one more time.

“If it’s all right with you,” he says, “we do have some business to conduct. Would you mind if we take over one of your tables? It’s just some paperwork for Tatum to sign. It shouldn’t take long.”

I swallow against the knot in my throat, forcing my brain to be reasonable, to focus on the facts.

Number one? Tatum loves me.

Two, her father has a long history of both gaslighting and manipulating Tatum. Showing up with paperwork hoping to pressure her into signing is well within the realm of expected behavior.

Three, if Tatum *does* want to sign on to do a television show with her dad, if she truly believes it will make her happy, I won’t stand in her way.

“Absolutely,” I say, managing a smile. “Whatever you need.”

I push into my kitchen to find my staff hovering around the door, completely oblivious to the storm clouds brewing in my chest. They quickly follow me, crowding around my office and firing off question after question.

“What’s he like?”

“Is he going to eat here?”

“Did you shake his hand?”

“Was it so amazing?”

I lift my hands, silencing their many questions. “That’s enough,” I say, my voice measured and controlled. “Back to work. That man is not here to see you or meet you or have anything to do with you.”

“Yeah but, while he’s here, he could probably sign my cookbook,” Zach says.

“Or one of the menus,” Derek adds.

“Or my chef’s coat,” Willow says.

I force a smile, even if I don’t feel like it. “There will be no signing of anything, at least not while you’re on the clock. What you do on your own time is up to you. But let’s all remember that Christopher Elliott is here as *Tatum’s* father, and first and foremost, our actions should respect her privacy.”

“Dude. Tatum’s father is Christopher Elliott?” Derek says from the back of the kitchen.

Willow reaches over and hits him on the back of the head. “Honestly, what planet do you live on?”

“The one where dinner service starts in forty-two minutes,” I say. “Don’t make me ask you again. Back to work.”

Zach claps his hand. “You heard him. Clock’s ticking. I want to see *mise en place* in every corner of this kitchen.” He looks at me. “Are you good?”

I clasp a hand around the back of my neck. “I uh—yeah, do you think you can send a couple of starters out?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

I nod. “Also, I think I need to step out for a minute. Can you handle things for a bit?”

He nods. “Of course. Take your time. Take the whole night off if you want. I’ve got this.”

I don’t hesitate to leave him because he *does* have it. The last month of training has really elevated the way my kitchen operates, and that’s all thanks to Tatum.

When I make it to the back door, Tatum is just coming down the steps. She isn’t dressed for work, which makes me grateful, but I still wish she’d stayed upstairs a little longer, if only to make her father squirm for a while. Her eyes widen the second she sees me. “Hey! Are you okay?”

“Um.” I shake my head, trying to orient myself to her presence. “Tatum, your father is in the Hawthorne dining room.”

Her face blanches. “What?”

I nod. “He came to surprise you.”

“He’s here,” she says softly, her eyes darting in every direction. “*Here.*” She presses a hand to her stomach and shakes her head. “Ohh, Lennox, I don’t like this surprise.”

I reach out and place my hands on her shoulders, squeezing them gently. “He also has some paperwork.” I fight to keep my tone neutral. “He said you’re ready to sign.”

“What? No, that’s not—Lennox, I didn’t ask him to come here. I swear I didn’t. I don’t want to sign *anything.*”

A sense of relief pulses through me, but this moment isn’t about me. It isn’t even about us. “I believe you,” I say, my tone as neutral as I can manage.

Tatum’s breathing slows and steadies. “I’ve got to go talk to him, don’t I?”

“I think you do.”

If she asks me, I’ll stay right here beside her. Hold her hand while she faces her father, squeeze her fingers if she starts to waver. But something tells me Tatum needs to fight this battle on her own.

I hope there will be a thousand decisions we make together. A thousand compromises. A thousand sacrifices that I make for her or she makes for me.

But this choice has to be Tatum’s and Tatum’s alone.

She needs to own it so she knows that she can. She can make choices independent of her father, but she can also make them independent of *me*.

She studies me for a long moment, her brow furrowed. “Are you leaving?”

I look at her, my expression pleading, willing her to understand. “Just taking a walk.”

*But ask me to stay. Ask me, and I’ll be right beside you.*

Her eyes are full of questions, and for a brief moment, I think she might waver, but then she nods and pulls her shoulders back. “I’ve got this,” she says.

I offer her a small smile, pride swelling in my chest. “Atta girl.”

I slide my hands down her arms, stopping to give her fingers one more quick squeeze.

Then I let her go.

I push through the back door, my long stride quickly carrying me across the parking lot. I hate that I’m leaving her. But I love that I’m leaving her, too.

“Lennox?”

I turn and see her standing on the loading dock, her expression clear, her eyes blazing. The sight of her takes my breath away. She’s so beautiful—so achingly, stunningly beautiful.

“I’ll find you,” she says.

Warmth spreads across my chest, and I lift a hand, pressing it against my heart.

“I know you will.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tatum

IT'S ALL I CAN do not to run after Lennox, but I understood the words he wasn't saying out loud.

I need to do this on my own.

On my way to the Hawthorne dining room, I take a quick detour into my office to grab Mom's notebook. It'll help for practical reasons during the conversation I need to have with my father, but there's a part of me that just wants to have it with me, too. I look down at the worn cover, my mother's handwriting curling across the top right corner. She only wrote three words, all in French, but they weren't hard to translate. *Recipes. Journeys. Stories.* I press the notebook against my chest, a sense of warmth spreading through me.

*You've got this, Tatum.*

The words pulse in my brain—Lennox's words—except this time, it's my mother's voice saying them.

I smile. Maybe I don't have to do this *completely* on my own.

Dad isn't alone in the dining room. He has an entire entourage with him, which shouldn't surprise me, but it does take a moment for me to reframe my expectations. I recognize his personal assistant and his manager, but the other three people are strangers.

Being honest with him will be slightly more difficult with an audience, but it's too late to back down now.

"Dad," I say as I cross the dining room.

His eyes brighten when he sees me, and he stands up to pull me into a stiff hug. "Feeling better? Your friend said you were under the weather."

"Much better. Thanks for asking." I step back, my grip on Mom's notebook tightening. "I can't believe you're here."

"Yes, it's a very long way to come," he says pointedly, as if it's my fault he's here. He motions to the table behind him, where there are several stacks of paper and half a dozen pens spread out across the tablecloth. "Care to sit?"

"Actually, can we talk for a second?" I reach out and take his elbow, steering him a few feet away. We still won't be having a private conversation, but it's better than being *at* the table with a bunch of strangers.

Dad clears his throat. "So," he says brightly. "Have you given our situation any more thought?"

*Our situation.* Six months ago, I wouldn't have flinched at his word choice, but today, it feels fifty shades of wrong.

"*Your* situation, Dad," I amend, my tone cool. "It's your situation."

His lips press into a thin line. "How very generous of you to pin all of this on me."

*Ohhh, give me strength, Mom.* "It's your career, Dad," I say. "I'm not responsible for your career."

"Tatum," he says, his tone patronizing. "Be reasonable. These people came all this way. They're expecting you to sign."

I take a deep, cleansing breath. "I'm sorry they came all this way, but I didn't ask you to bring them. You asked me to think about the offer, and I did. I don't want it. My answer is no."

He reaches for me, his jaw tightening, and wraps a hand around my arm. "You don't understand what you're throwing



away,” he says through clenched teeth.

I shrug out of his grasp. “I understand exactly what I’m throwing away. But I don’t think you do. If you aren’t careful, you’re going to lose more than just your working relationship with your daughter. You won’t treat me like this, Dad. Not anymore.”

He frowns, fire flashing in his eyes. He lifts a warning finger. “You’re being unreasonable.”

“Like Mom was unreasonable? Is that what you told her after you went on national television and told her stories like they were yours?”

Stories, not just recipes. That’s what finally nudged me over the edge. Dad didn’t just take Mom’s recipes, in the earliest days of his show, he told her stories. Claimed her ancestors. Talked like he was the one who learned how to make ratatouille in her grandfather’s kitchen.

I drop the notebook onto the table beside us. “I have them all, Dad. All her stories. All her recipes. How could you do this to her?”

I expect vitriol. Anger. But Dad’s shoulders drop, his face falling, and for a moment, I see a flash of heartache—of anguish—in his eyes. It’s the most real I’ve ever seen my father look, and it hits me all the way to my core.

The emotion in Dad’s eyes is gone as quickly as it arrived, masked behind his perfect, tv-ready face. “I didn’t do anything to her,” he says, but his voice has lost its conviction. He sounds more like he’s reciting lines than saying something he actually believes. “Your mother had a gift, yes. But she didn’t want to use it. She filled her notebooks, told her stories, but for whom? What was it accomplishing? I refused to let all those recipes go to waste, and she finally agreed to let me use them. That’s really all there is to the story. And I’d say it worked out pretty well for all of us.”

*Mom finally agreed.* I at least believe this much of his story. After the months of pressure I’ve gotten from Dad, it isn’t hard to imagine Mom eventually cracking, too.

“You think it worked out well for Mom?” I say. “You used her, Dad.” I square my shoulders. “And she left our family over it. I won’t let you do the same thing to me.”

Dad is silent for a long time—long enough for me to study his features and recognize how tired he looks. His eyes are rimmed with red, and the creases on either side of his face seem deeper than they did the last time I saw him.

He’s desperate. I recognize that much. And he’s being irrational.

Hopefully, someday, he’ll see it too, and we can come back from this.

I step forward and lift a hand to his arm. “Daddy, you don’t have to do this either. So what if they don’t sign your show? It was a good run. Maybe it’ll give you the chance to slow down a little, relax for once. There’s more to it, you know. To life.”

His shoulders finally drop, some of the fire leaching out of his voice. “So I came all this way for you to tell me I ought to retire?”

I shrug. “You can see it that way if you want. Or, you could say you came all this way to see your daughter, meet the man she’s fallen in love with, and have an incredible dinner at an amazing restaurant.”

His eyes lift to mine, a question in their depths. “Love?”

I nod. “I’m living *my* life now, Dad. It’s a good life, and I’m happy. I’m going to be angry about what you did to Mom for a while. But we’re still family. If you’re in town tomorrow night, come back and have dinner with me and Lennox. I’d love for you to get to know him. And I’d like for us to part on good terms.”

I squeeze his arm once, then turn and walk out the door, a strange sensation filling me as I go.

I’m all the way out in the parking lot before I figure out what it is.

For the first time, maybe in forever, I feel *free*.

*elle*

I circle the restaurant and sneak back inside long enough to grab Toby and change my shoes.

I know where Lennox is, and I can't get there fast enough.

I'm halfway to the farmhouse, worrying over whether I remember exactly how to find the trail to the ledge when I see Olivia approaching in a Gator. She stops when she reaches me. "Hey. Just the person I was looking for."

I force myself to smile. To be patient when it's the last thing I'm actually feeling. "Hi. What's up?"

"I didn't see you at the reception earlier. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Oh. Right. Sorry. I'm so sorry." Until just now, I'd forgotten I even have a job. "Did everything go okay without me?"

"Tatum, relax," Olivia says. "I'm checking on you as a friend. The party was fine. Your sous chef rocked it."

I nod a little too enthusiastically. "Good. That's good. Great."

She eyes me curiously. "But you are *not* great," she says, and my shoulders fall.

"You're right," I say with a shrug. "I'm not. Actually, are you busy right now? Because Lennox is up at the ledge, and I really need to see him."

Her eyes widen. "Ohhh, so this is a *that* kind of a problem. Get in, girl. I'll get you there in no time."

I help Toby into the back, then slide in next to Olivia, keeping hold of the grab bar. I still remember how Olivia drove this thing the first time I rode with her.

We stay silent for most of the drive, but Olivia's expressive features aren't hiding much. By the time we reach the familiar trailhead, I'm almost laughing for how hard she's fighting to keep her mouth closed.

She shifts into park. "Okay. Here you go. You just follow that trail right there."

I nod. “Lennox brought me here once before. I just wasn’t sure if I could find the trailhead.”

I climb out of the Gator, pausing with both hands resting on the door. “Thanks, Liv. Your help means a lot.”

“Of course.”

I only make it half a step away before Olivia finally caves. “Gah, Tatum, I can’t not ask.”

I turn around and smile, like I fully expected her to ask.

Because I *fully* expected her to ask.

“Please just tell me if this is an ‘*I’m about to break your heart*’ conversation or an ‘*I’m desperately in love with you*’ conversation. I just want to modify my expectations. And also know what kind of support Lennox is going to need after.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Liv!” I say on a groan.

“I know. I’m terrible.” She shrugs. “But I’m a Hawthorne. This is what we do.”

It’s what *family* does.

An ache pierces my chest, and a wave of loneliness washes over me. I’m not sure I’ll ever have this kind of relationship with my dad. But I can have it with Bree. Maybe even Daniel if I work on it.

And I can have it with Lennox. And with the rest of his family, too.

I look at Olivia and lift my shoulders. “I am definitely, unbelievably, *desperately* in love with your brother.”

She squeals and jumps out of the Gator, then runs around to pull me into a hug. “Does this mean you’ll stay? More than just a year or two?”

“Maybe not in the catering kitchen,” I say. “But with Lennox? I hope so.”

“Who cares about catering?” Olivia says. “Now go find your man.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lennox

TOBY FINDS ME FIRST, his wet nose dropping onto my shoulder and nuzzling into my neck.

I scratch his ears and turn to look over my shoulder, knowing I'll see Tatum. But she isn't there. I stand up quickly, panic rising. Why would her dog be here without her?

But then she steps into the clearing, like the sun breaking through the clouds, and my panic shifts into relief. Relief—and *yearning*.

She's walking toward me, and I rush forward to meet her, catching her when she throws herself into my arms. For a split second, we are a tangle of arms and hands seeking, touching, reassuring. Then her lips are on mine, her hands lifting to slide over my beard, then down to my chest.

"I did it," she says in between kisses. "I told him." Another kiss. "And I showed him Mom's notebook, and I said he couldn't use me anymore ..." *Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.* "And I told him I'm in love with you, and my life is really happy ..." She pauses, a smile stretching across her face. "I really did it."

I kiss her lips, her cheeks, her forehead, the curve of her neck just below her ear. "You did it," I repeat. I lean back and grasp her shoulders so I can look into her gray-blue eyes. "I'm so proud of you."

She nudges me playfully. “You’re just happy I’m not going anywhere.”

I lift my hands to cradle her face. “I would have gone with you, Tatum. I know it’s stupid to think you’ll stay here just for me. But if you don’t want to keep catering, if there’s work somewhere else that you *do* want, I’ll go with you. We’ll figure something out.”

She leans back and looks at me like she can’t believe the words coming out of my mouth. “You would have followed me all the way to California? Left your home, your family, your livelihood—just to be with me?”

I nod, not even hesitating. “Absolutely.”

“But it’s *stupid* to think I’d *stay* in Silver Creek just to be with you?” She lifts an eyebrow. “Are you the only one who gets to be the hero, Lennox?”

“It isn’t about being the hero. It’s about you being happy.”

“*You* make me happy,” she says, her saucy tone making me think of the battles we used to have over vegetables. “But also, I love it here, too. I would never ask you to leave this place, Len. This is your home. Your life.”

“*You’re* my life,” I whisper, pressing my forehead to hers.

She kisses me long and slow. “Then I’ll be your life right here in Silver Creek,” she says. “Besides, I’ve got an idea about a career I can do from anywhere.”

“You do?”

She nods, biting her lip like she’s almost nervous to tell me. “What would you say if I wanted to be a restaurant consultant?”

I smile wide. “I’d say you’re freaking brilliant. That’s perfect, Tatum. You’d be amazing.”

“Really?”

“Definitely,” I say.

“Really, really?”

I laugh. “Tatum, you saved Hawthorne, remember? Yes. Definitely. It’s an incredible idea.”

She throws her arms around my neck, her body flush against mine as I pick her up in an enormous hug. “I love you, Lennox,” she whispers into my ear.

“I love you, too,” I say, my voice catching in my throat.

This woman in my arms—it doesn’t feel real. *She* doesn’t feel real.

But Tatum *freaking* Elliott is my future.

And I couldn’t be happier.



After more kissing, more talking, and then more kissing, we head down the trail. It’s fully dusk when we reach the orchard, but it isn’t too dark to see my family hanging around the trailhead.

My family?

“What in the world?” Tatum says from beside me.

Several Gators are parked off to the side, and Brody is leaning over his portable fire pit, feeding wood into an already steady flame. Olivia and Tyler are sitting in a couple of camp chairs beside the fire, Asher sitting on Tyler’s lap. Perry looks like he’s playing a game of tag with Lila’s son, Jack, and Lila and Kate are lounging on a blanket nearby.

*What in the world* is right.

Finally, Brody turns and sees us, then lets out an enormous cheer, alerting the rest of the family to our presence. “You’re back!” Brody says.

Olivia jumps up and walks over to Tatum. “I swear, I only sent one text message letting everyone know you were up there declaring your love, and it just kind of happened.”

I look at Tatum. “You declared your love to my sister before you declared it to me?”

She grimaces as she shrugs. “I needed a ride. I had to give her *some* reason to drive across the farm like a banshee.”

Tyler comes over and drops Asher into Olivia’s arms. “Olivia doesn’t need an actual *reason* to drive across the farm like a banshee. That’s just how she drives.”

“Don’t you know it,” Olivia says before leaning up to kiss Tyler on the cheek.

“So, everyone just came out to meet us?” I reach over and lace Tatum’s fingers through mine, suddenly feeling a little overwhelmed. The good kind of overwhelmed.

Perry steps up beside me, Jack on his shoulders, and claps me on the back. “You know Brody will use just about any excuse to use his new fancy fire pit.”

“It’s called a SOLO stove,” Brody calls. “It’s smokeless.”

“But also, we’re really happy for you,” Olivia says. “Mom and Dad wanted to come, but Dad wasn’t feeling super great. They’re hoping we can do a family dinner at the restaurant tomorrow. I already checked the schedule, and Tatum’s clear if you can cut out of the kitchen for an hour or two.”

I look at Tatum, and she nods her approval. “Sounds good to me.”

“Daddy, can I meet the dog?” Jack asks from where he’s still sitting on Perry’s shoulders.

I’m still not used to hearing him call Perry *Daddy*, but Perry doesn’t even flinch. “Sure can, kiddo.” He looks at Tatum. “Is that all right?”

“Absolutely,” Tatum says. “He’s very friendly. You can take him for a little walk if you like.” She hands the leash over to Jack, who leads Toby over to where his mom is sitting with Kate. Lila immediately smiles, her gasp of delight loud enough for us to hear it all the way across the clearing.

“Oh no,” Perry says. “I’m going to have to get him a dog, aren’t I?” He moves off toward his family before either of us can respond.



“Come on,” Olivia says to me and Tatum. “I brought stuff for smores, and we need to have a serious conversation about our brother, because I’m pretty sure he just put an offer in on a piece of property on the other side of the river.” She doesn’t wait for us, and I take advantage of the temporary solitude to drape an arm around Tatum’s shoulders and tug her close.

“So Flint’s really moving home?” Tatum asks.

“I guess so.” I give her shoulders a squeeze. “Tatum, I know they can be a lot.”

She slips her arms around my waist. “Are you kidding me? Lennox, I love this. I love *them*.” She leans up and presses a kiss to my lips.

“But not as much as you love me?” I turn her so she’s flush against me, my hands clasped at the small of her back, and she grins.

“Not even close, Lennox Hawthorne. Not even close.”

# EPILOGUE

Eighteen Months Later

LENNOX WAKES ME UP with a trail of kisses down my spine, his breath warm as it brushes against my skin.

Ninety-nine mornings out of a hundred, I'm the one who wakes up first, so this is an indulgence I've never experienced. But lately, it feels like I've been sleeping longer and harder than ever before. Not that I'm complaining.

"I approve," I say sleepily, as I yawn and roll over. "This is a lovely way to wake up. Ten out of ten, would recommend."

Lennox smiles down at me, the early morning sunlight filtering through the window and casting tiny triangles of light across his bare chest. "Good morning, wife."

I grin. "Think I'll ever get used to the sound of that?"

"I hope so." He leans down to kiss me, but it's much too brief for my liking, then he's out of the bed and walking toward the door.

"Where are you going?" I whine.

"To get you coffee," he calls from the hallway. "We've got places to be."

I grab my phone from the nightstand and snuggle under the covers, feeling justified in staying in bed at least until Lennox returns with coffee.

I scroll through my notifications. My dad's flight is on time, so that's good. He won't make it by the time the picnic starts, but he should be there well before it's over.

Honestly, I'm just grateful he's making the effort to come at all.

It took Dad a little while to come around. He didn't come to dinner the night after I refused to sign his contract, and he spent many months pouting about his *forced* retirement. But in the end, I think even *he* realizes the change was good for him. He flew out for my wedding and even gave Lennox and me a trip to France for our honeymoon.

I was able to visit with my mom's brother and her father—my grandfather—for the first time in years and explore the country with a mind tuned to experiencing it through my mother's eyes instead of mine.

Don't get me wrong. Dad is still ... well, *Dad*. A little pompous. A lot arrogant. But in small doses, we're doing okay. As long as we never have to work together again, I think we'll manage just fine.

*Speaking of work.* I pull up the email that just popped up, glancing quickly through the PDFs my latest client sent over. Kitchen layout, menu, and then, in the body of the email, a breakdown of staff.

I'm less than a year into this new gig of mine, so all of this still feels very new and overwhelming. But it's also challenging in all the ways I want, tapping into my strengths and satisfying me far more than cooking ever did.

Maybe that's something most chefs wouldn't want to admit. But there's something magical about finding exactly what makes me tick and embracing it. I don't have to be what anyone else believes I should be. It only matters what I want to be.

"Your coffee, my very lazy darling," Lennox says, holding out my mug.

I sit up and take it, wrapping my fingers around the warm ceramic. I sigh. "You're my favorite today."

“But not every day?”

As if on cue, Toby jumps onto the bed and flops onto my lap. I lean back onto the headboard, Toby leaning with me, and grin at my husband.

“Okay, I see how it is.” He moves into the bathroom and turns on the shower. “Come on. I need to get meat in the smoker by ten if it’s going to be ready on time.”

“It’s always about the food with you, huh?” I joke, following behind him. I take a sip of the coffee and frown. “Did you do something different to the coffee?” I ask. I take another small sip. It doesn’t taste *bad*, necessarily. It just tastes different.

“Made it just like normal,” Lennox calls. “Are you showering? I don’t want to be late.”

“The party doesn’t start until two,” I call, stifling another yawn.

“But the meat!” he calls back.

I smile into my coffee, sensing that Lennox’s anxiety has a lot more to do with those *attending* this particular party than it does his responsibility to feed everyone.

Lennox has told me about the occasional opportunity he’s had to meet high-profile celebrities through his brother. But the guest list of today’s housewarming party for Flint reads like a guide to who’s who on Hollywood’s A-list. It’s a private party. No press, and Flint only expected a handful of his friends and associates to travel across the country to attend. But apparently, nearly every single person whom Flint invited jumped at the chance to come see the secluded house he’s built for himself in the mountains of North Carolina.

Even I’m feeling a little star struck, and I grew up in Hollywood Hills.

An hour later, Flint greets us at the door of his stunningly perfect home. Vaulted ceilings, long range view of the mountains, a kitchen that makes me want to weep with envy. It’s ridiculously extravagant, but somehow still comes across as understated. Earthy tones, comfortable fabrics. It’s the kind

of house where you feel like you can rest your feet on the coffee table without offending anyone.

“Tatum!” Flint says, pulling me into a hug. “Good to see you again.”

I am fully and completely dedicated to Team Lennox as far as the Hawthorne brothers are concerned. He’s definitely the most handsome, the most charming, and he feeds me, which, the discussion can really end right there.

But I’m not blind to the magnetic star power of the youngest Hawthorne brother. With his dark hair and those broody eyes he shares with Perry—I’m just saying. It’s not a wonder the world is obsessed with him.

Flint hugs Lennox next. “So glad you guys are here. Also, just a heads up? The Hemsworth brothers are in the kitchen. And Harry Styles is outside in the pool.”

“Wait, what? Are you being serious?” I peer over his shoulder toward the large living room windows that look over the pool and the mountains beyond.

“Nah,” Flint says with an easy grin. “It’s too cold to swim.”

He turns and heads toward the kitchen. “Come on back. I’ve got the smoker warmed up and ready just like you asked.”

I grab Lennox’s arm. “Wait. Does that mean Harry Styles *isn’t* at this party right now?”

Lennox chuckles and leans down for a quick kiss. “Nah,” he says, mimicking Flint’s tone. “The party hasn’t started yet.”

“Lennox!” I whisper yell at his retreating form. “That’s not even an answer!”

He lifts a hand, waving over his shoulder as he turns the corner and disappears, leaving me in the foyer with exactly zero information about Harry Styles. “I love you when you’re flustered!” he calls, and I roll my eyes.

I’m halfway to the living room to look for Harry when Lila and Kate appear in front of me, tugging me around the corner and down the hall to a guest bedroom. They stop outside the

closed bedroom door. “Hi. Sorry for the ambush,” Lila says. “We have a surprise for you.”

“Is it Harry Styles?” I ask.

Kate frowns. “No. But I heard he’s out by the pool.”

“But it’s better than Harry Styles,” Lila says. She reaches for my hand. “Come on. You have to close your eyes.”

A surge of love fills my chest as I yield control to my sisters-in-law. These women, and Olivia, too, have become my closest friends over the past eighteen months. We’ve bonded over Kate’s struggle with unexplained infertility and her subsequent pregnancy success through intrauterine insemination. She’s four months along now and is finally through the worst of her morning sickness.

We rallied around Lila when she lost her grandmother and took turns watching Jack when she and Perry spent a week moving her grandfather into their guest room.

We were all in the delivery room when Olivia had her second baby when Asher was only eighteen months old—way earlier than she and Tyler had originally planned.

But mostly, we just do a lot of laughing. Texting. Joking about small town life in Silver Creek married to men as intense as the Hawthornes. I know these women, and they know me. And that’s a pretty amazing feeling.

The door cracks open, and Olivia pops her head out. “Are her eyes closed?”

I lift my hands to my face and cover my eyes all the way. “They’re closed! I promise!”

“Okay,” Olivia says. “Take four steps forward.” One of them—I can’t tell who—grips my shoulders and turns me a different direction. “Okay. Now open your eyes,” Kate says from directly behind me.

I open my eyes and immediately scream. Bree is standing in front of me.

Here. At Flint’s house.

Tears immediately fill my eyes. I haven't seen her since the wedding.

I rush forward and pull her into a hug. "Oh my gosh! What are you doing here?"

"Are you kidding? The Hemsworth brothers are here. I'd have crawled naked to be here if I had to."

"But the twins—where are your girls?"

"With their father. He'll probably be certifiable by the time I make it home, but they'll be fine." She smiles wide. "You've got me for the whole weekend!"

My eyes fall on Olivia, immediately guessing that she's the mastermind behind this particular surprise. "You did this?"

She shrugs. "The party felt like a good excuse."

"But also, we have an ulterior motive," Kate says.

Lila pulls out a little stool sitting in front of a gorgeous vanity and motions for me to come over. "Come sit," she says gently.

"What is this? What's happening? And why do I feel like you're all having a conversation that I'm not a part of?"

"Just sit and we'll explain," Bree says.

"Wait, you're in on this too? Where's Lennox? I feel like I need someone on my team." Despite my protests, I sit on the stool anyway, a part of me enjoying all this if only because these women obviously care about me, and it's fun to bask in their attention.

Once I'm sitting, the four of them sit in a row along the foot of the bed. "Tatum," Lila says, her soft Southern voice soothing, "this is an intervention."

"What? Why? What am I doing?"

Kate leans forward and squeezes my hand. "Sweetie, we think you're pregnant."

I immediately scoff, tugging my hand back like Kate's is on fire. "What? That's ridiculous."

“You’re tired all the time,” Olivia says.

“You fell asleep on the phone the other day,” Bree says. “Mid-sentence.”

“You also threw up the other morning, and you’ve been complaining about nausea.”

“It’s because my birth control makes me queasy.”

“Does that explain why you haven’t had a period?” Olivia says.

“How do you know I missed a period?”

“You told us at lunch the other day,” Lila says.

I think back to the conversation. “Right, but that’s also my birth control. It’s messed up my cycles. I haven’t had a period since the wedding.”

They glare at me with matching dubious expressions. “It’s been three months, Tatum,” Bree says. “You’ve gone *three months* with no period?”

I shake my head, still not ready to cave completely. “*Barely* three months. But the doctor said the birth control might make my periods lighter. I guess I just thought ... but how could this even happen? I never missed a dose.”

“Yeah. It doesn’t always work,” Bree says.

“Asher was totally a condom baby,” Olivia says. “We’d only been married three months.”

“*We’ve* only been married three months,” I say, panic edging my voice.

“Hey,” Kate says, reaching out to squeeze my knee. “That doesn’t matter. You and Lennox are solid. Besides—it might be fun if we have babies at the same time.”

“Do your boobs feel heavier?” Lila asks. “That was the first thing I noticed when I was pregnant with Jack.”

“Boobs are definitely first,” Olivia agrees.

I look down at my boobs. They maybe *have* felt a little heavier lately. “Oh gosh.” I press a hand to my midsection,



suddenly feeling a little queasy. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Just breathe,” Lila says, her smile wide. “You’re fine. It’s going to be okay.”

“Okay. Time to take the test,” Olivia says. “It’s on the bathroom counter ready for you.”

Bree tugs me to my feet and ushers me toward the bathroom.

I look at my older sister over my shoulder. “Did you seriously fly all the way out here just to make me take a pregnancy test?”

“I flew all the way out here because Olivia said I could meet the Hemsworth brothers.” She nudges me into the bathroom. “But making you take a pregnancy test definitely feels like a fun bonus.”

I pause in the bathroom doorway. “Okay. I’ll be right back, I guess.”

Instead of opening the bathroom door as soon as I’m finished, I opt for solitude while I wait for the test to fully process. Of course, I’ll tell my sisters either way, but having been blindsided and shepherded into this experience with zero warning, I’m feeling a need to wrench back a little control and handle this part alone.

I lean on the counter, my hands braced against the sink as I watch two tiny pink lines appear on the test.

*Pregnant.*

I’m truly, actually pregnant.

I slowly open the bathroom door, but the room is empty, the bedroom door open into the hall.

For real? They all abandoned me to process this news on my own?

But then footsteps sound down the hall, and Lennox appears. “Hey,” he says, pausing in the bedroom doorway. “Liv said you needed me. You okay?”

I almost start to laugh. They must have been really certain the test would be positive to have already gotten Lennox. Or maybe Bree caught sight of a Hemsworth, and they all bailed for something more entertaining than me. Either way, I'm glad Lennox will be the first person to find out.

I stare at my husband for a long moment.

He's so achingly perfect. Physically beautiful, yes. But also kind and funny and gentle and brilliant and everything I would ever want the father of my children to be.

"I'm okay," I say softly, my lips lifting into a smile. "But you might wanna sit down."

He frowns as he moves into the room and sits down across from me.

"Lennox," I say, a slight tremor in my voice. "We're having a baby."

His face pales. "We?" He clears his throat. "As in you and me?"

I smile and let out a little laugh. "Yeah, baby. You and me."

I suddenly wish I could read the thoughts flashing through my husband's brain. He might be panicking, but knowing him, he could also be coming up with recipes for homemade baby food.

"So your birth control didn't work," he says like he's stating a fact instead of asking a question.

"Nope."

"And now we're having a baby."

I bite my lip. "Yep."

He stands up and takes my face in his hands. "Tatum, are you happy?"

Lennox would ask this question first. He doesn't know how to think about himself if he hasn't made sure I'm happy first.

I nod, finally surrendering to the tears that have been threatening since the test first showed up positive. "I'm happy,

Len. I mean, I'm terrified, but I'm definitely happy."

He kisses me soundly, then his face breaks out in the biggest, most beautiful smile. "This is why you've been sleeping so much," he says.

"It totally is. And I'll accept your apology for calling me lazy whenever you're ready to give it."

He tugs me down on the bed beside him, his hand shifting to my stomach. "How are you feeling? Are you tired right now?"

"I'm fine," I say gently, though his concern for me is doing very happy things to my heart. "I'm great, even. A little tired, sure. But I feel good." I take a steadying breath. "Are *you* happy?"

He picks up my hand, squeezing it as he wraps it between his. "To watch you turn into a mother?" He shakes his head. "I'm going to love every minute of this."

He kisses me again, this one touched with fervency and a tiny bit of heat. I lean into it, savoring the feel of him, loving that I belong to him, and he belongs to me. That, alone, is more than I ever dreamed of, but to think of a tiny human who will belong to us both? My heart nearly bursts at the thought.

Lennox breaks the kiss and leans back the slightest bit. "You promise you're okay? You're happy about this?"

I nod, smiling up at him. "The happiest."

"Really? This is it? There are no more levels of happy available to you?"

"Nope. This is the top. I am maxed out happy."

He nods and claps his hands against his thighs. "In that case, let me go tell Harry Styles you don't actually want to meet him."

I gasp. "Lennox Hawthorne, you better not be joking."

He stands and holds out his hand, his eyes bright with love. "Come and find out."

I slip my hand into his, relishing his strong grip, and let him lead me from the room.

Meeting Harry Styles is definitely a memory I'll always cherish.

But at the end of the night, when I climb into bed and settle into Lennox's arms, he's the one I think of as I drift off to sleep.

My maxed out, top level of happy.

Lennox *freaking* Hawthorne.

Thousands of chefs in America, but I fell in love with *him*.

*— e e —*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks for reading, friends. I truly love spending time with the Hawthorne family on Stonebrook Farm, and writing Lennox and Tatum's story was no exception, even if I WAS hungry the entire I was drafting. I did a lot of research about what it means to be a chef, and about the many challenges of running your own restaurant. I was stressed just doing the research, so I finished this book extra grateful for all the people who make a career out of creating beautiful food. I love to eat, so THANK YOU!

A note about Toby the goldendoodle—Toby was based on MY goldendoodle...whose name also happens to be Toby. Okay, fine. Tatum's Toby isn't just based on my dog. He actually IS my dog. Same personality. Same ability to give hugs. I've had a few people mention that they thought golden doodles had to be golden in color, but that isn't the case! Since a golden doodle is a cross between a golden retriever and a poodle, there are a lot of color combinations that are possible. Tatum's Toby (and my Toby) is considered a "parti" doodle—meaning he's fifty percent black and fifty percent white. It's one of the rarest color combinations, but it's absolutely possible! I love to post pictures of Toby on my Instagram account, @jennyproctorbooks, if you'd like to get a visual of what Toby looks like in real life!

Kirsten, I needed SO. MUCH. HAND HOLDING with this book, and I'm so grateful that you were willing to slog through so many reads to help me get the story to where it needed to be. Thank you for challenging me to be to push harder, to dig deeper and to give the story "FREAKING MOE" wherever it needs it. I'm so glad to have you on my team as a critique partner, but even more as an incredible friend!

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# HOW TO KISS A MOVIE STAR

**JENNY PROCTOR**

 *Jenny Proctor Creative*

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*This one is for you, readers.  
Thanks for sticking with me.*

# CHAPTER ONE

Flint

I'M IN A GARDEN supply store in one of the smallest towns in North Carolina, staring at a basket full of individually wrapped sugar cookies decorated to look like my face.

When I dreamed of being a famous actor, this is not where my brain went.

I pick up one of the cookies, noting the price tag stuck to the top of the cellophane. One cookie for more than six bucks? Ann's cookies are good, but is any cookie six-dollars-good?

I drop it onto the counter with a sigh. I was counting on most of Silver Creek ignoring the fact that I'm home. Everyone around here has known me since I was an idiot kid anyway.

It goes without saying that if you ever sat through one of the variety shows I put on in middle school—and by variety show, I mean a collection of badly prepared monologues and off-key Jonas Brother songs—you get a pass on being impressed with my career.

Was Flint just nominated for an Oscar? *Who cares?*

Was that him in all those *Agent Twelve* movies? *Maybe, but remember that time he skinny-dipped in the pond out by the Wilsons' pasture?*

If it were up to me, nobody in this town would mention my career at all.

I need normal.

I *crave* normal.

Which is why a basket of Flint Hawthorne sugar cookies is so disheartening.

I push my sunglasses onto my head.

Ann Arney has been running the Silver Creek Feed 'n Seed for as long as I can remember. It's been years since I've seen her, but she mostly looks the same. Her hair's a little grayer, her face a little more worn. But her eyes still have the same sparkle.

"Do you like them?" she asks. "I've already sold four this morning."

Believe it or not, selling cookies right next to the bird seed and a display of gardening gloves isn't unusual for Ann. Her sugar cookies are famous in Silver Creek, and she usually has some for sale, decorated to match whatever holiday or season is coming up next. At least she did when I was a kid. Pretty sure this is the first time I've ever seen her put a *person* on a cookie, though, unless we're counting Santa Claus.

I should be flattered. I guess a part of me is. But a bigger part just wants to blend in for a while.

I take in Ann's sincere expression and sense how much she wants me to be impressed. "They look great, Ann. It's a perfect likeness."

"I used that photo they put on the cover of *People* magazine," she says. She clears her throat and leans forward across the counter. "The one that named you...sexiest man alive." She whispers the *sexiest man alive* part like she's nervous to say the words out loud.

Behind me, an older man in denim overalls, who looks like he's definitely *not* one of *People* magazine's regular readers, clears his throat.

“Tell you what,” I say to Ann, pulling out my wallet. “I’m going to buy the rest of those cookies.”

Her eyebrows go up. “All of them? I’ve got three dozen more in the back. And I’m selling them for six-fifty a piece.”

I try not to wince as I do the math, but I’d rather buy them myself than have my sugar-cookie likeness reminding every single person who drops by to purchase a new shovel that I’ve finally moved home.

“Whatever you’re charging is just fine, Ann. I’ll take them all. Plus this bird seed and twenty bags of the black mulch you’ve got outside.”

She scans the bird seed and drops it into a bag, then darts into the back room, emerging with a paper grocery sack I assume is full of pre-wrapped cookies. “I suppose you’re looking to keep a low profile,” she says as she slides both bags across the counter, some measure of remorse in her voice.

I offer her an easy smile as I hand her my credit card, holding her gaze. “Or maybe I just know who makes the best sugar cookies this side of the Mississippi.”

Her cheeks flush. “Oh, you hush, Flint Hawthorne. Don’t you start with me.” She bats at my arm before she returns my card and a receipt, the twinkle back in her eyes. “Wait. One more thing.” She steps out from behind the counter and moves to the drink cooler sitting by the front door. She opens it and pulls out a Cheerwine in a tall, glass bottle. “For old time’s sake.”

When I was nine, Ann caught me stealing a Cheerwine out of this very same cooler and laid into me for over an hour, talking about representing the Hawthorne name and remembering who I am and working for the things I want instead of taking them. I had to sit in the back room until my dad drove over to pick me up, then I had to sweep the entire store to apologize for my attitude and entitlement.

The next time I was in the store, Ann offered to let me sweep whenever I wanted a soda. That way, I wouldn’t need to steal one.

I take the icy cold drink and twist off the top. “I haven’t had one of these in years.”

“Don’t they sell Cheerwine in California?”

“They sure don’t.”

“Shoo, then it’s a good thing you moved home,” she says, her words a little more Southern than they were before.

*For so many reasons, I think to myself.*

I take a long sip of Cheerwine. It tastes like my childhood—like hot summers and cold creeks and hunting for lightning bugs. I lift the drink in farewell, and Ann smiles wide. “Take care, all right?”

Outside, the late summer sun beats down on the parking lot, and I’m suddenly grateful I have something cool to drink.

I don’t think about the scolding I’d get from my personal trainer if he could see what I’m drinking. Not to mention the forty-plus cookies I will almost certainly eat by myself.

Honestly, the scolding wouldn’t do much.

There is a time to live like my paycheck depends on the contours of my abdominal muscles. I just spent six months shooting on location in Costa Rica, playing a lifeguard who is shirtless at least fifty percent of the time. There were actual clauses in my contract about muscle definition and the efforts I made to maintain it.

But now is not that time.

Now? It’s time to eat cookies.

I head toward the far end of the building, where bags of mulch and soil and different kinds of fertilizer are stacked on pallets at the edge of the parking lot. My truck is already parked next to the mulch—something I did on purpose—so it won’t take long to load up what I need.

As I round the corner, I almost collide with a massive tomato plant hustling toward the front of the store. “Hey, whoa, watch out,” I say, jumping to the side.

The plant stops and lowers to the ground, revealing the woman carrying it. She looks close to my age, mid-twenties, probably, and I brace myself for the inevitable recognition.

I'm not trying to be presumptuous. I'm just going off experience. Most women in their twenties and thirties recognize my face.

But this woman doesn't react at all.

She only stares, her eyebrows raised like she's daring me to say something else.

I lift a placating hand. "Sorry. Didn't mean to stop you. But you almost ran me over."

The woman's eyes flash, and for a moment, I can't look away. They are the most startling pale blue, clear and arresting—a contrast to the rest of her, which is clad in forest browns and greens. Her dark brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and she's wearing utility pants, an oversized T-shirt cinched into a knot at her waist, and practical work boots. The whole look gives off a strong "don't mess with me" vibe.

The vibe only gets stronger when the woman's lips purse. "Definitely. There's so little space in the parking lot, I can see why it was so difficult for you to avoid me."

She looks around pointedly in a way that makes me grin.

Partly because she's talking to me like I'm just some random dude. Mostly because the fire flashing in her bright blue eyes won't let me go.

"Fair enough," I say. "I'll keep a better eye out."

We stand there and stare at each other for a long moment before I take a step toward her. I don't know why I don't just let her leave. She's nothing like the women I normally pursue, but the impulse to keep her talking is strong.

I motion to the tomato plant beside her. It's twice as big around as she is, though she didn't seem to be struggling to carry it before. "Can I carry that for you?" I ask.

She's going to say no, but maybe she'll say something else, too.



She raises her eyebrows before bending her knees and hoisting the plant into her arms like it weighs nothing at all. She turns to the side and looks straight at me, her look saying I did not just ask to carry her plant. “I’ve got it,” she says.

Something sparks deep in my gut.

Before I became famous, I used to love the challenge of pulling a smile out of a woman, of using my charm to crack even the stoniest expressions. It’s a game I haven’t played in years, but I can’t keep myself from trying now.

“I can see that,” I say with a grin. “Maybe I should be asking for *your* help.”

She chuckles, but I don’t miss the faint question in her eyes. I’ve made her curious, at least, if not interested. “You don’t need my help,” she says, but the conviction in her voice from moments before has waned the slightest bit.

I take another step forward. “What makes you so sure? I’ve got twenty bags of mulch to load up all by myself.”

She puts down her plant, her hands going to her hips as she pointedly eyes me from top to bottom. “And you look perfectly capable.”

I resist the urge to flex my biceps, but I can’t keep myself from saying, “Thanks for noticing.”

She rolls her eyes and huffs out a laugh. “Okay. We’re done here.” She crouches toward her plant, but I call out to stop her.

“Wait. Don’t leave.”

She leaves the plant on the ground and slowly turns to face me one more time.

When I was barely twenty years old, I auditioned for the lead role in a low-budget romantic comedy. I’d had a few minor parts here and there, but nothing big. Never the lead. I got the part, and when the casting director called to let me know, she mentioned my smile specifically and told me it would make me a star.

The movie was released to streaming platforms without even hitting the box office, but it was a surprise hit. *I* was a

surprise hit. Since then, a dozen different directors have asked for that same smile, making it such a trademark, my first agent made me practice it in the mirror for hours so I wouldn't forget exactly how to replicate it.

I slip it on now, trusting it will impact this woman like it does...well, most everyone else. "What if I don't *need* your help, but I want it anyway?"

The woman doesn't move. She just stares, her gaze focused, like she's trying to puzzle me out.

My jaw tightens under the scrutiny, but I hold my ground. I've never had to work this hard, but I'm not about to give up now.

This time, the effort feels different—less like the games I used to play in high school when the prize was the ego boost of knowing my charm had no bounds. I want this woman to smile for real—because I've said something to make her want to.

"I don't know what's happening here," she finally says, taking a step backward. "But you shouldn't waste your smiles on me."

I shift the bottle of Cheerwine I'm still holding from one hand to the other and run my fingers through my hair. The cool condensation from the bottle coats my fingertips and chills my scalp at the contact. "If you smile back, it won't be a waste at all."

Her eyes lift and a grin plays around her lips, but she never quite gets there. Which only makes me wish to see it more. "I gotta go," she says, her tone laced with humor.

I watch as she picks up her plant and heads toward the front of the Feed 'n Seed.

"It was nice talking to you!" I call after her, but she doesn't look back.

I'm still watching her walk away when my brother, Brody, eases his truck to a stop in front of me, a bright red kayak strapped into the bed. He's shirtless, which makes me think he

was probably just on the river, and my eye catches on the faint scar stretching across his left pectoral muscle.

We were nine and eleven years old when I convinced Brody that reenacting the sword fight from *The Princess Bride* required actual swords. And by swords, I mean knives tied onto the ends of sticks.

Brody wound up with twelve stitches, but I wound up absolutely positive I was destined to be an actor.

I was also grounded for three weeks, but the punishment was well worth the self-discovery.

“What did you say to *her*?” Brody says as he lifts his sunglasses into his sandy brown hair.

I look across the parking lot just in time to catch the woman disappearing into the store. “I didn’t say anything.”

Brody lifts an eyebrow, and I grin.

“I mean, I said *something*. But I promise I was nice.”

“My level of nice? Or your level of nice? And by that, I mean flirty and self-indulgent.”

“Trust me, I wasn’t indulging in anything. She didn’t even recognize me.”

Brody feigns a gasp. “The horror,” he says dryly.

I pull a cookie out of the bag Ann gave me and toss it through his window and into his lap. “Shut up and eat a cookie.” I turn and cross the last few yards to my truck. I finish my Cheerwine, then drop the empty bottle, the bag of cookies, and the birdseed into the front seat before moving to the back and opening the tailgate.

Brody follows slowly behind me, stopping again once his truck is perpendicular to mine. “Ann made your nose too big,” he says, studying the cookie for a brief moment before taking an enormous bite of my frosted face.

He’s not wrong about my nose. But I wasn’t about to be *that* guy and complain. “What are you doing here? Want to make yourself useful and help me load up this mulch?”

“Just need to pick up some new carabiners. Wait, this is *your* truck?” Brody asks, like he’s noticing it for the first time. He lets out a low whistle. “I thought you weren’t getting it until next week.”

“The dealership delivered it this morning,” I say as I reach for the first bag of mulch. I lift it onto my shoulder, then toss it toward the back of the truck bed.

“They *delivered* it?”

I grab a second bag, then grin. “For a small fee.”

He rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t give me any more trouble than that. In different circumstances, I’d be perfectly happy to go buy a car like a normal person. But Asheville’s a decently sized city. Even half a dozen bystanders in a car dealership can interfere with me getting things done.

Funny the things I’ve started to miss over the years. Grocery shopping. Hanging out in a coffee shop and reading a book. Talking to a woman who doesn’t already know my name.

I’m not saying fame isn’t worth it.

I am saying it has a lot to do with why I moved back to North Carolina in the first place. I can’t live completely under the radar in Silver Creek—the bag of face cookies in my truck clearly indicates as much—but I can come close. At least closer than I could in California.

I heft another bag onto my shoulder and toss a look at my brother, who has made no move to get out of his truck. “You’re seriously going to watch me instead of helping?”

He grins. “It’s fun to watch you do all the work.”

“At least come over to the house and help me plant,” I say. “I’m finally filling in the beds behind the pool.”

In reality, I don’t care if he actually helps. I like landscaping. The immediate payoff of working, digging in the dirt, then seeing the fruits of your labors. I’ve done it everywhere I’ve lived, even after I started making enough to pay entire crews of people to do it for me.

But helping or not, I'd happily take Brody's company. My house was finished almost a year ago, but work kept me traveling for months, and I've only been in North Carolina full-time for a couple of weeks. I was looking forward to some family time, but I've seen less of my siblings than I hoped I would.

"Wish I could," Brody says. "Kate's heading out of town, which means I've got to hurry home to get River."

A strange feeling pulses through my chest.

It's weird enough that all my siblings are married now. I'm still getting used to the fact that they're also *parents*. Brody and Kate's daughter, River, is only three months old. A real, tiny human who depends on them for everything. Food. Shelter. Sleep. And Brody is acting like it's no big deal.

Most days, I feel like I can hardly take care of myself.

"You could probably call Perry," Brody says, mentioning our oldest brother. "I don't think he has anything going on today."

"Nope. Jack has a soccer game."

"Lennox?" Brody asks.

I glance at my watch. "Already at the restaurant."

"Sorry, man," Brody says. "If not for River, I really would come."

I wave away his concern. "Don't worry about it. Nate will help if I really need it."

It's not like I blame my siblings for having busy lives. It's just annoying when I've got six weeks of time to kill before the press cycle starts up for *Turning Tides*, the movie I was filming down in Costa Rica. Not long after, I'll be back in Los Angeles to film the third *Agent Twelve* movie, which is making me eager to spend as much time as possible with them now.

Brody nods, but his expression doesn't shift, his brow furrowed in that worried big-brother way. He hesitates another

moment, then climbs out of his truck, leaving it idling in the parking lot, and helps me load the last few bags of mulch.

I close the tailgate and dust off my hands. “Thanks.”

“What about Dad?” Brody says as he moves toward his truck. “I bet he’d keep you company while you plant.”

I roll my eyes. “Dude. Just go home.” I pull on my sunglasses. “I’m a grown man. I can put plants in the ground by myself.”

“Fine. But we’ll all get together next week.”

“Brody. Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop acting like I need special treatment. I’m fine.”

“But you’re—” His words cut off, and he runs a hand through his already tousled hair.

*I’m alone.*

I don’t need to hear him say it to know that’s where he was headed.

When I talked to Mom about moving home, she brought it up as a reason for concern. In a town as small as Silver Creek, it’s unlikely I’ll ever meet any eligible dating prospects.

I see the logic in her argument. But I can’t be worse off than I was in LA. Six years in a city with millions of women, and all I have to show for it is a string of casual relationships and a fame-hungry actress ex who’s still giving me trouble.

My eyes drift across the parking lot to the woman I almost ran into earlier. She’s loading her tomato plant into the back of a beat-up Toyota, securing it into the bed with a length of rope she ties with enough ease, it’s clear she’s done this sort of thing before. She pulls a camouflage baseball cap out of her pocket and puts it on her head, pulling her ponytail through the back before she climbs into the truck.

She cranks the engine and pulls away without giving me a second glance.

Not that I care.

I don't care.

*Do I?*



Three hours later, my flower bed looks freaking amazing. It's a little wild—not as cultivated as the garden space outside my previous house in Malibu—but I like that it blends into the surrounding wilderness.

Seventy-five acres of wilderness, to be exact.

It used to be a research forest that belonged to Carolina Southern University. Now, it's home.

I lift my shirt and use it to wipe the sweat from my forehead. The heavy Southern humidity is bad today, and I'm half-tempted to strip down and dive into the pool to cool off.

Except, why shouldn't I dive in?

When I left California, I brought very few people with me—my private security agent, Nate, and my manager, Joni. That's it.

I *didn't* bring my chef, my trainer, my stylist, the rest of my security detail, or my housekeeper.

My agent and publicist are back in California, and they call me frequently enough to make it seem like they live with me, but for the first time in I don't know how long, I'm well and truly *alone*. Even Joni and Nate (who happen to be married to each other, thanks to my excellent matchmaking skills) have their own house at the edge of my property. They're around, but they don't hover. I don't have any neighbors, and this far into the mountains, I don't need to worry about paparazzi.

A few traveled out and sniffed around Silver Creek when word first got out that I'd sold my Malibu house, but I haven't seen any since I got back from Costa Rica. It's inevitable that word will eventually get out, but even if some desperate photographer sets out to find me, they won't get through the front gate, and that gate is the only way to access the house without hiking through miles of rugged terrain.

Point being, if I want to jump into my pool totally naked, I can jump into my pool totally naked.

I tug my shirt over my head and toss it onto a lounge chair, then unbutton my pants. I have them halfway to my knees when I see Nate walking across the deck, his frown so pronounced, I can see it all the way from here.

He's holding his iPad, and he's clearly looking for me. "Might want to keep your pants on, man."

"I'm not swimming with my pants on. It's hot. Whatever you need to talk to me about, you can talk to me about it while I'm in the pool."

He shrugs. "Fine by me. But don't say I didn't warn you when pictures of your bare butt show up all over the internet."

Pictures of my bare butt are already all over the internet, thanks to a particularly gripping scene I filmed in which I played a criminal getting strip-searched during prison intake. But I take Nate's meaning. I pull my pants back up with a sigh. "What's wrong? What's happening?"

He finally reaches me and lifts his iPad, holding it up so I can watch as he taps on the screen. "Just picked this up on the security camera over on the east edge of the property."

He pulls up a video clip and zooms in. The image is too small for me to make out actual facial features, but there's clearly a person dressed in heavy camouflage crawling through the underbrush, camera in hand.

I swear under my breath. "Did the cameras out front pick anything up?"

Nate shakes his head. "Nobody has passed by on the main road since you got home."

"Which means what? They hiked in from the university service road? That road isn't even on the map."

"That's what makes me think it's someone local. An amateur," Nate says, "hoping they can sneak a few images and sell them for quick cash."



“A local? That’s better, at least.” I don’t like the idea of someone sneaking around my property with a camera, but I’d rather it be someone from around here than someone who followed me here from LA. Paparazzi tend to move in packs. If you see one, you’ll eventually see more.

“See the way he’s dressed?” Nate says, pointing at the screen. “That’s pro-level camouflage. And the way he’s moving through the forest—it’s someone who knows the terrain.”

I sigh. “Either way, it’s still trespassing. If we don’t do something now, he may try again. And let other people know how to do the same thing.”

Nate nods. “I’ll call the cops, but I’ll have to bring whoever this is up to the house. I doubt the cops will want to hike in after him.”

“Just make sure you take his camera before you do.”

Nate stalks off, and I turn around to retrieve my shirt.

I managed to escape a lot of things when I moved out of California.

A lot of unnecessary pressure and expectations. A toxic relationship. The constant hounding of the press.

But apparently, no matter how far into the wilderness I go, I’ll never escape the kind of people who will don camo and traipse through the woods just to capture a few pictures.

I’ll never escape my *fame*.

## CHAPTER TWO

Audrey

THREE WEEKS. THREE WEEKS I've been searching, and I finally found him.

I'd heard rumors about various sightings.

But I wasn't going to believe it until I saw for myself.

The implications are huge, after all. Here? In Silver Creek? I suspected it might eventually come to this—all my PhD research indicated it might—but to see actual, physical proof?

My heart squeezes. It's almost too much.

I inch forward across the loamy forest floor and lift my camera. I'm up on a bit of a ledge, a deep ravine cutting through the mountainside directly in front of me, but the height of my current position makes it easy to see, even at a distance. "Gotcha," I say as I focus my camera, zooming in to get a clearer picture.

"I'm going to need that camera," a deep voice says behind me. I jolt, and my finger slams down on the button, sounding the shutter before the camera slips from my hands, landing on the dirt in front of me.

When I look up, the white squirrel just on the other side of the ravine is nowhere to be seen.

I jump to my feet, glaring at the stranger behind me with the heat of a thousand suns.

*Figurative suns*, my rational, science-minded brain asserts. Because a thousand real suns would char me into nonexistence before I could glare at *anyone*.

It's a ridiculous thought, considering the giant, stern-faced stranger standing not ten feet away, but I've been with my brain for twenty-nine years now. I've learned that sometimes, there's no reasoning with it.

A flash of white appears in the distance, then vanishes behind a tree, and my jaw tightens. I was so close.

"Was that truly necessary?" I say as I scramble to my feet and reach for my camera. I use the hem of my shirt to wipe off the screen on the back.

The man holds out his hand, totally unfazed by my fury. "The camera," he repeats.

Does he not realize what he just disrupted? Does he have any clue how long I've been attempting to verify the presence of white squirrels in this area?

I take a step backward. "You can't have my camera."

The man is wearing some sort of utility vest over a black T-shirt, and he makes a show of sliding the vest back and propping his hands on hips, an obvious move to show off the handgun strapped to his waist.

*Okay*. So I probably ought to take this man seriously. Still, he doesn't look like he necessarily wants to *use* his gun. And he isn't trying to strongarm me, something he could absolutely do, though he does look poised to grab me if I try to run.

My eyes dart up to his face. There's a slim earpiece looped over the top of his left ear.

Stern expression. Armed. Wearing an earpiece. He has to be some sort of security guard.

It occurs to me that I actually have no idea who purchased the land I've been trespassing on for the past eighteen months.

Trespassing with zero issues, I might add. I've never seen a soul out here, and no one has ever seen me.

"Look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way," the man says, his tone gentle, like he's trying to pacify me.

My initial frustration over losing the squirrel is fading, replaced by a sickening sense of dread. I worried I'd eventually get caught trespassing. Just not enough to actually stop.

I shrug with as much innocence as I can muster. "Do what? I'm taking pictures in the woods. I'm not breaking the law." I spare a cautious glance over my shoulder, down the deer trail that brought me to the ravine. When I look back, the Incredible Hulk—honestly, the resemblance is uncanny—folds his arms across his chest, his meaty forearms flexing.

I'd like to think I could outrun him. How fast can you truly be when you have to haul around that much muscle? But I haven't been in tiptop running shape since college.

The man takes a step closer. "You *are* breaking the law. You're on private property, for which I'm responsible. The cops are already on their way, and I'm sure they'd appreciate you coming in easily. Wouldn't want to add resisting arrest or evading a police officer to your rap sheet."

"My rap sheet? I'm just taking pictures. This really doesn't need to be a big deal."

The man frowns. "You're taking pictures *on private property*."

I barely keep myself from rolling my eyes.

I mean, yes. Technically, I am on private property. And yes, when Carolina Southern University sold the seventy-five acres of research forest they owned in Polk County, I was supposed to shut down the multiple experiments I had going on and relocate to the public forest land on the other side of town. But I was here first. One doesn't just *shut down* three years of research on oak ecosystem restoration, forest stand dynamics, and wildlife response to human forest management. Not to mention the water samples we've been collecting from the

Broad River. I can't relocate our collection site without scrapping all our data and starting over. There are too many factors at play.

I look to my left at the house now sitting in the middle of my research forest. It's hard to miss at this distance—a monstrosity of glass and brick and poured concrete that makes my chest ache for all the trees that were sacrificed to build it. Most of the time, I'm not anywhere near it. I stay intentionally close to the river, on the back thirty acres where most of my research takes place. I'm only here now because of the squirrels.

“Ma’am, the property line is well marked. Let’s not make this more complicated than it needs to be.” The man shifts again, one hand moving closer to the firearm strapped to his waist. I resist the urge to ask him the diameter of his bicep because I’m pretty sure it’s bigger than my entire left thigh.

My shoulders drop. “What if I just go quietly?” I motion down the deer trail, in the opposite direction of the house. “We can pretend like I was never here.”

He lifts a single eyebrow—a feat only thirty to forty percent of humans can do. (I’m convinced the ability is inherited, though some argue it’s simply a matter of muscle dexterity. I’d need to do my own research to fully rule out the genetic component.)

“You give me your memory card, and I’ll think about it,” the man says, reminding me that there is more at stake here than eyebrows.

I press my camera against my chest. There’s way too much research on my memory card—at least two months of documentation, not to mention potential photos of a rare and possibly monumental white squirrel. I’ll go to jail before I give it up.

“No way,” I finally say. “You can’t have my memory card.”

He nods as though he expected my response. “Then you’re coming with me,” he says. “*Now.*” He moves forward and reaches for my elbow.

I jerk it out of his reach. “Fine. But I’ll walk by myself, thank you very much.”

He gestures for me to go ahead of him, pointing through the trees. “That way,” he grunts.

I push through the undergrowth for fifty yards or so, then follow Bruce Banner’s lead as he cuts around a thick stand of rhododendron and lands us on a rough trail that looks like it’s only recently been cut in. It isn’t quite wide enough for a car, but the utility vehicle sitting a few feet away clearly fits just fine.

My feet slow, this whole situation suddenly feeling very real.

Am I really going to let this enormous man drive me somewhere? What if he isn’t actually a security guard? What if he’s just some random dude with a hidey-hole on the other side of the mountain where he plans to fatten me up like Hansel and Gretel before feeding me to the coyotes?

He motions toward the passenger seat. “This will be faster than walking.”

I take a step backward, then lower my camera into the bag secured across my shoulder and around my hips. “I don’t—” The words catch in my throat, and I swallow against the knot there. With the adrenaline firing in my brain right now, I probably *could* outrun this guy. But then I see a flash of blue through the trees—a police car making its way down the drive leading to the house. It’s only visible for a moment before it disappears again. Weirdly, this brings me comfort. If I’m not getting away from this guy, I’d at least choose real jail over a hidey-hole.

“Ma’am?” the guy says.

I breathe out a resigned sigh and climb into the utility vehicle beside him.

“Who lives here anyway?” I say as we make our way up the trail. “You could have just asked me to leave, and I would have. This seems like a lot of fuss over a few pictures.”

He eyes me warily. “Very funny,” he says, no trace of actual humor in his voice.

*Very funny?*

Fear tightens my gut, but I do my best to will it away. All I’ve been accused of is trespassing, something that, even with official charges, only carries a fine. *Annnnd* possibly thirty days in jail. But probably—hopefully?—it will just be a fine. It’s not like I have an actual criminal record. I’m a model citizen! A distracted scientist who ignored private property signs because she was so focused on finding the ever-elusive white squirrel.

A surge of satisfaction pulses through me.

*I actually found him.*

I resist the urge to look through my pictures to see if I captured a clear image before the Incredible Hulk scared me half to death. I’m desperate to know, but I don’t want to get into any more trouble than I already am.

The ground levels out before us, then turns to pavement, and Brucey Hulk eases us to a stop directly in front of a Polk County Sheriff’s car, lights still flashing blue in the fading afternoon light.

The house looms in the distance, though *looms* isn’t really the right word. It *is* big, as big as I thought it was when I was seeing it across the ravine and through the trees, but from this angle, it’s surprisingly pretty, its muted browns and greens and grays blending into the surrounding mountainside like it somehow belongs here.

I’m still bitter I lost access to seventy-five acres of forest land so someone can live here, but even I have to admit—the house is really lovely.

The doors on either side of the cruiser open, and two deputies climb out.

*Okay.*

I’m also bitter that I’m about to get arrested.

This is really happening.

I'm going to have a mugshot and ink smears on my fingertips. I'm going to be given one phone call on a sketchy payphone while a heavily tattooed man waits behind me, telling me I'd better hurry up or else.

Will I have to wear an orange jumpsuit? Or stripes? Do they still make prisoners wear stripes?

Apparently, *words* have been exchanged during my existential crisis, and now one of the deputies is moving toward me, his mouth set in a grim line.

Next thing I know, my camera bag has been lifted over my shoulders and is in the hands of giant Mark Ruffalo.

And I'm in handcuffs.

Real. Actual. Handcuffs.

"Do you understand your rights?" one of the deputies says from behind me.

"My rights," I repeat. I *know* I should be listening, but Hulky Banner has pulled out my camera and is scrolling through my pictures. If he would just turn to the side a tiny bit, I'd be able to see the digital display on the back. Even just a flash of white would make me happy—

"Ma'am, are you listening?" the deputy repeats.

"Yes, but—I'm sorry, can you just tell me if I managed to get a picture of the squirrel?"

Mark Bulky Man looks up. "The squirrel?"

I nod. "White? With a little pink nose? Dark brown eyes?"

He looks through a few more pictures. "You were taking pictures of a squirrel?"

I scoff. "Trying to," I say, unable to curb the snottiness of my tone, despite my best effort. "Before you scared him away."

The man levels me with a long look. "Why?"

Something like hope flickers in my chest as all the pieces click into place.



This isn't just about trespassing. This is about my pictures. And this guy thinks I was taking pictures of an actual person—a person *he* is supposed to protect.

I square my shoulders. “Because I just finished my PhD research on the migratory patterns of Sciuridae as a response to climate change and the environmental impacts of urbanization and suburban sprawl.”

All three men—Incredible Bruce and the two sheriff's deputies—blink in unison.

Finally, Security Hulk clears his throat. “What?”

“Squirrels. Marmots. Small rodents. I've been hunting for white squirrels in these woods for weeks. And I finally spotted one.”

The man's expression clears. “You're a...” He hesitates. “Scientist?”

“A wildlife biologist.” I look toward the fancy house in the distance. “Look, I don't even know who lives here. I promise I wasn't trying to trespass, and I wasn't trying to take photos of anything but the squirrels.”

His expression shifts, and he lifts an eyebrow. “You really don't know who lives here?”

I shrug. “Should I?”

He exchanges a quick glance with the deputies, like they're all part of some special club and I'm the dumb one who doesn't know the secret word for admittance. “Give me just a second,” he says. He sets my camera down on the hood of the sheriff's car, then walks toward the house, his phone lifted to his ear. A minute or so later, another man leaves the house and meets him, then they walk back to the rest of us together.

The closer the new guy gets to me, the more my stomach fills with dread.

I know this guy. Or, I *sort of* know this guy. He's the man who almost ran into me at the Feed 'n Seed this morning when I was rescuing a nearly dead tomato plant from the back of Ann's garden center.

He stops a few feet away from me, his arms crossed over his chest, recognition flashing in his eyes. “We meet again,” he says easily.

“Do we?” I say, feigning innocence. “I’m not very good with faces.”

My sisters tell me I shouldn’t use this as an excuse since my inability to recognize faces is *willful*. I could do better. I just choose not to. But is it truly my fault that I like science more than people? I came this way—hardwired to be hopelessly nerdy and unsociable. I can’t help it that I remember the coat patterns of American marsupials more easily than I remember a man’s face.

The trouble is, I *do* remember this man’s face.

I also remember the thrill of emotion that shot through me (it was really just adrenaline and a spike of dopamine—it doesn’t have to mean anything) when he smiled at me.

I may not be particularly adept at reading social cues—a surprise to absolutely no one—but I’m not so helpless to have missed that this guy was flirting with me.

I did not flirt back for three very specific reasons.

One—I cannot flirt. Flirting requires nuance, something I’ve never been able to achieve.

Two—he is much too pretty to be interested in someone like me, which means he had to be messing with me. Sadly, this isn’t the first time this has happened. Experience has taught me it is much easier to keep my walls up before any real damage can happen.

And three—even if he *wasn’t* messing with me, I know what kind of men I’ve been compatible with in the past. And they are much more the bookish, lab-coat-wearing type than the muscled, sunglasses-wearing type. As soon as this man got to know me enough to actually *know* me, he’d be out of town faster than the mayfly’s life cycle.

My sisters argue I’m selling myself short and will never be happy if I can’t stop *sciencing* my love life. (Their word

because I only use real words, and *sciencing* isn't one.) But it's who I am.

This isn't hypothetical. It's a fact: men with faces this perfect do not fall for women like me.

He lifts a hand and rubs it across his jaw, then props both hands on his hips. The motion stretches his T-shirt across his sternum and pectoralis muscles, which—yes, I notice. Unfortunately, his face is not the only part of him that's perfect, and while I am undoubtedly a scientist with very specific opinions, I'm also a woman. I'd have to be dead not to notice.

“You really don't have any idea who I am?” he asks.

By itself, the question might sound arrogant. But there's a hope in this man's voice that negates his presumption. It's almost as though he doesn't want me to know who he is.

I wrack my brain, trying to think of somewhere I might have met him. Or seen him, since, going by the enormous house and the security guard, this guy is probably someone famous. A singer? An actor, maybe? Either way, I'm out of luck. I haven't listened to anything but classical music in years, and I haven't watched a movie since before my PhD program.

According to my sisters, *not liking movies* is one of the things that contributes to my hopeless misanthropy and should not be admitted out loud in any social situation. It's number three on the list, actually, right under my dissertation for my PhD program and the number of small rodent skeletons I have stored in my attic.

(FOR SCIENCE. I promise I don't hang out with them or anything.)

My obvious social ineptitude aside (it's shameful how much I actually need my sisters' help), I'm positive I have no idea who this man is.

“I really don't,” I finally say.

He nods and looks toward the cops standing on either side of me. “You can let her go. This was obviously a misunderstanding.”

Relief surges through my chest, and I take a deep breath, maybe the first one I've taken since this whole shenanigan began. As soon as my hands are free, I step forward to get my camera from the hood of the sheriff's car.

The man clearly in charge of this situation, the one with the impressive pectoralis muscles and the bright blue eyes, beats me to it. He picks it up and scrolls through several photos. "You were photographing squirrels, you say?"

I nod, resisting the urge to yank the camera from his hands. "White ones. Or, *one* white one. Though I'm hopeful there are more."

He stops on what must be the last photo I took before my... abduction? This is not the right word, I know. But my brain is full of norepinephrine from all the stress, and I'm not thinking clearly enough to land on the correct one.

"Huh. Look at that," he says. "I've never seen a white squirrel before."

I smile wide, elation filling my chest.

*I got it.* I got the picture. It would have been better had I been able to track the squirrel for a while, figure out where he's nesting, but a photograph is a good start.

The man looks up and startles the slightest bit, his eyes dropping to my smile, which I quickly shift into something less enthusiastic. I might as well wear a T-shirt that says, *Please ignore me. I'm too weird for regular human interaction.*

He's still looking at me, though. *Staring* at me, even. My system must still be dealing with some sort of adrenaline flood because it almost feels like there's a weird kind of energy sparking between us.

I brush the impression aside—I am stronger than the chemicals inside my brain—and clear my throat. "White squirrels don't typically live around here," I say, sounding more professorial than I would like, but it's my default mode, and in the present circumstance, it's all I'm capable of. "That's why I was tracking him. I did my PhD research on the

migratory patterns of—” My sisters’ threats echo in my brain, and my words trail off. What do they always say I should do? Dumb things down for regular people? “What I mean is, white squirrels aren’t typically native to Polk County. The fact that they’re here is new. And a big deal.”

He lifts an eyebrow like I’ve said something to amuse him. “Is it?” he says through an easy grin.

I shrug. “A big deal to me.”

He hands me the camera, our hands brushing in a way that makes my skin tingle. I rub at the back of my hand like I can wipe away the sensation, and the man eyes me curiously before taking a giant step back and pushing his own hands into his pockets.

He looks at his security guard, a question in his eyes. It’s clear they’re having some kind of wordless conversation, because eventually, the security guard shakes his head, and the other man nods, his expression resigned.

“Just the same, this is private property,” he says. “I can’t have you wandering around my woods.” He looks to the sheriff’s deputies. “Could you give her a ride back to... wherever she came from?”

The younger deputy nods. “Absolutely, Flint. Consider it done.”

The deputy sounds like an overeager puppy, hoping to please, corroborating my belief that this man is someone famous. Also, his name is *Flint*. If that doesn’t sound like the name of a star in one of my sister Lucy’s romantic comedies, I don’t know what does.

“Wait,” I say, stepping forward. I reach for Flint’s arm, which immediately has the security guy stepping toward us like he’s prepared to toss me over his shoulder like a ragdoll if that’s what it takes to protect his boss. Not that *Flint* looks like he needs protecting, based on his own obvious (and very impressive) upper body strength.

I hold both my hands up, taking a step away. “Sorry. I just— if I’m only looking for squirrels,” I say. “Taking pictures of

*only* squirrels. Can I come back? I swear, I won't take pictures of anything else. And I'll stay in the woods, far away from the house."

Flint studies me, his arms folded over his chest. He takes a step forward, his eyes trained on me, and suddenly it feels like we're the only two people on the planet. His security guard is hovering beside us, but he is nothing but a blurry blob in the background of whatever this moment is. "What's your name?" Flint says softly.

I swallow and clear my throat. "Audrey," I croak out.

"Nice to meet you, Audrey," he says smoothly. "I'm Flint." He holds out his hand, and I slip my palm into his. I cringe when I notice the dirt staining my fingers, lining the beds of my nails, but his hands are just as dirty as mine—like he's been digging in the dirt all afternoon. Something about this makes me like him—notable because I don't generally like people at all. But if he really is big and famous and important—and I'm beginning to sense that he must be—I like that he's not above doing his own yard work. "This is Nate," he says, gesturing to the giant behind us. "He's head of my security team."

"I gathered," I say simply.

"I believe you're a scientist, Audrey," Flint says, before letting out a light chuckle. "You look like a scientist."

I'm not sure if I should take this as an insult. I *am* a scientist, so I suppose I ought to look like one, but something tells me my sisters would not take the remark as a compliment. Regardless, I'm pretty sure Flint is about to cave and let me come back. He can insult me all he wants if it means I get to find my squirrels.

"Flint, it's not a good idea," Nate says, and my jaw tightens.

*It IS a good idea, Flint. It really, really is.*

"I promise I'm harmless," I say, my eyes pleading.

He holds my gaze for a long moment, then slowly shakes his head. "I wish I could make an exception, but I take my privacy very seriously. My property is off-limits."

“But the squirrels—” I start to argue. My words cut off when Nate steps in front of me, blocking my view of Flint. Blocking my view of *everything*. Geez, I didn’t know humans could even BE this big.

“It was nice to meet you, Audrey,” Flint says from behind the brick wall of a man now blocking my view. “Good luck with your research.”

I almost ask about him wanting my help earlier today, about the implication that he wanted to spend time with me. If I were a different woman, one well-versed in playing the games that men and women play, I might. Instead, I yell out, “There won’t *be* any research if I have to stay off your property.”

Flint doesn’t even turn around.

“Time to go, ma’am,” the younger deputy says. “I assume you’ve got a car parked out here somewhere?”

I sigh. “A couple miles down the road.”

He nods and opens the back door of the cruiser, holding it for me while I climb in.

Seconds later, we’re driving past the main house—it doesn’t look so gorgeous anymore—and passing Flint, who is standing on the stone walkway that leads up to the front door. His thumbs are hooked on the front pockets of his pants, and he looks casual and comfortable and stupidly delicious.

We make eye contact through the window, and I give him my most serious glare.

His eyebrows lift the slightest bit, but otherwise, his expression remains neutral.

I hope he understands exactly what I’m trying to say.

He may have won this battle, but he isn’t going to win the war.

*For the squirrels.*

## CHAPTER THREE

Audrey

IT'S NEARLY DARK BY the time I pull into my driveway. The lights inside my house are blazing, which can only mean my twin sisters, Lucy and Summer, who rent the basement apartment of my cozy mountain bungalow, have decided they'd rather hang out at *my house* instead of their own.

I shouldn't be surprised. I have a better kitchen than they do, and Lucy loves to cook. I've learned not to argue. They always make enough to share, and since I *don't* like to cook, it's a situation that works out for all of us.

I'll even begrudgingly admit that since my little sisters graduated from college a couple of years ago and turned into actual adults, we've had a much easier time getting along.

I push through my front door and take a deep breath. *Mmm*. Something Italian. "Please tell me you made homemade pasta again," I say as I drop my bag in the entryway and pull off my boots.

Summer pops her head around the corner. "She totally made homemade pasta. And a pesto that's going to blow your mind."

"Yes, please. Is there bread? I really need bread." I follow Summer into the kitchen.



“Brown butter garlic bread,” Lucy says from the stove, and I try not to moan in anticipation.

“How was your squirrel hunt?” she asks as she ladles sauce over the three plates lining the counter.

I settle into a chair at my small kitchen table. “Successful until the Incredible Hulk put me in handcuffs for trespassing.”

My sisters both stop in their tracks and turn to face me. “Umm, what?” Lucy asks.

I grab a piece of bread out of the basket in the center of the table. “So I guess I was *technically* trespassing on some famous person’s property, and I got caught. But it was totally stupid because they thought I was trying to take pictures of the guy who actually lives there. Which—why would I ever do that?” I take a bite of bread which is delicious enough to make me cry real, happy tears. “Anyway, the security guy told me I could go if I gave him my memory card, but there was no way I was giving it up after I got a picture of a white squirrel *fifty miles away from its native home*.” I shrug and cram the rest of my bread into my mouth, suddenly feeling famished. It occurs to me that I haven’t eaten all day, and I reach for another piece. “So the police came, and I was almost arrested, but then they figured out I was a biologist, and it was all just a misunderstanding, so they let me go.”

When neither of them responds, I look up, cheeks chipmunk full, and look from one sister to the other. Both of them are staring like I’ve been speaking an entirely different language. “What?” I ask before digging into the second piece of bread.

Lucy puts a plate in front of me, her movements slow and deliberate, then lowers herself into the chair across from me. “Audrey. What famous person?”

I pick up my fork. “I don’t know. Flint somebody? Am I supposed to know who he is?”

Summer’s jaw drops. “You *don’t* know who he is?”

Lucy’s hands are pressed against her chest, and her eyes are wide. “Let me get this straight. You *trespassed* on Flint

Hawthorne's property? As in, *the* Flint Hawthorne? Did you see him? Did you see his house?"

I take a big bite of pasta and groan. Forget crying over the bread. This pesto is unbelievable. I'm sure Lucy is an excellent nurse, and she seems to really like her job. But I still think she missed her calling in life.

"Audrey!" Summer practically yells, snapping my attention back to their question.

"I met him," I manage to say in between bites. "And I don't like him. He won't let me come back to photograph the squirrels, which is particularly irritating because now I know they're absolutely living on his property."

"So it was Flint Hawthorne who bought your research forest," Summer says, like this is some amazing revelation. She looks at Lucy. "We knew he moved back home. We probably should have made that connection."

I take a long swig of water. "Honestly, what's the big deal with him?"

"Oh my gosh," Summer says. She lowers her face into her hands. "You met Flint Hawthorne, and you don't even care."

Lucy scoffs. "Of course she doesn't care. This is Audrey. What else would you expect?"

"I mean, sure," Summer concedes. "Maybe I wouldn't expect her to win a game of 'Who's Who on the Red Carpet,' but we're talking about *Flint Hawthorne*. He's this generation's Tom Cruise."

"I do know Tom Cruise," I say unhelpfully. Just don't ask me to name any of his movies. Something with planes and missions, maybe? Oh! And the one where he was a sports agent. I watched that one on an airplane once. "But you still haven't answered my question," I say to my sisters. "How did you guys know some random actor was moving to Silver Creek?"

"He's from here," they say in unison.

“He’s a *Hawthorne*,” Lucy adds, emphasizing his last name. “Like, a Stonebrook Farm Hawthorne.”

I recognize the Stonebrook Farm name—it’s a commercial farm on the other side of town. But the last name doesn’t mean much.

“He was a few years ahead of us in school,” Summer says, “so we never met him. But he’s like, the darling child of Silver Creek.”

“He’s younger than you though,” Lucy clarifies. “I bet you went to school with one of his older brothers.”

“You’re forgetting I didn’t go to high school in Silver Creek,” I say. “And I don’t remember anyone from middle or elementary school.”

Summer waves her hands in front of us like this whole conversation is suddenly bugging her. Neither of my sisters has taken a single bite of their food. “We’re missing the point,” she says. “The most important thing here is that Flint Hawthorne is *here*, and you just met him. You need to tell us everything.” She leans forward, her posture mirroring Lucy’s. “What was he like?”

“What was he wearing?” Lucy adds.

“What did he say?”

“Did he smile? He’s famous for his smile.”

“Is he as gorgeous in person as he is in movies?”

My sisters are identical twins, but I can always tell them apart even without using the cheater butterfly tattoo Lucy has on the back of her neck just below her hairline. From their mannerisms to the way they style their hair, even just the way they carry themselves.

But every once in a while, there will be a moment like this one where they look so completely identical that if you took a freeze frame and only showed me their faces, I wouldn’t be able to tell who is who.

I take a deliberate bite of food, chewing slowly, then take a long swig of water.

They watch and wait, their eyes tracking my every move. “Seeing as how I’ve never seen him in a movie,” I finally say, “I’m not sure I could possibly judge.”

“But he *was* gorgeous.” Lucy says this like it’s a statement, not a question.

I shrug. “I really liked his house. The outside, at least.”

“She’s face to face with Flint Hawthorne, and she notices the house,” Summer says dryly.

“Come on, Audrey,” Lucy says. “Try? For us? There has to be something you can tell us.”

I pause, my fork hovering over my plate. All things considered, the man I met this afternoon *was* objectively handsome. Fit. Nice jawline. Nice hair. Blue eyes that I can conjure in my mind with very little effort. A smile nice enough to trigger a dopamine spike.

I put my fork down as a flush rushes through my body, warming my skin as I remember the way he looked at me when he asked me my name.

Lucy gasps. “Oh my gosh.” She reaches over and grabs Summer’s arm. “She’s blushing. Audrey never blushes. What happened? What aren’t you telling us?”

I roll my eyes. “*Nothing* happened.” I grab my fork and shove a giant bite of pasta into my mouth. “Yes, he’s handsome,” I say. “I noticed. Is that what you want me to tell you? He was wearing a T-shirt. Jeans. His hands were dirty like he’d been working in the yard. But he’d be more handsome if he would let me onto his property.”

“He was working in his yard?” Lucy asks, her voice small and dreamlike. “That’s so sexy.”

I scoff and stand up from the table. “Is there more? If there isn’t, you guys better start eating or I’m going to steal your plates.”

“There’s more,” Lucy says as she protectively crowds around her food. “No stealing.”

When I'm back at the table, plate heaped with a second serving of pasta, my sisters are both eating, but their eyes are still wide, like they're processing something unbelievable.

I don't get it. So the man is famous. It's his job just like biology is my job or the law is Summer's job. Why should we treat him any differently than we treat anyone else?

"I don't think you're understanding what we want, Audrey," Lucy says, her fork hovering in the air. "We need a play-by-play. Every single thing he said. Every single thing you said. All of it."

They can't actually be serious, but their expressions are sincere and earnest. I breathe out a sigh. "This is ridiculous."

"I fed you dinner," Lucy argues. "Indulge us."

"Fine, but it isn't a very exciting story."

I walk my sisters through a quick rundown of my interactions with Flint, even backing up enough to include our run-in at the Feed 'n Seed this morning.

The only thing I edit out is Flint's attempts to make me smile. It's probably silly, but in the back of my mind, I somehow know that if I imply a movie star was flirting with *me*, my sisters won't believe it. I might be as socially adept as an alligator snapping turtle, but I do have some pride. I'd rather not feel the sting of their disbelief or hear them laugh at such a ludicrous idea.

"And that was pretty much it," I finish. "We shook hands. He wished me luck. He said goodbye."

"*You touched him,*" Summer says dreamily. "You touched Flint Hawthorne."

"Who cares?" I say, even if the thought does make my gut clench the slightest bit. "It doesn't change the fact that now he *knows* I've been on his property, and he'll be looking for me if I go back." I slump back into my chair. "It would be a win for me workwise if I could find evidence of these squirrels. And right now, I need a win."

Summer frowns. “Have you still not heard from the foundation people about your grant?”

I shrug. “It’s still under review, but my gut says they’re going a different direction.”

Even though I’m technically an employee of Carolina Southern University, my research is funded by grants—not the university itself. The university *did* own the forest—it was left to the school when some fancy alumni person died—but they weren’t able to get an official state designation as a research forest, so after three years of trying, they sold it.

To Flint Hawthorne, apparently.

I’m not deluded enough to think that discovering white squirrels in Polk County would save my grant. But it would give me the chance to validate the research I completed for my PhD. And it *might* make it easier to find new funding, if (when?) it comes to that.

“You’ll figure something out,” Lucy says. “Even if you lose your funding, you can still teach.”

“For a while. But a PhD with no research is like a doctor with no patients. The university won’t tolerate it for long.”

I think of the grad students I’ve worked with over the past few years. And the friends I’ve made at the forest service research lab. Carolina Southern has been leasing access to the lab so I have a home base for *my* research, and the forest rangers who work there have become good friends. It was one of them who first tipped me off about white squirrels in Polk County in the first place.

If I lose my funding, I’ll lose them too.

A silence settles across the table, but I can tell by my sisters’ starry-eyed expressions that they’re still thinking about Flint and not my potential job woes.

“I still can’t believe you actually touched him,” Lucy says with a sigh. “I would have been a complete wreck.”

“I would have cried,” Summer says. “Big, fat, genuine tears. Either that, or I would have wet my pants.”

I push my empty plate away and let out a tiny laugh. “It wasn’t that big a deal. He seemed pretty normal, honestly.”

“Ha! Normal,” Summer says. “That’s funny.”

“I wish you’d been wearing something different,” Lucy says, sitting up a little taller in her chair. Apparently, we’re going to talk about Flint and only Flint for the rest of eternity. “Or at least had on a little bit of makeup.”

I tense the slightest bit but quickly shake it off, giving my shoulders an easy roll. “Why? What would it have mattered? I wasn’t there for him. I was there for the squirrels.”

“Still. Stranger things have happened,” Lucy says. “He’s young, single...”

This makes Summer giggle. “Can you imagine? Flint Hawthorne asking out *Audrey*?”

I frown, hating that even with my earlier efforts to avoid the subject, we still wind up here. “Gee. Thanks.”

“I mean, come on,” Summer says. “I’m not saying that to insult you. You’re gorgeous and brilliant and any man—even a movie star—would be lucky to be with you. But you hate movies. And you don’t exactly dress like a woman hoping to catch a man’s attention.”

I’m momentarily stunned by the generosity of Summer’s assessment. She thinks I’m gorgeous? But then my brain catches up with the rest of her words, and I glance down at my T-shirt. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“Audrey,” Lucy says, her tone level. “Most days, you dress like you’re preparing for guerilla warfare, and we haven’t seen you wear makeup in years.”

“Since your PhD hooding ceremony,” Summer adds unhelpfully.

“Guerilla warfare?” I scoff. “I dress to protect myself when I’m in the woods. There are any number of things that could hurt me. Copperheads, mosquitos, *Toxicodendron radicans*—”

“Toxico what?” Lucy asks.

I furrow my eyebrows. “Poison ivy.”

“Then why didn’t you just say poison ivy?”

“Because she’s Audrey,” Summer says to Lucy. “That’s not how her brain works.”

She does not say this like it’s an insult because it isn’t one. My sisters *do* know how my brain works. They might have gotten a larger share of fashion sense than I did, and they definitely got *all* the social awareness, but they grew up in the same brainy family, and their SAT scores were just as high as mine.

If our parents taught us anything, it was to appreciate the brains in our heads and use them to the best of our abilities. Summer and Lucy know better than to ever make fun of me for using mine.

Still, their observations about my wardrobe sting a little. Which is stupid. I *don’t* dress to catch a man’s attention. But *being* hopeless and knowing *they* think I’m hopeless aren’t the same thing.

Summer leans forward and rubs her hands together. “Okay. So I’m thinking we find a few projects to do around the yard, ones that would require trips to the Feed ’n Seed, then we spend every Saturday there to see if Flint shows up again.”

I stand and carry my plate to the sink. “Very funny.”

“I’m not being funny,” Summer says. “I’m totally serious. And I’m offering free manual labor, so I think you should take me up on it. I’m sure you can think of *something* you want to...” She hesitates because Summer spends as much time outside as I do at the mall. She’s a brilliant attorney, but the only biology she knows is what she learned for the AP exam her junior year of high school. “Plant?” she finally finishes.

“You want to plant something, huh?” I purse my lips. “Like what?”

“*Flowers,*” she shoots back.

“Okay. What kind?”

She purses her lips. “Yellow ones are nice.”



“They are,” I agree. “But not nice enough to justify you stalking an innocent man just because he has a job that makes him famous.”

“I thought you didn’t like him,” she says sulkily. “Now you’re defending him?”

I lean against the sink, arms folded across my chest. “I’m defending his right to *not* be accosted at local businesses just because you’ve seen him in a movie. That’s different from his ridiculous need to have seventy-five acres of *privacy*.” I load my plate into the dishwasher, then move back to the table to gather the rest of the dishes.

“So what *are* you going to do about the squirrels?” Lucy asks. “Are you sure they’re only living on his land?”

“Not necessarily. But so far, that’s the only place I’ve seen them. I could start asking around, see if anyone else nearby has seen anything. But considering the proximity of his land to the Henderson County border, and assuming that’s where they’re coming from, his property makes the most sense.”

“Will you try to go back?” Summer asks.

“I have to,” I say, a little too quickly. I temper the vehemence in my voice. “It’s my only option if I want to see how many squirrels there are and start tracking their movements.”

Summer’s expression immediately shifts from starry-eyed fangirl to grumpy, stern lawyer. Apparently, loitering at the Feed ’n Seed is *not* in the same arena as actual trespassing. “Audrey, a man like that has a lot of money to fight legal battles. He let you go this time, but who’s to say he will next time if you trespass again? Especially if you no longer have the support of your university behind your efforts.”

Spoken like a true assistant to the district attorney.

I purse my lips to the side. Her reasoning is sound. If Flint Hawthorne were to actually press charges, my university wouldn’t back me for a second. In fact, I’d probably lose my job, though, if that’s going to happen anyway, what do I truly have to lose?

“Trespassing only carries a fine. *Maybe* community service,” I reason. “It’s not like I’d actually go to jail.”

“You *absolutely* could go to jail,” Summer says. “Your sentence would be at the discretion of the judge, and with someone like Flint Hawthorne on the other side of the courtroom, I’m not sure *any* judge in Silver Creek would opt for leniency. It would only invite other creepers to Flint’s property, make them think that if you got away with it, they could too.”

“But I’m not a creeper,” I say.

“Tell it to the judge, honey,” Summer says.

I sigh, suddenly ready for this conversation—for my entire day—to be over. I move toward the hallway that leads to my bedroom. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Audrey,” Summer calls, and I turn around, one hand propped on the door jamb. “Just be careful,” she finishes. “No squirrel is worth losing your job.”

*What job?* I think to myself, but if I complain any more than I already have, one of them will inevitably tell Mom and Dad, and the next thing I know, my parents will be racing up from Florida to plant their RV right in the middle of my driveway, *just in case* I happen to need them.

I love my parents. I do. But this isn’t a problem they, or my sisters, can solve.

Finally alone in my bathroom, I turn on my shower and drop onto the closed toilet seat to wait for the water to warm up. I turn on my favorite classical playlist, then tap my phone against my knee.

I don’t *really* care that Flint Hawthorne is a movie star. I didn’t care when I met him earlier, and I don’t care now. But my sisters have made me curious.

I open Google and search for a celebrity’s name—something I have literally never done before.

*Oh my.*

There are a lot of hits.

I click over to images.

*And so. many. pretty. pictures.*

Flint posing with his shirt off.

Flint on the beach.

Flint beside stunningly beautiful women.

Flint beside *multiple* beautiful women.

Flint on a horse.

*Oh, this is ridiculous. A horse?!*

I'm about to close out the search when my eyes snag on a picture of him arm in arm with three men who all look enough like Flint, they must be his brothers. I click on the picture. If my sisters are correct, one of these men went to elementary school with me. Middle school, too.

I read through the caption, noting the names of each brother. Lennox Hawthorne is the only name that triggers my memory, but I can't remember anything concrete, though that's not all that surprising. Middle school wasn't exactly an easy time for a nerdy kid like me. A lot of memories I blocked on purpose.

I stand up and put my phone on the bathroom counter, then look in the mirror, taking in my bare face. I reach up and pull out a twig that's lodged in my hair, just above my ear.

What did Flint truly see when he looked at me today? Was he genuinely interested in seeing me smile? Or was it just a game? Is flirting something he does because he can? Because he's so used to women fawning all over him?

Lucy's laugh from earlier echoes in my mind.

Either way, she's right. Whatever his motive at the Feed 'n Seed, whatever made him look *once*, I am *not* the kind of woman a man like Flint Hawthorne would look at twice.

A gnawing discomfort settles in my chest.

I'm a biologist. Dedicated to science and research and way too enthusiastic about most forms of wildlife.

Most of the time, it's enough.

But every once in a while, something reminds me that I'm more than just a brain. I have a beating heart, too. And right now, it's aching in a way that feels foreign and disconcerting.

It takes a moment of careful thought to figure out what the feeling is.

*I'm lonely.*

And I have no idea what I'm supposed to do about that.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Flint

I LEAN AGAINST THE counter in the middle of my kitchen, my arms crossed over my chest. Nate and Joni sit on the opposite side of the island, while my publicist, Simon, and my agent, Kenji, both back in LA, are on a video call connected through Joni's iPad, propped up in the center of the island.

It's a relatively small group, and that's just the way I like it. The longer I'm in this business, the happier I am with as few people as possible involved in my career. A few years ago, it was thrilling to travel with an entire entourage, knowing they were all there for me. But now, the simpler my life is, the better.

"What if we come up with some credible reason for him to skip the premiere?" Joni says. "A family issue, maybe?"

"He's the lead," Simon says. "His attendance isn't negotiable. Unless someone is dead or dying or in need of a life-saving kidney only Flint can provide, he's *going* to the premiere."

"Of course I'm *going*," I say. "But there has to be a way we can preemptively manage this."

And by this, I mean *her*.

Claire McKinsey.

Hollywood darling. *Turning Tides* co-star.

And my ex-girlfriend.

It wasn't a long relationship. But you wouldn't know it for how much she's milking the few months we spent together whenever she's in front of the press.

"It's like she's honed it down to a science," Joni says. "It's honestly impressive how she manages to say just enough to keep people guessing but not enough to actually *declare* anything outright."

"Kenji, were you able to make any headway with Rita?" I brace my hands against the cool countertop, wishing this entire conversation could be over. This is the part of my job I'm really starting to hate.

"Rita. That's Claire's manager?" Nate asks as he reaches for one of the sugar cookies I brought home from the feed store.

Joni nods and picks up her own cookie. The icing on hers didn't set quite right, and my nose has three nostrils. When she holds it up to show Nate, they both start to giggle.

"We talked last week," Kenji says, his voice all business, despite the circus clowns hanging out in my kitchen. "I kept things casual. Like we were just catching up. But I did make a light *suggestion* that Claire tone down the storytelling. Rita seems to think the gossip Claire is generating is only going to help the movie. I could try again, make the request feel a little more official, but I don't think Rita is our ally in this."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. Maybe I'm the one who needs a cookie.

Claire was sweet at first. But she was hungry, too—*Turning Tides* is her first major motion picture role—and her attempts to piggyback off my fame and thrust herself into every possible spotlight quickly led to our relationship's demise.

At this point in my career, I'm ready to get *out* of the public eye when I'm not working. She's looking for the opposite.

"Okay, hear me out," Simon says, and my jaw tenses. This isn't the first time we've talked about the Claire problem and last time, Simon agreed with Rita.

“What’s truly the harm?” he argued. “Claire is the kind of star America is going to love, and they already love you. If she’s getting people talking about the film, who cares if she’s telling the truth?”

To a point, I understood where he was coming from. I learned a long time ago that I can’t react every time someone says something about me that isn’t true. But this time, Claire’s antics are hurting more than just me. *Turning Tides* will be the directorial debut of Lea Cortez, who happens to be a good friend of mine. Back on set, she expressed concern that Claire’s starlet behavior might detract from the seriousness of the film. Claire and I were dating at the time, and I assured Lea everything would be fine.

I want those words to be true. But more than that, I don’t want Claire to overshadow the work Lea did on the film. If Claire keeps this up, it’s all the press junket will focus on. We won’t talk about my acting. About Lea’s directing. Every single question will be about whether I noticed Claire’s latest Instagram post and do I really have plans to meet her in Fiji next week? Lea deserves to have her work celebrated, not overshadowed by an upstart’s attempt to steal the show with a false narrative. That’s the last thing this movie needs.

When no one protests, Simon clears his throat and dives in. “As I made it clear the last time we spoke, I don’t actually disagree with Rita. Be that as it may, *you* are my client, so I’ve come up with a potential solution that should, if executed correctly, get Claire to shut up.”

My eyes lift to Joni’s. She doesn’t love Simon, and I trust her instincts. But he’s too good at his job for me to let him go. Hollywood is a multilayered web of connections—someone who knows someone else who knows that one guy who knows the casting director for the movie you really want to work on. Simon is neck-deep in connections. I don’t want to need him, but there’s no escaping how much I do.

Joni lifts her shoulders as if to say there’s no harm in hearing him out, and I nod.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” I ask.

“Fake a relationship,” Simon says bluntly. “Drop a few photos of you with someone else, someone who *won’t* talk to the press, and make it clear you’re *really* enjoying your time with this woman. Then bring her with you to the premiere.”

I’m already shaking my head. This is exactly the kind of Hollywood drama I was trying to get away from when I moved. Joni’s frown echoes mine, and she opens her mouth, but Kenji speaks before she can. “I’m guessing you already have someone in mind?”

Kenji is a few steps ahead of me, but *of course* Simon has someone else in mind. He’s a publicist with multiple clients. If he can work this so it benefits someone else as well? He will.

“I’m not faking a relationship,” I say before Simon can mention any names or provide even one more detail of his ridiculous plan. “Especially not with any actresses.”

“Not all actresses are like Claire,” Simon says, his tone annoyingly gentle, to the point that he sounds like he’s patronizing me. “We’ll choose someone discreet. Someone experienced with the media.”

I turn and open the fridge, pulling a water bottle from inside. “I don’t disagree with you,” I say as I twist off the top. “Not all actors are like Claire. But the ones who have the discretion and the media experience to pull off what you’re suggesting are *not* the ones who need to fake a relationship to get ahead in their careers.”

“You’re too generous,” Simon says dryly. “Just let me mention a few names—”

“No.” I toss the water bottle lid onto the counter, and it clatters into the phone. “I won’t do it. I already told you I want my personal life to be off-limits. It’s why I moved. I don’t want to play these kinds of games anymore. Even to shut up Claire.”

It wasn’t all that long ago that I milked the media as much as the next guy, as much as Claire, even, taking every leg up the extra attention would give me. But I don’t want that life anymore. I want to take myself seriously enough to believe I



can maintain my career because I'm good at what I do, not because TMZ won't stop speculating about who I'm dating. Others have done it. Separated their personal lives. Made their public persona about their *work*. I have to believe I can do the same thing—that I can take back control before I lose control altogether.

“I admire your idealism,” Simon says, “but what other solution is there? Either you control the narrative, or Claire does. It's your choice.”

“What I want is for Lea to control the narrative. She doesn't deserve to have her directorial debut overshadowed by the personal drama of a bunch of idiot actors.”

“We don't always get what we want, Flint. Ideals are nice, but it doesn't change the reality of the situation. Just think about it,” he says. “We can circle back next week. In the meantime, I'll have the details of the Oakley thing within the week. I'll send them to you and Kenji as soon as I have them. All right. That's it from me. I'm out.” Simon disappears from the call, and I look at Kenji.

“The Oakley thing?” I ask.

“Sunglasses,” Kenji says. “You're doing their spring ad campaign.”

“I am?”

Joni exchanges a quick glance with Nate, then looks back at me. “They came to see you in Costa Rica.”

Details flood my memory. The Oakley people *did* come to see me. We had dinner at a little cantina on the beach, and they plied me with alcohol and showered me with compliments, and I guess...here we are. “When? And how long will it take?”

“Not until November,” Kenji says. “And it shouldn't take more than a couple of days. One for the photoshoot, another to film the commercial. Those are the details we'll have from Simon this week.”

I nod. “Fine. But it can't conflict with Thanksgiving.” It's been years since I've spent the holidays with my family. I've

had to modify my expectations somewhat since getting home—I'm not spending nearly as much time with my brothers as I thought I would—but the holidays are different. That's when we're *supposed* to be together.

Joni's expression softens. With the angular cut of her straight blond hair, hitting right at her chin, her look generally says *I'm perfectly capable, thank you*, with a side of, *So you'd better get out of my way*. But right now, her face is saying something else entirely. She's either touched that I'm trying so hard to do things differently now, *orrrrr* she feels sorry for me because my brothers are not the bachelors they used to be, and they spend their time accordingly.

Not that I blame them. If I had the option to snuggle up on the couch with a beautiful woman, I wouldn't want to come over to drink beer with me either.

"Of course it won't conflict with Thanksgiving," Joni says. "We'll make sure of it."

"All right, I'm out," Kenji says. The sounds of Los Angeles suddenly come through the phone, and I can imagine him pushing out of his office, tugging at the sleeves of one of his impeccably tailored suit coats. "I'll reach out to Rita one more time and make the point about Lea's directing and see if that sways her. It can't hurt to try, anyway," he says.

"Thanks, man," I say, but I don't have a lot of confidence in Rita. I've met her. She's as fame hungry as Claire.

Kenji disconnects and Joni closes down her iPad, a welcome silence filling the room.

I'm suddenly very tired. And very grouchy. And I definitely need a cookie.

I reach for one and rip off the cellophane, only to notice this one has a tiny mustache drawn above my lip, the ends long and curly.

*Wait a minute.*

I look up to see Nate, lips pressed together like he's trying to hold in his laughter. I reach for the bag of cookies and dump them onto the counter. Every single one is slightly different. A

beauty mark on my cheek. A third eyeball in the middle of my forehead. An impressive array of different mustache and goatee styles. But the most impressive thing is that the cookies are all still *sealed*. Somehow Nate—because it was *definitely* Nate—managed to graffiti every single one of my cookies and then *reseal* them into their packaging.

“Dude. You’ve got too much time on your hands.”

He bursts out laughing. “This one is my favorite.” He pulls out a cookie from the bottom of the stack and slides it toward me. On this one, one of my teeth is blackened out, and a long feather earring dangles from my ear. Honestly, I’m impressed with the artwork. I had no idea Nate had it in him.

“How did you even know how to do this? Can we still eat them? This isn’t sharpie or anything, is it?”

“Ann taught me,” Nate says. “And they’re fine to eat. I used edible ink.”

“I still think it was totally unfair for you to ask Ann to help when you wanted to deface *her* cookies,” Joni says. “She never would have answered your questions if she’d known what you were up to.”

Nate waves his hand dismissively. “Pretty sure she figured it out. Either way, she had a fresh batch of cookies out on the counter. Who cares what happens to the ones she already sold?”

“Wait, she has new cookies out?” I ask. “She made more?”

Nate nods. “She sold three while I was waiting in line. Only person who didn’t buy one was the trespassing biologist lady.”

“Audrey?” I ask. “She was there?” My heartrate ticks up the slightest bit at the thought, which is dumb. I probably won’t ever see her again. Her bright blue eyes flash through my mind’s eye, and a twinge of disappointment pushes through me. “She saw the cookies?”

Nate nods, and the feeling in my chest tightens, then shifts to embarrassment. This should not matter even a little. But the thought of Audrey seeing those cookies, maybe even thinking I had something to do with them, makes me uncomfortable.

“Did she say anything to you?” I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral.

“Nah. She waved,” Nate says, “but she didn’t look very happy to see me.”

“Because you almost had her arrested,” Joni says. “And you’re the size of a tree.” Joni leans over and kisses Nate on the cheek. “Sometimes you intimidate people, baby.” She grabs her phone off the counter and slides it into her pocket. “Are we done here? I’ve got a million emails to sort through.”

“Yeah, go,” I say, waving her off. “Just keep thinking about possible solutions to this whole Claire situation.”

Joni nods. “Will do.” She steps away from the counter, then pauses and spins back around. “Flint, have you thought about just taking a *date* to the premiere? Not a fake one, like Simon suggested, but just... a date.”

I furrow my brow. “A real date? *Who*? I’m not seeing anyone.”

“We could easily figure that part out,” Joni says. “Just think about it. If you have a beautiful woman on your arm, looking all cozy and comfortable, people aren’t going to be asking about Claire.”

“No, they’ll be asking about the mystery woman on my arm. Besides, the press junket is *before* the premiere. That’s when people will be hounding me the most.”

Joni frowns. “That’s true. But if you *did* have a date, maybe we could do something before that makes it clear you’re with someone. Simon was right about that part, at least. If you’re seeing someone new, it would put *you* in control of the narrative.”

“And you won’t feed the flames like Claire does,” Nate says. “You can just say you want to keep your personal life private, and then move on to the next question.”

“*Exactly*,” Joni says, her eyes sparkling. “Claire will know that if she keeps talking about meeting up with you, dating you when you’ve clearly moved on, she’ll only look desperate.”

“And stupid,” Nate adds. “She won’t want to look stupid.”

I reach for my water and drain half the bottle. I still don’t love the idea, but it’s slightly more tolerable than Simon’s. His plan felt like a publicity stunt. This feels more like a decoy.

I run a hand through my hair. “Ya’ll are talking like I could just head down to the Feed ’n Seed and pick up a girlfriend on aisle four.” Audrey’s eyes flash through my mind one more time, and I quickly shove the image away.

“If anyone could, it’s you,” Joni says. “Just mention it to Ann. I bet she’d have a dozen women lined up in an hour, ready to date you.”

I appreciate Joni’s confidence, but I’m not half as certain. Besides, women lining up to date me because I’m *Flint Hawthorne*, famous actor, is a lot different than a woman wanting to date me because I’m...*me*. A lot less appealing, too.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, suddenly restless to be out of this room, away from the drama that drains the fun right out of my career. I look out the window at the late afternoon light. It’s already past four, but that doesn’t mean much. It’ll be almost nine before it’s fully dark. “I’m going to go work on the trail.”

Nate perks up. “You want me to come with you?”

“Nah, man. I need solitude. But I’ll keep my phone on me.”

I head toward the garage, but not before Joni yells out, “Please be careful with the machete, Flint. Your face is worth a lot of money!”

I pause, sensing that what Joni really needs is some sort of indication that I’m okay. That despite the tension of our conversation, I’m not going to drive off into the wilderness and never come back.

I pause and lean back into the kitchen where she can see me, offering her a wide grin. “I’m not worried. A few scars will only give me more sex appeal.”

She rolls her eyes, but I don’t miss the relief moving across her expression. Her voice follows me as I disappear into the

garage. “Flint, I’m serious!”

“Love you, Joni!” I say in reply.

I appreciate my manager’s concern. I really do. But I’m stressed as all get out at the moment, and any man with blood pumping through his veins would agree. There are few frustrations in life a little time with a machete won’t cure.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Flint

LATE AFTERNOON SUN WARMS my shoulders as I drive a four-wheeler down the roughly cleared trail I've been working on the past few weeks. Eventually, it'll meet up with the old forest service road that runs along the west edge of my property, and I'll be able to *mostly* make it around the entire perimeter. I don't have a particular purpose in connecting to the road, other than it seems like a good idea to have access to all the acreage I bought.

Plus, it's not like I have anything else to do. Not unless I want to go hang out with one of my brothers like some kind of lost puppy. None of them would truly mind. But I'm only comfortable being a third wheel for so long.

I drive the four-wheeler as far as I can, stopping a few yards shy of where I stopped clearing. There's a thick stand of rhododendrons just in front of me, which is going to require more than just a machete.

I smile to myself. I get to use the chainsaw.

An hour later, I'm covered in leaves and dirt and sweat, but I've made a hundred yards of progress, and I've finally reached the shallow creek bed that runs down the mountainside to meet the Broad River. I crouch down and scoop up a handful of the icy spring water and splash it onto my face, then toss another onto the back of my neck.

I'm tempted to take a drink. There are multiple springs in the mountains that are fully potable, but until I can test the water to be sure, I won't risk it. I've experienced firsthand what happens when you *do* risk it, and it's definitely not worth it.

Back at the four-wheeler, I slide the machete into its sheath and lower the chainsaw into the cargo basket on the back. Sweat drips down my brow, so I lift the hem of my T-shirt to wipe off my face, pausing when I hear what sounds like a gasp.

I freeze as my heart rate climbs, my eyes roving over the surrounding woods. I don't hear anything else, but all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I'm *not* alone out here—I'm sure about that.

Off to the left and up the mountainside a ways, a bush shakes and then settles.

I narrow my eyes and step closer.

Suddenly, everything becomes clear.

The bush isn't a bush at all. It's a person disguised as a bush. A *familiar* person disguised as a bush.

I fold my arms across my chest, my lips twitching into a smile. "Hello, again," I say dryly.

Audrey doesn't move, but she's absolutely close enough to hear me. Does she think I'll just leave her alone if she doesn't respond?

"You can't sit there all day, Audrey," I say. "I *know* you're there. You might as well come out now."

The bush shakes one more time, and Audrey stands up.

I can't help it. I burst out laughing.

Her get-up is absolutely ridiculous. It's also kind of ingenious. Leaves are sewn down the sleeves of her shirt and across the top of her hat, and her camouflage shirt and pants blend into the woods around her. Had she not made a noise, I probably wouldn't have seen her at all.



But she *did* make a noise, and I'm pretty sure she made it when I lifted my shirt to wipe my face. Is it possible she was actually checking me out? After the way she dismissed me at the Feed 'n Seed, she was more likely startled by a chipmunk or suddenly surrounded by a swarm of mosquitos. She definitely wasn't impacted by the sight of my abs. *Was she?*

Audrey slowly moves down the mountainside, her camera in hand, and stops on the trail behind me. She doesn't look even a little bit repentant even though she's obviously trespassing. *Again.*

I nod toward her clothing. "That's an awful lot of trouble to go to just to hide from me."

"I'm not hiding from *you*," she says, like that's the most absurd thing she's ever heard. "I'm hiding from the squirrels."

"Oh, right. The squirrels." Her expression is so serious, I hate to keep smiling. But this woman clearly has no idea how adorable she looks with leaves sewn onto her hat. I *can't* take her seriously. Not really. I scratch my jaw. "Tell me again why the squirrels at your house aren't good enough. Why is it you have to risk going to jail to see the squirrels over here?"

She winces the slightest bit when I say jail, but she quickly regains her composure. "The squirrels at my house are just regular eastern gray squirrels," she says, her words measured and slow like she's trying to explain trigonometry to a six-year-old. Or maybe like I'm a guy who just doesn't understand squirrels. "But the squirrels over here are white." She takes her hat off and tucks it under her arm while she pulls out her ponytail and shakes out her hair. It's long—longer than I expect—cascading over her shoulders in dark waves.

I swallow. *Focus on the squirrels, man. Squirrels.*

I clear my throat. "I remember you mentioning that. But why does that matter? Are they albino?"

She shakes her head as she regathers her ponytail, talking around the hairband she's holding with her teeth. "It's called leucism." She pauses long enough to grab the hairband and secure it. "It's a condition characterized by reduced

pigmentation linked to a recessive allele. You can tell them from albino squirrels because they still have dark eyes and skin. Just white fur.”

I study Audrey closely, noting the way her eyes brighten as she talks. Her posture is confident, her tone steady, her words punctuated with an air of certainty. I’m positive, even just from those few sentences, there isn’t anything I could ask about squirrels, probably about these woods in general, that she wouldn’t know. It’s a weird thought, considering she’s dressed like a bush *and* she’s trespassing on my land, but her confidence, her knowledge—it’s kinda sexy.

I take a step toward her, but she immediately steps backward, and I lose the ground I gained.

*Okay.* Sexy and still entirely uninterested.

If only *I* had white hair and a little brown nose.

“I think I saw one of those the other day,” I say.

If Nate were listening, he would not be happy. Mentioning the squirrels I saw outside my kitchen window is only going to make Audrey want to see them. And that’s going to make her ask me if she *can*, and then I’m going to have to say yes. Because *of course* I’m saying yes.

Her expression visibly brightens. “Just one? Or more than one? Where? Were you near your house?”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. “There were two. And I was *in* my house. They were on the lawn beside the pool.”

“That’s the first time you’ve seen them?” she asks.

“First time. Though it’s possible I saw them and just didn’t notice until you showed up and told me it was a big deal.”

“Right. That makes sense.” She lifts a hand to the back of her neck, her eyes glazing over the same way Brody’s do when he’s doing high-level math in his head. “There were two of them?” she finally asks.

I nod, and she moves her hand from her neck to her forehead, her expression disbelieving. “Two. That’s—that means this isn’t just a fluke but an actual migratory event.”

“Slow down, Dr. Doolittle.”

She looks up, meeting my gaze, and I grin. Her eyes are so incredibly blue, it’s really hard not to stare.

“How about you try again in English?” I say gently.

A slight blush tints her cheeks, but she nods like this is something she’s been asked before. She’s used to communicating with people who aren’t as smart as she is. “For over a century, white squirrels have only been native to a very small part of Western North Carolina. But now, apparently, they live in other places, too. The population is growing—*moving*.”

I move over to the four-wheeler and pull a water bottle off the back. I screw off the top and offer her a drink, but she declines, picking up a straw that’s connected to the shoulder of her backpack. “I have a Camelbak,” she says.

Of course she does.

I have a feeling she could live out here for days and probably be just fine, living on the land, mapping her location using her shoestrings and the clouds overhead. I take a long swig of water. “You said something about your PhD the last time you were here. You’re a scientist?”

“Wildlife biologist,” she says. “I wrote my dissertation for my PhD on the migratory patterns of the class Sciuridae as a result of urbanization and suburban sprawl, so the fact that these squirrels are moving—it’s incredibly relevant to my research. You have no idea how thrilling it is to discover it happening.”

*Okay.* Her brains are *definitely* sexy. No *kinda* about it.

Audrey studies me for a long moment before she steps forward, her expression pleading. “Look, I know I’m trespassing. But I swear I’m only here for the squirrels. Can you just...” She bites her lip, and I’m momentarily distracted by the way her teeth press into her skin.

I prop my hands on my hips. “What, give you permission?”

She nods. “Obviously, I wouldn’t go near your house. Or, at least not *in it*. If you saw them by the pool, they’re probably nesting nearby, which means I’d have to get close enough to take pictures. And I’d need to find their nest. See if I can date it and determine how long they’ve been living there.”

“Date their nest? You can do that?”

She levels me with a look. “We can carbon date trees that lived over fifty-thousand years ago. You don’t think I can guesstimate how long a squirrel has been nesting in a certain spot?”

I can’t help but smile. There’s something endearing about her fascination with a subject that is so patently boring to everyone else. But then, what do I know about what’s boring? I’ve been standing here talking about squirrels for at least five minutes, and I’m thoroughly invested. I suspect that has more to do with *who* I’m talking to than *what* we’re talking about.

The truth is, now that I’m certain she really *is* only interested in squirrels, in my mind, there’s no reason she can’t come back no matter what Nate says.

I’ve seen some paparazzi go to a lot of trouble to disguise themselves and get close to celebrities. But there’s no way someone could fake Audrey’s knowledge or enthusiasm. This woman is harmless.

A little odd.

But harmless.

Though, I’m kidding myself if I think I’m *only* letting Audrey come back because I think she’s harmless.

I also want a reason to see her again.

“How long would you need?” I ask, my eyes focused on the gear in the cargo box on the four-wheeler as I make sure everything is securely strapped down. If I look straight at her, I might scare her off with *my* enthusiasm.

“A week? Two, tops,” she says, hope infusing her voice.

“Two weeks to take a few pictures?”

“And gather the necessary data,” she says. “But you won’t even notice me. And I promise. No photographs of you, or the house, or anything that might identify where the squirrels are specifically located.”

“Would you be willing to sign an NDA?” I won’t make her sign one, not for something as harmless as this, but it’s a good test anyway.

“Absolutely. Whatever you need. And I’m happy to send over proof of my credentials. And a copy of the research grant currently funding my research.”

“Credentials?”

She clears her throat and steps forward, holding out her hand like she’s introducing herself. I finally look into her eyes as she slips her hand into mine. “Dr. Audrey Callahan,” she says. “Wildlife biologist, professor at Carolina Southern University, and published author. Google me.”

My gut tightens. I don’t need more reasons to be impressed with this woman, especially when she doesn’t seem all that impressed with me. But hearing her name like that—*Dr. Audrey Callahan*. And she’s a published author? I’m falling into full-on *crush* territory. Except, somehow, this crush feels bigger—different from anything I’ve ever experienced before. Maybe because Audrey is different. *Better*.

I study her for a long moment, this time letting myself fall into the pale blue of her eyes. They’re ringed in dark navy, but near the iris, they’re the color of the early morning sky.

Audrey doesn’t flinch under my scrutiny. She may be young to have accomplished so much, but she knows how to hold herself, how to go after what she wants. Which makes *me* want *her*.

“All right, Doctor Audrey Callahan. I’m going to make a deal with you. I’ll give you access to my property so you can study your white squirrels on one condition.”

She nods. “Anything. I’ll do anything.”

“No more hiding,” I say. “At least not from me. You use the main driveway. You check in with Nate. And you let us know

where on the property you're going to be."

She cocks her head to the side. "I already told you I wasn't hiding from *you*."

I motion toward her outfit. "You're saying when you got dressed this morning, you didn't hope, even for a moment, that your disguise would keep you out of sight from me?"

"It *would* have kept me out of sight if I hadn't *gasp*ed."

I raise my eyebrows and lean forward the slightest bit. "That's true. Why *did* you gasp, Audrey?" I ask, my tone playful.

She folds her arms across her chest. "I felt a bug run across my shoe."

"I bet." I mirror her stance. "You *really* seem like the kind of woman who is freaked out by bugs."

Her shoulders drop and she moves her hands to her hips, the leaves sewn down the seam bouncing as she does. "*Fine*," she finally concedes. "Yes. I *gasp*ed because I was not prepared to see twelve inches of your exceptionally defined abdominal muscles. Is that what you wanted me to admit?"

I turn on my famous smile—the same one she completely ignored when we first talked in the feed store parking lot. "I'm just having a conversation, Audrey."

I can't explain why this is so fun for me. Except, maybe it's not all that complicated. I haven't had to *work* to get a compliment out of a woman in years. And this one seems utterly and completely unimpressed. Well, by everything except my abs. "Now, do you agree to my terms or not?" I say.

She purses her lips. "Right. Your terms. So I'll come to the main driveway, check in with your scary hulkish bodyguard, and then I can go wherever I please?"

"As long as you tell us where you're planning to be. And Nate's harmless. I promise he'll be nice."

"Oh, I'm sure," she says dryly. "He was *so nice* when he was flashing his gun at me and threatening to take away my camera."

“He thought you were taking pictures of *me*,” I say, enjoying the way she’s bantering with me. “And considering the fact that I was mere moments away from stripping down to nothing and diving in my pool when he picked you up on our security cameras, I’m glad he reacted the way he did.”

Her gaze drops to my torso, sliding up to my chest and shoulders before she lifts it back to my face. “You swim naked?” she asks, her voice small.

I smile playfully, lifting my shoulder in an easy shrug. “There are some perks to living alone.”

She shakes her head, like she’s breaking out of some sort of trance, then clears her throat. “Fine,” she says haughtily. “*For the squirrels*, I agree to your terms.”

I don’t miss her emphasis on squirrels. She really wants me to know she isn’t here for me, which somehow feels like both a good thing *and* a bad thing. “What’s your number? I’ll have my manager text you, then you can work out the details with her.”

Audrey holds out her hand. “Here. I can just plug my number in and send myself a text.”

I pull my phone back, away from her reach. “Nope. Then you’d have *my* number.”

“So?”

“So...you might feel tempted to share it or sell it or who knows what else with it.” Sadly, I’m only half-joking. I’ve been burned before, and changing my number is too tedious for me to want to do it again. Also, Joni would kill me if I gave my number to someone I’ve only known as long as I’ve known Audrey.

Audrey blinks in surprise. “You really think I’d do something like that?”

Her question is serious, so I give her a serious answer. “I don’t. Mostly, I’m just trying to avoid getting in trouble with my manager. She’s as much of a guard dog as Nate and takes protecting my privacy very seriously.”

Audrey shakes her head. “People bother you that much?”

I shrug. “You’d be surprised how far some people will go.”

She nods. “Right. That makes sense. You *should* be cautious. You don’t really know anything about me.”

I playfully tap my phone against my palm. “I don’t know if I’d say *that*.”

She tilts her head to the side. “What would you say?”

“I’d say I know you’re serious enough about your work to trespass not once, but twice. Also, you have an uncanny ability to blend into the wilderness, and you know more about squirrels than any person should. Also, I’m pretty sure you have a thing for rock-hard—”

She cuts me off. “If you say one thing about your abdominal muscles, I swear, Flint Hawthorne, I will...” She hesitates, her eyes darting around like she’s trying to find an appropriate threat.

I lift an eyebrow. “You’ll what?”

“I don’t know what I’ll do,” she says, her tone snobbish, which is hilarious, considering she’s currently dressed like a bush. “But it won’t be good.”

“Well, now you’ve got me worried.”

She holds my gaze, and for a second, I think she might smile. I’m filled with a sudden craving for the sight of it, and that same certainty I felt the first time I saw her settles into my soul.

If this woman smiles at me—*because of me*—I think I’ll be done for.

Audrey rattles off her phone number, then glances up at the quickly darkening sky. “When can I start?” she asks as she rearranges the strap on her camera bag. “Is tomorrow too soon?”

I almost say yes, but I don’t want to sound too eager. This woman has already made her lack of interest perfectly clear. I don’t want to scare her off. “Just work it out with Joni,” I



finally say. “She knows my schedule better than I do. I’ll make sure she reaches out tonight.”

Audrey nods. “Okay. Perfect. Sounds good.”

I tilt my head toward my four-wheeler. “Do you need a ride?”

She looks over her shoulder, toward the creek. “I don’t think your trail goes far enough. But I’ll be okay. My truck isn’t far from here.”

I nod. “Okay. Then I guess I’ll see you when I see you.” I move to my four-wheeler and climb on, then reach forward and crank the engine until it hums to life. I look back one last time and watch as Audrey takes a few hurried steps toward me.

“Flint, I just...” She licks her lips. “Thank you. You have no idea what this means for my research.”

If this were anyone else, I might laugh. We’re talking about squirrels, after all. But after meeting Audrey and really talking to her, I have to respect someone who has so much passion for her work, who takes her job so seriously.

“Also, I know how important privacy must be to you,” she continues. “I want you to know I won’t tell anyone about this—that you’re letting me come here. Not anyone.”

“I appreciate that,” I say. Nate *is* going to protest, but I believe Audrey, and weirdly, even though we just met, I also trust her. She isn’t going to cause any trouble.

I lift a hand in a final wave, then ease my hand off the brake and head toward the house. Just before I pull into the garage, a white squirrel darts across the driveway and into the woods.

I grin, feeling invigorated in a way I haven’t in years.

Maybe it’s all the physical labor I’m doing. Maybe it’s being back home in the mountains.

Or maybe—just maybe—it’s the squirrels.

## CHAPTER SIX

Flint

“SO LET ME GET this straight,” my oldest brother Perry says, his expression disbelieving. I follow his gaze through the kitchen window and out to the lawn beside the pool where Audrey is sitting in a camp chair, scribbling something down in a small, leatherbound notebook. “You’ve given a complete stranger access to all of your property because she wants to take pictures...of squirrels?” He leans across the counter and grabs a cracker and a slice of cheese.

It is not surprising that Perry is the one asking the hard questions. He’s the oldest and the grouchiest and definitely the one most likely to point out potential problems.

It *was* surprising when my family descended upon the house, laden with groceries, for what they claimed was a “random family gathering.” Perry said it was because his son Jack wanted to swim, but I’d put money on this having something to do with the conversation Brody and I had a couple of weeks back. Brody thinks I’m lonely. And now he’s made the rest of my family think I’m lonely too.

To be fair, Jack *is* swimming—he and Perry’s wife Lila are outside by the pool with everyone else. Still, I know my family well enough to recognize their meddling for what it is.

It makes me itchy to know they’re all talking about me, worrying about me. At the same time, I *do* wish I got to spend

more time with them, so I can't really complain about them all coming over. Especially since they brought food. My brother Lennox and his wife, Tatum, both chefs, took over my kitchen the minute they arrived, setting out appetizers and commandeering the grill for what they swear are going to be the best hamburgers any of us have ever eaten.

I have to wonder what Audrey thinks about my family. Or if she's even noticed the people for all the squirrels.

As I watch, Audrey stands and moves toward the sugar maple at the edge of the lawn. Conveniently, the squirrels have a nest somewhere in its branches, though Audrey told me it's not all that uncommon for squirrels. Living closer to people means encountering fewer predators.

"She isn't a complete stranger," I say, finally answering Perry's question. I got so distracted watching Audrey, I almost forgot he asked. "And I promise she's harmless. I'm good at sniffing out people with ulterior motives, and she definitely doesn't have one."

"Just like you sniffed out Claire McKinsey's ulterior motives?" Perry asks, his brows lifted.

I frown. Sometimes I hate how much my family knows about my life. "This is different. Audrey is nothing like Claire."

"Did she grow up around here?" My sister Olivia leans backward in her chair so she can see Audrey through the window. "She doesn't look familiar."

"No clue," I say. "But Joni checked her out. Verified all her credentials. She's got a PhD. Publishing credits. She's legit."

"I've never seen a white squirrel," Mom says as she walks over to lean on the counter. "I didn't even know they existed." She moves to the fridge and pulls out a water bottle, holding it out to me. "Here. Take this out to Audrey. She looks thirsty." Her expression turns sly. "She might be hungry, too. Maybe you could invite her to join us for dinner."

I take the water bottle but lift a finger in warning. "Mom? That's not what this is."

She shrugs. “It might be. How will you know if you don’t try?”

“Trust me. I know.” *And it’s not for the lack of trying.* “I am not that woman’s type—not by a mile.”

“It pains me to say this,” Olivia says, “but you’re Flint Hawthorne. Doesn’t that make you everyone’s type?” She bounces her daughter on her knee.

“Not hers,” I say. “She didn’t even know who I was the first time we met.” And she hasn’t been impressed with me *any* of the times we’ve interacted.

“Well, that sounds perfect,” Mom says. “You don’t want someone who’s only interested in you for your celebrity. Maybe you’ve finally found the one woman on the planet who isn’t.”

I love the idea of a woman not into my fame, but no matter how I shake it, my fame *is* a part of the package. I’m working on making my private life more private, but the acting, the need to perform, the way I thrive in the spotlight—those characteristics are a part of what makes me *me*. And it seems in direct contrast to what might make a serious wildlife biologist interested in a relationship.

I move toward the patio door. “Please don’t make this a thing. It’s not a thing. She’s here for the squirrels. Period.”

I push outside and slide my sunglasses onto my face. I should have expected the matchmaking, especially from Mom. Audrey has a pulse, and she doesn’t live in California—as far as Mom is concerned, that’s all she needs to qualify.

I study Audrey as I approach, water bottle in hand. She’s back in her camp chair now, leaning over her notebook, her pen flying across the page. Her hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail, and her expression is serious. Focused.

She’s nothing like the women I’ve dated in the past, but she’s pretty in a simple, natural way that I appreciate. I once had a girlfriend explain to me that looking *effortless* actually requires quite a bit of effort. Wearing just enough makeup, but not too much. Having hair that’s polished but still totally

natural. But that's not what's happening with Audrey. I think her beauty really *is* effortless—in a way that probably makes women who work a lot harder to get similar results feel irritated.

“Are you thirsty?” I say when I'm a few feet away.

Audrey looks up, and it takes a moment for her eyes to focus. “Oh,” she finally says. “Thank you. That'd be nice.”

I twist the top off the water bottle and hand it to her. My eyes trace her slender fingers, smudged with dirt and ink, as she wraps them around the bottle and takes a long drink. The only thing more distracting is the long curve of her neck as she swallows.

I clear my throat and look away. I have *got* to get a hold of myself. “How's the data collecting?” I ask, my voice a little too loud.

Audrey's expression brightens. “Amazing. Incredible. I've identified a female and three younger squirrels I believe are her offspring and they're—” Her words stop short, and she holds up her free hand. “Sorry. My sisters are always telling me how *not interesting* my research is. But things are good. Thanks again for letting me be here.” She looks over her shoulder and bites her lip. “Especially during a party.”

“It's just my family,” I say. “Nothing fancy.”

“All these people are your family?”

I turn and look over the collection of people hanging out around the pool, then drop onto the grass beside her, extending my legs out in front of me and crossing my ankles. “The guy on the diving board, that's my brother, Brody. He teaches chemistry over at the high school. And whitewater kayaking on the Green River during the summer.” I lift a hand and point to Kate who is lounging under an umbrella with their daughter, River. “That's his wife, Kate, and their baby, River.” I look at Audrey and lift an eyebrow. “Yes, they did name their baby after the river, and no, none of us were surprised.”

She smiles, and the sight tugs at something deep in my gut. I was right. Her smile *is* going to be the end of me.

“The guy coming through the door—that’s Perry. He’s the oldest. He and my little sister, Olivia, she’s the youngest of all of us, run Stonebrook Farm together.”

She nods. “I’ve heard of the farm. Apples, right?”

“Mostly. And strawberries. They grow a little bit of everything. And host events. Weddings, reunions. That kind of thing.” I point at Lennox and Tatum, who are standing by the grill. “That’s Lennox, and his wife, Tatum. They’re both chefs. They’ve got a baby now too, but I don’t know where she is. Oh—right over there with my dad. Her name is Hannah, after my mom. And there’s Olivia and her two kids, Asher and Maggie, right there, getting in the water. Her husband is out of town, so he’s the only one not here, and that’s my mom sitting by the door.”

“Wow.” Audrey’s eyes are wide. “I hope you aren’t going to quiz me later because I’m not going to remember anyone’s names.”

“There will absolutely be a quiz,” I say. “If you want to study the squirrels, I expect first names, last names, ages, occupations. All of it.”

She nudges my shoulder with her knee. “Shut up.”

I look up and grin. “No quizzes, I promise.”

“Do they all live in Silver Creek?” she asks.

“Believe it or not. It’s the biggest reason why I moved back. Couldn’t stand the thought of them all being together without me.”

“I can’t imagine,” Audrey says. “I live with my two younger sisters, and sometimes even just they feel like too much. This is...”

“A lot,” I finish for her. “For sure. But most of the time, they’re worth it.”

“I guess you don’t really need friends when you have a family like this.”

“No, I guess not,” I say, but as I survey the scene, it’s not lost on me that I *do* need something else. In a family where

everyone has someone, I'm the only one still alone.

I'm working on being okay with this. My life has always been different from the rest of my siblings, but before, it was always because of my career. Now, it's different for other reasons. More personal reasons. And they somehow feel so much more substantial. I've never been particularly opposed to meeting someone and settling down. But now, seeing my siblings so firmly entrenched in family life is only making it obvious how much I want the same thing.

With someone *not* like my fame-hungry ex.

I lift an eyebrow as my gaze turns back to Audrey. She couldn't be more different from Claire. "Hey, what's your favorite movie?" I ask.

She leans back like the question surprises her. "Me?"

"I'm not talking to the squirrels," I joke.

She looks up, her eyes scanning the trees. Apparently, the very mention of her squirrels requires her to look for them. She looks back at me with a sardonic expression and pulls her dark ponytail forward so it's hanging over her shoulder. "I guess I don't have a favorite. I don't really watch movies."

I stare. She doesn't watch movies? Who doesn't watch movies? "Like, ever?"

She grimaces. "I realize that might be an insult to you, considering your profession. I just...I don't know. I have a hard time giving up two hours to do something so... pointless?" This last word she says like a question, almost like she senses it might not land well.

"Pointless," I repeat. I'm not exactly offended. I don't need everyone in the world to like movies. I'm just surprised. And maybe a little disappointed since, so far, I've liked everything about this woman. "The point is to relax. To be entertained. To feel...I don't know. Happy."

"There are other things that make me happy," she says, like that alone is enough to disqualify my argument.

"Like what?"

She takes another sip of her water. “Sometimes I read.”

“Science books?”

She rolls her eyes. “Not *always*. I read novels, too.”

“Novels about science?”

“Or nature, or—” She huffs and sits up a little taller. “You know what? It’s okay if I like different things.”

“Sure. If you liked different *kinds* of movies. But to not like movies at all? I don’t know that I’ve ever met *anyone* who doesn’t like movies.”

“Leave it to me,” she says dryly. “But don’t worry. Being the odd woman out is a feeling I know well.”

Audrey’s words ring with a note of truth that makes my heart twitch, and I feel a weird compulsion to invite her to everything. *Include her* in everything.

Across the yard, Mom and Olivia wave from where they’re standing near the house. Their smiles are wide, their waves much more enthusiastic than the situation warrants. It’s probably taking all their resolve not to come over and join the conversation. I shift my body so more of my back is facing them and turn all my attention to Audrey. “What if you’re just not watching the right movies?” I ask.

Audrey reaches down and scratches her ankle, her fingers dipping inside the top of her very utilitarian hiking boots. “Trust me, my sisters have tried,” she says. “But my brain—it takes a lot for it to slow down. Now, you want to watch a nature documentary? I’m here for it.”

“I narrated a nature documentary last year—the one about the orca whales.”

She brightens. “I loved that one! That was you?”

I clear my throat, then drop my voice into the baritone I used when narrating the documentary. “The orca whale, known colloquially as the *killer* whale, is the largest member of the oceanic dolphin family.”



“It *was* you!” she says, her smile wide. “You did an excellent job.”

I can’t help but grin. The power of that smile—I don’t even care that she doesn’t like movies. That, of all the work I’ve done, the only thing familiar to her is a nature documentary that’s barely a blip on the map of my career.

“Maybe I should have talked a little more when we first met,” I say. “Then you might have recognized me.”

She closes her notebook and notches her pen on the outside. “Did it really bother you that I didn’t know who you were? I mean, admitting I don’t watch movies—that has to ease the sting a little bit. There aren’t many actors I *would* recognize.”

“It didn’t bother me at all,” I say. “Honestly, it was kind of nice. And it worked to your advantage because your indifference was a big part of why I was okay with you coming back.”

She barks out a laugh. “Ha! It would kill my sisters to hear you say so. They’re constantly teasing me about being too nerdy for my own good. If only they knew.”

“They don’t know?” I ask.

“They know we met. But they don’t know I’m coming here to research,” Audrey says. “I told you I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Right, but, I mean, they’re your family.”

“Maybe, but they’re...let’s just call them fans. I’d rather not have them begging for a play-by-play of our interactions every day. Also, I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to keep from mentioning it on Instagram. Trust me. It’s better they don’t know.”

“Well, then I appreciate your discretion.” We’re silent for a beat before I ask, “Did they really make you give them a play-by-play?”

“Tell us everything he said,” she says, her voice breathy and light. “And everything he did. What was he wearing? Did you touch him? Did he touch you?”

I chuckle. “You probably hated that.”

She eyes me curiously. “You’re figuring me out, Flint Hawthorne.”

If I’m figuring *anything* out, it’s that this woman is unlike anyone I’ve ever met before. She’s smart—there’s no denying that. But she’s got this steadiness about her that makes me envious. Audrey Callahan doesn’t seem to care the slightest bit what other people think of her. *Authentic*. That’s the right word for it. She’s unapologetically who she is. And it’s *fascinating*.

I nudge her knee. “You know what I think, Audrey?”

She smiles a little shyly. “What’s that?”

“I think you’re watching the wrong kind of movies.”

She wrinkles her brow like she disagrees with me. “I doubt it. But if you come up with something you think I’d like, I’ll happily give it a try.”

“Challenge accepted,” I say. “I’ll start researching tonight.” I hold out the cap to her water bottle, which I’ve been holding this whole time. “Hey, are you hungry?”

Audrey takes the cap, her fingers brushing against mine. They linger a beat longer than necessary before she yanks her hand back, drops her eyes, and quickly twists the lid onto the bottle. She clears her throat. “What?”

“Are you hungry?” I repeat. “The food will be ready soon, and there’s plenty. You’re welcome to come grab a plate.”

She visibly swallows, her eyes darting from me, over to the pool, then back again.

“I promise my family won’t bite. They’re good people. Silver Creek people.”

She nods. “I think I went to middle school with Lennox.”

So she’s older than me. I file this information away, adding it to the quickly growing collection of *Things I find sexy about Audrey Callahan*. “You didn’t go to high school in Silver Creek?”

She shakes her head. “I went to NCSSM. In Raleigh.”

“That’s the North Carolina...”

“School of Science and Mathematics,” she finishes. “I really was the biggest nerd, Flint.”

“Really?” I say. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Her cheeks flame, but the smile that spreads across her face tells me she doesn’t really mind the teasing.

“For real. Come eat with us. Brody’s a total math nerd. If nothing else, there will at least be one person at the table who speaks your language.”

She nods. “Okay. If you’re sure your family won’t mind.”

They won’t mind at all. In fact, they’ll eat this up. But I’ve got more important things to think about.

Like what movie might turn Audrey Callahan into a believer.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Audrey

I SMILE AS FLINT'S mother, Hannah, lowers herself into the chair on the other side of the long patio table next to the house. "How was the burger?" she asks as I polish off the last bite.

I pick up my napkin and wipe my fingers. "Honestly, it might be the best I've ever had. What was so different about it?"

"Oh, tons of things, probably," Hannah answers. "Lennox is always trying something new. But I'm pretty sure the truffle butter is what made it so good this time."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize that what's happening right now is a very big deal.

I'm having dinner at Flint Hawthorne's house.

With Flint Hawthorne's family.

Even if I'm not particularly wowed by celebrity, I'm not so clueless as to ignore how much these circumstances would blow away the average thirty-year-old woman.

*Ugh. Thirty.*

I'm still not used to the sound of it. I mean, my sisters tell me I've been sixty-five since my seventh birthday—that I have an old-person vibe. But having an old-person vibe is very different than having an old-person body. And my thirtieth

birthday has sent me into a spiral of worry about that very thing.

I'm a scientist. I know how these things work. I know the ovaries in my body are already holding all the eggs they're ever going to hold, and every year that passes makes those eggs less and less viable.

Don't get me started on how unfair it is that men can father children until they're ninety-five as long their equipment is still working. But women? Nope. We get to have it all, sure. The careers. The education. The leadership positions. But if we want to have a family? Well, better fall in love before you hit thirty-five. No pressure. It's not like it takes a long time to get a PhD. It's not like your life when you're in grad school is basically nonexistent. There's time! Women can have it all!

Sometimes I feel like screaming.

Women *can't* have it all. Not without making some major sacrifices. Which is a problem because I *do* want it all. I love being a scientist, but I think I'd also love being a wife. Maybe even a mom if my eggs can hang on long enough.

I look around Flint's backyard, where his siblings are sitting, eating, bouncing babies. Olivia, his sister, runs Stonebrook Farm with Perry, so she's managing to do both. And Tatum—I think she's the chef? Maybe it's just about timing instead of being an either/or situation.

And maybe my sisters are right when they argue that if I spent more time with people instead of animals, my prospects wouldn't look so bleak.

Hannah looks over my shoulder and smiles as she points. "Look. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

I turn and see a couple of white squirrels running across the grass beside the pool before darting up the trunk of a nearby tree.

"They're pretty fun, right?" I shake my head. "Or, not fun, I guess. Not for everyone else. They're just squirrels. I know they're just squirrels. It would be so silly for people to care—"

She reaches over and touches my hand. “Honey, there’s nothing wrong with being passionate about your work. I make goat’s milk soap, and I treat my goats like they’re my children. My kids tease me all the time for it, but it makes me happy. And it’s good soap, too.”

Flint drops into a chair across from his mother and directly beside me. “It *is* good soap,” he says. “I ordered it in bulk when I was living in LA.”

Hannah rolls her eyes. “You know I’d have just sent you a box. You always had to be so official, with Joni placing orders.”

“If I’d had you send me a box, you wouldn’t have let me pay for them.”

“It’s just soap, baby.”

“It’s just money, *Mom*,” Flint says, his eyes full of warmth. “And you know I like to support the farm.”

Hannah looks at Flint for a long moment, and I get the sense they’re having a wordless conversation. About money? About soap? About the farm? I don’t know these people well enough to judge.

Hannah finally chuckles. “As if the soap really matters after everything else you’ve done.”

My eyes move from mother to son, then back again. There *is* something going on here, and I find myself desperately curious to know what it is.

Flint rubs a hand across his face as he looks away, but I don’t miss the tips of his ears turning slightly pink.

“Tell me, Audrey,” Hannah says, steering the conversation back to me. “What is it that makes you so passionate about your work?”

Something about the way she says *passionate* makes me think she probably knows about the trespassing. My eyes dart to Flint, who seems to have recovered from whatever embarrassment his mom caused and is looking at me, his lips lifted into a playful smirk.

“Yeah, Audrey. What makes you passionate enough to hike *miles* into the wilderness, property lines and giant security guards be damned, in pursuit of the elusive white squirrel?”

I roll my eyes, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the way he’s teasing me. “To be fair, your property belonged to my university before you bought it. It was my research forest—connected to my lab—and I’ve been visiting all my research locations for months without anyone caring or knowing.”

“So you admit you’ve been trespassing for months?” Flint says, his tone light.

I wince and offer a placating smile. “Yes? But relocating my experiments would have compromised so much data!”

“Does the university know about this? About your surreptitious forest use?”

An actual jolt of panic shoots through me. They *don’t* know, and they wouldn’t be happy about it. “Oh, well, I mean...” I swallow.

“Hey.” Flint touches my wrist, his fingers triggering an eruption of goosebumps across my arm. “I’m just teasing. I’m not going to tell anyone.”

I nod, grateful for the reassurance. “Causing trouble is the last thing I need to be doing right now. I’ve been using the same research grant for the past three years from this foundation over in Asheville. But I’ve gotten the sense lately that my funding might not come through for another year.”

“Which means what?”

“A lot more work for me. Writing new grant proposals, schmoozing, networking. It’s the part of my job I don’t like. There’s research money out there. It’s just not always easy to find it.”

He frowns. “That’s too bad.”

I shrug. “It’s the way it goes sometimes. I’m determined not to stress about it until I have more reason to think I should.”

“You know, Stonebrook is almost twice as big as Flint’s place,” Hannah says. “We don’t have as much forest land as

this”—she motions around us—“but you’re welcome on our property any time if it would suit your research needs.”

“I appreciate that,” I say. “That’s really generous of you.”

She smiles warmly. “I’d still love to know what makes you love what you do.”

I glance at Flint, his open, curious expression encouraging an honest answer. “It isn’t *just* about the squirrels, really,” I say, careful not to make my response too didactic. “So much of my research is about the way nature intersects with human life. Squirrels are very adaptable. They’ve taken to living among humans better than a lot of other species. But when we bulldoze entire stretches of forest, it still impacts their environment. We’ve gotten better at living alongside nature and respecting it, but there’s still progress that needs to happen. I mean, I like research because it’s cool to know stuff, but the greater purpose is to discover better ways to live *in* nature without destroying it.”

I press my palms against my thighs, suddenly self-conscious. This is not the first time I’ve rattled on and on about things that are only interesting to me. I bite my lip. “Sorry. That was probably more of an answer than you bargained for.”

“I love it,” Flint says warmly. “I respect your passion and dedication. And I’m all for respecting nature, living among it instead of destroying it.”

“I think you did that with your house,” I say. “It feels like it belongs here. Like it’s always been a part of the mountainside. I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

“No, it totally makes sense,” Flint says. “And I appreciate you noticing. That’s exactly what I was going for.” He holds my gaze, steady and confident, until I have to look away to catch my breath. I’m not sure my lungs can fully expand when he’s looking at me like that.

Hannah looks from Flint to me, then back to Flint again, a smile playing at her lips. “Well, I’ll be,” she says softly.



Flint's eyes jump to his mother, then he clears his throat and stands so quickly that his chair falls over behind him. He scrambles to pick it up, nearly tripping on his own feet as he does so. Once the chair is back on all four legs, he pushes it under the table and backs away.

"I'm going to get some more potato salad. Anyone else want more potato salad? No? Okay, then."

Hannah chuckles as he walks away. "I haven't seen that in a while," she says.

"What's that?" I ask, almost afraid of her answer because I know what I *want* it to be, and it's the most preposterous thought that has *ever* popped into my head.

*Don't say it, I think to myself. Just don't say it.*

"He's flustered," Hannah says. She looks at me coyly. "I think you did that."

I laugh much too loudly, even as the rebellious part of my brain rejoices that she thinks I could *ever* make someone like Flint Hawthorne flustered. "Ha! No. I'm not—he wouldn't—" I shake my head like a six-year-old trying to convince her mother she didn't steal the last cookie. "I'm just a girl who likes nature," I finally say.

She shrugs. "He's just a boy who likes movies."

Heat floods my cheeks, and I lift my palms to cover them, positive that Hannah—or anyone else who spares me a glance—will see how much the implication of her statement is getting to me. "Um, do you think Flint would mind if I use the restroom?"

I need a minute.

Or an hour.

Or maybe three days.

"Of course, honey. That door will take you to the kitchen, then just follow the hall to the left, and you'll find it."

I nod and quickly retreat to the cool interior of Flint's house. But good grief—if I thought this was going to help things, I

was dead wrong. The outside of Flint's house is actually pretty simple. Rock and wood and earthy muted colors. But the inside is bright and modern and beautiful. Clean lines. Huge windows. Light everywhere, even in the fading evening hours.

The living room just off the kitchen looks warm and welcoming. The furniture is leather, but it looks incredibly soft, and every chair and couch is draped with cushy blankets the same color as the walls—a pale, dusky gray-blue. I pause before crossing the kitchen and tug off my boots, not wanting to track any dirt through this incredibly perfect house.

The action only reminds me of how ridiculously I'm dressed. Not that I knew I was dressing for a family barbecue. I'm dressed for *work*. I've never felt uncomfortable in my baggy cargo pants. They are incredibly practical. Lots of pockets for my notebook, my phone, extra memory cards for my camera, ChapStick. But my sisters have teased me enough for me to know that, especially when combined with an old baggy biology T-shirt from my undergrad days, they aren't exactly flattering.

I do not miss the fact that I have never cared about whether my work clothes are attractive. Who would I ever be trying to impress when I spend most of my time alone in the woods?

It shouldn't be any different now. Flint Hawthorne might as well be an oak tree, for all the likelihood there is that he would ever find me attractive. I mean, *yes*. He flirted when we first met. But that was probably just an actor thing. The way he is with everyone.

And okay, *yes*, his mother did just imply that he's flustered, and it can only be because of me. But she's probably just reading into things because she's his mom, and isn't that what moms do? Try to play matchmaker for their kids?

I leave my hiking boots next to the door and head down the hall to find the bathroom, and *oh good grief*, this room is just as gorgeous as the rest of the house. It has to be a guest bathroom, off the kitchen like it is, but there's a full shower tiled in smooth river rock and stacked stone. It looks like the inside of a waterfall, and I immediately want to use it. It's a

stupidly impulsive thing to think. I'm not going to randomly take a shower in Flint's house. There aren't even any towels—*oh*. There *ARE* towels. Thick, fluffy gray ones stacked on the corner shelf. I reach out and touch one, but then quickly yank my hand away.

*No, Audrey! No impulsive bathing!*

I finish up in the bathroom without stripping down for an impromptu shower and head back down the hall. Based on the rest of the house, I'm itching to look around, open all the doors to see what the rest of the place looks like. It wouldn't be *quite* as bad as taking a shower, but it's still more than I'll let myself do. Except, just before I reach the kitchen, there's a room with a door that's already open.

There's nothing wrong with peeking into a room with an *open* door, is there? I step into the room, the plush carpet sinking under my feet, and pause in the doorway. This must be Flint's office. There's a desk on the back wall, a dark brown leather sofa on the other, and low bookshelves, about knee-height, circling three entire walls. But it's the wall decor that catches my attention.

I step back into the hall and peek around the corner into the kitchen to make sure I'm still alone, then tiptoe back into the room. It only takes a second to realize that the framed posters above the bookshelves are movie posters—and they are all movies Flint has been in. They're arranged chronologically, and I walk slowly past each one. Flint's picture isn't on every poster, especially not the early ones, but I make it a point to find his name listed at the bottom when he isn't a headliner. The farther I go into his career, the more frequently I see his face front and center. Action films. Dramas. Romantic comedies. Something about time travel?

“That was a really terrible movie.”

I jump, a hand flying to my heart, and turn to see Flint standing in the doorway. “Geez, you scared me.”

He's leaning against the doorframe with an easy confidence I envy. “Sorry. Didn't mean to.” His tone is warm and friendly,

like he doesn't care at all that he just found me snooping through his house.

I look back at the movie poster. "You were *in* this movie," I say. "Why would you make a terrible movie?"

He shrugs. "Sometimes you don't know it isn't going to work until you're already in it and it's too late. Sometimes you just need a paycheck, so you do it anyway." He moves into the room and stops beside me.

"Which was it with this one?"

"A little bit of both. I was in a bit of a dry spell, and the script seemed promising enough. My agent really wanted me to do it, so I did. But halfway through, I could already sense things weren't clicking. The chemistry was off, maybe, or...I don't know. Sometimes you can't really pinpoint what's wrong, only that something is. Sure enough, it tanked at the box office and was released for streaming less than two months later."

"That's not a good thing?"

He chuckles. "Not this time, it wasn't."

I continue my journey around the perimeter of the room, Flint following just behind. The next poster features Flint dressed as a soldier from what I'm guessing is World War II based on the style of his hair and uniform. "What about this one?"

"One of my favorites," he says. "I won a Golden Globe for that one. Nominated for an Oscar, too. But I didn't win."

"Quite a comeback after the last one, then."

"Something that every film critic felt they needed to point out," he says dryly.

"I'm sorry you didn't win the Oscar," I say, and Flint scoffs.

"Are you kidding? I was up against Matt Damon. I know it's what everyone says, but it really was just an honor to be nominated with someone like him."

I wrinkle my brow, hoping the name will jog something in my memory, but I've got nothing.

Flint frowns. "You don't know who Matt Damon is, do you?"

I grimace.

"*Good Will Hunting?*" he says. "Audrey, come on. It's one of the greatest movies of all time."

"I'm sorry!" I say through a laugh, and I really mean it. Could I possibly make myself any less interesting to this man? "Is that one I should watch? *Good Will Hunting?*"

"I mean, yes," he says quickly. "Everyone should watch that one. But..." He holds up a finger. "Not yet. I want to be more intentional when it comes to you."

My heart trips and stutters. He wants to be intentional *for me*? He's taking this whole movie thing much more seriously than I thought he would.

An image of me and Flint, snuggled up on the butter-soft couch in his living room watching a movie, suddenly pops into my brain, and my cheeks flush with heat.

I spin around, not wanting Flint to see, and press my palms to my cheeks. "What about this one?" I say, motioning to the next poster. "Should I start with this one?"

He's close to me when he responds, his voice just over my shoulder, and it sends another wave of goosebumps across my neck. "Not this one," he says, his voice low. "None of these, actually. To convince the woman who doesn't like movies to like movies? We have to go bigger than anything I've ever done."

It occurs to me that knowing Flint is *in* a movie might make me a lot more interested in sitting down to watch it.

But I'm not about to admit that to him.

I'm not sure I even want to admit it to myself.

I turn around, startling when I realize how close we're standing. There isn't six inches of space between us. I'm close

enough to touch him—to lift my palm and press it against his chest.

Instead, I tuck my hands behind my back, just in case they get any ideas, and force a deep breath through my nose. “Bigger like what?”

Flint lifts his hands and wraps them around my shoulders, his fingers brushing along the hem of my sleeves. The skin-to-skin contact makes my heart rate spike even more than it already has, and my breath catches in my throat.

“Patience, Audrey,” he says. “I’ll find the perfect movie for you. But this isn’t a process you can rush.” He gives my arms a quick squeeze before his hands fall away.

*Oh, he’s good. Too good.* No wonder all of America is in love with this man.

“Come on,” he says, taking a step toward the door. “There’s ice cream pie, and I’m not sure my brothers will save us any if we don’t grab a piece while we can.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” I say quickly. “You’ve already been so generous. I don’t need anyone to save me a piece of anything.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself. But you’re here. And it’s *really* good ice cream pie.” He holds out his hand in invitation. “I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want you to have a piece.”

I shake my head and slip my hand into his, letting him tug me into the kitchen. He doesn’t drop my hand until we’re halfway around the enormous kitchen island. “Is this how you treat everyone who trespasses on your land?”

“Only the biologists.” He smirks and glances at my shirt. “Even if you do want me to *leaf you alone*.”

I smile, my gaze lifting to his blue eyes, which are sparkling with mirth. I shake my head, letting out a small laugh as I look down at my navy-blue T-shirt. There’s a leafy sugar maple on the front and the very caption Flint just read: *Leaf Me Alone*.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, I *do* prefer to be left alone. I am nothing if not a solitary creature.

But maybe company isn’t so bad.

Even if that company is a movie star.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Flint

CLAIRE MCKINSEY IS GOING to be the end of me.

Or maybe just the end of my career. I close my laptop, cutting off the latest video Kenji sent over. Claire is still talking. *Hinting*. Making it seem like some time apart was good, but now we're in a good place, and we're *very* excited about promoting *Turning Tides* together. She isn't being explicit enough for me to call her a liar, but the innuendo is strong, and right now she's dominating entertainment news. Every possible public event she could attend, she's attending, talking to the press every time they call her name. And don't even get me started on her Instagram feed.

My team is getting daily requests for comment on the status of our relationship. Simon is fielding those requests, but he isn't doing much else except irritating me.

"You look happy," Joni says from the doorway.

I turn to see her leaning against the door jamb, arms crossed.

"My life is stupid, Joni," I say, dropping back into my desk chair and closing my eyes. I hear her move into the room and sit down across from me, but I don't move or look up.

"Did you talk to Simon?"

I nod.



“What did he say?”

I sigh and look up. “Just more of the same. He doesn’t think I have any reason to worry.” I crack my neck, tilting my head from side to side. “Says I need to get off social media and try to *relax*.”

Joni rolls her eyes. “You know, there are other publicists.”

I huff out a laugh. “Don’t tempt me.”

“I’m serious. He annoys you every time you talk to him. Why not cut your losses and let him go?”

“Maybe after the premiere,” I say. “He’s too involved with everything to cut ties before then.”

Joni scoffs. “I think we would manage just fine without him. Most of the hard stuff is done already anyway. Did he push the fake relationship thing again?”

“He did. But he thinks I’d need to be back in LA to truly sell it. Says we would need to orchestrate a few well-timed appearances in public places with a woman who isn’t Claire. I see his point, but honestly Joni, the thought of reviewing a list of names and picking one like I’m ordering a woman out of some sort of catalog, it feels so…”

“Misogynistic?” Joni says, her expression smug.

“I was going to say old-fashioned, but that works too. I just don’t like it.”

“You’re right not to like it. But then, I don’t like anything Simon suggests, so I’m not sure my opinion is relevant here. Have you given any more thought to taking someone from Silver Creek?”

“Like who? The only women I know are related to me, and I’m not sure that would have quite the same impact, do you?”

She considers me for a long moment. “Flint, what about Audrey?”

My hand jumps and knocks over a cup of pens, and I scramble to pick it up. When everything is back where it belongs, I take a moment to neutralize my expression before

looking up. Joni knows me well, almost as well as my family knows me. She'll see right through me if I'm not careful. "What *about* Audrey?" I finally ask.

"Invite her to the premiere." Joni says this simply, but there is nothing simple about her suggestion.

"That's...no. That's not a good idea."

"Why not? I think it's a great idea. Audrey is exactly the right kind of woman. She's poised. She's confident. She's well-spoken. She won't get flustered when she meets other celebrities."

"She won't even know who the other celebrities are."

"Exactly! Yet another reason why she'd be perfect." Joni shifts on the couch, sitting a little taller, like she's gearing up to really hit me with all her reasoning and logic. It's a very *Joni* move—one I know well. "Listen. I know she might not be the kind of woman you can actually see yourself with long-term, but for this, she doesn't really need to be. You just need her to be your decoy. And I think there's something you can offer her in exchange that she won't be able to refuse."

I let Joni's words settle into my mind. I'm surprised by a couple of things.

One—as well as Joni knows me, I don't know how she hasn't noticed that I've got a thing for Audrey.

Two—I can't think of any possible incentive that would motivate Audrey to say yes to whatever scheme Joni is hatching. Audrey doesn't even *like* movies. Why would she want to attend a premiere for one?

Especially when she has no interest in spending any time with *me*.

For the past three days, whenever Audrey has been on my property, I've been distracted, preoccupied with her presence. It's ridiculous the number of reasons I've found to walk across my backyard.

Install a new garden hose? That definitely needs to happen today.

Cut the grass even though I already cut it four days ago? Absolutely.

Weed the vegetable garden? No time like the present!

Unfortunately, all that effort has resulted in exactly zero progress. Despite all my efforts to capture her attention, Audrey has been so focused on her work, she's barely taken notice.

If I speak to her, she always responds with kindness, but I am always the one who speaks first.

"Okay. I'll bite," I finally say. "What could I offer Audrey that she couldn't refuse?"

Joni smiles. "Access to your land."

I lift my eyebrows. "She already has access to my land."

"For one more week. Tell her she can come back for the rest of the summer. Whenever she wants."

"In exchange for her coming to LA with me and pretending to be my girlfriend on the red carpet? That's a big ask, Joni."

She shrugs. "Yeah, but Audrey really likes those squirrels. She might say yes."

I stand up and move to the window, my stomach grumbling as I go. It's already past seven, and I still have no idea what I'm doing for dinner. "You've clearly given this some thought."

"It's better than Simon's plan," Joni says. "I know it still requires some faking, but if we're honest with Audrey, explain the situation, I think she'll say yes. I mean, you could at least ask, right? What's truly the worst thing that could happen?"

"She could come with me to California, realize my life is an absolute circus, and run the other direction as fast as she can."

Joni's quiet for a long moment. "Oh," she finally says. "*Oh. You like her.*"

I push my hands into my pockets and turn to face her, shrugging in acknowledgment.

Joni presses her palm to her chest. “Does she know?”

I huff out a laugh. “No. I—*no*. She’s clearly not interested.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I’ve seen her three days this week, and I’ve tried to talk to her every time. She’s polite, but otherwise, she’s totally indifferent. If I talk to her, she talks back. That’s pretty much it.”

Joni stares. “That’s it? That’s all you have to go on?”

“That feels like more than enough.”

“Flint. Just because she isn’t fawning all over you doesn’t mean she isn’t interested. She’s a guest when she’s here, which means she’s probably trying to be respectful of your time and not demand any unnecessary attention. Anything more than that might seem presumptuous, and I get the sense Audrey is *not* the presumptuous type.” She tucks a strand of platinum hair behind her ear and scoots forward on her seat. “I’m not saying she *does* like you,” she says. “But I *am* saying you might have to give her a little more to go on if you want her to know you *do* like *her*.”

“Something like asking her to fly to Los Angeles and attend a movie premiere as my date?”

Joni shrugs. “It can’t hurt to try.”

“And you think this would actually *help* my cause if I want Audrey to like me? Exposing her to the press, the fans, the relentlessly rude paparazzi? This will sell her on the benefits of being with someone like me?”

“Well, when you say it like that, it sounds like a terrible idea. But Flint, that’s not all your life is. It’s a pretty small part, actually. And if she just gets to know you, she’ll be willing to deal with all the attention and drama.”

“Or she won’t,” I shoot back. “And then what?”

Joni’s shoulders fall, and she frowns. “I guess that’s true,” she relents. “But if she’s scared off by a single movie premiere, honey, she’s not the woman for you anyway. Maybe this will be a good test.”

I rub a hand across my forehead, suddenly feeling so tired. “I don’t want a test. I want a normal relationship.”

“I know you do,” she says, her tone gentle. “But Flint, you haven’t had a normal life in years.”

I leave the window and drop onto the couch beside Joni with a weary sigh.

She’s at least right about that much.

Without saying anything, Joni slides her iPad onto my lap. There’s a long list of bullet points on the screen. “Just look it over,” she says. “Give it some thought.”

I sigh and pick up the iPad.

The plan isn’t complicated. We would start with a couple of photos on my Instagram account of me and Audrey hanging out around the house, maybe swimming in the pool, but the photos would *not* show Audrey’s face. She would just be an unidentified woman spending time with me. Over the next few weeks, up until the premiere, I’d post a few more times, making it clear I’m seeing someone, still without revealing Audrey’s identity.

I like this part of the plan because it will keep Audrey out of the limelight as long as possible. Her life will continue as normal—something that wouldn’t happen if the photos were to give any hint as to who she is. The internet wouldn’t need more than her face to dig up everything there is to know about her.

Finally, Audrey would attend the premiere with me, and we would act very much like a couple.

“Who knows?” Joni says as I hand her back the iPad. “Maybe after spending all this time together, you won’t even have to fake it on the red carpet. You can just *be* a couple.”

“You know, when I moved back to North Carolina, I thought I was leaving all the Hollywood drama behind,” I say.

“Claire’s too persistent to just let you go, Flint,” she says. “But I really think this plan will work. And it’s so much better than Simon’s idea.”

“What’s better than Simon’s idea?” Nate asks as he ambles into the room. He hands Joni a plate holding the most beautiful tomato sandwich I’ve ever seen. “I brought you dinner.”

“Did that tomato come out of my garden?” I ask, my stomach rumbling loud enough for both of them to hear.

Nate lifts an eyebrow. “Maybe?”

Joni takes a huge bite. She lets out a groan while she chews. “Oh my gosh, this is delicious.” She grabs Nate’s shirt and tugs him down for a kiss. “Thank you,” she says, and I look away. Sometimes the two of them are sweet. Sometimes they’re completely ridiculous.

“Okay, I need some food,” I say as I head toward the door.

“You want a tomato sandwich?” Nate calls after me. “Sorry, man. I should have brought you one.”

“Nah, I think I’m going to head out, actually.”

Nate stiffens. “Where to?”

I sigh. My personal protection officer does not like it when I go places alone. Even in Silver Creek.

“Just to Lennox’s,” I say, deciding on the spot. “I’ll be fine on my own. I promise.”

I don’t wait long enough for him to respond. Instead, I hurry out of my office and into my kitchen, where I grab my keys and a beat-up baseball cap from the hook by the garage door. I cram the hat on, then hurry out to my truck.

Is this really what my life has become?

Conversations about faking out the media and throwing off persistent exes?

Is it really too much to ask that I just *like* a woman, date her, then settle down without all this extra drama? I know there are actors in Hollywood who just *act*, who focus on their art without getting distracted by all the noise. Can I just *be* one of them? Can I let all this other stupid stuff go?

Ten minutes later, I pull up to the backside of Hawthorne, Lennox’s restaurant, craving, more than anything else, a

conversation about something besides my own stupid life.

The public parking on the opposite side of the restaurant was slam full when I drove past, and I don't love the idea of navigating a crowded dining room, so I'm hoping if I sneak in the back and find Lennox, he'll be able to feed me without making a scene.

I push through the back door and slowly make my way toward Lennox's kitchen. The Stonebrook Farm catering kitchen occupies the back half of the building, but it's quiet tonight, so there must not be anything going on at the farm.

I pause at the back of Lennox's kitchen. It takes me a minute to find him, but when I do, a burst of pride fills my chest. He's clearly in his element, doing something he loves to do. It's also clear that every single person in this room is tuned into him, listening to his instructions, paying attention to every single word that comes out of his mouth.

Until someone turns and sees *me*.

Awareness moves across the kitchen like a wave, and suddenly all is quiet as everyone turns to stare.

Lennox is the last to notice. "Hey, what's going on?" he asks, but then his eyes meet mine. "Oh. *He's* going on," he says dryly. He tugs a dish towel off his shoulder and drops it onto the counter. "Okay, let's all say hi to Flint together so we can get back to work, yeah?"

Laughter echoes around the room, then a few voices call out, "Hi, Flint."

I lift a hand, offering Lennox an apologetic smile. "Hey, y'all. Sorry to interrupt."

"Trust me," a female voice says from across the kitchen. "We *really* don't mind."

"Okay, that's enough," Lennox says. "Zach?" He gestures to a guy standing off to his left. "Cover for me?"

"You got it, Chef."

"Sorry," I say as soon as Lennox reaches me. "This seemed easier than trying to get a table out there." I motion toward the

dining room.

Lennox claps me on the back. “No worries. Are you hungry?”

“Is that totally obnoxious? To just show up and expect you to feed me?”

“It *is* a restaurant, Flint.”

“I know. But I don’t want to cause any trouble. Or, I don’t know. Expect special treatment.”

Lennox looks at me funny, then grins. “Are you feeling okay? I kinda thought special treatment was your jam.”

I roll my eyes. “Trust me. Sometimes it gets really old.”

“Come on,” Lennox says. “I’ll take a break and eat with you. You can wait in my office while I make us plates.”

“Sounds great.”

“You want a menu?”

I wave a dismissive hand. “Whatever you have extra is fine.”

Lennox leaves me in his office, and I kill time by pulling out my phone and checking my messages. I regret it the minute my phone is in my hand. Kenji has sent over another Instagram post from Claire. This one is a picture of the two of us. I recognize it immediately—we took it in Costa Rica when we were still dating and still filming *Turning Tides*. The background of the photo is dark enough that you can’t really tell where we are, something Claire uses to her advantage because her caption makes it sound like the photo was *just* taken.

**Kenji:** She isn’t leaving much room for debate, man. If you don’t say something soon, you’re as good as confirming your relationship.

Lennox pushes into his office holding two steaming plates and puts one down on either side of the desk. I drop my phone onto the desk and reach for the fork he just pulled out of his apron pocket.



“Baked salmon with mango creme fraiche, tropical chutney, and coconut lime rice.”

“Sounds amazing.”

He sits down across from me and shovels in an enormous bite. He motions toward my phone. “Who’s the woman?” he asks around his food, his words almost too muffled for me to understand him.

“Don’t get me started,” I say glumly. I take my own bite, the flavors immediately exploding on my tongue. “Dude, this is amazing.”

“One of my favorites,” Lennox says. “Is that the squirrel lady? Audrey, right?”

“What? No. It’s not—it’s Claire McKinsey.”

“Really?” Lennox takes another bite—the man is eating incredibly fast—then reaches for my phone. “Her hair’s darker. I didn’t recognize her. Did she just post this?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“So she *is* still your ex.”

I sigh. “Definitely. But apparently, she’s happy to let the world think she isn’t.”

“That really sucks.”

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk about it. How are you? How’s the baby?”

Lennox smiles wide. “She’s great. Sleeping like a champ. You should come by and see her some morning. She’s growing so fast, man. It feels like she’s different every time I see her.”

“Yeah? I’d like that.”

Maybe this has been my problem. Instead of thinking like a bachelor, looking for nights out with my brothers, I need to think like a dad and show up for breakfast and playdates.

We eat in silence for another minute until Lennox drops his fork, his plate clean. He nods toward my phone. “So what are

you going to do about Claire? Is this one of those situations where you'll get in more trouble if you respond?"

"Maybe. It's more complicated because of *Turning Tides*. I don't want to start something and have it reflect poorly on the movie."

"Who cares about the movie? She's yanking you around, and that's not cool. If it were me, I'd take back control however I could." He stands and motions toward my plate. "You finished?"

"Yeah, thanks."

He takes my empty plate, stacking it with his own, then heads toward the door. "I've got to get back to work, but seriously, come by anytime. You're always welcome."

He leaves me in his office, promising he'll send in dessert if I have time to wait around a few more minutes. I reach for my phone—I'm not about to turn down one of Lennox's desserts—and scroll back to the picture Claire posted.

Lennox is right. I can't let her keep doing this.

Making sure I'm logged in to my public Instagram account, I post a comment on Claire's picture. *I remember this night! We'd just filmed our last scene together for #TurningTides. So many happy memories! See you at the premiere!*

Then I text Joni and ask her to send over Audrey's address.

If this is ever going to work, there's one enormous hurdle I have to leap over first.

I have to get Audrey to agree.

# CHAPTER NINE

Audrey

WHEN I FIRST HEAR my sisters scream, my mind automatically jumps to the worst possible scenarios.

Something is on fire. A murderer has broken in to kill us. A tree has fallen on the house and crushed our living room.

It only takes five seconds for my brain to decide that, knowing my sisters, it's something much less sinister. A giant spider. A wasp caught inside the kitchen. Or—I don't know. A mouse, maybe? This is a *really* old house.

But then my sister's screams turn into squeals and move down the hallway toward my bedroom.

"Oh-my-gosh, oh-my-gosh, oh-my-gosh," Summer says as she and Lucy appear in my doorway. Lucy has a hand pressed to her heart, and both wear matching expressions, their eyes wide.

I stay on my bed, where I've been reading for the past hour. They look happy, not worried, which means there probably isn't a murderer chasing them, so I don't see a reason for me to get out of my very comfortable cocoon. "What?" I motion between them. "What is this? What's happening?"

"Um, Flint Hawthorne's on the front porch."

"What? No, he's not." I still don't move, but my heart starts hammering in my chest.

“Yes, he is,” Lucy says. “We just watched through the living room window as he climbed out of a very shiny truck, and now he’s on the porch.”

A quick knock echoes through the house, and both my sisters gasp, then start to laugh. “We’re going to meet Flint Hawthorne,” one of them says.

I’m no longer paying attention because there is only one person in this house who Flint Hawthorne actually knows.

He has to be here to see me.

I scramble out of my bed and move toward the door, but Summer catches me by the arm, swinging me back into the room. “What are you doing?”

“I’m answering the door?”

“Wearing that?” Lucy says, her voice too high. “You’re braless, Audrey. It’s totally nipple city in here.”

I look down at my outfit—baggy sweatpants and a black tank top. “Oh, geez. You’re right.” I reach for a hoodie to pull over my tank top.

Summer grabs it out of my hands. “NO. That only makes it worse. At least in the tank top, you look like you have a shape. Just put on a bra.”

Lucy tugs open the top drawer of my dresser and starts riffling through it. “Seriously? Do you have anything that isn’t a sports bra?”

“They’re comfortable,” I say as I wrestle my sweatshirt away from Summer. “And it doesn’t matter anyway because Flint Hawthorne is not here to see my boobs.” I head down the hallway, and they scurry after me.

“But he might come *back* to see them if you let him catch a glimpse,” Summer says, and I send a silencing glare over my shoulder.

“Stop it. Both of you. I don’t know what this is about, but you’re going to stay hidden until I find out.”

“Hidden?” Lucy squeals. “You aren’t going to introduce us?”

“Just go!” I whisper-yell and motion them back down the hallway. “Not a word.”

I tug my hoodie down and adjust the hood, then take a calming deep breath that does nothing but make me realize how *not* calm I am.

This is not a big deal. I’ve met Flint before. We’ve had a couple of actual for-real conversations. I even had dinner with his family. I can handle this.

I swing open the door.

Flint is halfway down the stairs, but he swings around as soon as I call his name. He’s wearing khaki shorts and an olive-green T-shirt, sunglasses, and a baseball hat pulled low on his head. The sun is setting behind him, casting an orange glow across his features. It’s perfect lighting. Movie star lighting. And I suddenly wonder if he timed his arrival on purpose.

Though honestly, he doesn’t need the lighting. I’m pretty sure he’d look good anywhere. Any light. Any situation. Any wardrobe. Put the man in a hotdog Halloween costume, and he’d still make it look sexy.

“Hey,” he says. “I thought you weren’t home.”

“I’m home,” I say. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

He looks me up and down, a smile playing at his lips. “You worried about a cold front coming through?”

I press my lips together, regretting the sweatshirt, but it’s better than nipples, so I force a smile anyway. “My sisters like to keep the house cold. Um, do you want to come in?”

He climbs back up the steps so he’s standing directly in front of me. I catch the scent of him—something clean and masculine that makes my toes curl into the wooden porch slats beneath my feet. “I’d love to come in if you don’t mind. I have something I want to ask you.”

“Okay. Sure.” I step back into the house and hold the door open for him.

He follows me into the living room, where we stand awkwardly for a long moment. “Do you want anything?” I finally ask. I’m terrible at this. At hosting. At *socializing*. “Water? That’s pretty much all I have.”

“We have Dr Pepper downstairs!” a voice whispers from the hallway.

Flint’s eyebrows go up, and I wince as I look toward the hallway where I know my sisters are hiding. I sigh. It’s probably better to get this over with now, then I’ll force them into the basement.

I look back at Flint. “My sisters,” I explain. “They’re nothing like me, so you might want to brace yourself.” I walk to the hallway and grab my sisters’ hands, pulling them into the living room. They stumble to a halt, and I step to the side, allowing them a full view of the movie star standing in my living room. “Flint, these are my sisters, Summer and Lucy.”

Something in Flint changes just slightly. He smiles as he steps toward my sisters and extends his hand, but it doesn’t seem fully genuine. But that’s not quite right, because he doesn’t seem fake either. He just seems like—the answer clicks into my brain with sudden clarity. He seems like he’s performing. *Acting*.

I just watched him put on his Hollywood face.

“Nice to meet you, ladies,” he says warmly.

I tune out my sisters as they babble at him, talking about their favorite movies, asking him about living in LA, what it was like to move home. My attention jumps back to the conversation when Lucy asks for his signature—I’m not at all confident she wouldn’t offer up a body part—but she pulls out her journal, and I relax back into my careful study of Flint’s behavior.

I do not think he minds the attention. I’ve told him I have sisters, and that they lived with me, and he came here willingly. If he wanted to avoid them, I’ll be at his house

tomorrow to finish up my week of research. He could have talked to me then.

But the way he's interacting with Lucy and Summer, it feels very practiced. When they ask for a picture, he agrees, but he seems very conscious of where he puts his hands—on their shoulders, with lots of space still between them. He answers their questions, but he doesn't really tell them anything significant. He maintains eye contact, smiles just warmly enough to make them feel seen, like they've had a personal interaction with him. But nothing about this feels personal for *Flint*.

It's fascinating.

And impressive.

"Okay, that's enough," I say to my sisters. "Time for you to go home."

"You're banishing us to the basement?" Summer says.

"I'm banishing you to your *apartment* that just happens to be in my basement," I say.

"It was nice to meet you both," Flint says, and it's this that finally makes them move. "Summer and Lucy, right? I'll remember that."

My sisters pause their awkward backward shuffle through the kitchen—an obvious attempt to get as much face time as possible on their way out. "You'll remember our names?" Lucy asks.

Flint shrugs easily. "You're Audrey's sisters, and Audrey is a friend. Of course I will."

Oh my gosh, the man is a master.

Summer makes a noise like she's trying to swallow a squeal while Lucy breathes out, "Flint Hawthorne is going to remember my name."

I clear my throat. "Goodnight, guys!"

Their sighs follow them to the basement steps, but the sound of them actually going *down* the stairs never follows.

“Door!” I call out, and they huff before the door finally clicks closed. I roll my eyes as I drop onto the couch. “I’m sorry about them,” I say. I motion to the empty space across from me. “Want to sit? Oh. They interrupted before I could get you anything. Do you want water? I’m nixing the Dr Pepper idea because that would mean opening the basement door again, and I think that’s probably a bad idea.”

He smiles, and this one *is* real. The mask from moments before is gone. “I’m okay. But thank you.”

A tiny ribbon of satisfaction unfurls in my chest. I’m not getting actor Flint. I’m just getting Flint. I didn’t realize it was something I appreciated—something that even mattered—until right now.

I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around my legs. “That was pretty impressive how you handled them,” I say motioning toward the kitchen and the basement door just beyond. “They can be a lot, and they’re big fans.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“Do you ever get tired of it?”

He shrugs, but I don’t miss the way his jaw ticks first. “It’s part of the job. And trust me, they were a lot nicer than a lot of people are.”

“I don’t know how you endure that kind of attention all the time. It would make me want to crawl out of my skin.”

A flash of uncertainty crosses his features. “Why, do you think? Is it the crowds or talking to people you don’t know, or...?”

I narrow my eyes, studying him. His question—or maybe the way he *asked* the question—feels very specific. Like he’s looking for a particular kind of answer. “I mean, I’m not incapable. I defended my dissertation in front of an entire auditorium of biologists, and I’ve spoken at multiple conferences. I can handle attention. I just don’t like it. And it drains my social battery pretty fast.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”



“Does that ever happen to you? A drained social battery?”

He grins. “My brothers would say no, and admittedly, it takes a lot. But yeah. It happens. Press junkets usually do it.”

“I have no idea what that is,” I say.

“Three days of hell,” he says, but then he shakes his head and gives me another easy smile. “Or three days of interviews promoting a movie. All the actors and directors gather together in one place and journalists file through for back-to-back interviews.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

“It is exhausting.” He runs a hand through his hair, then leans forward, his elbows propped on his knees. He fiddles with his fingers for a moment, and I get the strangest sense that he’s nervous about something. “Actually, that’s part of why I’m here.” He looks up and meets my eye, his gaze serious. “I have an unusual favor to ask you.”

I sit up a little taller and drop my feet to the floor, suddenly feeling like a serious question deserves serious posture. “Okay. Shoot.”

“This is going to sound weird at first, I’m just warning you. And you’re probably going to think—” His words cut off, and he clears his throat before he starts again. “Actually, let me give you some background information first. That’s probably going to help.”

The next five minutes are a blur as Flint walks me through the details of his new movie—and his last relationship. His co-star, Claire McKinsey. The way she’s talking to the press about him. The problem this is creating surrounding the upcoming premiere in Los Angeles.

The longer he talks, the more confused I become. Because what on earth could this possibly have to do with me? All he could want is advice, and I’m the last person on the earth who would know anything about how to navigate a situation like this.

“If I were dating someone else, this would be easier,” he continues. “But I’m not, and I don’t exactly have a lot of time

to sort that out before the premiere. But after talking to my publicist, and my manager, we're thinking that I only need to *appear* as if I'm in a relationship with someone else," Flint says.

"A decoy," I say, at least understanding this much. "That makes sense. If the public thinks you're seeing someone else, it will only make Claire look foolish if she keeps up her narrative."

He lets out a relieved breath, like he's grateful I understand. "Exactly."

"So you just need someone to pose as your girlfriend?" I tug at the drawstrings of my hoodie. "I'm not sure I understand what any of this has to do with me. Are you hoping I'll know someone who can help?"

My question seems to take him by surprise. "No, that's not —" He runs a hand across his face, and I notice a slight tremble in his fingers. "Audrey," he finally says, "I'm here because I want *you* to come with me."

Me.

*Me?*

Audrey Callahan posing as a movie star's girlfriend?

And that's when I start to laugh.

# CHAPTER TEN

Flint

I’LL BE HONEST. THE laughing isn’t doing much for my ego.

Audrey practically has tears coursing down her cheeks.

I sit patiently while she presses a hand to her stomach, actual guffaws coming out of her mouth. I mean, I realize I might not be her type, but is it really such a ridiculous thought?

Audrey sniffs and sits up a little taller. “I’m sorry,” she says. “That was—” She wipes her eyes. “I promise I’m not laughing at you.”

I chuckle lightly. “Thanks for the reassurance.”

“Flint, I’m serious. I’m just—do you honestly think anyone in the world would believe you’re dating someone like me?” She holds out her hands and looks down at her sweats.

Not that it’s the only thing that matters—and Hollywood is full of attractive people, so I’m speaking from plenty of experience here—but does she not realize how beautiful she is?

I almost tell her I *would* date someone like her and that should be evidence enough, but I don’t want to scare her off, so I stick with something simpler. “Audrey, I don’t know what

you're basing your opinion on, but you're beautiful. I can't imagine why anyone would question."

She scoffs. "I'm not—"

She doesn't finish the sentence, but I can fill in the blank well enough.

"Flint, I'm a scientist."

"I know."

"I haven't worn makeup in years."

"I know a few women who would kill for skin that looks that good bare."

Her cheeks flush, and she lifts her hands to cover them. She shakes her head, like she thinks I'm feeding her a line.

"Flint, it's a terrible idea," she finally says. "I'm not girlfriend material. Definitely not *movie star* girlfriend material."

She wouldn't be the first woman to assume I need a woman with special qualifications just because of my career, but she's wrong. Not that it actually matters, because it wouldn't be real in the first place.

"But are you *fake* movie star girlfriend material?" I joke.

She rolls her eyes. "What does that even mean?" She leans back and pulls her legs up to her chest, sitting like she was when our conversation first started. It almost seems like she's trying to make herself smaller.

This was a terrible idea. I've clearly made her uncomfortable. If just having the conversation is enough to do that, there's no way she'd ever agree to everything this would involve.

"Audrey, I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I'm realizing now this was a bad idea. This is not a problem for anyone else to solve. I'll just—" I push off my knees and stand. "I'll figure it out, all right? Forget I asked."

Before I can step away from the couch, she reaches out and grabs my arm, her fingers circling around my wrist. "Wait,"

she says. She slides her hand down to mine and I instinctively wrap my fingers around hers and let her tug me back onto the couch, this time sitting a little closer to her than I was before. “Just walk me through it. What all would this involve?”

A surge of hope pushes through me, but I still hesitate. If she’s going to shut me down—and all signs point to her doing just that—this will be the moment it happens.

“It really is okay if you say no,” I say, giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze.

She squeezes mine right back then slips her hand out of my grip. “I know,” she says. “But at least let me know what I’m saying no to.”

*Here goes nothing.*

“Okay, at first, it would just be a photo. The two of us together, but nothing that shows your face. I’ll post the photo on Instagram, hinting heavily that I’m seeing someone new, maybe hint that it’s someone I used to know growing up.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“It wouldn’t be, but that’s the easy part.”

She bites her lip. “What’s the hard part?”

“I would need you to come to Los Angeles with me for the movie premiere.”

Her face goes white. “To like, *go* to the premiere? Isn’t that a big deal?”

“Pretty big,” I say. “Red carpet. Lots of cameras. Questions, though they would only be for me. You wouldn’t have to say anything.” I keep going, hurrying through the worst of it all at once. “I would also need you with me during the press junket. You wouldn’t be on camera then, but all the journalists interviewing the cast would see you there with me, and it would make asking about my relationship with Claire seem moot.”

She breathes out a slow breath, a little bit of color returning to her face. “It sounds like you’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“*Joni* has given this a lot of thought. But I know Claire well enough to know this is the only thing that might shut her up.”

Audrey nods. “I get it. I really do, but Flint, I don’t know the first thing about how to act on a Hollywood red carpet. I wouldn’t know what to say. And I definitely don’t have anything to wear.”

“Don’t worry about that. One email from my publicist saying my date to the premiere is in need of a dress, and you’ll have three dozen in your hotel room by the time we get to LA.”

She lets out a little disbelieving laugh. “Okay, but what about everywhere else? You’ve seen what I wear every day. That’s basically my wardrobe. Work pants. T-shirts—”

“Don’t forget the bush disguise,” I add with a smirk.

She reaches over and smacks my arm. “Don’t make fun of me! Sometimes I need to blend in when I’m working.”

“I believe you,” I say. “Audrey, don’t worry about the clothes. I’ll buy you a whole new wardrobe if I have to. You’ll deserve it if you actually agree to go along with this crazy scheme.”

“If I were one of my sisters, that’s all it would take to get me to agree. But I just don’t—”

“What if I give you access to my land for the rest of the summer?”

Her eyes go wide, but then they quickly narrow, like she’s already two steps ahead of me. “*Just* for the summer?”

She’s negotiating. That has to be a good thing. “To the squirrels living in my backyard, yes.” I think about the various research sites she’s told me about that fill the forest behind my house. “To the rest of the acreage, you can have access indefinitely.”

She sits up a little taller. *I’ve got her.*

“For you, and any of your associates at the university,” I add.

“You would do that?”

I shrug. “I wanted the woods for privacy and a buffer from any future development. But it won’t hurt anything to have a bunch of biologists hiking around. As long as everyone steers clear of the house.”

I can almost see the thoughts flying through her brain. She’s probably already cataloging all the experiments she had to abandon but can now continue.

It occurs to me that had I known it would make her this happy, I would have offered her access to the land anyway. No strings attached. I’m a little disappointed that now I can’t.

She laughs to herself as she drops back into the sofa cushions. “I can’t believe I’m actually considering this,” she says. “*Me*. Maybe I’ll be able to convince a few journalists, but Flint, anyone who knows me is going to immediately know it can’t be real.”

I’m sure she doesn’t mean for her words to be an insult, but *man*, this woman is giving my ego a beating. Who cares if I do like her? Audrey couldn’t make herself any clearer. She’ll never feel the same way about me.

“Good thing you’re such a recluse, then,” I say, defaulting to what comes easiest to me. When all else fails, I can always crack a joke. “What are we talking, here? Ten, eleven people?”

She rolls her eyes. “Shut up. I know more than eleven people. It has to be *at least* fifteen.”

I grin. “I think those odds are good enough for us to take our chances.”

She gives her head another shake. “Girlfriend to a movie star,” she says, like it’s the most preposterous thing she’s ever heard.

“Maybe let’s drop the movie star thing,” I say, nudging her knee. “I’m just a guy, Audrey.”

“A guy who *IS* a movie star.”

“Just think of me as the guy who flirted with you at the Feed ’n Seed. The guy you met *before* you knew he was anyone

famous.”

She taps her chin. “Trouble is, that guy also had me hauled across the mountain by his Incredible Hulk bodyguard, placed in handcuffs, and interrogated by police.” Her eyes sparkle with humor, pulling an automatic smile out of me.

“That’s better than an actual rap sheet, right?” I ask. “And Nate’s not as scary as he looks.”

“When he’s looming over you in the middle of the forest, he’s *terrifying*.” Audrey holds my gaze for a long moment, her clear blue eyes bright even in the fading evening light. “But you’re right. He’s definitely a big softie. Especially when Joni is around.”

“I’ll take credit for that,” I say. “I set them up on their first date.”

“Speaking of dates,” Audrey says. “When is all of this supposed to happen?”

“The premiere is four weeks from Saturday. But we’d probably need to post a picture much sooner than that. As soon as possible.”

“Four weeks.” She licks her lips. “That’s just before classes start for me. What happens after?”

“After, you’re under zero obligation to do or say anything at all. We’ll probably both deal with people around here—especially people who know us—asking questions. You can be honest with the people closest to you—all my family will know the truth because I don’t lie to my family—but for everyone else, it will probably be easiest to just let them assume we dated and parted ways amicably when we realized you would never be happy dealing with all the crazy my life brings.”

My words ring with truth—at least in my own head—but then Audrey nods, confirming them even further. “I definitely don’t think I’m cut out for celebrity life.”

Well. Glad we’ve got that cleared up.

This will be fake dating and *only* fake dating.



Hooray for me.

“So you’ll do it?” I ask, and Audrey nods.

“I’ll do it.”

“For the squirrels?” I echo the qualifier she used when we first negotiated the terms of her research.

“For the squirrels,” she says. “But also...” She bites her lip, blue eyes blazing, and my heart climbs into my throat. “Also for you,” she finishes.

And those words carry me home.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Audrey

I MEAN, IT'S NOT like I've never worn a swimsuit. But these very tiny scraps of fabric my sisters keep foisting on me are far, *far* outside of my comfort zone.

I toss a magenta string bikini onto my bed. I'm not even willing to try that one on.

"What if I'm just hanging out *beside* the pool in a T-shirt?" I ask. "Or I'll just wear this one." I grab the very practical speedo I wore when I was in grad school and swam laps three times a week.

"That one gives you the worst uni-boob," Summer says, yanking the suit out of my hands. "Please just try this one on. Once you see how good it looks, you won't be protesting nearly as much." She thrusts out her hands, the least offensive of the bikinis dangling from her fingers.

"Ohhh, yes. That one," Lucy agrees. "The halter will look great with your shoulders."

"And look at the butt." Summer drops the top and holds up the bottoms. "There's plenty of coverage."

I sigh. We've been at this for half an hour already, and I'm supposed to leave to go to Flint's in half that time. I took an entire afternoon off from work for this. I don't have time to waste. "Fine," I finally say. "I'll try it on, but if it doesn't look

good, I'm wearing the Speedo, and there's nothing either of you can do about it."

"So help me, if you try and pose for a photo in *that* old thing —"

I slam my bathroom door, cutting off the rest of Lucy's sentence, and wiggle my way into the swimsuit. It's been three days since I agreed to pose as Flint Hawthorne's girlfriend. Three days since my sisters had the freakout of the century when I told them the reason Flint showed up at my door and offered me unfettered access to his property.

Lucy is convinced Flint is going to fall in love with me for real.

Summer is hopeful he'll discover he isn't in love with me, but one of the sisters he saw when he showed up at my house definitely caught his eye.

I'm still in shock that I agreed to go along with this.

The whole plan is completely ridiculous.

Utterly Laughable.

Totally—*wait*. I adjust the straps on the halter of the bikini top, tightening them the slightest bit.

Okay. This doesn't look half bad. I turn to the side and take in my profile, then shift so I can see how much of my butt cheeks are hanging out.

"Not bad, Callahan," I say softly to myself. "Not bad."

Summer bangs on the door. "How's it look?"

I take one last calming breath and swing the door open, then step into my bedroom.

Lucy's jaw drops.

Summer swears softly and lets out a disappointed sigh. "Okay. He's so going to fall in love with you."

I roll my eyes. "It's just a swimsuit. He's not going to fall in love with me over a swimsuit."

“But he might fall in love with you because of the body *in* the swimsuit,” Lucy says. “I can’t believe you’ve been hiding this.” She waves a hand up and down my body, like she still can’t believe it’s me standing in front of her.

“Do you really think it looks okay?” I ask, one hand pressed against my bare stomach.

“You’re smoking hot,” Summer says. “Ridiculously hot.”

I move to the mirror hanging above my dresser and take in my appearance one more time. Ridiculously hot is never a description anyone has ever used to describe me before.

I once overheard one of my TAs referring to me as *secret hot*. And the boyfriend I had during my master’s program always told me I was pretty in a modest, understated way. (I have no idea what he actually meant by this. When I told my sisters, they seemed offended on my behalf, but I always felt like it was an honest, practical assessment.)

Which is why *ridiculously hot* feels like such a reach. “You’re just saying that because you’re my sister,” I finally say.

“She’s not,” Lucy says. “I mean, you really need to tweeze and shape your eyebrows. And your skincare routine needs leveling up. But if you made an actual effort? Wore makeup? Bought clothes *not* from the men’s section at Tractor Supply? Yeah. You’d totally be hot.”

I reach for the nearest pair of pants. “Tractor Supply has a lot of really practical clothing.”

Summer grabs the pants away from me. “None of which you are wearing today. You’re going to the pool. Don’t dress like you’re out hunting for wild hogs. Hang on.” She holds up her finger, then disappears down the hall. Less than a minute later, she’s back holding a gauzy white sundress. “Here. Try this.”

I pull it over my bikini and turn to look. It’s loose and flowy, but somehow still flattering, which is a welcome surprise. In my head, clothes designed to flatter my shape are automatically clothes that will be restrictive and uncomfortable. But this isn’t either of those things.

“You like it,” Summer says proudly. “I can totally tell you like it.”

I smile the slightest bit. “It isn’t terrible,” I say.

“Here. Shoes. Bag.” Lucy drops a pair of strappy sandals onto the floor in front of me and holds out an oversized mesh tote. “I stocked it with everything you’ll need. Towel. Sunscreen. I even grabbed that boring book off your nightstand.”

“*Unseen Dangers* isn’t boring,” I say as I take the bag. “It’s a realistic look at the worsening crisis the Southern pine beetle is bringing to North Carolina pine trees.”

“And to think I’ve been wasting my time reading Emily Henry novels,” Lucy says, her voice a robotic monotone. “I had no idea what I was missing.”

“Whatever. I have to go.” I push past my sisters but hesitate when I reach my bedroom door. I look back at them both. “Are you sure I can do this?”

Their expressions shift simultaneously into identical looks of confidence and compassion.

“Of course you can do it,” Summer says.

Lucy nods. “Just remember. You’re doing this for the squirrels.”

I repeat those words the entire time I’m driving to Flint’s house. He must have Nate watching and waiting for my arrival because I don’t even have to press the call button before the gates are swinging open, admitting me onto the winding drive that cuts through Flint’s acreage and leads up to the house. Here, in front of the house, it’s less woodsy and more just rolling pastureland. New fencing lines both sides of the drive, and I wonder if Flint is eventually planning to have animals. He grew up on a farm, after all—it probably wouldn’t be outside his comfort zone.

Pondering this question distracts me until I’m parked in front of Flint’s house.

I cut the engine but stay in my seat, hands still gripping the steering wheel.

This is stupid.

I am not sexy bikini material. Girlfriend material.

Definitely not Flint Hawthorne girlfriend material.

It's funny. A few weeks ago, that name didn't mean anything to me. And now, it feels like I see it everywhere. In the *People* magazines Lucy is always leaving all over the house. In my Apple news feed on my iPhone, though that probably has everything to do with the increased Google searching I've been doing lately. I *told* my phone to show me stuff about Flint because I looked him up a few (or ten... maybe a dozen?) times. I even saw his face on a cookie down at the feed store. Apparently, Ann has always been a fan.

The only thing I haven't done yet is watch one of his movies, for reasons I can't quite define. A part of me thinks I don't want to watch one, only to be disappointed. Considering my track record with movies, that feels like a real possibility. But a bigger part just wants to see Flint...as *Flint*. Not as the movie star he became when he was interacting with my sisters, but as the guy who works in his own backyard and invited me to eat with his family. If I watch his movies, he'll turn into a movie star for *me*, too. And I don't know that I'm ready for that to happen.

A knock sounds on my window, and I startle, one hand flying to my chest.

I look out to see Flint bending down to look through the glass. He's wearing sunglasses pushed back in his hair, a plain white T-shirt, board shorts, and flip-flops. He's dressed for the pool just like I am, but on him, the clothes look effortless and easy. Like he dresses like this every day.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice muffled by the window between us.

I nod and unbuckle my seatbelt. It's now or never, I guess.

He opens the door for me, offering his hand, and I slip my fingers into his, letting him help me out of my truck.

“Wow,” he says, as he looks me up and down. “You look amazing.”

“Oh.” I look down at my clothes. “I—honestly, my sisters made me wear it. I wanted to come in the Speedo I swim laps in and a pair of sweats, but they refused to let me out of the house.”

“You looked great in sweats the last time I saw you. But this is nice too,” he says smoothly. He moves toward the front door, talking as he goes. “Thanks again for doing this. Joni and I have been talking about the best way to grab a few photos.” He opens the door, holding it open while I cross inside. “I’ve got a few ideas, but please remember you have full veto power. Anything that makes you uncomfortable, we don’t have to do. And of course, you’ll see every shot before I post anything publicly.”

I nod as I follow him through the kitchen and toward the back door that leads onto the patio. “Is there really a point to keeping my face hidden? If I attend the premiere with you, everyone will see me then anyway, right?”

“Yes. But we want the element of surprise on our side. If your face is visible now, before the premiere, odds are pretty good that someone will figure out who you are *beforehand*. Then we risk people showing up at your house or your lab, following you to the grocery store. I’d rather spare you that drama as long as possible.”

“So, wait. Those things will happen *after* the premiere?”

He grimaces. “Probably. But we’ll be prepared for it. As long as we both stay isolated for a few days, interest should die down.”

“Stay isolated. What does that mean?” I ask.

He shrugs. “The easiest thing would be for you to stay here for a few days. That way you won’t have to deal with people knocking on your door. And you’d be close to your squirrels so you could keep working.”

My heart grows the tiniest bit when he refers to them as *my squirrels*. But also, he thinks I’ll just stay here? At his house?

With him?

Flint lets out an easy chuckle. “It’s a big house, Audrey,” he says. “I’ve got plenty of guest rooms. You can be on the opposite side of the house from me if you want.”

I press my lips together.

Am I really so transparent? Or is this man just really good at reading me? “No, I know. I wasn’t worried,” I lie. “I’d be happy to stay here. You know. For the squirrels. But I’m sure we can figure it all out then.”

He gives his head the tiniest shake, like he can’t quite make sense of me, but then his easy smile is back, and he’s tilting his head toward the pool. “So we’re thinking something candid,” he says, steering the conversation back to the here-and-now of what we’re trying to accomplish. “Maybe we’re in the water, your arms around me, the mountain view visible behind us, and I take a selfie that shows my face, but only the back of your head.”

He’s talking like he’s reading a list of bullet points, which goes a long way toward keeping me calm.

“Whatever you think,” I say.

He nods. “Then maybe one of just you—another shot from the back—of you leaning on the edge of the pool, looking off into the distance—” His words cut off, and his cheeks turn the lightest shade of pink before he shrugs. “I don’t know. It sounds cheesy when I say it out loud, but I can see it in my head. If you’re game, we can take a few different shots and see what happens.”

“Okay. I trust you. Whatever you need, I’m happy to help.”

I follow him onto the pool deck and drop my bag onto a chair. The pool sparkles in the sunshine, the water a deep, mesmerizing blue. At one end, the pool has no visible edge; instead, it cascades over a hidden rim, giving the impression that the water goes on forever, blending right into the horizon. Whoever designed this place knew what they were doing. The water in the pool, whether because of the deep blue tiles lining



the deck or just sheer magic, is the exact same shade as the rolling Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance.

“Did you do that on purpose?” I say, pointing at the horizon. “You color-matched your pool to the mountains?”

Flint grins, then tugs his shirt off before dropping it onto a nearby chair. “I wish I were that good, Audrey. But that’s just luck. And a trick of the light.”

For a moment, I don’t have words. I caught a glimpse of Flint’s stomach that day he found me hiding in the bushes. And the internet has shown me *many* views of his physique, including a shot of his bare butt I possibly scrolled past four dozen times. But seeing him here, in person, only feet from me. He doesn’t even look *real*.

I swallow against the lump in my throat and force my eyes onto Flint’s face. His eyebrows are raised, his expression saying he’s fully aware I was just checking him out, but he doesn’t tease me about it. He steps toward the water. “Are you coming?”

The words sound like a challenge, and I’m not about to back down even if it means taking off this stupid sundress while I’m wearing this stupid tiny bikini.

I reach for the hem of my dress.

I’m not ready for this. Not even a little bit.

But there’s no going back now.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Flint

AUDREY IN A SUNDRESS, her shoulders bare and her hair down around her shoulders was one thing.

But Audrey in a bikini?

I am...*not prepared* when she pulls off her dress and drops it onto a lounge chair. She turns to face me, her hands pressed to her stomach like she's nervous.

I'm staring.

*Of course* I'm staring. Audrey is stunning. I'm used to being around women who spend hours with personal trainers every day, toning, tightening, perfecting. But Audrey feels different. Not that she's any less gorgeous. She isn't. Long legs, subtle curves. She just looks...*real*.

I pull my eyes away, somehow sensing that if she realizes I'm staring, it's going to make her uncomfortable. So I do the first thing that pops into my mind. I run toward the pool, shout "Cannonball!" at the top of my lungs, and jump in.

When I emerge from the water, Audrey has made her way to the edge of the pool. She has a towel and a bottle of sunscreen in her hands, and the expression on her face says she has no idea how she wound up here.

I don't know how she wound up here either, but I'm so glad she did.

Despite the impression she's given me that there will never be anything real between us, I can't quell my desire to impress her—to charm her.

I want Audrey Callahan to like me.

The challenge of that—of realizing those feelings aren't a guarantee—I could get high on it.

It makes this small slice of my life feel normal, and right now, I need all the normal I can get.

I swim toward Audrey, standing when the water is shallow enough for me to touch the bottom. I don't miss the way her eyes drop to my exposed chest and biceps, and I barely resist the urge to flex. Something tells me that kind of blatant display would only irritate Audrey.

She squirts a little sunscreen into her palm, then holds out the bottle. "Care to make yourself useful?" she asks. "Fifteen minutes without sunscreen, and I'll turn into a tomato."

She rubs the lotion into her arms and shoulders, then turns slightly, showing me her back.

*Okay. No problem.* I can totally handle this. I'm a grown man, not a fourteen-year-old boy high on hormones.

I swallow against the lump in my throat. "Well, we wouldn't want that." I lift myself out of the pool and sit on the deck beside her, then dry my hands on the towel she offers me.

I hold out my palm while she fills it with sunscreen, then rub my hands together before slowly sliding them across her shoulder blades. Goosebumps break out across her skin, and she sits up a little taller, almost like she's trying to compose herself.

I smile to myself, glad whatever this feeling is goes both ways, and slow my movements, prolonging the contact as long as possible.

Audrey tilts her head, looking at me over her shoulder. "So, what? Are you one of the lucky ones who just turns brown in the sun?"

“Not at first,” I say. “But I got enough of a tan down in Costa Rica that I do okay now. If we were going to be outside all day, I’d probably put some on.”

“How long were you there?” she asks.

My hands move down her back until I reach the top of her swimsuit bottom. I let my fingers linger there, sliding around until my hands are on either side of her waist. I might be making things up, but it feels like she leans into me the slightest bit before I move my hands back to her shoulder blades and clear my throat. “Six months shooting on location,” I say.

“Sounds like a tough gig.”

“You might feel differently if you saw the spiders.”

She perks up, looking at me over her shoulder. “Goliath bird eaters? Did you actually see one?”

I chuckle. “I forgot who I’m talking to. Only you would get excited about a spider the size of my palm.” I rub in the last bit of sunscreen just under the strap of her top. “That should do it,” I say.

She turns back to face me. “Thanks.” She drops her feet into the water, swirling them around a little. “I *would* be excited to see one. I mean, I’m not saying I want to find one in my bed, but they’re fascinating. *Theraphosa blondi*. They’re a part of the tarantula family.”

“Are they the big ones the Costa Ricans roast in banana leaves and serve as a delicacy?”

Her expression brightens. “Please tell me you tried one.”

I sink down into the water, letting it lap against my shoulders. “Only because I had to. It was in the script. But we just referred to them as big-ass spiders. I never knew the official name.”

She grins. “We should petition for an official name change.”

“Trust me. It fits.”

“What did it taste like?”

“The only thing I tasted was the whiskey I downed before and after every take. There was no way I was eating one of those things sober.”

She rolls her eyes and kicks a little water toward me. “Come on. Was it really that bad?”

I lift my foot and splash her right back. “It tasted like seafood. Like shrimp, maybe? But lighter. Crunchier.”

She nods, not at all disgusted. “Man, I need to travel more.”

I shake my head. Who even *is* this woman? And when is she going to stop surprising me?

“So what’s the movie about?” she asks.

I drop back into the water, and turn, leaning against the deck right beside her, enjoying the warm sun on my shoulders. “It’s about an American named Paul who grew up in Costa Rica with his ex-pat parents. He’s working as a lifeguard and a long-distance swimmer and has these crazy goals of competing in open-water swims all over the world.”

“That’s you? Paul?” Audrey asks.

I nod. “So then there’s this woman on vacation—that’s Claire—who gets sucked into a rip current, Paul saves her, and they fall in love. But the movie is about more than that, too. A hurricane hits and decimates the community where Paul has lived his whole life, and he has to make some tough decisions about where he truly belongs, whether he wants to leave Costa Rica, for swimming, *or* for the woman who just turned his life upside down.”

“I’m assuming you spent a lot of time in the water,” Audrey says.

“Both before and after we started filming. Apparently, I swam like an erratic helicopter before.” I grin. “My stroke needed some work.”

“But it’s better now?”

I splash her the tiniest bit. “Come in and judge for yourself. Are you a swimmer?”

“Not a fast one, but I swam laps when I was in grad school to keep myself sane.” She moves like she’s about to get in the water, but then she pauses, looking back toward the lounge chair where she left her things. “That’s my phone,” she says, the ringing distant but audible. “Um, just give me one sec,” she says. “That’s the ringtone assigned to my parents.”

“Take your time.” She walks back to the chair, and I do my level best not to stare as she goes. I sink into the water, letting it cool my face, but it doesn’t come close to cooling my attraction. If this is the way things are going to be whenever I’m around Audrey, it’s going to be a long month of faking.

“Mom, I need you to calm down,” Audrey says, as soon as my head is out of the water, and I immediately stand up, a sense of alarm racing through me.

Audrey must see me, because she waves her hand and smiles, her expression saying there isn’t a *real* emergency going on. She listens for another moment, then bites her lip like she’s trying to control her laughter. “No, I understand,” she says. “But I promise it isn’t going to hurt you. It’s just as scared as you are.”

Slowly, she walks toward me, then lowers herself back to the pool deck, sitting like she was before with her feet in the water. She lifts her finger to her lips as if to shush me, then puts the call on speaker phone.

“...it just climbed right through the window!” her mom says. “Ohhhh, Audrey! It’s on the bed. It’s on our bed! We’re going to have squirrel poop on our bed!”

“Get out of the way and I’ll catch it,” a man’s voice says. This must be her dad. “I’ve got the oven mitts on.”

“Dad, please don’t try to catch the squirrel,” Audrey says. “Even with oven mitts on. The RV isn’t very big. If you both just calm down and leave the windows and doors open, I promise it’ll find its way out on its own.”

“Can squirrels give us rabies?” her mom asks. “This one has angry eyes. Oh! It’s on the curtains! It’s climbing the curtains!”

“Squirrels don’t carry rabies,” Audrey says, her voice unflappably calm. “Is the window open next to the curtains it’s climbing? I’m sure it’s looking for a way out.”

“Derek!” her mom whisper yells. “Take off the oven mitts and open that window.”

Several thumps and bumps sound, followed by a loud crash. “It’s just you and me now,” Audrey’s dad says, his voice low. “Now head on out that window, or else I’ll swap the oven mitts for a baseball bat, and we’ll have ourselves some nice squirrel stew for dinner.”

I bark out a laugh, quickly lifting my hand and pressing it to my mouth to cut off the sound. Audrey’s eyes widen—she made it clear I’m supposed to be silent—but she’s just as close to laughing as I am. And rightly so. Audrey’s parents are hilarious.

“Dad! Don’t you dare get the baseball bat. Mom, do you have any nuts? Walnuts, maybe? Or pecans?”

There’s some rustling, then Audrey’s mom whispers, “I have walnuts. And peanuts.”

“Go for the walnuts. You and dad get out of the RV, then leave a few walnuts on the floor leading to the door, and a few more on the ground outside. Then just relax for a minute. I promise that squirrel is no more excited about being trapped in your RV than you are about it being there.”

“Right. Nuts. I can do that. Gah! It’s coming at me! Derek! Get out of the way, you oaf!”

Audrey shoots me another exasperated look, and I press my lips together, still fighting laughter.

“He took the nut!” her mom whisper-yells. “Audrey! He took it!”

“That’s good!” Audrey whispers back. “Are you outside?”

I love that Audrey is whispering too.

“We’re outside,” her dad says. “Are you sure I can’t use this bat?”

“I’ll never forgive you if you do,” Audrey says.

Her mom squeals. “He took another one! It’s working!”

A few seconds of silence pass, then her mom cheers into the phone! “He’s free! Ohhh, and look. He seems happy to have something to eat.”

“Mom, please don’t start feeding the squirrels, all right? This is a one-time deal. Is everything okay now?”

“Thanks to you,” her mom says. “How are *you*? Everything going all right?”

“Everything’s great, but I’m not really in a place where I can chat. If you’re okay, can I call you later?”

“Oh, of course. Squirrel crisis averted!” her mom says. “Call us anytime. Love you, Auds!”

Her dad’s voice echoes her mom’s. “Love you! Tell your sisters hello!”

Audrey ends the call and drops the phone onto her towel. “So that was my parents,” she says, her eyes still laughing.

“They sound fun,” I say.

“They really are. You can follow them on TikTok if you want. They’re traveling the country in an RV, documenting their adventures, and they’ve gained quite the following.”

“Really? That’s awesome.”

“They’re pretty adorable. They were both music professors at UNC-Asheville until they retired together last summer and decided they felt like traveling.”

“I love that.”

She smiles, her expression warm and genuine in a way that can only mean the relationship she has with her parents is a good one. “Mom plays the cello, and Dad the violin. They have their instruments with them, and wherever they stop for the night, they have these impromptu concerts. Mostly in RV parks. But they’ve done them in the lobbies of hotels, in restaurant parking lots, in public parks.” She reaches for her phone. “Here. Look. I’ll show you the one that went viral.”



She scrolls and clicks a few times before she holds it up, the video already playing. I move through the water to get close enough to see, stopping just in front of her and dropping my hands onto her knees. She doesn't flinch or move away, so I assume it's okay.

Her parents are sitting in the middle of a gravel road, her mom sitting on a small stool while her dad stands behind her with his violin. They're wearing Texas and casual clothes and floppy sun hats, and there's a small playground and a giant sign behind them that reads "Frank's RV Park and Campground." The music though—it's polished and refined and a complete contrast to the casual surroundings. "That's Bach, right?" I ask. "His Two-Part Inventions?"

Audrey's eyebrows shoot up. "You know classical music?"

"Little bit." I hand back her phone. "Your parents are great. I'm not surprised they've gained a following."

"Hold up," Audrey says, setting her phone down behind her. "People who know *a little bit* of classical music recognize Pachelbel Canon. But Bach's Two-Part Inventions?"

I grin. "Maybe I know more than a little? It's the only thing I listen to when I'm getting in character for a role."

She studies me for a long moment, her lip clasped between her teeth, and I resist the urge to reach out and tug her into the water just to have her close to me. "It's what I listen to when I'm working," she finally says, "and it's pretty much all we listened to growing up." She kicks the water lightly, splashing my chest.

"Are you ever coming in?"

She nods, then pushes off the deck and slides into the water. She gasps as the cold hits her skin, but then she drops all the way into the water, her head disappearing for a moment before she rises back up like some sort of ethereal water goddess, no care for what the water might do to her makeup—pretty sure she isn't wearing any—or her hair.

I've been around women angling for attention, and that isn't what Audrey is doing here. She isn't trying to be sexy, but she

*is* sexy. Maybe even sexier because she has no idea what she's doing to me.

She runs her hand over her face and down her wet hair. "Do you have a favorite composer?"

I love so much that she seems to have forgotten that she came here for a purpose. We're just talking, getting to know one another, and it really seems like she's enjoying herself.

"I love Copland," I say. "And Dvorak. And Eric Whitacre. He's contemporary, though. What about you?"

"Bach, probably," she quickly says. "Because he's so familiar, but there's also something about the intentionality of his work that appeals to my scientific brain."

Once, after wrapping a particularly difficult scene in *Turning Tides*, Claire found me out on the beach, headphones on, listening to my favorite classical playlist. She stole my headphones, listened for a few seconds, then rolled her eyes, declared my music boring, and asked me to go skinny dipping.

"I like Bach, too," I say, loving that Audrey and I have this in common. "I get what you're saying about intentionality."

Audrey holds my gaze, her head slightly tilted, then she shakes her head and sinks into the water, her palms lifting to her face. Her expression looks disbelieving, but why?

The fact that we both like classical music?

Or is it more than that? Is she feeling this too? This tension?

If she's feeling even half the attraction that I am, she's gotta be overwhelmed, because I'm nearly out of my mind.

Wanting her like this—it's torture and bliss. Agony and ecstasy. But I don't even care. Even if this goes nowhere, I'll take the sting of that disappointment if it means even a moment of the pleasure that comes from her company.

Audrey Callahan has me hooked.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Flint

“SO HOW ARE WE doing this?” Audrey asks, her expression serious. “Where do you want me?”

She’s several yards away from me in the water, her hands propped on her hips.

I can think of a lot of places I want her, but I force my mind to focus on the task at hand. “Um, right. Let me just, uh, grab my phone, and we’ll figure something out.”

I climb out of the pool and walk to the long patio table where I left my shirt and phone. I grab a towel off a stocked shelf by the door and dry my hands before picking it up.

Joni and I discussed the possibility of her being here, either to take the photos or just to offer her opinion on what she thinks will work best, but we ultimately decided Audrey would be more comfortable without an audience. Now, I’m wondering if an audience would have been helpful if only to help me behave myself. This woman is only *pretending* to be my girlfriend, and I can’t stop thinking about the way her skin felt under my palms when I helped her with her sunscreen.

I walk back to the pool, phone in hand, and use the stairs to get back in the water. My phone is waterproof enough, or so the manufacturer claims, but I’d rather avoid testing it out if I can help it. Audrey has moved to the infinity edge of the pool,

her arms resting on the edge, her long dark hair trailing down her back.

Without pausing to think about it, I pull up my camera and snap a picture. I move a little closer, grabbing a few more before she turns and looks over her shoulder, an easy smile on her face.

I snap one more photo. I won't be able to use this one, but she looks too amazing not to try and capture the moment.

"I could get used to this view," she says easily, turning back to face the mountains.

I leave the phone on the concrete pool deck and move up next to her. "Sometimes I forget how pretty it is here," I say. "Living other places. Traveling all over. Then I come home, and I'm surprised, you know? That I got to grow up here, enjoy views like this every day."

"I've never lived anywhere else," Audrey says. "But I'm still convinced this has to be the prettiest place on earth."

"You've really never lived anywhere else?"

She shakes her head. "I mean, high school at NCSSM in Raleigh, then college. But I was still in North Carolina for that. App State for my undergrad, then Carolina Southern for both my master's and my PhD."

"That's right over in Hendersonville, right?"

She nods. "That's where I teach. I'd love to do some traveling eventually, but I love it here, too. And my research is rooted in these mountains. To go anywhere else would be like starting my career over."

I turn and lean my back against the edge of the pool. "And you grew up in Silver Creek? I still find it hard to believe I never saw you. Never met you."

"But I wasn't around for high school, remember? Just home for the summers. But trust me. Even if you had run into me? You wouldn't have noticed me."

I look at her pointedly. "I find that hard to believe."

She flushes the slightest bit, then laughs as she looks away. “I’m serious. Every nerdy stereotype you can imagine, I was all of them. Braces. Big hair. Enormous glasses.”

“Whatever. We were all dorks in high school.”

She scoffs. “Nope. *I* was a dork in high school. The internet told me what you looked like in high school, and you were anything but a dork.”

“Are you admitting that you Googled me, Audrey? Is that what’s happening here?”

“You think I would agree to fly all the way across the country posing as your girlfriend if I hadn’t Googled you? I’m a researcher, Flint. Of course I Googled you.”

It doesn’t surprise me that she looked me up. But the internet isn’t always the kindest place for celebrities. “That’s fair. Just as long as you’re checking your sources. You know most of what the internet says about me isn’t true.”

“I hope so,” she says without missing a beat. “Otherwise, explaining my presence to your alien wife is going to be tricky.”

“Alien wife, huh? I must have missed that article.”

“Oh, it’s worth looking it up. They had pictures of your children and everything. And they didn’t look photoshopped. In one shot, you’re holding this tiny green baby close to your chest. Pretty compelling stuff.”

I frown, suddenly uncomfortable with whatever level of photoshopping was required to make images like that. Did they use actual pictures? Have I filmed any movies with babies lately? Do I need to call Simon and see if this is something I need to concern myself with?

But then Audrey smirks.

She’s messing with me. And it totally worked.

“Oh, that was mean,” I say. “Alien babies? For real?” I push my hands through the water, sending a tiny splash her way.

She screams and darts away from the spray, then uses her legs to kick water toward me, fighting back with splashes twice as big.

“Oh, it’s on,” I say, darting after her.

I catch her quickly, wrapping my arms around her waist as I tug her against me, her back pressed against my chest, and pull us both under the water.

She wiggles free, then jumps onto me, her hands pressing onto my shoulders until I’m back under the water again.

We keep going, tugging, pulling, dunking, chasing. I don’t know if Audrey is thinking the same thing I am, but for me, every tease is a reason to touch her, to hold her against me, even just for the short seconds it takes me to dunk her under the water.

I can’t get enough of this touching. Her skin against my skin. Her warmth seeping through my fingers, contrasting the cool pool water surrounding us.

After a particularly good dunk, she comes out of the water, spluttering, her smile wide, and lunges after me. Her hands land on my shoulders, and I catch her, tugging her against my chest. But this time, instead of splashing her or pushing her under the water like I have all the times before, I hold her, my hands around her waist, her body flush against mine.

Her breathing is labored, her chest rising and falling with each breath. Drops of water cling to the end of her nose and the tips of her eyelashes, and a dozen new freckles are visible on her cheeks.

I lift one hand from her waist and slide it across her cheekbone. “You have new freckles,” I say softly.

She lifts her hand to her cheek, touching the same spot. “Do I?”

I nod, sliding my hand back into the water. This time, I clasp my hands behind her back, tugging her even closer. It’s how we’ll need to stand for the other picture we need to take anyway. Might as well get used to it.

She settles against me in a way that sends a shot of warmth right through me. Like she likes it here. Like she *wants* to be in my arms.

My eyes drop to her lips.

It would be a bad idea.

Wouldn't it?

Before I can deliberate further, Audrey pushes away from me, taking a giant step backward. "So about those pictures," she says, her voice full of artificial cheer, and the tension building between us pulls and snaps.

I don't know what just happened, but I'd put money on Audrey having felt it too.

"Right. Pictures." I swim back across the pool and grab my phone. "I already took a few of you that I think will work. So we just need one of the two of us together."

She nods and swims toward me.

I gesture to the infinity edge of the pool. "Maybe over here?"

She follows me, waiting while I position myself against the edge of the pool and flip my camera around to selfie mode. I reach for her hand. "So, maybe something like this?" I tug her toward me, and she slips her arms around me like it's the most natural thing she's ever done. I curl my free hand around her waist, holding her against me. She lifts one hand to my neck, but keeps her head turned, like she's looking out at the view behind us. I frame the shot so enough of my face is visible for people to know it's me and take a couple of shots, then take a few more of me looking down, my gaze trained on Audrey.

The curve of her jaw is visible, and the tumble of her dark hair down her back, but there's no way anyone will know, just from this picture, who she is.

She looks freaking amazing though—like a goddess in my arms.

Selfishly, I keep my arm around her while I scroll through the shots. I'll want to run them past Joni, and Simon now too,

since Joni filled him in on our slightly modified version of his plan, but I think they'll work.

Audrey turns to face me, lifting her chin from where it's been resting on my shoulder. "Did you get what you need?"

She's so close. Close enough that I would only have to lean an inch or two to press my lips to hers. My pulse pounds in my throat as Audrey leans in the slightest bit, and my arm around her waist tightens.

She takes a stuttering breath and closes her eyes, but then she moves the opposite direction, just like she did last time, sliding out of my arms and swimming several yards away.

I hold up my phone. "I did. Do you want to see? I won't post them unless you approve."

"Um, actually, could you just text them to me?" She takes a few backward steps. "Or have Joni text them, I mean. Since she has my number."

*Okay, then.* "Sure. Are you heading out?"

"Yeah, I, um, I just remembered something I have to do at the lab this afternoon." She taps the side of her head. "Me and my brain. Always forgetting things."

Something tells me her brain never forgets anything, but she clearly wants to get out of here, and I won't argue with her.

"Okay. Sure. I'll send them over later." *I will send them. Not Joni. Joni's rules about me protecting my cell number no longer apply to Audrey.*

"Perfect," Audrey says as she scrambles out of the pool. "Totally perfect."

*She's flustered. Fleeing. Obviously uncomfortable.*

*Did I push things too far? Hold her too closely?*

"Audrey, wait." I swim after her, climbing out of the pool just as she reaches her towel. "Are you okay?"

She wraps her towel around her and reaches down to pick up her shoes. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"



I stop where I am, my hands resting on my hips, sensing that any sudden movements might make her bolt even faster. “It just...feels a little like you’re running away. Did I do something wrong?”

She starts to laugh—but not like she thinks something is funny. It’s more like she’s barely keeping it together and laughing is the only way she knows how to cope. “I’m fine,” she says, her voice too high for me to believe her. “Totally fine.”

I nod, resigning myself to letting her go. It’s the only thing I *can* do. “Okay. Well, thanks again for everything. I had a lot of fun.”

For a split second, whatever mask she put on when she decided to flee falls, and I see a flash of real emotion cross her face. Then she smiles tightly and disappears into the house.

I don’t follow her.

I can’t.

Because the last thing I saw flashing in her eyes was fear.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Flint

JONI LEANS ON THE counter in my kitchen, my phone resting in front of her. She swipes through the photos of me and Audrey, studying each one for a quick moment before moving on. “I really think they’ll do the trick,” she says, but then she pauses on the last photo, the one I took with Audrey in my arms. “Holy cow, Flint. Has Audrey seen this yet?”

It’s only been an hour since Audrey left, and I’m still reeling. Still *processing*. Spending an hour in the pool with her was so much more than I expected it to be. For the first time in a very long time, I forgot who I was. Forgot about Claire and the lies she’s telling. I forgot about everything except how much fun it was to be in Audrey’s company.

“She hasn’t seen them yet. Why?” I ask, though I’m only trying to buy some time. I know exactly why Joni is asking. In the last photo, I’m looking right at Audrey. And the expression on my face is less carefree and easy and more *I’d like to eat you for breakfast*.

“Look at your face,” Joni says, reaching over and tapping the phone screen before she straightens and props her hands on her hips. “If she sees this photo, she’s going to know you aren’t acting.”

“Or maybe she’ll think I’m just a *really good* actor.”

“Honey,” she says, turning on her mom voice. Joni isn’t quite old enough to be my mom. More like an overbearing older sister. But that doesn’t stop her from mom-ing me every chance she gets. “I really think you need to be straight with her. Tell her you like her.”

“I *can’t* tell her. Asking her to fake it is already something outside her comfort zone. If she knows I’m *not* faking, she’ll back out, if only to spare my feelings.”

“So you’re just going to suffer in silence?” Joni says. “Fall more and more in love with her only to have her walk away when all this is over?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Dramatic, much? I’m not going to fall in love with her. We’ll have fun, we’ll get through the premiere, then we’ll continue as friends. This isn’t a big deal.”

Joni huffs out a laugh. “Tell that to the man in this photo.”

“The man in the photo is telling you *I’m fine*,” I lie. “Now, can you please send me Audrey’s number so I can text her these photos and make sure she approves?”

Joni’s eyebrows shoot up. “You already have it. It’s in the text message you sent *me*.”

*Oh. Right.* I scroll through the message thread between me and Joni. “Geez. We text a lot.”

“Your life needs a lot of *managing*,” she says. “You do know if you text her, she’ll have *your* number, right?”

“And I trust her with it. It’s fine. I told her I’d text her before I posted the pictures.”

I don’t fault Joni for being cautious. It’s her job to protect my privacy—to be wary of anyone who gets close to me. But I’m not worried about Audrey.

“Here, stop scrolling. I’ll just send it to you.” Joni pulls out her phone. Seconds later, mine vibrates with an incoming message sharing Audrey’s contact information. “Okay. Done.” She grabs her bag off the bar stool beside her. “Let me know if there’s anything Simon needs me to do once the pictures go

live.” She moves toward the front door, and I follow her. “Have you talked to your family about this yet?”

*Oof. My family.* I knew there was something I was forgetting. I grimace. “Not yet. But I will.”

“Before you post the pictures, Flint. You know your mom follows your Instagram. She’ll lose her mind if she sees those pictures and you haven’t explained to her what’s really going on. She’ll be knitting new baby blankets before the end of the week.”

“I get it. I’ll call her.” She opens the front door, and I look past her into the fading evening light. “Where’s Nate? Is he really making you walk home by yourself?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not even fully dark yet. And what’s going to get me? A white squirrel?”

“How about a bear?”

She pulls a can of bear spray out of her purse. “What do you take me for? It’s less than a hundred yards to my house, Flint. I’ll be fine.” She steps off the porch and starts down the driveway. “Call your mom!” she yells over her shoulder before she gets too far away. “I mean it, Flint.”

I give her one last wave before moving back into my very empty house. It’s not that my house in Malibu was any less empty. I lived alone there, too. But it’s hard to ever *truly* feel alone when you live in Southern California. A hundred steps outside my front door in any direction, and I could find people, whether I wanted to or not.

Solitude means something entirely different out here.

I use my phone to turn on some music then drop onto my living room sofa. I call my mom first and talk her through the situation with Audrey, including all my reasons for deciding a charade is necessary in the first place.

Mom is, as I expected her to be, hesitant to think pretending is ever a good idea, but we still end the conversation on a good note. “I trust you, Flint,” she says. “If this is what you need to do, then do it. But be careful, all right? I don’t want either of

you getting hurt. Though, I can't say I'd mind if you happened to fall in love for real."

"Thanks, Mom," I say. "I'll keep you posted."

I text Olivia and give her a quick update, then I pull up Audrey's number and create a new message. Nerves jump in my gut as I scroll through the pictures, picking out the best ones. Actually, the best ones are the ones where I can see Audrey's face, but I can't post those, so those are just for me.

I finally decide on three, one of Audrey looking out at the mountains, and two more of the two of us together, including the one that Joni thought was such a big deal. If I'm going to really sell this, that picture is my best bet. I send them over, adding a message after all three photos go through.

**Flint:** What do you think? Are you okay with me posting these?

I tap my phone nervously against my palm, then send one more message.

**Flint:** Hope it's okay that I'm texting instead of Joni.

**Flint:** I figured that would be easier considering all the time we're about to spend together.

I sit and stare at my phone for what feels like an hour but probably isn't more than a few minutes. Either way, Audrey doesn't respond.

I double check the number, making sure I didn't mess it up somehow when I saved it into my phone, but the numbers all match.

I'm being stupid. Just because she hasn't responded doesn't mean she *won't* respond. She could be away from her phone. On a walk. Taking a shower. Watching a movie with her sisters. Or *not* watching a movie—this is Audrey we're talking about—but there are a hundred different reasons why she might not be available to respond immediately.

Also, when did I become so insecure about a woman texting me back?

What even is this?

Grumbling, I pull up the ongoing text thread I've shared with my brothers as long as we've all had cell phones. One of them is bound to respond right away and clearly, I could use the distraction.

**Flint:** Hey. Just a heads up. Claire won't stop talking about the two of us getting back together, and it's becoming the **THING** people want to talk about instead of the actual movie we were in. My publicist suggested it might be good to give the impression I'm seeing someone else.

**Brody:** What does that even mean? How do you do that if you aren't actually seeing someone?

**Perry:** Photoshop?

**Flint:** Not photoshop. I'm not that desperate.

I pull up the photo of Audrey and me and send it to my brothers.

**Lennox:** Dude. That's a real woman in your arms. Care to explain?

**Flint:** It's Audrey, and she's in on it. She came over this afternoon and posed for a couple of photos.

**Brody:** Audrey agreed to pose as your girlfriend?

**Flint:** Is that really so hard to believe? She's also attending the premiere with me in a few weeks.

**Brody:** Also as your girlfriend?

**Flint:** Fake girlfriend.

*Unfortunately*, I think to myself, but I'm not about to admit that to my brothers. It's bad enough they're all enjoying their happily married lives. They don't need another reason to feel sorry for me.

**Flint:** I just need a buffer from Claire. If I go alone, she'll corner me and force me into a compromising position.

**Brody:** And then, GASP, you'd have to marry her to save her reputation.

**Lennox:** Let me guess. Kate is making you watch *Bridgerton*.

**Perry:** I watched it with Lila. Season two is better.

**Flint:** It's MY reputation I'm worried about. And the director's. She worked hard on this film, and Claire is hijacking everything.

**Flint:** We're hoping if it's obvious I'm with someone, she'll lay off. And then the press can talk to us about the actual movie instead of my nonexistent love life.

**Brody:** Except, won't they want to talk to you about your new mysterious girlfriend?

**Flint:** They'll ask questions, sure. But I don't have to answer. And Audrey isn't a celebrity. They won't care about her as much as they would if I were with Claire.

**Lennox:** I'm surprised the movie people aren't making you and Claire pretend to be dating, seeing as how you fall in love in the actual movie. Isn't that the kind of PR thing movie studios love?

**Flint:** If it were really happening, they might be willing to capitalize on it. But they wouldn't make us pretend. That kind of thing only happens in books.

**Perry:** Says the guy who is literally taking a fake girlfriend to a movie premiere.

**Flint:** Shut up.

**Lennox:** I'm surprised Audrey agreed. How much did you have to offer her?

**Perry:** No. Please tell me you aren't paying her.

**Flint:** I'm not paying her. I'm giving her access to my land so she can continue her research.

**Brody:** Wait. Is that a euphemism? Or...please tell me it isn't a euphemism.

**Flint:** My actual LAND. It used to be owned by Carolina Southern. Apparently, there were all kinds of research things happening closer to the river.

**Lennox:** So you ARE paying her.

**Flint:** More like...we're exchanging services. It's fine. She's fine with it. I'm only telling you because I don't want you to see the post and think we're dating for real.

**Perry:** It's so cute you think we follow what entertainment news says about you.

**Flint:** I'm posting the pictures on my Instagram account.

**Lennox:** It's so cute you think we follow your Instagram account.

**Flint:** You're all idiots.

**Brody:** Kate says she follows you.

**Flint:** Tell Kate I like her more than you.

**Brody:** She also says she really likes Audrey and thinks you should date her for real.

*Yeah. She and I both.*

**Flint:** That's not what this is. It's a business arrangement. Audrey is way too grounded and practical for it to turn into anything else.

**Lennox:** That's the second time you've told us how SHE feels about it. How do YOU feel?

**Flint:** What do you mean?

**Lennox:** I mean, your expression in that picture looks like you're really into her.



**Flint:** Yeah? Maybe I should go into ACTING or something.

**Lennox:** Okay. Point taken.

*Deny, deny, deny.* That's the game here. I just have to convince myself my feelings aren't already involved.

I'm not invested.

I'm perfectly fine knowing this thing with Audrey isn't ever going to be real.

As I field a few more of my brothers' idiotic responses, my brain is fully on board. *It's all pretend. It's only going to be pretend.*

But when a new text pops up, this one from Audrey herself, the way my heart jumps clean out of my chest tells an entirely different story.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Audrey

IT TAKES ME ABOUT fifteen seconds to figure out that the pictures that pop up on my phone came from Flint himself, and not Joni.

It shouldn't be a big deal. But he made such a point of not giving me his phone number. What changed? What made him suddenly okay with texting me directly?

The bigger question. Why am I so happy about it?

I scroll through the three photos he sent over with trembling hands. They're better than I expected. He must have run them through a filter because they look more artistic than just a regular snapshot. The shadows are heightened, and it looks like he deepened the contrast in a way that really emphasizes the distant mountains behind us.

I zoom in on the photo of me, looking for anything that might identify who I am.

The woman in the photo could be anyone. The one of us together shows a little more of me—the line of my jaw, the bend of my arm, my palm pressed against Flint's chest.

My sisters might be able to look at it and tell that it's me, but no one else could. Especially without any context.

A pulse of anxiety pushes through me as I think about all 56 million of Flint's Instagram followers seeing photos of me. *Yes*

—56 million. Ten minutes ago, I thought he might have a few hundred thousand followers. A million, tops.

When I said as much out loud, Summer laughed until she cried real, actual tears, then she pulled up his account and showed me how far off I was.

I understood that Flint was famous.

I didn't understand *how* famous.

I click out of the photos and drop my phone onto the bed like it's too hot to touch. A part of me feels like it was a different person in the pool with Flint today. The woman in the photos—it's not me. It *can't* be me. If someone sat me down right now and explained that I was a part of some cutting-edge experiment in which someone else borrowed my body for the afternoon to frolic through the pool with Flint Hawthorne, I would believe it.

And then I would feel relief because it would mean I get to go back to my regularly scheduled life. My work. My research. The woods I know as well as I know my own name. The occasional run-in with my sisters when they insist I need to take off my cargo pants and socialize with humans instead of wildlife every once in a while.

I lean back on my bed and stare at the ceiling.

The only trouble with that scenario is that I actually *enjoyed* swimming with Flint today. I know my sisters think the man walks on water just based on how beautiful he is, and I'll be the first to admit it—I definitely enjoyed the view he gave me today.

But aside from the abdominal muscles and the nicely sculpted shoulders and the biceps—I definitely have a thing for biceps—he was also really fun to be around. He paid attention to me. Made sure I was comfortable. Teased me in a way that immediately put me at ease. Had the afternoon not ended with the whole *snuggling up against him for a picture* thing, it might have just felt like a fun afternoon with a friend.

That's what he said, after all.

*I had a lot of fun.*

Sure. Fun. Until his touch lit my skin on fire and turned my heart inside out.

But was it Flint that did that? Or just the fact that I was being touched by anyone at all?

It has been a very long time since a man has touched me in any kind of intimate way. Since that much of my skin has been in contact with that much of someone else's skin.

Snatches of sensation flood my mind in rapid succession. His hand curved around my waist. His sun-warmed skin under my palm. The press of his thigh against mine as he pulled me close.

I groan and grab my pillow, using it to muffle the sound as I grumble out my frustration. This is fake. *Only fake*. I shouldn't be frustrated about anything.

A knock sounds on my bedroom door. "You okay in there?" Summer calls. "Do I need to call for help?"

I sit up and lunge off the bed and across the room where I yank the door open.

"Whoa. Hey," Summer says. "What's with the crazy eyes?"

"Flint told me he had fun this afternoon."

She lifts an eyebrow. "Okay? That's a good thing, right?"

"And I *also* had fun."

"Still not seeing the problem," Summer says.

I grab Summer's wrist and pull her all the way into the bedroom, then tug her down on the bed beside me.

"Summer, it felt...I felt...I liked being with him today."

She gives me a dry look. "Honestly, I think I'd have you committed if you felt anything else."

"Stop with the movie star stuff. I didn't like it because he's a movie star. He could be a normal guy, and I still would have had a good time."

"Okay, but to clarify, would the normal guy version of Flint Hawthorne include the pool and the house and all the

muscles?”

I breathe out a huff of frustration. “You’re missing the point.”

“Then make your point more clearly. What are you trying to say here, Audrey?”

I groan and drop back onto my bed. I have a feeling I’m going to get awfully familiar with the blades of my ceiling fan over the next couple of weeks.

Summer taps my knee. “Okay. Let’s treat this like a research project and start with what we know. What are the facts?”

I sit up. I can do research projects. “The facts,” I repeat.

Summer nods encouragingly.

“I am *pretending* to be in a relationship with Flint Hawthorne.”

“Right. Good,” Summer says. “What else?”

“In exchange for my presence in his photos and my attendance at an event later this month, I’m gaining access to his land so my research may continue indefinitely.”

“Yes. Fake dating. Land. Got it.”

“I have been given no indication that our relationship is now or ever will be anything but strictly professional.”

Summer lifts her hand in slight protest, like she’s not quite comfortable with my last point.

“What?” I ask. “That’s a fact.”

“No, I know,” she says. “I was only protesting the use of the word professional. Is there really *anything* professional about paying a woman to be your date?”

“He’s not paying me. That’s not what this is.”

“It is what this is. He’s not paying you with *money*, but he’s still paying you.”

“But he’s—”

She cuts me off. “I didn’t say I have a problem with it. I’m just calling a spade a spade. As long as he isn’t paying you for sex, you’re fine.”

“Sex?” I squeak out. “You don’t think—surely he doesn’t —” I press a hand to my stomach. “Oh, man. I don’t feel so good.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Summer reaches over and grabs my shoulders, giving me a little shake. “We’re getting off track. And I’m positive Flint Hawthorne is *not* expecting sex.”

“Right. Of course not. Because that would be ridiculous.”

“Totally ridiculous,” Summer repeats, but my thoughts are moving so fast, I barely hear her words. It’s like the minute she mentioned sex, my brain lost a gear and spun completely out of control.

Summer lets out a little laugh. “Still, can you imagine?” Her expression turns sly, and she bites her bottom lip.

All at once, my jumbled thoughts coalesce into something potent and sharp, and I reach out and smack Summer’s knee. “Stop imagining sex with my fake boyfriend right this second.”

Her eyes widen, and her mouth stretches into a wide smile. “Oh my gosh.”

She jumps up and runs to the door. “Lucy! You’d better get in here.”

“What! Why?” I demand. “Why are you getting Lucy? And why are you smiling like that?”

“What? What’s happening?” Lucy bursts into the room, her apron on and a wooden spoon in her hand.

“Audrey likes Flint,” Summer says.

“What?” Lucy and I say at the same time.

“That’s why you’re so freaked out right now,” Summer says. She turns to Lucy. “I made a comment about imagining sex with Flint, and Audrey immediately turned into a jealous she-bear and practically pushed me off the bed.”

I roll my eyes. “I did not push you. I smacked your knee. And I’m not jealous, because I do not like him. Excuse me for thinking it’s wrong for you to sit there, thinking about him like he’s some sort of—”

“World-famous movie star?” Summer says. She lifts a hand to her chest in mock exasperation. “How dare I?!”

“He might be a movie star, but he’s also a person,” I say. “Why is it okay for people to think of him like an object just because he’s famous?”

“It’s a fair point,” Lucy says. “But if that’s the way you feel, definitely *do not* Google Flint Hawthorne fanfiction.”

“Fanfiction?! What is fanfiction?”

Lucy and Summer exchange a look.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” Summer says. She scooches over and makes room for Lucy on the bed. “You know, it wouldn’t be a bad thing if you *did* like him, Audrey. You’re great. He seems great. Why not be great together?”

“I don’t know that he is great. I barely know him. And you only think he’s great because you’ve seen him in movies. It’s not the same thing.”

“And interviews,” Lucy adds. “We’ve seen him in tons of interviews, and he’s very charming in interviews.”

“Ohhh, the Graham Norton interview!” Summer says. “When he talks about his mom and all the little baby goats on the farm and then they bring out an *actual* baby goat, and he totally knows exactly how to hold it and feed it like he’s a total pro.”

Lucy sighs. “Or the one where he goes into the coffee shop wearing a headset and he has to repeat everything that Ellen Degeneres says, and the barista gets so flustered that she starts to cry, and then he gives her a hug and goes to all this effort to make her feel better.”

“Seriously? You guys have been watching these videos all along and never thought to share them with me?” I make a mental note to do some Googling as soon as I’m alone again.

Which—am I ever alone these days? Lately, it seems like my sisters are spending less and less time in their actual apartment. Or maybe it's just that I'm spending less time in my lab.

Ever since Flint, nothing has been the same.

“Share them with you?” Lucy says. “Are you kidding? Audrey, a month ago, you would have laughed in our faces if we tried to share celebrity news with you. The fact that you've somehow evaded the magic of Flint Hawthorne all these years is totally on you.”

“We're still missing the point.” Summer holds up a hand like she's trying to regain control of the conversation. She looks at me pointedly. “You said you liked hanging out with him today. If you don't like him, then what's going on? Why are you freaking out?”

“I'm not freaking out.”

“You were groaning into your pillow like you got dumped the night before senior prom.”

“Terrible analogy,” Lucy says.

“Like you accidentally deleted all your white squirrel pictures,” Summer amends.

“*Better* analogy,” Lucy says.

“I think I'm just worried about how I'm supposed to gauge what's real and what isn't. He told me he had a lot of fun today. And even though he originally told me Joni was the one who would communicate with me about stuff, he's the one who texted me the pictures.”

Summer takes a slow breath and closes her eyes. “I will not freak out that you have his number in your phone. I will not freak out that you have his number in your phone.”

Lucy nudges Summer, then shoots her a *shut-up* look before she turns her attention back to me. “Audrey, I think you're overthinking it. So you both had fun. That's a good thing because you're going to be spending a lot of time with the guy



over the next couple of weeks. And so what if he's the one who texted you? People text each other all the time."

"She's right," Summer says. "But you still raise a valid question about discerning what's real and what's not. Have you guys talked about it at all? Set boundaries? Talked about expectations? About the rules?"

My mind drifts back to the sex conversation I had with Summer before Lucy showed up. "That all sounds very official."

"You said yourself this was a professional arrangement," Summer says. "It should be official."

"Totally," Lucy adds. "Like, you're going to walk down the red carpet with him, right? But will he expect you to hold his hand? Kiss him?" Luckily, Lucy's questioning doesn't go quite as far as Summer's did, but I'm still feeling like I need a break anyway.

I swallow against the tightness in my throat. "I'll ask him," I finally say. "I'll make sure we talk about it."

Summer squeezes my knee. "And otherwise, you'll just try to have fun, right? You'll stop overthinking."

I stand and stretch, feigning a confidence I don't really feel. "Me? Overthink? Never."

"Did you say he sent you the pictures?" Lucy asks. "How did they turn out? Can I see?"

I grab my phone and take it over to my dresser, where I plug it in to charge. "You can see them once he posts them. Aren't you cooking something right now? Do I smell something burning?"

"Oh, geez." She jumps up and runs from the room, yelling as she goes. "Summer, make her show us the pictures!"

Summer lifts her hands in surrender. "I'm not making you show me anything. I'm surprised you've lasted this long, with all the talking we've made you do. I'm willing to cut my losses and see the photos with the rest of the world."

“Thanks,” I say, feeling a surge of gratitude for my little sisters. There are a hundred things I don’t love about their nosy, bossy presence in my life—especially when they are so completely different from me. But I’ll be the first to admit it: the good definitely outweighs the bad.

The minute Summer is gone, I close and lock my door and grab my phone, returning to my bed.

I have some Flint Hawthorne interviews I need to Google, but I also need to respond to his text.

I look over the pictures one more time, then slowly key out a response.

**Audrey:** They look great. I’m fine with you posting these.

The message feels entirely too boring and bland, but what else can I possibly say? Before I can overthink it—you’re welcome, Summer—I send the message and collapse back onto my pillows like I just ran a marathon and finally get to rest.

I close my eyes, half-expecting Flint not to respond at all, but my phone buzzes before even a minute goes by.

**Flint:** Great. I’ll post them tonight. Can I give you a word of advice?

**Audrey:** Sure.

**Flint:** Don’t go looking for the pictures. If you have an Instagram account, don’t like the post. And most importantly, don’t read any of the comments. Lots of people have opinions, but I’ve learned that the ones I value will never be left in a public comments section.

**Audrey:** I don’t have an Instagram account, so this won’t be difficult, but I appreciate the tip. Do you mind if I ask you a question?

**Flint:** Anything.

**Audrey:** Should we talk about parameters for how this whole situation is going to work?

**Flint:** Parameters?

**Audrey:** For when we go to California.

**Flint:** Right, so like, how long we'll be gone.  
What events I expect you to attend?

I take a deep breath. That information will be valuable, but that's not truly at the heart of what I'm asking. I muster my courage and try again.

**Audrey:** Sure. But also, what will you expect from ME? Hand holding? Public hugging?

**Flint:** I like public hugging.

He adds a winking emoji at the end of his message.

**Audrey:** Are you making fun of me? I feel like you're making fun of me.

**Flint:** I'm not! It's a valid question. Can we talk about it in person? Joni has a mile-long list of things to discuss with you. It might be overwhelming if we try to cover it all via text.

Before I can respond, a second text pops up.

**Flint:** Are you free on Saturday?

I drop my phone onto my chest, my hands trembling. But this is no big deal. I'm not overthinking. Spending Saturday with Flint will be No. Big. Deal.

**Audrey:** I'm free.

**Flint:** Perfect. I'll pick you up at 9.

I glance at my watch. Oh great. That's only...thirty-eight hours to *not* freak myself out.

An hour later, Summer bursts into my room holding her phone.

"He posted them! The photos are live!" She looks down at her phone. "Oh my gosh, Audrey. You look so gorgeous."

"I do not," I say even as I put down my book and scoot closer to the edge of my bed. "You can't even see my face."

“But look at your hair!” Summer says. “And your back looks amazing.”

I push up on my knees and look over her shoulder. “My back looks like a back. There’s nothing amazing about a back.”

“Sure there is. No weird rashes or bulges. You look good.”

“Let me see,” Lucy says, pushing into the room. “My phone just died so I can’t pull it up.” She pulls Summer’s phone out of her hands. “Ohhh, you do look good. And look! Already ten thousand likes.”

Ten thousand likes. He posted the picture minutes ago, and it already has ten thousand likes.

“What do the comments say?” Lucy says.

“No! Don’t read the comments. Flint says I shouldn’t.”

“I’ll only read the good ones out loud,” Summer says as she starts to scroll. I scoot back on my bed and lean against the headboard, pulling my pillow tightly to my chest. I watch as Summer’s eyes dart back and forth over the screen. I shouldn’t be curious. I know better than to be curious. But I can’t help it.

“Ohhh, listen to this one.” She clears her throat. “‘WHAT? Flint Hawthorne is off the market? Crying for the rest of my life.’”

“How about this one?” Lucy says. “‘Did Claire McKinsey dye her hair brown? Could they actually be back together? #clairandflint’”

“Umm, we hate *that* hashtag,” Summer says.

“Wait, they think I’m Claire?” Flint and I didn’t talk about that potential assumption, but it makes sense. You can’t see my face. If the woman in his pictures could be anyone, why not Claire McKinsey?

“He makes it clear in the caption he’s with someone from home,” Lucy says. “And there are already a billion replies to that one comment saying it’s absolutely *not* Claire in the photo.”

Still, I feel like Flint needs to know even *one* person is making the assumption. I grab my phone from where it's charging on the nightstand and send him a quick text.

**Audrey:** So, I know you said not to read the comments, and I'm not. But my sisters are, and they say people are speculating about whether the woman in the photos is Claire. Is that a reason to worry?

His response comes through almost immediately.

**Flint:** People will speculate about everything. But we've added an element of doubt. That should be enough to keep the story under control.

**Audrey:** Okay. I won't worry if you aren't worried.

**Flint:** I'm not worried.

**Flint:** But Audrey? Don't even let your sisters read the comments.

**Audrey:** Clearly, you don't know my sisters.

**Flint:** Then don't let them read any of them to you. Promise me?

I look up at my sisters who are both staring at Summer's phone like vultures hovering over a dead raccoon on the highway.

"Okay," I say. "Time for bed." I stand up and usher them toward the door.

"No, no, wait, you need to hear this one!"

"I don't need to hear anything," I say. "I promised Flint I wouldn't read them, and that means not letting you read them either. At least not to me." Well, I *will* promise Flint. Just as soon as my sisters have left me alone.

Summer clutches her phone to her chest. "He made you promise? That's so sweet."

I nudge Lucy's shoulder, making her walk backward to the door. "I guess if you can text the *actual* celebrity, there's less

thrill in reading comments about said celebrity,” Lucy says.

“Exactly. So if you’ll *excuse* me, I’m going to text him right now.”

They pause in my doorway, twin images of wide-eyed wonder. “I can’t believe this is your life,” Lucy says.

I smile and start to close the door, pushing gently until they finally get out of the way and I hear the click of the latch. “Goodnight!” I call through the door, locking it for good measure.

Back on my bed, I snuggle under the covers and pull up the text thread to Flint. He texted again in the time it took to kick my sisters out of my room.

**Flint:** Audrey? Don’t make me come over there and talk to your sisters myself.

**Audrey:** They would be thrilled if you did. But all is well. I kicked them out. And I promise—I won’t let them read me any more comments.

**Flint:** You really don’t have your own Instagram account?

**Audrey:** I really don’t. I’ve never felt like I needed one.

**Flint:** How do you stay in touch with people? Keep up with what everyone is doing?

**Audrey:** I’m sure it will shock you, but as someone who mostly prefers the company of wild animals to people, I haven’t exactly accumulated a lot of people to keep up with.

**Flint:** Come on. Everyone has people.

**Audrey:** I have my sisters. But I live with them, so I don’t need to follow them on social media.

**Flint:** But you have TikTok, right? To follow your parents?

**Audrey:** ONLY to follow my parents. And watch cute dog videos.

**Flint:** \*Makes note to self about sending Audrey cute dog videos\*

I smile and bite my lip. I like flirty Flint, even if there's a possibility it's only *fake* flirty Flint.

**Flint:** What about college roommates?

**Audrey:** My freshman roommate was awful, but after that, I lived with my lab partner from my first biology class. We're still friends. We talk on the phone once a month.

**Flint:** Old school.

**Flint:** I like it.

**Flint:** Sometimes I wish I didn't have social media at all. But I do love seeing all the pictures my siblings put up of their kids. I have a private account that I use with my family. It's nice.

**Audrey:** With a family as big as yours, I can understand the appeal. That's a lot of people to keep up with.

It's another minute or two before another message pops up, and this one nearly makes my heart stop.

**Flint:** So, are you ready to talk about movies? I've been doing my research, and I've got a couple I want you to try. Maybe we can watch a few together?

I lean back into my pillows and smile, positive I won't actually be able to sleep anytime soon.

**Audrey:** Bring it on.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Audrey

“OH MY GOSH, HE’S IN A LIMO!” Lucy spins around from where she’s spying out the front window, her eyes wide. “Audrey, he’s picking you up in a limo!”

I press a hand to my stomach. A limo is fine. A limo is *no. big. deal.*

Seconds later, a knock sounds at the door. I nudge Summer out of the way and open it with trembling hands. It isn’t Flint on the other side, but a serious-looking man in a dark suit with a thick, white envelope in his hand.

“Audrey?” he says.

When I nod, he hands over the note. “From Mr. Hawthorne. Regrettably, he’s unable to join you this morning, but he hopes this will make up for it.”

I ignore the disappointment blooming in my heart and yield to the curiosity urging me forward as I open the envelope and pull out a gold-edged notecard.

Beside me, Summer whispers, “Do you see that? Even his stationery looks rich.”

I roll my eyes and tilt the card so only *I* can read it.



*Audrey, So sorry I'm not there this morning. Something came up—an urgent production meeting for my next project—and since I'm signing on as a producer for this one, it seemed risky to ignore it. In the end, the women in my family assure me it's better this way, and you'll enjoy what I have planned more without me tagging along. I hope they're right, but I still don't want to spoil the surprise, so if you'll allow me this one indulgence, will you trust Charles and get in the car with him? (Older, balding, wearing a dark suit? If anyone else handed you this envelope, do not, under any circumstances, get in the car.) If your sisters are free, they're welcome to join you. If they already have plans, don't worry. My sisters are waiting for you at your destination. I hope it's a great day. And Audrey—please don't protest. After all you're doing for me, this is the least I can do in return. — Flint*

I look up and meet Charlie's eye. "You're Charlie?"

He nods.

I look at my sisters, nervous excitement making me tremble and unsteady. Lucy's eyes drop to the quivering notecard. She steps forward and reaches for it. "Can I?"

I nod, and she pulls it from my hands. Summer steps up beside her, and they read it together. "Oh, wow," Lucy finally says. "How are you feeling, Auds?"

"I don't know." I press a hand to my stomach. "Overwhelmed?"

"K, listen," Lucy says, slipping an arm around my waist. I'm not generally great at surprises, something that has been true long enough for my sisters to have seen me freak out more than once. It's not a huge deal. I usually just need a minute to adjust. "It's a surprise, yes," Lucy continues. "But it looks like Flint has done every possible thing to make sure you're comfortable." Summer appears on my other side, bracketing me like my sisters so often do.

“Do you trust him?” she asks.

“I do,” I say, realizing I don’t even need to think about it. I *do* trust Flint. Maybe weirdly, considering how little I know about him, but I feel certain he wouldn’t do anything to intentionally make me uncomfortable. He’s been so cautious about all of this, about making sure he’s not pushing me into anything. “I’m sure it’s going to be okay,” I say, as much to reassure myself as my sisters. “So, um, do you guys want to come with me today?”

“Are we leaving Silver Creek?” Lucy asks, though I don’t know why she thinks I know the answer to her question. I don’t have a clue what’s about to happen. “I’m on call, but if we’re staying in town, I could maybe come.”

We turn together and look at Charlie. “You will not be staying in Silver Creek,” he stoically says.

“Boo,” Lucy says. “Then I’m out.”

“I can’t go either,” Summer says. “I have hours of depositions to read. Though, if I stay up late tonight, I might could...” She cocks her head as if considering, but Lucy protests before she can say anything else.

“No!” she says firmly. “If I can’t get out of work, you can’t get out of work, either.”

Summer scoffs. “That is not how this twin thing works.”

“It is too how it works,” Lucy says. “You don’t get to have fun without me. Especially not movie star fun.”

“It won’t be movie star fun if Flint isn’t even there,” I say.

“It will be *planned-by-a-movie-star* fun, which can only mean it will be expensive and amazing,” Summer says.

“And we’ll hear all about it when Audrey gets home,” Lucy says pointedly, and Summer sighs. “Fine. But if we didn’t know Flint’s family will be with her, I’d leave you in a second if it meant Audrey not being on her own.”

“Of course you would. And I’d want you to go. But that doesn’t matter now, does it? We’re both staying home today.”

“Fine, yes,” Summer concedes. “We’re both staying home today. Geez. Overreact much?”

I reach out and grab my sisters’ hands. “Thanks for looking out for me, you guys.” I smile, wanting to reassure them. There’s still a slight edge to my nervousness—there always is when I’m facing the unknown—but the much larger part of me is excited. *Happy* excited. My sisters don’t need to worry.

I look down at my jeans and the white, V-neck T-shirt I borrowed from Lucy because she insisted it was better than all the science pun shirts I tried to put on before she intervened. I lift my gaze to Charlie. “Do you know where I’m going today? Am I dressed okay?”

Charlie nods. “I was instructed not to give you any more information than what’s on the card, but I believe your wardrobe is appropriate for the occasion.”

I take a steadying breath and look from Lucy to Summer. “Okay, well, I guess I’ll see you later?”

They both lunge forward and pull me into a group hug. “Whatever it is, it’s going to be great,” Summer whispers.

I hear her words, but I don’t miss the concern hovering in my sisters’ eyes. Not that I can blame them. Sometimes, I think my sisters forget what I’m capable of because I’ve intentionally made my world so small. But just because I don’t *like* doing lots of people-y things doesn’t mean I’m incapable.

“You guys. I’m fine. Please stop worrying about me.”

“You *are* fine,” Lucy says. “You’ve got this.”

I give them one last hug, then follow Charlie to the limo which is really more like a stretched-out SUV. It’s *enormous* and feels like a ridiculous expense to drive around one person, though I do feel slightly better when I see the eco symbol on the door telling me the car is fully electric.

I wait while Charlie opens the door for me, then I climb in. “There’s chilled water and sodas in the fridge across from you,” Charlie says through the still-open door. “And snacks in the basket next to you. Help yourself to whatever you like.”

“Thank you, Charlie,” I say, though honestly, I’m way too nervous to eat. It occurs to me, as Charlie pulls the limo onto the interstate heading toward Asheville, that the whole point of getting together with Flint today was so that we could talk about boundaries and expectations. I don’t particularly love surprises, but even more, I don’t love not knowing what to expect.

I pull out my phone, intent to text Flint and let him know he still owes me a conversation, but as soon as I look at my phone, I find a text from him already waiting for me.

**Flint:** Thanks for agreeing to go. Sorry again for abandoning you. Were your sisters able to join you?

**Audrey:** They’re both working today, so I’m on my own. But thanks for inviting them.

**Flint:** I thought you might need your sisters to convince you to go at all. Now I’m even more grateful you said yes.

**Audrey:** Oh, I definitely needed them to convince me. I don’t typically love surprises.

**Flint:** Noted. I hope you’ll enjoy this one anyway.

**Flint:** Have a good day, Audrey.

**Flint:** I’ll be thinking about you.

I lean back into the seat, keenly aware of the way my heart is fluttering. I don’t have a lot of experience with this sort of thing, but Flint’s texts feel...I don’t know. Like *more*. Not quite flirting exactly, but like more than he would say to a casual acquaintance. But maybe I’m wrong. Maybe Flint is this thoughtful and solicitous with everyone he texts.

I take a couple of screenshots of our last few texts and send them to my sisters.

**Audrey:** Give me your thoughts.

**Summer:** Ummm, he’s totally into you.

**Lucy:** Yep. Agreed.

**Audrey:** But is he really? How am I supposed to know what's real when our relationship is fake?

**Lucy:** I mean, you'll only be faking it in public, right? Why would his text messages be fake?

**Summer:** I agree with Lucy. I think he's into you for real. But you still have to talk to him. You need rules, woman.

My sisters can't be right.

I've lost sleep over the idea of being a *fake* movie star girlfriend.

I wouldn't know the first thing about being a real one.

Still, as I look at the basket sitting next to me and pull out a bag of chocolate-covered almonds, I let myself indulge in a frivolous, ridiculous thought: *A girl could definitely get used to this.*



*Oh my.* If I thought limo service directly from my front porch was nice, I don't even know *what* to think now.

Because we're at the Asheville airport. On the tarmac. Beside a private jet.

No lines. No ticketing agents. No security checkpoint. Just me, Charlie, and a set of stairs leading onto an actual airplane that is only here for me.

"This is not for real," I say out loud.

But then Olivia, Flint's younger sister, appears at the top of the stairs. "Audrey! You're here!"

Another woman appears beside her. Kate, I think? She's married to one of Flint's brothers, but I can't remember which one. She smiles wide and waves.

I look at Charlie, and he nods, as if he understands he needs to give me a nudge. "This is where I leave you," he says. "I hope you have a lovely trip."

*Trip?* Where on earth am I going? And for what?

“Come on!” Kate calls. “We’ve got places to go, baby!”

Olivia meets me halfway up the stairs and pulls me into a big hug. “How are you? Were you so surprised? Are you so excited?”

“Um, should I be excited?” I manage to say. “I still have no idea what we’re doing.”

“Oh, girl, you should absolutely be excited.” She wraps an arm around me and pulls me onto the plane. Which is *not* like a plane. It’s more like an upscale living room. Leather seats that swivel to face any direction. Sleek wood trim. An actual couch stretching along one side of the plane. Opposite the couch, there’s a table holding a full spread of breakfast foods. Muffins, juice, quiche, five different kinds of fruit.

I look at Olivia. “Is this all for us?”

She nods. “Are you hungry? We’ve been waiting for you, but Tatum over there might eat her arm if we don’t dig in soon.”

“It’s the breastfeeding,” Tatum says. “I’m literally starving all the time.”

“You remember Tatum,” Olivia says. She leans a little closer. “This is the first time she’s ever left the baby, so she might be a little emotional today. She’s married to Lennox, who is two brothers up from Flint.”

I nod, appreciating that she’s including family ties in her introductions. I don’t think I would have remembered everyone on my own.

“And Kate, she’s married to Brody who is next up from Flint. And that’s Lila, Perry’s wife. Perry is the oldest. We love her because she tamed his grump and turned Perry into a big softie.”

“Got it,” I say. “And you and Perry run the farm, right?”

Olivia nods. “Yes! And Tatum’s a restaurant consultant, Lila’s a piano and voice teacher, Kate’s a fancy magazine editor, and we really don’t expect you to remember any of this.”

I smile. “I’ll do my best.”

“I promise we’re a forgiving bunch,” Tatum says, standing and reaching for a plate. “Especially when we’re fed.”

“What about your husband?” I ask Olivia. “He wasn’t at Flint’s that night, was he?”

Olivia smiles, her expression softening. “Tyler. He’s a videographer based in Charlotte, and he travels for work quite a bit, but he doesn’t have any trips planned, so you’ll totally meet him the next time we’re all together. He’s great.”

I don’t miss the way she so easily includes me—like it’s just *assumed* I’ll be with Flint whenever the family gathers.

I try not to read into it while we all fix our plates, happy chatter bouncing around the plane. It’s hard to believe these women are just sisters-in-law because they sound a lot like my sisters do. Finishing each other’s sentences, teasing each other with good-natured jokes. It seems incredibly lucky that, in a family with four sons, all their wives get along like this.

In an unusual beat of silence, I ask, “So what are you guys going to do if Flint marries someone you don’t like?”

They all stare, their expressions curious, and I suddenly realize how random my question must sound without context. “Sorry. I just mean, you all seem to get along so well. You sound like actual sisters. At the very least, best friends. I just...” I shrug, feeling sheepish. “I was just thinking about how sad it will be if Flint ends up with someone who doesn’t fit.”

Lila shrugs. “You can love anybody if you try hard enough,” she says simply. Her lilting Southern accent makes her words as soft and lovely as their meaning.

“Aww,” Olivia says. “I love that. But also, if he picks someone we don’t like, we just won’t let him marry her.”

Everyone laughs, but the sound quickly dies when a throat clears behind me. “Good morning, ladies.”

Kate and Tatum are facing me, and I watch their expressions shift before I turn and look over my shoulder, immediately

understanding their open-mouthed reactions. The man standing behind me is one, clearly the pilot who will be flying us wherever we're going, and two, drop-dead gorgeous. Tall. Dark hair. Strong jawline. Beautiful brown eyes.

"My name is Captain Blake Salano, and I'm honored to be your pilot today."

We nod in unison, but no one says a word.

"The weather is clear between here and New York, so it should be an easy, relaxing flight. I'll leave you to your breakfast. I just wanted to assure you—you're in very good hands."

"I bet we are," Tatum says under her breath, and Kate snorts as she stifles her laugh.

The second the captain has returned to the cockpit, Olivia pulls out her phone as the rest of us start to giggle. "What on earth?" Lila says. "Where did *he* come from?"

"I feel like we need to be concerned about whether he's a real pilot or just one of Flint's actor friends *posing* as a pilot," Tatum says.

"We definitely need answers," Olivia says. "And I'm going to get them right now." She makes a show of calling Flint, then drops the phone onto the table where we're all sitting with our breakfast.

"Hey, what's up?" Flint asks. "Is everything okay? Did Audrey make it okay?"

My heart skips at the mention of my name, and Kate looks at me and presses a hand to her heart, like she can't believe how sweet it is that he asked about me.

"She's here, she's fine, and you're on speaker phone. We just thought we should call and make sure Captain Blake Salano is a *real* pilot and not someone you pulled off your last movie set."

Flint chuckles. "I thought you might like him."

"Looking at him, sure. But all your happily married sisters want to make sure he can get us to New York in one piece."



“Liv! Did you just spoil Audrey’s surprise?” Flint says.

Her eyes lift to me. “Captain Salano already spoiled it, but she doesn’t know what we’re doing yet.”

The *only* thing that distracted me away from asking about New York was Olivia calling Flint, but now the question is practically burning a hole in my tongue.

“Go ahead and tell her,” Flint says. “She doesn’t like surprises.” Olivia’s eyes jump to mine, and my heart squeezes, *again*, at Flint’s efforts to be thoughtful, to remember what I told him. “I gotta jet,” Flint says. “My meeting is about to start, but you guys take care of her, all right? Hey, Audrey?”

All eyes swivel to me. “Yes?” I say, proud of how *not croaky* my voice sounds.

“Try to have a good time, okay?”

I bite my lip. “I’ll do my best.”

As soon as Olivia’s call disconnects, the sisters erupt in a round of gasps and sighs and squeals. “Girl,” Kate says, gently shoving my arm. “What have you done to him?”

The more important question: *What is he doing to me?*

“So, do you want to know why we’re going to New York?” Lila asks.

Olivia tosses a credit card onto the table. I lean forward and see Flint’s name stamped onto the top of the card. “Brace yourself, Audrey,” Olivia says. “We’re going shopping.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Audrey

THE FLIGHT PASSES QUICKLY.

*Too* quickly, if I'm being totally honest.

Apparently, I'm supposed to get a whole new wardrobe, one fit for the red carpet and every other event I'll be attending with Flint.

Shopping has always been more of a utilitarian experience than an exciting one for me, so all this feels *very* overwhelming. At this point, the only thing keeping me together is the fact that Flint's sisters are all so happy to be here. To spend the day focusing on *me*.

If I can get past the discomfort of being the center of attention, this might end up being the perfect shopping scenario. There are four other women here who clearly know how to put together an outfit, and I'm positive they'll all be willing to give me their opinions. If I'm lucky, they'll just make all the decisions for me.

Tatum, Lennox's wife, drops into a chair next to me. Before she can say anything, Captain Salano's deep voice comes through the overhead speaker announcing our final descent.

"How are you feeling?" Tatum asks.

"A little overwhelmed? I've never been to New York."

“It’s a lot,” she says. She reaches down and buckles her seatbelt. “Well, it *can* be a lot. But it can be great, too. And the shopping is next level.”

“I wouldn’t even have anything to compare it to. I’m very practical when it comes to my clothes. The only dress I own is the one I wore under my graduation robes when I finished my PhD. And I only bought that one because my sisters made me.”

She raises her eyebrows, but there’s no judgment in her expression—just surprise. “Sounds like you’re long overdue.” She studies me for a second before she adds, “You know, Flint was *really* excited about doing this for you today.”

I wave away her comment, ignoring the heat climbing up my cheeks. “Believe me, it’s only out of desperation. He’s seen the clothes I show up in every day. It’s nothing fancy enough to ever wear into public with him.”

“I doubt that’s *all* this is about. If it were just about the clothes, he could have had a wardrobe hand-picked and shipped to Silver Creek.” She grins. “I think he wants you to have fun.”

I shake my head and lift my hands to my cheeks. “What is even happening, Tatum? What am I doing here?”

“All I know is Flint’s instructions were to spare no expense. So whatever is happening, it’s going to be amazing.”

Ten minutes later, we’re on the ground at LaGuardia walking across the tarmac from the plane to an awaiting helicopter. From there, we fly into the heart of New York City, land on the roof of a building I couldn’t identify again if I had to, then ride an elevator down to street level before Olivia takes charge and ushers us into what I think is a Bloomingdales.

And that’s when the whirlwind begins.

I don’t know how to shop, but Flint’s sisters *definitely* know. We start with the more casual things I’ll wear when I’m *not* on the red carpet. Jeans. High-waisted pants that miraculously make my waist look tiny and my butt look better than I’ve

ever seen it. And shirts that feel like regular T-shirts but are made of lighter, nicer fabric and look so much better. They keep their selections practical, picking out stuff I might actually wear even when I'm *not* posing as Flint's fake girlfriend.

At first, I try to minimize how much we're spending, but Olivia waves off my concerns, Flint's credit card clutched in her hand with obvious glee.

Three hours later, my feet are sore, I'm completely exhausted, and there are more bags between the five of us than we can easily carry.

Olivia just purchased *ten* new pairs of shoes for me, which feels utterly ridiculous and indulgent, but I've given up trying to argue with her. And let's be honest. The Frye ankle boots that I tried on last are possibly the most comfortable shoes I've ever put on my feet. *AND* they look amazing. Turns out, shoes that are both fashionable and comfortable *are* possible.

You just have to be willing to pay for them.

Olivia is currently negotiating with the store clerk about how to get all the shoes and the rest of the two dozen bags we've been hauling around delivered to the airport. I didn't even realize that was a thing we could ask for, but a no-limit AMEX card apparently goes a long way in this city.

"Perfect. Thank you so much," Olivia finally says before spinning around to face the rest of us. "Load him up, girls," she says, pointing back at the store clerk, a waifish man named Eduardo with bushy eyebrows and what looks to be a permanent frown. He opens a door behind the counter and holds it open with his foot while we hand him bag after bag. It seems awfully trusting, honestly. Olivia has been stingy with the receipts, not wanting me to see the total from each store, but I've been adding in my head as quickly as I can, and the number is...well, let's just say it's not an amount I'd feel comfortable losing to Eduardo.

"He won't just steal them, right?" I whisper to Tatum.

“Absolutely not. This kind of thing happens all the time,” she assures me. We spent a little time on the plane talking about her childhood growing up as the daughter of a very famous celebrity chef, so I know I have every reason to believe her. But all this still feels so foreign to me.

“Okay,” Olivia says, rubbing her hands together once we’ve given Eduardo everything we’ve purchased so far. “It’s time for the best part.”

Kate lets out a little gasp. “Evening wear?”

Olivia nods, her grin wide. “Oscar de la Renta, here we come.”

“Oscar de la who?” I say as they usher me out the door.

“Oscar de la dream come true,” Lila says. She loops her arm through mine. “Do you have any thoughts on color?”

“Is it awful if I tell you I literally have zero thoughts about evening wear?” We turn left and follow Olivia down Madison Avenue.

“Not even about style? Sleeveless? Sequins? Ruffles of any kind?” Lila asks, her tone teasing.

“No ruffles and no sequins,” Olivia says, tossing a look over her shoulder. “Audrey needs something classy. Something sophisticated.”

“Audrey needs something comfortable and easy to walk in,” I say. “Anything to help combat the odds of me falling on my face.”

“You’ll have Flint to hold you up,” Kate says. “He won’t let you fall.”

A wave of trepidation washes over me. He *will* be there to hold me up. Probably with an arm around me, or a hand pressed to the small of my back. It scares me to realize how excited I am about that.

Maybe it’s just the exhilaration of the day. Or the acceptance and camaraderie I’ve felt from his sisters. Or it could be that Flint’s fingerprints are all over everything we’ve done—he’s done so much to make me feel special. But for the first time,

the trepidation I've grown so used to feeling every time I think about what's coming shifts into something a little less frightening. It's more like anticipation—the good kind of anticipation. The kind that makes my stomach flutter and my heart pound out of my chest.

“Okay,” Olivia says, pausing outside the door of Oscar de la Renta's New York store. “A woman named Remy is waiting for us, and she's handpicked several gowns for you to try that will compliment Flint's red-carpet look.”

“Oh my gosh, this is so exciting!” Lila says from just behind me. “Have you ever worn a designer gown, Tatum? Is it as amazing as I think it would be?”

“It's pretty magical,” Tatum says, and I frown. I don't even know what it means to wear a designer gown.

Tatum reaches over and squeezes my hand. “It just means you're wearing a one-of-a-kind dress instead of something off the rack.”

“So, there's only one? What if it doesn't fit me?”

“They'll make it fit,” Lila says. “Make whatever adjustments you need. Isn't that part of the magic?” She looks at Tatum, who has become our source for all things even tangentially related to celebrity life.

“Don't worry about the fit,” Tatum confirms.

“Okay! Let's do it,” Olivia says.

I fall in love with the first gown I put on.

It's ice blue—not far from the shade of my eyes—with a fitted bodice and a gentle flare that starts midhigh. A sheer sort of lacy mesh overlay with tiny flowers stitched on top (clearly, I have no idea how to talk about dresses) covers the entire dress, then extends over the chest and shoulders, making it look like the flowers are growing up and over my skin.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever put on my body. I press my hands against my stomach as if the gesture will calm the riot happening inside.

“I don’t think we’ll need to alter it,” Remy says, stepping up behind me and tugging gently at the fabric across my shoulders. “The fit is perfect.”

“You look so amazing,” Olivia says, and everyone else nods their agreement.

“Oh hey,” Tatum says, picking up my bag from where it’s sitting on a little bench behind the three-way mirror where Remy has me perched on a raised dais. “Your phone is ringing.” She pulls the phone from the outside pocket and grins. “You want it? It’s Flint.”

A chorus of squeals erupts around the room, like this is some kind of middle school slumber party and I’ve just gotten a text from the boy I like. Which is a weird analogy to make because I was *never* that girl in middle school. I didn’t get texts from boys, and I didn’t have slumber parties. But right now, with all these women cheering me on, it’s easy to guess what that might have felt like.

Tatum steps closer and hands me the phone, and I quickly answer it before the call cuts out. “Hey,” I say, a little breathlessly. “Hi. Hello.”

“Having fun?” Flint’s smooth voice triggers a wave of goosebumps to pop up across my skin, and my heart rate quickens. I lift my free hand and rub it across my bare arm as if the gesture alone will calm my racing pulse. I look up and see five sets of eyes on me. “I am, but...actually, hold on.” I step off the dais and move toward the dressing room behind me. I look back at my ever-eager audience. “I’m just going to take this back here,” I say. The heavy dressing room door won’t provide a ton of privacy, but it’s better than nothing at all.

“Okay, I’m here,” I say, collapsing against the wall before remembering the very expensive dress I’m wearing and standing up tall again. “Sorry about that. How are you? How was your meeting?”

“Productive,” Flint says. “I feel really good about the direction we’re taking things.”

“Good. That’s good news.”

“How has *your* day been? Have you gotten everything you need?”

“Flint, I’ve gotten so much more than I need. Olivia is relentless. You might hate me when you finally get your credit card bill.”

“She was only following my instructions,” he says easily. “And I’m not worried about the bill.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I bought a pair of jeans that cost half my mortgage payment. Do you know how stupid that is? How many children could be clothed with that kind of money?”

“I’ll send over my charitable contributions for the year if it’ll make you feel better,” he says lightly.

“Just tell me it’s more than what you’re spending on me today. All of this just feels so...I don’t know. Extravagant?”

“Audrey, you’re worth a little extravagance.”

I close my eyes, momentarily stunned by the thrill of hearing my name on his lips. Not to mention the words coming out of his mouth. *I’m worth a little extravagance? Be still my freaking heart.*

I press a hand to my chest. I should not be thinking like this. I should not be enjoying his attention this much.

“And I bet those jeans looked amazing,” Flint says.

I smile, happy his sisters can’t see the goofy expression on my face. The jeans *did* look amazing. Best my butt has ever looked, not that I’ve ever paid particular attention to how my butt looks in *any* pair of pants. The closest I’ve come is putting on jeans my sisters have thrown at me, insisting they’ll look fine even if they *are* a little short in the inseam. It’s possibly dangerous that I’ve discovered the magic of a pair of jeans made for *my* body instead of my sisters’ much smaller frames.

“Maybe,” I say through my grin. “Though, nothing is as amazing as the dress I’m currently wearing.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Has Remy taken good care of you?”



“Her and everyone else,” I say, sensing in Flint’s tone how much he wants this to be true. “Thank you for today, Flint. It’s possible I might freak out tomorrow when I try to fit everything in my closet, but for right now? It’s been a good day.”

“Can we make it a good night too?” he asks, and I pick up on a tiny note of hesitation in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I was hoping you’d have dinner with me tonight. I owe you a conversation, so I was thinking you could come back to the house, I could order us some takeout, then we can talk. Maybe watch one of those movies I sent over since I’m positive you haven’t watched any of them on your own yet.”

I bite my lip, a faint flush spreading across my chest. “What makes you so sure I haven’t watched?”

“Audrey,” he says, his tone dry.

“Fine,” I concede through a smile. “But I had to work late last night! I genuinely haven’t had time!”

“I was also thinking we could take another picture to post on Instagram. Something to keep people guessing.”

My heart sinks, hating the reminder that no matter how amazing this feels, it isn’t real.

“Oh. Right. Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

“So you’ll come?” Flint asks.

I glance at my watch. It’s just past two o’clock, but, according to Olivia, I still have an appointment at a salon for whatever makeover-ing they decide I need. I *do* want to talk to Flint, though. As nervous as the prospect makes me, I’ll feel better if I have some clarity about what to expect moving forward. Fancy clothes are nice, but they won’t matter at all if I’m so overwhelmed by everything else that I’m in a constant state of panic.

“It might be late,” I say. “We aren’t quite finished with everything.”

“I don’t mind late,” he says quickly, almost *eagerly*. “I’ll wait up.”

I agree to Flint’s plan, we say our goodbyes, then I hang up the call, his words echoing in my mind the entire time.

*I’ll wait up.*

I look at myself in the mirror and study my reflection. He’ll wait up for what?

For me? For this woman looking back at me?

Once upon a time, I used to dream about being the kind of woman who wore fancy dresses. Or even just *regular* dresses. Anything even remotely cute or moderately fashionable would have been a step up from the practical, mostly frumpy clothes I wore.

I figured out by middle school that I didn’t have a very strong sense of style, but more than that, I figured out that I didn’t have the social skills that seemed to go along with being fashionable. You couldn’t just have *the look*. You needed the personality to go along with it. The confidence. I didn’t have either of those things, something that was made even more obvious as my twin sisters grew up. It didn’t take long to realize that everything I lacked, they had in spades.

That’s when I really gave up trying.

What did I know about putting together a cute outfit? And where would I even wear it if I did?

Attending a magnet high school for the smartest math and science kids in the entire state didn’t help my cause. By college, I was settled into my ways. My clothes were functional. Practical. As boring as my nonexistent social life.

But the woman I’m looking at now?

She looks different.

Still like me. But maybe a little more like the me who used to look at the oversized blazers everyone wore to school and think, *what would I look like in one of those?*

I think she’s been in there all along.

Maybe I just needed a nudge—or, you know, a free shopping spree in New York City—to wake her up again.

Still, the fashion isn't really the problem, is it?

I'm not so shallow to think that a new wardrobe will turn me into a different person. And I'm mature enough to recognize that I don't really *want* a relationship with someone who doesn't like me for who I am—nerdy job, lack of social skills, and all.

But I've only been myself when interacting with Flint. I've been *dressed* like myself. He doesn't know a lot about my job, but he knows I was willing to sneak onto his property disguised as a bush.

Could he actually like me?

Or is this just part of the charade?

Either way, it shouldn't matter. Flint is a movie star. I know what his life is, and I'm not supposed to like him back.

Which is troubling.

Because I definitely already do.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Flint

I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR Audrey for hours, anticipating her arrival, and I'm still not prepared to see her standing on my doorstep, looking like some kind of vision ripped directly out of my private fantasy.

The first time I saw Audrey outside the Feed 'n Seed, I noticed her—her eyes, in particular.

Then I actually met her and got to know her a little bit, and she only became more attractive. Even in her cargo pants and T-shirts, her hair swept back in practical ponytails, her face completely bare. I even thought she was cute when she was dressed up like a shrub.

But now?

I don't know what to think. How to breathe.

I definitely don't know how to *talk*. "Hi," I croak out, my hand still gripping the front doorknob. "You look...*Wow*."

I am a fumbling mess, and I don't even care. Any man in this position would be.

Audrey lifts a hand to her hair, which is down, falling around her shoulders in loose waves, and runs her fingers through the glossy strands. Her eyes drop to the floor, like she's nervous, or at least uncomfortable, and I do my best to rein in my reaction. The last thing I want to do is make her feel

like new clothes and hair make her any more worthy of attention than she was before.

“That’s not to say...I mean, you always looked...” *Oh man. Abort! Abort! This is not going well.* “I just mean you look nice. That’s all.”

I finally step back from the door and gesture into the house. “Come on in.”

She follows me into the living room and drops her bag onto a chair. Her hands move to the skirt of her dress, smoothing it down, and I do my best to keep my eyes on her face and not her long, shapely legs. “It’s fine if you say something about how different I look,” she says, lifting her gaze to meet mine. “I looked in the mirror, Flint.” She looks down at her dress and holds her arms out to the side, lifting them just slightly. “It’s pretty drastic, right?”

I push my hands into my pockets. “You look beautiful,” I say. “Truly.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re just saying that because you have to,” she says.

“Why would I have to?”

She waves her hands in front of her like she’s trying to emphasize her point. “You know. The whole fake girlfriend thing. The charade. Telling me I’m beautiful—that’s what a boyfriend would say.”

I lift my eyebrows and look around the room. “There’s not anyone else here for us to fool, Audrey.”

She drops onto the couch with a tiny, adorable huff. “I know that. But I guess I figured you were just, I don’t know, practicing?”

I sit down on the opposite end of the couch, angling myself so I’m facing her. “There are probably things that we *should* practice,” I say. I lean forward and clasp my hands together, resting my elbows on my knees. “But Audrey, if we’re alone, if there’s no one else who can see us or hear us and interpret our interactions, it’s important to me that you know—I won’t lie to you. I won’t pretend.”

She nods and bites her lip. “Okay. That’s good to know.”

“I really do think you look beautiful right now.”

She takes a deep breath. “My eyebrows are still sore from the torture they put me through at the salon. I’m surprised I have any eyebrows left.”

I grin. “Does it make you feel better or worse about the suffering to know I thought you were just as beautiful before?”

She raises one of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows. “You really thought I was beautiful before? Even when I was wearing my bush hat?”

“Especially when you were wearing your bush hat.”

She shakes her head and lifts her hands to her cheeks. “That feels like a lifetime ago. So much has happened since then. I mean, for me, anyway. It probably doesn’t feel that way for you.”

I hold her gaze for a long moment. “No, it feels that way for me, too.”

There’s a question in her eyes, and I wish I had some way to answer it. But I don’t have any more clue what’s happening between us than she does. I just know I really like sitting here across from her.

“Flint, thank you for today,” she says, her voice soft. “It was pretty magical. And your family was amazing.”

Heat spreads through my chest. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you had a good time.” My hand twitches with the desire to reach out and touch her, and I curl my palms into fists. If this keeps up, I might have to sit on my hands.

“So,” she finally says, her fingers curling over the tops of her knees. “Do you want to take the picture first?”

“Right. Yes. Let’s do that.” I grab my phone off the coffee table, happy to have somewhere to direct the energy coursing through me.

It’s just past eight, and the sun has finally disappeared, leaving a sky streaked with red, yellow, and orange. “Actually,

this is probably the perfect time to do it. Look at that sky.”

Audrey moves to the window. “It’s beautiful.”

“Wait. Stop right there. Can I take your picture?”

She turns and looks over her shoulder, her lips curving into a soft smile.

My heart might as well be out of my body and on the floor.

“Looking out the window?” she says, turning back to face the sunset.

“That’s perfect.”

I watch her a moment, and she lifts her hand to her hair, brushing it to the side so I can see the long column of her neck. One arm rests on top of her head, her hair cascading down from her hand, and I snap the picture. When I pull it up to see if it works, I almost start to laugh. With the fading evening light, the sunset view over the mountains, and her silhouette in front of the window, it looks like a shot out of a magazine.

I walk over and stand beside her, showing her the photo. “You’re a natural.”

She takes my phone. “What? That’s not me. How did you even do that?”

“You did it,” I say, taking the phone as she hands it back. “All I did was push the button.” I pull up my Instagram account. “Are you okay if I post this?”

She nods, so I upload the photo and add a quick caption. “*Enjoying the view of her enjoying the view...*” I say out loud as I type. I show it to her. “Does that work?”

She lets out a tiny chuckle. “I like the hint of word play.” She licks her lips, and I force my eyes away from them. I can’t start thinking about kissing this woman. Not when we still have so much that we need to discuss. *Including kissing*. Will she be willing? Do I even want her to be if it isn’t real?

“There. Posted.” I toss my phone onto a nearby chair, determined not to touch it again. Simon will see the post and

know how to field any questions or inquiries it triggers. For now, my part is done.

“Now what?” Audrey asks.

“Now we talk details.”

She nods and follows me back to the couch. I start by going over the schedule in detail, using the outline Joni dropped off earlier. The plan now is that we’ll fly into LAX together and make sure we walk through the airport holding hands. Simon will tip off a couple of photographers about when we’ll be arriving just to make sure my presence—and the fact that I’m not alone—is noted by the press. The press junket will start early the following morning with a round of interviews, followed by the premiere that evening, then a panel discussion with the entire cast, hosted by UCLA and open to the press, the following morning. “We’ll make sure you’re around during the junket,” I say. “Visible to reporters, but not on camera. I’ll decline to comment directly on our relationship, but we’ll make it clear through our interactions that we’re together.”

“Right. But what does that mean, exactly? *How* will we show them?” She fidgets with the hem of her dress, folding it up accordion style, then smoothing it out again.

“We don’t have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable, but I was thinking we’d just touch each other a lot, hold hands. Maybe I’ll whisper things into your ear every once in a while.”

She nods, but she doesn’t look up.

I wait, sensing she wants to say something, but nothing comes.

“Hey.” I reach over and touch her knee, my fingers lingering just long enough for me to notice the silky softness of her skin. “It doesn’t have to be that way. If anything makes you uncomfortable, it’s off the table. You could tell me you’ve changed your mind altogether, and I’d say okay, no questions asked.”

She lets out a little laugh. “You just spent a billion dollars on me today. I’m not backing out.”



“Not quite a billion dollars. But okay. Then tell me what works for you.”

She’s quiet for a long moment before she stands up and holds out her hand.

I slip my fingers into hers, and she tugs me up so we’re standing directly across from each other, no more than a foot of space between us.

“Show me?” she says, her voice soft. “If I just try to imagine what this is going to be like, my brain will spiral and come up with all kinds of uncomfortable possibilities. But if you show me, I’ll know exactly what to expect.”

“Show you how we’ll touch?”

She nods, her expression serious. If she were any other woman, I might think she was trying to take advantage of the moment, but Audrey isn’t messing around. She really wants to know. More than that, I think she *needs* to know.

I reach over and slip her hands into mine, entwining our fingers. “So, we might hold hands like this,” I say, my voice low. “And whenever we’re together, we’ll stand close, like there’s some sort of magnetic pull constantly tugging us closer.”

That feeling isn’t hard to imagine at all because it’s what I *actually* feel every time Audrey is near. But I don’t say that out loud. Something tells me that particular truth would make her run out the door and never look back.

“Okay, what else?” she says.

I lift her hand and press it to my chest, flattening her palm just over my heart. “You might put your hand here, while we’re talking, or place it on my shoulder.”

She slides her hand up, but then she keeps going, moving it up and around to the top of my neck where her fingers tangle in my hair. “How’s this?” she asks on a whisper.

I swallow against the knot forming in my throat. “Yeah, that’s—that works.”

I lift my free hand to her waist and slip it around to the small of her back, tugging her against me. She drops my other hand and lifts hers to my shoulder, sliding it around until her fingers are clasped behind my neck.

We're standing *so close*, our bodies practically flush, and I'm about to completely lose my mind. She's all I can see, all I can smell, all I can feel.

*I want her.*

The feeling is sharp—a burning intensity that rushes through me like a roaring forest fire but then quickly settles into my heart with a frightening certainty.

I want her, but more than that, it feels *right* to want her. To hold her like this.

It feels like we belong together.

Audrey looks up and meets my eye. I don't know a lot about makeup, but whatever she's wearing, it makes her eyes look twice as big and twice as blue.

“Will I need to kiss you?” she asks. “Will that be part of what we do to convince everyone we're together?”

If it's even possible, my heart starts pounding even faster. “Would you be okay with that?”

She bites her lip, and her eyes drop, a light flush climbing up her cheeks. “I don't know how to kiss a movie star, Flint.”

I tighten my hold on her, and she yields willingly, her body melting against mine. “Don't think of me that way. Just think of me as a guy who likes to landscape his yard and work in his garden and hang out with his siblings. Think of me as an uncle who really loves his nieces and nephews and a son who still calls his mom once a week.”

Her gaze drops to my lips, but I don't move. There's still a question in her eyes—a question that I don't have. I'm all in. Ready to kiss her *for real*. But if this is going to happen, it will happen because she chooses it. Because she wants it.

She leans up, her head tilting just slightly, and I bend down to meet her. My nose brushes against hers, a whisper of a

touch, but then she sucks in a deep breath and pulls away. Her hands fall from my body, and she backs up before turning and pacing across the living room, one hand pressed to her stomach.

She spins back around to face me, fire blazing in her eyes. “What are we doing, Flint? What was that?” She shakes her head, like she can’t make sense of the situation, but then words start to tumble out of her. “We were *practicing*. You were showing me how things were going to be when we’re *faking* a relationship.” Her hands lift to her hips. “And then we almost...and we can’t. That’s not...” She props her hands on her hips, and I get the sense that wherever she’s going, I need to let her get there before I interrupt.

“You’re telling me to think of you as just a normal guy, but this isn’t a normal situation. We’re going to *Hollywood* so I can pose on the red carpet as your *fake girlfriend*. There’s nothing normal about that.”

I brace my hands on the back of the couch. She’s right. But nothing about almost kissing her was fake. At least not for me.

“I know you aren’t *just* a movie star. I do,” she says. “But I have to think of you that way. It’s the only way I can protect myself.” Her shoulders slump, and she wraps her arms around her middle, hugging herself. I barely resist the urge to go to her, to pull her into a real embrace. But her words stop me in my tracks.

She wants to protect herself? From me? From having feelings for me?

“You have fifty-six million Instagram followers, Flint,” she says. “Everywhere you go, people recognize you.”

“That’s true,” I say slowly. “But Audrey, it isn’t who I am.” I wince at the words because even as I say them, they don’t quite feel true. I hate it, but it’s the truth whether I like it or not. “It isn’t *all* I am,” I correct, but even this amendment doesn’t feel like enough.

“I get that,” she says softly. “And I believe you. But that doesn’t change your reality. The people, the paparazzi, the

attention. I spent some time watching videos last night. Interviews you've done. And the crowds, the way everyone screams at you, clamors for your attention. I don't know how you do it. I'll get through the premiere, and I'll be fine. Because I'll know what to expect. I'll know what's at stake. But it will probably take me a week to recover. You'll see what I mean. I'm not...*equipped*."

I've made a career out of studying body language, paying attention to the tiny nuances, the almost imperceptible movements that tell a story ten times more powerful than the actual words we say. And what Audrey's body language is telling me now is that she's afraid.

But afraid of what? My fans? My feelings? Or is it her *own* feelings?

"You're not equipped to have a *real* relationship?" I ask slowly, wanting to make sure we're on the same page.

She shrugs. "Did I misread what that was? Almost kissing you. That didn't feel fake to me."

The fact that she's willing to own it, admit it, instead of hiding her feelings makes me like her even more. Which sucks since she's in the process of telling me that, despite whatever connection we clearly have, she doesn't want to give us a shot.

Still, there's no point in denying that I'm picking up on it too.

"It didn't feel fake to me either." I move to the couch and sit down. "So where does that leave us?"

She drops down beside me. "We get through the premiere. Play our parts. Silence Claire. Save your movie."

I nod, chuckling over her very frank summary. I lean forward to prop my elbows on my knees. "Then what happens?"

She shrugs. "Everything goes back to the way it was before. You go back to your life, and I go back to mine."

"What about your squirrels? You won't ever come back to check on them?"

She breathes out a weary sigh. “I’m not saying we’ll never see each other again; I’m just saying we can’t...that I don’t want...”

I move a hand to her knee. “Hey. It’s okay,” I say gently. “I get it.”

She lifts her eyes to mine. “You do?”

“I won’t pressure you into anything you don’t want, Audrey. That was never my goal.”

She wraps her arms around her waist, and for a moment, it almost looks like a flash of disappointment crosses her features. “That’s good. Great,” she says. “I appreciate that.”

“Are you sure you’re still comfortable coming to California with me?”

She nods. “Of course I am. I made a commitment. And everything we—” She waves a hand in front of her, and I notice a slight tremble. “All of the touching. All of that is fine.” She lifts her chin. “And kissing too, if we need to. I can—we can—whatever we need to do.”

“I don’t think we will *have* to, necessarily,” I say, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “But it would probably help.”

“Let’s plan on it, then,” she says, her tone growing more and more business-like.

If I could see inside her brain, I’m pretty sure I’d find an army of construction workers building a brick wall, thick and impenetrable, its sole purpose to separate *me* from Audrey.

It occurs to me that even if she’s willing, I’d rather *not* kiss Audrey than only kiss her because we’re pretending. Now that I want to kiss her for real, anything else somehow feels cheap. Not to mention torturous. Nothing like having a small taste of something you really want but can’t actually have.

“If it’s absolutely necessary,” I say, knowing I’ll do everything in my power to make sure it isn’t.

Simply put, I like her too much.

We're quiet for a long, awkward moment—so awkward that I expect Audrey to flee at any time. There's dinner in the kitchen, and a movie cued up for us to watch after we eat. But something tells me Audrey isn't going to want to stay. Not unless I do something to recover the mood and steer us back onto "friendly" ground.

A part of me wants to just let her go. Give myself the chance to wallow and lick my wounds. I didn't come right out and tell Audrey how I'm feeling, but I definitely implied it.

But a bigger part of me—probably the stupid part—still wants her to stay. This is a big and stupid lonely house, and I like Audrey's company. I just need to reframe how I see her. Somehow knock her back into the friendship zone.

It'll take some acting. Luckily, I have some experience with that.

I give my shoulders a little shake and nudge her knee with mine, willing my expression into something light and friendly. "Hey," I say, reaching out and giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze before dropping my hands back to my side. "It's okay," I say. "I'm okay. I'm grateful you're willing to do this, and I'm happy to do it as friends." I hold her gaze. "*Just* friends."

"I think that would be best," she says softly. "I'm glad you understand."

I lift a shoulder. "Actually, I think you're probably right," I lie. "Our worlds are completely different. We're probably saving ourselves a lot of trouble by getting this sorted out now."

She nods, but she's still frowning. "Right. Definitely."

I look over my shoulder toward the kitchen. "I promised you dinner," I say. "Will you stay? I was thinking we could eat while we watch a movie."

A flash of trepidation crosses her features, and her eyes cut to the front door before darting back to me.

"As friends, Audrey. I promise. I have no ulterior motive here. I just enjoy your company, and I'd like you to stay." My

words sound so convincing, I almost believe them myself.

Except that isn't quite good enough. I have to make myself believe them. Find a way to be content if Audrey is only ever my friend.

She nods. "Okay. I'd like that. I like the sound of *friends*."

I lead her to the kitchen, willing, even if begrudgingly, to make this new dynamic work. Things are awkward at first, but then we both start to relax, falling into the same easy pattern we had when we were in the pool. Conversation comes easily, energy buzzing between us, and Audrey's smiles come quickly and frequently. We eat sitting at the island in my kitchen, our knees close together under the bar, and every time Audrey gets up—to get a napkin, to refill her water glass, to grab a second piece of bread—she touches my shoulder as she passes by. I'm not even sure she realizes she's doing it. Either way, it confirms my earlier suspicion. She might be afraid, fighting whatever this is, but it *is* something. She feels the pull, too.

And that thought fills me with a potent (and dangerous) emotion. At least when it comes to Audrey.

*Hope.*

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Audrey

I DON'T EVEN KNOW what happened.

One second, I was inches away from kissing Flint Hawthorne, from letting my heart give in to whatever was happening between us. Then the next, I was caught in a nearly blinding panic.

Suddenly, all I could see was a future of photographers scrambling to take Flint's picture everywhere we went. Of fans wanting to talk to him, touch him, write *fanfiction* about him. Then I spiraled into thinking about what those fans might think of *me*. Would they judge me? Criticize my hair? My wardrobe? My career choices? Would they dig up old pictures from my high school yearbook and wonder why Flint Hawthorne was dating someone so completely nerdy?

The thought of all that attention, all that *noise* in my life. It was too much.

So I pushed away.

And it was the right thing to do.

Wasn't it?

I do not want to date a man well-known enough for Ann down at the Feed 'n Seed to put his face on a cookie.

I want a normal life. A *simple* life.



I mean, yes. I actually *did* have a good time on Saturday night. Once we decided that our evening wouldn't involve any kissing.

We ate, we laughed, we talked for an hour before we finally settled in to watch a movie, a drama about a wildlife biologist who gets trapped in the Amazon and survives on her own for three weeks before she's rescued.

Flint was right. I *did* like the movie. From beginning to end. It was thoughtful and informative and, according to the research I did after I came home, mostly historically accurate. I mean, I'm not fully converted. But I'm at least willing to acknowledge there might be *some* movies out there that aren't a waste of my time.

Though, let's be honest. I could have sat on the couch and watched *Sesame Street* for two hours as long as Flint was beside me.

Which is why all of this feels so complicated.

I don't want to like Flint.

I shouldn't like Flint.

Everything logical and practical and smart tells me that liking him would be a *very* bad idea.

But I *do* like him. When I'm around him, none of those practical reasons seems to matter.

I've seen him half a dozen times in the five days that have passed since last Saturday—don't judge, those squirrels are *really* interesting—and every time, it's harder and harder to see him as anything but a normal guy. Well, not normal exactly. He's much too charming to be normal. Charming, handsome, funny, thoughtful. He's basically perfect. And *perfect* and *normal* don't feel like they belong in the same sentence. I just mean it's hard to think of him as a celebrity. Because around me, he really doesn't act like one.

I zip up my last suitcase and slide it off the bed, setting it by the door. Joni came over to help me pack earlier this morning and *good grief* she has me bringing way more than I actually think I'm going to need. The only thing I didn't have to pack

was my gown for the premiere, which Remy promised me would be pressed and perfect and hanging in my hotel room by the time I arrive.

My sisters swooned over my new wardrobe for hours, begging and bartering for the chance to borrow the things they love the most. I'm taller than my sisters. I have broader shoulders and bigger boobs, but there are a few things, the dresses and a couple of the jackets, that will work for them.

They didn't even really need to beg. It's not like I'll spend a lot of time wearing these things anyway. At least not after this weekend. Last time I checked, my grad assistants, and the state forest rangers who share my lab space don't care what I wear to work.

The squirrels definitely don't.

I just have to get through the next few days. Attend the events. Fake it with Flint. Then come back to Silver Creek. To my normal life in my normal town.

Let's not talk about the fact that I'll probably still *see* Flint after this week. He lives here, after all, and if I'm ever in the forest, there's a good chance I'll run into him.

But he can't stay in Silver Creek forever. Eventually, he'll have another movie to film. He'll jet off to some faraway location where he'll fall in love with a Brazilian bombshell who loves the limelight and would like nothing more than to bask in his celebrity for the rest of her days.

A pulse of irritating jealousy rushes through me. Which is just *stupid*. I'm not even supposed to like the man, and I'm jealous of a woman my brain just created all by itself?

Maybe I'm worse off than I thought.

"Hey, you ready to go?" Summer says from the doorway of my bedroom. "Flint just pulled up outside."

"He's driving?" I ask.

"Yep. His very pretty truck. Looks like he's alone."

"Well, we aren't traveling alone, so that's weird."

Summer shrugs. “Maybe you’re meeting the rest of his team at the airport?”

Summer seems so calm about this. Talking about Flint’s *team* like it’s perfectly normal for someone to travel with an entourage. In the week since I had dinner with Flint, or as my rebellious body likes to remind me, the night when we *almost* kissed, my sisters have grown more comfortable with the idea of me spending so much time with a movie star. Or maybe they just got tired of my shutting down their attempts to talk about him *constantly*.

Either way, I’m glad today doesn’t feel like some ridiculous send-off. I’m just a girl going to the airport. That’s all.

“I’m ready,” I say, picking up my shoulder bag, some butter-soft extravagance that I picked up in New York.

The only reason I caved and let Olivia add it to the stack of clothes I was already embarrassed to be buying was because it’s vegan leather. I’m not anti-leather. But I maybe *am* anti-leather-that-costs-two-thousand dollars. This was a fraction of that amount, but it still feels soft and luxurious and, bonus, it’s pretty practical. Big enough to hold a book and my water bottle and my iPad, should I have any need to work or do research while I’m gone.

Summer grabs my suitcase, which is also new (don’t judge—I know it’s ridiculous), and I grab my carry-on, following her to the living room. By the time we open the front door, Flint is already on the porch.

Summer lets out a little gasp when he smiles at her. “Summer?” he clearly guesses—there’s no way he can tell my sisters apart—and Summer grins.

“Excellent guess,” she says.

“I figured I had a fifty/fifty chance,” he says easily. He turns to look at me. “Hey,” he says easily. “You look good.”

“Thanks. Are Nate and Joni not coming?”

“They’re already at the airport. There was some sort of trouble with our connecting flight, and Joni thought she’d have an easier time working out the details in person.”

“Oh. We’re flying commercial?” The question sounds so completely pretentious, it almost makes me wince, but we definitely didn’t fly commercial on our way to New York, so I’d expected it would be the same this time, too. “Not that I mind,” I quickly say. “Of course I don’t mind. Seeing as how I’ve flown on a private jet exactly one time, I don’t exactly have grounds to simply *expect* it. Who even does that? Just assumes they get to travel on a private jet—*annnd* I’m rambling,” I say. “I’ll shut up now.”

Flint reaches for the biggest suitcase.

“Be careful, that one’s heav...” Summer’s words trail off as Flint lifts the suitcase like I packed it with feathers and slides it into the back of his truck. “Or not so heavy,” she says under her breath.

“I almost always fly commercial.” He comes back for my carry-on bag. “All those CO2 emissions for one guy feels a little excessive.”

Summer grabs my arm and gasps. “Audrey! He speaks your language.”

I shrug out of her grip and shoot her a look that says *shut up right now or I’m evicting you out of my basement*, but only because that’s an easy distraction from the fact that Flint Hawthorne actually cares about CO2 emissions, and that’s doing crazy things to my heart.

“The private jet was a luxury just for you,” he says, and Summer sighs. “Now he’s speaking *my* language.”

I grab the last of the suitcases and follow Flint. “Tell Lucy I said goodbye?” I say over my shoulder, ignoring her last comment. “I’ll text you both and let you know I’ve arrived safely.”

Summer shrugs. “Sure. But don’t worry. If we don’t get a text, we’ll just turn on TMZ and wait for you to show up.”

“TM-what?”

“It’s a gossip—you know what? Never mind. Just text us,” Summer says.

I'm buckled into the passenger seat, my bag at my feet, before Flint and I speak again. He looks over at me, and I reach over and press a hand to his cheek. "It's really growing in."

His facial hair has been a hot topic lately. He hasn't shaved all week, his attempt to disguise his face for our trek through the airport. At first, I didn't understand. The whole point of our trip is for us to be *seen*. But Flint assured me we'll be seen regardless of facial hair. "Lots of people will recognize me no matter what," he told me. "But we still have to make it through security and walk through the airport without getting mobbed. It's all about balance."

"It's itchy," Flint says. "I'm shaving the second we get to LA."

"I really like it," I say. "I think it makes you look mysterious."

His lips lift into an easy grin. "My brothers say it makes me look like I'm trying too hard."

"They do not."

He shrugs as he backs out of my driveway. "They like to keep me humble."

"They're crazy. It looks really good on you," I say, because it really does. He's got a good jawline, so he's ridiculously handsome either way, but as a woman who loves the outdoors, this slightly more rugged look on Flint is really doing it for me.

"Yeah?" He looks genuinely pleased by this, which surprises me but still makes me smile.

Before this summer, I'd never given a thought to what it might be like to be a celebrity, but after meeting Flint, finding out about his fame, his money, the never-ending attention that's thrown his way, I somehow assumed he must never feel insecure or lack confidence. With so much evidence of his success constantly surrounding him, how could he? These tiny moments, when he seems less superstar and more human, are nice to see.

Which is funny, really. When we first met, and my sisters completely freaked out, I was the one who insisted that he's just a man. I don't love how little it took to make me forget. One private plane ride to New York City, and I started seeing a *movie star* too.

An uncomfortable feeling niggles at the back of my mind.

Is that what I did when I pulled away from him last weekend? When I stopped him from kissing me? I saw him as a celebrity instead of a man?

"Flint, is it hard?" I blurt out, and he tosses me a quick glance before turning his eyes back to the road.

"Is what hard?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Living like this. Growing a beard to make it through the airport without getting mobbed. Spending a small fortune to outfit a woman just so she can pretend to be your girlfriend?"

He smiles. "Geez, Audrey," he says, his voice teasing. "Want to make me sound a little more desperate?"

I grin, glad that he's at least willing to joke about it. "If it matters, I *really* love my new wardrobe."

"That does matter," he says. "I'm glad you do."

"I do feel obligated to tell you that we'll have to stay in California for at least three weeks for me to wear every single thing Olivia bought. Or, *you* bought. As it were."

"I figured. I knew what I was doing when I asked my sisters to go along."

"That was really sweet of you. I think I would have been overwhelmed doing all of it by myself. But what I meant was, is it hard being famous?"

He shrugs. "Yes and no. I'm kind of built to like the attention—it's just the way my personality is—but sometimes the lack of privacy is tough. It's why I moved back home. Things are infinitely easier in North Carolina than they are in LA. But I try not to dwell on the negatives. I get to do what I

love. Not a lot of people can say that, so it doesn't feel right to complain."

"I feel that way about my job sometimes," I say. "Once, I was out early in the morning collecting water samples from the creek that cuts across the bottom of your property—this was before you bought it—and I saw a doe and two fawns cross the path in front of me. The sun was filtering down through the trees, and the air was still and quiet and peaceful, and I just thought, *this is my job*. I actually get paid to be out here, to experience this magic. I felt pretty lucky."

He's quiet for a beat before he says, "I really am sorry I bought your research forest out from under you."

I shrug. "The university would have sold it anyway. Better it went to you instead of someone building mountain condominiums or something else ridiculous. I know I was mad at first, but I definitely prefer what you've done."

"Oh hey, I almost forgot," he says. "I got a couple new pictures for you this morning."

I sit up a little taller. "Of the squirrels?"

He nods. "There was a fourth one with them this morning, and I don't think I've seen this one before. His tail looks a little bushier than the other two."

"You can tell them apart?"

He smiles. "I couldn't at first, but I like watching them. And the more I do, the easier it gets." He nods toward his phone sitting in the center console. "Here. You can just pull them up if you want. They're the most recent photos in my Favorites album."

I reach for his phone, then hold it up to his face to unlock the screen. It only takes a little bit of scrolling to find his photos and pull up his favorites.

"See how the one on the left has a tiny gray spot between his eyes?" he says. "I've been calling him Coal Dust. The one on the left I'm calling Colleen."

"Colleen? What kind of a name is that?"

“Are you kidding? It’s a perfect name. She looks like a Colleen. Don’t tell me you don’t see it.”

I chuckle as I swipe to the next picture. “And this is the new one?” This photo is of a slightly smaller squirrel with a much bushier tail.

“Yeah. I haven’t named him yet. But he’s new, right? Have you seen him before?”

“I’ll have to compare to my photos just to be sure, but I don’t think so.”

I scroll through the photos one more time, but then I swipe one too many times, and a new photo comes up. My breath freezes in my throat. The photo is of me, clearly taken that day we were in the pool together, only in this photo, my face is visible. I’m smiling, one hand lifting my wet hair off my neck and holding it up in a makeshift ponytail, and I’m looking over my shoulder with an expression that seems just on the verge of laughter.

Flint looks over and must see why I’ve fallen silent. “Oh, geez, Audrey. I’m sorry. That—I should have asked before I kept it. I just thought—” His words cut off, and he lifts a hand off the steering wheel to run it through his hair. He swears softly. “I must look like such a creep.”

I breathe out a chuckle. “I knew you were taking my picture, Flint. It’s okay.”

He nods. “I just—” He clears his throat. “I really love that photo of you.”

I swallow. *He loves a photo of me?*

A rush of heat flies through my body, reaching all the way out to my fingertips and down to my toes. Logically, I know it’s only a surge of adrenaline and norepinephrine that’s making my skin feel tingly and hot. It’s hormones, not logic, and I shouldn’t let it influence my thoughts.

But the guy saved a photo of me on his phone. He likes the way I look enough to save it and add it to his *favorites*.



“Thank you,” I say softly. I breathe in, hoping he doesn’t notice the way my words tremble. “It’s okay that you saved it.”

He lifts his brows, his eyes flashing with something that almost looks like hope, which shouldn’t surprise me. Flint told me he was interested.

Or, he *sort of* told me. He told me that wanting to kiss me wasn’t fake. Now that I really think about it, those two things aren’t necessarily the same thing. He could absolutely want to kiss me without wanting to have a real relationship. But that doesn’t feel quite right either. Flint doesn’t really come across as the kind of guy who is into meaningless flings. I could be wrong—but I would be surprised if I am.

We park the truck in an overnight lot in front of the airport where Flint’s brothers will pick it up later. Before climbing out, Flint puts on a baseball cap, then pulls his hoodie up *over* the hat. He slides on a pair of sunglasses to complete the look.

I’ve got to hand it to him. If I didn’t know it was him, I might not recognize him. But then, I’m probably not the best judge since a month ago, I didn’t even know who he was.

He pulls my suitcases out of the truck, as well as one of his own, and I begin to wonder how we’re ever going to get all of this inside. But before I can even ask the question out loud, Nate appears with a luggage cart.

“Thanks, man,” Flint says before helping Nate load everything up. He holds out his hand to me as we start to move, giving my fingers a quick squeeze as he laces his through mine. “Just trust me, okay? I’ll get us through everything.”

I nod, realizing that I *do* trust him.

And I might be more scared of that than I am the paparazzi.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Audrey

IT'S THE WEIRDEST SENSATION.

*Everyone* is looking at us.

Flint keeps my hand held tightly in his, and Nate is a mountainous shadow hovering a few steps ahead, so I don't feel unsafe. But all the eyes—it's the most disconcerting thing I've ever felt.

In line at security, Flint pulls me close. "Audrey, stop looking at people, all right?" His words are gentle, not at all like a scolding, but my cheeks flush with heat anyway, though that could just be from his warm breath skating across my ear. "If you make eye contact, it invites conversation. And it only takes one person to approach for the dam to break, and then *everyone* will approach us, and we'll never make it to our gate."

I nod. "Right. That makes sense. No eye contact."

He wraps his arm around me and tugs me against his chest. His warm, solid, deliciously amazing chest. "Just keep looking at me," he says into my hair.

Behind us, someone calls out his name. I flinch and start to turn—a force of habit—and Flint's arm tightens around me. "Don't look," he whispers, and I relax back into him, slipping my arms around his waist so we're facing each other. I press

my forehead against his chest and let out a little groan. “It wasn’t even intentional. More like a reflex. How do you keep yourself from responding?”

“Lots of practice,” he says. “You’re doing an excellent job selling the girlfriend thing, by the way.” His hands cinch a little tighter around my waist.

“Am I?”

“Mmhmm. You’ve basically got *me* convinced, and I already know you’re faking.”

There is something easy about standing like this in Flint’s arms, and I find myself feeling disappointed when I have to let go long enough to walk through the security scanner.

The TSA officer on the other side of the scanner asks for a photo with Flint and he graciously obliges, putting a loose arm around her shoulder and leaning in while her co-worker takes the shot.

As soon as he returns to me, he slips my hand into his, then lifts it to his lips, pressing a kiss just above my knuckles.

And he thinks *I’m* good at selling the girlfriend thing? I am putty in this man’s hands.

It’s almost time to board, so I expect us to go straight to the gate, but as we pass one of those frequent flyer private travel lounges, Flint and I veer off from Nate and Joni and duck inside. The lounge is mostly empty—maybe a benefit of the time of day?—and Flint immediately pulls back his hood and removes his sunglasses.

“Not in a rush to board?”

He shakes his head. “Nate and Joni will board first and let the gate agents know we’re on our way, then they’ll text when the plane is mostly boarded so we don’t have to sit there while everyone walks past us.”

“Man, the things you have to think about.”

His lips curve into the easy grin I’m beginning to love. “Are you hungry?” He looks around. “There are usually snacks in

these things. And bathrooms, too. Nice, when you don't want to get cornered coming out of the stall."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Has that ever happened?"

"More times than I can count."

We walk together to a table full of snacks and iced beverages. Just beyond the table, there's a bartender serving an older gentleman a beer.

Flint lifts his hands to my shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. "We only have a few minutes, so I'm going to hit the bathroom while I can. Will you be okay here?" His eyes dart around the room like he's legitimately worried about my safety.

There's no one else even here, aside from the guy at the bar, but I appreciate his concern anyway. "I'll be fine," I say.

He leans forward and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Be right back."

I close my eyes for the briefest second. It would be so easy to just give in. To soak up his attention and wrap it around my heart. To chase away the fear that's currently acting as a giant barricade, and just *see what happens*.

Could I do it? Could I actually—

"Oh my gosh. Are you actually dating Flint Hawthorne? That's him, isn't it? I swear, if it isn't, your boyfriend could play his twin brother." The woman appeared out of nowhere—could she have truly entered the lounge just in the time I had my eyes closed?—and is standing uncomfortably close to me. The look of expectation on her face is strange. She doesn't just want an answer, she almost looks like she's *entitled* to one.

I know the whole purpose of this is to be *seen* as a couple. But does that really have to happen right this second?

I take a step backward. "Yeah, funny. He gets that a lot."

She frowns. "So, it *isn't* him?"

From the corner of my eye, I see Flint emerge from the bathroom. I take another step backward, away from the lady in

front of me and toward Flint. “Sorry. I’ve got to go now.”

She looks from me to Flint, and her expression shifts. “Shut. Up.” She steps toward him. “It is him!” she squeals.

I turn and walk quickly now, grabbing the hand Flint is holding out as soon as I reach him. He looks over my shoulder, makes polite eye contact with the woman, says a quick, “Hi, there,” then tugs me right out the door.

“She literally came out of nowhere,” I say as we walk. “And she didn’t even say hello. She just asked if my boyfriend was Flint Hawthorne.”

“What did you say?”

“I was like, ‘Yeah, funny. People make the comparison a lot.’”

He chuckles. “That one has actually worked for me a few times.”

We approach the gate, and Flint slows. They’re clearly already boarding, but there are still people everywhere. “Come here a sec,” he says. He tugs me toward the wall and spins me so my back is against it, then hovers in front of me, his big body shielding me from view to anyone passing by. I lift my hands and press them into his chest, reveling in the warmth coming off him.

“What are we doing?” I whisper.

He smiles down at me. “We’re hiding.”

“Hmm. Do you do this often?”

“It’s a little more awkward when I’m traveling alone,” he says. He wraps his hands around my wrists and tugs them around his waist. “A guy standing against the wall all alone? That’s a reason to worry. But now?” He leans down and brushes his nose along my cheek. “Now I just look like I’m getting a really fantastic goodbye kiss.”

“It isn’t goodbye if we’re already through security.” It’s a stupid thing to say. But focusing on the logistics of airport goodbyes is the only thing keeping me from kissing him right now, which is a very alarming realization. I am exactly two

hours into this entire fake dating scheme, and I'm ready to abandon all restraint and jump in?

"True," Flint says. "Stupid TSA has ruined so many potential grand gestures with their rules."

"Grand gestures? Is that a romance movie term?"

He chuckles. "Oh, Audrey. I have so much to teach you."

We stand like this, all wrapped up in each other, for another few minutes. Finally, Flint's phone buzzes in his pocket, and he pulls it out. "Okay. Nate says we're clear to board."

We walk hand in hand to the gate, where the waiting ticket agent smiles so broadly, it looks like her face might crack.

"It's a privilege to have you on board, Mr. Hawthorne," she says, her voice a little breathless.

Flint smiles easily. "Thanks, Marcy. I appreciate that."

We aren't two steps away when she calls after us and asks for a photo.

Of course, Flint seems happy to comply.

Again, I marvel that he handles everything so effortlessly.

We settle into our *very* comfortable seats at the front of the plane, and I do my best *not* to make eye contact with the women sitting across the aisle from us, who are openly gawking. Flint is next to the window, so I angle my body toward him. If I'm staring at him, I can't look at anyone else, even if I can *feel* eyes on my back.

I give my body a little shake, even as all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It's the most uncomfortable sensation, like tiny worms wriggling all over my skin. "Flint, I can literally feel people staring at us. How are you not squirming right now?"

"I promise you get used to it." He pulls out his AirPods. "Here. Put one of these in. I was thinking we could watch a movie together."

I make a face. "What kind of movie? Because I brought the latest edition of *Wildlife Biology*, and there's an article on

evolutionary behavior that I am very excited to read.”

“Uh, let’s definitely do that, then. You could read it out loud to me.”

If I didn’t notice the way his lip twitched, I might have thought he was serious. But I’m learning this man’s tells. Good actor or not, right now, I’m reading him loud and clear. I reach over and swat his chest. “Very funny, Mr. Hawthorne. But evolution is a very important subject.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he says, his tone more serious. “But come on. This will be fun. I spent over an hour searching for the perfect movie to keep you entertained on the flight. And I really think you’ll like this one.”

“Fine,” I say. “But later, I’m going to make you listen to my article.”

“Sounds like a perfect bedtime story,” he says. “It’ll lull me right to sleep.”

I roll my eyes at his joke, only momentarily distracted by the idea of going to bed with Flint. I’m positive Flint has zero expectations on that front. He’s given me control of whether we even kiss. But to maintain the charade, his PR guy Simon says we need to stay in the same room. At the very least, we need to appear as though we’re using the same bathroom, sleeping in the same bed. Otherwise, hotel staff might talk.

Apparently, it doesn’t take much to motivate a hotel maid to sell a few lines to gossip magazines. And “Flint Hawthorne’s girlfriend is sleeping in a different hotel room” would make a very juicy headline.

At least according to my sisters, who have dissected this entire situation inside and out.

After a flight attendant takes our drink orders, Flint turns on the movie, leans into the corner of his seat, then pulls me against him so I’m leaning against his chest. Like this, it’s easier for me to hold the phone, so I take it from him, making it possible for him to secure his arms around my waist.

Okay. So there are definitely worse ways to sit on an airplane, even if, from this position, I can see the ladies across

the aisle staring us down.

The women can't be much older than I am, and one of them is so blatantly ogling Flint that it makes my blood start to boil. Feeling surprisingly bold, I intentionally meet her gaze, lifting my eyebrows in a *do you have something to say* gesture.

The woman leans back the slightest bit and drops her eyes.

Behind me, Flint chuckles, his chest vibrating against me. "Well done," he whispers.

Not sure *actual for real* jealousy is necessary for a *fake* relationship, but if it's going to help sell it, well, might as well lean into how I'm feeling.

I tilt my head up and back and press a kiss to his jaw.

I feel more than I hear Flint take a stuttering breath when my lips press against him. His beard is sharp against my lips, but it's a rasp I'll take over and over if it means kissing him again.

Desire sparks in my gut, spreading outward, making me feel hot and tingly. I do my best to rein it in, both for the obvious reason—here is absolutely not the place—and the not-so-obvious.

Even if the not-so-obvious reasons are getting harder for me to remember.



The flight from Asheville to Atlanta is brief; there, we change planes for a longer flight directly to LAX. We repeat the same process we went through in Asheville, hiding out in a lounge until the plane is mostly boarded, then jumping on at the last minute. Flint poses for another photo with the gate agent and another with the first-class flight attendant before we're finally in our seats.

"Do you ever say no?" I ask him, and he shrugs.

"Not usually. Enduring fifteen seconds of posing for a photo is easier than dealing with people going online and telling all of Reddit that you're rude."



“People do that?”

He nods. “‘Always be polite, always be respectful, always be generous with your time and energy.’ Those are Simon’s words. Says abiding by them will make his job a lot easier and my career a lot more successful.”

Fortunately, there are a couple of businessmen sitting across from us on this flight, both of whom look like they couldn’t care less about who Flint is or what movies he’s starred in. I guess technically that means we don’t have to lean into the faking, but that doesn’t seem to stop Flint.

He must touch me a thousand different times in the almost five hours it takes us to get across the country. A steadying hand on my back when we hit a bit of turbulence. A nudge against my knee when something funny happens in the movie we finish on this flight because we didn’t have time to get through it on the last one. An arm around my shoulders when the flight attendant gets particularly bold and asks if he’s dating anyone.

I mean, does she think I’m his sister or something? Has she not noticed the *many, many* times we’ve touched throughout the flight?

Flint handles it like a pro, deflecting the question with an easy, “I’d rather not talk about my personal life, Jessica. I’m sure you understand.” But then his arm was around me, his expression pointed as Jessica nodded and excused herself. Every time she passes by, he makes sure we’re touching, at one point even pulling me in for a soft kiss just below my earlobe.

“You know, it’s nice having you here,” he says just before the flight lands. “Normally I keep Nate beside me to help fend off overeager fans, but you’re a much more entertaining shield.”

“I’m so glad I’m useful,” I deadpan, and he grins.

“You’re a lot more than useful,” he says. “This is the best flight across the country I’ve ever had.”

The mood stays light until we land at LAX. As the plane taxis to the terminal, Flint sobers quickly. He pulls on his hat but leaves his sunglasses off. “You don’t want the full disguise?” I say, and he shakes his head.

Joni answers for him, leaning forward from where she and Nate are sitting behind us. “No disguises this time,” she says. “We need the photographers to get a clear shot of your face. There can’t be any doubt that it’s you.”

Flint nods. “Have you heard from Jasper?”

Joni nods. “He’ll be just outside security.”

“Jasper?” I ask.

“One of the less despicable photographers in the business,” she says, looking at me. “Audrey, you’ll stay with Flint the entire time, all right? *Don’t* let go of his hand, no matter what happens. Nate will stay just behind you on your other side, but people will still try to get close. Too close. Don’t stop moving, don’t make eye contact. Don’t answer any of their questions, no matter what they say.”

“Got it. Keep moving. No eye contact. No answers.”

“And don’t let go,” she reiterates. “A car is already waiting outside. Nate will stay with you until you’re safely inside the car, then we’ll both come behind you as soon as we have your luggage. But no getting out at the hotel—”

“Until you catch up,” Flint says, rolling his eyes. “Just like always.”

“I was filling in Audrey as much as I was reminding you,” Joni says. “One of these days, you’re going to be grateful for all my nagging.”

“I’m already grateful for your nagging, Joni.” Flint squeezes my hand. “You ready to go?”

“Absolutely not,” I say without missing a beat.

He smiles warmly. “You’re going to do great.”

Funny. I almost believe him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Flint

IT'S NOT LIKE I haven't walked through the airport before. I've dealt with the crowds. Listened to the questions thrown at me as I pass by. I've heard the click of a thousand cameras as they grab shot after shot and seen the cell phones lifted to record me.

But I've never done it with another person beside me.

When it's just me, I don't worry. I smile. Maybe even sign a few autographs. But this time? All I want to do is move. Get out of here as quickly as I can and keep Audrey safe.

Audrey is all tension. Her shoulders are tight, her steps stiff. Her hand is gripping mine so tightly, I can't even feel my fingers anymore. We're about to exit the terminal, and the crowd outside security will be much larger than the one here, where we're only dealing with ticketed passengers who happen to recognize me.

Out there? We'll find the people who *came* for me.

I have no idea how many other photographers Simon tipped off, but word tends to travel fast. And if anyone who saw us on earlier flights posted on social media, it won't just be photographers who are waiting, but fans. I'll never understand the lengths people will go to, researching flights, scouring the

internet for any random mention that might give someone a clue about where and when I'm going to show up somewhere.

Audrey stumbles beside me, tugging at my hand just in time for me to reach over and stop her before she hits the ground. "Are you okay?" I steer her over to the wall, and Nate quickly steps up behind us, creating some semblance of a barrier between us and the passing crowd.

Audrey nods, even as she lifts her free hand, holding it up in between us. It's trembling like a leaf in the wind. "Sure. Totally fine."

I grab her hand and pull it to my lips, kissing it once, then again.

I never should have asked her to do this. "Hey." I drop her hands in favor of cradling her face, urging her to look right into my eyes. "It's going to be okay. Breathe with me." She nods, and together we take a slow, deep breath. "I've got you," I say. "I'm not going to let anything happen."

"Okay," she whispers. "Okay."

We've only made it fifty feet outside security before the voices start. At first, it's just people calling my name. Then the questions start.

*Flint, who's your friend?*

*New girlfriend, Flint?*

*Are you cheating on Claire?*

*How long have you been together?*

*What does Claire think about you dating someone new?*

I look for Jasper in the crowd and immediately spot his trademark bright red baseball cap. We make eye contact, and I slow, leaning down to whisper in Audrey's ear. "Look up and to the left just for a second," I say.

She does, and hopefully that means Jasper gets a shot of us both.

The crowd moves with us as we make it outside, closing in, despite Nate's attempts to keep everyone back. Now, people

are yelling questions at Audrey.

*What's your name, sweetheart?*

*How did you and Flint meet?*

*Have the two of you slept together yet?*

I hear her gasp after this question, and I tighten my grip on her hand, tugging her into my side and wrapping an arm around her waist. “Just ignore them,” I say close to her ear. “We’re almost there.”

Kenji is waiting in a dark SUV at the curb, just like Joni said he would be. He jumps out as we approach and opens the door, tilting his body to create as much of a shield as he can. With him on one side and Nate on the other, we’re able to slip into the car with relative ease. It’s hard to believe, but Kenji is even bigger than Nate. He’s got the shoulders of an NFL linebacker, but he’s got as much aggression in his entire body as I have in my pinky finger. I’ve never seen the man get ruffled. It’s why I like working with him so much. He just takes everything in stride. Once we’re inside the car, Kenji jumps in behind us as Nate moves back into the crowd to find Joni and retrieve our luggage.

Audrey exhales, her shoulders sagging into the seatback. “That was insane,” she says.

“More insane than usual,” I agree. I look at Kenji. “What’s going on today?”

“You’re going on, man,” he says easily. “Some big-time influencer posted a picture of you two snuggled up on the airplane, and it only took about five seconds to go viral.” He leans over me and extends a hand to Audrey. “I’m Kenji. Nice to finally meet you.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” she says.

Kenji lifts his expression to me, an eyebrow cocked. “Don’t worry. I only told her that you’re bigger than a tree but sweeter than a kitty cat. I didn’t reveal any of your scariest secrets.”

Kenji shrugs. “Just so long as you remember that no matter how much dirt you have on me, I will *always* have more on

you.” He pulls up his phone and navigates to *People* magazine’s website. The headline is big and bold, in bright red letters. *Flint Hawthorne in Love?* “If you wanted the world to know you have a girlfriend who isn’t Claire McKinsey? Well, you’ve done it.”

Kenji’s tone isn’t exactly judgmental, but it doesn’t need to be. He was never in favor of this whole scheme, not from the first time Simon mentioned it.

As I look at Audrey’s drawn expression, noting the dark circles under her eyes, I have to wonder if he’s right.

Not for the first time, I wonder what would have happened—if *anything* would have happened—had I never asked Audrey to come to LA. What if I’d just asked her out? Expressed an interest and told her I wanted to take her to dinner?

Just like every other time I’ve asked myself the question, doubt roars up to squelch the idea. I may not like the idea of lying to everyone, but the reality is, Audrey wouldn’t have said yes had all I done was ask her out. For exactly the chaos we’ve just endured. She would never choose this.

She would never choose *me*.

For that reason, I have to be grateful Joni took Simon’s hair-brained idea and turned it into something I could actually swallow.

It’s bought me time with Audrey, and I’ll never regret that.

Whether it will make a difference in how the press handles the movie, that’s still up for debate. The pictures of Audrey on my Instagram account have put a stop to Claire’s veiled comments and innuendo, but for how long? If this business has taught me anything, it’s that you only have so much control over any story, and things can spin out of control at any moment. The best I can do is hold on for the ride.

“Oh, heads up,” Kenji says. “Mark Sheridan will be at the premiere tomorrow night. His RSVP came in late, but he’ll be there.”

I sit up a little taller in my seat, angling my body so I can better look at Kenji—no small feat seeing as how he fills up half the backseat all by himself. “He’ll be there? Should I take that as a good sign?”

Kenji shrugs. “I don’t think it’s a bad one.”

“Mark Sheridan?” Audrey asks, leaning around me to look at Kenji. “He’s the one who did the documentary on offshore drilling.”

Kenji’s eyebrows go up. “Most people know him for his multiple Oscars, but sure. Off-shore drilling.”

“He actually *won* one of those Oscars for the offshore drilling documentary,” I say, and Kenji lifts a hand in acknowledgment. “But the most important thing,” I say, looking back at Audrey, “is that he’s the executive producer for a movie I really want to work on. If he’s here, I can only hope he’s interested in meeting me in person.”

“This isn’t the one you just had a meeting about the other day? The one you’re producing?”

I shake my head. “Something different. That one is already a sure thing.”

She nods. “Sounds like a big deal.”

“It’s a great role. It’s thoughtful. A little cerebral. And it’s a *tough* character. But *gah*—when I read the script, it felt right in my bones, you know?”

Audrey reaches over and squeezes my hand, her lips lifting into a smile that sends a bolt of heat straight to my heart. “I like it when you talk about your work,” she says.

I hold her gaze. “You do? You know my work is *movies*, right?”

She rolls her eyes and tries to tug her hand away. “You make me sound like such a troll. I’ve watched *two* movies with you now, and I loved them both. So there.”

I grin and hold her hand a little tighter. She’s not about to get away from me. “Two down, only thousands more to go.”

“The point,” she says, wagging a playful finger in front of my face, “is that you light up when you talk about acting. I can tell you really love it. I’m just saying that’s fun to see.”

“Well, we want him to light up for this role,” Kenji says. “It’s the kind that could land him another Oscar nod. Maybe even a win.”

I settle back into my seat, loving the way Audrey leans into me, her body flush against mine. “Only if I do it justice.”

“For now, just focus on making a good impression when you meet Sheridan,” Kenji says.

I nod. “I can do that. What time do we start tomorrow?”

“Early,” Kenji says. “Eight a.m. Interviews will run until four, then you’ll have a couple hours free before you walk the red carpet at six p.m. sharp.” He looks from me to Audrey, then back again. “You’re going to feel jetlagged in the morning, and you always get puffy when you’re jetlagged. Stay in tonight. Even if Simon asks. And no alcohol. Alcohol also makes you look puffy.”

Audrey snickers beside me, and I nudge her knee with mine.

“Simon will definitely ask,” I say, knowing my publicist well enough to sense exactly where his priorities are.

“He will. And he’ll probably want you to show up somewhere Claire is going to be.” Kenji looks toward Audrey. “Don’t let him cave, Audrey. Simon is very persuasive. Keep him in tonight. Tomorrow’s a big day. You both need to rest up.”

Audrey nods, but Kenji has nothing to worry about. I can’t imagine wanting to go anywhere when the alternative is staying *in* with Audrey.

I’ve been thinking way too much about all the time we’re going to spend together. The *hotel room* we’re going to share—not that I have any intention of trying anything. I won’t even kiss her unless she asks me to, even if it takes every ounce of restraint to keep from doing so. I just want her to be comfortable, to be able to relax for one night before everything gets crazy tomorrow.



Beside me, Audrey sighs and drops her head onto my shoulder as she stifles an enormous yawn.

The contact sends that same pulsing energy through me. Every place she touches me crackles with electricity. I could light up all of Los Angeles with this energy, with the fire that sparks whenever her skin brushes against mine.

I lift my arm and wrap it around her shoulders, tugging her closer until her head is resting against my chest. It feels so easy. So natural to hold her like this.

She must think so too because she lifts an arm and wraps it around my waist. Whether intentional or not, her hand slips under the hem of my T-shirt and presses against the skin on my lower back. Her touch is whisper soft as her fingers trace tiny circles on my skin. I close my eyes, not wanting her to stop but knowing if she doesn't, I might lose my actual mind.

She's killing me with this. *Literally* killing me.

My phone buzzes from my pocket, but I don't dare move to grab it. Instead, I tilt my wrist and read the message notification on my watch. It's a text from Kenji, and it's only two words long, so it's easy enough to read the entire thing.

**Kenji:** Fake, huh?

I look up and meet his knowing expression. All I can do is shrug.

I don't know much right now.

But I know that nothing about holding Audrey in my arms feels fake.



We take the long way to the hotel, some swanky place in West Hollywood, giving Nate and Joni time enough to get our luggage, then get to the hotel and do a security sweep to make sure everything checks out.

Kenji has already checked us in, so it's a relatively straight shot from the car, through the hotel doors, and to the elevators. From there, it's a quick ride up to the eighth floor, and suddenly, Audrey and I are alone.

*For the night.*

The suite is spacious—an open living space, a full kitchen, and French doors that open into a luxurious bedroom.

Our luggage sits near the foot of the bed, and there's a tray of fruit, cheese, and sparkling water on the table by the window. A text from Joni confirms that dinner will be up in an hour, which means we won't have to leave this room for anything unless we want to.

Audrey didn't protest when Simon demanded we stay in the same room, but I can't help but wonder how things are going to go tonight. Whatever it takes to make Audrey comfortable—that's my priority.

I watch as she slowly walks through the hotel suite, her fingers running across the back of the sofa. It's a little small, but if I end up sleeping out here, I'll manage all right.

I push my hands into my pockets. "Are you hungry?"

She picks up an apple from the tray on the table, then puts it back down. "A little," she says, but when she looks up at me, it doesn't look like she's thinking about fruit.

We've been touching all day, taking every excuse to have our hands on each other, but now that we're alone, we don't have a reason to pretend. That doesn't stop me from wishing I could pull her into my arms.

"Flint, will you kiss me?" Audrey blurts out.

Her words are like cannon fire throwing me fifty feet backward. I stutter out a laugh. "What?"

"I liked being in your arms today," she says. She wraps her arms around her middle, like she's trying to shield herself from the room. From me, maybe? *I hope it's not me.* "I liked it a lot. And I know I said I didn't want anything to happen between us, and I think I probably still feel that way. But I also feel like my limbs are going to spontaneously combust whenever you touch me." She licks her lips and takes a step forward. "It's hard for me to even say that sentence out loud because hyperbolic expressions like that always irritate me. But I don't know how else to describe what I'm feeling. When you're not

touching me, I want you to be. When you aren't in the room, I can't stop thinking about when I'll see you again. It's illogical." She lifts her fists to her cheeks, then thrusts them down again. "It's maddening."

She takes a deep breath and drops her eyes, then gathers her hair and pulls it forward over her shoulder with trembling hands. "Last week, when we almost kissed, that was real, right? You wanted to kiss me for real."

I nod slowly. "I did."

"Do you still want to?"

I swallow, thinking of the promise I made to myself to only kiss Audrey if I'm kissing her for real. "Only if it's what you want."

She shrugs. "I asked, didn't I?"

She *did* ask, and that's all the confirmation I need. I close the distance between us with two long strides and sweep her into my arms, one arm wrapping around her and pulling her body flush against mine. I lift my other hand to her cheek and cradle her face, my thumb running across her bottom lip. "Audrey, I wanted to kiss you the day I met you. And I've wanted it every day since."

She closes her eyes and takes a stuttering breath, then she pushes up on her toes and presses her lips against mine, slowly at first, then with increasing pressure. I let her set the pace, wanting, above all else, for her to be comfortable. But then she nips at my bottom lip before pulling back long enough to say, "Please don't hold back, Flint. I'm not going to break."

I let out a low groan and pull her even closer, my lips colliding with hers, the air between us crackling as our movements grow more frantic. I slip my hands around her waist, under the blazer she's wearing, and she shrugs it off, letting it fall to the floor behind her. I pause, breaking our kiss long enough to take in the curve-hugging tank top I've been catching glimpses of all day. I skate my palms over the silken skin on her bare arms and shoulders and close my eyes. I want

all of her, to claim her with my touch, my kisses, each one an echo of the feeling coursing through me: *mine, mine, mine.*

I slide my hands to her hips and hoist her up until her legs wrap around my waist, then I kiss her like she *isn't* going to break, with every ounce of the desire that's been building in me for weeks. Her tongue brushes against mine as her hands tangle in my hair, and I almost lose my mind.

This woman is everything.

The taste of her, the feel of her as she moves with me, against me, like our bodies are tuned together in ways even our words aren't.

I walk us backward to the couch—the bed's closer, but I don't want to give her the wrong impression—and sit down, leaning back until she's hovering over me, her lips still pressed to mine. My hands splay across her back, reaching under the hem of her tank top to feel her skin warm against my palms. Her movements slow and her kisses yield to something more languid than frantic but still just as passionate. She isn't in a hurry, and that's fine with me. We've got all night.

If I have anything to do with it, we'll have forever.

Except, somewhere in the back of my mind, I can't let go of Audrey's words, spoken just before we kissed. *I know I said I didn't want anything to happen between us, and I think I probably still feel that way.*

I want her. But not until I know she wants *me.*

All of me.

Even my stupid crazy life.

Our bodies really must be in tune because Audrey pulls back, shifting until she's sitting on the couch beside me. She breathes slowly, deeply, until she finally says, "Flint, we can't."

I lean forward and run a hand across my face, my elbows propped on my knees, and take a minute to regulate my breathing. After the last ten minutes, it's no small feat. "You're right," I finally say.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Audrey says, almost like she didn’t hear me agree with her. “Obviously I want...wait, I’m right?”

I look up and meet her gaze, then reach for her hands, tugging them into mine. “I just want you to be sure, Audrey.”

“About us?”

I lift a shoulder and nod. “I don’t really do casual. Not when it comes to sex.” I only need one hand to count the number of intimate relationships I’ve had, even if the tabloids like to assume otherwise. “If that’s where we take our relationship, I want it to be because we’re both ready. Because we both want something serious.”

She lets out a low groan of frustration, pulling her hands free and scooching herself to the other side of the couch, putting a few feet of space between us.

I miss her warmth the second she’s no longer beside me. “Did I say something wrong?”

She quickly shakes her head, her eyes wide. “The opposite. By telling me you don’t do casual, you just made yourself infinitely more sexy. I didn’t even think that was possible, but you did, and I might need to go sit on the other side of the room.” She scrambles off the couch and walks through the open bedroom doors, turning to face me as she sits on the edge of the bed. “I definitely need to sit over here,” she says. “This is better. You stay where you are.”

I smirk. “What are you going to do tonight?” I joke, glancing back at the bed.

“I’ll sleep in the bathtub.” She looks toward the bathroom. “I’m sure it’s big enough.”

*Or you could just choose me,* I think, but I can’t say those words out loud. Audrey has a lot more on the line here than I do. Choosing me will change her future indefinitely. Her privacy, her work, her anonymity. All of it would be impacted. Only she can decide if it’s worth it.

“A pillow barricade might work,” she says. “As long as we both promise to keep our hands to ourselves.”

“I can handle a pillow barricade,” I say. “I’d prefer that over either of us taking the bathtub.”

“Or the very tiny couch,” she says.

I nod. “Glad we agree.”

She’s quiet for a long moment before she walks back to the couch and stands between my knees, her hands hooked over my shoulders. I pull her into an embrace, my face pressed against her stomach, and she slides her hands up to my hair, rubbing her fingers over my scalp in a way that melts my limbs and relaxes me against her. “Oh, man. Please don’t ever stop exactly what you’re doing.”

She chuckles. “Flint, I really like you,” she whispers. “I’m still scared. But I’m trying not to be, okay?”

My grip around her tightens. “I really like you too. And I’m glad you’re willing to try.”

*Glad* might be the understatement of the century.

Scared or not, I’m already halfway in love with this woman.

I just hope that doesn’t mean I’m halfway to heartbreak.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Audrey

**Audrey:** Hi, sisters. I have news. Are you awake?

**Lucy:** We're awake! Are you there? Are you safe?

**Audrey:** Safe and sound in a very posh hotel suite in West Hollywood. Hang on. I texted a picture. Did it come through?

**Summer:** I am jealous on so many levels. But I'm more interested in your news.

**Audrey:** I just wanted to tell you I watched *Good Will Hunting*.

**Audrey:** And I LOVED IT.

**Lucy:** Shut up.

**Summer:** What have you done with my sister?

**Audrey:** I'm serious. I've been too hard on you guys. Movies can be really fun.

**Summer:** I mean, yes. But were you watching with Flint? Because if you were, the only thing we know for sure is that you like watching movies WITH FLINT. That's not the same thing as just liking movies.

**Audrey:** I see your point. But I really did love the story. Did you know Flint was nominated for an Oscar against Matt Damon? He didn't win or anything, but STILL. Matt Damon. He's in *Good Will Hunting*, and he's so great.

**Lucy:** Um, yeah. We know. Welcome to the world of popular culture. So happy you're finally joining us.

**Summer:** So I need more details about this whole movie viewing situation. Were you snuggled up on the couch? Relaxing on the bed? Naked in the hot tub?

**Audrey:** Stop it. No naked talk. We were on the couch, in our hotel suite, eating dinner. It was all very civilized and polite.

**Summer:** BORING.

**Audrey:** If it makes you feel better, we did a lot of making out BEFORE dinner. So there's that.

**Lucy:** !!!!

**Summer:** You're joking.

**Audrey:** Not joking.

**Lucy:** For real kissing or fake kissing?

**Audrey:** Definitely for real kissing.

**Lucy:** Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.

**Summer:** \*breathes into paper bag\*

**Lucy:** How are you feeling? Was it amazing? Are you okay?

**Audrey:** I feel good. A little overwhelmed, but in a good way.

**Summer:** This is so freaking amazing. Seriously. I don't even know how to process.

**Lucy:** So what happens now? Are you together?



**Audrey:** We haven't really talked about it. We're taking things slow, I think. I mean, I had a lot of reasons for not wanting a relationship, and those things haven't really changed.

**Summer:** Maybe not, but people do crazy stuff for love all the time.

**Audrey:** I don't know about love. But I know I like him. And I know he likes me. And we're finally being honest about that.

**Lucy:** The rest will work itself out. It will!

**Summer:** Love conquers all! Or...in this case, really like conquers all!

**Lucy:** I'm so, so happy for you, Auds. Seriously.

**Summer:** Have you told Mom and Dad?

**Audrey:** They know I'm in LA, but they don't know I'm with Flint. I'll give them an update once I'm home.

**Lucy:** You aren't worried about them seeing you on the news?

**Summer:** Do you even know our parents? They're less likely to watch entertainment news than Audrey.

**Lucy:** Fair point.

**Audrey:** I promise I'll fill them in eventually. I just don't want them to worry. And this whole scenario will make Mom worry.

**Summer:** That's true. You're making the right call.

**Summer:** You have to keep us updated though. Any new details, you'd better message us!

**Audrey:** I will. Promise.

**Lucy:** And Audrey, try not to overthink, okay? Just enjoy yourself. This is an amazing, magical thing happening to you. Just enjoy it. You deserve all the happy things.

**Audrey:** Thanks. I love you guys.

**Summer:** Love you too. Please tell your movie star boyfriend I would love to meet Ryan Gosling, please and thank you.

**Audrey:** Hahaha. I'll pass that along.

**Summer:** Tom Holland would also be great.

**Summer:** And Liam Hemsworth.

**Summer:** Oh! And Chris Evans. Does he know Chris Evans?

**Lucy:** Summer. STOP.

**Summer:** Chris Pratt! I would love to meet Chris Pratt.

**Summer:** And Bradley Cooper! Flint was in a movie with Bradley Cooper, right? He has to know him!

**Summer:** Why do I suddenly feel like I'm here by myself now?

**Summer:** FINE. I'm done now.

**Summer:** Just kidding. One more. Harry Styles. The internet says he and Flint are FRIENDS, Audrey. FRIENDS.

**Lucy:** Okay. You're safe. I stole her phone. Love you, Auds! Have fun!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Flint

THE CAST AND CREW of *Turning Tides* are set up in three different hotel rooms, with a fourth room available to us when we need coffee or food or just a break away from the reporters who will be cycling through in ten-minute intervals.

As expected, I'll be interviewed with Claire. We're the stars of the movie, so it only makes sense, but I'm not looking forward to an entire day sitting right beside her. At least Audrey will be there, visible to me *and* Claire. I just have to hope that will be enough to make her behave.

So far, I haven't even seen her.

The hotel room door opens, and I look up, expecting Claire. We're supposed to start in less than ten minutes, so she should show up any second. Instead, it's the director of *Turning Tides*, Lea Cortez, who comes in. She smiles wide when she meets my gaze, and I stand, hurrying over for a hug.

"Oh, it's so good to see you!" she says, squeezing my shoulders before letting me go. Her eyes flit to where Audrey is standing just behind us, then she leans forward. "Excellent timing, Flint," she says knowingly. "You happened to get a girlfriend just in time for the premiere, huh?"

The question doesn't surprise me. Lea is fully aware of what Claire has been up to the past few months, and she knew my

team was trying to figure out a way to make it stop.

“Let’s call the timing fortuitous instead of suspicious,” I say, reaching for Audrey’s hand.

She steps forward and slips her fingers into mine.

“Lea, this is my girlfriend,” I say, not even tripping over the words. Maybe because now, they feel true. “Doctor Audrey Callahan.”

Audrey reaches out and shakes Lea’s hand. “And this is Lea Cortez. Director of *Turning Tides* and my very good friend. She and her wife, Trista, were my neighbors when I lived in Malibu.”

“You’ve caught yourself a good one,” Lea says to Audrey, her tone warm. “Are you a doctor of medicine? What’s your specialty?”

“Not medicine,” Audrey says. “I have my PhD in wildlife biology.”

“Oh, I love that.” Lea snaps her fingers. “Actually, have you ever done any consulting? I’m reading this script right now, and *oh*, it’s so gorgeous. Historical. West Virginia mountains. A little bit of coal mining, a little bit of falling in love. But there’s one character who’s this activist, in opposition to the mining industry for environmental reasons, and I’m feeling like the science is a little thin. Would you be willing to take a look? Give me your professional opinion?”

Audrey’s eyebrows lift. “Oh. I...sure. I’d be happy to.”

I give Audrey’s waist a reassuring squeeze. This is the first I’ve heard of the script Lea’s reading, but Audrey would be a perfect consultant. The woman knows *everything* about everything.

“Truly? That would be amazing,” Lea says.

The door behind us opens again, and this time it really is Claire. Her gaze meets mine for the briefest second, then she looks down, a flash of trepidation crossing her features.

It isn’t what I’m expecting, and I narrow my eyes.

“Okay. Looks like we’re getting started. I’ll see you on the other side.” Lea heads across the hall to where her interviews are taking place, and I pull Audrey into my arms. She settles against me with an easy comfort that warms me from the inside out.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I say, smiling down at her.

“I’m glad I’m here too.”

“We’re ready to roll,” a voice says from behind me.

“They’re just waiting on you, Flint,” Joni calls.

I look at Joni and nod, then lean down and kiss Audrey, lingering long enough to cause a few snickers and whispers to sound across the room. “Promise you’ll stay where I can see you?” I ask when I finally pull away.

She leans up and kisses me again. “I promise.”

I pass Joni on my way to the middle of the room where Claire’s waiting for me, and she grabs my arm, halting my progress. “So we’re kissing now?” she whispers under her breath.

“Looks like it.”

“You’re really selling it,” she says through clenched teeth.

“Well, I’m a really good actor.”

She leans back and studies me, then her gaze narrows. “You aren’t acting, are you?”

I smile. “Absolutely not.”

A sound guy approaches, mic in hand, and attaches it to my collar, then melts into the crowd of techie people standing behind the cameraman while a makeup artist quickly descends, powdering my face until Joni tugs her away. “That’s enough,” Joni says. “He looks great.”

Claire offers a tentative smile when I sit down beside her. She seems fidgety, nervous, almost like she’s afraid to look at me, which is incredibly out of character for her.

“Hi, Claire,” I say. “How are you?”

She looks up, her expression curious, maybe even a little surprised. “Okay, I guess,” she answers. “How are you?”

I don’t have time to answer her because someone calls “mics on” from behind us, and then we’re off.

The process is just as taxing as it always is. We answer ten different variations of the same ten questions over and over again.

*What was it like working together?*

*Is there any animosity between us now that we’re no longer together?*

*How was it filming on location in such a beautiful country?*

*What’s up next for the both of us?*

*Do we have any plans to work together in the future?*

Most of the questions steer clear of my personal life—a requirement that was made clear to all participating journalists. But that didn’t stop them from asking about *Claire’s* personal life. My favorite question: *Was Claire disappointed when she realized I’d moved on with someone else?*

Just before we break for lunch, a woman from LA Weekly asks me something no one else has thought to ask yet.

“Last question for you, Flint,” the journalist says. “Are we supposed to assume that the new relationship in your life has something to do with your move back to North Carolina?”

Joni steps forward—this is definitely a question that crosses into personal territory—but I lift a hand and motion her away. I’m okay answering this one.

“Yes and no,” I say. I look up and smile at Audrey, who’s standing just off to my left. “When I moved, I knew I was looking for something. More stability, more time with my family. But there was something else I wanted, too. I didn’t know what it was, really, only that I’d never found it in LA. And I didn’t find it until I met Audrey. We all need people to keep us grounded, you know? Who will remind us what’s really important. It’s easy to lose sight of that in this business.

Our relationship is still new, but if I'm lucky, I hope that's what she'll be for me."

There's a long stretch of silence after my answer, and I squirm with sudden discomfort. "What?" I quickly joke. "Was that too much? Too personal? Nobody knows how to handle Flint Hawthorne being a little vulnerable?"

It's Claire who responds. "It wasn't too much, Flint," she says softly, a hand on my arm. "It was perfect."

If this really was just an act, if my feelings for Audrey really were fake, I might regret fooling Claire because there is real and genuine warmth in her eyes. It's surprising to see, and so completely unexpected, I almost have whiplash. But then, she hasn't really seemed like the same Claire today. It could just be that the pictures of me and Audrey—and then seeing Audrey here with me—accomplished their purpose. But I'm beginning to sense there's something else to Claire's change in behavior.

I lift my eyebrows in question, and Claire shrugs. "I'm happy for you," she says, her tone low. "And I'm sorry—"

I lift a hand, cutting her off, and reach over to tug off her mic, then I do the same with mine. "Can we go ahead and cut the cameras?" I say, hoping someone in the room will listen.

Joni appears beside me and takes our mics, then ushers the LA Weekly lady and everyone else to the other side of the room.

"Thanks," Claire says softly. "I'm still so new at this."

"You're doing fine," I say gently.

She's quiet for a beat before she looks up, eyes watery and a little red. "Flint, I'm sorry about all those things I said." She takes a deep breath, hesitating the tiniest bit before she keeps going. "Simon just kept saying I needed to keep our names on everyone's minds as much as possible. It was his idea for me to hint that we were still in a relationship. He said it would create exactly the kind of buzz the movie needs."

"Wait, you're working with Simon?"

She nods, wide-eyed. “I thought you knew. He called me right after you and I broke up.”

It takes me a moment to process what she’s telling me.

All this time, Simon has been playing both sides of the game, telling me one thing and telling Claire something else.

I lean back in my chair.

*I should have known.*

Honestly, I’m surprised I didn’t piece it together sooner.

“Simon can be very persuasive.” I breathe out a tired sigh. “I wish you’d told me, Claire.”

She nods. “I know. I should have. But Simon said I couldn’t trust you on this. He said that you—” She winces and shakes her head. “Well, never mind what he said. I shouldn’t have listened, and I’m sorry.”

“Let me guess. He said I’m stuck on my own high horse and can’t be trusted to know what my career really needs?”

“Something like that,” Claire says.

“Where is Simon anyway?” I ask, suddenly realizing that he hasn’t been around all morning. Normally, he would be.

Claire frowns. “He’ll be here after lunch.”

I nod, wondering how quickly Joni can draft up some official paperwork terminating my relationship with my publicist. It’s a decision I should have made a long time ago. I haven’t been on the same page with the guy in months. Knowing Joni, she already has the paperwork saved on her laptop just in case.

“Hey, can I give you some advice?” I say to Claire. The room around us is clearing out as everyone breaks for lunch, but I can’t *not* say what needs to be said, no matter how difficult she’s made my life the past few months.

She nods. “Of course.”

“Fire Simon. He’ll use you, Claire. He’s a lot more concerned about his own star rising than he is yours, and I



don't think you can trust him to have your best interests at heart. He didn't have mine. In fact, he went directly against what I asked of him. He played us against each other, which wasn't good for either of us."

"Yeah, I see that now." She breathes out a sigh. "Are you going to fire him?"

"The minute I see him," I say. "But not just over this. He's had it coming for a while." I stand, and offer Claire a hand, pulling her to her feet.

"Thanks, Flint. I really am sorry about everything I said. I hope I didn't cause any problems for you and your girlfriend. She seems really nice."

"I appreciate the apology." I make eye contact with Audrey and hold out my hand, hoping she'll come join me.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" Claire asks, and I nod. "At the premiere tonight, do you think we could make a show of looking like we're friends again? Simon said bringing the drama would go farther, but I don't think he's the right publicist for me anymore. All this clamoring for attention—gosh, I really don't like the way it makes me feel. I'd feel a lot better if we could all just get along."

Audrey finally reaches me and slips her hand into mine, offering Claire a warm smile.

"How about we just *be* friends again?" I say. "No show required."

Claire smiles. "Thanks, Flint. That would be great."

After I introduce Audrey, she and Claire chat for a few minutes, then we say goodbye, and Audrey and I head back to our room with Nate and Joni for lunch.

We need privacy if I'm going to fill them in on what Claire told me about Simon, and I definitely need to fill them in. If this guy has been pitting Claire and me against each other, who knows how else he's been mismanaging things.

Joni was right. I have been too trusting.

But all of that stops right now.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Flint

JONI IS LIVID, AS expected, when she hears what Simon has been doing. Fortunately, she really did have termination paperwork prepared just in case. We can even get Simon uninvited to tonight's premiere if we work quickly enough.

Audrey is quiet while I relay everything I learned, but her eyes are sharp, darting from me, to Joni, and back again as we discuss the situation. As soon as there's a pause in the conversation, she lifts a hand. "Listen. I understand your desire to *not* have Simon at the premiere. After what he's put you through, I don't really want him there either. But Flint, Simon knows a lot about you. He knows about *us*. Are you sure it's worth firing him *now*? Right in the middle of the press cycle? If he has no reason to be loyal, why would he be?"

"That's a valid point," Joni says. "I hate it because cutting ties today would be so incredibly satisfying, but Audrey might be right."

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, and run my hands through my hair. The wardrobe people will be annoyed when I go back for the rest of the interviews, but I'm too annoyed to care. I do see Audrey's point, but I *really* don't want to be around Simon anymore. Claire said he'd be here after lunch. The idea of faking it, of playing nice—that's a hard thing to swallow.

I shake my head. “I see your point, but Simon also has a lot on the line here. He may be well-connected, but I am, too. I could ruin his reputation among other actors. He has to know that. I don’t think he’ll screw me over.”

“You might be underestimating the size of Simon’s ego,” Joni says. “I’m not saying we don’t fire him; I’m just saying we wait a couple of weeks until the movie press is behind us.”

“That’s my vote too,” Audrey says. “Not that I deserve a vote. But, you know. Just in case you were curious.”

I reach over and pick up her hand, threading my fingers through hers, then lifting our clasped hands to my lips. I press a kiss on her knuckles. “You definitely get a vote. And I understand what you’re both saying. But now that I’ve discovered the kind of cancer Simon is, I can’t stand the thought of working with him any longer. I just want him gone.”

Joni sighs. “Okay. I’ll get everything ready for you. You can talk to him after lunch.”

After we eat, Audrey excuses herself to the bathroom, and Nate heads onto the balcony to make some calls about tonight’s security detail. In their absence, Joni eyes me in her big-sister way. “Okay, spill it,” she says, folding her arms as she leans back in her chair.

“Spill what?”

She rolls her eyes. “So Audrey likes you now, too? You’re both feeling it?”

I look toward the bathroom door. “We’re taking it slow.”

“Slow is good. She seems like she’s holding up okay.”

“More than okay,” I say. “She’s been amazing.”

“Tonight will be the true test,” Joni says. “You think she’s really up for this full-time?”

“Maybe not the way I’ve done things in the past. But I’ve been wanting to handle this part of my career differently anyway. If I set some stronger boundaries, say no to stuff that

isn't essential. I think we can make it work. And I want to—because I really like her.”

Joni's expression softens. “You know I'm up for anything that means we all get to slow down a little.” Her eyes dart behind me for a moment before coming back to me. “Speaking of slowing down, what do you say you let Audrey sit out the rest of the afternoon?”

I frown. “What? Why?”

Joni motions behind me. “Because I think she needs a nap.”

I turn and look through the bedroom door to see Audrey curled up on the edge of the bed.

“Besides,” Joni says. “She's got a lot more getting ready to do for tonight than you do.”

I nod. “It's probably better if she isn't there when everything goes down with Simon anyway. And after our conversation, I'm sure Claire is going to be fine even without Audrey nearby.”

“Claire would be crazy to say anything suggestive now, even if she hadn't apologized to you. Audrey's face is all over the internet. You've sold it. You're in a relationship. No one is doubting that now.”

“My face is all over the internet?” Audrey asks, appearing in the bedroom doorway.

Joni winces, like she maybe didn't want Audrey to hear her. “Don't go looking,” she says as she reaches over and swipes a handful of grapes from my mostly empty plate. “But yes. And TMZ has already figured out who you are, thanks to Flint introducing you to Lea as *Doctor Audrey Callahan*.”

“Someone heard that?” I ask.

“There was a reporter sitting ten feet behind you,” Joni says. “Of course she heard you. I wouldn't stress about it though. We knew this would happen. I didn't want you to freak out about it, but it isn't a bad thing.”

“What do you mean they know who I am?” Audrey asks. “I mean, they know my name, sure. But what else have they

figured out?”

Joni reaches for her phone, scrolling while she talks. “Honestly, every time the story updates, it seems like they have a little more information. They found your faculty photo from Carolina Southern, and it looks like there are links to a few more articles you’ve published.” She holds up her phone screen so Audrey and I can both see it. “This is kinda cool though. You’ve gotten so much attention that Amazon has sold out of your book.”

“My book?”

“Reforestation and Biodiversity,” Joni reads. “By Doctor Audrey Callahan.”

Audrey lets out a surprised laugh. “The only people who ever buy that book are college students who have to because it’s on their syllabus.”

Joni shrugs. “Maybe people will learn something, then.” She stands and points at Audrey. “Hey, guess what? You get the afternoon off. I suggest a real nap instead of a two-minute one on the way back from the bathroom.”

Audrey’s eyes dart to me. “Oh. I’m fine. I’ll be fine without a nap.” A yawn muffles the last few words of her sentence, and she stifles it with her fist. “Ignore that,” she says. “It’s just a little bit of jet lag. But I swear I’m okay.”

I smile. “Stay and sleep. For real. I can manage without you for a little bit. Especially now that I’ve talked to Claire.”

A flash of uncertainty flits across her expression, but she nods. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’ll give you two a minute to say goodbye,” Joni says, moving toward the balcony to get Nate. As she crosses back through the room, she says, “You know, since this is a totally fake relationship that doesn’t have anything to do with real, actual feelings.”

Nate follows quickly behind, and they both disappear out the door.

“She knows?” Audrey asks as soon as the latch clicks closed behind them.

I nod. “She guessed.”

Audrey nods and moves into the bedroom, dropping onto the edge of the bed. She kicks off her shoes. “Do you think we need to check in with John? If people know who I am, I worry someone might show up at the house.”

“That’s a good thought. I’ll have Nate check in with him and tell him to be extra vigilant.”

She nods, and I reach up to curve a hand around her cheek. She closes her eyes and leans into me.

“Are you okay? I know all of this is a lot.”

She nods. “I’m great, actually. It *is* a lot, but I’ve enjoyed watching you talk about your work.” She reaches over and slides her hands across my chest, toying with the buttons on the front of my shirt. “You know what I’m not excited about though?” She bites her lip in that anxious way I’m beginning to love.

“What’s that?” I lean forward, needing to touch her, to kiss her before I leave.

She presses her hands into my chest, stopping me just before my lips meet hers. “I’m *not* looking forward to watching you make out with Claire.”

I freeze, not grasping her meaning. I have zero plans of ever doing *that* again.

“In the movie, Flint,” Audrey says softly.

Oh. *Oh*. She isn’t the first person to worry about something like this. I have friends who have navigated this road before, setting boundaries, figuring out what makes them and their spouses or partners feel comfortable when it comes to on-screen intimacy. “I get that,” I say gently. “But it’s acting, Audrey. It isn’t real.”

“It was real with Claire, though, wasn’t it?”

I nod, wishing I didn't have to say yes. "Not the whole time we were filming. Just for a while there at the end. By the time we started dating for real, we'd already filmed all the scenes that included us both."

I can tell Audrey's mind is working from the way her brows are creased, a tiny line appearing right between them. "How do you keep it from feeling real?" she asks. "Not just with Claire, but generally."

I run a hand across my face and consider her question. "I mean, it helps that there are normally a dozen people or more crowded around you when it's happening. Cameras in your faces, directors paying very close attention to everything from where your hands are to how long a kiss lasts to whether your eyebrows are relaxed while you're kissing. The whole thing is directed, scripted, which generally makes it about the least intimate setting ever."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"Then there's the cardinal rule of all on-screen kissing," I say, and she lifts her eyebrows.

"What's the cardinal rule?"

I grin. "No tongue."

Her eyes widen. "Ever?"

I shake my head. "Not unless it's scripted. And that's something that would have to be written into a contract. Otherwise, it's a very fast way to make other actors think you're a jerk."

She smiles and stands, shifting so she's directly in front of me, her arms wrapped around my neck.

I lift my hands to her waist, settling them on the swell of her hips. I will never get tired of standing this way, of feeling this woman under my hands.

"This actually makes me feel a lot better," she says playfully. She leans down and nudges my nose with hers.

"Yeah? Why is that?" I ask, my voice low.

“I like that there’s something only *I* get to do,” she whispers. She lowers herself until she’s sitting across my lap, her legs straddling either side.

“Only you, huh?”

She bites her lip, a flash of trepidation crossing her face. “I mean, only if...” Her words trail off and she takes a deep breath, but then she squares her shoulders and looks at me dead on. “Actually, yes. Only me. If I thought you were doing this with other women, I’d lose my mind, Flint. If you want me, it has to be only me.”

“I don’t want anyone else, Audrey.” I lean up and press my lips to hers. “I’ve never wanted anyone like I want you.”

She kisses me this time, gently at first, but then her hands slide up to my jaw, and she deepens it into something that breaks every single rule of on-screen kissing.

Fire floods my veins as her tongue brushes against mine, her hair cascading forward and enveloping me in her scent. My fingers press into the fabric of her jeans as I pull her even closer. It isn’t enough. *This* isn’t enough.

I have to stop, go back to work, and leave her, and yet, I’m certain that if she asked me to stay, I would. I’d ignore it all. The obligations. The journalists. The premiere. I’d forget all of it just to be *right here*. And not just because I crave the feel of her skin against mine. Though, five more seconds of this, and I might be breaking all kinds of rules—especially the ones I’ve set for myself.

I want to stay because I want to *know* Audrey.

All of her. Everything there is.

I want to know what makes her happy and sad and angry at the world. What makes her stop and think. What challenges her. What inspires her. What makes her stand up and fight, and what makes her hole up and hide for a while.

I want to know all her favorites. Foods. Colors. Books. Countries.

Name it, and I want to know it.



I want the people who love her the most in the world to call *me* when they don't know what to buy for her birthday present. Because they know I've done the research. They know I've asked every question and cataloged every answer.

It's Audrey who breaks the kiss, and it's probably a good thing. I'm too far gone. Too consumed by her to think straight.

"You have to go," she whispers against my ear, her lips close.

"I don't want to," I say, hugging her a little tighter.

I feel her smile, even though I can't see it. "I'm not answering to Joni, Flint." She shifts backward and stands, then tugs me to my feet. "Come on. Get out of here. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

She walks me to the door, and I kiss her one last time. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

She grins and shoves me toward the door. "In this very fancy hotel suite, in a very comfortable bed? However will I cope?"

Joni has already gone ahead, but Nate is waiting for me outside the room, and I follow him down to the seventh floor where all the interviews are happening. Nate has a key card to get me into the interview room, but I drop a hand on his shoulder, stopping him before he can use it.

"How do you do it, man? How do you ever walk away from Joni when you feel like this?"

His eyebrows lift. "Like what?"

"Like I can't breathe. Or think about anything but her."

His eyes lift with understanding. "You and Audrey?"

"Joni didn't tell you?"

He shakes his head. "Nah, but I should have guessed."

I rub my hand against my sternum, like I can somehow soothe the ache pulsing just behind my ribs. "I don't even know what this is," I say more to myself than Nate.

He chuckles, a wide smile stretching across his face. “That’s love, man.” He waves the keycard in front of the lock and pushes the door open. “Better buckle up,” he says as I push past him into the room. “Your heart’s in control now.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Audrey

I STAND IN THE hotel bathroom and stare at my reflection in the full-length mirror.

Honestly, I think everyone on the planet could look amazing if they had this many people available to help them get ready every morning.

I have been plucked and polished and shined and glossed.

And I have never felt so beautiful.

That *could* have something to do with the billion-dollar gown I'm wearing. It's even prettier than I remember. And it's the most feminine thing I've ever worn. The tiny flowers woven into the lace overlay are so delicate, I'm afraid to even touch them.

"How are the shoes?" Joni asks as she steps into the bathroom. "Are you dying? If you are, there are four other pairs you can try."

"These are great. I feel pretty steady." I don't have a ton of experience walking in high heels, but these have a wider block heel and they aren't too high. Plus, they have some sort of memory foam insole that makes them really comfortable—something I didn't expect in a pair of heels.

"Perfect," Joni says. "Flint should be here any minute." She looks me up and down. "He's going to pass out when he sees

you, Audrey. Seriously. You're stunning."

Joni had Flint's tuxedo taken to her room so he could get ready there. She claimed it was "easier," but I think she just wants us to have some ridiculous big reveal in which he sees my red-carpet look for the first time.

For all her no-nonsense displays, Joni is clearly a romantic at heart.

Not that I'm not excited about seeing Flint in a tuxedo. I totally am. But after I *see* him, we're going to the premiere, and I'm pretty sure that's going to be just like the airport. Except worse because I'm wearing heels and a dress.

Joni keeps assuring me everyone will be corralled safely behind a barricade that will keep them from getting too close. There will be cameras, people, and lots of noise, but it will all feel very civilized.

Sure. *Civilized.*

"You okay?" Joni asks. "You look a little green."

I force a deep breath. "I'm okay. Maybe I just need some air?"

"Totally. Balcony? Let's get you to the balcony."

She hovers behind me as I cross through the bedroom and into the living room, then make my way to the balcony. Fortunately, she doesn't follow me outside.

I *am* okay; I just need a minute to breathe. To process the fact that four hours ago, I told a man, whom millions of women love and lust after, that I want him to be exclusive with *me*.

Me.

It feels impossible. Ridiculous. Utterly unlike me.

And yet, when I'm with Flint, when his arms are around me, nothing feels *more right*.

I know how much he wants a normal relationship. And he deserves it. He deserves to be with someone capable of loving him despite the craziness of his life.

I press a hand to my stomach. I have no idea what this is going to look like. I just know I want to try.

Behind me, the balcony door opens, and I slowly turn.

Flint is standing in front of the door, his hands pushed into the pockets of his tuxedo.

*Oh. Oh my.*

I don't have adequate words to describe how good he looks. I have a sudden urge to take his picture and preserve it for scientific purposes—a representation of the perfect male species. For generations to come, researchers can look back and know that this—this man—is as good as it gets.

“Audrey, if you keep looking at me like that, we aren't going to make it out of the hotel room,” Flint says through a chuckle. He walks slowly toward me.

I smile. “I could say the same thing to you.”

He slips a hand around my waist, pressing it to the small of my back and tugging me against him. “I have never seen a woman so beautiful,” he says, his tone low. He leans down like he's going to kiss me but freezes when Joni yells from inside the hotel room.

“No! No kissing. Her makeup is perfect, and you can't ruin it.”

Flint grins. “The price to pay for red carpet perfection.” He presses his lips to my forehead instead, giving me a lingering kiss that almost feels as intimate as a regular kiss. “I'll be right beside you the whole time,” he says. “I promise. Just don't let go of my hand.”



Flint stays true to his word. The only time he lets go of me is when the photographers need him to pose on the red carpet by himself or with his fellow cast members.

Just as frequently, they take pictures of the two of us together. It isn't all that different from walking through the airport, except this time, people know my name.

*Audrey, look this way.*

*Audrey, who are you wearing?*

*Audrey, can we see the back of your gown?*

I have never been so overwhelmed. The main reason I'm making it is because Flint is my north star, taking every opportunity to look into my eyes and make sure I'm okay. But there's something else motivating me forward, too. And that's *pride*.

Flint is really good at his job. He's charming and gracious and kind to everyone he greets. When we stop for interviews along the red carpet, he's professional and generous in his efforts to praise his director and co-stars. He does not *seek* to be the star, but that only makes him shine brighter.

When people ask about me, he smiles and squeezes my hand, and says something vague about our general happiness or how we're looking forward to a future together. The only questions directed toward me are about my gown, which is fine with me. Those are easy enough to answer. Otherwise, I'm happy to let Flint soak up all the attention. This party is about him. About his amazing accomplishment. And I'm just so proud and happy to be here with him, even with all the noise and chaos.

During the movie, I sit in between Flint and Claire, who is on her own for the night. Turns out, Simon was supposed to be her date to the premiere. Earlier today, when Flint terminated his relationship with Simon, Claire did the same thing. It still makes me nervous, especially now that Simon has lost two clients instead of just one, but I trust Flint's instincts. If he believes Simon will walk away quietly, who am I to tell him any differently?

After chatting with her earlier today, I decided I actually like Claire. She seems really sweet and genuine, which makes me think it was Simon's manipulations that were turning her into the opposite.

Still, I'm nervous enough about seeing Flint on the screen.

Now I have to do it while sitting next to *Claire*?

I don't care what Flint said about on-screen intimacy. This is still going to be weird.

I brace myself for the worst, but once the movie begins and I settle into the story, it's not so bad. It's Flint on the screen, but it's not *really* Flint. He's acting. And he's so good at it, I almost want to cry.

When it's clear we're approaching a *first kiss* moment, it's Claire who reaches over, her hand resting on my forearm. She leans toward me. "So, when we were filming this scene, we'd been out in the sun for hours already. You know what I couldn't stop thinking about? How much sand I had inside my swimsuit."

I stifle a laugh, and she grins. "And the wedgie," she says with a groan. "It was the worst. I was uncomfortable and grouchy, and I'm pretty sure Flint got really irritated with how many takes I required."

I know what she's doing. And I love her for doing it.

After the movie, all I want to do is talk to Flint. Rehash all the parts I loved the most. Tell him how incredibly talented I think he is. I've had a few moments in life when I've felt as though I'm doing exactly what I was born to do. When my writing has clicked or my research has revealed something insightful and powerful and useful. Watching Flint tonight, I knew with utter certainty that this is *exactly* what he was born to do. He's an artist. A storyteller. And it's an amazing thing to watch.

But I can't tell him any of that because the minute the movie is over, we are swept up and out and we're moving through a crowd of producers and executive producers and screenwriters and studio executives, all congratulating each other and hugging and shaking hands.

I am introduced to dozens of people. I smile and nod and do my best to catalog names, but soon everyone's faces are blurring together, my feet are killing me, and I can't remember the last time I ate anything.

Maybe this is how everyone in Hollywood stays so trim. There is never any time for food.

“How are you holding up?” I ask Flint in a rare moment of silence. We’re on an elevator on our way up to the penthouse of some building where there is a party happening to celebrate the movie. I’m pretty sure all the same people we were just talking to outside of the premiere will also be here, which, I’ll be honest, seems a little excessive, but Claire says there will be *food* at this party, so I’m in.

Assuming I can figure out a way to eat in this dress.

Flint tugs me close, pulling my back against his broad chest, and bends his head down to nuzzle my neck. He presses a kiss just beside my ear. “I’m starving. How are you?”

“Same. Am I allowed to eat in this dress, you think?”

“Definitely yes.” He’s quiet for a beat before asking, “What did you think of the movie?” The vulnerability in his voice makes my heart squeeze.

I spin around to face him, pressing my hands to his chest. “Flint. I loved the movie. You were brilliant.”

He smiles the slightest bit. “High praise from a woman who doesn’t like movies.”

I push up on my tiptoes and press my lips to his. “I just needed the right person to show me the right movies.”

“Yeah? What movies are the right ones?”

I grin. “Any ones that you are in.”

The elevator reaches the top floor and dings, the door sliding open, and Flint reaches for my hand and tugs me out of the elevator. Instead of walking toward the party, he heads to the right, pulling me into a small alcove just past the bank of elevators.

He leans down to kiss me, stealing my breath and sending ripples of heat through my body. He pulls back, looking at me for a long moment before pulling me into his chest and wrapping his arms around me.



It's just a hug—but this hug feels like it means something different. Something *more*.

“Things are better when you're here,” he says, his lips close to my ear.

I run my hands up and down his back. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Everything,” he says simply. He finally lets me go, and I look up to find his gaze fixed on my face. He smiles. “I don't want to freak you out, Audrey. But I like the man I am more when you're beside me. You make me better.”

I push up on my toes and kiss him one more time. Because what else could I possibly do? Tonight, for the first time, I'm finally willing to admit that maybe I *can* handle this kind of life.

It's still so new, but as I press my palms against Flint's chest and feel the pounding of his heart, it suddenly feels magically, blissfully possible that this man will be the rest of my life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Audrey

THE PARTY IS IMPRESSIVE. Unlike any party I've ever attended before.

Claire said there would be food, but the spread, which covers two enormous tables lining the far wall, is more elaborate than anything I've ever seen before. There is also an endless supply of champagne, which I would usually ignore without a second thought. But tonight, we're celebrating.

Flint grabs a couple of glasses from a passing tray and hands me one. "To *Turning Tides*," I say, holding my glass.

Flint grins, then leans forward and presses a quick kiss to my lips. "You can toast the movie if you want. But I'm toasting us."

After we eat and drink and eat some more, Flint catches me yawning. All the champagne is making me sleepy.

Flint squeezes my fingers. "What do you say we find Mark Sheridan, impress him with my startling charm and your giant biology brain, then call it a night?"

I smile. "That is the sexiest thing you've ever said."

I won't take full credit if Flint ends up getting the lead in Mark's next movie. But I'm just saying, I *own* the conversation about the environmental impacts of offshore drilling. If the goal was to impress him, mission freaking

accomplished. Flint keeps looking at me, his smile wide, squeezing my hand whenever I answer another one of Mark's questions.

It's not like I thought Hollywood was *only* about beautiful people talking about inconsequential things. But...okay, maybe that *is* what I thought. But after talking to Lea earlier today about consulting on her script, and after talking to Mark, it's nice to recognize there's more to it than that.

Even though our plan was to cut out early, the four of us, me, Flint, Mark, and his wife, Deidra, end up talking for hours before I finally have to excuse myself to find a bathroom.

"Hey, take Joni with you," Flint says, motioning to where Joni and Nate are sitting just behind us. "I don't want you going anywhere by yourself."

"It's just the bathroom," I say, charmed by his concern, but entirely positive I will be just fine. I press a quick kiss to his lips. "And we're at a private party. I'll be fine."

He nods, but I don't miss the concern flitting across his expression. "Okay. Just be quick."

I nod and head down the hall, a tiny bit tipsy but still steady on my feet. Honestly, I maybe should have grabbed Joni, because I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to manage my dress on my own, but I'm buzzing on intelligent conversation and champagne, so I'm just going to run with it. It's been an amazing night! Anything is possible!

I push through a door and freeze. I thought this was the bathroom, but I'm actually on some sort of outdoor rooftop terrace. *So...I'm possibly tipsier than I thought.*

I stand at the door and consider my options. The terrace is pretty, full of oversized planter boxes that are lush with vegetation. It isn't going to help with the needing-to-pee situation, but the night air feels cool against my flushed skin, and the plants are so pretty.

*Betula pendula*, I think, running my fingers over the shimmering leaves of a silver birch tree. That one has always been one of my favorites.

I step past the tree and grip the banister at the edge of the terrace, looking out at the glittering skyline. It isn't anything like the views in North Carolina, but there's still something magical about all the glittering lights.

"Needed a break?" a rough voice says from behind me.

I spin around and come face to face with an older, balding man wearing a smarmy expression. He's holding a camera in his thick, meaty hands.

I close my eyes and swear under my breath.

What was I thinking coming out here like this?

"The life of a celebrity can feel pretty intense for someone like you. Someone who isn't a celebrity." He takes a step closer. "How are you feeling, Audrey?"

I take a step backward, my heart pounding in my chest, but there's nowhere for me to go. The banister is directly behind me. I grip it with both hands and force words to come out of my throat. "I'd rather not talk to anyone right now," I say.

The man licks his lips. "I watched you in the airport yesterday. Scared out of your wits, weren't you?" He tsks. "Better toughen up, sweetheart. This life isn't meant for everyone."

"I really would like to be left alone," I say, my voice stronger this time, but I might as well be speaking a different language for all the care this man is giving my words.

He lifts his camera and fires off a few shots, the flash blinding in the dim light. I lift a hand to shield my eyes.

"Step forward for me, honey. Let me get a few shots where the light is better." The man reaches forward, his free hand wrapping around my wrist before he yanks *hard*.

I stumble forward, struggling to regain my footing and pull my arm free, but the man has an iron grip. "Let me go," I say, the words sharp in my dry throat, but his grip only tightens as he pulls me closer, his breath hot on my face.

"Take your hands *off* my girlfriend," a familiar voice says, and I look up to see Flint hauling the man away from me. He

holds him by the shirt collar, anger blazing in his eyes. “Don’t go near her again. Do you understand me?” He shoves the man toward Nate, who is waiting just behind him, then he’s in front of me, his hands gripping my shoulders, his expression intense. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

I manage a stuttering breath, but I can’t form words. My heart is beating too fast, the adrenaline racing through me making me hot, then cold, then hot again.

“Audrey,” Flint says, giving my shoulders the tiniest squeeze.

It’s enough to rattle something loose, and I lift my gaze to his. His eyes are an intense blue, fear radiating in their depths. “I’m okay,” I whisper. “Can we just...I don’t want to be here anymore.”

He tugs me against him for a brief hug, then curls an arm around me protectively as he walks me out of the party. Nate and the photographer are nowhere to be seen. We don’t talk to anyone as we make our way to the elevator.

Nate must have talked to Joni though, because she shows up downstairs right after we do, letting us know a car is already on its way to pick us up.

Flint hasn’t said anything since we left the terrace, but I don’t need him to say actual words for me to understand how he’s feeling. His jaw is tight, tension radiating from him in palpable waves.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know he’s only angry because he was worried, and clearly, he had reason to be because I was in way over my head when that photographer accosted me. But the longer Flint is quiet, the more defensive I feel.

How was *I* supposed to know there would be a photographer hiding out on the terrace? As far as I understood it, the party was supposed to be private—no press. I don’t know how the photographer got in, but it’s not *my* fault he was there.

As soon as we’re in the car, Flint shifts to face me. “Audrey, what were you thinking going out there alone? I told you to

take Joni with you. *I told you.*”

My indignation boils to the surface. “What was I thinking?” I shoot back. “I’m not a child who needs scolding, Flint. I just wanted some air. How was I supposed to know there would be a photographer lurking in the corner?”

He scoffs. “That man is not a photographer. At least not a credible one. His name is Ed Cooper, and he’s a criminal with a mile-long list of restraining orders, a stalking charge, and the worst reputation in all of Hollywood. He has no morals, Audrey. He will cross every line there is to cross.”

“Oh, great. So happy to have met him. Maybe I’ll throw a party of my own and see if he’d like to be my official photographer.”

Flint’s expression darkens. “What are you even saying?”

“I’d like to ask you the same question. You’re talking to me like it’s *my fault* Ed Cooper was on that terrace. I didn’t do anything wrong, and I don’t appreciate you talking to me like I did.”

Flint lifts his hands, some of the fire draining out of his voice. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s absolutely not your fault. He shouldn’t have been there, it *was* a private party, and the fact that he found a way in doesn’t have anything to do with you. *I’m sorry,*” he says again.

I fold my arms over my chest. “Thank you for apologizing.”

“But Audrey, you still have to be cautious. In this city, you have to assume there is *always* a creep lurking in the corner. You can’t wander off on your own. You need air? Nate goes with you. You want to go on a walk? Nate goes with you. You want food? Nate or Joni takes care of it. That’s the only way this can work.”

His words knock the wind right out of me. That’s the only way this can work? The *only* way our relationship can work?

I want to protest, my natural instincts rearing up to claim my independence, assert that I’m perfectly capable of doing things on my own. But then I close my eyes and feel the

photographer's hand closing around my wrist, and a shudder goes through me.

I understand what Flint is saying. Safety is important, and as long as I'm with him, I have to think about it differently than I did before.

I also know the thought of having people hovering near me, watching my every move, waiting on me hand and foot twenty-four hours a day makes me want to crawl out of my own skin.

I thought I could do this.

I *want* to do this. I *want* to be with Flint.

But my fight or flight response has been triggered, and all my body wants to do is flee.

"What if I don't want people waiting on me like that?" I ask, my voice small. "What if it feels too weird? Weird and presumptuous and pretentious and so many other words that make me uncomfortable."

"It's their job," Flint says, an edge to his voice.

"No, it's their job to serve *you*."

"And you, as long as you're with me," he says without hesitation. "You're the least pretentious person on the planet, Audrey. Nate and Joni aren't going to mind."

Moisture pools in my eyes, and I press them closed, letting the tears slide down my cheeks. "It isn't about Nate and Joni, Flint. It's about *me*. We both know this conversation is about *me*."

He holds my gaze for a long moment, then he drops back into his seat, his jaw resting on his hand.

Neither of us says another word until we're back in our hotel room. By then, it's close to two a.m., and talking is probably the last thing we need to do. I can't speak for Flint, but I'm exhausted all the way down to my bones. On top of that, my heart is heavy, my emotions a confusing mass of raw, jumbled feelings.

Flint shrugs off his jacket and pulls off his tie, then unbuttons the top few buttons of his shirt. He runs a hand through his hair, looking just as tired as I feel. “Should we talk about things?” he asks, but there’s no oomph behind his words. He doesn’t want to talk any more than I do.

I shake my head. “Let’s just get some sleep. We can talk tomorrow.”

He nods, his expression grateful as he steps out of his shoes.

I do the same, slipping out of my heels, then I pause. I really don’t think I can get out of this dress by myself.

“Flint, can you help me with my dress?”

He moves in behind me without a word, his fingers brushing against my skin as he slowly unclasps the tiny hook and eye at the top of my dress, then slides down the zipper. I press my arms against the bodice to hold it in place, closing my eyes as sensation dances up and down my spine.

“Thank you,” I say, when the zipper reaches my waist.

He lifts his hands, his fingers briefly brushing across my exposed shoulders before he steps away. “I’ll give you a minute,” he says, and then he disappears into the bathroom.

It only takes a few more minutes for us to both be ready for bed.

Flint turns off the light and settles onto his pillow without even saying goodnight.

I close my eyes and try to regulate my breathing, but I’m still keyed up from everything that happened, my mind jumping from the run-in with the photographer to my argument with Flint to some crazy version of a future where Nate follows me around all the time, trudging behind me through the woods, watching me do all my research, even hovering outside the bathroom when I need to pee.

I close my eyes and take a slow, intentional breath, willing myself to relax. But it’s useless.

I am never going to fall asleep.



Beside me, the mattress shifts, and suddenly, Flint's warm body is right beside me. He snakes an arm around my waist and tugs me against him, curving his limbs around me, making himself the big spoon to my smaller one. His breath brushes over my ear. "Just breathe," he whispers. "I've got you."

I instantly relax, melting into the warmth of him, savoring his solid presence behind me. I didn't know this is what I would need to fall asleep, but with Flint beside me, his strong arms holding me close, I have never felt so safe.

My breathing slowly steadies, and my eyelids grow heavy.

Soon, Flint's breathing changes, and I can tell that he's asleep.

I don't want this to be complicated.

I have met a ridiculously perfect man, and I want to be with him.

More than anything.

But I can't pretend like there isn't a cost. My safety. My anonymity. My solitude. I can never take those things for granted again.

My life will never be *the same* again.

I just have to decide if it's worth it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Audrey

THERE IS ONLY ONE more stop before we're heading back to North Carolina, and that's the panel discussion at UCLA's film school.

Flint and I haven't talked much this morning. We only got a few hours of sleep before we had to be up, so it's possible we're both just tired. But the air seems different between us somehow. Like we're both waiting to see how the other is going to act.

A part of me wants to just throw my arms around him, apologize for the argument, and promise everything is going to be fine.

But I still feel sick whenever I think about the photographer in my face, violating my privacy, touching my skin, pulling me toward him.

I have no idea how I'm supposed to survive in Flint's world.

Trouble is, I also have no idea how I'm supposed to survive without him.

Applause and laughter echo through the auditorium, and I look up from where I'm sitting just off-stage with Nate and Joni, catching Flint's profile as he smiles. The question was a softball, something silly about staying in shape for all his shirtless scenes.

Flint lobs it right back, joking about good genetics and a team of twenty-five people all dedicated to the contours of his abdominal muscles.

Somehow, he manages to be perfectly self-deprecating while also pointing out the ridiculousness of regular people comparing themselves to celebrities who literally do *nothing* on their own.

It's the perfect answer, and clearly, the audience agrees because they're still laughing and cheering in response.

I don't envy the moderator's job, who has to somehow make the entire *Turning Tides* cast feel like they matter when clearly, the audience is mostly interested in hearing from Flint.

I drain the last of my coffee and set the cup at my feet, anxious to be done, to finally be heading home. Flint and I still have a lot to talk about, but I just keep clinging to the hope that it will be easier in Silver Creek.

Everything makes more sense there.

*We* make more sense there.

But a tiny voice in the back of my mind reminds me that Flint makes sense *here*, too. This is his world. And that isn't ever going to change.

The moderator sends a question over to the casting director, so I pull out my phone, using the moment to check my email. If Flint isn't the one talking, I feel much less compelled to listen.

Besides, I haven't even bothered to open my work email since Thursday afternoon. Since I'll be back in the lab tomorrow morning, it's probably smart to check in and see if I missed anything important over the weekend.

The email at the top of my inbox makes the air freeze in my lungs. The subject line alone is enough for me to know it isn't good news, and opening the message only confirms my fears.

I didn't get my grant.

Come January of next year, my funding will be gone.

I close out my email and drop my phone in my lap, not wanting to cry right here in the middle of everything that's going on. Even though I had a vague sense this was coming, it still feels like a shock. It's *real*. And it absolutely sucks.

Beside me, Joni swears and reaches for her phone as a ripple of sound moves across the auditorium. I was so distracted by my sudden job crisis, I missed whatever the question was that caused such a stir. If it was even a question at all.

"What is it? What happened?" I whisper, looking at Joni. I stand and move to the other side of Nate so I have a better view of Flint.

"I'm sorry, can you repeat your question?" Flint says, leaning toward his microphone.

I lean forward with him, straining my ears so I can hear the repeated question.

"Are you willing to comment on the story that just broke on TMZ, claiming that you faked a relationship with Audrey Callahan in order to create distance between you and your co-star?"

I gasp, my hand flying to my mouth.

*What in the world?*

I hold my breath while Flint clears his throat. I can't even imagine how he's feeling, what's running through his mind right now.

"You know," he finally says, his voice measured and controlled, "since you're in film school, I assume you have some aspiration to make it in this business. So I'll give you some advice. Don't pay attention to what gossip sites say about you, and don't comment on what gossip sites say about you. It's a rule I live by, and so far, it's served me well. If you've got a question about the movie or my experiences as an actor, I'd be happy to answer that one instead."

"Geez, only Flint could deflect a question like that," Joni says behind me without lifting her eyes from her phone.

“Why did someone ask it in the first place?” I say. “Who would even know to ask?” Someone beside us, Claire’s manager, I think, shushes us, and Joni grabs my hand, pulling me off the stage and into a hallway behind the theater.

“Anyone who reads the news would ask the question,” she says darkly. She hands me her phone, a search engine full of headlines taking up the entire screen. “Someone leaked the story, Audrey. It’s everywhere.”

Five minutes later, the four of us, Nate, Joni, me, and Flint, are all in a black SUV driving toward the airport. My insides are a mass of swirling, sickening emotions. First, the email from work, now this. In one thirty-minute stretch of time, my entire life has been turned upside down.

“Okay, give me the worst of it,” Flint says.

Joni takes a deep breath, then begins to read. *“A-list actor Flint Hawthorne made quite the statement last month when he posted photos of a new relationship on his public Instagram account. After claiming he was moving back to his hometown of Silver Creek, North Carolina to have more privacy, it seemed an abrupt shift to suddenly be making public declarations of affection. Turns out, it WAS an abrupt shift, and a totally fabricated one. An anonymous source close to the actor claims Hawthorne’s new relationship with wildlife biologist Audrey Callahan, a Silver Creek native, is completely fake.”*

*“Our source couldn’t confirm Hawthorne’s specific motivations, but our best guess is it had something to do with silencing his co-star, actress, Claire McKinsey. In the past few months, McKinsey has made very public insinuations that she and her Turning Tides co-star are on the brink of getting back together. Which leads us to ask, what really happened between Claire and Flint? Is this a publicity stunt? A way to get back at a scorned ex? Whatever his reasons, we give two thumbs down to Flint Hawthorne and his fake girlfriend and think this actor needs to grow up. Fake relationships? This isn’t middle school! The pair might have looked great on the red carpet at the Turning Tides premiere, but America doesn’t want to be duped. Stay tuned for further updates as the story unfolds.”*

Joni leans back into her seat, and a heavy silence settles over us. “I mean, it could have been worse,” she finally says.

I reach over and pick up Flint’s hand, entwining our fingers together. I don’t know how things are between us. I’m feeling off-kilter in every way possible, so I can only imagine he’s feeling it, too. But no matter what our relationship looks like in the future, I want him to know I’m here for him right now.

“*This actor needs to grow up*,” he says, his voice hollow. He swears softly. “I should have known this would happen.”

“What do you want to do, Flint?” Joni asks. “You fired Simon, but as far as everyone else knows, he’s still your publicist. He’s probably already gotten two dozen requests for comment.”

Flint scoffs. “On the story *he* leaked.”

“You really think it was him?” Joni asks.

“Of course it was him,” Flint says, steel in his tone. “Simon is the only person who knows, outside of the people in this car and our immediate families.” He looks at me. “You warned me. You *told* me he might do something like this, and I didn’t listen.” He presses his fists into the seatback in front of him and groans. “Why didn’t I just listen to you? Why didn’t I wait to fire him?”

I lift a hand to Flint’s back, rubbing slow circles across his shoulder blades. It’s such a small thing. Too small. But what else can I do?

“We just have to move forward from here,” Joni says. “What’s done is done. There’s no use beating yourself up over it now.” She pulls out her iPad and opens up her notepad app. “Okay. Bare minimum, we need to get Simon’s information off your website and issue a statement saying he no longer represents you. I can see if Kenji has someone who can handle that for us. But then you’ll need to decide if you want to hire a *new* publicist, or if you want to just go dark and hope this all blows over.”

“Can you get Kenji on the phone?” Flint asks. “I want to know what he thinks.”

As soon as Kenji is on the line, Joni gives him a quick update, all the way back to Simon's involvement with Claire and her decision to also fire Simon.

"Wow," Kenji says when Joni finishes. "You sure know how to piss a guy off."

"What do I do, man?" Flint asks. "Can I just go home? Hope all of this goes away on its own?"

"You *can*," Kenji says. "And it might. But I'm not sure that's a gamble I'd take."

My heart sinks at Kenji's words. I don't *want* to stay in LA. I *can't* stay. Not when my professional life is falling to pieces back in Silver Creek.

Flint sighs and presses his forehead into his palm. I move my hand from his back, down to his knee, giving it a quick squeeze. He doesn't respond to my touch at all, and I pull my hand back into my lap, hating how far away he feels. Hating even more that I'm part of the reason why.

"Listen," Kenji says. "Most of what Simon is saying is inconsequential. It's annoying and it makes you look a little stupid, but if it doesn't get worse than what we're seeing right now, it isn't going to have much impact. You're a professional. You work like a professional. That holds more weight than what entertainment news has to say. My bigger worry is that Simon isn't finished."

"You think he'll try to sabotage my career?" Flint says.

"Nah," Kenji says easily. "You're too big for him to sabotage anything. But I can see him spreading rumors. Saying you're not so easy to work with. Maybe hinting that your personal drama sometimes gets in the way."

"But couldn't Flint do the same thing to Simon?" I say. I look at Flint. "That's why you felt comfortable firing him, right? Because you thought he'd be too nervous about what you could do to *his* reputation."

"It's a valid question. But Simon isn't an idiot. I'm sure it occurred to him that you could go public with what he's done and impact his credibility. The fact that he leaked the story

*anyway* makes me think he's got some greater strategy in all this. I don't have any idea what that strategy might look like, but honestly, I'm more concerned about what Simon might say in the future than I am about what he said today."

"Or he just acted impulsively," I say. "He has no strategy. He was just angry and vindictive."

"Either way," Kenji says, "we need to stay a few steps ahead of him."

I don't need Kenji to say the words to sense where this conversation is going.

Flint needs to stay in LA.

"Why don't you come by the office this afternoon?" Kenji says, confirming my fear. "We'll come up with a plan and talk about a new publicist. I know a woman. She's young and not as well-connected as Simon, but she's sharp. Thinks faster than anyone else I know. I'll get her in here and see if we can draft a response to any inquiries that come in that will minimize damage, deny the story, and keep you looking like the professional you are. Then we'll talk about how to handle Simon."

"Can we do it over the phone?" Flint asks. "We're flying out in a couple of hours."

"Dude, listen. I know you hate being in LA, but this will be so much easier if you just come in. If you're hiring this publicist, you need to meet her. Get some face time. Make sure you feel good about this."

Flint breathes out a weary sigh. "Okay. I'll make it work."

"If possible, Audrey should stay too. The more the two of you are seen in public, together and obviously into each other, the easier it will be to discredit Simon's story. Either way, I'll see you this afternoon."

Kenji hangs up and Flint's gaze shifts to me, his eyebrows raised in question.

I bite my lip. I want to stay. I do. But I *can't*. I need to call the university. Talk to my summer grad students. Regroup.



Figure out if there's any money out there that can keep us funded. We need to be writing grant applications. Networking. Deciding what's next.

Flint must read my hesitation because his expression shifts, his hope turning into resignation. He masks it quickly, but I don't miss the hurt in his eyes, despite the effort he's making to keep it hidden from me. "Flint, it's not you. I want to be here with you. I do. But—I just found out I didn't get my grant."

"What? Why not?"

I shrug. "The organization that's been funding me the past three years has decided to shift their efforts to research on the coast—something about the impact of global warming on oceanic temperatures. Which is timely and important, so I guess I can't really fault them."

"But your research is important, too," Flint says. "Audrey, I'm so sorry."

"That's why I need to get home. I have to find money, somehow. Revise my grant application. I don't know. This late in the year, it's going to be tough. But I have to try."

"*Of course* you do. You have to go." He drops back into his seat. "I'm really sorry this is happening. It's like everything fell apart for both of us all at once."

I have to wonder if everything has fallen apart for *us*, too. As a couple.

"We're going to get through it though, right?" I say, willing myself to cling to whatever optimism I can muster. "It's going to be okay. You'll stay here and get through your stuff, I'll go home and get through my stuff, and everything will work out?"

He frowns. "Audrey, my stuff is *your stuff*, too. We haven't really talked about this part yet, and it really, really sucks, but the next few days are not going to be easy for you. You're probably going to be bombarded with emails, voice mails, text messages. Gossip columnists will do everything they can to try to get a comment out of you."

Joni nods. “He’s right, Audrey. There would have been *some* mild interest when everyone thought your relationship was real. But now that people think it was all staged, they’re going to want your side of the story. They may even reach out to your sisters or parents. All of you should probably block calls from unknown numbers, at least for the next couple of weeks.”

“And you shouldn’t go anywhere alone until you’re sure there isn’t anyone in Silver Creek who doesn’t belong there,” Flint says. He looks at Nate. “I want you to travel home with Audrey, Nate.”

“Nate isn’t staying with you?” I ask.

“No,” Flint says, his expression stern. “I want him with you.”

His words settle over me like an itchy wool blanket. Somehow, I’d forgotten to consider the fact that the other half of Flint’s fake relationship is *me*. Enduring all the attention when I have Flint around to help me through it is one thing.

I don’t know how I feel about enduring it on my own.

“What about your security?” Nate asks. “I’m happy to go, but I don’t like the idea of you out here by yourself.”

“Honestly, I can fly home by myself,” I say, but Flint is shaking his head no before I’ve even finished my sentence.

“You aren’t traveling alone. That’s not up for debate. If I can’t be with you while all this nonsense blows over, then Nate has to be.” He looks at Joni. “Call the security agency we used to use and have them send someone out to cover me until I fly home.”

“I assume I’m staying with you?” she asks, and Flint nods.

I sink back into my seat, my brain split between worrying about my lack of funding and stressing over the unknown attention and drama I’m facing because of stupid Simon. This isn’t how my trip with Flint was supposed to end. This isn’t how *anything* was supposed to end.

And now we have to say goodbye with all this tension between us, all the conversations we haven’t had still lingering

in the air.

How do we even move on from our last conversation? We both know it didn't end well, but how else could it have ended? I *can't* be with Flint without considering my safety—my privacy—in new ways. It doesn't matter whether I like it or not. Reality is reality. End of story.

But what am I supposed to do if that reality makes me uncomfortable? It was simple to think I could handle Flint's celebrity life when everything was easy and perfect, but the second it got hard, I freaked out. That can't be a good sign.

We pull up in front of LAX, and Nate and Joni both jump out, probably to say their own goodbyes in private. Our driver gets out to retrieve our bags, leaving Flint and me alone.

Flint must feel some sense of hesitation—or maybe he's just picking up on mine—because he makes no move to touch me. “Call me when you make it home?” he says. “I don't care how late it is. I just want to know you're safe.”

I nod. “I'm really sorry I can't stay.”

“I'm sorry I *have* to stay.” He lifts a hand like he wants to touch me, but then it falls back into his lap. “And I'm sorry you lost your grant. I wish there was something I could do.”

Joni opens the passenger door behind me. “Time to go, Audrey.”

“Just one more second,” I say, and she nods and closes the door.

I sniff and wipe at the tears streaming down my cheeks. I hold Flint's gaze for a long moment, and then suddenly, whatever tension keeping us apart snaps, and I throw myself into his arms.

His hands lift to cradle my face and he kisses me, his thumbs wiping away my tears. When he finally breaks the kiss, I melt against him, my head falling on his chest while his hands run up and down my back.

“Why does leaving you feel so hard?” I whisper.

He presses a kiss to my temple. “We’ll talk soon, all right? We’ll figure things out.”

Joni knocks on the window, giving us another heads-up that we’re out of time.

I reluctantly pull away and gather my things, then slide across the bench toward the door of the SUV. I look back one last time. Right now, Flint doesn’t look like a movie star. He looks tired and worn down and as frustrated as I feel.

I follow Nate into the airport, through security, and toward our gate, keeping my head down to avoid eye contact just like Flint taught me.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

I only know it feels like my body is on its way home to Silver Creek, but I’m leaving my heart in LA.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Audrey

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, LIFE in Silver Creek post-celebrity-relationship (fake celebrity relationship?) could be worse.

Flint and Joni weren't wrong about inquiries from gossip sites and other reporters. Fortunately, my lack of a social media presence has made me slightly more difficult to reach. Mostly, I've just gotten emails. A few people have shown up at the house or stopped by the lab, but since Nate has insisted on shadowing me everywhere I go, it's been easy to simply let him turn them away.

I pull off my glasses and drop them onto my desk, then close my eyes, pressing my fingers into my eye sockets.

"I'm not gonna lie, Audrey. You look like you need a good night's sleep," Nate says, setting a mug of coffee down on my desk. "Drink this, at least."

I manage a small smile and reach for the cup. "I don't think I've *had* a good night's sleep since I got home." *Since I left Flint*. I think of how easily I slept with his arms around me, even just after a horrible run-in with the skeevy photographer at the premiere party, and a wave of longing rushes through me.

“Hey, whatever happened to the guy at the party? Ed Cooper?”

Nate drops into an empty chair across from my desk, causing a loud creak.

Malorie, one of the forest rangers who staffs the research lab, shoots us some side-eye, and Nate squirms.

“Can you get in trouble for me being here?”

I wave a dismissive hand. “I don’t work for them. My university has an agreement with the state allowing me to use the space, but I’m my own boss around here. You’re fine.”

“Will that be in jeopardy too?” Nate asks. “If you don’t find new funding?”

I nod. “Sadly, yes. Malorie is grumpy—she’s the one who just gave us angry eyes—but everyone else is really great. I’ll be sad to go.”

“Maybe you won’t go,” Nate says. “Don’t give up yet.”

I take a long drink of coffee. “Oh, geez,” I say, putting down the mug. “I forgot how bad the coffee is here.”

“Sorry,” Nate says. “You looked desperate.”

I press my face into my hands, rubbing them up and down like I’m trying to wake myself up, then breathe out a long sigh. “I miss him, Nate.”

“I’m sure he misses you, too.”

“So, Ed Cooper?”

“Right. We called the cops on him that night, but he’d somehow managed to snag an official invitation to the party, so they had to let him go. He wasn’t breaking any laws by being there.”

An uncomfortable shiver runs down my spine. “I just feel like there ought to be a way to stop him somehow.”

“Unfortunately, there will always be guys like Ed Cooper out there. It sucks, but it’s the price people like Flint have to pay.”

“And people close to Flint,” I say, my voice tired.

Nate leans forward, holding me with his very serious stare. It’s funny to remember how intimidated I was by this man when we first met. He really is just a giant softy. “Listen,” he says. “I know my opinion doesn’t matter. But I worked for a security agency before Flint hired me full-time, and I shadowed a lot of famous people. Flint is one of the good ones.”

Warmth spreads through my chest. Nate doesn’t have to convince me. I *know* Flint is good. “Thanks, Nate. Your opinion absolutely matters.”

Nate glances at his watch. “Are you working late tonight?”

It’s only my second day back at the lab, and I can for sure find something to do, but if I stay late, Nate will stay late, and I don’t want him to do that. He hired a second security officer to cover my house when I’m home and in for the night, but as long as I’m out and about, Nate won’t stop working.

“We can go now,” I say, pushing back from my desk. “I can work on grant proposals from home, and that’s mainly what I need to be focusing on anyway.”

Nate follows me out to the parking lot, his eyes moving from side to side like there’s *actually* a possibility of danger in this sleepy corner of Silver Creek. “So, when I start teaching classes next week, will someone have to come to school with me? I bet my students would love—”

Nate grips my elbow, silencing my rambling, and tugs me behind him.

And that’s when I see him. *Ed Cooper*.

“I like you in your natural habitat,” he says as he lifts his camera.

My stomach rolls, a wave of nausea nearly doubling me over.

“Keep walking, Audrey,” Nate says, his voice low. “Don’t respond to him.”

Suddenly, the distance between us and Nate's SUV seems enormous. It can't be more than twenty yards, but my shoes are full of lead, and my limbs are trembly and weak. The car could be miles away for how long it's going to take me.

"This whole look," Ed says, following behind us, the shutter on his camera clicking over and over. "It really suits you, Audrey. You look like a real biologist."

I swallow against the lump in my throat, but it's Nate who answers him. "She *is* a real biologist. And you're on private property. You need to leave."

"Touchy," he says, as he takes a step closer. "Sorry if I'm a little confused about what's real and what isn't. After all the news lately, who knows?"

Nate pulls out his keys and clicks the fob to unlock the doors. He keeps his hand on my elbow, half-leading, half-dragging my stupid functionless limbs toward the passenger side.

"What can you tell me about your relationship, Audrey? Was it all fake? Are you going to see Flint again?" *Click. Click, click.* "I saw Flint the other night. He was out with Claire McKinsey. Did you know he's still seeing her? Was all this faking just a ploy to make her jealous?"

I ignore his words. I *have to* ignore his words.

I trust Flint.

Ten times more than I trust Ed Cooper.

Nate pulls open the passenger door and helps me in, shutting it firmly behind me. Seconds later, Nate is in the driver's seat, and we're leaving Ed Cooper and his stupid camera behind.

"Are you all right?" Nate asks.

I manage a weak nod, but my mind is spinning. I can't stop thinking about what might have happened had Nate not been there.

What if I'd been alone?



Nate checks his rearview mirror at least a dozen times on the way home. I don't see anyone following behind us, but that's little comfort. If Ed Cooper figured out where I work, I'm sure he knows where I live.

"Do you think he'll come to the house?" I manage to ask, shocked by how shaken I sound.

"If he does, I'll be there," Nate says. "I won't let him close to you, Audrey."

Ten minutes later, I'm on the couch in my living room with a bowl of Lucy's chicken noodle soup in my hands, flanked by a sister on either side. Nate called the cops first—he suspects Ed Cooper broke parole when he left California—then he calls Flint. I can only hear his side of the conversation, but it's enough to tell me how worried Flint is.

I appreciate his worry. And Nate's worry. And the way my sisters are hovering like I might break apart if they aren't here to hold me up. But I also feel like I'm wearing too-small shoes.

The attention. The security measures. All this *concern* for my welfare. Two months ago, the only thing threatening my peace and safety was the occasional run-in with a black bear. And then, I knew exactly what to do to keep *myself* safe. I was capable. Confident. Strong enough to handle whatever situation I found myself in.

But I'm in over my head with this. I *did* get away from the photographer today. But what if it happens again?

After eating and reassuring my sisters that I'm okay, I escape into my room and collapse onto my bed. I stare at my ceiling fan for a long time, watching the blades spin slowly around.

Right after Flint asked me to go to LA with him, Lucy talked me down from a full-on freak-out by treating my circumstances like a science project. We examined the facts. Formed reasonable hypotheses and logical conclusions. And it worked.

Taking a deep breath, I try to do the same thing, but my thoughts are so jumbled, I just keep thinking myself in circles.

When my phone rings an hour later, the screen lighting up with Flint's face, I have no more clarity than I did before, but I can't not answer—not when I know how worried he must be.

I grab my phone, pressing a pillow against my chest as I answer the call. "Hi, Flint."

"Hey. How are you?" he asks, concern filling his voice. "How are you feeling?"

"Still a little shaken up, but I'll be okay."

"Audrey, listen," he says. "I want you to move into my house for a few days. At least until they find Cooper and arrest him. Take your sisters with you. You'll be closer to Nate, and you'll have a security system to keep you safe when Nate can't be close by."

I close my eyes. I suspected this was what Flint would want. Logically, it makes sense. If I'm in danger, his house is a lot safer than mine. But my physical safety isn't the only thing on the line here. Nate already assured me there would be eyes on my house around the clock. I'll be safe here at home. And right now, I *need* to be.

A sense of calm settles into my heart. This is the right call. Even if it's a painful one.

"I don't want to move into your house, Flint."

He's quiet for a beat. "I don't mean permanently. Just until we can make sure—"

"I know what you mean," I say, cutting him off as gently as I can. "And I appreciate the offer. But Flint..." I hesitate, hating the tremble in my voice. "I just need to be in my own space for a while. I think I'm feeling..." I pause, fresh tears streaming down my cheeks. "Swallowed, I guess? Like my life is somehow getting sucked up into yours. And that's not your fault, and I'm not saying I don't want us to be together. I just need to breathe a minute, and that's going to be a lot easier in my own house."

“I’m not sure I understand,” he says.

“Flint, your house is a fairy tale. It’s magical and beautiful and full of white squirrels, and I love every single thing about it. *All of it* is a fairy tale. You. The private jet and the beautiful clothes and the people ready to wait on me hand and foot. It’s amazing. *Of course* it’s amazing. But it also makes it easy to get swept up. I’m Cinderella at the ball, only, I was never the girl who sat around and dreamed about ball gowns. I would have totally ruined that story because I would have taken one look at the royal invitation and been like, ‘You know what? I’m good. Y’all have fun at the party. I’m gonna hang back and chill with the mice.’”

He chuckles. “That’s one of the things I love most about you. I don’t want you to change, Audrey. I just want you to be safe.”

“I know. *I know* you do, and I appreciate that. But this is about more than my safety. It’s the conversation we *didn’t* have when we argued after the premiere. Every time I’m faced with a new reality of *your* world, I have to stop and ask myself how it’s going to impact *mine*. How will being together influence my work? Will I travel with you whenever you’re filming? Will I stay in Silver Creek? Will I require a security detail even when we aren’t together? Every answer impacts the level of autonomy and control I have over my own life. I realize that’s the case with every relationship. But we can’t pretend like there aren’t special circumstances here.”

Flint is quiet for a long time. *Too long*. If not for the slight sound of his breathing, I might wonder if he was still on the call.

“So you’re saying you aren’t sure if you want us to be together,” he finally says.

“No,” I say, my voice breaking under the strain of my emotions. “I’m not saying that at all. I’m just saying I’m scared and uncertain, and I want to make sure I know my own mind. Your life is so big, Flint. And it’s amazing and glamorous and I love being a part of it. But my life is

important, too. I just don't want to get so swept up in your world that I lose my own."

"Which is why you want to stay at your house."

"I mean, yes. But it's more than that too."

He sighs. "I understand. I don't like it. But I *do* understand it." He sniffs and clears his throat. When he speaks again, he almost sounds like a different person. "Listen, I want you to take as much time as you need, all right? Stay at your place, for sure. Nate will still be keeping an eye on things, but I'll tell him to keep his distance so your life will feel as normal as possible."

"Flint, stop," I say.

"Stop what?"

"I don't know what just happened, but your voice changed." I think back to the way he spoke to my sisters when he first met them. That's exactly what he sounds like now. "You just turned into actor Flint—like you're only saying what I want to hear. But I don't want you to pretend with me."

He's quiet for a long moment. "You can't have it both ways, Audrey," he finally says. "You can't ask me for space and also ask me to be real, because what I want *for real* is the opposite of giving you space."

Pain slices into my heart. What am I doing? Am I really pushing him away?

"I'm sorry," I say, my voice soft. "You're right. That wasn't fair of me to say."

He sighs. "Audrey, you told me from the beginning you weren't interested in a life like mine."

"But that was before I knew you, before I..." *Before I fell in love with you.* I don't finish the sentence out loud, but the realization fills my heart with perfect clarity.

I love him. *I love him.*

If that's true, everything else will have to work out, won't it?

“I think...I need to not call you for a few days, all right?”  
Flint says.

“Flint, wait—”

“No, this is good. I think we both need a minute to think. To figure out what we want.” He’s actor Flint again, protecting his heart, doing what he thinks I need in order to protect mine.

I close my eyes, tears falling freely now. “Are you still coming home?”

“I’ve got a few more things to do first. But soon. As soon as I can.”

We end the call and I crawl under my comforter, not even caring that I haven’t brushed my teeth or checked the front door lock or plugged in my phone.

I said the hard things that were sitting on my heart—the fears, the struggles, the worries—and I don’t have regrets about that. A relationship with Flint will mean all kinds of conversations about how his fame impacts both of our lives.

But I still feel like my heart is broken, and I’m not sure I can fix it until Flint is here—until I see him again.

Soon better get here quick.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Flint

**Flint:** So. Pretty sure I'm in love with Audrey.

**Brody:** WHAT? I'M SHOCKED.

**Brody:** We all saw this coming, dude.

**Flint:** For real?

**Perry:** You're a good actor, man. But not that good.

**Lennox:** Olivia made us watch the red-carpet footage from the premiere.

**Brody:** It made me throw up in my mouth a little. What are you wearing, Flint? Oh, you look so handsome tonight, Flint. BARF.

**Flint:** I was wearing Tom Ford. Thanks for asking. Brushed wool, lined in silk. I promise it felt as good as it looked. Anyone else ever wear a Tom Ford tuxedo?

**Brody:** Tom Ford. That's the bargain brand you rent from Men's Warehouse, right? Like, for prom and stuff?

**Lennox:** Hahaha. Brody's on one...

**Flint:** Can we please get back to the very important subject of my love life?

**Perry:** Yes. Right. You love Audrey.

**Lennox:** Does she love you back? Are we celebrating here? Or commiserating?

**Flint:** Not celebrating yet. Things are still... tenuous?

**Perry:** Explain tenuous.

**Flint:** She's kinda been through it. The same photographer who accosted her in LA followed her to Silver Creek and showed up at her lab. Nate was with her. She's fine. Just a little freaked out.

**Lennox:** Yeah. That's a lot.

**Flint:** And maybe not sure if it's worth it, I guess?

**Flint:** She said she's worried about her life getting swallowed up in mine.

**Brody:** I mean, your life is a lot. But it isn't ALWAYS a lot. Things will probably calm down after the initial freak-out over you being in a relationship.

**Flint:** Have you guys ever resented my fame?

**Flint:** I realize there are a million ways you could make fun of me for asking that question, but this time I need a serious answer.

**Perry:** I was a little annoyed when I had to hire security because your fans wouldn't stop sneaking onto the farm to take pictures with Mom's goats. But I didn't resent you.

**Brody:** You're family, man. And we're proud of you. If we have to deal with a little extra attention every once in a while, it just means we make fun of you harder that week.

**Lennox:** Blending two lives into one is never easy. You guys will figure it out.

**Flint:** If she loves me back.

**Brody:** Have you told her how you feel?

**Flint:** Not yet. She asked for a little bit of breathing room.

**Lennox:** Ohhh. That's not good.

**Brody:** Don't freak him out. It's probably nothing.

**Flint:** Probably? What does probably mean?

**Brody:** Actually, I think we need to survey the wives here. Hang on.

**Perry:** Lila says wanting breathing room COULD mean she's not interested, but it could also mean she's VERY interested but also VERY overwhelmed. She says having met Audrey, her vote is for the second one.

**Brody:** Yep. Kate said the same thing. She says Audrey is probably gun-shy. She needs to know you see her for HER. And not just as a celebrity girlfriend.

**Flint:** I do not see her as a celebrity girlfriend.

**Brody:** Hi! This is Kate. I know that's not how you see her, but so far, all your big gestures have been about what she's doing for YOU. Attending your premiere, walking the red carpet, posing for your Instagram photos. What have you done for HER?

**Brody:** Okay. Giving the phone back now. I'm done.

**Flint:** Oh man. That's...

**Brody:** THAT'S MY WIFE, Y'ALL. She's smart.

**Lennox:** Tatum here. Typing one-handed because I'm breastfeeding. But YES. Listen to Kate. Do something for her that lets her know you care



about her life, too. And your relationship will never be JUST about your status as a celebrity.

**Perry:** How's the baby? Is she so big? I swear, they grow so fast at that age.

**Flint:** Lila, did you steal Perry's phone? WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THIS GROUP CHAT? No more breastfeeding and baby talk. Go find your own thread.

**Flint:** Actually, wait. Don't leave. I think you guys might be able to help me more than my idiot brothers can.

**Brody:** YES!! I'm back in control. Let us help. We love you. We love Audrey. We want this to work.

**Perry:** Why don't you start by telling us what you love about her? <3

**Lennox:** Ohhh yes! Good idea.

**Flint:** Okay. She's brilliant. It's killer sexy.

**Perry:** Excellent first answer!

**Flint:** I also love her authenticity. She is who she is, and she doesn't equivocate about it.

**Lennox:** This is important. Especially because you're famous. Having a partner who has a strong sense of self matters. What else?

**Flint:** She's gorgeous. Like, knock the breath out of me beautiful. She's the person I want to tell whenever anything good happens, but I also want to talk to her when something really sucks. I just...want her to be my person.

**Brody:** Sigh. <3

**Perry:** <3 <3 <3

**Lennox:** I'm literally crying right now!

**Flint:** Stop with the exclamation points and heart emojis or I'm making you give the phones back to your husbands.

**Perry:** Flint, you don't really need our help. Do you know why you're a good actor? You have high emotional intelligence. You get how people feel, and you translate that into how you act.

**Brody:** Ohhh, that's so true, Lila.

**Lennox:** Which means you know her, Flint. You know what she needs.

**Brody:** But also, maybe hire some female security. If you're going to have security people around all the time, might be nice if she has someone who can also be her friend.

**Flint:** Thanks, y'all.

**Perry:** We really like her, Flint. Good luck. Let us know if you need us again. <3

**Brody:** You can do it! Win her heart! <3

**Lennox:** <3 <3 <3

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**Perry:** Oh wow. That's a lot of heart emojis.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

Audrey

LUCY WAKES ME UP the following morning by climbing into my bed.

“What is happening?” I mumble sleepily, squinting against the Saturday morning sunshine pouring through my window.

“Look at this,” she says, snuggling in beside me and holding up her phone. “Someone stopped Flint on his way out of a restaurant the other night, and he actually answered a question about the whole fake dating thing.”

“Wait, he talked about it?”

“I mean, he didn’t say much, but yeah. Here. Watch.” She cues up the video and holds her phone in the air above us so we can both watch. It begins with a commentator providing a summary of the allegations in the original story, then cuts to a clip of Flint’s response during the panel at UCLA, and then, finally, a clip of Flint on the sidewalk outside a restaurant.

“I have nothing but positive feelings for all my co-stars from *Turning Tides*. Claire and I ended our relationship amicably, and we’ve remained friends. As for my current relationship, I can assure you, everything I’m feeling is very real.”

Lucy drops the phone and turns her head to look at me. “So smart, right? He didn’t lie by refuting the story, but he also

made it seem like it was all just total baloney. And he totally did it on the spot!”

I take a deep breath, still trying to wake up, and stretch my arms over my head. “Smart, yes. But it probably *wasn't* on the spot. My guess is his publicist planted that reporter on purpose and coached Flint on how to respond.”

“Really? They do that?”

“Of course they do. When we flew into LAX, why do you think there were so many people there to see us arrive? Flint’s publicist leaked our travel plans on purpose. We needed to be seen together, so he made sure we were seen.”

“Look at you with all your insider Hollywood knowledge,” Lucy says.

“Hey, pull that video back up again,” I say, motioning toward her phone. “Is there an article with it? Does it say anything about who he was with that night?”

She pulls it back up. “There was an article. Hold on.” She scrolls through it, angling the phone so I can also see. “He was with Claire McKinsey, it looks like,” she says. “But other people too. Wait. Here’s a photo of all of them leaving.” She hands me the phone. “Do you know these people? That’s Joni, right?”

I study the picture closely. It’s blurry, but I’m sure I see Joni just behind Flint. And Claire is there too, along with Kenji, her manager, who I remember from the UCLA panel, and one other woman I don’t recognize. “That *is* Joni. And this guy is his agent, Kenji. That’s Rita, Claire’s manager. I’m guessing this other woman is the new publicist Flint just hired.”

Either way, I feel a tiny pulse of satisfaction knowing Flint wasn’t out with Claire alone, no matter what stupid Ed Cooper said.

“Is that weird?” Lucy asks. She wraps an arm around me. “To get information about his whereabouts from the internet?”

“The photographer who showed up at my lab actually said something to me about it—about Flint being out with Claire.

He was just taunting me, trying to get me to react, so I didn't really believe him. But yeah. It's still weird."

Lucy is quiet for a long moment. "I never thought about how much trust you have to have. There will probably always be people saying crap about him. I guess you have to get good at filtering it out."

"Flint says it gets easier over time."

"Yeah, probably. But still. It's so easy to focus on the fairy tale part. I guess there's a lot more to it."

I take a deep breath. "Yeah."

She turns her face to look at me. "You still haven't talked to him?"

I shake my head no. It's only been four days since we last talked, but it feels more like an eternity.

"How are you feeling?"

I tug my blanket up to my chin, snuggling a little deeper into my covers. "I miss him, Lu."

"Because you love him?"

I press my lips together. So far, the only person I've admitted my feelings to is *me*. But at this point, the idea of keeping secrets is much too exhausting. If I *am* in love, I don't want to pretend like I'm not.

Lucy can clearly read my emotions because her eyes widen. "Oh my gosh. You *do* love him." She sits up. "I can see it on your face."

I lift my hands and press them to my cheeks. "It's crazy. I don't even know how it happened."

"Oh, honey, I know *exactly* how it happened." She scrambles off the bed and yanks down my blankets.

"Lucy! What are you doing?" I reach for my comforter, but she tugs it completely off the bed, then grabs my hands, pulling until I'm on my feet beside her.

“That was really rude and awful,” I say, my voice still sleepy.

“I don’t care. You’re in love, and that means we need to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what? I only admitted I love *him*. I have no idea how he feels about me.”

She props her hands on her hips. “Woman, did you *watch* the footage from the premiere? He looks at you like he *worships* you.” She moves to the bedroom door and heads down the hallway. “Come on. I’m making you breakfast.”

I pick up my comforter and quickly make my bed. I hate leaving it unmade, but also, I need a minute to process. In the video Lucy showed me, Flint said his feelings were real—but that’s not a surprise. He told me the same thing. But the joy that shot through my veins when I heard him say it so plainly—I wasn’t expecting that.

I drop onto the corner of my bed.

I’ve been so worried, so confused the past couple of days. But is there really anything confusing about it? If I love him, why would I chose not to be with him?

Lucy is mixing pancake batter when I make it to the kitchen. She nudges a container of strawberries across the counter. “Here. Want to cut these for me?”

I fish a knife out of the drawer. “Do you and Summer even keep *any* food downstairs?”

“Very little,” Lucy says. She turns to face me, leaning her hip against the counter. “So what are we going to do about this? If you love him, why aren’t you with him right now, hugging and kissing and making beautiful babies?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not that easy. You know it’s not that easy.”

“I don’t, actually,” Lucy says. “I’ve never been in love.”

This gives me pause. My little sisters have both dated a lot. I lift my eyes to meet hers. “Really? Not even with...what was his name? With the glasses and the curly hair? Tim?”

Lucy frowns. “Ugh. Definitely not Tim.”

“Huh.”

“Focus, Auds. What’s the hold-up with you and Flint?”

I slowly slice my way through a few more strawberries. “I’m just scared, I think. Which, when you make me say it out loud, it feels incredibly lame.”

“It’s not lame. It’s how you feel. But just because it’s scary doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it. People do scary things all the time.”

“No, *you* do scary things all the time. Summer does scary things. I don’t.”

Lucy scoffs. “Says the woman who has faced down a black bear? More than once?”

“You’re crazy if you think bears are scarier than people.”

She pulls out my griddle pan from under the counter and turns on the stove. “You’re crazy if you think life *with* Flint is scarier than life without him. You have to listen to your heart, Auds. Don’t let fear ruin something that could be amazing.”

“But what if it isn’t amazing?” I drop the knife and spin to face her. “I mean, of course it’s amazing right now, but what if the magic eventually wears off and then it’s just a lot of time apart, wishing we weren’t on opposite sides of the country?”

She levels me with a long look. “Then you will have been on one wild ride, and you can sell your story to *People* magazine and make millions of dollars.”

“Shut up. I would never do that.”

She drops butter onto the pan, watching while it slowly melts and starts to sizzle. “The point still stands. It’s okay for something to be good while it’s good and then end without the experience being a failure. Besides, what if it *does* stay amazing forever? You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

Tears suddenly prick my eyes, but I’m not about to start crying when it isn’t even nine a.m., so I pick up the knife and dig back into the strawberries, willing the tears away.

Lucy bumps my hip with hers. “Don’t cry into the strawberries, Auds. They aren’t good salty.”

I hiccup a laugh and give up fighting. I drop the knife and lift my hands, using my sleeves to dry my tears. “Seriously, what are you doing to me? And when did you get so wise?”

Lucy smiles and points at me with her spatula. “Pretty sure wisdom is encoded in our DNA. I’m just not as big a chicken as you are, so I’m seeing this particular situation a little more clearly.”

I huff. “I’m not a chicken.”

“Then let go. Let go, and just *be* with him.” She pours out the first few pancakes. “Oh! Did you bring your phone out here?” she asks. “There was one more thing I wanted to show you. Mom and Dad’s TikTok has totally exploded.”

“What? Why? Isn’t their account already huge?” I slide the last of the strawberries into a bowl then reach for my phone, navigating through TikTok until I find Mom and Dad’s account.

“I mean, it was kind of huge,” Lucy says. “But someone tagged them as Flint Hawthorne’s future in-laws, and they’ve gotten something like a million new followers in the past twenty-four hours. Watch their latest video. They just posted it yesterday.”

I push play, then listen to a minute or so of Mom and Dad, playing their instruments outside their RV, but I don’t recognize the song. “What is it?”

“It’s the theme song to Flint’s *Agent Twelve* movies. Clever, right?”

“I might say a little on the nose, but let’s go with clever.”

“They’re playing it so cool in the comments though,” Lucy says. “Like, they aren’t confirming anything. They just aren’t denying it either.”

“I bet Mom is loving all the attention.”

“She totally is.” Lucy flips the pancakes and smirks. “The attention isn’t always bad, Audrey. Sometimes it can be fun.



Now go wake up Summer. Breakfast first, then I know exactly what we need to do to celebrate.”



Lucy’s idea of celebrating is watching movies all day.

And by movies, I mean *Flint Hawthorne* movies.

My first impulse is to refuse. I can’t watch all his movies. Watching his movies will only make me love him more. But then I think of Lucy’s words.

*Let go and be with him.*

I take a steadying breath, then drop onto the couch. “Fine, but you have to fast-forward through any kissing.”

Summer pops some popcorn even though it’s only ten-thirty and we only just finished breakfast, then drops onto my other side, plopping the bowl into my lap.

I look from one to the other. “I know what you guys are doing,” I say.

“What? What are we doing?” Summer asks.

“You’re *here*,” I say. “I can’t remember the last time either of you was around on a Saturday. I know you’re staying in for me.” I link my arms through each of theirs. “I just want you to know I appreciate it.”

Lucy nudges my knee. “You’re watching a *movie* with us, Audrey. Even if I *had* plans, I’d cancel them to see this miracle happen.”

I roll my eyes and grab a handful of popcorn. “Just shut up and push play already.”

One movie turns into two, then three. With my limited experience, I’m probably a poor judge, but Flint deserved the Oscar for the World War II movie. After that one is over, we watch the first two *Agent Twelve* movies back-to-back, and I fall a little bit in love with Flint as a beard-wearing, gun-wielding CIA agent. Next up is the time travel movie (my sisters say it isn’t nearly as bad as Flint claimed) but we’re breaking for dinner first because Lucy insists we can’t survive

on popcorn and Red Vines alone. I feel like we're doing a pretty solid job, but I'll feel better tomorrow if I get a little protein, so I don't need much convincing when she mentions pasta Bolognese.

Just before we start the next movie, a knock sounds on the front door.

My heart stops. I'm pretty sure Nate is still out front, and he wouldn't let anyone approach unless he trusted them. Could it be Flint? The way my chest suddenly aches tells me just how much I want it to be.

Summer gets up to answer the door, but it isn't Flint.

It's his mother.

Hannah Hawthorne smiles wide as she sets a gift basket down on my coffee table. "Well, this looks like fun," she says as she surveys my very messy living room. Soda cans, red vine wrappers, an empty ice cream carton.

I jump up and start scrambling around the room, picking up trash. "We've been watching movies all day. Had I known you were coming, I would have—"

Summer shuts me up with a hard stare and pulls the trash I've collected out of my hands. "Just sit down and stop being a weirdo," she whispers.

"Don't clean up on my account, Audrey. I don't want to interrupt your movie. But I come with news." She motions toward the basket. "And a few things from the farm."

Lucy and Summer disappear into the kitchen. "Oh. That's really sweet of you."

"There's some goats' milk soap, some fresh apples—first of the season, and they're delicious—and a box of almond pillow cookies that are going to be your new favorite. Lennox makes them," she says easily. "But he doesn't give them to just anyone, so you should feel pretty special."

I pick up a bar of soap and lift it to my nose. It smells like apple blossoms and spring sunshine. "I don't know what to say. Thank you."

We settle onto the couch, her warm gaze putting me at ease despite the tension I initially felt at her arrival. “I hear you had a bit of a scare earlier this week.”

I nod.

“That’s actually the news I mentioned earlier. Flint wanted me to tell you Ed Cooper was arrested. He *did* violate his parole when he left California, so the cops have been looking for him. They found him early this morning at a motel up in Hendersonville.”

Relief washes over me, and I close my eyes. “That’s really good news.”

She smiles. “I thought so too.”

“But you didn’t have to come all this way just to tell me. Nate could have—” *Oh*. It suddenly occurs to me why Hannah is here. Flint told me he’d have Nate keep his distance so my life could feel as normal as possible. A visit from his mom is still significant, but it’s more personal—more *normal*—than an update from his security team.

“Flint asked *you* to come,” I say.

Hannah nods. “I’m sure it’s tough to get used to having security around all the time.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely different.”

“Audrey, it won’t always be like this. You’ll get used to some things, but people will get used to you, too. If I’ve learned anything watching Flint make his way in Hollywood, it’s that the internet has a very short attention span.”

I don’t know if it’s the warmth of her voice or the fact that I’ve been watching movies all day full of Flint in all his glory, but my heart suddenly feels like it’s going to burst. Instead, I start to cry. Which is just *ridiculous*. Before Flint, I would go months without shedding a single tear. And now I’m a freaking water fountain.

“Oh, honey, come here,” Hannah says. She pulls me into a hug, rubbing my back while I hiccup and sniff and leak tears all over her shirt.

“Seriously. I have no idea what’s wrong with me.”

Hannah smiles as I pull away. “I’m pretty sure I have an idea.”

I laugh as I wipe away my tears. “But it’s worth it, right?”

“What, love?” she asks. “Or loving someone like Flint?”

I shrug. “Both?”

Her expression shifts into something soft and tender. “Audrey, that boy has been a ray of sunshine every day of his life. He’s worth everything. And love? Well, that’s just plain fun. Of course it’s worth it.”

Hannah makes me try an almond pillow cookie before she leaves, and she was right. It’s definitely my new favorite cookie.

I walk her out to the porch, watching as she walks down the stairs and toward her car. But there’s one more thing I need to ask her.

“Hannah, wait!” She turns, and I run down the stairs, stopping in the grass a few feet away. “Is he home?”

She smiles. “He’s home.”

*He’s home.*

And I need to see him *right now*.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Flint

NORTH CAROLINA HAS NEVER felt more like home.

Maybe because Audrey is here. Maybe because the summer heat is finally yielding to something cooler. Maybe because the last week in Los Angeles has been so long.

Turns out Audrey was right, and Simon really did just act impulsively when he leaked the story. He claimed stress and mounting financial obligations made him irrational. I'm not sure what he meant by that, and I don't really want to know. All I care about is it only took one conversation to make it clear that if he kept talking about me, I would be forced to let people know why I *really* fired him. It's generous that I don't let people know *anyway*. I can only hope he'll learn from the situation and do better with future clients.

Either way, I have never been so happy to leave Los Angeles behind. My own house, in the mountains I love, is just the balm I need.

Well, that's not entirely true. Audrey is the balm I need. But I still don't know where we stand.

It's just after eight when I get a text from Nate.

**Nate:** Your brothers are at the gate. You want me to let them in?

My brothers. All of them?

I send Nate a quick thumbs up.

Five minutes later, I swing my front door open to see them standing there in a cluster, Brody, Lennox, Perry, and Tyler, my brother-in-law.

“Expecting someone else?” Lennox says dryly.

“Nah, I knew it was you. Nate texted and asked if I wanted to let you in.”

“Wait, you could have said no?” Brody asks. “Rude.”

“Brilliant,” Perry says. “I’d love to be able to screen people before they make it to my porch.”

“But then you’d just say no to *everyone*,” Lennox says.

Perry smiles. “Exactly.”

“What are you guys doing here?” I step back from the door, making room for them to file inside.

“We thought you might be hungry,” Brody says. “Lennox has food from the restaurant.”

Lennox holds up a bag as he heads toward the kitchen.

“We also have beverages,” Perry says, holding up a case of beer as he follows Lennox.

Brody claps me on the back. “And also Mom is worried about you.”

*There it is.* The real reason they’re here. But whatever. I’ll take it. I need all the distractions I can get right now.

We eat around the kitchen island, then take the beer outside. The night air is cool, the cicadas’ song rolling through the trees like the rise and fall of a wave.

“Okay,” Perry says, cracking open a beer and handing it to me. “What’s the update? Where do things stand with Audrey?”

I run a hand across my face, scratching at the week’s worth of beard growth I still need to shave. “I’m definitely in love with her, I’m completely miserable without her, and I’m pretty much consumed with the need to find her, tell her, then tell everyone else how amazing she is.”

“So...like a regular Saturday,” Lennox says, and my brothers chuckle.

“Is this seriously what it’s like to be in love?”

“Yes,” they say in unison.

“At least at first,” Perry says. “The intensity eases up after a while. But the feelings don’t.”

I rub my chest. “It feels...like I can’t breathe right if she isn’t in the room, but then she comes into the room, and it only gets worse.”

Brody nods. “Like she could ask you to do anything in this world, *anything*, and you’d do it without flinching.”

I nod. “Exactly.”

“I once drove three states over to pick up Tatum’s favorite ice cream,” Lennox says.

Perry takes a swig of his beer. “I spent half my savings restoring a Steinway piano because Lila has always wanted one.”

“You need to tell her, man,” Brody says. “It’s time.”

“I just don’t want to overwhelm her before—”

Brody’s eyes widen and he motions behind me. “Nah, man. I mean you need to tell her *now*.”

I stand up and spin around.

Audrey is standing in the doorway leading into the house.

I take in the sight of her. A week without seeing her has only made her seem more beautiful. She’s dressed casually. Jeans. A simple T-shirt. She rocked a red-carpet look, but I think I prefer this dressed-down version of Audrey.

Probably because it’s more *Audrey*.

“Hey,” I say, taking a step forward. “You’re here.”

“Nate let me in,” she says. “I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s *always* okay. It’s good to see you.”

Behind me, my brothers are moving, picking up empty beer bottles and straightening their chairs. In a matter of seconds, they're filing past me, each of them patting me on the back and saying hello to Audrey as they pass into the house. Perry is the last one to leave. When he reaches the door, he pauses and looks at me over his shoulder, his eyes cutting to Audrey for the briefest second. "It's not always easy. But it's the best thing that ever happened to me. And it's always worth it." He taps his hand against the door jamb, then disappears into the house.

Seconds later, the front door clicks closed, and Audrey and I are alone.

I take a step toward her and push my hands into my pockets, resisting the urge to run to her, to pull her into my arms.

"I didn't mean to break up the party," she says.

"Don't worry about it. They were just hanging out. We weren't doing anything important."

She nods. "I, um..." She looks up and breathes out a trembling breath. "I had this whole speech prepared, and now I can't remember anything I wanted to say." She tucks her hair behind her ear. "Actually, that's not true. I do remember one thing."

She lifts her eyes to meet mine, hope shining in their depths, and my heart starts pounding in my chest. "Yeah? What's that?"

She smiles, her expression tender. "Just that I'm in love with you."

I close my eyes and let the words wash over me.

"I think a part of me knew, right from the start, that I eventually *would* love you," she continues. "But I was so scared, Flint. Scared of getting hurt. Of feeling overwhelmed. Of getting lost in a world so much bigger than the one I've made for myself. All that fear made me push you away, but I didn't even last twelve hours before I realized that the thought of living without you is so much scarier." She takes a step toward me. "I want us. I want *you*."



I have so much I want to tell her.

But I can't say anything until I'm holding her.

I hurry forward, catching her when she launches herself into my arms. I spin her around, hugging her close, then slowly lower her to the ground, her body flush against mine.

Her hands lift to my face, and she pushes up on her toes to kiss me, stopping just before her lips meet mine. "You haven't said anything yet, Flint."

"I love you," I whisper. "I love you so much."

She smiles, her nose brushing against mine. "I love you, too."

When our lips finally touch, it feels like our first kiss all over again. All the fire, all the passion and excitement, but there's something else now too.

Now, there's a promise threaded through each touch, each caress of her skin against mine. I pull back, my hands lifting to her face. "Hey, I need to tell you something."

Her eyes flutter open. "Okay."

"Come inside and sit."

Her eyebrows lift, and she bites her lip.

"It's good. I swear it's good," I say. "Just come on."

I leave her on the couch and run to my office where I grab the list I printed off for her earlier. I take it back to the living room and sit down beside her.

"This is for you."

She takes the single sheet of paper, her brow furrowing as she looks it over.

"It took a little bit of leg work. And quite a few phone calls. Mark and Deidre helped with that—they have a lot of connections. But all these organizations have grant money that's currently available, *and* they're interested in seeing your proposal."

Audrey looks up. "You did this?"

“I mean, Mark did a lot of it. And nobody guaranteed anything. But there’s a lot of money in California. And a lot of environmentalists who are concerned about development and how it impacts—”

She cuts off my words with a kiss, her fingers tangling in my hair. I could keep doing this all night, but I’m not finished yet. There’s something else I still need to show her. I pull away, but she holds me close, her hands moving to the sides of my face. “I can’t believe you did this,” she says. “Flint. This is amazing.”

“Like I said, there are no guarantees.”

“I know,” she says quickly. “I know. But it’s a place to start.”

I jump off the couch, not even trying to curb my enthusiasm. I *want* Audrey to know how excited I am about this. About *us*. “Okay, I have one more thing to show you.”

She laughs. “What has gotten into you?”

This time, I head to my bedroom and grab the Feed ’n Seed bag from the top of my dresser. I carry it back to the living room and set it on the back of the chair, then pull out the camouflage sweatshirt I picked up on my way home. “I got this today. And a hat, too.” I pull out a baseball cap trimmed with leaves, just like the one she was wearing when I found her hidden on the trail. “I figured, this way, if you ever want to go out to observe the squirrels or birds or whatever, I can come too.”

She studies me for a long moment, her eyes shining. “Flint,” she finally says. “This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

I lick my lips and hurry back to the couch, reaching for her hands. “Audrey, I know my life is big and stressful and frequently stupid. But I fell in love with a biologist, and I don’t ever want you to *stop* being a biologist. I see you, all right? Your life won’t get swallowed by mine because I won’t let it. It’s too important to me. You’re too important to me.”

She smiles through her tears, then kisses me for a very long time.

Later, when we're stretched out on the couch, Audrey snuggled against me, she lifts her head, propping her chin on my chest. "You know, it's okay if *some* of my life gets swallowed by yours."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"I mean, if we get to the point where we're choosing houses, I definitely choose this one."

"Good to know," I say through a grin.

"I'm just saying though. If the master bathroom isn't as pretty as the guest bathroom just past your office, I'm using the guest one instead. I've had actual dreams about that shower."

"It's nice, right?" I lean up and press a kiss to her forehead, still overwhelmed by the realization that I *can* kiss her—that she wants me to. "But trust me. You're going to love the shower in the master bathroom."

She smiles. "I can't wait to see it."

I can't wait for *everything*. All of whatever this life with Audrey is going to be.

Audrey drops her head and settles against me, breathing out a contented sigh.

I've done a lot of amazing things in my life, and I've met a lot of amazing people. But there isn't a single doubt in my mind: nothing has ever compared to this.

# EPILOGUE

Flint

AUDREY HAS NEVER LOOKED more beautiful.

In the past three years, she's looked amazing on the red carpet half a dozen different times.

She also took my breath away on our wedding day.

And she looked *stunning* when she held our son for the first time, her sweat-streaked hair clinging to her face.

But there's something about today that feels different. Or maybe it's just that every time I look at her, she's more beautiful than she was the day before.

"What do you think?" she asks, turning away from the hotel mirror to face me. "I feel like my boobs might fall out."

"They aren't falling anywhere," I say. "You look great."

She grumbles as she adjusts the front of her dress. "Seriously. They haven't been the same since the pregnancy."

I step up behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, and press a kiss to her collarbone. "You're perfect. Your body is perfect."

"But is it the right balance? I want to look professional, but also like...I don't know. A woman."

I turn her to face me, keeping my hands on her arms. “Audrey. You’re going to be the most beautiful woman in the room. You always are.” I give her shoulders a tiny squeeze. “More importantly, you’re going to be the most *brilliant* person in the room.”

“You really think so?”

“You’re the one they’re giving the award to, aren’t they?”

She leans up and presses a quick kiss to my lips. “I still think it’s silly we’re here. If anything goes wrong with our travel, we might miss—”

I kiss her again, cutting off her protests. “We aren’t going to miss anything. Besides, we already know you *won* your award. If we had to choose between your thing and mine, I’d rather be at yours.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever said.”

“It isn’t dumb. It’s the truth. Now come on. Your fancy luncheon awaits.”

The annual luncheon for the Weston Science Foundation is happening at a luxurious lakeside hotel just outside of Asheville. They only give one outstanding achievement award each year, and this year, it’s going to Audrey for her research on biodiversity in intentional green spaces to counteract the negative impacts of urbanization.

It took me three tries to memorize that sentence.

Have I mentioned how sexy my wife’s brain is?

We make our way to the elevator, then ride down to the banquet hall on the first floor. Nate is hovering near the door when we arrive, and he nods as we pass into the room. “Congrats, Audrey,” he whispers, and she smiles wide.

We move toward our table, and I bristle at the eyes swiveling to watch us. Audrey has grown pretty used to the way people stare whenever we’re out in public. But today, I’m the one who is uncomfortable. This is Audrey’s moment. Nobody should be looking at me.

“You have to stop frowning, Flint,” Audrey says. “You look miserable.”

“What? I’m not! I’m so happy to be here.”

She chuckles as she sits down, and I scoot her chair under her. “Then smile and lean down here to kiss me.”

I do as I’m told, and she hooks her hand around my tie, holding me close long enough to say, “I don’t care that they’re staring at you, baby. Just sit down and relax.”

Fortunately, our tablemates are much more enthusiastic about Audrey’s presence than mine. They pepper her with question after question about her work, and she fields them like a pro. She is gracious and charming and funny and brilliant, and I am so in love with her, I don’t think we need a plane to get us to Los Angeles tonight. I’ll fly us there myself.

After lunch, the foundation president shares a few remarks, then gives the stage to Audrey so she can present her latest findings and recommendations. I reach over and squeeze her hand just before she stands. “You’ve got this,” I whisper.

There’s a slight tremble in her exhale, but she squares her shoulders and smiles. “I’m going to be so boring,” she says. “Don’t fall asleep.”

She isn’t boring. Not even a little bit. By the time she finishes, the foundation president who presents her with her award looks so enamored, I think he might propose.

Across the room, Nate lifts his head, then pointedly looks at his watch.

I resist the impulse to do the same thing. We’ll be fine. And I’m not about to rush Audrey out of here on my account.

Another round of applause breaks out as Audrey leaves the stage and makes a beeline straight for me. “Okay, done,” she whispers, grabbing my hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

Nate escorts us out of the hotel to a waiting car, which whisks us to the airport where we climb onto the private jet we hired *just* for today—our only hope if we’re going to make it Los Angeles in time.

Captain Salano, the same pilot who flew Audrey to New York, greets us at the door. “Busy day?” he jokes as he shakes my hand.

I grin. “It’s up to you, now.”

“Hey, is Blake single?” Audrey asks as we settle into our seats.

“I don’t know. You have someone in mind?”

“Summer, actually,” she says as Nate and Joni file past us to sit at the back of the plane.

“She broke up with the other guy?” I ask. “The attorney guy?”

Audrey nods. “And she’s totally disheartened and positive I married the last decent man on the planet.” She drops her head on my shoulder, stifling a yawn. “I swear, you and your brothers are like unicorns. How are you all so good?”

“Blake’s a nice guy. I’ll talk to him. See what I can find out.”

“That would be amazing.” Audrey yawns again. “I’m sure Summer would appreciate it.”

“You going to make it, sleepyhead?”

She gives me a pointed look. “*Somebody* kept me up late last night.”

Depending on the day, she could be talking about Milo, who is only nine months old and still wakes us up at least once a night. But I’ll take full credit for Audrey’s lack of sleep last night.

I smirk. “True. And I have zero regrets.”

She bumps her arm into mine. “I’ll take a nap as soon as we’re in the air. Find me a blanket?”

I *do* find a blanket—one big enough for us both—and I tuck it around us, our chairs almost fully reclined.

Audrey sighs as she relaxes into the seat. “I miss Milo.”

I lean over and kiss her forehead. “Me too. But your sisters will take good care of him while we’re gone.”

She turns and nestles into my side, making me think flying private is worth it just for the chance to travel like this, with Audrey so close. “Hey, Flint?” she says, her voice sleepy.

“Hmm?”

“You’re going to win an Oscar tonight.”



## AUDREY

I’m biased.

I *know* I’m biased.

But I’ve watched all the other movies and studied all the contenders for Best Actor, and Flint’s performance is just *so good*. I really think he’s going to win.

His entire family has flown to California to be with us for the awards. We won’t have time to see them beforehand, and we’re the only two who will walk the red carpet, but we’ll all be together at the hotel afterwards.

Even if he doesn’t win, I’m glad his entire family is here. Flint’s had such a big year, and he’s worked so hard. He deserves to be celebrated.

The next few hours go by in a blur. We land in LA, hurry to the hotel where we meet our fashion people who get us dressed and coifed and looking red-carpet fabulous, then we race over to the Dolby Theatre for the Academy Awards. We hit the red carpet an hour later than Flint’s publicist would have preferred, but we’re here. We made it.

And I’m *so proud* to be next to Flint.

I still don’t love the paparazzi. I don’t love the attention and the entitlement some fans feel to the innerworkings of Flint’s private life. But it *has* gotten easier. The noise has gotten quieter. And we’ve gotten really good at holing up at the house whenever we need to recharge.



We see Lea Cortez when we're entering the theatre, and Claire McKinsey, who comes over to give me a big hug. Through it all, Flint is kind and quick to smile, but he's quieter than usual, and he just gets quieter and quieter the closer we get to his category.

He's told me a hundred times that it's an honor to be nominated, and when he says it about the *last* nomination, I believe him. But this time, I think he really wants it. Maybe because he knows his work on this movie—Mark Sheridan's movie—is the best he's ever done.

Applause fills the room as, fittingly, Matt Damon takes the stage to present the award for Best Actor. I thread my fingers through Flint's. "You have so much to be proud of," I whisper. "Win or lose."

*He wins.*

He wins, and he's smiling, and I'm crying, and he's kissing me and then he's on stage.

"I, um—" He chuckles, his words trailing off. "You know, I watched my wife win an award just this morning for the work she does as a biologist, and she was so poised and collected. And here I am, a complete mess." The audience laughs, and Flint looks right at me. "Audrey, I wouldn't be up here without you. I love you. Thank you for believing in me, and for giving *me* something to believe in. And for bringing Milo into this world which is truly the most amazing thing I've ever witnessed. Hopefully, we'll get him to sleep all night someday." He smiles. "Maybe. Before he's five." Flint takes another deep breath and looks toward the balcony where the rest of his family is sitting. "To my family, my parents, my siblings, thank you. You have shown me with your unending love and support that being important to the world will never matter as much as being important to *you*."

He goes on to thank Mark and the rest of the crew that brought the movie to life, then he leaves the stage.

I close my eyes and listen to the applause filling the room. Marrying Flint, watching his dedication to his craft, the seriousness with which he approaches every single role, has

given me a new appreciation for actors and everyone else who works to put art out into the world.

There is so much of Hollywood that is silly and frivolous and exhausting. But this moment—this honor given to someone who has worked tirelessly to do and be the best—this isn't silly. This is everything Flint deserves.

I can't wait to tell him how much I love him.

Back at the hotel, I sit on the couch with Hannah and watch as the four Hawthorne brothers stand together by the window. They're all still in their tuxedos, though jackets have come off and ties have been loosened.

Perry's hair is starting to gray at the temples, something I've never noticed until now, but then, he's closer to forty now than he is thirty. And the rest of them aren't far behind.

I loop my arm through Hannah's and lean my head on her shoulder. "They're good men," I say, and she reaches over and pats my hand.

"They are, aren't they?"

We watch as Olivia moves across the room and joins the circle. Flint steps to the side, making room for the youngest Hawthorne sibling, and he puts his arm around her.

One of the other brothers says something that makes them all laugh—I'm too far away to hear—and Olivia rolls her eyes. Still, it's clear how much she loves her brothers no matter their teasing.

Eventually, Flint makes his way back to me, dropping onto the couch on my other side. "I still think your award is prettier than mine," he says.

It *is* pretty—opaque crystal in the shape of a tree. It honestly looks more like living room décor than an actual award.

"We'll have to keep yours in your office then," I say, my tone serious. "Wouldn't want guests to be offended when they come over to the house."

"I like this plan." He grins and pats my leg. "You ready for bed?"

“Yes, please.” I shift and let him pull me off the couch. “Oh my gosh. Flint,” I say, and he pauses, his eyebrows going up. “There is no baby here. We can sleep *all night long* without waking up.”

He tugs me into his chest. “Dr. Callahan, that’s the sexiest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

We say goodbye to his family as they head to their respective hotel rooms, then finally make our way to bed.

“It’s been a good day, Auds,” Flint says as he turns off the light. He reaches for me in the dark, curving his body around mine, his chest to my back and his arm around my waist. “I love you,” he whispers. “So much.”

I turn so I’m facing him and press my lips to his, deepening the kiss in a way I know he’ll recognize as an invitation. I’m so tired. Ridiculously tired. But I’m also ridiculously in love with him, and I’m not ready for the night to end.

He chuckles. “Do you know how many hours we’ve been awake?”

I kiss him one more time. “What’s one more?”

His hand moves to my back, and he tugs me close. “Fine, but I’m only doing this as a favor to you,” he says playfully.

I grin into the darkness. “Your noble sacrifice is noted.”

Later, when we finally go to sleep, Flint drifts off first, but that’s no surprise. He usually does. It always takes me longer to slow my brain down enough to sleep.

But tonight, I don’t mind the thoughts coursing through my tired mind.

Thoughts of Flint, of Milo, of our tiny, happy family. Of his extended family and the way they treat all the Callahans—my parents included—like we’re part of the clan.

I know well that things will not always feel this perfect.

Just next month, Flint will come back to Los Angeles for three months, and I’ll have to stay in Silver Creek to finish out

my semester. It won't be the first time we'll be apart, but it will be the *longest* we'll go without seeing each other.

There will be other trials too, I know. Challenges we can't foresee and won't feel prepared to handle.

But I'm choosing to trust that whatever life brings, we'll weather it well because we'll weather it together.

I'm choosing to trust that love—our love—will always be enough.



Thanks so much for reading How to Kiss a Movie Star. I hope you enjoyed Flint and Audrey's story!

Want to check in with the entire Hawthorne clan a few years down the road?

**[Click here to download a BONUS SERIES EPILOGUE.](#)**



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You guys! This is an emotional moment. I've spent the last year and a half dreaming up the Hawthornes, getting to know them, and falling in love over and over again. I've loved every minute of it, and I'm so sad to see the series end! As always, there are always so many people who are involved in the creation of a book. My cover designer, Stephanie, thank you for giving my vision balance and clarity. Lana, I don't know how you make illustrations look hot, but you totally do and I love you for it! My critique partner, Kirsten, you make my stories stronger and smarter and I'm so grateful for you—for your brilliance and our friendship. To my editor and sister, Emily, I'm so lucky. You make my words smarter. You make my life better. You support me in all the ways. Thank you for being my person. Josh, I love you. Please don't ever stop inspiring my love stories. To my Lucy, and your Summer, thanks for letting me steal your names! Finally, and most especially, readers, you make this work possible. Thank you for reading, for sending me notes of encouragement, for letting me know when you love my books. You have no idea how much those messages and emails mean! I'm an extrovert by nature, and writing is a pretty solitary game, so it means so much when I get to connect with readers. Thanks for being so awesome. Until the next one! Happy Reading!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Proctor grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, a place she still believes is one of the loveliest on earth. She lives a few hours south of the mountains now, in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Mild winters and of course, the beach, are lovely compromises for having had to leave the mountains.

Jenny works full-time as an author of romantic comedy. She and her husband, Josh, have six children, and almost as many pets. They love to hike as a family and take long walks through the neighborhood. But Jenny also loves curling up with a good book, watching movies, and eating food that, when she's lucky, she doesn't have to cook herself. You can learn more about Jenny and her books at [www.jennyproctor.com](http://www.jennyproctor.com).