

THE WYLDER LOVE SERIES

A romantic couple embracing in a field of tall grass at sunset. The man is wearing a brown jacket and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a white dress with gold stars. They are standing in a field of tall grass, with a sunset in the background.

Irresistible
LOVE

NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SAMANTHA
CHASE

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Edits: Jillian Rivera

PRAISE FOR SAMANTHA CHASE

“If you can’t get enough of stories that get inside your heart and soul and stay there long after you’ve read the last page, then Samantha Chase is for you!”

*-NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Melanie Shawn***

“A fun, flirty, sweet romance filled with romance and character growth and a perfect happily ever after.”

*-NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Carly Phillips***

“Samantha Chase writes my kind of happily ever after!”

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“The openness between the lovers is refreshing, and their interactions are a balanced blend of sweet and spice. The planets may not have aligned, but the elements of this winning romance are definitely in sync.”

*- **Publishers Weekly, STARRED review***

“A true romantic delight, *A Sky Full of Stars* is one of the top gems of romance this year.”

*- **Night Owl Reviews, TOP PICK***

“Great writing, a winsome ensemble, and the perfect blend of heart and sass.”

*- **Publishers Weekly***

“Recommend Chase to fans of Susan Elizabeth Phillips. Well-written and uniquely appealing.”

*- **Booklist***

PROLOGUE

THREE MONTHS AGO...

SWEAT WAS LITERALLY POURING off her body, and her hair was practically matted to her head. Her heart was racing, her throat was dry, but as the choreographer took his spot in the corner of the room, Lily Montgomery took her position and waited for the music to begin.

The bass beat started, and Tag loudly counted them down. “And five, six, seven, eight! Hold, two, three, four, right, left, right, left, pull...pull...” He clapped almost aggressively as he continued to count out the movements and Lily knew she was nailing every one of them. This particular piece was jazz funk, and when Tag smiled and winked at her as she strutted across the room, she knew he was pleased.

Catching her reflection in the mirror, she spun several times before leaping three times along with the fifteen other dancers currently on the floor. It wasn't until she landed and held her pose that she felt a twinge of pain in her hip that wasn't there before.

Shake it off.

The routine was new and challenging, and perhaps she overextended on that last leap. Either way, when they took their water break, she'd do a little extra stretching just to play it safe.

“Take five!” Tag called out. “And when we start back, I’d like to see a little enthusiasm out of all of you, not just some of you!” He turned away without another word.

It wasn’t the first time that class went past midnight this week, so that didn’t throw her. But looking around at the full group—all thirty-six of them—it didn’t look like everyone was feeling the same way. Tryouts for this year’s squad was apparently going to be brutal, and as much as this had been a bucket list thing for her, she hadn’t expected there to be so much competitive precision this long before auditions. She had come to Miami to get situated and settle in long before auditions, which were still almost six months away. Unfortunately, her chance to dance with the squad at the Dolphins’ games wasn’t guaranteed yet.

But it would be.

She’d danced for a year as a Rockette and she did another year performing with the national tour of Hairspray. Basically, she’d grown bored with New York and doing all the travelling and was ready to tackle the world of NFL cheerleading. When she’d seen some of the competition, she’d played up the fact that her father was a bit of a legend in the world of football. He’d been forced to retire because of an injury before she was born, but his name still opened the door for her here.

And even though it stung a bit that she’d had to resort to dropping names, it just made her all that more determined to prove to everyone that she deserved to be here.

I’ve got this.

With a shrug, Lily went to the back corner where her bag was and pulled out a bottle of water. Taking a long drink, she allowed herself a solid minute to let her mind go blank before getting down on the floor and stretching.

Her nose was touching the floor when her friend Drea sat down beside her, mimicking the pose. “I’m ready to shoot Tag with a tranquilizer dart,” she murmured. “I don’t know why he doesn’t call out the specific people who are screwing up.” Turning her head, she grinned at Lily. “Because I don’t see why you and I have to be punished for other people not learning the damn routine.”

Lily straightened for a moment before bending to touch her nose to her left knee and winced.

“You okay?”

She hesitated only for a second before forcing a smile. “Yeah. I guess I didn’t stretch as well as I thought I had earlier.”

“Oh, same,” Drea said, mimicking all of Lily’s moves.

They were new friends, but...like...dance friends. They rarely hung out together outside the studio or rehearsals. It wasn’t intentional, but mostly because once they were done rehearsing each night, Lily went home and slept for almost twelve hours. She knew she needed a break, but she was making up for some lost time after breaking her collarbone three years ago in a freak accident.

Still...it would be nice to go home and see everyone...

“And we’re back!” Tag called out. He was a fantastic choreographer, but she wished they could move on to something new.

Both she and Drea got to their feet, finishing their waters. “I bet Tag picks me to be in his top five tonight,” Drea said confidently. “He’s been winking at me all night, so I know he sees how I’m nailing the choreography.”

“Or maybe he’s just got some sort of nervous tick,” Lily muttered.

“*What?*” The friendly girl she’d been chatting with was gone judging by the sneer she was giving Lily.

“I’m just saying...he’s winked at me too,” she quickly explained.

Muttering something under her breath, Drea stormed off, leaving Lily standing there, shaking her head.

Diva.

“Let me get group one up first!” Tag ordered. “And I want you all to watch Lily! If I had to pick someone to make the team right now, she’d get my vote!”

While she wanted to gloat, she didn’t.

She did, however, smile sweetly at Drea as she took her position.

“And five, six, seven, eight! Hold, two, three, four, right, left, right, left, pull...pull...” he commanded, as he clapped with each count throughout the short routine. “And turn! Turn! Leap! Higher! Three, four...”

The music was blaring, and Lily was in her element. Everything she wanted was within her reach.

“Keep it going!” Tag yelled as he paced along the mirrored wall until the music ended. “I want to see that one more time and I want those leaps higher and more powerful!” He clicked the music on again from the beginning and counted them in once more.

Slightly winded, she immediately jumped right into it as if she’d had a break. She smiled, she preened, she mentally high-fived herself when Tag winked at her with a nod of approval.

She had this—she knew she had this. There was a bit of a high that she got from dancing, and right now, she was experiencing it at a whole new level.

The big finish was coming up again. She nailed her turns and swiveled her hips in a sexy little move before taking her three steps and...

“Leap! Leap! *Leap!*” he called out, but something in Lily’s hip snapped as she crashed to the floor in excruciating pain.

Well...shit...

ONE

THERE WERE dozens of butterflies in Lily Montgomery's belly threatening to take flight. Today was the day she was both looking forward to and dreading.

The day she found out if she was cleared to go back to dancing.

It had been three months since that fateful leap at dance rehearsals—three months since her dream pretty much crashed and died as she'd crumbled to the floor—but with any luck, her scans would show that she was good to go. With nothing else to do but wait, she pulled out her phone and figured she'd scroll through social media to kill time until the doctor finally came in to see her.

There were three missed calls and two texts from her mother.

Yeah...she'd been avoiding talking to her family because she knew they were worried about her and, truth be known, she was worried about herself too. It was safer to keep her distance, otherwise she'd completely break down and wallow in self-pity. The missed calls had been on the phone for almost a week and she hadn't listened to the voicemails, but the texts were new.

Mom: Lily, whatever it is I did to upset you, I'm sorry. I've left you multiple messages and your father said not to pester you, but I'm concerned.

She laughed softly. Since her father had been a pro-athlete when he was younger, he understood how an injury could mess with you psychologically and the importance of people giving you space while you heal. Clearly, he was running interference for her.

Mom: We've got some stuff going on here and I know I've been a little distracted, but please call me. I miss you.

Tears stung her eyes because...yeah...she missed her too.

She just didn't want the pity she'd been getting ever since her injury. It was almost as if her mother knew something she didn't, like this injury was going to end her career. Glancing around the office, she chose to take it as a good sign that she was sitting here rather than in an exam room. Although...

The door opened and Dr. Mathis walked in. She was the orthopedist Lily had been working with since her injury. She was in her forties, specialized in sports injuries, and came highly recommended. From the moment they'd met, she'd been nothing but kind and understanding, and always put Lily's mind at ease. But as she walked by on her way to her desk, she suddenly looked a bit imposing.

"Well?"

Dr. Mathis took a seat behind her desk and let out a soft breath. "I wish I had better news for you, Lily, but..."

Her heart sank.

"But I'm not healing," she said miserably. She'd been preparing herself for this day. After three months of physical

therapy, she definitely felt better, but not healed. With her shoulders sagging, she braced herself for what would come next. “So? What are my options?”

With a patient smile, Dr. Mathis replied, “That depends on what you’re looking to do.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, if you want to go back to dancing full-time, then surgery is really your only option.”

“What if I don’t do the cheering? I know that was way more aggressive and challenging than anything I’d ever done before. What if I go back to the Rockettes or...or...Broadway? Or...”

“I can tell by that response that surgery isn’t an option for you.”

It really wasn’t. The thought of it terrified her because there were too many “what if” things that could happen.

She shrugged. “Not that it’s *not* an option, but...I want to make sure we exhaust every other option first. I know I’ve rested; I’ve done P/T, I’ve done the over-the-counter pain relievers...” She paused. “What about the shot? We haven’t done the cortisone shot yet.”

“We haven’t,” Dr. Mathis agreed. “But it’s not a cure, Lily. I need you to understand that. Cortisone shots can provide relief for anywhere from two weeks to six months, but that’s it.”

“And will I be able to dance during that time?” She had already lost valuable prep time for the cheer squad and didn’t have anything else lined up. Fortunately, there were normally auditions open year-round all over the world for all kinds of shows if she wasn’t too picky.

The look Dr. Mathis gave her wasn't optimistic. "I think you can try, but you'll end up aggravating the injury more." Pausing, she got up and walked across her office and pulled a brochure off one of her bookshelves. "This is some literature about the surgery. The recovery time is lengthy—three to six months—but I truly believe it's the best option for you."

She begrudgingly accepted the brochure. Surgery was the absolute last thing she wanted to do. Call her stubborn, but she truly believed she would heal on her own.

The thought made her laugh. How many times had she heard the stories about her father and his stubbornness regarding surgery for an injury he received while playing pro football?

Like father, like daughter.

Still...maybe she could talk to him about this and get his input. So far, she'd downplayed her injury to her family and had even turned down multiple invitations to go home for a visit because she didn't want anyone fussing over her. The last time they did that was after the ski lift accident three years ago. Her father and two of her cousins got injured as well, but it felt like everyone hovered over her during her recovery until she thought she'd go mad.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like she had much of a choice. Her short-term rental lease was almost up and it just made sense to go home to North Carolina and regroup.

"Okay, I promise to think about it," she told Dr. Mathis.

Nodding, she sat back down behind her desk. "I hope you don't just think about it," she said carefully. "I think you should go for another opinion. Maybe two. Talking to more professionals may help you understand a bit more what an

injury like this can look like in the long term, whether or not you do the surgery.”

She hadn't thought of seeing another doctor, mainly because Dr. Mathis was the top in her field in this part of the country. But perhaps it was something she could also ask her father about, since he had to make a similar decision regarding his own surgery.

“I'll do that,” she finally said. “I'm planning on heading back home to North Carolina and I'll look up some doctors there.”

Smiling, Dr. Mathis asked, “Where in North Carolina?”

“Charlotte. That's where I'm from and my family is all still there.”

“I actually have several colleagues that I can highly recommend in the area, plus several at Duke. I know that's a few hours from where you live, but...”

“I appreciate any recommendations. My dad played in the NFL back in the day and had to have multiple surgeries after an injury. I'm sure he'll have some names as well.” Then she paused. “Although most of those doctors may have retired by now.” Laughing softly, she shook her head. “That would be my luck.”

“I know this isn't the news you were hoping for, but this isn't the end of your career. It's a small detour. You're young and healthy and you're obviously willing to do the work to get better.”

She nodded. “Thanks. It's all just...it's a lot. This is the second injury in the last few years and...well...it's scary. Dance is all I know,” she admitted quietly.

That's when she saw the sympathy on the doctor's face and it nearly made her cry. But rather than give in to that feeling, she forced herself to sit up straighter and forced herself to smile.

"But I'd really like the shot just to get me through until I decide. Is that okay?"

"Absolutely." Standing, Dr. Mathis walked around her desk and came to stand beside her. Giving Lily's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, she said, "Give me a minute and I'll get a nurse to set you up in one of the exam rooms."

"Thanks, Dr. Mathis."

An hour later, she was walking into her apartment with mild discomfort. The damn shot hurt almost as much as the injury. Tossing her purse on the sofa, she gently collapsed next to it with a groan. The smart thing to do was call her mother and let her know she was coming home, but...it could be fun to surprise her again. No one made her feel more loved or missed like her mom. Tears stung her eyes as she slowly nodded because...yeah. It was time to go home.

Glancing around the apartment, she knew there wasn't really a whole lot she needed to do. The place came furnished—including all the pots, pans, and dishes—so realistically, she could have all her personal stuff packed within the next day or two. Some things she'd ship home, but the rest she could toss in the car with her.

"I could realistically be home by Friday and get the whole weekend with everyone," she murmured. And just the thought of sitting down to dinner with all of them and then going to see her grandparents over the weekend was enough to spur her into action.

It was barely lunchtime, and she opted to throw a quick salad together before she began packing. But once she got started, she dove into it like she did everything else, with every ounce of energy and a determination to get it done.

First, she made a bag of clothes to donate. Next, she went through her pantry and filled a box with unopened food to take to the local food pantry. Then she packed up all her non-essential things that she could ship first. Fortunately, she kept all the boxes she had moved in with, so it was just a matter of putting them back together and taping them for packing. Once she knew how many she was going to ship, she called her neighbor Robin to see if she could borrow her pickup truck so she could get them all to the UPS store. By four in the afternoon, she had called the leasing office to let them know she was moving out early, made arrangements to get the keys to them, and was loading everything into Robin's truck—with Robin's help—before driving all around town dropping them off.

After stopping to buy more tape, she was back home by dinnertime and made herself another salad before tackling laundry and more packing. The next thing she knew, it was midnight and, although she was exhausted, she was also done.

“I don't know if I'm pathetic for not having a lot of stuff or proud that I'm super-efficient,” she said with a laugh. There were a handful of framed pictures on her dresser that were the last things she needed to pack. Looking at them always cheered her up when she was feeling down, and it was only natural that they'd be the final things she put away. She was carefully wrapping them to place in one of her suitcases when she picked up the one from Christmas three years ago. It was a silly picture, really. A group shot where no one was really posing, but they all knew the picture was being taken. With a

smile, Lily gently ran her finger over the glass. She was standing with her cousins, Willow, Harry, and Tanner.

And Noah Wylder.

Ugh...Noah Wylder.

He was with them for Christmas due to work reasons, not because he was related. He'd shown up for what was supposed to be one night and ended up staying for over a week. Even after all these years, she still wished she could go back in time and stop herself from the humiliation of that trip and her behavior toward him.

And with him.

She groaned and quickly wrapped the picture up. If she stared at it any longer, she knew she'd still remember every moment of their kiss at midnight on New Year's Eve. Her boyfriend had dumped her via text, she was lonely and hated the thought of being alone when the ball dropped, so...she'd kissed Noah.

And he'd kissed her back.

Spectacularly.

Yeah, he might be a numbers nerd like the rest of her family, but the man certainly knew how to kiss.

Sadly, she hadn't been kissed like that since.

Damn him.

“Okay, no more thinking about *that*,” she quietly reprimanded herself. “You have a job to do here. Finish packing and you could potentially be on the road tomorrow.”

It was an almost twelve-hour drive back to Charlotte and while that normally wouldn't bother her, she needed to be

logical. She had some things to take care of before she just hopped in her car and drove home, but...if she did the drive in two days...

Yawning, she gave herself a full body stretch and decided to call it a day. She'd take the two days to get home, arrive there on Thursday—earlier than she originally planned even with the extra day of driving—and could settle in and relax.

Stripping out of her sweaty clothes, she contemplated a shower, but ultimately decided against it. She'd wash the sheets and take a shower in the morning before she left. And as she crawled into bed, she couldn't help but smile. In forty-eight hours, she'd be home with the people she loved most in this world.

And hopefully closer to figuring out what was next for her.



Getting called into his boss's office wasn't anything new and it certainly wasn't cause for alarm.

It was the other people in the office with him that still made him quake in his shoes a bit.

Three years.

Three damn years and he was still getting the stink eye from Lucas Montgomery over a stunt his daughter pulled—a stunt she admitted being responsible for—and yet Lucas was still holding a grudge toward him.

Noah Wylder was used to dealing with stubborn people. Hell, he was related to the most stubborn man in the world. But with the way his boss's son was still trying to intimidate

him, he'd have to say he was the second most stubborn man in the world.

And he was tired of it.

Noah was an excellent employee and got along well with William Montgomery and his three sons until he went to Asheville three years ago. He was invited to their family holiday retreat to finalize important contract work for a merger because they trusted him. Unfortunately, the weather had turned and Noah had essentially gotten snowed in with them. He had been making great strides in securing the fast track to making it to the executive level, and the time he gained with them out of the office had been invaluable.

And then Lily Montgomery, Lucas' daughter, had derailed everything for him.

Okay, maybe not *everything*, but it had taken months to get everyone to see him as the same model employee he'd been before the holidays and not the guy who kissed the Montgomery princess on New Year's Eve—a kiss that she loudly announced she'd initiated. And yet...it felt a little like he was still being punished.

At least it was only one Montgomery still holding a grudge and not the rest, but...jeez.

Knocking on William Montgomery's door, he forced himself to smile as he stepped in. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Noah!" William said jovially. "Good to see you! Have a seat!"

Naturally, the only seat available was next to Lucas.

Great.

He nodded at both Mac and Jason and then did his best to avoid eye contact completely with Lucas as he sat. Then he waited to hear why he was there.

“Noah,” William began, “My sons are going to be away for the next month. They’re leaving Thursday morning and taking their wives on a Mediterranean cruise that was a gift from Monica and myself.”

“O-kay...”

“We’ve been talking,” he went on. “And we’d like you to step in and oversee their top clients while they’re gone.”

Noah was fairly certain his eyes were comically large. “Really? You *all* want me to do this?”

Everyone clearly caught what he was really asking, and luckily, they all laughed.

Even Lucas.

“We’ve all taken time away from our clients for holidays and vacations,” Mac explained. “But this is the first time we’re going to be away for this long. You’re the strongest guy we have and while we’ll be sharing our clients within our own teams, we each have a few that require a little more attention.”

“You excel at that,” Jason chimed in. “I don’t want to say they’re difficult, because they’re not. These are the clients that prefer to call in at least once a week so they know exactly what their money is doing.”

“I can handle that,” he told them.

“Going through our lists, we each had two to three clients that we felt you’d be a better fit with rather than anyone else,” Lucas added, and Noah wondered if it physically hurt him to have to give him even that tiny bit of praise. “However, we

weren't sure what your current list of clients is like or if you even have the time to take on more—even if it's temporary.”

“How many exactly would I be responsible for?”

“Seven,” Mac said. “Possibly eight. I'm still working some things out.”

Nodding, he worked out in his head what that would look like for him. Realistically, it could be as simple as an additional ten hours a week. His schedule wasn't jam-packed so it wouldn't require any overtime—and even if it did, it would be minimal.

“You'd also have all our assistants available to help you with anything you needed,” Jason said after a moment. “We realize we're putting a rather hefty workload on you, so if you need someone to take on a few of the smaller tasks, Andrew, Kylie, and Joanne can handle it.”

“And the same goes for Sara,” William added. “Rose is now officially retired and this will be her first week going completely solo, but I think she'd be just fine if you needed her for something, Noah. Don't be afraid to ask.”

The mirthless laugh was out before he could stop it. “Um...I think I should be more than okay with three assistants. If I need to get Sara involved, then maybe I'm not the right guy to help with this.”

“No one's saying you're not the right guy or that you're even going to need the help. We're just letting you know that help is available if you need it,” Mac corrected. “I know I'd be a little hesitant if someone told me I'd be managing eight extra accounts for a month.”

“I thought you said seven?” Jason reminded him.

He shrugged. “Changed my mind. I think Noah can handle them all.”

All four Montgomerys were looking at him expectantly and it was the first time in...well...three years that he felt like he had finally earned their respect.

Even Lucas’.

“This really means a lot,” he said, his voice gruffer than he intended. “I appreciate your confidence in me, and I don’t want any of you to worry about your clients. I’ll take good care of them.”

“Excellent!” William said as he shifted slightly in his seat. “Now, why don’t we go over all the accounts you’re entrusting Noah with, so if there are any questions, he can ask you directly.” He shifted again in his chair and seemed to grimace.

“Dad?” Lucas asked. “Are you okay?”

“What? Oh...I’m fine. I slept the wrong way and my back’s a little sensitive today.” He laughed softly. “It’s not easy getting old.”

After that, they spent the rest of the day discussing clients and making sure Noah felt comfortable with everyone’s accounts. It was a little overwhelming, but he also knew there were plenty of people available to help if he needed it.

It was a little after five when he walked out of the office. As he made his way to his car, he contemplated whether to pick up a pizza or go shopping for groceries.

With a weary sigh, he climbed into his car and knew he was going to do the practical thing and shop for groceries. With the extra work he was going to be doing for the next month, it would just be smarter for him to stock up on things he could easily pack up and take to the office for lunch.

“Probably going to be spending a lot of time at my desk rather than going out on my lunch break,” he murmured, but he wasn’t particularly upset about that prospect. Instead, he was thrilled to have this opportunity. He had a plan for his life and this was the first time in a long time that he felt like everything could work out. If things went well over this next month, maybe by the time everyone was back from vacation, they’d see he was someone who was a prime candidate for a promotion, and possibly a good choice to head up his own office, even just a small one. He wouldn’t be opposed to branching out somewhere outside of Charlotte. He wasn’t particularly tied to the area.

Hell, he wasn’t particularly tied to any area.

If they suggested wanting to open an office in the northern-most tip of Alaska, he’d say yes to it. If it meant securing his future, he’d go wherever they asked him to.

His mother was still here in North Carolina, but she was about five hours northeast of Charlotte, in the same small town he grew up in. He went home to visit occasionally, but it wasn’t a place that held any good memories for him. In the last ten years, whenever he and his brothers got together with their mom, it was a neutral location. But that was mainly because his middle brother was a pop star who was seemingly always on tour and his baby brother was playing football in Wichita. They all led very busy lives and spent more time on Zoom calls with one another than actually sitting in the same room.

Unlike the Montgomerys.

It didn’t matter that he’d been working for them for almost four years; it still boggled his mind a bit at just how close they all were. It wasn’t just that the four Montgomerys he worked with were close—although how they could all want to go on

vacation with one another after working together every damn day was a mystery to him—but the entire extended family. The Christmas he got snowed in with them in Asheville, there were over fifty of them in the house— and all they talked about were all the things they enjoyed doing together. Shuddering, Noah pulled into the Wegman’s parking lot while mentally making a shopping list.

It took a little over an hour for him to walk through the door of his condo with his arms loaded with bags. He was somehow both energized and exhausted, but more than anything, he was starving. Placing the bags down on the granite countertop, he kicked off his shoes and strode into his bedroom to change into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. The place was a little on the small side—only one bedroom, one bathroom, and an office—but he didn’t need a lot of space. The location was fantastic, and it offered a concierge, fitness center, clubhouse and next-day dry cleaning services.

It was a single guy’s dream, even if it was a little too quiet for him sometimes.

Six months ago, the girl he’d been dating for almost a year broke up with him. She said he worked too much, was never around, and basically was a huge bore.

Noah shrugged it off. He hadn’t been in love with her and even though he’d cared about her, if she didn’t understand what he was trying to accomplish, then it wasn’t meant to be. Some day he hoped to get married, but not until he was financially secure and firmly settled in his career. Only then would he feel confident that he could put the required time into a relationship.

“So maybe I’m a little rigid,” he mumbled as he walked back out to the kitchen and began putting groceries away.

“There’s nothing wrong with that. I would never tell anyone I was involved with that they had to work less just so they could hang out with me. A good work ethic is important.”

And apparently...boring.

Okay, that one stung, but it was just bad timing. Plus, he was still trying to prove himself at Montgomerys. In a month from now, he knew he’d be able to breathe easier.

“And it’s gonna feel great.”

Once everything was away and the countertops wiped down, he grabbed the steak he’d purchased as a bit of a celebratory thing and placed it under the broiler. Next, he grabbed the ready-made side of mashed potatoes and green beans and heated them up. Looking across the room, he spotted a bottle of merlot that would go great with the meal and decided he deserved that too. He’d have only one glass since he had to work in the morning, and he was going to savor it.

When the food was ready, he carried his plate and glass into the living room and put them down on the coffee table before going back for silverware and the salt. When he finally sat down on the sofa, he turned on the TV to CNN and got caught up on the day’s news.

Another hour later, he was pleasantly full and utterly bored. It was only eight o’clock and he was sitting alone with nothing to do.

“I should probably see if there’s anything going on downtown this weekend,” he said as he cleaned up the dinner mess. Maybe he’d call a few friends and see about going out for drinks or something. For the next month, he was going to

be busy with work and doing everything he could to make a great impression on his bosses.

And maybe after that, he'd look into getting out a little more and perhaps finding a hobby.

Not that it was helping him right now.

For now, he sat back down on the sofa with his iPad and scrolled aimlessly until it was time to go to bed.

It definitely was a solitary life, and he was okay with it.

At least...that's what he kept telling himself.

He liked things neat and orderly, quiet and uncomplicated. He'd grown up in an extremely chaotic environment, and always swore that as soon as he was old enough to move out, he'd embrace the peace and simplicity of a normal life.

And he'd found it.

He was living it.

But as he climbed into bed and turned out the light, a strange thought hit him.

Am I really even living?

TWO

IT WAS late Thursday afternoon when Lily turned onto the long driveway leading to her parents' house. She was practically bouncing in her seat and couldn't wait to see the look on her mother's face when she walked through the door. No doubt she was going to be shocked. Then she'd cry because her mother always cried whenever she came home, and then she'd...

“What the hell?”

There were four different work vans parked in front of the house, along with a couple of pickup trucks. She pulled up as close as she could get and climbed out in total confusion. There were workmen everywhere, and several of them only spared her a token glance before going about their business. It looked like some major work was going on and if she could only find her mother...

“Lily!”

Turning her head, she spotted Laura Hamilton, their next-door neighbor, coming out of the house, waving and smiling. “Hey, Mrs. Hamilton,” she said. “What's going on?”

After a friendly hug, Laura pulled back and motioned to the house. “Your parents left me in charge of overseeing the start of the renovations on the house, and...*whew!* It is messy

and loud in there!” She paused for a moment. “What on earth are you doing here? Your mom didn’t mention you were coming home.”

Frowning, she glanced at the house. “I was going to surprise them. Um...where exactly are they that you’re overseeing the renovations?”

The cheery smile was replaced with a more sympathetic one. “Oh, sweetie...they just left this morning for a month-long trip. Emma’s been talking about it for weeks! They’re going on a cruise to the Mediterranean for twenty-one days and then doing a week in England and Scotland.” Her hand rested over her heart. “Honestly, it sounds absolutely fabulous, and I’m totally jealous!”

“Um...”

“And after a fantastic vacation, they get to come home to a renovated house!” Laura went on. “The crews have already gotten so much of the demolition done; it’s incredible.”

“What exactly is getting renovated?” This was all brand-new information to her and from the looks of things, she wasn’t going to be staying here.

“On the main floor, the kitchen, pantry, and dining room. Then upstairs, the entire master suite, including the bathroom, plus the laundry room and the other two bathrooms. It’s a mess right now, but it’s going to be gorgeous. I know your sisters were very excited about the whole thing too.”

“Are they on the cruise with my parents?”

Laughing softly, Laura shook her head. “Heavens no. It’s just your folks, Jason and Maggie, and Mac and Gina. The trip was a gift from your grandparents! I wish my parents were that generous!” Another laugh. “As for your sisters, I don’t think

either of them is on break from school. It was one of the stipulations for the timing of the trip. Your mother wants to be home and have the house done before they come home for spring break.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders sagged as it hit her that she essentially had nowhere to stay. “So my grandparents didn’t go on this trip?”

Laura shook her head. “Not as far as I know.” She paused. “I’m sure this is all a bit of a shock to you, but as you can see, the house isn’t livable. All the water has been shut off and…”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Hamilton. Really.” Letting out a long breath, she looked toward her car and then back at her neighbor. “But I’ve obviously got to find a place to stay so I’m going to call my grandparents. I’m sure staying with them won’t be an issue.”

“We’ve got several guestrooms now that we’re empty nesters, so if you get into a pinch…”

“Thanks, but I’m sure it’s all going to be just fine.” She forced herself to smile. “Thanks again and thank you for helping my parents with the renovation. I know I’m excited to see it when it’s all done!”

And with a wave, she turned and walked back to her car. As soon as she was behind the wheel, she pulled out her phone and called her grandmother.

“Hi! You’ve reached Monica! Please leave a message after the beep and I promise to get back to you as soon as I can. Have a wonderful day. Bye!”

“Hey, Grandma! It’s Lily! Listen, I came to surprise my folks and they’re not here. I heard from Mrs. Hamilton that they just left for vacation. I’d like to come and stay with you

and Grandpa if that's okay, so...call me. I'm heading over to your house now. Love you! Bye!"

Tossing the phone down, she started the car and pulled out of the driveway. She'd barely turned out onto the street when her phone rang. Luckily it was paired to her car and she saw her grandmother's name pop up on the screen.

"Hey, Grandma!"

"Lily!" Monica said happily. "I was so surprised to get your call! What on earth are you doing home? Why didn't you tell anyone you were coming?"

She hesitated only a second before saying, "I wanted it to be a surprise." Then she laughed. "But I guess I'm the one who's surprised. I had no idea my parents were doing such extensive renovations on the house. It's so torn up that I can't even stay there!"

"I heard they were doing it that way so they wouldn't have to deal with the mess," her grandmother explained.

"Smart. So...can I come to the house and stay with you?"

"Staying with us won't be a problem except..."

"Except?"

"I'm not home either! Your grandfather surprised me, Aunt Janice, and Aunt Eliza with a trip to Africa! We're going to a luxury resort and going on a safari and..." Pausing, she sighed happily. "It's something I've always wanted to do. We're at the airport in New York right now, waiting for our next flight."

"Oh, um..."

"Your grandfather is at the office; I just spoke to him. Go there right now and let him know you'll be staying. I'm just so sorry I'm not going to get to see you!"

“How long are you going to be gone?”

“Almost a month. After South Africa, we’re going to spend a week in Paris.”

“Wow...everyone’s going to be gone a month?” she asked incredulously. “That just seems...I don’t know...bizarre.”

“I just wish your grandfather would have come with us! But...then you would have been completely by yourself, so there’s the silver lining.” She paused. “Sweetheart, they’re calling our flight. I need to go. I love you!”

“Love you too! And have fun!”

This time when she hung up, she was more than a little unsettled. How could everyone just be away like this, and why wouldn’t her grandfather go with them? It was so weird! Her grandparents did everything together! They were the cutest couple she’d ever seen and probably the most in love out of everyone she’d ever known. How could he *not* go with her on this adventure?

“I guess I’m going to find out,” she murmured as she drove toward the Montgomery offices.

Traffic was mildly annoying as she hit the downtown area, but it didn’t take long for her to pull into the parking garage.

And take her father’s parking space.

Grinning, Lily grabbed her purse and climbed from the car. She took a moment and sort of cursed the fact that she wasn’t looking her best. The oversized t-shirt, yoga pants, and sneakers made the drive comfortable, but her hair being up in a messy bun and the zero makeup thing was pure laziness.

“Too late to worry about that now,” she mumbled as she walked over to the elevator that would take her up to her

grandfather's floor. Once she stepped inside, she pulled out some lip gloss and put it on before fussing with her hair a little. Not that it was going to make a huge difference, but at least she felt like she tried to make herself a bit more presentable.

When the doors slid open and she stepped out onto the executive floor, she stopped short.

Everything was different. The walls were now a soft gray instead of the darker blue they'd been for years and all the dark wood accents were gone. Slowly, she made her way through the reception area and over to Rose's desk only to find...well...not Rose.

"Hi!" the young woman said with a smile. "Can I help you?"

Lily looked around in mild confusion. "Um...hi!" she forced herself to say. "Is Rose here?"

The woman's smile fell slightly. "Rose recently retired. I'm Sara. Is there something I can help you with?"

It took her a moment to wrap her head around Rose retiring, but then she finally responded. "I'm Lily Montgomery, and my father is..."

"Oh my goodness! You're Lucas' daughter! The dancer, right?" she asked excitedly.

Nodding, she relaxed. "That's me! I just got back into town and was hoping to see my grandfather. Is he in?"

"He is, and you came at the perfect time. Let me tell him you're here."

But when she turned to pick up the phone, Lily stopped her. "Would it be okay if I just sort of...you know...walked in

and surprised him?”

“Of course,” Sara said. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks! And it was nice meeting you.”

“You too!”

Smiling, Lily walked over to the massive doors that led to her grandfather’s office and knocked lightly before stepping inside. He must not have heard her because he was sitting at his desk with his head resting back against his chair and his eyes closed.

“Knock, knock,” she said softly as she walked into the office. It wasn’t until she was halfway to him that he opened his eyes—at first not really reacting, but then...

“Lily!” he cried happily, coming to his feet. “Oh my goodness! What a wonderful surprise! What are you doing here?” By this point, he had her in a great big bear hug and it was the first time in days that she felt like everything was going to be alright.

When she pulled back, she explained how she was trying to surprise her folks and how that ultimately led her to showing up here. “So, it looks like you and I are going to be roommates for a month!” she said excitedly. “Won’t that be fun?”

She expected her grandfather to say something sweet and immediately talk about all the wonderful things they were going to get to do, just the two of them, but...he didn’t. If anything, he looked a little panicked.

“You’re staying for the entire month?” he asked as he slowly made his way back to his desk to sit down. “I thought you were just passing through on your way somewhere.”

For a moment, she was a little too stunned to respond, and forced herself to sit in one of the chairs facing him. “Um...no. Things weren’t working out in Miami, and I’m...I don’t know...I just needed some time at home with my family.” The mirthless laugh was out before she could stop it. “I just had no idea my family wasn’t going to be here.”

“Well, I’m here,” he said firmly, sounding a little more like himself. “I guess I’m just surprised, that’s all. You and I just talked a few weeks ago and you didn’t mention coming home.”

She shrugged. “It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment decision. My lease was going to be up in two weeks and it just seemed pointless to stay any longer.”

“I see.” He simply looked at her for several long moments. “How about you tell me all about it over dinner? I was just planning on picking up some Chinese food on the way home, but we can certainly eat somewhere if you’d prefer.”

“As much as I want to say yes, I’ve been driving all day and I’m not really dressed to go anywhere. Having some takeout with you at your house sounds like the perfect night,” she told him.

“Excellent!” He was on his feet again. “I hope you won’t mind making it an early dinner. I’m done for the day and was just contemplating leaving when you walked in.”

Lily was instantly standing with him. “An early dinner is fine with me.” Hooking her arm through his, they walked across the room and out of the office. There was a guy standing at Sara’s desk with their back to them and for a moment, Lily finally understood why some women found men in suits so attractive. This guy clearly worked out and his clothes fit him perfectly. Dark trousers that really showcased a

rather grabbable butt, a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose his strong forearms...

Yum.

“Sara,” William said as they got closer to her desk. “I’m calling it a day. If anyone needs me, they can call.”

“No problem, Mr. Montgomery,” she replied pleasantly. “I hope you and your granddaughter have a good night.”

The hot guy with his back to them seemed to stiffen. Lily found herself holding her breath, waiting for him to turn around so she could see if the face was as appealing as the body. But he didn’t turn right away. If anything, it seemed like he was going to sidestep his way around Sara’s desk and walk away.

Rude much?

“Noah,” her grandfather said. “Are those the annual projections we were talking about earlier?”

Noah?

No, it couldn’t be. He doesn’t still work for Montgomerys, does he?

But as the man whose butt she had been ogling turned around, Lily gasped in horror.

“Yes, they are, Mr. Montgomery,” he said, handing a folder over. Then he gave her a stiff smile. “It’s nice to see you again, Lily.”

Well, crap.



Don’t react.

Don't react.

Don't react.

His smile felt tight and he was starting to sweat.

Shit.

“Oh, um...good to see you too, Noah,” Lily said with the same enthusiasm he just spoke with.

“Lily and I were just going to grab some takeout before heading home, Noah,” William said as he scanned the contents in the folder. “I have an appointment in the morning and won't be in until after lunch. Is there anything urgent you need?”

“I have a call in the morning with one of Jason's clients.”

“Russell Foster, right?”

He nodded. “Some of his investments aren't doing well—the ones he insisted on choosing himself, even though Jason warned against them. So now...”

“Now he's going to play the blame game, and Jace isn't here to make it a fair discussion.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “I'm sure I can buy us some time. I just wanted to get your input on some of the stocks. They're ones I'm not familiar with.”

William hesitated for a moment, glancing down at Lily before looking at him again. “I'll tell you what, finish up what you need to, and meet us at my house in about an hour. You'll have dinner with us and then, while Lily's unpacking, you and I can go over these.”

“Um...”

“If you need to stay and work,” Lily quickly interjected, “I can fend for myself. I just need a key or the code to get into

the house. I'll pick up dinner and we'll eat when you get home. It's not a big deal."

Noah almost sagged with relief. It was nice to know he wasn't the only one who didn't love this plan.

"It shouldn't take much of your time. By the time Lily is settled in at your place, we'll be done here."

"Nonsense!" William said with a hint of humor, knowing exactly why he and Lily were doing their best to avoid having dinner together. "Not another word out of either of you. Lily and I will see you at the house in an hour, Noah." Then he smiled at his assistant. "And I'll see you sometime after lunch tomorrow, Sara. Have a good evening."

"You too, sir!"

"Oh, I almost forgot," William said after going only a few steps. "What should we get you from the Chinese restaurant?"

"Uh...the Peking duck, please."

"Excellent choice! We'll see you at the house!"

Noah forced another smile as William and Lily walked away. It wasn't until he saw the elevator doors close that he let himself relax.

"What on earth was that all about?" Sara asked with a soft laugh. "I don't think I've ever seen you get that tense that fast."

There was no way he was going to get into that right now.

Or ever.

"It was nothing," he murmured. "I need to get a few things done before I go. I'll see you tomorrow, Sara."

"Have a good night, Noah."

He all but sprinted to his office to get his files organized and everything he needed tucked into his satchel, all while trying to come up with an excuse not to join the Montgomerys for dinner.

Why did Lily Montgomery have to show up now, after all this time? It wasn't possible for this to be a coincidence—the timing was too spot on for it be...well...a coincidence. Cursing under his breath, he shut down his computer and quickly straightened up before heading out. He stopped to talk to Andrew and Kylie to let them know he was leaving a little early and why. Once that was done, he really didn't have a reason to linger.

Except that he didn't want to go.

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. If this was just a business dinner between himself and William, he'd be almost giddy about it. But knowing that Lily was joining them? He groaned inwardly. It shouldn't be a big deal, and yet it was.

You're overreacting. Quit whining and man up!

That thought hit him as he got into the elevator, and he knew he was being ridiculous. What happened between him and Lily was nothing but a stupid misunderstanding. It had been three years and surely they were mature enough to forget about it and move on.

So that's what he decided to do.

If Lily had any lingering awkwardness toward him, then that was on her. Noah was opting to take the high road and put it behind him. He was blaming his reaction to her earlier as simply being in shock at seeing her there in the office. After all, he never saw her there before the Christmas trip and he hadn't seen her since, so...shock. And now he was over it.

The drive to the Montgomery estate—because...yeah... that's how he viewed it—took almost thirty minutes due to traffic. He'd been there many times over the last few years, and every time he drove up that long driveway and the massive house came into view, all Noah thought was how it looked like something out of a movie. He grew up poor and had never seen a mansion in real life. The first time he'd been invited here, he'd pulled up to the house and then immediately turned around and left because he didn't feel like he belonged there at all. Of course, he'd gone back because it was a company event that William was hosting, but he'd never felt so out of place in his life. But now? He was used to it.

As he got out of his car, he let out a long breath and mentally prepared himself. Just because he was ready to go inside and forget all about his and Lily's unfortunate history didn't mean she was doing the same. So he stood there, staring up at the house, and silently hoped that he wasn't about to take another step backwards in his career if she provoked him.

Although, William had never held that one transgression against him. He'd had Noah's back the entire time, standing up to Lucas whenever things got too tense.

Which was often, in the beginning.

“Are you just going to stand out there all night? The food's getting cold,” Lily said, casually leaning in the front doorway.

Dammit.

Gently clearing his throat, Noah made his way to the door, hoping he looked completely at ease, even though the sight of her momentarily took his breath away. It didn't matter that she was dressed super casually with no makeup on and her hair in a messy bun, she still looked ridiculously tempting.

I'm in trouble...

When he got to the doorway, he smiled. "Sorry. I was just mentally making sure I hadn't forgotten anything." He stepped inside and waited while she closed the door. As they walked toward the kitchen, he asked, "So, have you had time to get settled in yet?"

"Not yet. I was planning on just going up to the room I've always stayed in, but my grandfather offered me the guesthouse to use since I'll be here for a month, so I'm torn."

"A month?"

She nodded. "This wasn't a planned thing, and I had no idea my folks were going to be away or that our house was under major renovations. So...here I am."

"Wow. Even I knew about the renovations," he said with mild amusement. "Your mother must have come to the office with paint and tile samples several times a week for the last month. How could you not know?"

Frowning, she snapped, "I've been busy, okay?"

By then they were in the kitchen and William was standing by the table, looking at them expectantly. "Everything alright?"

Lily nodded and practically floated over to her grandfather. "Absolutely. I'm just glad Noah's here so we can eat! I'm starving!"

Good save, he thought.

"Sorry I was late," he apologized. "Traffic was its usual brutal self."

"No worries," William said as he sat. "Take a seat and no business talk until after we're done."

For a few minutes, everyone was busy making their plates, pouring drinks, and simply talking about how good all the food looked and smelled. It wasn't until they had each eaten several bites that any real conversation started.

"Before you arrived, Lily and I were discussing her staying in the guesthouse rather than here in the main house," William began before looking across the table at his granddaughter. "I thought you'd appreciate the privacy."

"Grandpa, this house is huge, and it's just the two of us. I don't think privacy is really going to be an issue," she replied with amusement. "Your bedroom and everything you need is down here, and the room I always stay in is upstairs, along with everything I need. We'll just be enjoying some of our meals together and maybe a movie or a game or something after dinner each night. It will be fun!"

William didn't respond other than a nod, and Noah watched as Lily's expression fell slightly. He'd spent enough time around the Montgomerys to know this seemed a little odd. From everything he had observed about their family, they all enjoyed spending time together. Knowing that Mrs. Montgomery was out of town and William was here by himself, Noah would have figured he'd be thrilled to have Lily in the house with him.

Then again, maybe this was a private family issue and none of my damn business.

"Where've you been living, Lily?" he asked in an attempt to change the subject a little. "Are you in between dancing gigs?"

"I was down in Miami for a while, and before that, New York City. I had a minor injury that I was letting heal and that took me out of prepping for a spot on the Miami dance squad."

She let out a small sigh. “I figured I’d come home to regroup and finish recuperating.”

“I thought the injury was minor,” William commented, his voice laced with concern. “Have you gone for a second opinion?”

“Um...that was part of my plan while I was home. I was hoping my dad could recommend someone...”

“I know all the doctors that treated your father and can easily give you their names and get an appointment for you. I’ll make some calls tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” she murmured before looking at Noah. “So? What about you? Obviously, you’re still with Montgomerys, but anything new and exciting going on?”

“Not particularly,” he replied and realized how lame that sounded.

Mainly because it was true.

“I thought I read somewhere that your brother was coming to Charlotte as part of his tour,” she went on. “I take it you’re going.”

“Absolutely! It’s not until the end of next month, but Simon and I already made plans to hang out even though he’s only here for the one night.”

“Oh, that’s right!” William said. “Your brother’s a singer! I had forgotten about that. And your other brother is still playing football, correct?”

He nodded. “He is, but he’s already thinking about what he wants to do when he’s no longer playing. I’ve been helping him with his portfolio so he’ll have a healthy income when he retires. I was considering...”

“No shop talk, remember?” Lily reminded him with a smug smile. “And you never really expanded on what’s going on with you other than the evasive, ‘not particularly.’ So...?”

He took another bite of his dinner before responding. “I moved into a great place last year—a condo right in the middle of the downtown district. Great views, concierge service...I was a first-time homebuyer, so it was kind of exciting.”

“Wow! That is exciting!” she said. “Good for you!”

“What about you?” he asked. “Are you thinking of staying in Charlotte or do you want to live somewhere else?”

“I guess it depends on where the next dance gig is. I’m pretty open to moving to wherever the opportunity is.”

“There are plenty of opportunities here in Charlotte,” William chimed in. “My assistant Sara was telling me how they are always looking for dance teachers for her daughter’s classes. She’s a single mom and the hunt for finding a dance school with teachers who stay has been a bit of a struggle. You should consider that, Lily. We would love to have you home.”

“Oh, um...”

Noah saw the way she squirmed in her chair and knew this was probably yet another family conversation he shouldn’t be part of. So he went for another change of subject and silently prayed dinner would be over soon so he could talk business with William and then get the hell out of here.

“Did Mrs. Montgomery take off on time for her trip today?”

THREE

SHE WAS IN THE GUESTHOUSE, and honestly, it stung.

Oh, her grandfather was very diplomatic and downright charming as he pretty much steered her out the back door of the main house and down the path to the guest one after Noah left, but still...

He claimed he was taking a page from her parents and having someone come in to do some work on the upstairs of the house while her grandmother was gone, but something wasn't sitting right with her and she just couldn't put her finger on it.

As she roamed around the space that was going to be her home for the next month, it was hard to be disappointed. She always loved the guesthouse and it definitely didn't suck to have so much space for herself. It only had one bedroom, but the rest of the space was open and airy and had a coastal vibe to it. The pool and hot tub were literally steps from the front door, but considering winter wasn't quite over yet, she knew she'd only get to utilize the hot tub.

“And that doesn't suck either,” she murmured as she unpacked. That's when it hit her—she'd shipped all the rest of her stuff to her parents' house. Cursing, she grabbed her phone to see if she had Mrs. Hamilton's number so she could give her

a heads-up. Otherwise, she was going to have to head over there tomorrow to see if anything arrived.

And then figure out how to get it all here since there was too much going on over there.

Groaning, Lily collapsed on the sofa. “Why did I think it was a good idea to come home?” What she wanted more than anything was to talk to her mother, but it was around 3 a.m. in Rome right now, which was where they were. “This is what I get for being such a stubborn brat.”

And yeah, she really regretted not talking to her mother more recently. It was her own foolish pride that kept her from doing it and now...lesson learned.

She only allowed herself to wallow for a few minutes before going back to her task of unpacking. Tomorrow, she'd deal with finding the rest of her stuff and moving it over here temporarily.

By the time she climbed into bed, she was exhausted.

And when she woke up the next morning, she was only slightly less exhausted.

Fortunately, it was a Saturday and she was hoping to go up to the main house and see what her grandfather was doing today. Maybe they could go to lunch and then over to her parents' house to see about her stuff—which reminded her...

Rolling out of the bed, she walked over to grab her phone and finish looking for Mrs. Hamilton's phone number. Instead, she paused and looked at the reminder of the voicemails from her mother. By her calculations, it was three in the afternoon in Rome and decided to finally call her back.

“Lily!” her mother said, answering after only one ring. “Oh my goodness! Where have you been? I've left a bunch of

messages and texted you and..."

"Mom," she said with a small laugh, "I'm really sorry about that. I just...I wasn't in a good headspace these last few weeks. I shouldn't have taken it out on you, though. I'm sorry."

"Oh, sweetheart...what's going on?"

It was such a simple question, but it led to an emotionally complex response. "I'm not healing," she sobbed before telling her about the physical therapy and the appointment she had with her doctor earlier in the week. "It was pointless for me to stay in Miami, so I packed up and came home. I wanted to surprise you, but..."

"We weren't there," she replied miserably. "Oh, Lil...I don't even know what to say! Where are you staying? I hate that we weren't there for you!"

"Don't, Mom, okay? It's my own fault for not answering your calls or letting you know I was coming. I'm staying in Grandma and Grandpa's guesthouse."

"What? Why the guesthouse?"

"It's weird, right?" Lily countered. "Grandpa said he's taking your lead and getting some work done on the upstairs of the house while Grandma's away, but...I don't know. Something about the way he said it seemed odd."

"Hang on," Emma murmured before seemingly talking to Lucas. "Did you know your father was planning to do work on his house too?"

"Nope. He never said anything to me. Why?" Lily heard her father respond.

“Because our daughter wanted to surprise us and is back home, but your dad put her in the guesthouse!”

“Let me call him,” Lucas muttered.

“Your father’s going to call him and straighten this all out. I can’t believe your grandfather would put you out in the guesthouse!”

“It’s really not that terrible. This place is gorgeous and it has everything I could need, I just...I don’t know. It felt odd, that’s all.”

“We’ll see what we can find out,” Emma said. “Now, back to you. What are your plans? I can get on a plane and head home...”

“No,” Lily said adamantly. “Absolutely not. This trip sounds fabulous and I don’t want you to miss out on any of it. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere. I promise I’ll still be here when you get home.” Then she laughed softly. “And then I’m moving back home where apparently everything’s going to be new and fabulous upstairs.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for, but you still haven’t told me what you’re going to do while we’re gone.”

She sighed. “I’m going to talk to another doctor or two and see what my options are. I’d rather not have to have surgery...”

“Like father, like daughter,” Emma murmured. “You should really talk to your dad about this. I can put him on when he’s done talking to your grandfather.”

“I would like to talk to him about it, but...not today. Once I meet with the doctors, I’ll definitely have questions and we’ll talk then. But for now, I want you to go and enjoy your trip. Tell me all the fabulous places you’ll be seeing!”

For the next ten minutes, her mother gave her a very detailed description of their itinerary. “I’m so excited for all of it, but I know by the time it’s over, I’ll be more than ready to come home.” Now it was Emma’s turn to sigh. “I really hate that I’m not there for you and that you couldn’t even go home and sleep in your own bed.”

“It’s fine, Mom. Really. But can you text me Mrs. Hamilton’s number? I had some stuff shipped to the house and I want to call her and see if it got there. Some of it I’ll probably just leave in the garage, but the rest I’d like to have here with me.”

“No problem. As soon as we’re done talking, I’ll send you her number.” She paused. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

At first, she just nodded because she was still a bit emotional, but then she forced herself to say, “I will be. Grandpa’s here with me and I still have friends here in town, so it’s all good. Go and have some fun and send lots of pictures. I love you!”

“Love you too, Lil. We’ll talk soon.”

As soon as they hung up, Lily tossed the phone aside and let herself have a good cry. It didn’t last long, but it really helped her release some of the tension she’d been holding onto. Sitting up, she stood and stretched before going into the bathroom and taking a shower. By the time she was out, it was almost ten and she wanted to be over at the main house by 10:30 to see what her grandfather was up to for the day. But as she stepped out of the bathroom in her robe, she heard a knock at the front door and smiled when she spotted him standing there.

“Great minds!” she said when she opened the door and hugged him. “I was going to head up to see you once I was done getting ready.”

“Did you sleep okay?” he asked. “I didn’t want to come over too early. I figured you were going to sleep in a little.” Sliding his hands into his trouser pockets, he gave her a lopsided grin. “Then your father called to yell at me so I knew you were up.”

Groaning, she gently tugged him over to the sofa to sit with her. “I didn’t mean for him to yell at you.”

“Your father doesn’t need a reason to be grumpy,” William said with a hint of a smile. “But I guess I didn’t realize how upset you were about staying in the guesthouse. I’ll cancel the contractors if you’d like.”

“No, it’s okay. It just sort of felt like you didn’t want me staying there with you,” she said. “I know I’m just being overly sensitive because of everything going on with me. I’m sorry if Dad gave you a hard time.”

He waved her off. “Like I said, that’s just his thing.” Winking at her, he added, “But I knew you and I would work it out.” After a brief pause, he asked, “So, what would you like to do today? How about lunch at the country club?”

“Ooh, that sounds good. Do they still make that seared ahi tuna salad with the spicy wasabi dressing?”

“Even if they don’t, you know the chef would make it for you,” he replied before squeezing her hand. “Was there anything you needed to do today?”

She told him about the stuff she had shipped home. “So I’m going to call Mrs. Hamilton and see if it arrived. I’m going to need to bring some of it here, but it’s going to take

multiple trips since my car's kind of small. And we might need a hand moving the boxes from the car to the house because some of them are heavy. Any chance any of my cousins are around to help?"

William shook his head. "I don't think anyone's on school break, and the ones who aren't away at college are staying with people that I don't really know. But don't worry. We'll make it work." He stood and glanced around. "Why don't you finish getting yourself ready and then we'll get going? Maybe the Hamiltons can help us move, or perhaps one of the contractors wouldn't mind giving us a hand."

"It can't hurt to ask," she agreed. "Okay, give me about a half hour and I'll be ready to go. Will that work?"

"Of course." He kissed her on the cheek before heading for the door. "Meet me up at the house whenever you're ready." And then he was gone.

Lily immediately sprang into action. Her hair was longer than it had ever been and normally took a while to dry, even with a blow dryer. So, she made fast work of applying her makeup and then slid into a pair of black skinny jeans, an ivory cable-knit sweater, and a pair of black ankle boots before tackling her hair. After brushing and diffusing and then giving it several minutes with the air on full blast, it still felt damp. Muttering a curse, she had no choice but to put it up in a bun again. It wasn't her favorite style, but at times like these, it worked.

After grabbing her phone, purse, and keys, she was out the door and looking forward to the day ahead.



Monday was grueling. Noah felt like he'd been doing nothing but taking calls and putting out fires all damn day. It was almost five and all he wanted to do was go home, order a pizza, and drink a cold beer. And come hell or high water, he was going to make it happen.

The sound of someone knocking on his office door had him looking up, and he smiled when William came strolling in. "I hope I'm not interrupting," he said as he approached Noah's desk.

"Not at all. Just finishing up and thinking of the toppings I'm going to get on my pizza."

"Oh."

If Noah wasn't mistaken, there was disappointment in that small, one-word response. "Was there something you needed?"

William raked a hand through his hair. "Actually...I was hoping to ask a favor of you, but it sounds like you have plans for the evening."

This was slippery slope territory here. If he kept saying yes to every favor and every extra task that was asked of him, he would work himself to death. However...

"Lily had some of her belongings shipped from Miami to her parents' house and she needs to move them to the guest house," William explained. "And as much as I like to think I'm still a young man, I know I'm not." He let out a small laugh. "I know she's adamant that she'll just do it herself, but it's going to take her about four trips to do it all, and..."

"And you don't want her to hurt herself since she's already nursing an injury," he finished for him. As much as he genuinely didn't want to get involved with anything related to

Lily, did he really want to be the reason either she or William hurt themselves?

Ugh...

Sometimes having a conscience sucked.

“If you’re busy...”

Getting to his feet, Noah shook his head. “Not busy at all, just thinking about dinner,” he said with a laugh. “So...should I just follow you over to Lucas and Emma’s?”

“Actually, I’m going to head home, and I’ll order us some pizzas to be delivered. I think I’ll just be in the way over at the house with all the construction going on. Just tell me what you like on your pizza and I’ll make sure it’s ready for you when you and Lily get to the guesthouse.”

“Oh, um...okay. I guess I’m okay with almost anything on my pizza. I’m not too picky.”

“Noah?”

“Hmm?”

“What kind of pizza were you going to order for yourself?” William prompted with a knowing grin.

“Pepperoni, mushrooms, and peppers,” he murmured.

“Then that’s what you’ll have! And really, thank you for this. I’ll text you Lucas’ address and you might as well head over there now. I think Lily’s already on her way there.”

Nodding, Noah thanked him again and began collecting his things as William walked out the door.

Part of him was utterly annoyed with himself for caving in and agreeing to help. After all, it was starting to feel like he was turning into everyone’s damn lackey. But again, this was

just who he was; he hated the thought of anyone getting hurt just because he was trying to make a point. So, now he was off to help Lily.

“At least I’m still getting my pizza,” he mumbled and figured he’d wait to have his beer until he got home. His phone dinged with an incoming text, and when he glanced down, he saw it was the address from William.

No one stopped him with any questions or concerns as he walked out to the elevators, and other than a few waves and goodnights, he was on his way.

Lucas and Emma lived in the opposite direction of William’s house, but the traffic wasn’t nearly as congested. When he pulled up their driveway and saw all the construction trucks and crews, he couldn’t believe anyone would do this sort of extensive work while out of the country.

“I would definitely want to oversee this sort of thing myself, but...that’s just me.”

Control freak...

Okay, maybe.

He parked and popped the hatch on his SUV and went in search of Lily. There were still easily over a dozen people working, and he didn’t have the slightest idea where to even begin to find her.

Luckily, she found him.

Jogging over to him in a pair of black leggings, a baggy pink sweatshirt, and her long hair in a ponytail, she looked like a young girl. But the closer she got, it was obvious this was no girl he was dealing with. Lily was a woman.

An incredibly attractive woman.

“Hey!” she said cheerily. “What are you doing here?”

“Um...your grandfather asked me to come and help move some boxes with you.” He frowned. “Didn’t he tell you?”

Shaking her head, she replied, “Nope! Just said he knew someone to ask.” She paused and looked him up and down. “Although I would have thought you’d change clothes. You don’t want to get your suit all dirty, do you?”

The frown deepened. “It’s not a suit, and it’s fine. These boxes haven’t been tossed in the mud, have they?”

She laughed and it was kind of a great sound. “Thankfully, they have not. I just thought you’d be more comfortable in jeans and sneakers. But if you’re good...”

“I am,” he said confidently, even as he mentally kicked himself for not thinking of stopping home to change first. He didn’t even carry a gym bag with him because there was a gym in his condo complex, so there was no need for it to ever go in his car.

Lily waved and chatted briefly with everyone they passed before leading him into the garage. There was an obscene amount of boxes in there, and he simply stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of them.

“Um...these aren’t all yours, are they?”

She laughed again. “Holy crap, no!” More laughing. “Most of this is from inside the house. That stack to your right is mine.” She paused before adding, “Actually, both those stacks are mine, but the one closest to you is the one we’re taking to the guesthouse. The rest can stay here until the house is livable again.”

There were about eight boxes, but they were all on the larger side. “Okay. I think we’ll be able to fit most of them in

my car with all the seats down. What kind of car do you drive?”

“It’s the blue Toyota sedan over there.” She pointed to a very sporty, very new-looking car and he wasn’t the least bit surprised.

“It looks brand new.”

“It is. I bought it when I got to Miami six months ago. It’s a great car and it drives beautifully, but...it’s not very big.”

All he did was nod before walking farther into the garage and snagging the hand truck that was tucked away in the corner. “Let’s start with the three smallest ones and see if we can get them to fit in yours.”

“Sounds good!”

It took them an hour to get everything loaded. Only two of the boxes fit in her car safely, and the rest went in his, along with the hand truck. It was cramped and he couldn’t see out his rear window, but at least they were going to get this done in one trip.

“I’ll meet you at the guesthouse,” he said to Lily as he climbed into his car. Naturally, she pretty much sped out of the driveway, but he drove at a slower pace since he couldn’t really see like he was supposed to. It took him almost thirty minutes to get there and she was pacing in the driveway as he pulled in.

“Jeez, I thought you got lost!” She said it lightly, so Noah didn’t take offense. “I called my grandfather and let him know you were here and he’s calling in the dinner order now. I hope pizza is okay for you.”

He nodded and walked around the back of his car and carefully slid the hand truck out. “It is. I actually gave him my

order before leaving the office.”

“Okay. Cool. Let’s do this!”

After some discussion, it was decided that Noah would do all the lifting and moving while she directed where she wanted everything. It wasn’t a bad method, but now he was regretting not having a spare change of clothes because he was sweaty. Maybe he could take his pizza to go and no one would question it.

Once everything was inside, he accepted the bottle of water Lily handed him. “I seriously can’t thank you enough. This whole situation has been way more chaotic than I planned, and I really appreciate you taking the time to help me.”

But before he could respond, she walked out of the room.

O-kay...

When she came back almost five minutes later, she had a pile of clothes in her hands. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“There were several drawers filled with clothes when I got here. My grandfather said it was just extras in case anyone ever needed anything. So I rummaged around and found some stuff I thought would fit you.” Then she motioned to his clothes. “I know you’ve got to be uncomfortable, so hopefully there’s something in this pile that works.”

As much as he wanted to argue, he was way too grateful. “Thanks. I honestly thought it wouldn’t be a big deal, but...”

“There are a couple of towels in the bathroom too, if you want to grab a quick shower. We’re eating down here according to my grandfather, so...”

The idea of a shower was beyond appealing, so he simply accepted the clothes and headed for the bathroom. “Fifteen minutes, tops,” he said before closing the door and he heard her soft laughter.

He certainly didn’t want to waste any time, so he turned on the hot water and quickly stripped. It felt a little weird to be doing this, but as soon as he stepped under the spray, he knew it was the right decision. The tiled shelf was lined with all sorts of fruity and flowery soaps and body washes, but there were also a couple of bottles of...well...non-fruity and flowery stuff that he could use. So, he lathered up from head to toe and rinsed off before simply letting himself stand under the water and relax.

The knock at the door, however, made him instantly tense.

“Pizza’s almost here!” Lily called out. “Just FYI!”

“Thanks!” And that effectively put an end to the shower. Turning off the water, he reached for one of the towels and quickly dried off before wrapping it around his waist. He hadn’t looked too closely at the clothes Lily pulled out for him.

After pulling his briefs back on, he took a pair of black sweatpants from the pile and slid them on. All of the t-shirts she picked out, however, were too small.

Crap.

With no other choice, he folded up his work clothes and put them on the vanity before grabbing the pile she’d given him and stepped out of the bathroom. “Any chance there are a few more shirts to choose from? These are all too small.”

Lily turned and froze. There was no other way to describe it, and it reminded him of the night she’d seen him shirtless in

Asheville three years ago. She'd stared at him with that same intensity that told him she wasn't as disinterested as she wanted everyone to believe.

Slowly, he took a step toward her, but her gaze was locked on his chest. He swallowed hard before taking another step and then another until they were almost toe to toe. "Um... these are all too small," he said gruffly, and almost groaned when she finally looked up at him.

"I...can go check," she said, her voice softer than he'd ever heard it. "Or...you can come with me and see for yourself."

Nodding, he followed her into her bedroom, and suddenly it felt too warm in there. He wasn't thinking about how she was the boss's daughter or granddaughter or that there was pizza on the way. He watched the soft sway of her hips and how perfect her backside was. And when she reached the dresser and bent over...yeah...his hands twitched with the need to touch her.

She straightened with another shirt in her hands and carefully held it up to him. Her knuckles brushed against his bare shoulders and his eyes drifted shut.

This was torture.

Then her hands flattened on his chest to hold the shirt in place, but she didn't say a word.

Noah opened his eyes and gently tugged the shirt out of her grasp as they both seemed to be leisurely closing the gap between them. Lily's gaze fixated on his chest again before pressing her hand on it.

"This is new," she whispered, touching the tattoo there. She looked up at him. "You didn't have this in Asheville."

He swallowed again. “My brothers and I went and got them in Vegas the first time Simon performed there. He flew us both out and we thought it would be something fun to commemorate it.” It honestly wasn’t something he’d ever considered, but once the idea was out there, he’d been on board. The Phoenix represented rebirth— a reminder that no matter how tough life gets, there’s always the possibility for a fresh start.

“It’s really cool. The artist did a great job,” she said as her finger traced the design.

When her eyes met his again, Noah whispered her name before lowering his head. She went up on her toes to meet him halfway when...

“Dinner’s here!” William called out.

They immediately jumped apart and Lily raced from the room while he slid the t-shirt on and took a moment to compose himself. It was obvious there was an attraction between them, but...there shouldn’t be, and there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that this sort of thing was going to keep happening the more time they spent together. She was back in town, but that didn’t mean they had to see each other again other than in passing after tonight, and as long as William stayed to eat with them...

“Tell Noah I said thank you,” he heard William saying.

Wait...what?

He turned and immediately joined them out in the kitchen and knew he had to look a little wild-eyed. “Are you leaving?” he asked, his voice sounding more high-pitched and frantic than he intended.

“I’m afraid so. I had a little something to eat when I got home and now I’m not very hungry. The two of you enjoy the pizzas, and I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

“Wait!” they both said at the same time, exchanging glances.

William chuckled. “Is everything okay?”

“Just...thought you’d want to stay and hang out,” Lily said casually. “Come on and sit with us. I hate to think about you all alone up there.”

But her grandfather wasn’t having any of it. “Lily, sweetheart, I’m genuinely tired and have to return a call to your Uncle Robert, so...you two enjoy yourselves.” He kissed her on the cheek before turning and shaking Noah’s hand. “Thanks again for helping Lily out today. I’ll see you tomorrow in the office.”

“Have a good night, sir,” he said and had no choice but to watch him leave. Once the door was shut, you could have heard a pin drop in the room.

“So, um...pizza,” Lily said after a moment.

Noah turned and saw two boxes on the table and there was only one logical thing to do. “I think I’m going to go too,” he said before walking to the bathroom and grabbing his stuff. When he came back to the kitchen, Lily was standing where he’d left her. “Thanks for the clothes...” He looked down at his bare feet and realized how ridiculous he was going to look in sweatpants and loafers, but what choice did he have?

“You’re seriously leaving?” she asked, confusion written all over her face.

He took a tentative step toward her before stopping. “I think it’s for the best.”

“But...why?”

“Lily, it’s been over three years since the whole New Year’s Eve incident, and your father still gives me the stink eye almost daily. I’m serious about my career with Montgomerys and...and I just think this isn’t a good idea. I’m sorry.”

To her credit, she didn’t argue with him. “I think you’re right.” Then, she opened the pizza boxes to see which was which before handing one to him. “Thank you for all your help today and...I’m sorry that you feel you have to run out of here.”

“I wouldn’t say run...”

She laughed softly. “Well, not in those shoes,” she joked, nodding at his loafers.

He laughed with her and then it got quiet again all too soon. “I really should go.”

“I know.”

“I...I guess I’ll see you around.”

“I guess so.”

And then there was nothing left to say, but man did he want to lean in and kiss her just one more time. The kiss they’d shared three years ago had been damn near perfect and he was dying to know if it was a fluke or if there was genuine chemistry there. Had he imagined how great it was? Had his imagination been playing tricks on him all these years?

Sadly, he was never going to find out.

Taking one step backwards and then another, he said, “Have a good night, Lily.”

“You too, Noah.”

And yeah, he heard regret there too.

Dammit.

This was for the best.

At least, that’s what he was going to keep telling himself.

FOUR

AFTER A WEEK BACK IN CHARLOTTE, Lily was settled in the guesthouse, but was beginning to notice some odd behavior from her grandfather.

He was vague about his days. They ate dinner together every night and yet whenever she asked him about his day, he never gave her a real answer. It was all, “It was good” or “same old, same old” and that wasn’t like him. If anything, he tended to overshare every detail of what was going on in his life. That’s why she was taking matters into her own hands and going to his office to surprise him for lunch. She figured if she showed up unexpectedly, she’d get a glimpse into his day.

The going out to eat part was just a perk.

She parked in her father’s spot again before riding the elevator up to the executive floor. “Hey, Sara!” she said as she approached the desk. “You look so pretty today! Pink is a great color on you!”

“Oh! Thanks, Lily! Are you here to see your grandfather?”

She nodded. “Is he free?”

“He sure is! Go ahead in.”

“Thanks!” And with a small wave, she headed into the office and found her grandfather in a similar pose as she had

last week—eyes closed, head back. She gently cleared her throat so she didn't startle him.

“Lily! What a wonderful surprise,” he said with a smile. “What brings you here?”

“I was hoping to take you to lunch,” she said sweetly. “There are so many great places we can walk to, and I thought...”

“Oh, dear,” he murmured. “I'm sorry, but I've got a big conference call I need to get on in...” He paused and glanced at his watch. “In ten minutes. I'm afraid it's going to be a long one.”

Her shoulders sagged. “Oh. Okay. No biggie. I guess I'll just plan on seeing you for dinner.” Walking over to him, she gave him a hug before pulling back. “Don't work too hard and make sure you eat.”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma'am!” He kissed her cheek. “I'll see you at home.”

Well, that was disappointing.

Waving to Sara, Lily walked to the elevator and contemplated what she was going to do with herself now. She rode down to the parking garage and got all the way to her car before she decided that she didn't want to drive anywhere. There really were some great restaurants within walking distance, and she wasn't afraid to eat alone. So, she walked out of the garage and made the long trek around to the front of the building and sat down on one of the benches facing a massive fountain.

“I should probably look up some of these places and figure out what I'm really in the mood for.” Reaching into her purse, she pulled out her phone and began looking at her options.

There was a Korean barbecue place around the corner that she was dying to try, but that was really more fun with someone else. The burger place she knew was fantastic, but was she in a burger mood? She shifted to get more comfortable when her hip cramped. Muttering a curse, she bent over slightly to stretch it out.

“Oh, William! You are so funny!” someone said—a *female* someone—and Lily sat up and looked around just in time to see her grandfather walking arm in arm with a woman!

“What the *what?*” Lily got to her feet and tried to come to grips with what she just saw. Why would her grandfather tell her he had a conference call and was busy if he simply had other plans?

With a woman.

A woman who is not your grandmother.

The gasp was out before she could stop it. Hiking her purse strap over her shoulder, she turned to follow them, only to run directly into a wall.

Okay, not a wall, but a very solid person.

“Lily? Are you alright?” Noah asked, his hands gently grasping her shoulders.

“What? Oh, um...” She looked beyond him and couldn’t find which direction her grandfather went. “Dammit!”

“What’s the matter?”

Stepping out of his grasp, she pointed in the direction she last saw her grandfather. “Did you see my grandfather on your way out of the building?”

He shook his head. “No. Why?”

“He told me he had a conference call and was too busy to go to lunch. Then I see him walking arm in arm with...with... some *woman!* Who the hell is this woman and why is she so cozy and flirty with my grandpa, huh?”

“Um...”

“Why would he lie? And what kind of woman gets all giggly and flirty with a married man?” she demanded. “I mean...sure, Grandpa’s still kind of a good-looking man...you know, in a grandpa way, but...*ugh!* We have to find them!”

“Um...we?” he asked, looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Yes, Noah. We,” she said firmly. “Come on.” Taking him by the hand, she took off toward the end of the block before pausing.

“Problem?” he asked, taking his hand from hers.

“I don’t know which way they went!” Stomping her foot, she tried to think of a plan of action.

“Lily, there are dozens of places they could have gone. We couldn’t possibly hit them all. And then what are you going to say if you find them?”

“I will remind him that it’s *wrong* to lie, and that he is a married man! Jeez, try to keep up, Noah!”

“Keep...?” He huffed with annoyance. “You need to calm down and think about this for a minute. You can’t chase your grandfather all over the city, and I’m certainly not going to do that with you.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Oh, right. Your precious job might suffer. Gasp!” she added sarcastically. She continued to stare at him, but all that was doing was making her realize how

freaking attractive he was. He'd been good looking when she met him three years ago. But now? Now he was on a whole other level. He had a bit of scruff on his jaw today that she'd never seen before, and it was stupid how sexy it made him look.

Run! Run away! Stop thinking about this and go!

“You know what? Fine,” he said wearily. “We’ll check a few places, but then wait here for him to come back. You can ambush him then.”

She didn’t hate the idea, but...

“What if he takes an extended lunch?” And yeah, just the thought of what he was possibly doing on that extended lunch made her shudder.

“Hang on.” Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he called someone. “Hey, Sara, it’s Noah,” he said, sounding extremely pleasant. “Is Mr. Montgomery in?” He paused. “Oh. Do you know when he’ll be back?” Another pause. “Uh-huh. Great. Thanks!” Hanging up, he slid his phone back into his pocket. “Okay, according to Sara, your grandfather’s at lunch, but will be back at one because he really has a conference call then.”

“Oh.”

“Maybe you just misunderstood what he told you. Maybe he meant that he had a call coming up?”

“Maybe,” she murmured. “But it still doesn’t explain the woman. And if he had time to go out with her, he had time to go out with me.”

They stood in awkward silence for several long moments before Noah spoke. “How about we grab something quick from the sandwich shop on the corner? We’ll sit at a table by

the window so we can watch the front of the building and see when they come back.”

At that moment, Lily’s stomach growled and she nodded. “Fine. But when I see them, just know that I’m going to run over here and demand answers and you won’t be able to stop me.”

He held his hands up in surrender. “Consider me warned.”

With a small huff, she stepped up to the edge of the sidewalk and waited for the light to change. Noah came up and stood beside her and she felt like she needed to say something.

“I appreciate you...you know...doing this with me,” she said quietly. “After everything that happened on Monday...”

“It’s not a big deal,” he interrupted. “I was going out to grab some lunch anyway.”

“Still...after you said...”

“Lily?”

“Hmm?”

“Just drop it, okay? We’re just going to eat some lunch and then you’re going to run and tackle your grandfather while I sit back and watch. That’s all we need to talk about.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “Okay.”

The light changed and they crossed the street and walked into the sandwich shop. It was slightly crowded, but fortunately they were able to snag a table by the window just like they hoped. Lily was mildly distracted by a myriad of things—watching the people walking by the Montgomery building, the noise in the restaurant, and the man sitting across from her. It was a hell of a time for her to fixate on his looks,

but that damn scruff on his face was practically like catnip to her.

“Are you okay?” he asked after a minute.

“Yeah. Why?”

“You’re staring at me. Is there something on my face?”

Why yes there is, Sexy McScruffy...

Ugh...

“Sorry, I wasn’t really staring at you,” she lied. “I was just...my mind’s racing with this entire situation.”

He nodded. “I get it.” Then he glanced at his menu. “What are you going to get?”

She did the same. “Probably just a salad, even though I really want a BLT.”

“So get the BLT.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I still have to stay in shape. I haven’t been able to work out like I want to because of this stupid injury, so that means I have to be extra careful with my diet.”

He nodded and put his menu down. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How much weight do you seriously think you’ll gain if you ate the sandwich instead of the salad?”

“Um...”

“And for the record, there’s nothing wrong with your figure. One BLT couldn’t possibly change that.”

Her cheeks felt warm and her heart raced a little. “Um... wow. Thank you.”

He shrugged. “Just telling the truth. I don’t see the point of depriving yourself if you really want something.”

There was a snarky comeback on the tip of her tongue, but she kept it to herself. This was about a sandwich, not a kiss, although now she wanted both.

Their server came over to take their orders and Noah smiled up at her. “Hey, Charlene! How are the kids?”

“Making me crazy,” she said with a laugh. “Your usual, Noah?”

He nodded. “Yes, please.”

Then she looked at Lily. “And for you?”

“Um...” She caught Noah’s eye and saw the challenge there. “I’ll have the BLT on wheat toast, and can I get fries with that?”

“Absolutely! Anything to drink?”

“Just water with lemon, please.”

“You got it!”

As soon as she walked away, Lily crossed her arms on the table. “I was curious how much weight a BLT will cause me to gain.”

“And the fries?”

She shrugged. “Goes with the territory. You can’t have a BLT without fries or chips. That’s just not right.” Laughing, she added, “Salty snacks are my weakness. I think because I grew up with my mom owning a bakery that sweets aren’t as

appealing, but if there are chips and fries around, I am all over them.”

“Fries and chips are definitely good, but I am all about desserts. Your mother has brought in a ton of cookies and brownies over the years and those are always the best days. And I think she takes pity on me because your father clearly holds a grudge, so she always brings a little extra that are just mine.” He grinned. “And as a guy living alone, I appreciate having cake all to myself.”

The conversation flowed while they ate. They primarily talked about her family and her career, but it made her curious why he didn’t talk more about himself and his life. And she was just about to ask him when she spotted her grandfather and his mystery woman standing on the corner right outside their window.

“Oh my God! There they are!” she whispered loudly. “I have to go!”

“Lily, you can’t just go out there and ambush them,” he reminded her, even as he was throwing cash down on the table.

“Why not? What he’s doing is wrong, Noah!” She got to her feet and grabbed her purse. “Uh-oh...oh, no!”

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I think he can see me!” she hissed, looking around frantically.

“What’s the big deal? You’re about to go out there anyway.”

“It’s just...I don’t know now, and...*crap!*” She knew she wasn’t making any sense, but she was starting to have second thoughts about the whole confrontation thing. “Maybe I should

wait and talk to him tonight.” She turned her back to the window and was about to walk away when Noah tugged her down into his lap. “What the...?”

Her hands landed on his chest and they were practically nose-to-nose. Lily’s heart was racing, but she wasn’t sure if it was because of potentially getting seen or the fact that she was in Noah’s arms. She swallowed hard as she stared at him and wondered what was happening.

“Noah, I...”

But he silenced anything she was going to say when his lips claimed hers.



In his defense, he hauled her into his lap as a way of getting her out of view because her grandfather was definitely looking in her direction.

However...

He was keeping her there because she was pure temptation, and her kiss was exactly like he remembered it.

Spectacular.

And it didn’t seem like she was going to complain because her hand raked through his hair as she moved in closer. It was a little awkward to be pressed together like this in the booth, but he sure as hell didn’t mind. As he smoothed his hand up and down her back, he wished they were someplace else, somewhere they could sprawl out comfortably and...

“Noah, can I get you anything...oops!” Charlene said.
“Sorry!”

He and Lily instantly broke apart, but they stared at each other breathlessly for a moment before he answered. “Um... we’re good, Charlene. Thanks.”

Lily slowly crawled off his lap and stood, smoothing her hair and straightening her top. He joined her and quickly checked the cash he had thrown on the table before motioning for her to lead the way out. By now he was hoping William had crossed the street and was back in the office, but he couldn’t be sure. Fortunately, when they stepped outside, he wasn’t there.

They stood on the corner and Lily finally spoke. “So, um...I don’t know what that was all about, but...”

“Your grandfather was definitely looking in your direction, so I was trying to pull you out of sight.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “And the kiss...?”

The light turned green and they began to walk. “I figured with the way we were angled, he wouldn’t be able to see your face,” he explained, but even to his own ears it sounded lame. “You seemed to be panicking about him seeing you, so...”

“So you were just throwing yourself on the grenade,” she said miserably, making him feel guilty.

“I’m sorry. That was totally not acceptable of me. I kissed you without your permission, and that’s definitely not cool.” He growled with frustration as they stepped up onto the sidewalk in front of Montgomerys. “I just thought...”

“It’s not a big deal,” she said quickly, but wouldn’t look directly at him. “It’s not like we haven’t kissed before.” She let out a nervous laugh. “Anyway, uh...thanks for that. I’m sure you need to get back to work and I’m just gonna head home.” She took one step back and then another. “And thanks for

lunch. I realized I didn't even offer to pay, so if you want, I have some cash..."

"No. We're good. It's good...I mean...it's no big deal." He paused and studied her. "Are you going to talk to your grandfather about this?"

"The kiss? Um, no. Why?"

"Not the kiss, Lily, about him and that woman."

"Oh, right. Duh," she said with a nervous laugh. "I'm going to bring it up to him tonight. Although I'm not sure I'll believe anything he says right away, but I'm going to try to give him the benefit of the doubt."

He nodded. "Good for you." This time he paused because Lily's eyes had gone wide. "What's the matter?"

"That's her," she whispered, nodding to a woman walking toward them. "That's the woman he was with. Do you recognize her? Does she work for Montgomerys? Is she a client?"

This time he shook his head. "I don't recognize her, but that doesn't mean anything. It's not like I'm familiar with everyone who does business with us."

"Damn. I was hoping you would have known who she was, so I wouldn't have to say anything to him." Her shoulders sagged. "I really hope he isn't doing anything icky."

That made him chuckle. "Icky?"

"Yeah, icky. It totally wouldn't be cool if he were cheating on my grandmother. And look at her! She's definitely younger than him!" She groaned. "This is the worst!"

"Okay, you're freaking out again and you really shouldn't," he reasoned. "You don't know who she is and why

he was out with her. You need to stay positive and not assume the worst. There could be a very logical explanation for all of this.”

The look she gave him said she didn't believe him even a little bit.

“Fine. Think the worst, but I really need to go.” Not that anyone was watching the clock on him or anything, but he had a full schedule this afternoon. “Take care of yourself and try not to let your imagination run wild.”

“Pfft. Easier said than done,” she muttered.

“Lily...” he said with exasperation.

“Okay, okay, okay!” she huffed. “I won't attack him when he gets home, but just know that if I'm right, you are not allowed to tell me not to freak out ever again. Understood?”

He nodded.

“Good. Okay, um...thanks again for lunch and I guess I'll see you around.”

Another nod. “Take care.” They waved to each other and Noah stood there and watched her walk away until she was out of sight.

Then he nearly sagged to the ground, partially with relief and partially out of disgust for himself.

He'd kissed her. After all the talks he'd given himself this week after the whole after-shower thing in the guesthouse, he went and did it anyway. Part of him reasoned that it was bound to happen, but that didn't mean it should have happened so soon. Did he have no self-control at all?

Where Lily's concerned? Apparently not.

Raking a hand through his hair, he took a minute to clear his mind a bit before heading into the building. On the elevator, he went through his afternoon schedule in his mind and got himself firmly back into business mode, and by the time he was sitting behind his desk, all thoughts of lunch and Lily were forgotten.

The afternoon flew by and he stayed a little later than usual to finish a few things. When he shut his computer down and made his way back to the elevator, almost everyone was gone. His plan was to go home and go to the gym and get some time in on the treadmill before making himself some dinner and giving his brother Jax a call. Football season was over and the two of them had talked about getting together at some point. Right now, Noah needed the distraction because as soon as work was over, his mind immediately went back to Lily.

Kissing Lily.

Getting Lily alone and doing more than just rubbing his hands along her back.

“Yeah, definitely need to work out and see how soon I can get Jax here,” he murmured as he walked to his car.

When his phone rang before he could pull out of the parking garage, he couldn't help but grin. Swiping the screen, he said, “Dude, do you have some sort of psychic abilities?”

“Um...what?” his brother said with a laugh.

“I was just thinking about how I was going to call you after I went to the gym. We talked about you coming for a visit and I wanted to see what your schedule was like since the season's officially over.”

Jax groaned. “Don't remind me. I really thought we were going to go all the way this year.”

“It was close,” Noah reminded him. “And you had an awesome season. You should be proud of yourself.”

“I don’t know. It was okay, I guess...”

His brother had a tendency to get like this and Noah usually ended up giving him a pep talk to cheer him up. “It was more than okay. Your name was mentioned the most in every game and you know it. And didn’t you just sign an endorsement deal?”

“Yeah, but...” He sighed loudly. “I’m bored, Noah. Like... I know I can keep playing. I’ve got a lot of years left in me, but...I just don’t know if it’s what I want.”

This was brand new information.

“O-kay...then this is why we need to get together. We can talk about this and maybe come up with a plan for you that doesn’t involve football. Do you know what you want to do?”

“I’ve got some ideas, but...it’s nothing I can really flesh out just yet.”

“Um...”

“Anyway, enough about me. What’s going on with you?”

Noah told him about the extra work he took on while Mac, Jason, and Lucas were away and how they entrusted him with their top clients.

“That’s awesome, bro!” Jax said, and Noah could hear the pride in his voice. “I honestly don’t know how you do it. Working with numbers all day would literally be like torture for me. I mean...I barely passed every math class I ever took with a D. You clearly got all the brains in the family.”

“That’s not even a little true,” he replied with a laugh. “We each got a talent that the others didn’t. I got the business gene,

you got the athletic gene, and Simon got the musical one.”

“Tell me about it. Did you see him on *The Tonight Show* last week?”

“I did, and I can’t believe he told the story about us building him that pillow fort so we wouldn’t have to listen to him sing all the damn time!”

Jax laughed. “I know! But luckily he didn’t tell the story of how we heckled him in the middle school talent show.”

“Yeah. That totally would have made us look like dicks, so...we should probably thank him for not sharing that.”

“Nuh-uh. Maybe he’s forgotten about it and if we say anything, then we’re just reminding him. I say just let it go and hope it never comes up.”

“Good call,” Noah agreed. “So? When am I seeing you?”

“It sounds like your work schedule’s keeping you busy. I don’t want to be in the way. When do your bosses get back?”

“Three weeks.”

“Damn. I was hoping to be there in two,” Jax told him. “And am I staying with you? You only have the one bedroom. I can totally stay at a hotel.”

“I hate for you to do that. The couch is a pull-out and the mattress is the thickest you can get. I actually tried it and it’s really comfortable. Plus, my complex has a pool and a gym, so you could use them as much as you want.”

“We’ll make it work. I have to stay in a lot of hotels when the team travels and I’m kind of over them. It might be nice to just rough it a bit,” he teased.

“Great. Thanks. I appreciate you being willing to slum it by staying with me,” he murmured.

“Don’t pout. It’ll be fun. You know I’m just poking at you. But it’s a shame you can’t take some time off and come here. You’d have your own space, a private indoor pool, and a golf course. If you want to wait until your bosses get back...”

But Noah was shaking his head. “I don’t have any time to spare right now. I’m taking a day when Simon’s tour comes here next month and other than that, I’m using the rest of my PTO for the holidays. We all promised Mom we’d do Christmas at home this year.”

“Ugh...don’t remind me. Any chance we can convince her to come here or find out where Simon’s going to be touring and go there?”

Chuckling, he shook his head again, even though Jax couldn’t see him. “I’ll let you bring that up to her and you can tell me how it goes.”

“Oh, come on! You’re her favorite! You should ask her.”

“What? Since when am I the favorite? You’re the baby of the family, Jax. Trust me. You’re the favored son.”

“Are you kidding? I remind her too much of Dad. Simon could be the favorite, but he travels too much and she doesn’t agree with his rock and roll lifestyle.” Then he laughed. Hard. “Simon’s the least rock and roll guy in the business!”

“That’s the truth...”

“So that just leaves you, big brother. You’re smart and have job security and you look out for her. That screams favored child if I ever heard one.”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?” It wasn’t a question.

“Nope!”

“We’ll talk about it when you get here in two weeks. That’s the best I can do.”

“Deal!” Jax readily agreed. “So, any chance we can go clubbing? I don’t like to date any of the locals because it gets awkward when it doesn’t go beyond a single date.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “So you’re just looking to one night it on my fold-out couch?”

“The one night? Yes. On your couch? Hell no. I’ll gladly get a hotel room for that night.” He paused. “Or nights. I promise not to make things awkward in your monastery.”

“Um...my what?”

“Dude, come on. When’s the last time you brought a woman home? Hell, when’s the last time you got laid? Has it been since you broke up with what’s her name like...a year ago?”

“It was six months ago and...”

Shit.

“By the hesitation, I’d say you’ve been leading a celibate life since. We’re going to have to work on that while I’m there.”

Great.

Maybe it had been a long time, but he hadn’t been interested in anyone. Plus, there was his job and his five-year plan.

Lily's face came to mind and he couldn't help but wonder if she were anyone but Lucas's daughter, if he'd be willing to relax on his rigid schedule and be a lot less...celibate for her.

Maybe.

Too bad that wasn't possible because she was a Montgomery and there was no way he was going to risk his career.

Not even for her.

FIVE

SHE NEVER GOT to confront her grandfather on Friday night because her Uncle Robert showed up and seemed to dominate every conversation.

And he continued to do so for the entire weekend.

The weather had been relatively mild on Saturday, so the two of them went golfing at the country club. Then on Sunday, they went to some big wine tasting event—also at the country club—and again, she wasn't included. It was hard to say she was offended, but...she was offended.

She'd called a few of her friends, but everyone was busy and so she'd spent the bulk of the weekend on her own. Part of the time she spent just lounging around, curled up with a good romance novel, but after a few hours, she felt restless and decided it was time to get herself moving again.

First, she experimented with doing some of her exercises from PT—something she'd been dreading since getting the cortisone shot—and then dancing. The exercises had felt great, but she'd been careful to ease herself into all the dance movements. While it had felt good to simply let go and give herself over to the music, she was paying for it now. Her whole body felt stiff and sore and it was a painful reminder

that she needed to reach out to the doctors that Dr. Mathis recommended to her.

Glancing at the clock, she saw it was after six on Sunday afternoon and, considering she hadn't heard anything from her grandfather, she assumed she was on her own for dinner again tonight. There wasn't anything in the refrigerator that she really wanted, so she decided to soak in the hot tub first, and then order some takeout to be delivered.

Feeling good about her plan, Lily walked outside to get the hot tub running and getting the cover off before going back inside and into her bedroom to change into a swimsuit. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and grinned when she realized eating that BLT and fries with Noah really didn't affect how she looked. Sighing happily, she went and grabbed a towel and then put her robe on over her bathing suit because now that the sun was going down, it was chillier out.

“Or...cold,” she murmured when she stepped outside. Fortunately, there was a heat lamp next to the hot tub, so that helped warm her up a bit too. Once she had everything situated, she quickly shed her robe and climbed in, letting out a very throaty moan as she sank lower in the hot, bubbly water. “So good...”

She got comfortable, rested her head back, closed her eyes, and let out a long breath. The jets soothed her sore muscles and the hot water felt like a little slice of heaven. The only thing missing was a glass of wine.

And a man.

It had been months since she'd even been on a date, and ever since Noah kissed her the other day, he was all she could think about. It didn't matter how hard she tried to think of something or someone—anyone!—else; it didn't work. Years

ago, she found out firsthand how great of a kisser he was, but as time went on, she thought she was just over-romanticizing it. Now, she had confirmation that he was still an excellent kisser.

“I’m so screwed,” she whispered.

This week she was going to have to make a real effort in reconnecting with friends. She needed to go out and meet someone and just not think about Noah. Hell, she’d be willing to pretty much kiss the first guy who caught her eye if it meant pushing him from her thoughts.

Shifting slightly to get the jet to hit a little higher on her back, Lily felt good about this plan for the week. As soon as she was done soaking and relaxing, she was going to go inside, text all her girlfriends, and plan a night out for as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, all this thinking about why she needed to make these plans had her thoughts firmly back on Noah. She envisioned him in the hot tub with her...

“Mmm...” In her mind, she saw that tattoo on his chest and she’d be straddling his lap here in the water and touching it. He had a really great body and all she wanted was the chance to explore it at her leisure. She hummed again. “Oh, the things I’d love to do with him...”

Sadly, she’d have to simply do them in her imagination because it wasn’t going to happen, and that thought played on a constant loop in her head for the rest of her time in the hot tub.

“That’s it! I’m out!” Standing, she grabbed her towel and quickly climbed out of the tub. She was shivering as she turned it off, put the cover back on, and tugged her robe on.

Then she turned off the heat lamp before she sprinted back into the house, slamming the door behind her.

In the bathroom, she peeled off her robe, towel, and bathing suit and opted to take a quick shower just because.

And then remembered Noah being in there a week ago...

“Ugh...this is the worst!”

It took almost twenty minutes for her to shower and change into a comfy pair of pajamas before she walked out to the living room with her hair in a towel. She had to move the sofa back to its original spot after today’s workout, but then sat down with a huff and grabbed her phone.

“Pizza? Chinese? A salad?” She scrolled and scrolled and scrolled, but nothing was really piquing her interest. “What am I in the mood for?”

Noah.

Groaning, Lily forced herself to think about food and only food, no matter how hard it was.

Hard, like Noah’s muscles.

“I’m in hell,” she mumbled as she stopped and looked at the menu for a local sushi place and decided that’s where she was ordering from whether she really wanted it or not. Once her order was placed, she sent out a group text to all of her friends.

Lily: GIRLS!! I desperately need a night out!
Please tell me we can make that happen ASAP!
Seriously, I’m desperate! xoxo

With nothing to do but wait, she turned on the TV and pulled up Netflix and scrolled until she found something to watch that was guaranteed to keep her attention.

That took almost thirty minutes to achieve.

But by the time her dinner arrived, she was able to sit down, hit start, and settle in for a quiet and somewhat boring night.

The next day, she tried to surprise her grandfather again. It was a rainy day and she didn't want to stay in the house for another whole day. Plus, there was no way he could turn down her invitation to lunch a second time—not after he did it on Friday and then essentially ignored her over the weekend. And when she strolled up to Sara's desk a little before noon, she decided she wouldn't take no for an answer this time.

“Hey, Sara!” she said with a smile. “Is my grandfather busy?”

“Your timing is impeccable, Lily. He just got off the phone. Do you want to surprise him again?”

She nodded. “I do. Thanks!” And with a purposeful stride, she walked into his office. “Hey, stranger!”

“Lily!” William said as he got to his feet, his arms open wide to hug her. “How was your weekend?”

“A little boring,” she admitted. “And yours?”

“Oh, my brother and I had a great time. The weather was nice for a round of golf and the wine tasting was a delight! So, what brings you to the office today?”

“Well...since we didn't get to go to lunch on Friday, and you were busy all weekend...”

“Oh, dear,” he murmured.

“What's the matter?”

“You want to go to lunch, don’t you?” It wasn’t a question. “I’m afraid I’m booked again and I can’t get out of it.” He took her hands in his and gave them a gentle squeeze. “But how about we go to dinner tonight at Bella’s? I remember how much you used to love their lobster ravioli. What do you say?”

As much as she wanted to argue, she supposed dinner was a good compromise.

“I think that sounds great,” she told him. “Do you want me to meet you there, or are you going to come home first?”

“Why don’t I meet you there at five? I’ll go as soon as I’m done here for the day.” Then he paused. “Or is that too early?”

“It’s perfect. I’ll see you later.” Then, kissing him on the cheek, she turned and walked out. Waving to Sara, she continued over to the elevator, smiling as she was already thinking about how good dinner was going to be.

The doors opened and she stepped on and hit the button for the parking garage when someone yelled out, “Hold the door!” Lily instantly hit the button to open the door and stood to the side, gasping when Noah joined her.

“Thanks, I...” He paused and stared for a moment. “Lily? What are you doing here?” The doors closed as he shook his head. “You’re not stalking your grandfather again, are you?”

“No,” she said adamantly, but then laughed softly. “Well... I came to invite him to lunch, but he was busy.”

“And...?”

“And what?”

“He told you that on Friday and you got all suspicious,” he reminded her. “What’s so different today?”

“First of all, on Friday he told me he had a call and then walked out of the building five minutes later with a woman. Today he simply said that he had plans and then promised to take me to dinner.” She shrugged. “There’s not much I can find suspicious this time, right?”

“I suppose.” They rode in companionable silence until the elevator opened on the parking garage level. He stepped aside and motioned for her to go out ahead of him, but they ended up slowly walking toward their cars. “How was your weekend?”

She shrugged again. “A little boring, actually. My grandfather and my uncle went out golfing and to a wine tasting and sort of left me behind.”

He looked at her oddly. “And that’s a bad thing? I would have thought you’d be catching up with friends and going out all weekend, not hanging out with your grandfather.”

Now she glared at him. “I happen to *adore* my time with my grandfather. He is truly the *best* human being on the planet, and if you don’t have a grandparent like that, then that makes me sad for you.”

The snort he gave should have prepared her for his response, but it didn’t.

“Yeah, well, not all grandparents even want to be involved with their grandchildren. I have one set of grandparents who don’t give a damn about me and my brothers, and another set who I haven’t seen since I was five, so...”

Lily stopped short. “Noah, that’s crazy! Why would they be like that?”

He wouldn’t look directly at her and continued to walk to his car. “Not everyone comes from a good family, Lily,” he

murmured. “And it’s not cool to assume that they do.”

Wow. So that was a lot more information than she bargained for, and as she watched him stiffly walk away, she felt bad for sticking her foot in her mouth. Jogging to catch up to him, she immediately apologized. “Okay, okay...you’re right. That was wrong of me to just...you know...think everyone has a great relationship with their family. I’m sorry.”

All he did was nod and come to a stop next to his car. “Look, I need to go and grab some lunch, so I guess...” Pausing, he let out a mirthless laugh. “I mean...I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

And yeah, she caught the snark and sarcasm in that little correction.

“Can I buy you lunch?” she blurted out.

“What?”

Nodding, she stepped in closer. “You bought me lunch on Friday and now I went and got you all pissed off. The least I can do is buy you something to eat.”

“Lily...”

“Please...,” she begged lightly. “I swear we won’t talk about family stuff, okay? I feel bad, and I’d really like to make it up to you.”

Letting out a long breath, she knew he was trying to come up with an excuse not to go anywhere with her. “We’ve been over this,” he said after a moment. “You know why this isn’t a good idea.”

That wasn’t even a deterrent right now. She could put her attraction to him aside for the sake of doing the right thing.

“It will be fine. We’ll stick to neutral topics and...”

Off in the distance, they heard people walking out into the parking garage and she recognized her grandfather's voice immediately.

"I'm just relieved my granddaughter didn't hang around too long," he was saying. "It would have been extremely awkward to explain who you are."

"William," the woman said with a small laugh. "You're going to have to tell her eventually. It's not like you can keep me a secret forever. Especially not with..."

The rest of her words were cut off by someone slamming a car door.

"Dammit," Lily hissed as she moved to the hood of Noah's car and crouched down.

"Um...what are you doing?" he whispered.

"Didn't you just hear that conversation? They can't know I'm here! Open your door so it will block me even more when they drive by."

"This seems a little..."

"Oh, my God! Can you please *not* argue with me about everything?" she hissed.

"Fine." Noah opened his door and slid into the driver's seat and waited until William's car left the garage. "The coast is clear. You can..."

She hopped in on the passenger side. "You have to follow them!"

"*What?*" Groaning, he started the car. "No, I don't."

"Noah, please! I just want to see where they're going! I won't go in and make a scene, I swear!"

“I am so going to lose my job...”

Resting her hand on his thigh, she told him, “No, you won’t. I won’t let that happen. Now, can we please go?”

He nodded, but she didn’t take her hand off of him.



Lily Montgomery was seriously going to be the death of him.

And if her hand moved any higher on his thigh, he’d probably die a happy man.

Ugh...I have issues.

And yet, he pulled out of the garage and onto the main road. Luckily it was a one-way street, so they could see where William was heading. There were several cars between them, but he hoped this wasn’t going to turn into an obvious car chase of some sort.

“What’s the plan here?” he asked. “If he pulls into a parking lot and I pull in after him, he’s going to see us. He knows my car.”

No response.

Glancing over at her, he noticed she was just intently staring out the passenger window.

“Hey,” he said softly, resting his hand on top of hers. “Are you okay?”

“Why would he say that?” she whispered miserably. “He was relieved that I left.”

For a moment, he wasn’t sure what to say. “You have to know that whatever’s going on, it has nothing to do with you.

And from what she said, it's only a matter of time until he tells you. You just need to be patient.”

Her only reaction was a snort.

Up ahead, William turned into the parking lot of a local bistro. Noah had eaten there before and the food was amazing, but as hungry as he was, he obviously couldn't grab lunch here. He kept driving straight and figured he'd pull into the parking lot across the street so Lily could watch for...whatever it was she was hoping to see.

Together, they sat in silence and watched as William got out of his car, walked around to the passenger side, and opened the door for this mystery woman. Then, they walked into the bistro. The last thing he wanted was to sound heartless, but he was hungry.

“So, um...there's a great Korean barbecue place around the corner if you're still interested in doing lunch,” he suggested. “Or I can take you back to your car and...”

She straightened and looked at him.

And removed her hand from his thigh.

“No. I'm hungry and I was serious about buying you lunch. I know you don't have a lot of time, so...let's go.” The smile she gave him didn't quite reach her eyes and all he wanted to do was reach out and caress her face and tell her it was all going to be okay.

But he could only do part of that.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, he said, “Don't think the worst. For all you know, she's an event planner or an interior decorator looking to do work on the house while your grandmother's gone. I mean, this doesn't have to be...”

“Oh my God, Noah! That’s it!” she said excitedly, her hand landing back on his thigh.

“What’s it?” he croaked before clearing his throat. “I mean...what do you mean?”

“The interior decorator! My grandfather mentioned having work done in the house and that’s why he asked me to stay out in the guesthouse! Whew! Okay, now I can relax!”

“Excellent,” he agreed, and two minutes later, they were parked in front of the Korean barbecue restaurant.

“Although...” she began as they walked inside. “Why wouldn’t he want me to meet her? It’s not like I’d try to have a say in whatever she wanted to do at the house...”

Resting his hand on her lower back, he guided her into the restaurant and kept it there until they were seated.

“Why are you looking for trouble? Can we please just... talk about something else?” The huff of frustration spoke volumes, but he chose to ignore it. “Should we do the all-you-can-eat or do you want a specific meal?”

Lily picked up the menu and looked it over before responding. “Will you have enough time for the all-you-can-eat? I know they have a 100-minute time limit, but I’m guessing that’s there for a reason.”

“I’ve been in and out of here in an hour before. So if you’re game for trying stuff...”

She chuckled softly. “Oh, believe me, I am totally game. I’ve been wanting to come here, but there never seems to be anyone available when I’m in the mood to try it. So this is a treat for me. Thank you.”

This time her smile was positively radiant and for a moment, this almost felt like a date.

Like...a real date.

And then he immediately pushed that thought from his mind and had to quickly think of something for them to talk about. “So, what did you do this weekend?”

They were interrupted by their server who took their order and began putting plates of side dishes down that came with the all-you-can-eat option before lighting the grill in the middle of their table. Once they ordered their protein choices and were alone, Lily answered.

“Before I left Miami, I got a cortisone shot in my hip,” she explained. “My doctor advised me to take it easy for a week before I tried to dance or workout again. Since I had nothing but time on my hands, I decided to test the waters.”

“And? How did it go?”

“Not as great as I had hoped,” she replied honestly. “Everything felt stiff and sore afterwards and...” Pausing, she sighed. “And now I know that I definitely need to find a doctor here.”

“What exactly did you injure?”

“I have a hip labral tear.”

Frowning, he asked, “What’s that?”

“It’s a tear in the ring of cartilage, the labrum, that follows the outside rim of the hip joint socket. It cushions the hip joint, and the labrum acts like a rubber seal or gasket to help hold the ball at the top of the thighbone securely within the hip socket.” She laughed softly. “It sounds crazy, right? Basically, all the years of dance have caught up with me. It’s a common

injury in athletes and dancers, but mine is to the point where it's going to require surgery and I don't want to do that."

"Why not? I would think you'd do whatever it took to get better so you can dance."

She shrugged and sat back when their server placed plates of raw shrimp, chicken, and brisket on the table. They spent the next several minutes preparing their lunch and talking about the things they were eating. It wasn't until they were halfway through the meal that Lily addressed his question.

"The thing is...surgery scares me. I can have it and it can repair the issue, but there's a good chance it can tear again if I go back to doing the things I do. Plus, there's a greater risk of developing osteoarthritis in my hip because of this. I mean... I'm only twenty-five and I'm dealing with some potentially career-ending stuff."

She said it lightly, but he heard the slight tremble in her voice and knew she was genuinely scared.

"I wouldn't say it's career-ending, but you may have to modify what you're doing," he said and hoped he didn't sound like an insensitive jerk. "So maybe you can't be doing leaps and flips, but maybe you could do something a little less strenuous. I don't know much about dance, but I know there are a ton of different styles. Or maybe you could teach."

But Lily was already shaking her head. "I had a dance bucket list that I wanted to accomplish before I was thirty, and if I stop now, it's never going to happen."

"Yeah, but if you don't have the surgery, you're going to have to stop anyway."

The look she gave him was like he'd kicked a puppy.

And...clearly I am an insensitive jerk...

“How many doctors have you talked to?” he asked.

“Just the one down in Miami. She gave me a list of referrals here in Charlotte and a couple in Chapel Hill and Durham. I’m not sure I want to drive three hours for those, but I might have to.”

“Maybe it won’t come to that. When are you seeing the doctors here?”

“Um...” she didn’t look at him and was pushing her food around on her plate.

“Have you called any of them?”

“Not yet, but I am going to.”

Shaking his head, he laughed quietly. “If your parents were home, would you be waiting?”

She shook her head and finally looked up at him. “No. But if they were home, my mother would have made the appointments for me and gone with me to all of them. And my dad would share his own stories about his football injuries and how he dealt with them.” She sighed as her expression turned sad. “But they’re not here and I’m not going to ruin their vacation by calling them and bogging them down with my tale of woe.”

“Okay, that sounds a little dramatic, don’t you think?” he teased, but Lily didn’t look the least bit amused. “What about your grandfather? Have you talked to him about it?”

“I did when I first got back, but he’s just been really distracted. I guess I need to put my foot down and talk to him at dinner tonight. Maybe I can...” She paused when her phone dinged with an incoming text. “Excuse me for a minute,” she murmured as she swiped her screen.

Noah watched the play of emotion on her face. She went from completely neutral to a full-on smile until she was practically bouncing in her seat.

“Good news?” he asked.

She tapped out a response and put her phone back down. “Definitely good news. Girls’ night out tonight! Finally!”

“I thought you were having dinner with your grandfather?”

“Oh, that’s still on, but we’re meeting at five and we’ll be back home by seven, guaranteed. I’m meeting the girls at eight.” She clapped her hands. “You have no idea how much I’m looking forward to this.”

All he could do was shrug. “I hope you have fun.”

And yeah, that sounded completely lame, but what else was he supposed to say?

Leaning back, Lily continued to smile at him. “Do you ever just go out with the guys? Like a night where you grab something to eat or go to a bar for drinks?”

“Um...”

“I knew it!” she said with a laugh. Shaking her finger at him, she went on. “You should totally do that at least a couple of times a month. It’s so good for your mental health! And... no offense...you definitely look like you could use a night out. You’re very tense.”

If only she knew that *she* was the reason for that, but he wasn’t going to go there.

“I promise I’ll think about it,” he said with a tight smile before taking another bite of his lunch.

“Good,” she replied as she plucked a cucumber slice off her plate and popped it into her mouth. “And don’t do something lame like go to a movie. You need to go out and blow off some steam. It’s been a while since I’ve gone out here in the city, but I’m sure there are some great places to go.” She paused and took a drink. “Any suggestions?”

“Seriously? After you just pointed out how I never go out, you think I’ve got suggestions?” And he couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m sure your friends will have better ideas than I can come up with.”

And while that was partially true, if she had asked for suggestions of things they could do together, well...the list would be endless.

“I’m really just hoping to go out for a couple of drinks and maybe a little dancing and dessert. Nothing wild or complicated.” She shrugged. “I’m sure it’s going to be fun, no matter what.”

He nodded. “I’m sure it will.” This time they were interrupted by his phone and he frowned when he saw it was the office calling. “Hello?”

“Hey, Noah, it’s Joanne. I’m sorry to bother you during lunch, but Mr. Halloran from JT Halloran and Sons called.”

“O-kay...”

“He’s on his way here and he’s a little freaked out that Jason’s away on vacation,” she explained. “He claims he has some investment concerns and wanted to talk to you about them face-to-face. Any chance you’ll be back in the next fifteen minutes?”

“Fifteen minutes? He’s going to be there that soon?” he asked a bit frantically, as he waved their server over and

motioned for the check.

“No, he said he’d be here in forty-five minutes, but I want you to have time to look over his account before he shows up.”

“Oh. Right. Good plan.” He glanced at his watch. “I’ll be there in fifteen. Twenty, tops. And thanks, Joanne. I appreciate the heads-up.” He slid his phone into one pocket and pulled his wallet out of the other, but Lily was already handing their server her credit card. “What are you doing?”

“Lunch was on me, remember?” she asked with amusement.

“Oh, right.” Raking a hand through his hair, he let out a long breath. “I guess you heard I need to get back.”

“Sure did, and I’m doing my best to make that happen.”

“Thanks.”

They didn’t talk much as Lily paid the bill and they quickly made their way out to his car. Honestly, he was too distracted and already thinking about what he was going to say to this Mr. Halloran to put his mind at ease. By the time they pulled back into the parking garage, he was more than anxious to get up to his office and was maybe a little distracted when he said goodbye to Lily.

“Have fun tonight,” he said with a wave before stepping into the elevator, all the while thinking that maybe he should make plans of his own tonight.

SIX

“WAIT...WHAT ARE WE DOING?”

“We’re going to The District,” her friend Morgan repeated. “It’s this crazy awesome game complex downtown. It’s got a bar and they serve food and there are a ton of game rooms with things like pool, darts, ping-pong, and even laser tag!”

“It’s so much fun,” her other friend Bree said excitedly. “You’re going to love it! Plus, Micah and his friends are going to be there too! I thought it would be fun if we all met up and hung out together.”

“Um...”

“I think Ty and Scott are going to be there too,” her friend Sue added. “And they’re bringing some friends too, so...”

“Who are Ty and Scott?” Lily asked.

“Oh, Ty’s my boyfriend and Scott’s his brother,” Sue told her before adding, “And Morgan’s totally got a crush on him!”

“Stop! I do not!” Morgan said with a laugh. “But he is totally hot!”

This so wasn’t the girls’ night out she was envisioning.

Actually, this entire night hadn’t gone as planned.

Dinner with her grandfather had been fine, but her uncle tagged along and the two of them seemed hell-bent on keeping the discussion off of her grandfather and completely on her. They talked about doctors and specialists, and there wasn't a doubt in her mind that tomorrow she was going to have several medical offices calling her to schedule an appointment. And when she didn't seem too thrilled about any of that or the possibility of surgery, her grandfather offered to fly her to whatever port her folks were going to be at next so she could join them on their trip.

If she even had the teeniest of doubts that he was looking to get rid of her, that pretty much confirmed it.

So she ate her lobster ravioli, which was delicious, and was home by seven and met up with the girls at eight. And now she was apparently going on a group date.

Yippee.

"I thought we were going out just us," Lily commented. "You know...*just* us. It's been so long since we've hung out and I was hoping to catch up with everyone."

"We're still going to do that," Bree said. "We promise not to give the guys all our attention, okay?"

Somehow she greatly doubted that, but...sure.

Her friends were all talking at once, and Lily was clueless about most of the conversation topics. It was crazy to feel lonely when you were surrounded by your best friends, and yet she did. Nothing in her life was going her way and she suddenly wished she were in her own car so she could turn around and just go home.

Oh, right...I can't even go to my own home right now.

“I’m sure Scott’s bringing Axl,” she heard Bree saying. “Are you interested in hooking up with anyone, Lil? Because I swear Axl is totally your type! He’s tall and tattooed and he owns a moving company, rides a motorcycle, but also competes in a lot of off-road races. He’s kind of a legend around here.”

She remembered her train of thought from last night and how she wanted that exact thing to take her mind off of Noah, but right now, she wasn’t in the mood. “I...I don’t know. I really just wanted a quiet night with you guys. Life has just been exhausting lately, and this injury really has me freaked out. I think I need...”

“To hook up with a hot guy!” Morgan finished for her with a burst of laughter. “You’re *way* too serious tonight, Lily! This is about going out and having fun! You need to lighten up!”

It was pointless to argue, so she forced a smile and said, “You’re right! Let’s do this!”

This—it turned out—was a part of the downtown district that used to be where most people stayed away from, but it was now going through a bit of a renaissance. The District was a massive indoor complex and she was surprised at how packed the parking lot was for a Monday night.

“Wow, it’s not too crowded tonight,” Sue said when they were getting out of the car. “You should see this place on the weekend, Lil. We normally have to park a couple of blocks away.”

“Seriously?”

Her friends all nodded. “You’re going to love this place,” Bree said, taking her by the hand. “And I can tell you really need this.”

They stepped inside, and the noise level was almost deafening. She sighed loudly, but no one noticed. Still, resigning herself to an evening not of her choosing, Lily did her best to smile and look like she was into all the possibilities of the night.

They hadn't walked more than a handful of steps when Bree tugged on her arm and pointed across the room. "There!" she yelled in Lily's ear. "See that guy over there by the dart boards? The one in the black t-shirt and the blonde hair? That's Axl!" Then she pulled back with a wide grin. "He's cute, right?"

He wasn't bad looking, but she genuinely wasn't feeling it. When she caught Bree staring at her expectantly, she nodded. "Yeah! Cute!"

Liar.

It became a blur after that as the four of them made their way across the room to the dart boards. She was introduced to Scott, Micah, Ty, Axl, some guy named Freddy, and another random guy named Brent. Lily smiled and said hello to all of them, and Axl immediately moved in beside her.

That's when she realized this was possibly a set up.

Ugh.

"So," he began, his breath warm and a bit moist against her ear. "I hear you're a dancer. That's so cool!"

"Um...yeah. Although, I'm on a break right now because of a..."

"What kind of dancing? Like...ballet and shit?"

Conversations like this irked her because she knew he wasn't really interested. His breath reeked of beer, his cologne

was way too strong, and he was standing all up in her business, making her uncomfortable. Casually taking a step back, she nodded. “Sometimes it’s ballet, but I’ve done some stuff on Broadway and...”

“Oh, man! I love New York! Did you ever spend time in Times Square? It’s awesome!”

“Here, Lil!” Sue said, thrusting a glass into her hand. “We’re doing shots! To girls’ night! *Woo!*”

She glanced down at her glass and frowned. Shots really weren’t her thing, so she took a small sip while everyone threw theirs back.

“Not a drinker, huh?” Axl asked, his mouth back at her ear. “That’s cool.”

“Thanks,” she murmured and looked around, hoping to make eye contact with one of her friends to come and rescue her. Even if this was a setup, she wasn’t into it.

“Hey, everyone!” Brent called out. “This is my neighbor, Noah! He lives in my building and is a total workaholic, but I finally convinced him to come out tonight!”

Lily’s eyes went wide and she even heard herself gasp when she saw him. Her heart was racing, her mouth went dry, and she couldn’t believe he was really here.

Or how amazing he looked when he wasn’t in his corporate suit mode.

His hair was a little mussed up, he had on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that was just snug enough to show off that muscled chest. She went to take a step closer because he hadn’t noticed her yet, but Axl put his arm around her waist and gently tugged her close.

“What’s your pleasure?” he asked, again...too close.

“Excuse me?” And yeah, she took offense to the question.

“The games,” he replied, nodding toward the rest of the complex. “What’s your favorite? They have a cool virtual racing machine. I’d love to sit with you and teach you.”

I’ll bet...

She took another step back and gave him a tight smile. “I’m not really into racing.” Another step back, and he followed. “This is my first time here, so...” Another step back and this time she banged into someone. “Oh, sorry,” she murmured as she spun around and...

Noah.

“Lily?” he asked with a frown.

She gave him a small wave to match her small smile. “Hey! Fancy meeting you here, right?” She laughed softly, but he didn’t look amused. He glanced just beyond her and she knew he was looking at Axl who—surprise, surprise—stepped in way too close and put his arm around her again. Without being too obvious, she squirmed out of his grasp, but that put her closer to Noah.

Their gazes locked and she silently willed him to help her get away from Axl, and by the tiniest nod he gave her, he understood.

And what happened next was not what she expected.

“Holy crap! Lily!” he said enthusiastically. “I can’t believe it’s really you! I mean...what’s it been...three years?” He was grinning from ear to ear. “I never thought I’d get to see you again! This is like...it’s fate!” Then he hauled her into his arms and kissed her senseless.

Okay...um...wow!

When he released her, he was still smiling. “I never thought we’d get a second chance and now...” His hand went over his heart. “This is the happiest day of my entire life! Can I buy you a drink?”

“Um...sure?”

“She doesn’t drink,” Axl chimed in, looking totally confused.

“Lily?” Bree asked. “How do you know Noah?”

“Oh, um...we met a few years ago over Christmas,” she began, as Noah’s arm stayed possessively around her. “It was during the trip to Asheville with my whole family.”

“We had an amazing week,” Noah gushed, “but Lily had big dreams for her career and I knew I needed to let her go.” He sighed happily. “And now here she is!”

Oh, good Lord. And the Academy Award goes to...

“I hope you guys don’t mind, but...I really would love to have some time to catch up with her,” Noah went on. “So...?”

Lily looked as her friends were all watching her with wide-eyed wonder. “I...I know we all said we’d hang out, but...”

“Go!” her friends all cried at once.

“But we are all going to want details tomorrow!” Morgan said before hugging her.

“Go have fun!” Sue added and hugged her as well.

“I hate that we aren’t going to hang out tonight, but I totally get it.” Bree pulled Lily in close and whispered, “He is yummy! I’d be running out of here as fast as I could if I were you.”

“Thanks! We’ll talk tomorrow!” Then she looked at Axl. “It was...nice meeting you.” And taking Noah’s hand, she quickly pulled him away from the group and to a secluded corner next to the bar. When she faced him, she burst out laughing. “Oh my God! That was incredible! Thank you!”

Luckily, he laughed with her. “You looked a little frazzled. Who was that guy?”

She shrugged. “A friend of a friend, I guess? His name was Axl and he just sort of plastered himself to my side and...” She shuddered. “It was awful. You totally saved me.”

Nodding, he replied, “My pleasure.” They both grew silent. “I didn’t mean to pull you away from your friends, though. I just thought...”

“Don’t worry about it. I thought this was a girls’ night, but it wasn’t. All those guys are either their boyfriends or crushes, and I totally think they were trying to set me up with Axl. This wasn’t the night I wanted or needed at all.”

“Damn. Sorry.”

“What about you? You finally go out and now I pulled you away from your friend. You don’t need to hang out with me if you don’t want to.”

Now it was his turn to shrug. “Honestly? He kind of cornered me at the gym and he’s been telling me about this place for a while, so...”

“You just caved,” she teased. “Got it.”

“Basically.” Another shrug. “The good news is we don’t have to stay here. We have officially given ourselves a plausible out.”

“I know!” she laughed. “And I have to admit, you gave a stellar performance as the long-lost lover.” The blush heated her cheeks even as she said the words because...yeah. Lover was definitely wishful thinking.

He was watching her, but didn't respond.

“And that kiss? *Wow!* That was quite the surprise! I mean...it was *very* hot.”

Still nothing.

Swallowing hard, she wasn't sure if she was making a fool out of herself or what, but she also couldn't seem to stop talking.

“And they all believed us. I guess since we've kissed before, it wasn't one of those awkward things, right?” Now her laugh was more on the nervous side. “The girls are going to want all the details tomorrow, so...”

“Lily?”

“Hmm?”

“Let's get out of here,” he said gruffly, his gaze full of heat and promise.

And she knew any details she shared tomorrow wouldn't be made up.



There was only so much temptation a man could take, and tonight Noah reached his limit.

He didn't care that Lily was a Montgomery.

He didn't care that her father disliked him.

Hell, he didn't even care that this could put his job in jeopardy.

All he knew was that he was tired of denying his feelings and depriving himself. Lily was beyond irresistible to him, and for this one night, he was going to have what he wanted.

And by the way she was practically sprinting to keep up with him as they walked out of the building, he'd say she felt the same way.

They stepped outside and Noah went directly to his car and that's when he finally paused. "Did you drive here?"

She shook her head. "No. I came with the girls."

"Good." Opening the passenger door, he looked down at her and was surprised when Lily moved in close, cupping the nape of his neck, and dragged him down for another kiss. She was all warm curves and soft moans and part of him wished they were already back at either her place or his. The drive was going to be maddening. They were both panting and clinging to each other when he lifted his head. "I hate to sound like a cliché, but...your place or mine?"

"Mine," she said, giving him one more kiss before sliding into the passenger seat.

He had one fleeting thought of, "What if William sees my car there?" but he quickly pushed it aside. There was a private driveway around the back of the property for the guesthouse, so it really wasn't an issue. Plus, at this moment, he was willing to risk it. Hell, the only deterrent would be if her grandfather was actually in the guesthouse.

And he completely pushed that image out of his mind because...um...no.

Noah jogged around and got in the driver's seat, afraid to do or say anything to ruin what was going to happen. Silently, he pulled out of the parking lot and did his best to simply breathe. Lily reached over and rested her hand on his thigh and when he glanced at her, he noticed the sexy grin on her face.

"You know how I did this when we were in the car earlier today?" she asked, her voice taking on a husky tone he'd never heard before. "I imagined a scenario like this—that we were driving somewhere to be alone instead of to lunch." Then, leaning forward, her tongue gently teased his ear.

The groan was out before he could stop it. "Did you imagine what would happen once we were alone?" he whispered, tangling his fingers with hers on his thigh.

"Definitely," she breathlessly replied, nipping his earlobe. "I won't go into specifics. Let's just say there was a lot of skin and we were hot and sweaty." Another gentle bite. "And there may or may not have been a cowboy hat and some rope."

He wasn't going to survive the short drive at this rate.

"I'm not saying we have to do anything that involves props," she said seductively. "I'm just really looking forward to finally being alone with you."

Now wasn't the time to talk about any rules or how this could only be a one-time thing, but...maybe it was. Glancing over at her, he let out a soft breath and Lily instantly pulled back.

"Oh, no," she said firmly. "Whatever's going on in your head right now, Noah Wylder, you just ignore it. I don't want the serious, levelheaded numbers guy. I want the hot and sexy guy whose kisses are addictive and who saved me from an

incredibly awkward evening.” She sighed. “I know there are things we’re going to have to discuss, but...later, okay?”

Picking her hand up, he kissed her palm. “Okay.”

The rest of the drive was made in relative silence, but fortunately, it only took them five minutes to get to her place. Noah was out of the car as soon as he shut it off and Lily scrambled out the passenger side too. They met up at the hood and kissed. His hands anchored into her hair as she grabbed a fistful of his shirt. On and on it went—hotter, wetter, and wilder by the moment—and he knew if they didn’t get inside soon, he wouldn’t be opposed to taking her right there on the hood of his car.

“Inside, Lily. Now,” he growled against her lips.

Together, they quickly made their way around to the door, and as soon as she had it open, they stumbled inside. Lily gave him a playful shove against the wall, tossed her purse over her shoulder, and then moved in close to kiss him again. It felt so good to touch her and have her hands on him. His hands smoothed down her back until he firmly grabbed her ass and lifted her up, her legs automatically going around his waist.

He’d been here before and already knew his way to the bedroom.

There was one light on to guide them, and as soon as he crossed the threshold into her room, he kicked the door shut. It took only a few steps to stop beside the bed, where he gently dropped her. Her hair was in sexy disarray, her lips were wet and simply beckoning him back for another taste, and as he placed a knee on the mattress beside her, he knew that was exactly what he was going to do.

All over her body.

Finally.

She tugged him down on top of her, and then it was the sexiest madness. They rolled around on the bed as articles of clothing got tossed aside. When he had her down to nothing but her bra and panties, Noah pushed up and looked his fill.

She was perfect.

So damn perfect he almost couldn't believe she was real.

She was curvier than he ever let himself imagine, and she didn't have a typical dancer's body. Although, what did he know?

"Damn, Lily," he murmured, his hand cupping her breast. "You have no idea how many times I've thought about this."

"Really?" she whispered, and he heard the uncertainty in her voice.

Nodding, he said, "Really. Ever since that New Year's Eve..."

"Me too. I know I never should have done that, but...right now, I can't bring myself to regret it. Not if it got us to where we are right now."

"I feel the same way." He toyed with her bra strap before slowly pulling it down her arm, exposing her breast along the way. "You are so damn sexy. Every time I see you, that's what I think. It doesn't matter what you're wearing...do you have any idea how much I want you?"

That slow and sexy grin was back. "Why don't you show me?"

"That's the plan," he said gruffly, and then he put that plan immediately into action.



It was late—almost after three—and Noah was losing the fight to stay awake. They'd dozed a few times already, but never for long. Right now, however, he could barely keep his eyes open.

“Noah?”

“Hmm?”

“This is just for tonight, isn't it?” It wasn't a question, and he hated how accurate it was.

“I think it has to be.” He was holding her close, her head on his chest, their legs tangled together. “I don't think it would be an issue while your parents are away, but if your father found out, there isn't a doubt in my mind that he'd strangle me.”

She laughed softly. “Okay, I think that's a slight exaggeration.”

“Trust me. It's not.”

Kissing the top of her head, he was willing to just leave it at that, but she twisted slightly and lifted her head, clearly waiting for more of an explanation. Sighing loudly, he figured he might as well put it all out there so she understood why things had to be the way they are.

“Look, ever since the whole New Year's Eve thing, your father has barely tolerated me. He wanted me fired—or at the very least, transferred to another branch of Montgomerys. The only reason I'm still here is because your grandfather and uncles stood up for me. But believe me when I say that almost every time he sees me, he just...he glares.”

She laughed again. “Is that all? Please, my father loves to glare at people. It’s kind of his thing. He likes to think he’s all big and intimidating, but he’s just a marshmallow.”

“Yeah, to you and your sisters,” he corrected. “To the people in the office he doesn’t like? He’s borderline terrifying.”

“Noah...”

“Before they all left on this trip, I had to have a meeting with the four of them—you know, your dad, uncles...”

“And grandfather. Yeah. Got it,” she interrupted.

“Anyway, they put me in charge of some of their most important accounts. I was told how they all decided I was the guy for the job, and I flat out said—well...hinted—that I didn’t believe it was unanimous. And your father knew I was referring to him.”

“And?”

“And...he didn’t confirm or deny that he didn’t want me handling his clients.”

“Okay, but ultimately...he did,” she reasoned. “You’re handling my dad’s clients and he’s allowing that because he *does* like and trust you.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Trust me? In business, yes. Outside of the office? Hell no. Outside of the office, I am always going to be the guy who kissed his daughter in the middle of a family celebration.”

Groaning, Lily rolled onto her back. “For the love of it! *I* kissed *you*! And I admitted it to everyone!”

“And yet he either still doesn’t believe it or he’s pissed that I didn’t immediately push you away.”

She was silent for a moment before turning her head to look at him. “You know what?”

“No, what?”

“We’ve had a pretty spectacular night,” she said softly before looking over at the bedside clock. “And that night is almost over. I know you have to be in the office by eight and you need your sleep and all, but...”

Right now, he would be hard-pressed to say if he wanted the sleep or to make love to Lily one more time. She had certainly put his stamina to the limit tonight—even without the props she talked about on the drive over—but he was exhausted.

You have one night, you asshole. You can sleep anytime!

Okay, there was that.

She inched closer, resting her hand on his chest and tracing lazy circles around his nipple. “I’m not going to lie,” she whispered sexily. “I’m exhausted. But if this is the only night you’re going to give me, then I want every last minute of it.” Then she surprised him by moving over and straddling him. “I feel like this has been a long time coming and I hate that it’s going to be over soon.”

Reaching up, Noah caressed her cheek before letting his hand skim along her jaw, her throat, and over her breast before settling on her waist. “Believe me, I feel the same way. And if there were any other way to...”

Lily stopped his words by placing her finger over his lips. “Don’t, okay?” she said quietly. “I don’t fully agree with your reasoning, but I respect it. I would hate it if I were the reason you lost your job, but I think we both knew that this was going to happen no matter what. It started three years ago and it was

inevitable.” Even in the darkness, he saw her sad smile. “I don’t regret this and I hope you don’t either.”

He shook his head. “I don’t,” he replied gruffly. “You have no idea how badly I wish things were different.”

“Noah...” she whined.

“Sorry.” There wasn’t anything left to say, but there was still some time left for them to make the most of. Lifting his hand again, he anchored it in her hair and pulled her down close and kissed her with every ounce of passion he had. Carefully, he maneuvered them until she was lying beneath him. Then he memorized every inch of soft skin. He touched every sexy curve. And loved her thoroughly enough to make sure she remembered this.

Remembered him.

There was no way to avoid seeing each other. With her back in Charlotte indefinitely, there was always the chance of running into each other, especially if she kept showing up at the office the way she had been.

But he couldn’t think like that. Once he drove away from this guesthouse, their time was over. After that, it was back to the real world where she was just the boss’s granddaughter and he was just a guy working hard to make sure he never had to live in poverty again.

For one night, he allowed himself to have this connection to a vibrant and beautiful woman—the kind of connection he’d never felt with anyone before and had a feeling he never would again. So, for a little while longer, he was going to enjoy it, soak it all in, because it was going to be over far too soon.

SEVEN

AS SHE EXPECTED, Noah was gone when she woke up and if it weren't for the soreness and the scratches in a few places from his scruffy jaw, she would have sworn it was all a dream.

A highly erotic, wonderful dream.

And dreaming was the only way she was ever going to get to relive last night because as much as she wanted him, she wasn't the kind of woman who was clingy or demanding. His career was important to him and she meant what she'd said last night about not ruining it for him.

Climbing from the bed, she stretched and pulled on her robe. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that her father had been intimidating him, and if he ever found out about their night together, she knew Noah would lose his job. No amount of arguing would stop that. Even though she knew her uncles and grandfather would intervene, it would still be pointless. She couldn't imagine Noah wanting to stay in a job where there was such open hostility.

Still...her father needed to unclench a bit because she was a grown woman who didn't need his approval for the men she dated.

Or slept with.

The mirthless laugh was out before she could stop it. Unfortunately, she knew there was no chance the great Lucas Montgomery knew how to be anything but overprotective with her

“Ugh...why did I think coming home was a good idea?” she murmured, padding out to the kitchen to make herself some coffee. While it was brewing, she went in search of her phone. Her purse was on the floor in the middle of the living room where she’d dropped it last night, so she picked it up and grabbed her phone. This was how she spent her mornings—scrolling the news and social media while she drank her coffee.

“I lead such an exciting life,” she murmured as she picked up her mug and strolled over to the sofa to get comfortable.

Naturally, there were already a dozen texts from the girls wanting to know how her night was. The smile was already tugging at her lips, but she wasn’t ready to share anything with them yet. It was something very private and...

And that’s when she knew it meant more to her than she originally thought.

In the past, she never hesitated to share some intimate details of her sex life with her friends. But last night wasn’t something she wanted anyone but the two of them to know about. It was special—and not just because it was only for the one night, but because it was Noah.

She was about to put her phone down when it rang, causing her to jump. Her hand immediately slapped her chest, but she smiled when she saw her grandfather’s name pop up on the screen.

“Hey, Grandpa!” she said cheerily. “How are you?”

“Doing good, sweet girl! How are you on this fine day?”

“So far, so good. I just woke up, so maybe it’s too soon to tell,” she told him with a laugh.

Laughing with her, he replied, “Ah, to be young and carefree! I take it you had fun with your friends last night.”

That’s one way of putting it...

“I did,” she told him. “So what’s up?”

“After we got home from dinner last night, Robert and I made some calls and we have the names of a couple of doctors for you. We spoke to all of them and...”

“All of them? How many are we talking about?”

“Three. And I meant to text you their information, but I left it on the island in the kitchen. They’re all expecting your call. All you have to do is go up to the house and get the paper. Two of them can see you this week, possibly today if you’re up to it.”

Oh, God...am I?

“Wow! That’s...that’s...”

“Lily, I know you’re apprehensive about potentially getting more bad news, but you need to make sure you’re proactive and doing what needs to be done so you can heal and get back to your career. That is what you want, isn’t it?”

“More than anything,” she told him. “I’m just...surgery is scary and there are no guarantees!”

He laughed softly. “You sound so much like your father, and that’s why I’m going to put my foot down with you. I wish I had done it sooner with him and saved him so many years of anger and isolation.”

She'd heard the stories often enough to know exactly what he was referring to, but now was the first time she could actually understand and sympathize with him.

"I know what you're saying and I appreciate the concern. As soon as I finish my coffee, I promise I'll go up to the house and make the calls."

"That's my girl. Call me and let me know what any of them say and when your appointments are."

"I will. I promise. Love you!"

"Love you too, and I'll talk to you later."

They hung up and Lily sipped her coffee and scrolled through her phone for a bit, but ultimately, she knew she needed to take a shower, get the information on the doctors, and make some calls. There was only so much sitting around she was willing to do. After three months of not dancing and doing physical therapy, she was eager to move on.

"And clearly that means by seeing more doctors," she mumbled.

With her coffee finished, she slowly made her way around the kitchen—putting the mug in the dishwasher, wiping down the countertop and coffee maker—before going to shower. It was almost an hour later before she forced herself to walk up to her grandparents' house.

Her heart was racing slightly as she let herself in. It was the first time she'd ever been in the big house all by herself, but she knew her anxiety had ratcheted up a notch because she was finally going to have to speak to a doctor—possibly as early as this afternoon.

"Stop being a baby and just do it." Walking into the kitchen, she stopped when she didn't see anything on the

island—not a scrap of paper of any kind—and there was nothing on the table either. “Okay, that’s weird.” She walked through the dining room and didn’t find anything and then to the living room where there also wasn’t any paper lying around. “Where in the world would he have put it?”

She was standing at the foot of the stairs and decided to go up and peek around just in case she and Noah were right and the mystery woman was doing the redecorating. But once she got upstairs and looked around, there was literally nothing out of place. Every room looked exactly as it always had.

And now her mind was racing back to who that woman was.

“Focus, Lily!” she reprimanded herself as she walked back down the stairs. “Where is this paper with the information on the doctors?”

On the main floor, she went to her grandfather’s office. His desk was large and had two massive computer monitors, a stack of folders, and a scattering of miscellaneous papers. She moved behind his desk and there, on the top of all the papers, was one with a list of doctor names and phone numbers. She picked it up and scanned it and was about to walk away when another paper caught her eye.

“Your cardiac care and lung cancer,” she read before slowly lowering herself into his chair. She slowly picked up the packet and began reading about lung cancer and its effects on heart conditions. As she read, she flipped to the second page, which was very specific care instructions for...

William Montgomery.

“What the hell?” Her grandfather was sick and he sent his entire family away? Was that what was going on? Panicked,

she picked up the papers, including hers, and quickly made her way out of the house and down to the guesthouse.

What was she supposed to do? Call her parents? Her grandmother? Did she really want to freak them out when they were so far away and couldn't do anything about this? And if he sent them away intentionally, no wonder he was so freaked out by her being there.

"I have to talk to him," she decided. Grabbing her purse, phone, and keys, she made her way out to her car and drove a little recklessly to the Montgomery offices. Parking was a breeze, and the elevator opened immediately when she pushed the button. The ride up seemed to take forever, but when the doors opened, she was shocked to find Noah standing there.

"Lily? What are you doing here?" he hissed, his annoyance clear.

"Don't worry, I'm not here to see you. I need to..." But he took her by the hand and led her down the hall to his office, pulling her inside and shutting the door. "What the hell, Noah? I said I wasn't..."

He had her against the door and kissed her senseless.

Okay, totally not what I was expecting, but...

She kissed him back with reckless abandon. It certainly wasn't why she was here, but it was actually a pretty spectacular distraction. When he finally lifted his head, she licked her lips and stared up at him. "What in the world?" she whispered.

He swallowed hard as he breathlessly stared down at her. "I've gotten nothing done today because I've been thinking of you. I had just decided to go and take a walk to clear my head, and there you were."

“Oh,” she breathed, feeling a little pleased that he was this out of sorts over their night together.

*Wait...was he thinking about me in a good or bad way?
Should I ask?*

“I honestly thought you were a mirage when the elevator doors opened,” he was saying. “That’s why I had to do this. I had to bring you in here and see if you were for real.”

“Noah...”

He silenced her with another kiss and she was finding that she liked this side of him.

A lot.

When he lifted his head a second time, Lily placed her hand on his chest to keep him from kissing her again. “Not that I’m not loving this, but I really am here for something important.”

He frowned. “What’s going on?”

Reaching into her purse, she pulled out the paperwork about the cancer. “I have to talk to him about this. I mean...if he’s sick, why would he send everyone away? And it would totally explain why he wasn’t happy about me being here. So I’m just going to walk into his office and demand to know what’s going on.”

“You can’t.”

“What do you mean I can’t? Of course I can! He’s right down the hall and I’ve been walking into his office practically since I could walk!”

Noah shook his head. “I mean, you can’t because he’s not here. He’s out of the office today. Didn’t he tell you?”

“Um...no. He called me earlier and then asked me to call him later.”

“Yeah, he and Robert are in Raleigh for the day meeting with clients.”

“What clients?”

He laughed softly. “Does it matter? And for the record, he doesn’t share that stuff with me.”

“Would Sara know?”

“Maybe? But you should really...”

“I gotta go.” Her hand was on the doorknob, but she turned and kissed him one last time because...yeah...she really loved kissing him and didn’t think she’d ever get to again. So, she’d take this little break from reality and enjoy it for one more moment. “Bye!”

Making her way back down the hall, she turned the corner and walked over to Sara’s desk. “Hey, Sara!”

“Lily! What a surprise!” she replied and then looked at her curiously. “Your grandfather’s out of the office today.”

“I just found that out. Do you know who he’s meeting with?”

“Um...that’s confidential information. I’m sorry.”

“But it *is* with a client, right?”

“Like I said, it’s confidential. If you need to reach him, I’m sure you can call. He might not answer and you’ll have to leave a message, but he’s very good at returning calls.”

It was obvious she was getting nowhere here, so all she could do was smile. “I’ll do that. Thanks.” But when she turned to walk away, she knew there was one more thing she

had to ask. Turning, she looked at Sara. “Is my grandfather sick?”

Sara’s eyes went wide. “Excuse me?”

“Has he been going to the doctor or anything like that? I’m not asking for specifics, but...”

“I’m still fairly new. Rose only retired a few weeks ago, and I’m not privy to your grandfather’s personal information. I’m sorry.”

And the thing was, she genuinely seemed sympathetic.

Not that it helped, because it still left Lily with more questions than answers.



Noah kicked himself for the rest of the day and questioned his own sanity. He knew he hadn’t imagined Lily and he also knew that she was a living, breathing person standing in the elevator.

He simply craved her again.

After she left his office, he stayed there with the door closed for the rest of the day. He even had his lunch delivered so there wasn’t a chance of running into her again.

“Because obviously, I can’t control myself,” he muttered as he finally stepped out of his office a little after seven in the evening. At the elevator, he was surprised when he turned and found Sara standing beside him. “Hey! What has you here so late?”

She looked nervous, which was unusual for her. He was the reason she had the job at Montgomerys; she was dating a

buddy of his and they all hung out together a lot. When William had announced that Rose was retiring and he was looking for someone to replace her, he suggested Sara for the position. It was safe to say that he knew her well and something was definitely on her mind.

“Sara?” he prompted. “Is everything okay?”

She sighed and moved away from the elevator. “Can we... talk?”

“Of course!” Glancing around, he was fairly certain they were alone, but... “Do you want to talk in my office?”

She nodded. “Please.”

Okay, something was definitely up. As soon as they were back in his office, he motioned for her to have a seat and he sat back behind his desk. “What’s going on?”

“Okay, this has to stay between us,” she began.

He nodded.

“Mr. Montgomery isn’t in Raleigh to meet with a client. He’s actually there for...health reasons,” she told him. “He didn’t want me to know, but there have been a lot of calls coming through that were apparently from doctors and hospitals and he wanted me to be aware and make sure I always put the calls through.”

Another nod.

“Earlier, his granddaughter showed up—she’s been here a lot lately—and she kind of surprised me by asking if William was sick.” She sighed. “I hated lying to her, but...I don’t think it’s my place to tell her. If he hasn’t told her, then there’s got to be a reason, right? I mean...I shouldn’t be the one breaking that kind of news to her.”

For a moment, Noah didn't know what to say. Lily was clearly onto something and he knew she was going to fixate on it until she got her answers. "I'm sure she'll talk to him when he gets home tonight."

"That's just it," she said. "He's not going to be home tonight. He called me a little over two hours ago to clear his schedule for the rest of the week, but said he'd be back in the office on Thursday." She let out a long breath before adding, "Whatever he has, I don't think today's appointment went well."

Shit.

"And you have no idea what this...health issue is about?"

She shook her head. "Last week, we received several calls from Duke—the hospital. I thought it was odd that he had them calling the office instead of calling him directly on his cell phone."

"Yeah, that seems a little odd to me too," he murmured. "So...I guess I'm not sure what to say here. I can tell you're upset, but..."

"I honestly don't know what to do or say if Lily shows up again. Lying is not my strong suit and she seems like a very determined woman." She paused. "I know you've hung out with her a little, do you think you could talk to her?"

His eyes went wide. "And say what? Just like it's not your place to tell her what's going on, I don't think it's mine either."

Liar.

There wasn't a doubt in his mind that he was going to leave here and see her, but he wasn't sure Sara needed to know that.

“Maybe just tell her that William’s client is demanding and he and Robert are staying an extra day or two to smooth things over? Honestly, Noah, she’ll see right through me if I have to be the one to tell her.”

“I’m pretty sure she will have spoken to William by now. I saw her briefly when she was here earlier, and I can practically guarantee that she’s called him already.”

That seemed to relax her. “Do you really think so? Because I’m already dreading what will happen if she shows up here tomorrow.”

He smiled at her as he stood. “Come on. It’s late, and I’m sure Justin is waiting for you.” They walked out of the office and back to the elevator. “But I’ll reach out to Lily and see where she’s at. I don’t want you to get all stressed out about it.”

“Thanks, Noah. You’re a real lifesaver.”

He wasn’t so sure about that, but there were worse ways for people to see him.

After saying goodbye to Sara in the parking garage, Noah got in his car and considered his options. He didn’t have Lily’s phone number, so if he wanted to talk to her, he was going to have to go to the guesthouse. And considering that William wasn’t home, he felt relatively safe heading over there.

Pulling out of the parking lot, his stomach growled and he made the snap decision to grab a couple of burgers and some fries to bring with him to share with her in case she hadn’t had dinner yet. And if she had, well...more for him. It was thirty minutes later when he pulled up to the guesthouse and breathed a sigh of relief that her car was there. It hadn’t hit

him until he was almost here that she could be out with her friends again.

Lily was standing in the doorway as he got closer. “Noah? What are you doing here?”

He held up the bag of food. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Um...no, but...”

He walked up to the door and gave her a lopsided grin. “Sometimes I hate eating alone. But I also wanted to see how things went earlier with your grandfather. Then I realized I didn’t have your number, so I figured I’d just drive over.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Oh. Come on in. It’s kind of a short story.”

“Really?” Following her inside, they set up the food at her small kitchen table and sat down. “What happened?”

“First, give me your phone,” she said, holding her hand out. When he gave it to her, she programmed her number in and then sent herself a text so she had his number. “There. One problem solved.”

“Great. Now, what happened?”

“As you know, he was out of the office for the day. But Sara was acting all weird and nervous and I asked her outright if she knew if my grandfather was sick and she gave me this totally lame answer about being new there and...I don’t know. I feel like she was totally not telling me something.”

Okay, so Sara was spot-on in her worrying.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked to eat, but I figured everyone likes burgers,” he said instead of addressing her comment. “And the fries from this place are to die for and they were made fresh while I waited, so...”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him. “You totally know something, don’t you?” she accused.

Crap.

Apparently Sara wasn’t the only one Lily could see right through.

“Noah, come on, seriously? You’re not going to tell me what you know?”

“Can we just eat first and then talk?”

“No,” she snapped. “We absolutely can’t. If there’s something wrong with my grandfather...”

“Did you talk to him this afternoon?”

“What?”

He nodded. “You heard me. Did you talk to him after you left the office?”

With a huff of annoyance, she leaned back in her chair. “Yes. He called me because he told me earlier to call him and I didn’t. Then I had things to do and I talked to him again just a little while ago.”

“Okay...and what did he say to you?”

“That he and Uncle Robert were staying in Raleigh because their client was difficult, but he sounded weird. Like I could totally tell something was off and anytime I tried to address it, he completely deflected and made me talk about what the doctor said today. It was beyond frustrating and...”

“Wait,” he interrupted. “You went to the doctor today?”

Now she groaned and muttered a curse under her breath. “He actually made some calls for me yesterday and managed to get me in to see an orthopedic specialist today. I wasn’t

particularly ready for it, but the two of them made all the arrangements without consulting me first. And I have another one tomorrow.”

Now Noah understood all of Sara’s concerns.

And Lily’s.

Something was definitely going on, and he had no idea what to say.

“What did they say?” he asked.

“Who? The doctor?”

He nodded.

“Basically, he said I’ve been doing all the stuff I’m supposed to, but if I want this to be fixed, I need the surgery.” She paused and picked up a fry, not looking at him. “And that I may need to rethink my dance career.”

“Damn. Lily, I’m sorry. Isn’t there another option?”

“That’s what I’m hoping for and maybe tomorrow’s doctor will offer me one.” Then she let out a small laugh. “Or maybe the one after him, because I have another appointment on Friday.”

He was connecting the dots and it seemed like William was deliberately keeping Lily busy with doctor’s appointments on key days.

“What about when you talked to your grandfather? What did he say?”

“After comparing me yet again to my father, he thinks I should get all the opinions, but that they’re all ultimately going to lead me to the same conclusion. Surgery.” She looked up at him miserably. “I hate this.”

Reaching over, he covered her hand with his. “I know you do. I wish there were something I could do or say to make this better.”

“So do I.” Slowly, she pulled her hand away and straightened. “But junk food for dinner is a good start.” Opening the wrapping on the first burger, she studied it. “Is there bacon on this?”

He chuckled. “I believe you mentioned how much you enjoy bacon, so...yes.”

“Perfect.” They ate in companionable silence for a minute before Lily put her burger down. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Are you here because you know something?”

“Lily, I...”

“Dammit, Noah! Look, I get that you’re one of the good guys and you’re all about being loyal to Montgomerys, but can you please just be honest with me?”

With the way her eyes were pleading with him, he would have given her anything.

So, he told her about the conversation he had with Sara. “She’s kind of terrified of you right now, so please don’t use that against her.”

“I wouldn’t,” she said adamantly. “I just don’t understand what is going on.”

“Did you ask William just...flat out? Did you tell him you found the paperwork?”

She didn’t respond right away, and that was essentially her answer.

“You can’t keep freaking out over what he’s doing if you’re not willing to actually have the confrontation,” he said levelly. “I have great respect for your grandfather, but I also know he’s a master of distraction. Hell, that week I spent with you and your family for Christmas, that’s all everyone talked about! That’s how he played matchmaker to pretty much every person there! He distracts and almost uses smoke and mirrors to get people to come around to his way of thinking. As long as he suspects that you’re onto him, he’s going to keep doing this.”

“Well, he can’t keep doing it forever. My parents, aunts and uncles, and my grandmother are all going to be back in a little over two weeks. So whatever he’s trying to hide, it would have to be done by then, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess, but the real question is, what are you going to do for the next two weeks? Are you going to finally confront him or just keep playing this game?”

“I’m not playing anything, Noah,” she said defensively. “I’m trying to be respectful.”

“And making yourself crazy.”

“Yeah, well...that seems to be the story of my life lately,” she murmured before taking another bite of her burger.

“I know the whole surgery thing isn’t ideal, but...”

“It’s not just the surgery, Noah!” she cried. “I mean...what are we doing here?”

“Um...”

“You didn’t have to come here tonight, just like you didn’t need to pull me into your office and kiss me today,” she said hotly. “You said it was only going to be last night. You said it *had* to be only one night. And I totally respected that decision,

even if I didn't agree with it. But you are throwing me all kinds of mixed signals and it's making me crazy! Like I didn't already have enough to deal with, now you're doing...well...the whole um...throwing thing! *Gah!*"

The only thing he could say to her was, "You're right."

She gasped softly as her eyes widened.

"Do you want to know what I was thinking when I decided to come over here?" He tossed his burger down. "Even though I know there's something wrong with William, all I could think of was how he wasn't going to be home tonight, and that meant we could be together and no one would catch us. How messed up is that?" And because he hated how that made him sound, he stood and kicked the chair out from under him.

Another soft gasp as her burger dropped from her hands.

"Do you have any idea how much it bothers me that I'm being like this? I get that we don't know each other very well, but I'm strict and regimented with myself and my career for a reason! I grew up in near poverty with a deadbeat father and a mother who practically worked herself to death to take care of me and my brothers. I saw firsthand what giving into whims and whatever it is you wanted can do to a family, and I refuse to be like that." Pacing away, he raked a hand through his hair in frustration. "Then I met you and you just pushed all my damn buttons!"

"Noah, I..."

"That week in Asheville? You had me tied up in knots, Lily! I've spent three years trying to redeem myself for one indiscretion that wasn't even my fault!"

"I know, and..."

“Can I find another job with another finance company? Sure,” he went on. “Do I want to? No! I’ve put a lot of time and energy into *this* particular job and yet one look at you and I’m ready to throw away everything I’ve worked so hard for! It’s like I don’t even know myself anymore and it scares the hell out of me!”

She stood and walked over to him, her eyes wide with wonder. “What are you saying?”

“That’s just it, Lily,” he said gruffly. “I don’t even know. Being with you genuinely freaks me out because you take me out of my comfort zone. You...”

Her hand reached out and raked through his hair as she pulled him down and kissed him. It wasn’t helping anything. It was simply making it possible for him to avoid actually answering her question. Still, as his arms wrapped around her, he didn’t have the will to care. All he wanted was this woman, even if it was for only one more night.

Which was something they were going to have to deal with.

Just...not right now.

Right now, he wanted to pick her up and carry her to bed and make love to her all night long again. And when his hands slid down her back and cupped her ass, she automatically jumped up and wrapped her legs tightly around him. They both broke the kiss and stared at each other.

“What about the rest of dinner?” he asked.

“We’ll order a pizza later,” she said breathlessly. “I want you, Noah. So much.”

He swallowed hard. “I know. I want you too. So much it makes me crazy.”

She gave him an impish smile. “Then I suggest we go inside and get crazy together.”

That sounded like heaven to him. Turning, he walked across the room without taking his eyes from hers. And when he placed her down on the bed, he knew he’d never seen a more beautiful woman. With her arms thrown over her head, her hair fanned out, and all those magnificent curves on display in snug yoga pants and a tiny t-shirt. She was a living, breathing fantasy, and he had another night with her.

And he intended to make it memorable for both of them.

EIGHT

THEY DIDN'T ORDER PIZZA, but they ended up making a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches around eleven that night. They were sitting on her sofa. Noah was shirtless and wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and Lily put her t-shirt back on and a pair of sleep shorts. They were thoroughly mussed up and yet this was the best she had felt in a long time.

“Okay, not to bring up a weird subject...”

“But...?” he prompted.

“But you sort of threw out a few random facts about your life and...I don't know...I guess I want to know more about you. What exactly happened to make you into this structured finance guy who's mildly obsessed with his career?”

It was risky to broach this subject—especially when he was kind of vulnerable just sitting there in his underwear—but even if this relationship were ending before it had a chance to begin, she was genuinely curious about what made Noah the man he is today.

He casually finished his sandwich and took a drink of the sweet tea she'd made before getting more comfortable. When he looked at her, she already knew he wasn't fully comfortable sharing things about himself.

“My mom was studying to be a nurse in college and was casually dating my dad when she got unexpectedly pregnant. She managed to continue with school through the pregnancy and for a little while after I was born, but she got pressured into dropping out by her conservative in-laws after she and my father got married.”

“Oh, wow...”

“My father was a college athlete who likely wasn’t going to make it pro, but still had hope. When my mom got pregnant, his parents pressured him into marrying her and getting a ‘real’ job to support his family.” With a snort of derision, he shook his head. “He really resented the whole thing, and his way of coping was to drink excessively until he ultimately became known as the town drunk.”

Now she really hated that she’d brought this up.

“It became clear fairly soon after I was born that he wasn’t going to clean up his act to take care of our family. And yet they still ended up having two more kids, my brothers, so Mom took on a job as a personal support worker to make money to support us and to have enough flexibility to still be around for us.”

“That must have been so hard for her,” she quietly commented.

“It was, and she spent a lot of years trying to be the one who held it all together. When I was ten, she sort of had enough and kicked him out.” He paused and took another drink. “But the old man was good at making promises, and even though she knew better, she took him back.”

“Oh my goodness. Why?”

“He claimed to have cleaned up his act, started going to AA, and got a steady job. Unfortunately, this was a cycle they fell into repeatedly...for years, actually. Until something happened that convinced her he was never going to change and we were better off without him.”

As much as she hated to make him keep going, she had to know. “What happened?”

“He caused a car accident—a bad one. He hit a car that my brother Jax was in with a bunch of his friends. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, he had a woman in the car with him. Some whore he picked up in a bar.” He paused for another drink. “That was a huge wake up call. That accident finally broke the cycle, and she kicked him out once and for all.”

“Noah, I’m so sorry!” Reaching over, she took his hand in hers and kissed it. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay. Really.” He looked at their hands and she thought they were done, but he continued the story.

“As the oldest brother, I was the one who was the most aware of what was going on with them and I tried to shield my brothers from it as much as I could when we were all kids. From a pretty young age, I took on a sort of parental role to help my mom out.”

“Believe me, I have two younger sisters and I know how hard it can be taking care of your siblings, even though I never experienced anything like you did.”

“You’re lucky. I didn’t have a good childhood and didn’t always make the best decisions, especially as a teenager. But I was always determined to be successful so I could take care of my mom and so that I’d never end up in a situation like when I was a kid.”

“And you’re working hard to make that happen. You take your responsibilities seriously. It’s really amazing all you’ve overcome.”

“Thank you, but...on the outside, I might look like a pretty straightlaced business guy, but it’s really just a front I put on so people don’t pay too much attention to me. I enjoy flying under the radar and just keeping my head down. I’m constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I don’t really trust anything good that happens in my life because when I was a kid, the good times usually meant that really bad times were just around the corner.” He let out a small laugh. “So... there it is. That’s my life.”

“Holy crap, Noah,” she said sadly. “I don’t even know how to respond to all that.”

“When we met, you had me pegged as this numbers geek without knowing anything about me, and believe me, you’re not the only one. Sometimes people don’t want the spotlight on them or are extremely content being behind the scenes. My brothers obviously chose very different paths, and to the world, they look like they have everything.” He shrugged. “We all struggle with our past. Simon puts a lot of that into the lyrics he writes for his music. And Jax? Well...I think he gets to vent any frustration or anger when he’s on the field. It motivates him to play harder and he’s very good at what he does, so...”

“But what about you?” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“If Simon’s voicing his pain through his music, and Jax can let out all of his through playing aggressively, where does that leave you? How do you deal with your pain? Because you’re making it sound like you just keep pushing it down and

working hard so you can have a better life, but...you're not dealing with it."

He hesitated a moment before responding. "I went to therapy all through college," he said softly. "I'm a big proponent of that sort of thing and take mental health issues seriously."

All Lily could do was stare at him in wonder, even as she felt ashamed of herself.

She had made some broad assumptions about him when they first met, and every single one of them was wrong. Noah Wylder was possibly the strongest, kindest man she'd ever met.

And probably the most tortured.

He overcame a traumatic upbringing and was working hard to make a better life for himself.

And I'm the reason that's going to get ruined.

Damn.

That thought hit her like a ton of bricks, and she was completely torn. She'd grown up very privileged and had gotten almost everything she'd ever wanted. There were never any struggles and, compared to Noah's, her life was a damn fairytale. And if she had to answer right now, she'd say with full conviction that she wanted him no matter what. But could she really be that selfish?

For tonight? Yes.

But come tomorrow? She couldn't be sure.

She cared about him far too much to watch him lose all that he was working toward.

Ugh...change the subject!

Reaching for her glass, she cradled it in her hands and smiled at him. “What’s your dream vacation?”

His bark of laughter was his first response, but then he smiled. “Um...I’ve always wanted to see the Grand Canyon.”

That was...not what she expected. “Like...just see it or go camping and river rafting?”

“Both,” he said with an easy grin. “I’ve talked about it with my brothers, but they’re not interested in the camping part. They’re both used to staying at five-star resorts with room service, so it’s not all that appealing to them.”

“I get that. I don’t think I’ve ever gone camping, but I certainly wouldn’t say no if the opportunity presented itself.” She knew she could make that offer to him right now—for the two of them to take that trip as soon as he had the time off—but she felt like she would come off sounding a little like a spoiled brat.

Which...I am.

“Favorite food?” she asked instead.

“Steak. I love a good steak and when I go out to eat, that’s always what I get.” He studied her for a moment. “But enough about me. I think I’ve overshared here tonight. Now it’s time for me to learn a little about you.”

Leaning back against the cushions, she nodded. “Bring it on.”

“Did you ever want to do anything other than dance?”

She shook her head. “Nope.” Shifting slightly in her spot, she expanded on that. “Growing up, there were a lot of options to go the business or corporate route. I was never good with

numbers and I've always been a little too fidgety to sit still at a desk. Of course, my mom left the corporate world—she used to be my grandfather's assistant..."

"I never knew that! I guess I always thought that Rose was his one and only assistant!"

"Nope! Rose was my mom's assistant. When Mom left Montgomerys, she ended up working at a bakery. That had always been her dream, but she didn't have the confidence to pursue it and she took the job with Montgomerys because it was more stable."

He nodded.

"So, my mom always encouraged me to be brave and follow my dream, and once I was old enough to really start thinking about my future, I knew I wanted it to include dance. I know I can't dance forever, but maybe down the line, I can open a dance studio and teach."

"What was your greatest dance moment?"

"Ooh...good question! I think it was actually the first time I danced on Broadway. The show had been playing for years, but it was my first night, and when the curtain went up, I almost cried. That was like...a total dream come true." And even though that was the absolute truth, she couldn't help but compare her life—again—to his. Unable to look at him, Lily ducked her head slightly and added, "I'm sure that all appears pretty shallow."

Noah moved closer and gently caressed her cheek. "Hey," he said softly and waited until she looked up at him. "Don't say stuff like that. Like you, I made some assumptions when we first met and I was wrong. You've obviously worked very

hard to get where you are right now and you should be proud of yourself.”

“I am, but...even though I know how hard I work—it’s physically and mentally challenging for sure—it still seems to pale in comparison to everything you’ve had to overcome.”

“It’s not a competition,” he told her, resting his forehead against hers.

“I know,” she murmured. “You just have me looking at things a little differently. I know I can’t change the way I grew up or who my family is, but I guess I never really paid a lot of attention to how it wasn’t that way for other people.” Shaking her head, she let out a long breath. “And it just makes me feel not so great about how I may have treated other people in my life.”

“Lily...come on.” Noah scooped her up into his arms and held her in his lap. “You can think like that and it would be crazy if you think you’ve been so perfect in your life that you never said or did anything that hurt someone’s feelings. We’ve all done it, whether it was intentional or not.”

They sat in companionable silence for several long moments and she kind of felt like things had gotten way too deep and depressing. She wanted that fun and lightness back that they shared while making sandwiches after making love for hours.

“What’s your favorite song?” she asked and smiled when Noah chuckled.

“Nice change of subject,” he said. “And for the record, I’m going to have to say something by my brother.”

“No! Simon’s music doesn’t count!” she laughed.

“Oh, believe me, it does! I swear he knows whenever I say any song other than one of his!”

“Fine, then what’s your favorite Simon Bennett song?”

“*Still of the Night*,” he said without hesitation. “It’s a power ballad off his first album and I can honestly say it was the first time that I was blown away by his talent. I always knew he could sing, but I had no idea how freaking amazing he was.”

“Aww...I love that!” She paused. “I think my favorite Simon Bennett song is *Just Like That*. There’s a totally sexy vibe and I love dancing to it.”

He frowned. “I’m not sure how I feel about that statement.”

Laughing softly, Lily cupped his stubbled jaw and kissed him. “I said the *song* had a sexy vibe, not your brother. Big difference.”

“If you say so...”

It was kind of adorable that he was pouting.

“How about we go back inside and I prove to you that you’re the only one I find sexy? Will that help?”

He shrugged and sighed dramatically. “I guess it couldn’t hurt...”

They both laughed and Lily wrapped her arms around him. “There’s my big, brave man. Now let’s make the most out of this night because I know you’re going to need some sleep.”

Noah stood with her in his arms and strode toward the bedroom. “Sleep is highly overrated.”



The next day, Noah was thoroughly exhausted and yet somehow energized. He made it to work on time and handled a few mini crises before ten a.m. and even managed to land a new client for himself. When he went to get himself a cup of coffee, he spotted Sara and assured her that Lily wouldn't be showing up unannounced today to interrogate her.

"I know I sounded paranoid last night," she said, "but I really hated the idea of lying to her."

"No worries. I talked to her and you're good."

She studied him for a moment. "I noticed the two of you hanging out a time or two, but...is there more to this relationship?"

And only because it was Sara did he feel like he could answer honestly. "I really wish there was, but...you know that Lucas already doesn't particularly like me."

"Oh, right...the New Year's Eve kiss thing. Boy, he can hold a grudge, huh?" she said with amusement.

Noah wasn't nearly as amused. "As much as I'd like to see where a relationship with Lily could go, there's just way too many complications."

"Well, that's just sad. Maybe you should just talk to Lucas when he gets back. He might respect you more if you finally ask to sit down with him and tell him how you feel about his daughter."

"I don't know. Maybe." He sighed. "Any word from William today?"

She shook her head. “He said he’d call me after lunch, so...we’ll see.”

They both went back to work after that, and Noah kept busy until lunchtime. Lily’s doctor’s appointment was at eleven and he wondered if it was over already or if she was still there. Rather than wonder, he simply pulled out his phone and tapped out a text to her.

Noah: Hey! Just checking on you and seeing how the doctor’s appointment went.

He put his phone down because he had no idea if she would respond right away or not, and then he wondered if he should just go to lunch or wait and see if she wanted to meet him somewhere.

She responded a minute later.

Lily: It went okay. Got the same response I got from yesterday’s appointment.

Lily: That’s three in a row that all said the same thing. So even if I go to the guy on Friday, it’s not like he’s going to be a tiebreaker.

Damn. He hated this for her. He knew how much she was hoping for someone to give her another option other than surgery, but it seemed like that definitely wasn’t going to happen. He knew she had access to the best doctors, so if three of them were in agreement, he’d have to say that this probably needed to happen.

Noah: I’m sorry. I know that wasn’t the news you were hoping for.

Lily: It really wasn’t.

Noah: Want to meet somewhere for lunch?

Lily: I wish I could, but I just arrived at a place I needed to stop at.

It was crazy to be so disappointed, but he was.

Noah: Not a problem. Can I call you later?

Lily: Hang on a sec...

He put his phone down and stood to stretch, contemplating if he wanted to order lunch in or go somewhere. If she had been available to meet him, he would have loved to get out, but now he felt like staying in.

There was a knock on his office door and when he looked up, there she was.

“What in the world...?” he said with a laugh.

She held up a large cooler bag as she stepped in and shut the door. “Is this too risqué? Should I keep it open?”

Chuckling, he walked over and kissed her soundly. Sometime around five this morning, they decided that they weren't ready to put any parameters on what they were doing, but they knew that could change the moment William got home. Which reminded him...

“Leave the door.” Taking the bag from her hand, he placed it on his desk. “Any word from your grandfather?”

Rolling her eyes, she collapsed into the chair in front of his desk. “Get this—Uncle Robert called to see how my appointment went. When I asked him why he was calling instead of my grandfather, he claimed he walked out of a meeting because he was frustrated with how long things were

taking and my grandfather asked him to call me.” Another eye roll. “I mean...that sounds suspicious, right?”

“I hate to say it, but...yes.” Opening the bag, he looked over at her. “What did you bring?”

Lily got to her feet and helped him. “Oh, since we didn’t really get to finish our burgers last night, I went and bought them for us. The bag was just to make sure they stayed hot until I got here.” Then she looked around. “I figured we could grab drinks from here somewhere.”

“I’ll go grab a couple of bottles of water from the breakroom. I’ll be right back.” And then, just because he could, he kissed her before leaving the room.

And yeah, he left the door open.

When he came back, he left it only slightly ajar because he had a feeling people would talk if he was having a closed-door lunch with the boss’s daughter. If Lily thought anything of him leaving it like that, she didn’t say anything. She had everything set up for them, and it felt like a little picnic.

“Thanks for doing this. I was really just getting ready to order something when you knocked on my door.”

“I didn’t want to go home,” she admitted. “I was so disappointed by everything this doctor said to me today and I knew I needed to just be around someone for a little while.”

“Well then, I’m honored that you chose to be around me.” Picking up his burger, he took a bite and hummed with appreciation. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why not call one of your friends? I know we never really decided on anything where we’re concerned, but...”

She took a bite of her burger and held up her finger to give her a minute. “I’ve been living away from home for a long time,” she began. “And the other night when I went out with them, it was the first time in years that I’d done that. All I wanted was a girls’ night, something like a nice dinner and maybe going dancing, but I wanted it to just be us.” She shook her head. “But they all had an agenda and wanted to meet up with the guys and then tried to set me up with that Axl guy.”

“It’s a ridiculous name...”

She nodded. “Yup. And there was a time when I would have been thrilled by them doing that, but...I had zero interest in him.” Then she smiled. “And that’s because you’re the one I’m interested in, Noah.”

“Lily...”

“I’m just saying...I love my friends, but there’s kind of a disconnect there that I don’t know what to do with. I left to pursue my dreams and I created a life that I wanted. They did the same. It just feels like maybe we’ve drifted apart.” She shrugged. “Or maybe I was just in a mood because I didn’t get my way.”

He could honestly see it going either way. “And what about your sisters? Have you talked to them since you came home?”

“I have, but not for very long. They’re both involved in a lot of things at school and other than a few texts, we really haven’t been in touch. I probably should try a little harder to pin them down and get their take on what’s going on with our grandfather, but I also don’t want to freak them out and worry them if this isn’t anything.”

“Okay, that makes sense. But maybe you can reach out to them and...not talk about your grandfather and maybe just talk about what you’re going through with your injury.”

“I downplayed it all this time. Like...even when it happened and I was in so much pain and unsure of what was going to happen, I didn’t tell anyone how bad it was or how I was freaking out.”

“Why? I would think you would have wanted everyone around you. And I’m not saying that in a bad way; I just consider you to all be really close.”

“We are, but...I got weird about this injury because it happened so dramatically and then I went into denial. Part of me still is, even though I have all these doctors telling me how bad it really is.”

“Have you been doing the physical therapy since you came home?”

She shook her head. “Not like I should be,” she murmured.

“Lily...”

“Denial, Noah! I just said...”

“Yeah, I get it, but you have to realize how much more harm you’re doing to yourself! I would have thought you’d be going above and beyond what the therapist told you to do so that you could get back to dancing faster.”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she took a bite of her burger and then played with her fries before eating a handful of them while staring at him defiantly.

“Are you even going to keep the appointment you have on Friday?”

“I don’t know. It’s all the way in Chapel Hill and that’s a little over a two-hour drive. Not that it’s a big deal, but it turns a one-hour appointment into an all-day event. And what’s the point if it’s just going to be more of the same?”

“Maybe it won’t be,” he countered. “Maybe this is the doctor who’ll suggest an alternate treatment.”

“It’s all just more bad news that’s keeping me from dancing. If I have the surgery, the recovery time from it is ridiculous and then I still might not be able to do everything.”

“Okay, but there will still be a lot that you can do. You’re looking at this in a very pessimistic way.”

Another fistful of fries went into her mouth and he knew a stalling tactic when he saw one.

“How would you feel if something happened to you that kept you from your job, Noah?” she challenged. “What would you do if you couldn’t work for almost a year and when you finally could go back, you could only give eighty percent? Would you be happy about it? After all the work you put into getting where you are, would you really be excited to go back knowing you’d never be as good as you were before?”

While he knew something like that really didn’t apply to his own career, he understood what she was saying. “I’d like to think that I’d just be grateful that I could go back at all in any capacity. Would I be disappointed sometimes? Sure. That’s just human nature. But I also know I’d do whatever I could to make the most of the situation.”

“I had forgotten how optimistic you were,” she mumbled.

“Is it the surgery that’s bothering you or the recovery?”

“Both.”

There was no way he was going to change her mind about any of this. Right now, she was struggling and dealing with a lot of emotions, and he had to let her feel what she was feeling.

Finishing up his lunch, he figured a change of topic was in order.

“How about dinner and a movie tonight?” he suggested. “There’s a great Mediterranean place around the corner from the movie theater. There are a couple of new releases that I was curious about, so I’m sure we can find one we both want to see.” Then he paused. “Or is William going to be home tonight?”

“Uncle Robert said they were going to stay one more night in Raleigh, or wherever they are, and they’d be home Thursday morning. I plan on being in the house waiting for them.”

“Alright. And where did we land on tonight? Dinner and a movie, or is there something else you’d rather do?” When she didn’t say anything right away, he threw another option out there. “Or if you’d rather be alone tonight, I totally get that too. I’m not trying to dominate all of your free time. I know you’ve got a lot on your mind, and...”

“Noah?”

“Hmm?”

“Dinner and a movie sounds great,” she told him. “And for future reference, you’re not dominating my time. I enjoy being with you and it’s kind of nice to do that without any of my family snooping into our business.” She sighed. “I have no idea what’s going to happen when my grandfather gets back, so...”

“I know,” he quickly interrupted.

A little too quickly.

“I mean...I know what you’re saying. We said we wanted to make the most of the time we have together and that’s what we’re doing. Would you like to stay at my place tonight?”

Her smile brightened briefly before falling a bit. “I want to say yes, but...would you mind if we waited on that? I know I’m being weird and I don’t even know why, but...”

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “But would it be okay if I brought an overnight bag and left for work from your place? It really sucks sneaking out before the sun’s up so I can drive home to shower and get ready to go to the office.”

Then that beautiful smile was back. “I’d really like that. It can be fun to get up and have coffee together before you have to go. Maybe I’ll even get some stuff to make us breakfast.” She giggled. “That sounds very domesticated, doesn’t it?”

It did, but he was already looking forward to it.

Standing, he walked around the desk and gently tugged her to her feet and kissed her. “I think it sounds perfect. What time should I pick you up?”

“You tell me,” she said softly as her hand smoothed over his chest. “I don’t know what time you usually get out of here and then you have to drive home to change and pack a bag, so...”

Noah glanced at his watch and knew he needed to get back to work soon. “How about we do a quick search for movie times and work it out from there? I’m normally out of here by 5:30 and can be home in fifteen minutes. Then I could potentially be to you by 6:30. But...”

Laughing, she gave him a playful shove. “Good thing we were going to look at movie times first.”

“Yeah, I know. I can’t help but overthink things. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I think it’s cute.” They each pulled out their phones as they sat back down and compared movie choices. “Would it freak you out if I really wanted to see the new Pixar movie?”

“Um...I don’t really want to see a cartoon. How about the new Spiderman?”

She shook her head. “Not really a fan of the superhero stuff.” They each continued to look and went back and forth on every movie showing in the multiplex. “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

He had to agree.

“Okay, how about this time we see the new Pixar...”

“Yay!” she said excitedly as she clapped her hands.

“But the next movie is my choice.”

“Deal!”

They finished their lunch and cleaned up, and he kissed her thoroughly before she walked out of his office. And when he sat back down at his desk and started looking over the account he had a call with in an hour, Noah realized he felt lighter and happier than he had in a long time.

If only it could last...

But he already knew it wouldn’t.

Because he meant what he said to her last night. He didn’t really trust anything good that happened in his life because, as

he learned growing up, the good times usually meant the bad times were just around the corner.

He was older now and more prepared, but that didn't make him any less apprehensive.

The worst part of it all was that right now, he felt like he had the most to lose.

NINE

IT WAS a little after nine the next morning and Lily was sipping her coffee in her grandparents' kitchen. She heard the car pull up and was peacefully waiting for the door to open so she could finally confront her grandfather.

In the distance, she heard the front door open, and she stood and smoothed her hand over her hair and calmly walked to the entryway.

And froze.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “And what are you doing in my grandparents' house?” There, standing before her, was the mystery woman she'd seen her grandfather with.

“You're Lily, right?” the woman asked before finally introducing herself. “I'm Wendy Scott. I've been working with your grandfather. Is he home yet?”

Lily eyed her suspiciously. “Working with him on what?”

Wendy looked wildly uncomfortable for a moment before she seemed to resign herself to answering. “I'm a nurse and I take it your grandfather hasn't told you what's going on.”

“He has not,” she said firmly. “And I'd really like to know because nothing makes sense around here!”

“It's not really my place...”

“And yet here you are in my family’s house and I’m the only one here,” Lily challenged. “I get that my grandfather clearly wanted everyone away for whatever’s going on and I showed up unexpectedly, but I’m here and I’m not going anywhere!” She hated how hostile she sounded, but her level of frustration had finally hit its limit.

“Why don’t we sit down?” Wendy suggested.

“Fine.” She led them into the kitchen and offered her a cup of coffee. “Is my grandfather okay?”

For a moment, Wendy didn’t respond. She simply cupped her mug in her hands and stared down into it. “I told William that he needed to talk to you about this and I’m a little disappointed that he didn’t. I’m not allowed to talk about a patient without their consent.”

The huff of annoyance was out before she could stop it. “Okay, I get that. You can’t give me specifics, but you have to give me something. I don’t know what time he’s going to be home, and I have a feeling he’s going to keep using his avoidance tactics about what’s going on with him.”

Wendy laughed softly. “Yes, I’ve witnessed firsthand how crafty he can be.” She paused. “And how are you doing? I heard you had two doctor appointments this week and...a third tomorrow, right?”

“Wow. So I can’t know about him, but he’s telling you all of my private medical stuff? How is that fair?”

Another laugh. “He’s not a medical professional,” Wendy explained. “And he wasn’t doing it maliciously. He’s genuinely concerned about your injury. So? What did the doctors say?”

It was obvious that she wasn't going to get the information she wanted. They had to kill some time here, so she told her about all the results.

"They're all telling me the same thing," she said levelly. "It's just not what I want to hear."

"That's understandable. No one actually wants to have surgery."

"Especially not in this family," Lily murmured. "I'm not even sure I'll go to the appointment tomorrow. I mean... what's the point?"

"Maybe just for your own peace of mind. If you don't, you'll always wonder if they were the one with a different treatment plan." She took a sip of her coffee. "For what it's worth, from everything William shared with me, it seems like you've done everything right up to this point. If the injury was going to heal, it would have by now."

She nodded. "I know. It's very disappointing. I wasn't doing anything overly taxing. I'd done leaps like that a million times since I started dancing. I feel like my body betrayed me."

The look Wendy gave her was full of sympathy. "The funny thing about our bodies is that sometimes it's that repetitive action that ultimately breaks us. But...you know that after the surgery, all of this could go away and you'll be back to your old self."

"Or...I could have the surgery and not be back to my old self and have to change how I dance."

"But you'd still be dancing," Wendy countered. "This isn't a career-ending injury, Lily. Not everyone is fortunate enough to say that. From what I've heard, you excel in all areas of

dance. So you don't leap anymore? Is that a reason to never dance again?"

"No, but..."

"Lily?" her grandfather said as he slowly entered the room.

Lily took one look at him and wanted to cry. He looked pale and frail and suddenly so much older than he was. She was instantly on her feet and rushing over to him. "Oh my goodness! Come sit down! Should you even be walking?"

He chuckled softly, but let her lead him to a chair. "I'm fine and yes, it's okay for me to walk," he assured her. "Hey, Wendy. We hit a bit of traffic getting home. I'm sorry I wasn't here to greet you."

"That's okay. Lily was here waiting for you, so we had some time to talk."

"Oh?" He looked over at Lily before turning back to Wendy. "And?"

"She had questions that weren't my place to answer," Wendy gently admonished. "So maybe now would be a good time for the two of you to talk." Then she glanced over at Robert and seemed to silently agree that they should leave the room.

Once they were alone, Lily blurted out, "What is going on? Are you sick? Is that why you sent everyone away?"

He gave her a patient smile before reaching over and taking one of her hands in his. "The simple answer is yes to both," he began slowly. "It took some intense coordinating to make everything fall into place and then you, my sweet Lily, showed up." He squeezed her hand before continuing. "Two months ago, at my annual physical, my doctor found a spot on my lung. I was already under his care for some minor heart

issues and unfortunately, this has the potential to be very serious. I didn't want everyone sitting around worrying about me. By now I'm sure you've noticed that I prefer to be the one taking care of everyone else."

"I do, but..."

"I have to wait ten days for the pathology report," he went on. "And a few days after that, everyone will be home and I either can celebrate with them or have some serious conversations. I didn't want to deal with the hovering while we wait." He sighed. "And then you showed up."

"And I don't feel even a little bit bad about that! You should *not* be alone right now!"

"Lily, Robert is here with me and he knows me better than anyone and is a master at keeping me occupied. Not that I don't love and appreciate you being here and your concern, but just like I didn't want your parents and grandmother making a fuss..."

"I'm not making a fuss, Grandpa!" she argued. "I'm genuinely concerned, and I hate that you lied to me!"

He continued to smile patiently. "I think we can both agree that this family is not great where medical issues are concerned. Present company included."

She felt her cheeks heat. "Okay, fine. We're not. But you kept lying to me. I saw you walking around with Wendy twice when you told me you had conference calls and were busy!"

This time he had the decency to look remorseful. "Again, I wasn't expecting you to be here," he said gently. "And I certainly didn't expect you to show up at the office. I thought you'd be out with your friends and doing stuff on your own." He paused. "Or that you'd be anxiously meeting with doctors."

And yeah, she caught the hint of sarcasm.

“Fine, I ruined your big secret plans, but where have you been these last few days?”

“I had a cardiac catheterization and a lung biopsy.”

“Oh. That doesn’t sound like two things that usually happen together.”

“They’re not, but everything needed to be checked out so we know how to proceed from here.”

“So what happens now?”

He shrugged. “Now I wait for the results of the biopsy. My heart looks good. I’ve modified my diet and I’m doing everything my cardiologist recommended and all I can do now is...”

“Wait,” she said miserably.

“Exactly.” He squeezed her hand again. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Have you made any decisions about your surgery?”

Damn.

“We’re talking about *you*,” she reminded him. “I’m not the one who’s keeping a big secret from the family. Everyone knows about my injury.”

“True, but none of them know that your only option is surgery. Or have you called your parents and told them?”

Her gaze narrowed. “That was a cheap shot and you know it. I would never call them while they’re on vacation and worry them.”

“Well, then I guess I feel safe knowing you won’t call and tell them about me either.”

“You know, for a sick guy, you’re being a little sassy,” she teased. “And for the record, I would not rat you out.”

“Same,” he told her. “It’s not my place to tell them about your current condition, but I am going to encourage you to do what the doctors are suggesting. Of course, you should wait until everyone gets back so you can recover at home in your own bed, but...I’m serious, Lily. You need to do this. Don’t make the same mistakes your father did.”

She couldn’t help but sigh. “The only difference is that no amount of surgery was going to let him play football again. According to the doctors—and Wendy—there’s a good chance that I’ll be able to go back to dancing after a lengthy recovery. Maybe not the way I’ve always danced, but at least I’d still be dancing.”

And that was the first time she said it without the tightness in her chest.

“I know it’s a hard decision to make; just promise me you are thinking about it.”

“I am,” she told him before resting her cheek on his hand. “And promise me you’re going to be okay.” Tears stung her eyes and she let them fall. “Because we all need you. You’re the glue that holds us all together, and if anything happened to you...” Her voice cracked and she couldn’t speak.

“Lily,” he whispered and waited for her to lift her head and look at him. “I don’t plan on going anywhere for a very long time. And I want you to know that I am very optimistic about whatever they find. I’ll do everything the doctors want me to

do because I'm not ready to go anywhere yet either. I've got a lot of life left in me, so don't you worry."

She knew his words were meant to reassure her, but it just made her cry a little harder. He was a little too frail for her to crawl into his lap like she wanted to, but that didn't stop her from getting up, wrapping her arms around him, and hugging him tight.

And it was a long time before she wanted to let go.



On Friday evening, Noah found himself on the treadmill at the gym in his building. It wasn't actually something he wanted to be doing, but he was bored and a little tired of his own company. Lily had gone to Chapel Hill and her appointment was delayed. She texted an hour ago to say she was finally on her way home but was exhausted and just going straight to her place and to crash.

Not that he could blame her. It sounded like a hellish day.

This doctor seemed to do a lot more than the other two and then insisted on bringing in a second doctor to examine her and even a physical therapist to work with her. If nothing else, they were being extremely thorough. Unfortunately, it didn't yield any different conclusions. If she ever wanted to dance again, she needed the surgery.

And apparently, she didn't want to talk about it.

He upped his incline on the machine and picked up speed as his mind wandered to what he could do or say to encourage her. He'd never been in her position and wasn't sure how he'd feel if he was. What he did know was that he wished she were

coming over tonight just so he could comfort and distract her. Her entire world was a little out of control at the moment, and he wasn't sure which was upsetting her more—her own medical issues or William's.

She'd told him everything once William got home and no one else in the office knew any of it. Part of him felt a little guilty about it, and he had to pretend that he was just as oblivious as everyone else.

William had come into the office earlier today and came into Noah's office to see how things were going and he simply had to overlook the fact that his boss looked tired and not his usual, larger-than-life self. If he was honest, it was a little upsetting. And if he was feeling this way, he knew Lily was feeling it a thousand times worse.

Deep down, there was a part of him that not only looked at William as his boss and mentor, but a little like the grandfather he never had. Neither of his had taken an interest in Noah and his brothers, so he didn't have much to compare it to, but from everything he witnessed that Christmas he spent with the Montgomerys, William was the best example of unconditional love.

Particularly for his family.

For several minutes, he let his mind go blank and simply ran. Sweat was pouring off of him, his heart was racing, and if nothing else, he was going to sleep well tonight. But when his phone vibrated and he looked down and saw Jax's name on the screen, he was a little relieved to have an excuse to stop.

“Hey!” he said breathlessly as the treadmill came to a stop.

“Hey! Did I call at a bad time?”

“Not at all. Just finishing up a run. What’s up?” He grabbed his towel and wiped his face before picking up his water and taking a long drink.

“I’m flying out to you Sunday night but have to leave Tuesday morning,” his brother was saying. “I really wanted to stay longer, but my agent has some meetings set up for me that I need to be at.”

“If stopping here is going to mess with your schedule...”

“No, it’s not that at all,” Jax replied. “Like I said, I just hate that we’re not going to get as much time to hang out as I thought.”

“I totally understand. What time are you landing on Sunday?”

“Eight. So maybe we can grab a late dinner or even just get some takeout and go back to your place?”

“Are you staying with me or going to a hotel? Because the last time we talked...”

“Staying with you on your sad sleeper sofa,” Jax said with a laugh. “It’s only for two nights, so it’ll be fine. Any chance you can take off on Monday?”

“Sadly, no. I might be able to get out a bit earlier, but my schedule is jammed.”

“No worries. I’m sure I’ll find plenty of stuff to do. Maybe I’ll drive you to work on Monday so I can use your car if that’s okay.”

Noah chuckled. “Dude, you know I don’t drive anything fancy...”

“And you really should let me help you with that! I offered to buy you something better than your practical little SUV. We

can go car shopping while I'm there!"

"We are not going car shopping," Noah argued wearily. "Can't we just hang out and relax? I don't need or want anything from you, dude. I'm happy just to see you."

"Yeah, well...I wouldn't be where I am right now without you, Noah," Jax said, his voice far more solemn than it was a minute ago. "You've been encouraging me for years and overseeing all my money so that when I'm not playing football anymore, I'll be comfortable for practically the rest of my life."

Damn. They rarely got this serious with each other, and he wasn't sure what to do with that.

"Well...then that's just another reason I don't want you buying me a car. Why waste all that money when you'll need it in your retirement?" he teased.

"Noah..."

"Look, I get what you're saying and I appreciate it. But I'm also saying that I don't need it, okay? I make money from your investments too. That's how my career works, so the more money I make for you, the more I make for me. So really, you're helping me without even knowing it."

"Still doesn't feel like enough."

"Then you can treat me to all the dinners while you're here. Will that work?"

His brother laughed. "You mean the two meals? Wow! I don't want to spoil you..."

"Don't be a jerk. Just text me your flight info and I'll see you Sunday night, okay?"

"Sounds good. Thanks, Noah!"

They hung up and Noah made his way through the building and got on the elevator to his floor. He was hungry and had planned on making himself something easy, but now he wasn't in the mood to cook.

"Takeout it is," he murmured as he stepped off the elevator. His head was down and he was scrolling through the food delivery app when he saw something—or someone—out of the corner of his eye.

Lily.

The smile instantly tugged at his lips because he was so happy to see her standing by his door. The urge to scoop her up in his arms was strong, but he was a sweaty mess and figured she might not appreciate it.

"Hey!" he said as he got closer, hesitating before getting too close. "I thought you were going home?"

Her eyes were fixated on his chest, which was covered in a sweaty t-shirt, and he loved the way she openly checked him out.

"Lily?"

This time she met his gaze, but she was frowning. "Why are you being weird and standing so far away?"

"Um...because..." And he motioned to his body. "I'm just getting back from the gym and..."

She was instantly pressed up against him, kissing him.

Well...if she's okay with it...

His arms banded around her as he held her close, kissing her back like he was ready to devour her.

Which...he was.

Always.

When they finally broke apart, they were both smiling. “Now this was a great surprise. C’mon, let’s go inside.” He opened the door for her and closed it, leaning against it and watching her. This was the first time she’d been here, and he was curious about what she was thinking. This condo was his first big splurge and by far the nicest place he’d ever lived.

“So? What do you think?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“It’s nice! And this building is amazing! Concierge service and the outdoor spaces are all very appealing. I can see why you moved here.”

“What was your place like down in Miami?”

“Ugh...very basic. It was a short-term rental and it came furnished. I don’t think I’ve ever lived anywhere long enough to really give it much thought. I traveled a lot with the touring company and even the year I spent with the Rockettes, I rented a tiny studio because I was never there. You’ve made this place feel like a home.” Then she turned and smiled at him. “Well done.”

Her compliment made him feel like he was blushing.

“I need to grab a shower, but why don’t we order some dinner and hopefully it will be here by the time I’m done?”

Nodding, she slowly sauntered over to him. “Or...we can order some dinner and I can join you in the shower and they can leave it with the concierge if we’re not done.” Her hands were all over him and suddenly he didn’t care if they had dinner or not, he had to have her.

Her name was a whispered plea as he simply surrendered to her.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you quite like this,” she said in breathless awe. “I’ve seen you naked and sweaty after having sex, but seeing you like this is just...” She paused and licked her lips as she looked up at him. “It’s a very good look on you.”

Her hands snaked under his shirt and smoothed their way upward, taking the fabric with her until she pulled it over his head and tossed it aside. And then she was kissing his chest, running her tongue in soft circles around his nipples, and Noah swore he was ready to explode. His hand anchored roughly in her hair and he tugged until she was looking up at him.

“You’re killing me,” he said gruffly.

That impish grin of hers was back as her hands slowly moved lower until they got to the waistband of his athletic shorts. “What are you going to do about it?” she asked, her voice going all husky.

She wasn’t dressed nearly as accessibly as he was. If she’d been in a dress, he’d have her up against the wall right now, tearing her panties away. But in a pair of leggings and a long sweater, it wouldn’t be as sexy as he was picturing it in his mind.

And all the while his mind was wandering, Lily was slowly tugging his shorts down and going down on her knees at the same time.

Damn.

Noah loosened his grip on her hair and looked down at her. She was the sexiest woman he’d ever seen in his entire life, and sometimes he couldn’t believe that such a beautiful and vibrant woman would even want someone like him. He was just a boring guy who worked in finance and was obsessed

with having a low-key and stable life. But when she looked at him the way she was looking at him right now, he felt like the luckiest man on the whole damn planet.

“Get up,” he quietly commanded and smiled when she did as he said. “Take that sweater off.”

And she did.

He groaned at the sight of the completely sheer bra she wore that left nothing to the imagination. “Now the leggings.”

Lily kicked her boots off before peeling the spandex from her body. And her body was absolute perfection.

“Are we going to take a shower now?” she asked, moving in close so he could feel the heat of her body.

But Noah shook his head. “Not yet.”

She arched one perfectly manicured brow at him and gasped when he hauled her in close, lifted her off her feet, and spun her around until her back was against the wall. Her legs went around him at the same time he reached for her panties and gave a strong tug, tearing them away.

And then he lived out one of the most erotic encounters of his life. It was fast and frantic and over way too soon, but every second spent with Lily Montgomery wrapped around him was freaking worth it.

TEN

WHEN LILY GOT HOME late Saturday morning, she was surprised to find her grandfather walking toward the guesthouse.

“Hey!” she said, feeling grateful for showering before coming home from Noah’s, but a little self-conscious about wearing his sweatshirt. “What are you up to this morning?”

“I didn’t see or hear you come home last night, so I thought I’d come down and check on you. I know you called me after your appointment yesterday, but I wanted to see how you were feeling now that you had some time to think.”

Ugh...

They walked into the guesthouse, and she tossed her purse down on the sofa. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No, but thank you.” He looked around. “Did you sleep out last night?”

Thankfully her back was to him because she knew she was blushing from the roots of her hair to the soles of her feet. “Actually, yes. I stayed at a friend’s house. After that long drive, I really just wanted a distraction.” She fussed around the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee, even though she really didn’t want one. “Anyway, we ordered some takeout

and watched a movie, and then I was too tired to drive, so I crashed on her couch.”

Liar! Liar! Liar!

“Oh.”

And if she wasn't mistaken, he sounded disappointed.

Turning around, she leaned against the counter and studied him for a moment. He was looking much more like his old self and she knew he was taking it easy, but she also knew he wasn't out of the woods yet.

“I was hoping maybe you were out with someone special. Maybe reconnecting with a certain someone?”

Oh, good Lord...

“The girls set me up with someone when we all went out Monday night,” she told him to hopefully throw him off the trail he was definitely on. “He was a pretty nice guy.”

Liar.

“Oh? What's his name?”

“Axl.”

His eyes went wide. “Seriously? That's a name?”

She nodded.

“Do I dare ask what he does for a living?”

Her grandfather had a fascination with the careers of the men she dated—mainly because they were normally slackers with no real ambition. It used to be something she found attractive. She used to love a guy who was a bit of a rebel or who was the polar opposite of the corporate type. But now? Now she could definitely see the appeal of a man in a well-

fitting suit. There was something extremely sexy when you found what was underneath.

And man, did Noah look freaking amazing underneath his suit.

“Lily?”

“Hmm?”

“I asked what he did for a living and then you got a goofy little grin on your face. Does that mean you’re a bit smitten with this...Axl?”

“Not really. He was nice enough, but...” She shrugged. “There wasn’t any connection, you know? Plus, with all that’s going on with me and my hip stuff, I’m not looking to get involved with anyone. I’m too distracted.”

So many lies!

If she were a wooden puppet, her nose would be out the damn door by now.

“Well, that’s just disappointing. I would think being in a relationship with a decent young man would be just the thing to help you right now!”

Laughing softly, Lily pushed away from the counter and went to sit at the kitchen table. “Grandpa, that is a very old-fashioned and outdated way of looking at things. I don’t need to be in a relationship. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself and I have a ton of friends and my family around to help and support me if and when I decide what I’m going to do about this surgery.”

He frowned and sat down beside her. “Having someone other than your friends and family who cared about you wouldn’t hurt either, you know.”

She gave him a sly grin. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing here. I’ve heard all the stories for most of my life. Clearly you have someone in mind that you want to set me up with, so why don’t you just spill it so I can tell you all the reasons why you’re wrong.”

William laughed heartily, and then completely threw her for a loop. “I was hoping you’d reconnected with Harry Singleton! You’ve been coming to the office a lot since you’ve been home and I was certain the two of you would have run into each other!”

“Um...wait...*what?* Who’s Harry Singleton?” she asked in total confusion.

“Oh, Lily, come on! Certainly you remember Harry! The two of you went to school together. And remember the summer you interned at Montgomerys and Harry did too? I thought the two of you were a little flirty with each other back then.”

It took her a solid minute to figure out who he was talking about, and then her eyes went wide. “Oh my *God!* Are you talking about hairless Harry? The guy who went bald in like the eleventh grade and wears golf pants and glasses?”

“What are golf glasses?”

Groaning, she shook her head. “No, the pants were plaid like golfer’s pants and he wore regular glasses. You can’t possibly think I ever had a crush on him!”

“And why not?” he demanded. “He’s a perfectly nice young man and he’s a hard worker! He’s a junior assistant in our payroll department!”

“Grandpa, you’re being ridiculous. I haven’t seen Harry and I haven’t been looking for him either. *Sheesh!* What in the

world?” she asked with a laugh. Lily shook her head before adding, “Sometimes I wonder how your mind works with this matchmaking thing. You can’t possibly think I’d want to go out with someone like Harry!”

“Honestly, I’d rather see you with someone like Harry than someone named Axl,” he said with a haughty snort. “There are plenty of eligible young people working at Montgomerys. You just say the word and I’ll gladly set you up with one of them.”

“Grandpa...”

“They’d be nice and respectful,” he went on. “And I already know they’re hardworking and would take very good care of you.”

“No thank you,” she said sweetly, before taking a sip of her coffee.

“What about Noah Wylder?” he asked, nearly causing her to choke. She coughed wildly, and William reached over and patted her on the back. “My goodness! Are you okay?”

Nodding was all she could handle because it took a minute for the coughing fit to calm down.

“All I’m saying is Noah is an impressive young man. And I would think after all the trouble you caused back in Asheville that you’d be eager to go out on a date with him.”

Luckily, she wasn’t drinking anything because she certainly would have choked again. “Excuse me? All the trouble I caused?” Then she realized that was definitely accurate and simply asked, “Why would that make me eager to go out with him?”

“Well...you kissed him!” William exclaimed. “And not just a peck on the cheek, but a full-blown passionate kiss!” He laughed softly. “Now I realize I’m a lot older than you and I

don't quite understand your generation, but I'd like to think that you don't just randomly grab people you find repulsive and kiss them like that!"

"Okay, I never said that Noah *repulsed* me," she corrected. "I said I wasn't into corporate guys." With a shrug, she continued. "Noah was a good-looking guy and I was surrounded by family. It would have been super weird if I kissed one of my cousins like that at midnight, don't you think? Noah was just the only option."

It was only partially true.

Back then, she had been wildly attracted to him, but was desperately trying to pretend she wasn't. The kiss had been impulsive, but she never really regretted it.

His eyes narrowed slightly. "So, there are no lingering feelings?"

She shrugged. "Like I said, it was just a matter of proximity. No big deal."

"And when you saw him again? You weren't inclined to maybe get to know him now that you're back home?"

Ugh...why is he interrogating me like this?

Oh, that's right. Because he's diabolical.

"Sorry. I guess you'll have to work on fixing my sisters up with these nice young executives when they're home for spring break."

"All in good time," he said as he slowly got to his feet. "I think Becca and Noah would get along very well. Now there's a girl who definitely comes in and flirts! Your father had to ban her from coming to the office last summer because she was distracting some of our interns."

“Becca flirted with Noah?” she said with just a little too much heat. Lily knew the instant her grandfather caught that as well because his grin was slow and smug.

“Are you sure you want to stick to your story of not being interested in Noah?”

But she wasn't ready to admit anything to him yet. Hell, she and Noah hadn't talked about what exactly they were doing, and she didn't want to be the one to out them to her grandfather.

“I hate to disappoint you, but I'm not playing this game with you,” she said coyly. “So, what are your plans for today? Anything exciting?”

Fortunately, the change of subject worked. “Robert took the first flight of the day back to New York for the weekend, so I'm on my own until he comes back on Monday.”

“Oh, wow. I didn't know he was going to do that. Is there anything you need? Would you like to do something together today?”

His entire face lit up. “I thought you'd be busy. I didn't think you'd want to spend your Saturday babysitting your old grandfather.”

Walking over, she hugged him. “I told you; I love the time the two of us spend together.” Pulling back, she smiled up at him. “What should we do?”

“How about you come up to the house around one and we'll have some lunch and maybe watch a movie? What do you think?”

“I think that sounds perfect! Do you need me to go to the store for anything?”

William shook his head. “I did one of those online grocery orders and everything’s being delivered.”

“Then I guess I’ll see you at one!” She kissed him on the cheek and watched as he walked out the door and up the path leading to the main house. As soon as he was out of sight, she yawned. Sleep had been non-existent last night, and now that she knew she had a little time, she padded into her bedroom, stripped down and pulled on a pair of pjs, before crawling into bed.

But before she could lie down, it occurred to her she needed to set an alarm and her phone was out in the kitchen.

“Dammit,” she mumbled as she went and grabbed it and brought it back into the bedroom. She put all her notifications on mute, set the alarm for noon, and promptly fell back against the pillows and went to sleep.



Noah stood on the front porch of the Montgomery home and sighed. He checked his phone again hoping to see a response from Lily, but so far, she was suspiciously silent. He’d driven by the guesthouse first, but her car wasn’t there. Now he was more than a little nervous about this spur-of-the-moment invitation to lunch from William.

Letting out a long breath, he straightened and rang the bell. He knew he was just being overly apprehensive; after all, this wasn’t the first time he’d been invited to the house.

But it was the first time he’d been invited since he started secretly sleeping with William’s granddaughter.

I’m so screwed.

“Noah!” William said brightly as he opened the door. “Glad you could make it! Come on in!” He clapped Noah on the shoulder as he entered. “I appreciate you indulging me a bit today. After being out of the office for most of the week, I was feeling a little out of the loop.”

“I hope everything’s okay,” Noah said as they walked toward the kitchen. “I heard you were dealing with a difficult client in Raleigh.”

William chuckled before walking over to the refrigerator. “There was no difficult client,” he admitted. “I had to have a mildly invasive medical procedure done. Of course, I don’t want that getting out around the office, but I know I can trust you to keep that to yourself.”

All he could do was nod.

“Can I get you a drink? Water? Sweet tea? Soda? Beer?”

“Um...a soda. Please.” Glancing around, he wondered if he should take a seat at the kitchen table or the massive island and waited to take his cues from William.

“Let’s go inside and chat,” William said before leading him into the family room. “Obviously I didn’t want anyone to know about my little health crisis, so I instructed Sara to tell anyone who asked that I was in Raleigh dealing with a client.” He took a sip of his tea. “How are things going for you? Are you able to keep up with all your clients and the ones my sons put you in charge of?”

He nodded. “It’s kept me very busy, but everything’s under control. I had a few lengthy calls with a couple of them, but I was able to put everyone’s minds at ease.” Then he laughed softly. “But I’ll be glad when the guys get back and I can pass all those files back to them.”

“I can imagine.” William paused a moment. “I really appreciate you coming over today. I wanted the chance to speak with you without the usual prying eyes around the office.”

“O-kay...”

“This health issue of mine has got me thinking,” he began after a moment. “I wasn’t interested in retiring, and I’m still not, but I believe I’m going to be less present in the office moving forward. Over the last several years, I’ve talked to my sons a bit about how things would look if and when I ever retired. Jason would take over for me; that’s already been decided.”

“Really?” Noah asked, surprise lacing his voice. “I would have thought Mac would be the one to do that.”

“That was the original plan, but he really has been enjoying spending less time at the office. He and Gina are traveling more and honestly, this is the happiest I’ve seen the two of them in years. I wouldn’t take that away from him. Jason’s the most like me and I believe him taking the helm would be the easiest transition.”

There wasn’t anything he could say to that, so he simply nodded again.

“Mac would keep his position as vice president along with Lucas, but I want them to have a strong executive team behind them.” He paused and took another sip of his drink, even as Noah’s heart hammered hard in his chest. “We have a great team—not only in our office here in Charlotte, but across the country to choose from—but I would like for you to be a part of our team here.”

Noah could feel his mouth move but couldn't seem to speak.

“I realize you're already part of the team, but what I meant was...I'd like for you to be a part of our executive account management team.” William gave him a pointed look. “It would come with a significant pay increase, a bigger office, and more responsibility. We haven't talked about your goals in a while, but I hope they still include a future with Montgomerys.”

This was everything he had been working toward, and it was finally happening. He didn't want to appear too eager, but he was also ready to jump up and high five William!

Okay, probably not a great idea, so...reel that shit in.

“You have no idea how honored I am, William,” he said, amazed at how calm he sounded. “My goal has been to climb the ladder at Montgomerys and go as far as you felt I could. It means a lot that you have the faith in me to promote me to the next level. I had no idea something like this would happen so soon.”

William looked very pleased. “I saw something in you from the very first day, Noah. And when you joined me and my family for Christmas three years ago, I had the opportunity to get to know you, and it just solidified my belief that you were a valuable addition to our team. I look forward to seeing great things from you.”

“Thank you.” And then he smiled so hard his face hurt. “I feel like we need to celebrate, but...”

“I've got you covered,” William said with amusement. “I've got a bottle of champagne waiting just in case you

accepted the offer.” He paused. “You are accepting it, aren’t you?” Then he laughed.

“I thought that was obvious!” Noah said with a laugh of his own.

In the distance, he heard a door open and close and figured it was Robert Montgomery. Last he’d heard, he was staying here with William.

“Come on! I ordered some lunch for us. We’ll eat and toast to your promotion.”

“Is it wrong that I really like the sound of that?” Noah asked as he got up and followed William from the room. There were dozens of questions he wanted to ask—like when was this all going to officially start and what office was he going to get—but he figured that could wait until they were in the office on Monday.

But the wait was going to kill him.

“Hang on, I forgot my drink in the family room,” he said before turning around to get it. He’d gone all of two steps when he heard William talking to someone.

A female someone.

Oh, God...

“I knew you’d get us yummy stuff for lunch, but I wanted to get us yummy stuff to snack on while we watch a movie,” she was saying.

Watch a movie...? What?

Noah grabbed his drink and did his best to look casual as he walked back into the dining room. Lily’s wide-eyed expression told him she was just as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

“Noah, um...hey,” she said a bit stiffly before looking at her grandfather. “You didn’t mention that Noah was joining us. I thought we were just hanging out—you know...just the two of us.”

Ouch.

“That was the original plan, but then I had come to an important decision about work and I wanted the chance to talk to Noah before we got back to the office on Monday. I figured it wouldn’t be a big deal since the two of you know each other and you’ve both dined with me before,” he said with a soft laugh. “Besides, the more the merrier, right?”

“I guess so,” she said with a tight smile.

“Let me grab the platters from the refrigerator,” William said, but Lily cut him off.

“Why don’t you sit and relax while Noah and I grab everything?” she suggested and Noah knew it wasn’t just about fussing over him because of his health. “We’ll be right back!”

“Take your time,” he replied as he sat down and pulled out his phone. “I’m just going to give Robert a call and make sure he made it home okay.”

“Great!” And as she walked out of the room, she motioned for Noah to follow her. She didn’t stop in the kitchen; she went farther away to the family room before spinning around. “What are you doing here? Why didn’t you call and give me a heads up?” she whispered.

“I texted you multiple times and you didn’t respond!” he said in an equally hushed tone. “Then I drove past the guesthouse to warn you, but your car wasn’t there! What else was I supposed to do?”

“I forgot to charge my phone when I got home this morning. I slept for a few hours and when I got up, I had the idea about going to the bakery. On my way out the door, I grabbed my phone and charged it in the car.”

“You could have done that on your way home this morning.”

She frowned at him. “Yeah, I know! But I didn’t! I didn’t even look at it; otherwise I would have seen your texts and made an excuse not to come!”

Rolling his eyes, he huffed. “Seriously? You can’t even be in the same room as me when you’re around your family?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It’s exactly what you’re saying,” he countered angrily. “For crying out loud, we’ve done this before, and I think we can both control ourselves for an hour or two in front of your grandfather. After lunch, I’ll make an excuse and leave, okay?” When he turned to walk away, she said his name to stop him.

“It’s just...” She groaned. “I don’t know how to act like I’m not interested in you. And my grandfather is just looking for even a hint of us being attracted to each other.”

Moving in close, he rested his hands on her hips. “And that would be a bad thing?”

Her big eyes looked up at him. “I thought to you it was. You’re the one who’s all freaked out about my father and what he’s going to do to you if he found out about us.”

Oh, right.

Something must have tipped her off because she pulled back, and her expression fell. “We’re going to have to talk

about this eventually, but not here. I suggest we go inside and have lunch and then...you need to go. Maybe I can come over tomorrow or..."

"My brother's coming to town tomorrow and I've got some stuff to do before he arrives."

"Oh? Which brother?"

"Jax."

She nodded and he could tell she was hurt that he hadn't mentioned it to her sooner.

"You're more than welcome to hang out with us tomorrow night. I wasn't sure if you'd want to, considering we don't know what it is we're doing. It just seems like..."

"Lily? Noah? Is everything okay in there? Do you need help?" William called out.

Lily raced from the room and went into the kitchen with Noah hot on her heels. "We've got it! You just sit tight and we'll be right there!" She grabbed a platter of sandwiches from the refrigerator and handed it to Noah before grabbing two bowls of salad, shutting the door with her hip. Together they walked back into the dining room and put the food down. "Did I miss anything?"

"Noah and I were going to open a bottle of champagne, but if you'd like something else to drink...?"

"Champagne?" she asked in confusion. "What are you celebrating?"

"I just offered Noah a promotion!" William replied happily. "I'm proud to announce that he has accepted the promotion to be part of our executive accounts management team." He paused and smiled at Noah. "He's been working

hard for a long time, and I believe this was his ultimate goal when he came to work for us. Isn't that right, Noah?"

He nodded and did his best not to look directly at Lily. "It is!"

"Oh, well...congratulations," she said as she took her seat to William's right.

Over the next few minutes, they popped the cork, toasted, drank champagne, and made their lunch plates. And while Noah did his best to project a happy and relaxed exterior, inside there was a battle raging, and the woman sitting directly across from him was the cause of it.

Again.

Always.

"I told Noah about my health crisis," William said after a few minutes, "and I'm pretty sure he knows all about yours, Lily. It occurred to me after I left you this morning that you never answered me about whether you came to any decisions about the surgery."

"Grandpa!" she hissed before glancing nervously at Noah.

Noah fought the urge to roll his eyes because she was being ridiculous. "Lily," he said a bit heatedly. "Why don't you just..."

"Excuse me?" she snapped at him, her eyes narrowing to mere slits, and there was no mistaking the warning in her tone.

William looked between the two of them before focusing on his granddaughter. "Lily, what in the world?" he asked with amusement. "Let the boy speak!"

If she hadn't interrupted him, Noah was basically going to blow their cover. He felt like William was a safe space for

them, but by the way she was looking at him, he immediately changed his mind.

So instead, he gently cleared his throat and said, “I was just going to say that you can relax in front of me. I already know how passionate you are about your career, and I think you should have the surgery so you can get back to it.”

It wasn’t even close to what he really wanted to say, but there didn’t seem to be a choice.

“Oh, well...”

“Noah has a point,” William chimed in. “I would think you’d be near frantic by now to get back on track with your career. It’s been over three months since your injury and I’d hate to see you give everything up that you’ve worked so hard for.”

She didn’t respond right away and sat with her back ramrod straight without looking at either of them. William’s phone rang and he looked at the screen before rising and excusing himself. Once he was completely out of the room, Noah whispered her name to get her attention.

“What were you really going to say before I cut you off?” she asked quietly.

“I was going to say that I already knew all about it because you told me last night when we were together,” he told her.

Lily stared back at him in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? Why would you do that?”

“Because I wasn’t thinking...I was merely reacting! This whole thing is awkward as hell, and I’m not a good liar, okay?”

“And you think I am?” she hissed, as she shoved away from the table and stood. “Believe it or not, I hate this too. I hated keeping all the facts about my injury from my family, but I was struggling with all these crazy emotions and I thought it was for the best!”

Now he stood and slowly walked around to her. “I didn’t say that I thought you were a good liar or that you enjoyed it,” he said softly. “That is definitely not what I meant. I’m just…” Groaning, he stepped in close and carefully wrapped his arms around her waist. “Believe it or not, I’m struggling too. This promotion is everything I’ve been working toward, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize it. If you weren’t here right now, you would have been the first person I called to share the news with.”

“I’m thrilled for you, Noah, I truly am. And I hated that I couldn’t really show that because I know my grandfather is watching us a little too closely.”

Noah looked over her shoulder in the direction William had left. “How long do you think he’ll be gone?”

Lily gave him a flirty smile. “If he took his phone and left the room, it could be at least another five to ten minutes.”

“Good.” Leaning down, he claimed her lips in a possessive kiss. He wished they could do this whenever they wanted, no matter who was close by, but there was also something to be said about being secretive. Breaking the kiss, he stared down at her. “Tell me you’re coming to my place tonight.”

Licking her lips, she nodded. “I wouldn’t miss it,” she whispered before going up on her toes and kissing him again. Her arms wound around his shoulders and she pressed herself against him so he could feel every luscious curve of her body. If they were alone, his hands would be under her sweater,

cupping those gorgeous breasts and doing his best to make her cry out his name.

He loved it when she did that.

But for now, he'd settle for savoring the taste of her and imagining all the things he was going to do to her when they were alone later. His hands smoothed down her back and were a mere inch or two away from cupping her rear when someone cleared their throat.

Well, not someone.

William.

Lily slowly lowered her feet and looked up at Noah in sheer panic.

“Well now,” William said as he strolled back into the room. “Why don't the two of you catch me up on what I've missed?” And with a laugh, he sat back down in his seat and looked at the two of them with pure glee. “I'm not even sure how I missed this, but I'm dying to know how we got here!”

ELEVEN

FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, Lily felt like she couldn't breathe. How on earth was she supposed to explain all of this to her grandfather without the risk of consequences for Noah? She sat down and was ready to explain, but Noah beat her to it.

“It all started the day you told Lily you had a conference call when she came to surprise you for lunch,” he said, and she was impressed by his honesty. “We met up outside the building by accident and she was upset because she saw you walk out with a woman.”

William's eyes went wide before he looked at Lily. “You saw me with Wendy? Why didn't you say anything?”

“Because I was hurt and confused!” she admitted. “You lied to me and were with some random woman! I thought you were cheating on Grandma!”

His bark of laughter made them both jump. “Cheating on your grandmother? Oh, Lily! You have a wild imagination. There isn't another woman on this planet that could lure me away from Monica.”

“How was I to know that?” she asked.

“I would think you know me better than that,” he gently chided and then looked over at Noah. “So, you run into each

other and you see that she's upset and you comforted her?"

"Um...not exactly. We followed you, but then ultimately went somewhere else to eat. We were finishing up when you and...I'm sorry, was it Wendy?"

William nodded.

"O-kay... so yeah. We were finishing our lunch when Lily spotted you and Wendy standing on the corner and she thought you saw her."

William laughed again. "I thought I did too, but then figured I was seeing things! Oh, this is entertaining!"

"Yeah, well...I freaked out when I thought you saw me and Noah pulled me into his lap and...I kissed him."

Now William was laughing and smiling like he'd just won the lottery. "You kissed him again? Oh, sweet girl, you cannot tell me it was an accident or for the sake of hiding from me. You don't do that sort of thing twice unless you really want to."

Noah cleared his throat. "Um...actually, *I* kissed *her*," he murmured. "I'm sorry if that betrays your trust, but..."

"Oh my God," Lily groaned. "Why would you even say that? I was willing to take the blame again!"

"Because it's not right!" Noah countered before looking at his boss again. "Look, we don't really know what we're doing because Lucas has been gunning for me ever since Asheville. On top of that, Lily's still undecided about what she's doing with her career and might not even stay here!"

"Hey! I never said that!"

"Are you saying you want to stay in Charlotte and give up all your dreams of dancing or cheering or whatever else it is

on your dance bucket list?” he challenged.

“Um...”

“Okay, okay,” William said in a bit of an authoritative tone. “We’re getting a bit off track here.” First, he turned to Noah. “Yes, Lucas has held a grudge, but I can safely say that he does that with anyone who even looks at his daughters. It’s not personal. If the two of you are serious about each other, I’m sure he’d be fine.”

And while this should have been great news, Lily’s thoughts kept going back to what Noah said—was she ready to give up her career and settle down back here in Charlotte? Sure, they’d get to be together and that would be awesome, but dance was her life. Was she admitting defeat by opting to stay here? And what if she had the surgery and it was successful? Would she resent him if she stayed?

Noah looked ready to speak, but she beat him to it.

“Look, I appreciate your optimistic attitude, Grandpa, but this is all very new, and Noah and I haven’t really talked about the future. We were kind of going to just test the waters while Dad’s away because it was safer that way. The last thing I want is to do anything to jeopardize his position at work.”

“That will never happen,” William said firmly. “I won’t allow it.”

Again, Noah looked like he had something to say, but Lily cut him off.

“I know you like to think that way, but even you have to admit that Dad’s been a bit of a jerk to Noah. I mean...that whole kiss thing was three years ago and he’s still carrying on about it!”

“I wouldn’t say carrying on,” William corrected.

“But he’s also made it abundantly clear that he doesn’t like me,” Noah finally said. “The only reason he let me handle some of his clients while he’s gone is because Mac and Jason recommended me. I’m not stupid enough to think he’s just suddenly had a change of heart and I’m really not looking for any more hostility from him.”

It was crazy how devastated she felt. How that one crazy, impulsive action had caused Noah so much grief, and how he was even willing to be around her was almost beyond her comprehension. She had no idea her father was behaving badly and planned to talk to him sternly after his vacation.

Even if she and Noah decided not to pursue a relationship.

It was the only fair thing to do.

Unfortunately, now that the cat was out of the bag, she knew her grandfather was going to be rooting for them.

Especially if she stayed in Charlotte for any amount of time.

“You leave Lucas to me,” her grandfather was saying. “This is still my company, my family, and my rules. I believe in you and so does every other person who works for me. If my son challenges me on this, he’ll lose. Your position is safe, no matter what goes on between you and Lily.” Then he paused and smiled. “But can I just say how much this pleases me? The two of you? It does my heart good just thinking of the two of you together. I knew it since Asheville and have been dreaming of this day.”

Lily groaned loudly. “Grandpa...stop! Please! You’re making this super weird.”

“Alright, alright,” he said after a moment. “I just wanted you both to know where I stand and that I’m on your side.”

Both she and Noah nodded before she asked, “Now can we please just eat and talk about something else?”

“Absolutely!” he agreed before making up his lunch plate. “So tell me, Noah, how’s your family doing? Any plans to see them?”

“Actually, my brother Jax is coming for a quick visit. He’s flying in tomorrow night and leaving Tuesday morning,” he explained. “It’s not ideal, but…”

“You should take Monday off,” William said.

“As much as I’d like to, I don’t think that’s a good idea. There are too many things on my desk that need to be handled, but I was planning on maybe leaving early if that’s alright with you.”

“Of course! If it were up to me, I’d say leave after lunch, but you know what needs to be done and whenever you’re comfortable, call it a day. Do what you think is best.”

“Thanks.”

“Was there a special occasion he’s coming in for?”

“No. He’s got some time off and wanted to come and see me. He was going to stay longer but ended up getting some appointments with ad reps up in New York, so he’ll be heading up there on Tuesday.”

“Did he mention what kind of ads?” Lily asked. “Does he go to New York a lot? If not, I can recommend some places to him.”

“Oh! You’re going to meet him?” her grandfather asked.

“Um…”

“I invited Lily to join us tomorrow night. Jax and I were going to grab a late dinner,” Noah explained as he smiled at her, and even though she smiled back, it felt forced.

Ugh...why am I being weird?

But she already knew the answer to that. Things were getting a little too real and as much as she loved her family, she loved her privacy just as much. Living away from home and being on her own for so long meant she only had to show what she wanted them to see. Getting involved with Noah meant all eyes would be on them, and it made her just a little twitchy.

Okay, a *lot* twitchy and she wished she had thought of this before.

Not that it would have changed anything. She'd wanted Noah Wylder for a long time now, and her curiosity was going to get the best of her eventually.

She just wished it hadn't happened quite so publicly.

Too late to think of that now...

So, for the rest of the meal, they talked about Jax, football, food, and movies. Noah stayed through the afternoon while they had a mini *Indiana Jones* marathon and then ordered Chinese food for dinner. And when they left, he simply drove around to the guesthouse and parked there. They soaked in the hot tub, ate some ice cream, and went to bed and made love. Lily told herself not to think about all the crazy stuff that had been swirling around in her mind earlier and, mostly, it worked.

But as she drifted off to sleep with Noah's naked body wrapped around her, she wondered if she was doing either of them any favors by keeping her thoughts to herself.



The next night, Noah sat back and laughed as his brother talked about a locker room interview that got a little X-rated. They were eating pizza, drinking wine, and Lily had picked up some decadent triple fudge brownies for dessert from her mother's bakery.

"I didn't see what the big deal was," Jax was saying. "Now if something like that had happened in the cheerleader's locker room, *that* would have been newsworthy! We all know athletes have no shame when walking around in the locker room. The camera crew should've paid more attention!"

"Working on Broadway, you can't be modest," Lily told him. "Sometimes we were only a few feet offstage and had to change costumes! It just goes with the territory."

"Yeah, but at least there weren't live interviews going on while you were changing," Jax reminded her. Pausing, he took a sip of his wine. "So, where are you dancing now?"

She sighed softly and told him about what she had been training for in Miami. "Unfortunately, I suffered an injury and had to take some time off."

"What kind of injury?"

"A hip labral tear."

"Damn, sorry," Jax murmured. "Did you have the surgery?"

Shaking her head, she replied, "I've gone to four different doctors and they all recommend it, but...I'm a little reluctant. I want a guarantee that I'll be able to dance the way I did before and no one can give me that. And if I can't go back to the way

I was before the injury, why put myself through the trauma of surgery?”

“Because the tear is only going to get worse,” Jax told her. “You might not have a lot of pain now, but that can cause osteoarthritis in the joint later.” He took another sip of his wine. “If you do the surgery now, you’re looking at how long of a recovery?”

“The recovery time sucks,” she said wearily. “It’s going to be around four to six months.”

“Okay, but the longer you put it off, the more time you’re losing,” Jax explained. “If it were me, I’d have had the surgery as soon as it was suggested because I don’t want to miss a season. I might not play as much as I want, but I’d make damn sure the coach put me in at least once a game.”

“It’s not like that with dance. If I’m in a show or a touring company or a dance squad, I need to perform at every performance. No one’s going to coddle me because there are a hundred girls waiting to take my spot who are just as talented, if not more!”

Jax leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and began talking about sports statistics. That’s when Noah got up to get himself a bottle of water—not that anyone noticed. He was glad his brother and Lily were hitting it off, but...he hadn’t been part of the conversation in over a half-hour. Hell, he could probably go to bed and neither of them would miss him.

Even in his head he sounded whiny, but he hadn’t expected to be completely shut out of the conversation. He’d been looking forward to his brother meeting Lily; he just hadn’t thought the two of them would hit it off quite so well. It made him feel like he couldn’t sit at the cool kids’ table even when it was in his own damn house.

Yeah, I'm whiny...

Rather than continue down that path, Noah took a few minutes and straightened up the kitchen and took out the box of brownies Lily brought for them. Then, he drank half his bottle of water and told himself it didn't matter if he wasn't an athlete; he could still be part of the conversation and to stop being so sensitive about being excluded.

Or jealous.

Because...yeah. How could he not be? Jax was Lily's age and the two of them had a lot more in common than he and Lily did. And on top of that, his brother was a wildly successful football player who had women chasing after him all the time.

All. The. Time.

Noah had no issues with his looks; he was actually pretty confident in them. He didn't have a hard time meeting women and had enjoyed a bit of getting chased all through high school and college. But Jax was on a whole other level, mainly because he had a lot more confidence and swagger. And from the way Lily was giggling over something he said and had her hand on his arm, he was fairly confident in believing she was attracted to that swagger too.

Dammit.

Grabbing their dessert, he stalked back to the living room and dropped it on the coffee table. "Dessert anyone?"

Both Jax and Lily looked at him in confusion. "You okay, bro?" Jax asked.

"Sure," he lied. "Why wouldn't I be?"

His brother's eyes narrowed. "Because you're pretty much shooting daggers at me and slammed that box down. What crawled up your ass and died?"

If it were just the two of them here, Noah knew he'd have no problem starting a fight. Lily was sitting right there watching the two of them though, so he took the high road.

"Just tired of sitting here silently while the two of you talked sports injuries," he told him before sitting down.

"Don't get pissy," Jax said with a snort. "And you could have joined in. You've listened to me talk about this sort of thing since peewee football. You're just as versed in this shit as I am."

"I'm really not, and I just thought we could talk about something that we all could participate in," he retorted. "You don't see me bringing up stocks and interest rates, do you?"

"Only because you don't want to put everyone to sleep..."

"Okay, okay," Lily said as she stood and stretched. "This sounds like you're both gearing up for something that I don't want to see and I'm taking it as my cue to leave."

The brothers were instantly on their feet, and Noah blocked her from walking away. "You don't have to leave. We're just picking at each other. I'm sure you do this with your sisters."

"Oh, I definitely do, and that's why I know I need to go. The two of you only have a short time to visit and I shouldn't have horned in on it." She kissed him softly on the lips before turning to Jax. "It was really nice meeting you."

"You too, Lily. And if you ever want to consider trying out for the squad by me in Wichita, just let me know. I'm close with the management and could put in a good word for you."

She walked over and hugged him. “You’re very sweet and I promise to think about it.” Then she grabbed her purse and jacket while Noah waited for her by the door.

“I hate that you’re leaving,” he told her, holding her close.

“It’s really okay. I wasn’t going to stay tonight. You’ve got work in the morning and, like I said, you two only have a short amount of time together. So, stop pouting, eat a brownie, and play nice with your brother.” Then she kissed him again before walking out the door with a wave. Noah watched until she was in the elevator.

“She’s a great girl,” Jax said when Noah closed the door. “You didn’t mention her when we spoke the other day.”

“Yeah, well...it’s new and it’s complicated.”

Jax took a brownie out of the box and ate half of it in one bite. “Why?”

So Noah explained their history—from Asheville, the kiss, Lucas, and how they currently came to be together.

“Wait...so she’s the reason your one boss has been a dick to you for three years and you got involved with her anyway? Dude, she seems like a great person, but...you’re finally getting that promotion. Do you think dating her is a smart move?”

With a loud huff, Noah sat down on the sofa with his head thrown back and eyes closed. “I honestly don’t know anything anymore. Lily Montgomery is...she’s just irresistible to me. Every time I see her, I just...I feel lighter and happier and so completely different from how I usually am.”

“That’s because she’s hot,” Jax said with a snort of derision. “Don’t think with the little head, Noah. Don’t let this relationship derail everything you’ve been working toward.”

“That’s kind of been my thought since the beginning, but...I really care about her. A lot. Like more than I’ve ever cared about a woman before.” Raking a hand through his hair, he added, “Hell, I could seriously see myself falling in love with her.”

“Okay, let’s just...back up for a second. Let me play devil’s advocate here. Let’s say the two of you keep going. Her father comes home and—let’s be honest—he is *not* going to be thrilled about this. It doesn’t matter what you or Lily or her grandfather says, he’s going to be giving you shit times ten.”

“That’s a possibility, sure, but...”

“Then let’s say Lily has this surgery and gets the opportunity to dance somewhere that’s not here in Charlotte. You’ve just got this promotion that ties you directly to this spot. She could be gone for a year or more. Then what?”

“That’s a year away,” he reasoned. “And no one knows what can happen a year from now.”

“No, but you can see all the possible directions that aren’t lining up.” He let out a long breath. “Look, I’m not trying to crap all over your life, but there are a lot of complications here and none of them work out well for you. It’s not just your job that’s potentially at risk or your sanity at your job; it’s your heart that’s going to get broken if she decides this isn’t where she wants to be.”

“But...”

“And lastly,” Jax went on. “If you decided to stick this out and maybe follow her to wherever the next dance gig is, where does that leave you?”

“I never said I’d follow...”

“I know you, Noah,” Jax said solemnly. “You’re a fixer and a caretaker. You took on the role of parent when things were shitty at home when we were growing up. You look out for all of us even now when we’re all doing well.” He paused. “Just promise me you’ll think about this, okay? I’m seeing some red flags here and it wouldn’t be right if I didn’t look out for you too.”

Noah knew he should thank him, but right now there didn’t seem a lot to be thankful for. Basically, Jax was saying his relationship with Lily was doomed.

And maybe it was.

Only...it didn’t feel that way. From the moment he kissed her in that diner, there was something there and it was growing stronger every day. He wanted her to get the surgery so she could go back to dancing, and he wasn’t intimidated by that. True, he had no clue what that life would look like, but he also wasn’t afraid to find out. After all, not every relationship worked out. That didn’t mean you shouldn’t ever get involved. They had one week left before Lucas and everyone came home, and Noah planned on enjoying every moment with Lily that he could.

Just in case.

“Okay, enough of this depressing conversation,” he said, turning to look at his brother. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on with you because unfortunately, I have to be up early tomorrow so I can leave work early.”

Jax laughed softly. “I still don’t know how you do it. How can you stand sitting in an office all day?”

Shrugging, Noah laughed with him. “And I don’t know how you can spend your life either working out in the gym or

having a bunch of two-hundred-pound guys chasing you before slamming you to the ground. I mean...that doesn't sound even a little fun.”

Jax nodded but grew quiet. “Yeah...it's starting to get old. I just don't have the same enthusiasm as I once did. And you're right, spending all my free time at the gym sucks. But I know I need to keep going and play for as long as I can, otherwise...what else would I do?”

“There are plenty of things you can do!”

“Dude, I've been playing football since Dad taught me how to throw a ball. It's literally all I know. I'm not proud of it, but...I cheated and skirted my way through high school and that year of college I attended. I'm not smart enough to do anything else.”

“I don't believe that. I think you've been programmed to believe that nonsense. If you stopped playing football, there isn't a doubt in my mind that you could do anything you wanted—even if it's not sports related.”

His brother's only response was a snort as he shook his head.

“If you wanted to stay in a semi-comfort zone, you could coach—either in the NFL, college level, or high school. You could become a PE teacher or go to school to be a trainer,” he went on. “Personally, I think you have a lot of options. If you're really not into playing professionally anymore, you shouldn't keep doing it.”

“Noah, you know the salary I'm making. How can I just walk away from that?” He shook his head again. “No. If I stick it out for another five years, I think I'd feel better financially. I want to know that when I'm done playing, I can maybe relax

for a year before having to dive into a new career. And thanks to your financial planning, that's all possible."

"It is, but I don't see the point in staying in a career you're no longer happy with and facing potential injuries, for the sake of being able to take a year off five years from now."

Jax frowned. "Now who's crapping on someone's life?"

"And just like you said, that's not what I'm trying to do. Your plan has some complications too."

"Well, shit."

Noah had to agree. "Exactly."

"Listen, um...there is something else I wanted to talk to you about."

His tone was slightly ominous, and all he could do was brace himself for whatever Jax was going to say next.

"Dad called me again," Jax said gruffly. "He...he said...he needs..."

"He needs money," Noah finished for him and didn't bother hiding his disgust. "You didn't send him anything, did you? Because you know it's just going to..."

"I didn't, okay? But...he said if I didn't, he'd reach out to Simon and..." Muttering a curse, he stood and paced for a moment. "You know how he is with all of us, but he's worse with Simon. I don't want Dad messing with him while he's on tour."

"So then you're going to send him money," Noah said wearily. "Dammit, Jax!"

"What am I supposed to do, huh? At least if I do this, everyone will play nice and then I won't hear from him for

another year and he'll leave everyone else alone.”

Swallowing hard, he hated the kick in the gut he felt just knowing that even after all these years, he was the son his father never reached out to.

Not that he wanted him to, but it was a rejection nonetheless.

The old man always went to Jax because he was the son he was most proud of, and for whatever reason, Jax was the only one who could deal with him. Growing up, their father treated Simon with disdain because he thought he was weak because he loved to sing. Now, whenever he dared to get in touch with Simon, he'd say all kinds of vile things to get a rise out of him—mostly hoping to get some money so he'd go away.

But he never reached out to Noah.

Never.

“How much this time?” he asked.

“Twenty-five,” Jax murmured. “He asked for twenty and I offered the extra so he'd leave Simon alone.”

“Shit.”

“Yup.” Jax sat back down with a long breath. Turning his head, he looked over at Noah. “Aren't you glad I came to visit?”

There was little humor in his laugh, but basically...yeah. He was glad his brother was here with him.

They sat in companionable silence for a minute before Jax turned to him. “Okay, enough about Dad. Clearly, we have enough shit we're both trying to deal with.” Then he laughed softly. “Maybe we should call Simon and see if his life is running smooth or if he's spiraling like we are.”

“We’re not spiraling,” Noah argued lightly. “It’s more like we’re at a crossroads and trying to figure things out.”

“Still doesn’t determine if we call Simon or not.”

“I have no idea what his tour schedule is...”

“Only one way to find out,” Jax said as he reached for his phone.

“Wait...do we really want to call him? You know he’s always like...the glass is more than half-full in his world. We’re both in shitty moods right now. Why would we want to bring him down?”

That made Jax laugh. “I don’t think it’s possible to bring Simon down. Like you said, he’s perpetually optimistic. Maybe we need him to snap us out of our moods.”

It was on the tip of Noah’s tongue to remind his brother that his mood was just fine before he got here, but kept that to himself.

“How about we wait on that and just finish these brownies and relax before calling it a night? I know we had talked a while ago about going out clubbing or something, but...”

“No, I get it. I’m not up for that either. I have a feeling I’m going to end up doing all that crap while I’m up in New York. I’d rather take this time to just chill. But maybe tomorrow, if you get out of work early enough, we can go do something fun.”

Noah thought about The District and told Jax about it.

“That sounds like the perfect distraction. Are you going to ask Lily to join us?”

Was he?

“Nah. We’ll make it a guy’s night. You and I don’t get to hang out nearly enough.”

“Awesome!” Reaching for the box of brownies, Jax grabbed a second one and took a massive bite. “I will say this for her—she’s got excellent taste in desserts.”

Grabbing a brownie, Noah had to agree. But then again, there were a lot of things about Lily that were pretty damn great.

Unfortunately, his brother had given him far too much to think about and he had a feeling he was going to overthink it all.

And possibly ruin a good thing.

TWELVE

LILY KEPT herself busy for a few days by doing things she hadn't been doing for a long time.

Namely, dancing.

She'd talked to enough doctors and physical therapists to know which movements were going to cause her the most discomfort, and worked on some choreography that simply avoided them. It wasn't her favorite way to dance, but she was loving getting back into the routine. The only real issue she had was space.

Which the guesthouse lacked.

Oh, it was spacious enough to live in, but it really wasn't conducive for dancing. That's when she decided to be proactive and go online to find studio space to rent. Most dance studios offered space by the hour or even by the day, and if she could get in a couple of hours a day for the next week, she felt fairly confident that would help her decide whether or not she was going to get the surgery.

Basically, she was determined to prove all the doctors wrong and go back to her career with modifications to the choreography.

And if there was one thing Lily knew she was good at, it was proving people wrong.

“Okay, not the greatest trait to have, but there it is,” she murmured as she scrolled through dance studio listings. She was familiar with a lot of them since she grew up here and had been dancing since she was three, but there was one in particular that she really hoped offered space.

For years, she studied contemporary, tap, and jazz with Kiki Carter, and Lily knew if there was one teacher she’d love to reconnect with, it was Kiki.

She scrolled and scrolled and scrolled and then... “Bingo!” she said excitedly, immediately making the call to inquire about rental space.

An hour later, she was walking through the front door of Kiki’s Dance Studio and feeling more excited than she’d been in months about dancing.

The woman at the desk smiled as Lily walked in and then seemed to freeze. “Oh my goodness! Lily Montgomery, is that you?”

When she’d called earlier to reserve the space, someone named Carol had answered the phone. But the woman currently standing behind the desk was the same one who’d worked there all the years Lily had been a student and a wave of nostalgia hit her hard.

“Hey, Miss Zoey! How are you?”

“You know, still working here and watching all these talented dancers go on to do amazing things, just like you!” Zoey said with a big smile. She had to be almost seventy and the last time Lily was here, she had fourteen grandchildren. “I heard you danced with the Rockettes! How exciting!”

“I had a lot of fun, but after a year I realized it wasn’t creative enough for me. Then I went to Miami and was prepping to try out for the dance and cheer squad, but I got hurt. Now I’m home and trying to ease back into things, which is why I’m here to rent some space,” Lily explained cheerily.

Zoey looked at the computer screen at the desk and nodded. “Okay, you’ve got the downstairs studio for the next three hours. Wow! That’s ambitious! Remember to take it easy if you’re coming off an injury. Kiki will give you her famous lecture if you get hurt again.”

That made her chuckle. “I remember those lectures well and I don’t believe I’ll be needing it anytime soon.”

“Good girl.” She printed out a form for Lily to sign and went over the basic rules before saying, “You’re all set! Do you remember how to get downstairs?”

Nodding, she smiled. “Absolutely! See you in a few hours!” And then she practically skipped out of the lobby, down the hall, and down the stairs. The studio was one she spent a lot of time in back when she was taking tap, and for a moment she simply stood there and grinned, lost in her memories.

Then the eagerness to hear some music and start moving took over and she got everything set up. Her heart raced as she looked at her reflection in the mirrored wall, and it was like she’d been waiting for this moment for far too long. For several minutes, she stretched, doing everything she’d been taught to loosen up before dancing. Then the music changed, and in her mind, she counted, “Five, six, seven, eight...”

After that, time had no meaning. Closing her eyes, she simply let her body do what it had been trained to do her whole life. She started slowly, with some passés with dynamic

arm movements, pirouettes, and leg extensions before letting the music completely consume her.

Sweat was pouring off of her and as much as she didn't want to stop, she desperately needed a towel and water break. When she walked over to her bag and saw the time on her phone, she was shocked. She'd been dancing for ninety minutes, and she felt so invigorated and alive! Grabbing her towel, she wiped off her face and neck and then opened a bottle of water and drank half of it down. She used her phone to find a bluesy and soulful playlist that would help her move slower and with more control. There was a time when she loved doing it, but as she matured, she tended to favor the livelier choreography. Finishing her water, she toweled off one more time before starting the playlist and taking her position in the center of the room. After her countdown, she moved to the floor and concentrated on her floorwork, really stretching her body as she danced.

During the third song, Kiki Carter, her teacher and mentor, appeared at the door and smiled at her. She instantly walked over to lower the music before going over and hugging her.

“What you were doing was so beautiful, I was practically in tears,” Kiki said before cupping Lily's face. “Your talent always blew me away.”

She felt herself blush at the praise. “Thank you. I was so excited when I saw you had studio space for rent. I've been home for a few weeks after three months of intensive PT and was just itching to really stretch myself and work a room.”

Nodding, Kiki walked farther into the room and pulled out a couple of chairs that were in the corner. “Tell me what's going on. Why were you doing intensive PT?”

Sitting down, Lily went into the whole story about what happened the day she injured herself and what kind of dance she'd been doing in the years leading up to it before going into detail about her recovery. It was actually a huge relief to talk to someone who knew exactly what she was talking about. Chatting with Jax the other night was fine, but dancing and playing football, while both very athletic, were very different.

“Why a cheer squad? That doesn't seem like you. That's a lot more...stompy,” she said as her expression scrunched up slightly. “You've always been smoother and more lyrical.”

“They're really a dance squad who also happens to cheer,” Lily clarified. “And they cover a lot of styles that I love—jazz, contemporary, hip-hop...it's just a lot of fun and a bit more challenging than I was expecting.”

“I can understand that. We all like to be challenged.” Then she paused before asking, “Are you going to have the surgery?”

Shrugging, she let out a soft sigh. “I'd like to avoid it. The recovery time is long and I think it's going to be hard to have that much downtime and then try to come back to where I am now.”

“That's true, but where you are now is four months after an injury and you're just dipping your toe back into the studio. That feels like the same amount of time. Imagine where you'd be right now if the surgery was over and done with. Now you're looking at missing out on multiple opportunities because auditions are all right around the corner. What's your goal here? Where do you want to be when you're finally healed and cleared to dance?”

“Um...”

“Do you plan to go back to re-audition in Miami or with another team?”

“A friend who plays for Wichita said he’d help me if I wanted to try out for their squad, so I was considering that...”

“You don’t need favors to help you get hired, Lily,” Kiki admonished. “You know you’re talented enough to do that on your own. Don’t let anyone make you feel like you can’t.” Pausing, she stared at Lily—hard. “What made you want to go the cheerleading dance squad route?”

Another shrug. “It was just something I haven’t done. I was on the dance squad and did kickline in high school and enjoyed it. I thought it might be a nice addition to my resume.”

“Would you go back to Broadway or doing another traveling show?”

“I’m not opposed to it...”

“But...?”

Laughing softly, she shook her head. “Living out of a suitcase or in temporary housing isn’t as fun as it used to be. I’m still not settled anywhere, but I’m looking forward to my parents getting home from their trip and the renovations on their place being done so I can finally unpack for a while.”

“Okay...then why not look for something local?”

This time her laugh was a little more of a snort. “Kiki, come on. I get that Charlotte’s a big city with a lot to offer, but it’s not like there are a ton of opportunities here for me to do what I want to do. It’s not New York.”

“And what is it you want to do? I want you to take a minute and really think about it. You can dance anywhere, Lily. Even here in your hometown. But if you’re looking for

more—if this is about traveling or not living here—then you need to admit that.” Leaning back in her chair, Kiki looked both relaxed and stern and so much like the teacher she’d known for most of her life.

Did she want to stay here in Charlotte? This was where her family was—her parents, her sisters, her grandparents, cousins...everyone she loved.

And Noah.

But if she were being honest, she was afraid to stay. What if she couldn’t find any dance positions? What if she went for a long stretch of time without getting hired and then had to find another job? What if she ended up settling and working at her mother’s bakery or Montgomerys? Everyone would know that she failed, and that was something she couldn’t handle. She was from a family of overachievers and it would genuinely suck if she was the first Montgomery to fail hard.

Inwardly, she groaned while outwardly she was giving Kiki a serene smile. “My whole life I took classes and learned different dance styles and I love them all. Once I turned eighteen and did my time in college and performed with the dance team there, I just felt like there had to be more. Does that make sense?”

Kiki nodded.

“I always feel like the productions could be better, the choreography is repetitive, and I believe I’ll find what I’m searching for if I keep looking.”

“Or...you feel stifled by someone else’s choreography. Maybe what you really want is to teach or to lead?” Reaching over, she rested her hand on Lily’s knee. “You’ve always been a powerhouse. You pick up everything faster than most and

sometimes it felt like you were waiting to be challenged. And you know something? You're not alone."

"So...what does that mean? What should I be doing?"

"I think you should dance," she said emphatically. "But you should do it smartly. Take these next several days that you rented space here and think about what gives you joy!" Slowly, Kiki got to her feet. "And most importantly, you should have this surgery so you can achieve whatever it is you decide to do." She walked over to the door. "I've got a class starting, but I hope we'll get to visit more while you're here." And with a wave, she was gone.

Letting out a long breath, Lily sat there for several minutes and tried to figure things out, but ultimately, she wasn't ready to yet. So rather than frustrate herself, she opted to turn the music back up and finish out her time here in the studio.

By the time her alarm went off on her phone, she was exhausted, but in the best possible way. She put the chairs back and gathered her things before turning out the lights and going upstairs. At the front desk, she smiled at Zoey and was about to walk out when she overheard a conversation between a mother and her daughter.

"I don't want to do this," the little girl sobbed. She had to be around six or seven years old. "I'm the worst one in the class and the other girls are mean to me. I want to go home!"

"Jasmine, we've paid for the classes," her mother said with a hint of frustration "I'm sure if we talk to your teacher she can give you some extra help, and I'll tell her to make the other girls be nice."

"I hate this! I hate tap, and I'm never going to be able to do it!" she cried.

Without hesitating, Lily walked around the back of the desk and quietly asked Zoey if there were any extra tap shoes around. Zoey silently pointed to the office door and Lily smiled when she realized everything was in the same place it had been when she was a student there.

After putting the tap shoes on, she casually walked back out to the lobby until she was standing beside Jasmine. “Hi,” she said with a big smile. “I’m Lily.”

The little girl looked up at her with mild confusion. “Um...”

“Did I hear that your name is Jasmine?”

She nodded.

“She is my *favorite* Disney princess! I used to wish I could fly on a magic carpet just like her!”

“Me too!” Jasmine said with a shy smile. Then she noticed Lily’s shoes. “Do you dance here?”

“I was a student here for a lot of years. Then I went away to college and danced there and then I went to New York and danced on Broadway and then traveled with one of the shows. And I couldn’t have done any of it if I hadn’t learned how to tap.”

“Oh,” she said miserably. “I’m the worst one in the class.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Lily said. “Come over here with me and let me see what you can do.”

“Um...” She looked up at her mother, who nodded that it was okay. When they were a few feet away from the desk, Jasmine just stared at Lily as if to say, “Now what?”

“Okay, just...humor me for a minute. I’m sure you learned this part, but I just want to see you do it. First, try to heel-step,

which is just walking across the floor. Remember, when you place one foot in front of the other, bring the heel of your foot down first. It may help to exaggerate the movement and stomp your heel to the floor. Let's do it together."

And they did.

"You did great! Look at that! You've already mastered the first part! Yay!"

Then they went through three more basic moves in tap: the shuffle, the single buffalo, and the ball change. Jasmine was a little uncertain and didn't seem to like that everyone was watching them, but ultimately she knew how to do them all. And because she didn't want to lose momentum, Lily kept them moving until they were doing the repetitions she knew all students did when warming up. After a few minutes, Jasmine was keeping up and smiling as she danced.

"I'm doing it! Mom! Look, I'm doing it! Do you see me, Miss Zoey?" she asked excitedly.

It wasn't long before she had to go to class and she turned and hugged Lily tight. "You got this, Jasmine," she told her. "Now go and have a great class!"

Once she was out of sight, Jasmine's mom came over with tears in her eyes. "I don't know how to thank you. We've tried at least a dozen different activities, trying to find one that clicked for her. We signed up for eight weeks and this is week three, and she was arguing with me the whole way here." She sighed. "You have a real gift and you were great with her, so... thank you."

"It was my pleasure. She looked like she needed a little encouragement, and I'm glad I could help."

"Do you teach here?"

“Me?” she asked with a small laugh. “No. I’m a former student and I just came to rent some studio space so I could get a little practice in.”

“Well, I’m so glad you were here, and I hope we get to see you again.” Her phone rang and after she said goodbye to Lily, she answered excitedly by saying, “Tom! You’re never going to believe this, but Jasmine was excited to go into dance class today!”

Walking around to the office, Lily took off the tap shoes and put them away. When she grabbed her things, she looked up and saw Kiki standing in the doorway. “That was a wonderful thing you did out there.”

She smiled. “Yeah, well...the poor kid looked miserable. I thought if we could have a little one-on-one time to see where she’s at, that I could encourage her.”

“Jasmine’s been a tough sell because it doesn’t come naturally to her. I think your little instruction and the fact that you made her feel special really helped.”

“Glad I could do it.” She hitched her bag over her shoulder. “Thanks for the studio time and I’ll see you tomorrow! Have a good rest of your day!”

And as she walked out to her car, she felt...good. Lighter. And had a sense of accomplishment she’d never felt before.

But it had to be because of the time she spent dancing, right? It couldn’t be from that five-minute interaction with Jasmine.

“No. It’s definitely because I was able to dance again,” she murmured as she climbed into her car. Maybe all the doctors were wrong or being overly cautious because she felt great.

She was finally getting her life back.



“It just felt so great!” Lily was telling him over dinner that night at her place. “I’m telling you; I haven’t given myself that kind of workout in a long time and by the time I left, I felt like I was floating on a cloud! It was amazing!”

He smiled and nodded, but in his head he was listing all the reasons she was crazy. Four doctors and a team of physical therapists all couldn’t be wrong. And as good as this workout she did today felt, he had to wonder what tomorrow would bring and if her body was going to betray her.

But there was no way he was going to crap on her parade—and he seriously wanted to punch Jax for putting that phrase in his vocabulary. Right now, he was going to listen to her talk because he genuinely loved how animated she got when she described her dances.

And someday he really hoped to see her dance—whether on a stage or in his living room, it didn’t matter. All he wanted was the chance to see her in action.

“What are you thinking right now?” she asked.

Laughing quietly, Noah shook his head. “You don’t want to know.”

She hummed sassily. “Ooh...now I really think I do. C’mon. Tell me.” Reaching across the table, she took both his hands in hers. “Was it something sexy? Naughty?”

He felt his cheeks heat a little. “Um...no?” Then he laughed. “I mean...I don’t think so. I was just thinking about how I’ve never seen you dance and how much I hoped that one day I would.”

Her confident smile softened. “Aww...I love that.”

He shrugged. “Well...you talk about it a lot and I realized I’ve never seen you perform. Of course, I know absolutely nothing about dance, but I know I’d enjoy watching you.”

“You are the sweetest man in the world.” Stretching across the table, she kissed his hands. “And if you can get out of work maybe an hour early tomorrow, you can see me dance. I’ve booked studio time all this week from two to five.”

“I’m not sure I can make that happen—I left early on Monday so I could hang out with Jax, so...”

Sitting back in her seat, she took a sip of her wine. “Did you guys have fun?”

“We did. I took him to The District Monday night and had a blast.”

“Did anyone recognize him?”

“A few people, but they were all really respectful of him wanting his privacy, so it was cool. But mostly we spent a lot of time talking because he’s always so busy that we don’t have time to do that very often. I know my life is relatively boring compared to his, but I think he appreciated the peace for a little while.”

“Why do you do that?” she asked, frowning slightly.

“Do what?”

“Put yourself down. Why would he think your life is boring? And who even said your life was boring?”

“Um...I hate to point this out, but...you said that to me when we first met.”

Rolling her eyes, she huffed with annoyance. “Okay, fine. I may have thought that, but that was wrong of me. Everyone’s lives aren’t supposed to look the same. And for all you know, he may want what you have.”

Noah wouldn’t go that far, but he knew Jax had genuinely enjoyed their laid-back time together. As soon as he’d landed in New York, his schedule was filled from noon to midnight. There was no way he could live like that, even temporarily.

“We had fun and I’m glad he could come and hang out with me. We were going to call Simon, but decided to let it just be us this time. The tour’s coming here next month, so I’ll get to see him then.”

“Oh, that’s right! How fun!” She smiled at him, batting her lashes. “Any chance you’ll have an extra ticket?”

He chuckled. “I thought we already covered this at some point. Of course you’re coming with me. I wouldn’t dare go without you.”

“Yay! My sisters are going to be so jealous! Ha!” She rose and began clearing away their dishes. “Any chance you want to hang out in the hot tub with me? I’m a little sore from today and want to make sure it’s not going to be worse in the morning.”

“Yeah, sure,” he agreed, rising to help her clean up. “Although...I don’t have anything to wear. I know your grandfather isn’t likely to come down here, but...”

“Oh my God!” she said with a hearty laugh. “I can pretty much guarantee that he’s not going to come down, but if you’re that paranoid, keep your briefs on.”

That was the logical thing and now he felt like a complete idiot for saying anything, but he figured he could turn it

around. Walking up behind her, his hands grasped her hips and pulled her close. “What about you, beautiful girl?” he murmured against her throat. “What are you going to be wearing?”

Her moan was low and throaty and a complete turn-on.

Lily squirmed against him, her very grabbable ass grinding against his growing erection. He’d be happy to skip the hot tub all together and just take her to bed right now, but there was something to be said about a little water-related foreplay.

“Mmm...leave the dishes,” she said huskily. “Let’s get undressed and head outside.” Then she spun around and kissed him hard as her hands snaked under his shirt and began pushing it up.

Well...if she’s going to do it...

And then he mimicked her move and soon they were down to their underwear in the middle of her kitchen before Lily pulled away. “I’m going to put on the tiniest bikini I own. Why don’t you go out and get the jets going? I’ll be out in a minute.”

Noah readily agreed, but had a moment of uncertainty right before he stepped outside in his boxer briefs.

Please don’t let William stop by...

The sun was down and the air was cooler than he was comfortable with, so he made quick work of pulling the cover off, turning the jets on, along with the heat lamp, before sprinting back into the house. Lily was stepping out of her bedroom in a white bikini that was definitely the tiniest thing he’d ever seen.

“Wow,” he groaned and loved the sexy grin she gave him.

“I’ve got the towels. Why don’t you grab our wine?”

He topped off their glasses and then followed her out the door. Within minutes they were under the water and sighing at how good it felt.

“My parents don’t have a hot tub at home, but I might have to ask if they’d consider buying one, because having this right here is positively decadent.”

“Does that mean you’re going to be staying for a while? Have you made any decisions?” And he really hated having to ask. The last thing he wanted was to sound needy or like he was another person trying to force her into figuring out her life. She was obviously working through some things, and he didn’t want to add any pressure.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t curious as hell.

“I’m going to be here for at least a little while,” she replied vaguely. “And now that I can rent space at Kiki’s, it makes my life a lot easier.” Humming softly, she sank a little lower under the water. “I got to dance with this little girl who was begging her mom not to make her dance.”

“Why didn’t she want to dance?”

“She didn’t think she was good enough and felt like the other kids were making fun of her.” With her head thrown back and her eyes closed, she frowned. “The thing is, back when I was her age, I probably teased someone who didn’t dance as well as I thought they should. Kids are just mean. But I was walking by and heard her and just felt like...I don’t know...I just knew I could help her.”

“So you danced with her?”

“Yup. Went and grabbed a pair of tap shoes and danced in the lobby with her.” Turning her head, she smiled at him. “She

knew exactly what to do, but she's a little shy and unsure of herself. I'm hoping she went into class when we were done and killed it."

"That would be awesome." Mimicking her pose, he smiled back at her. "That was a really cool thing you did today. I bet that girl is going to remember you for a really long time."

"Well...I don't know about that. It was actually kind of fun."

"Maybe that's something you can do. I'm sure if you wanted to teach in between dancing gigs or even right now while you're figuring out what you're going to do that Kiki would welcome you."

Her face scrunched up slightly. "I don't know...I guess a part of me always figured I'd do that when I didn't want to do all the big stuff anymore. Like when I was ready to retire and settle down that I'd look into opening my own studio or something." She shrugged. "It's always been there in the back of my mind, but there's so much I want to do first."

They sat in tranquil silence for several long minutes before he asked, "So, when are your parents coming home?"

"Next Wednesday, so...one week." Her eyes were closed again and she looked incredibly peaceful. "I can't wait to see them and I'm hoping the house is done so I can finally go home."

And that meant no more alone time in the hot tub and any overnight escapades—if they had them—would be at his place. None of this was bad, but...

"I thought about staying here," she went on quietly. "It's a great place and it's not like anyone else is using it, but I think

it would be weird if my folks were home and all my stuff was there and I stayed here.”

“That makes sense.”

She got quiet again and Noah wasn't sure if it was because she was thinking or if she was seriously just enjoying the hot water and the jets.

“It just sucks because we won't get to have a lot of time like this anymore,” she finally said. “And I don't just mean the hot tub, but...all of it. I realize I'm a grown woman, but I never did the staying overnight at a boyfriend's place while living at home. I think that could be awkward. Especially since you work with my dad.”

Yeah. That.

As much as it was fun not thinking about what was going to happen when Lucas and Emma got home, now that she had opened the door to that conversation, he knew it was time for them to talk about it.

“I know we've been avoiding this discussion, but...”

“I know,” she murmured with a weary sigh. “I've loved being in this bubble. I know that my grandfather knows about us, but that just makes him happy. He made it easy for us to just...you know...be.”

He nodded.

“As for next week? I honestly don't know what's going to happen. For all we know, my dad's going to be so happy and relaxed after this trip that nothing's going to bother him.”

He opted to keep his snarky comment to himself.

“Okay, but...” He sighed loudly, raking a wet hand through his hair. “What are we doing, Lily? I mean...I think

we both went into this out of pure curiosity and a mutual attraction, but I kind of got the feeling that you weren't particularly serious about a relationship."

She didn't respond right away and Noah wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

"Honestly, in the beginning I didn't know what I wanted or where I saw this going. All I knew was that I wanted you." She looked at him with a small smile. "Then I got to know you and I realized how I had misjudged you back when we met."

"I feel the same way," he admitted. "You have no idea how much I hated myself because you made me react in ways I never had before. As you can probably tell by now, I'm not confrontational, and yet you made me argue with you all the damn time."

She grinned. "It was actually like a weird form of foreplay." With a wink, she added, "And for the record, I kind of hated myself because you were the total opposite of every guy I ever dated and yet I was wildly attracted to you." Then she sank a little lower under the water before shimmying over to straddle his lap. "And I'm still wildly attracted to you."

As his hands went to her waist, a million questions raced through his mind and most of them would kill the moment. So instead, he gently flexed his hands and held her tight. "That's good, because I'm still wildly attracted to you."

"Then let's not think about next week," she said in a sultry tone, "and show each other just how wild we can be." Her hands went behind her back, where she untied her bikini top and pulled it off, tossing it onto the ledge.

Noah helped her with the bottoms, and Lily returned the favor with his briefs.

The way she touched him was erotic and so damn good that he barely remembered his own name, let alone that he was supposed to be worried about where they were going to be a week from now.

And as her body moved against his, he didn't even have the will to care.

THIRTEEN

LILY WAS LIVING her best life.

Like...seriously, her best life.

She was dancing and feeling stronger every day, and every night she and Noah were going out and having these amazing dates. She was so damn happy and life felt so perfect that it felt like she had a perpetual smile on her face.

And it felt good.

Really good.

It was Tuesday, and she was getting ready to leave the studio when Kiki asked her to join her in her office. With her duffle bag hefted over her shoulder and a bottle of water in her hand, she went upstairs and found her mentor sitting at her desk.

“Hey!”

“Hey, Lily! All done for the day?”

She nodded. “I am! And I cannot thank you enough for all the time you’ve given me. I feel like I’m mentally in a better headspace because I’ve been able to dance again.”

“I was watching you earlier and you really look great. I can’t see any signs of an injury.”

Sitting down in one of the chairs, she nodded. “I’ve been carefully avoiding the motions that I know anger it. I’m hoping if I can keep doing that while still dancing, I can have my cake and eat it too.” She laughed as she shook her head. “You know that old saying, ‘Doctor, doctor! It hurts when I do this!’ And he tells you to stop doing it? That’s what I’m doing. Or...trying to do.”

Kiki leaned back in her seat and studied her for a moment. “There’s a part of me that completely understands where you’re coming from, but the teacher in me is going to warn you that you’re on a very slippery slope. You’re going to get cocky and keep pushing your limits and end up doing some serious damage,” she gently admonished. “Promise me you’re going to be smart about this.”

“I am being smart. I promise. This has been great therapy for me. It’s showing me that if I have the surgery and have to modify my choreography at all, I can do it and be okay with it.” She smiled. “I’m good, Kiki. I learned from the best.”

Smiling back, Kiki nodded. “Well, I wanted to put something out there to you.”

“O-kay...”

“What you did last week for Jasmine was amazing,” she began. “And I heard from Zoey that you’ve helped a few other students out since then.”

It was true, and she found herself hanging back after her studio time and observing the students to see if there was anyone who needed a little encouragement. So far, it happened almost daily and it was a little boost to her good mood to help.

“I have,” she said cautiously. “I hope that’s okay. I’m really not trying to step on anyone’s toes...” Then she laughed.

“Sorry.”

Luckily, Kiki laughed with her. “No, it was a good analogy. But what I wanted to say is...well...I’d love to offer you a position here if you wanted one. You could teach a class or just offer private lessons so you can work one-on-one with dancers...whatever you wanted. You have a gift and I know you’re at a bit of a crossroads here, but I thought I should at least put it out there for you to think about.”

“Oh, wow...Kiki...” Pausing, she let out a soft breath. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that sort of thing. My boyfriend and I were talking about it the other night and...no offense...I see myself doing that down the road. There’s so much I still want to do before I...”

“Before you call it a day and can’t dance professionally anymore?” Kiki finished, one dark brow arching at her.

“Um...”

“It’s okay, Lily. I think we’ve all felt that way at one time or another, but let me just say this and then I promise not to bring it up again.” She sat up straighter. “You never know when it’s going to be your last big dance. Anything can happen—things that are out of your control, like what happened to you in Miami. I don’t look at owning this studio and teaching as a second choice or a consolation prize. I love teaching! I love inspiring others to dance!” Another pause. “We all have to walk our own path and I hope you’re walking yours with a mature outlook and not with immaturity and cockiness because you think you have something to prove.”

Lily’s heart was hammering hard and all she could do was nod.

Kiki looked at her watch as she stood. “I’ve got a class starting in a few minutes and need to get set up. Will you be here tomorrow?”

Getting to her feet, she shook her head. “My folks are finally getting back from their vacation and I want to be there when they get home, so...”

Walking closer, Kiki hugged her. “You’re welcome here anytime, Lily.” And when she pulled back, she was smiling. “I’m proud of you and can’t wait to hear what big thing you’re taking on next.”

“Thanks, Kiki.” And as she watched her leave, Lily started to question what that next big thing might be, but quickly pushed it aside. Tonight, she and Noah were having a low-key, romantic dinner at her place—probably their last one at the guesthouse, which kind of bummed her out.

Leaving the studio, it was the first time she didn’t stop to interact with any of the kids. Apparently, by doing that, she was leading everyone to believe she wanted to teach. And again, that was her plan down the line, just not right now.

Why does that make me sound so awful?

Driving home, she pushed all thoughts of dance aside and focused on the night ahead. She was ordering dinner from their favorite Italian place and she’d picked out a great bottle of wine from her grandfather’s wine cellar. Before she’d left for the studio, Lily picked out a pretty dress that she wanted to wear and even bought some sexy underwear to go with it. Just thinking about it made her sigh happily because this was all new and exciting and she was genuinely enjoying herself.

Noah was so different from any guy she had ever dated. From the time she was allowed to date, she had gone for the

bad boys. And in middle school, those were the rebels who had no idea what they were rebelling against, and she just stuck with that type since.

Until Noah.

She loved having some deep, intelligent conversations with him. She loved how utterly adorable he looked whenever she challenged him to do something out of his comfort zone. She loved laughing with him when they were half asleep and one of them said something completely goofy.

Essentially, she loved *him*.

There was a brief moment where she felt her heart kick hard, but it faded quickly because it wasn't scary. Noah Wylder was a good man—a great man, a kind and loving man. He worked so hard to overcome a crappy childhood and he was thriving and achieving his goals all on his own. What made her sad was that she wondered if anyone celebrated those achievements with him. Meeting his one brother, she saw how comfortable they were with each other, but considering Jax was a top player in the NFL, Lily knew he was extremely busy in his own life. Noah's accomplishments probably looked tame in comparison to what he was doing.

And then there was his other overachieving brother, who was one of the biggest singers in the world right now. Noah didn't talk about Simon much, but that was probably because they didn't spend a whole lot of time together. Lily thought of her sisters and even though they didn't get to spend a lot of time together since she'd left for college, they always talked on the phone at least once a week and texted random stuff all the time.

“And I'm a little overdue for our calls,” she murmured.

As for Noah's parents? She had no idea what those relationships were like other than the fact that they were divorced and they all took care of his mother. It hit her that she had no idea if his father was in the picture at all or if he'd finally walked away. Hell, she didn't even know if he was still alive!

"I should probably know some of this," she mumbled, wondering if she was just too wrapped up in her own life that she never asked or if Noah simply didn't want to talk about it.

And she wasn't sure if this was the night to bring it up at all.

"Probably not." Tonight was about them having one final night of privacy before her parents got home and she moved back in with them and her father went back to the office and continued to torment Noah. Groaning, she really hoped she could bring an end to that issue for him. Lily had a great relationship with her father and knew she'd have to sit him down and tell him how she felt. "He'll listen to me," she said confidently.

And she was going to keep on believing that.

At home, she showered and did her hair and makeup before calling in their dinner order. Noah texted that he was on his way a little after five, and as she slid on her pretty new undies and dress, she looked around and decided the rest of the place needed a little dressing up too.

So, she lit candles, put on some soft music, and made sure her bedroom was all cleaned up with the blankets all neat and turned down.

"Perfect." Walking back out to the kitchen, she poured the wine, smoothed a hand over her dress and swayed and danced

as Elton John crooned “The One.” Lily moved to the spot in the living room with the most space and did a couple of spins before simply letting the music move her.

And that’s how Noah found her.

She spotted him immediately when he walked in, but she kept dancing until the song ended. His gaze was intense as he strode over to her and possessively wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her.

Oh, my...

Her knees went a little weak as she melted against him. When he lifted his head, all Lily could think of was that he was the most handsome man she’d ever seen. Her hand caressed his stubbled jaw and it was that moment that definitely sealed the deal for her—she was in love with Noah.

“What’s that smile about, beautiful girl?” he asked gruffly, one strong finger stroking her cheek.

“I was just thinking how incredibly handsome you are,” she whispered, “and how much I love being with you.”

It was probably way too soon to say I love you, even if it was how she felt. The last thing she wanted to do was spook him. Lord knows her father was probably going to try doing that if she didn’t sit him down right away.

“I love being with you too,” he told her, his eyes scanning her face. He looked ready to say more, but the doorbell rang, breaking the moment.

“Dinner,” she said before moving out of his arms and sauntering over to the door to accept the delivery. “Thank you!” When she walked back to the kitchen, she felt like her feet never even touched the floor. With the bag on the table, she began unpacking it. “I was going to attempt to cook for us

tonight, but then I figured...do I really want to ruin a romantic evening like that?"

Chuckling, Noah came over and helped her, and within minutes, they were sitting down and sipping their wine. "Why doesn't it ever look like this when I order takeout?"

"Well...I know the owner, and when I called I made sure I name-dropped to make sure everything got a little extra attention," she admitted. "I used to hate when my parents did that, but we always ended up with better food or whatever it was we were getting." Frowning, she looked over at him. "That made me sound like a total bitch, right?"

He grinned but shook his head. "No. This is the way you grew up, Lily. And honestly, that's the first time I've heard you say something like that. It's not like you throw the Montgomery name around to get perks." He shrugged. "Because that would be a little...um...you know..."

Shame washed over her, and suddenly she couldn't look at him.

"Hey." Reaching over, he took her hand in his. "What's wrong?"

"That's what I was doing in Miami," she murmured.

"What?"

Now she looked up and felt slightly mortified. "I used my father's name and how he used to play in the NFL to make sure I got noticed. I was afraid that they wouldn't take me seriously or that I wasn't good enough and..."

"Hey," he softly interrupted. "I think that was a normal thing to do considering where you were. Most people would try to find something to use to their advantage when competing against so many people."

“Maybe...”

“Come on. Don’t let this ruin our night, okay? No one’s judging you.” He kissed her hand. “I think you’re perfect and I love that you got the chef to make our dinner extra special.”

Forcing herself to relax, Lily smiled over at Noah. “You’re right. Let’s eat!”



It was a little after midnight and they were naked and wrapped around each other, completely content. He was tired and knew he could easily fall asleep, but he wanted to savor the moment. Everything was potentially going to change at some point tomorrow.

Well...today, since it was after midnight, he thought.

He played out multiple scenarios in his head over the last several days, and yet he still had no idea which one was going to actually play out.

Professionally, he felt like he could handle anything. After all, Lucas had been snarling at him for three years; how much worse could it get? Plus, after handling everyone’s top clients for the last month, he would think everyone would be feeling thankful toward him. That should work in his favor, right? Either way, with his new position and the work he’d put in with Mac, Jason, and Lucas’ clients, Noah was feeling very secure.

Personally? Not so much.

This last week with Lily had been amazing. He felt like they had connected on a whole other level and he just truly loved being with her. Was he going to miss nights like this?

Absolutely. Was that a deal breaker for him that they couldn't do this as often? Not at all. They were adults and while the sex was off the freaking charts, he was mature enough to wait a little in between nights they could spend together.

Then there was the dancing.

She'd been spending a lot of time at the studio over the last week, and he knew she was feeling very confident because she was moving with no pain. Every day she talked to him about how she used to dance and how she was dancing now to avoid aggravating the injury. It sounded like a temporary solution to a long-term problem, but he kept that to himself.

Unfortunately, he was keeping a lot to himself because he didn't want to rock the boat, but eventually he was going to have to speak up. If this relationship was going to work, they had to talk to each other even when they didn't agree.

But...considering how his entire life had gone, he was overly cautious and wasn't confrontational. It wasn't a great way to live, but it had gotten him to where he was financially stable and helped his mother go back to school to get her nursing degree. He was never going back to that small town life of struggling.

Yawning, he shifted to wrap himself around Lily's sleepy form. He placed a kiss on her forehead, and it didn't take long for him to lose the battle to stay awake.

The next time he opened his eyes, sunlight was just filtering in and, in the distance, he heard her phone ringing. She instantly shot up and looked around frantically. "What the...?" She scrambled from the bed and stumbled naked out to the living room. "H'lo?"

Noah sat up and could obviously only hear her side of the conversation, which, he soon discovered, didn't sound great.

“Oh my God! Is he okay?” She paused. “Okay, okay...is the ambulance here now?” Another pause. “I'll meet you at the hospital. Thanks. Bye.”

He was instantly out of the bed because he figured this had to do with William. He was tugging his pants on when she turned the lights on. “What happened?” he asked, stepping in front of her and gently grasping her shoulders.

“That was my uncle,” she said, her voice shaking. “My grandfather...he wasn't feeling good after dinner...” Tears streamed down her face. “I...I don't know all the specifics, but he was up all night and he started coughing and then was throwing up blood...he fell and...oh God!” She was openly sobbing, and Noah pulled her into his arms and held her. In the distance, he heard the sirens. “We need to go...”

“We do,” he said, turning her toward her closet. “Get dressed and I'll drive you to the hospital. Maybe we'll beat the ambulance there and you can see him before they take him back to examine him.”

And that just made her cry harder.

He felt completely out of his element, but did his best to quickly dress and then help her. They were out the door five minutes later and in the distance, he could see the lights in front of the main house and knew the rescue squad and ambulance were still there. “Should we go up to the house...?”

“Yes. Please,” she said.

As soon as they drove around and pulled into the driveway, Lily was out of the car and running to the front door. The EMTs were carrying William out on a stretcher and Noah

quickly went over to catch her because she looked ready to collapse.

“Grandpa,” she sobbed, reaching for him.

“Hey, sweet girl,” he said hoarsely. “Don’t cry. It’s all going to be okay...” But his voice was fading and they were rushing to get him into the ambulance.

Robert walked out of the house looking grim and stopped short when he spotted the two of them.

“Would you like to ride with us?” Noah asked and was surprised when Robert nodded.

The ambulance pulled away and the three of them climbed into Noah’s car, with Robert taking the passenger seat and Lily getting relegated to the back. Noah had a ton of questions, but he didn’t want to upset either of them.

“Uncle Robert, who do we need to call?” Lily asked.

“No one yet,” he said quietly. “Let’s see what the doctors have to say first. I already called William’s primary care doctor and his cardiologist. They’re both meeting us at the hospital.”

“What do you think happened? Did he sleep at all last night? Why didn’t he go to the emergency room earlier?” Lily asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw how tired and upset Robert looked and did the only thing he could. “Are you okay, Robert?” he asked quietly.

The only way he could describe the expression on Robert’s face was devastated. “We watched our younger brother die,” he said solemnly. “By the time we got to see him, he was heavily sedated and had no idea what was going on. But

watching William all night and this morning...he's the strong one. He's not just my brother; he's my mentor and my best friend. Things like this aren't supposed to happen to him. I...I don't know what I'll do if..." His voice caught and Noah felt guilty for making him say any of this.

"It's going to be okay," Noah said firmly, for all of their sake. "William's strong. We all know that. And he's got the best doctors, so...it'll be alright."

They drove in silence, and luckily it was only a short drive. He dropped Robert and Lily off in front of the entrance to the ER and then went to park. It was important for them to get inside right away and...well...he needed a moment.

William Montgomery was everything Robert had just described. He might not be a brother, but Noah looked to him as a friend, a mentor, an ally, and...like the father or grandfather he always wished he'd had. As he climbed from the car, he said a quick prayer for healing and walked into the hospital. It was barely six in the morning, and fortunately it was relatively quiet in the waiting area. Both Robert and Lily were at the desk and he had a feeling it was going to be hard to keep them out here while William was anywhere else. He joined them and listened as the receptionist explained that someone would be out to talk to them as soon as they had an update.

"This is unacceptable," Robert murmured.

"It's bullshit," Lily huffed. "We should at least be able to see him. He shouldn't be alone!"

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he carefully maneuvered her away from the desk and toward the sofas in the corner. "The doctors have to examine him," he said softly.

“I know it’s frustrating, but it’s really for the best that we let them do their job.”

“You sound just like my brother,” Robert said as he joined them. “He was always the level-headed one in an emergency. When our brother Joseph was in the hospital after a massive stroke, we were all freaking out, and William...well...he made sure he sat and talked to everyone and made sure they were okay.” He gave Noah a weak smile. “I appreciate your calming influence, Noah.”

And damn if that almost didn’t make a tear come to his eye. Noah couldn’t ever remember any male role models praising him—other than William—and he didn’t grow up with that kind of influence.

It felt pretty damn good.

They sat in companionable silence for almost an hour before Lily got fidgety. She got up and paced and went to the desk to ask when the cafeteria opened. Walking back over to them, she announced that she was going to get coffee if anyone wanted to join her.

They all went.

At eight o’clock, Noah had to call the office to let Sara and his team know that he wouldn’t be in. He didn’t give specifics and fortunately, no one asked.

By nine, they were all getting restless, and Robert was ready to start throwing his weight around to get some answers. Unfortunately, Noah was feeling the same way and really hoped someone would come out to talk to them soon.

At ten, a nurse came out and asked them to follow her.

Noah’s heart sank and he held onto Lily because he could see she was scared. If he thought it was appropriate, he’d offer

his hand or arm or anything to Robert as well. They walked down several long hallways before coming to a private room. The bed was empty and that just made Noah even more nervous.

Please just let this be a random room...

“The doctor will be in shortly,” the nurse said before leaving them alone.

You could have heard a pin drop in the room and no one seemed to want to move or touch anything. There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief when the doctor walked in five minutes later.

“Mr. Montgomery,” the doctor said with a curt nod before turning to Noah and Lily. “I’m Dr. Kennedy. I’m William’s pulmonologist.”

“I take it you’ve seen him?” Robert asked. “How is he doing?”

“Dr. Solaris and I have been with him all morning. We’ve done a CAT scan, x-rays, bloodwork, and an EKG.” He paused. “He’s dehydrated, his blood pressure is low, and he’s is a little bruised from the fall. Luckily there’s no concussion, however...” Another pause. “The spot on his lung has grown. Pathology says it’s cancerous and we don’t see a need to wait to remove it.”

“Oh, God...” Lily quietly sobbed as she curled into Noah, burying her face against his shirt.

“Okay,” Robert said grimly. “Can we see him?”

Dr. Kennedy nodded. “They’re going to be bringing him to the OR in a few minutes, so I’ll have a nurse take you down to see him. He’s awake, but very weak, so please don’t tax him too much.”

They all nodded in agreement and when the nurse came to get them, Noah figured that was his cue to go out to leave. “I’ll be out in the waiting room,” he told her in the hallway. “You and Robert go and...”

“Absolutely not,” Robert said. “I know my brother, and seeing you here with Lily will be the best medicine for him.”

“Oh, um...”

No one talked until they reached William’s room. Robert went in alone and stayed in there for a solid five minutes. When he came out, he looked devastated and clapped Noah’s arm and whispered, “Don’t let her go in there alone,” before walking away.

So together, he and Lily went into the room, and he had to admit, it was a little shocking. The larger-than-life man he’d known for almost four years suddenly looked small and frail. Lily immediately went to him, bending over and resting her head on his chest. Noah could hear her quiet sobs and as he stepped closer, he saw William smiling wearily at him.

“Take care of my girl,” he said to Noah. “Everything’s going to be alright. I promise. I’ve got a lot of living left to do. You’re not getting rid of me this easily.”

She lifted her head and gave him a watery smile. “I’m going to hold you to that promise. I expect to be sitting and talking with you tonight about how I’m going to convince Mom and Dad to finally put a hot tub in our yard.”

William chuckled softly before going into a coughing fit.

“Oh! Oh, God! Oh God, I’m sorry!” Lily said frantically, but fortunately, William quieted down quickly. “Grandpa, I...”

“Don’t worry so much,” William told her, his voice weak and raspy. “Tell those doctors to get this show on the road. I’m

ready to get this cancer out of me.”

She nodded but started to cry again. That’s when William looked up at him. “Don’t let anyone give you any grief today,” he said, this time his voice sounded a little stronger. “This is where you belong. Here. Not at the office. The most important job for you is to make sure Lily is okay, understand?”

“I do,” he said solemnly.

Lily kissed him on the cheek before heading out of the room. Noah turned to follow her when he heard William say, “I knew you were the one.”

But when he turned around to look at him, William’s eyes were closed and he looked like he had fallen asleep.

Knew I was the one? What one?

With no choice, he joined Lily in the hallway just as the orderlies were coming to take William up to surgery. They stood to the side and waited until he was wheeled away, and then Noah held her while she cried some more. It was impossible to say how much time had passed, but it was safe to say it had been a while.

“Come on. We should go find your uncle.”

She agreed but was silent as they made their way back toward the waiting room. When they stepped out into the area, Robert was nowhere to be found. They inquired at the desk if anyone saw where he went, but the receptionist could only suggest the cafeteria. So they went there and found him sitting alone in the corner talking on his phone.

“Maybe we should give him a minute...”

“I’m guessing he’s calling my grandmother,” Lily said, wiping her eyes. “I have no idea what her travel itinerary is or

when she was supposed to be home. I hate to think of her flying while she knows this is all going on.”

As they approached Robert, Noah heard him say, “We’ll see you soon,” before hanging up. He looked up at both of them and sighed. “Your grandmother’s on a plane right now and I can’t reach her. I called the office and let Sara know what’s going on.” Then he looked up at Noah. “I told her you were here with us and to call you if there are any emergencies.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to start a phone tree so the family knows what’s going on,” he continued. “I’m not sure if I should tell anyone to come yet or...”

“Have you called my parents or Uncle Mac or Uncle Jason?”

“They’re all on flights too,” he said miserably. “But I left messages for all of them to call me as soon as they land. The airport is only fifteen minutes away, so once they touch down, they can be here fairly quickly.”

“What can I do?” Lily asked. “Is there anyone I should call?”

“I’m not sure you want to call your sisters until we know more, but that’s up to you.” Then he glanced toward Noah. “Would you mind grabbing me another cup of coffee?”

“No problem.” He walked over to Lily and kissed her cheek. “How about you? Would you like one?”

She nodded. “And a muffin or something. I just...I need a little something to eat, please.”

“You got it.”

For another hour, there wasn't a lot to do except sit and wait. When his phone rang, he almost sagged with relief to have something to do. Sara was calling for an update and while he spoke to her, Lily got up to use the restroom. Then Robert got up and said he needed to get some air. He was alone for all of two minutes before Lily walked over and literally crawled into his lap, resting her head on his shoulder as he hung up with Sara.

His arms went around her. "How are you holding up?"

"I hate this," she murmured. "I hate that this is happening and how there isn't anything we can do. But more than anything, I hate that he's up there all alone."

"Well...to be fair...he's not alone. He's got a team of surgeons up there and nurses and some incredibly skilled people who are making sure he's getting everything he needs." He kissed her cheek and held her close. "And as soon as he's in recovery, you know they'll let us go up and see him."

She nodded. "Thank you for being here with me. I don't know what I would've done without you."

"I'll always be here for you, Lily," he said gruffly. "Always. You can always count on me."

"Mmm..."

"What the hell's going on here?" Someone demanded loudly.

Not someone...but Lucas.

And he was glaring down at the two of them with a combination of rage and confusion.

Shit.

FOURTEEN

“DAD!” Lily cried as she scrambled off of Noah’s lap. She ran over and hugged him, but he felt stiff as a board.

“Hey,” she snapped, forcing him to look down at her. “Can you please just relax and remember why we’re here?” And yeah, it was a risk getting snippy, but she was mentally exhausted and couldn’t deal with one more complication right now.

“You’re right,” he mumbled, hugging her. “Sorry. Are you doing okay?”

She hugged him back. “Not really, but I’m doing the best I can.” Pulling back, she gave him a small smile. “I got to see him before they took him up to surgery.” Tears stung her eyes and her father was hugging her again.

“Oh, baby,” her mother said, joining in the hug. “I know this had to be so scary for you. Uncle Robert said you and Noah drove him here and have been with him the whole time.”

Nodding, Lily let go of her father and hugged her mother. “He looked so sad,” she sobbed. “Uncle Robert, I mean. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look that way.”

Emma held her tight. “It’s definitely tough, but I’m glad he wasn’t here alone. Come on, come sit down and talk to me.”

Only...it wasn't just talking to her mother; her aunts and uncles were there all looking at her as she sat down beside Noah. "Where'd Uncle Robert go?"

"He's on the phone with Uncle Zach," Lucas told her as he sat down before glaring hard at Noah. "Why are you here and not at the office?"

Lily watched as Noah swallowed hard and she was afraid he was going to get nervous and stammer, but he surprised her.

"I was with Lily when Robert called," he said bravely. "We got to the house before the EMTs got William into the ambulance and then I drove them both here. Your father is important to me, and I wanted to stay and help in any way I could."

"And I wanted him here," Lily added before realizing this really wasn't the time to have this discussion. "Anyway, they took him up to surgery like two hours ago and we haven't heard anything yet."

"What happened?" her Uncle Jason asked. "We all got the message from Uncle Robert, but he didn't go into any real details. Did Dad have a heart attack?"

Inwardly, she groaned, hating that she was going to have to be the one to tell them everything. Squirming in her chair, she tried to gather her thoughts. Noah reached over and held her hand to encourage her.

This man...

So...she told them everything—from all the sneaking around her grandfather was doing, to her finding the brochure and confronting him, to getting the call this morning. "It's been a wild month."

“He sent us all away,” Mac said wearily. “He sent us all away hoping we’d never find out he was sick.”

Jason nodded. “He figured this wasn’t going to be anything major and no one would catch on. What the hell is wrong with him? Does he have any idea how inconsiderate that was? How...how...?”

“He was protecting all of you,” Noah quietly interrupted.

“Who are you to say anything about this,” Lucas murmured. “You’re not family; you’re an employee. For now.”

But Noah didn’t back down. “Your father prides himself on taking care of everyone, and he couldn’t stand the thought of having those roles reversed. I honestly don’t think he believed anything like this was going to happen. In the meantime, he wanted all of you to have a wonderful vacation where you had nothing to worry about.” Pausing, he shook his head. “And he certainly didn’t count on Lily coming home. She was a good distraction for him, mainly because she didn’t really fuss over him. She simply spent time hanging out, eating, and watching movies with him. I truly believe she was good for him.”

The tears were back in her eyes as she turned and thanked him. When she faced her family again, she let out a long breath. “He kept it from me and I was staying with him. I thought it was odd that he made me stay in the guesthouse, but then I thought the woman he was going out with was a decorator or something.” She chuckled softly. “That was after I thought he was cheating on Grandma...”

“What?!” they all cried.

“Why would you even think that?” her mother asked.

“Because he was lying right to my face telling me he was busy with conference calls, and then I’d see him walking out with some random woman! What would you think?”

They all looked at each other but didn’t really comment.

“But when I found the brochure...trust me, he did not like getting caught. And he certainly didn’t want to talk about being sick.”

“It’s a family thing,” Emma murmured, staring at her husband. “I guess it’s not just injuries that we don’t talk about, but sickness too.”

“Emma,” Lucas said with a small huff before looking at Lily. “And that brings us back to you. Did you go to the doctor?”

Nodding, she told them about her appointments too. “They all say the same thing, but I’ve been renting studio space for a week now and dancing and I’m fine! I think if I change how I dance, I can put off the surgery.”

There was a collective groan all around her.

“What? What did I say?”

“She is definitely your daughter,” Jason said with a small laugh. “Stubborn.”

“Hey!” Lily said with annoyance. “I’m not being stubborn. I just don’t believe in having surgery unnecessarily. That’s not a crime.”

“Okay, relax,” her mother said, patting her arm. “Just because you’re being careful while you dance doesn’t mean you don’t still need the surgery, sweetheart. You need to really think about this.” Then she looked at Noah. “What do you think, Noah? Do you agree that she should wait?”

“Um...”

Lily turned her head toward him and silently begged him not to take their side. He smiled at her and she relaxed. Until...

“I think she should have the surgery,” he said wearily. “I get that she can dance carefully without aggravating the injury, but in the long run, I believe it would be best to have the surgery now and *then* go back to dancing with abandon.”

Now she glared at him.

Traitor.

Before she could comment, Uncle Robert was back and everyone was talking to him about how her grandfather had been for the last month since he spent the most time with him. Lily was only half-listening to the conversation because she felt like she needed to say something to Noah.

In private.

Carefully, they disengaged from the group and moved to the other side of the room. “What the hell?” she hissed. “How could you betray me like that in front of my family? Are you so desperate for my father’s approval that you’d throw me under the bus like that?”

His eyes went wide. “Excuse me?”

Crossing her arms, she nodded. “You heard me. I know you were freaked out about what he was going to do or say when he got home and found out about us, but I never thought you’d do something like this!”

“Like what? Tell the truth?” he asked incredulously. “I never said I agreed with your thinking, Lily. I thought it was foolish for you to keep pushing yourself with the dancing. I

get that recovery wasn't as positive as you wanted it to be, but it's like you're looking to hurt yourself!"

"What...? Are you insane? Why would I do that?"

"Because you're stubborn!" he said a little too loudly. The entire cafeteria got quiet, and he groaned. "Look, I don't know why else you'd keep pushing yourself when you know you shouldn't. Four doctors recommended surgery. Four doctors told you to take it easy. Why would they lie to you?"

"You know what? I don't need this right now. My grandfather is upstairs fighting for his life and I can't believe you'd choose now to pick a fight!"

"I'm not picking a fight," he said carefully. "I'm trying to have a rational conversation with you. That's all." Then he shook his head. "You know, just last night I was thinking about how we need to be able to talk to each other even when we don't agree, and the way you're reacting right now is why we haven't done that until today."

"What?!"

"Yeah, you want everyone to agree with you, and when they don't, you get all...like this!"

"Everyone gets upset when they're right and no one agrees with them," she countered tightly.

"Or maybe you need to think about why you're the only one who thinks you're right." Pausing, he let out a long breath. "I don't want to argue with you, but I'm also not going to lie to you. So, if this is how you feel and what you think about me, then I'll go. But..."

"You should go," she said, not looking at him. "This is all too much right now and..." She swallowed the lump of emotion that was threatening to choke her. "Just go."

With a curt nod, he walked away and toward her family. She had no idea what he was saying to them, but there was a round of nodding and a few handshakes before he walked out of the cafeteria.

Good riddance.

What kind of crappy person did something like this in the middle of a family crisis? Couldn't he have just changed the subject or simply agreed with her for the sake of argument?

Talk about rude...

"This sucks," she mumbled before walking back across the room and was confused by the strange looks everyone was giving her. "So, um..."

Her mother stood, hooked her arm with Lily's, and led her back to the other side of the cafeteria.

"Mom? What in the world...?"

One thing about her mom was that she rarely got angry. She stood up for herself and could be a strict parent, but she rarely got mad.

She definitely looked mad right now.

"I know this isn't the best place to have this discussion, but we're having it," Emma said firmly but softly. "It was *very* immature of you to get angry with Noah for simply saying how he felt."

"Is that what he told you? That *I* was being immature? Because..."

"No," her mother swiftly interrupted. "It's what we all saw, Lily. I don't think you understand the ramifications of stalling your surgery. And the fact that Noah was able to say it, with your father and everyone staring at him like they wanted to

strangle him just for being here with you, speaks a lot to his character.” Then her whole face pinched up. “*Your* character is the one I’m disappointed in right now.”

Her eyes went wide. “Mom! Seriously?”

“Robert was telling us how great Noah was today and how both he and your grandfather think so highly of him,” Emma went on. “And with as much of a brat as you just were, he still walked over and apologized for raising his voice over here and asked that we call him when William is out of surgery.” She shook her head. “Honestly, Lily, I...I don’t even know what to say.”

Good grief...

“Noah and I have been dating, Mom,” she said defiantly, and as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realized how bratty and immature she sounded.

Great.

She let out a long, weary breath. “All of this stuff with Grandpa...that’s what brought Noah and I together. There was still a lingering...something there from three years ago.” And dammit, tears stung her eyes again. “We thought we’d...you know...fling it out while you were all gone and possibly be done by now.”

“But you weren’t.”

Shaking her head, she swiped the tears that spilled over. “This is seriously all too much for me to deal with. I could handle just my stupid injury, but now there’s all this with Grandpa and my relationship with Noah...and I still have no idea what it is I actually want to do with my damn life! I keep going from one dancing gig to another and none of it makes me want to stay! But this last month? Being with Noah? It

confused the hell out of me because suddenly I wasn't so eager to leave."

It was the biggest admission she'd ever made.

"Oh, sweetie," Emma said, pulling her in for a hug. "I hate that we were gone while you were dealing with so much." Then she took a step back. "But more than anything, I hate that you haven't been completely truthful with us. It sounds like you've been keeping a lot of stuff to yourself and I don't know why."

The snort was out before she could stop it. "Please, in a family of overachievers, you think I want to be the one who fails in front of everyone?"

Her mother's eyes were the ones to go wide this time, but Lily was on a roll and couldn't seem to shut up.

"Do you have any idea how many times I went home after a show and cried when I lived in Manhattan? Or how scared I was sleeping in random hotels when I toured? Some nights I didn't sleep at all because I didn't feel safe! But all anyone saw was the successful dancer who was living her dream!" Tears were falling fast now, but she didn't bother to wipe them away. "I dated crappy guys so I would always be the more successful one. At first, it was just fun dating the bad boy types, but the older I got, it was more about just having fun and knowing I wasn't really investing anything in the relationship. I didn't care if they ended."

"Lily, I..."

"This injury? I didn't know what to do! When I went to the orthopedic urgent care, I really thought they were going to tell me to ice it and rest and I'd be good to go the next day. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before! And even

when I did all the stuff everyone told me to do, it wasn't enough!" Then she sobbed harder as her mother pulled her back into her embrace. "Why wasn't it enough?"

But her mother didn't have an answer.

No one did.

And she'd never felt more lost and alone in her entire life.



He'd gone home, showered, and then gone to the office.

Somewhere around three, Jason called to let him know that William was out of surgery. They'd removed the tumor and sent it off to pathology, but so far everything looked good.

"Thanks for letting me know," he said gruffly, the relief washing over him. "I appreciate you taking the time to call. I'm sure you have a lot of family to talk to, so..."

"Listen, Noah," Jason said. "Everyone was just... emotional today. I'm not making excuses for Lucas or Lily, but just...know that today has everyone out of sorts."

He nodded, and it took a moment before he felt like he could respond. "Thanks, Jason. Is it okay for me to let Sara and everyone know that William's out of surgery?"

"Um...yeah. Sure. But..."

"Look, I appreciate what you're saying, but there's more to it than what you're thinking. I get being emotional over everything, but there comes a time when the truth comes out and it's not the truth we want to hear."

Ugh...why am I talking in circles?

With a small huff, he shook his head. “So, um...I need to go. I’ve got a call starting in ten minutes and I have to look over some files. Please give William my best, and I’m sure I’ll be seeing you in the office soon.”

“Okay. Thanks, Noah,” Jason replied before hanging up.

There was no call he had to get on and he had been sitting miserably in his office trying to figure out just what this argument with Lily meant.

Liar.

He knew what it meant.

It meant she saw him as someone who wasn’t man enough to deal with her father’s bullshit—even though he had said right to the faces of the entire Montgomery family that he had been in bed with Lily when they got the call about William. It didn’t matter how much time they’d spent together or what he had just done right in front of her; in her mind, she still saw him as that boring, numbers guy who never stood up to his boss.

And until this morning, that was probably true.

He’d spent so much time whining about her father giving him grief for the last few years that it’s a wonder Lily ever slept with him at all. Just thinking about how he must have sounded had to have been a turnoff.

Not that much, since she slept with you repeatedly.

Yeah, well...sex was one thing. That was a physical act that you could have with someone even if you didn’t particularly like them. But for a relationship to work and last, there had to be respect, and it was obvious she didn’t respect him.

Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, Noah turned in his chair and stared at his screen and decided to send out an email to the company with William's update rather than going out and talking to Sara. His door was shut and he wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone.

Once the information was sent, he forced himself to do reports and updates for Mac, Jason, and Lucas on their clients so they'd have everything they needed without having to talk to him. Then he spent several hours running reports on clients who they hadn't spoken to directly in the last six months and started making appointments with as many as he could for the coming weeks.

After that, he went through all his emails, scrolled through the news, and did everything he could to avoid actually getting up and leaving. At six, there was a knock on his office door and his heart kicked hard in hopes it was Lily.

"Hey," Sara said as she opened the door. "Do you have a minute?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Um...I just got off the phone with Mac and he said Mr. Montgomery's been moved to ICU for the night and they hope he'll then go to a private room at some point tomorrow."

A nod was all he could do.

"He said not to count on him, Jason, Lucas, or Robert to be in tomorrow and wanted to make sure everyone knew you were the one to go to with any issues."

Awesome.

"Okay," he murmured.

She stared at him with a sad smile. “For what it’s worth, I get it. Mr. Montgomery is pretty much everyone’s favorite person. This whole thing just seems so surreal.” She paused. “But if you need to talk...”

“I’m good, Sara, but thanks,” he said solemnly. “I’m just gonna stay until I get caught up on everything so the guys won’t have any worries when they get back.”

For a moment, she continued to watch him. “No one expects you to move in here and run the entire company,” she reminded him. “These are extenuating circumstances and you need to give yourself some grace.”

“Okay.”

With a loud sigh, she nodded. “I’ll see you in the morning, Noah. Make sure you go home, have something to eat, and sleep.”

“Thanks.”

It wasn’t until she was gone that he realized she was right.

He did need to talk to someone.

Not Jax. He’d already talked to him about his relationship with Lily, and it didn’t make him feel great. Simon might be busy and he hated to bother him while he was on tour, so that left...

Picking up his phone, he let out a low moan because this was not the guy he ever wanted to be.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mom,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “How are you?”

“Noah! Hi!” Doreen Wyllder said with pure joy. “This is a surprise! How are you doing?”

“Um...not so great,” he replied honestly. “Do you have time to talk?”

“For you? Of course! I just got home and was sitting here trying to decide what to have for dinner. So, what’s going on?”

Where do I even begin?

“Three years ago, I met a girl,” he began, and then told her the whole story of everything that happened right up until he walked out of the hospital earlier today. “And now? Now I’m not sure what to do. This has made me look at myself and I don’t like the man I’ve become.”

“First, that’s ridiculous,” she said firmly. “There isn’t anything wrong with who you are. You’ve worked hard to accomplish your dreams, Noah. And the fact that you were trying to be respectful isn’t a bad thing. I don’t think there was ever going to be an easy path for you and Lily, and that’s more on her father than anyone else. What kind of man holds a grudge for three years?”

“I know, but...”

“And Lily’s a grown woman, for crying out loud! I get that some guys don’t like to think of their daughters as being sexually active, but...”

“Oh my God, Mom! Stop!” he said with a laugh. “I get what you’re saying, and yeah, Lucas has been my biggest obstacle. And just when I thought we’d overcome all of it and moved on, Lily shows up and I went and got involved when I shouldn’t have.”

“I hate to say this, Noah, but it takes two. And from what you’ve told me—and I’m sure you’ve left a lot out—it seems

like the attraction was mutual and this was bound to happen. Sounds like Lucas Montgomery's got a stick up his ass that needs to come out. Do I need to come to Charlotte and talk to him? Because I'll do it!"

Just the image was enough to make him laugh again. "As much as I appreciate you wanting to come here and kick my former NFL quarterback boss's ass, I'm going to have to say no."

"Please. I can still whoop your brother's butt and he's a football player too!" She went quiet for a moment. "All I'm saying is, this is a crappy situation and the timing for all of it is making it worse. You may have to just...wait this one out for a bit. William's in the hospital and he's been your buffer, but right now, the whole family's focus has to be on him."

"I know, but..."

"And Lily..." she began hesitantly. "It sounds like she's still a little impulsive and immature. And I know there was a lot going on, but she sounds kind of bratty. Maybe you're dodging a bullet with this one and you'll chalk it up to one of life's experiences and learn from it and move on."

He took a minute to let that sink in.

"I don't know if I could continue to work here then," he confessed. "The thought of seeing her and knowing our history? I just don't think I'd be comfortable."

"Oh, sweetheart, you think that now because it's all fresh. She never came around for three years. I'll bet once William is home and recovered, she's going to stop coming around to the office."

"Maybe."

“Trust me. I’m used to dealing with bratty, immature people,” she murmured, and he knew she was referring to his father.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course!”

“What attracted you to Dad?”

Doreen was silent for several long moments. “That...that wasn’t what I expected. Why would you even ask that?”

“Honestly? Because I’m the total opposite of him. I’m the guy who’s respectful and cautious and basically a decent human being, and I feel like...guys like Dad? Guys who are shitty human beings? They have all the luck.”

She let out a long breath. “Do women have a thing for bad boys? Absolutely. It’s a common thing and we all know it’s wrong, but we do it anyway. With your father...I don’t know. Back when we met, he wasn’t the train wreck he turned into. And, at the time, I thought we were just having fun. Then we got pregnant with you, and...”

“And I ruined your life,” he finished for her. “So this is karma. Awesome.”

“Stop being so damn dramatic,” she said with a small laugh. “Be thankful you’re nothing like your father. Although, you’re both good-looking and charming with great senses of humor. The difference is you have a great moral compass where your father didn’t.”

“And yet you kept taking him back,” he reminded her. They didn’t talk about this often, hardly ever actually, but right now, he just needed to understand some things.

“I took him back for the sake of our family and because I was too young to understand that we would have been better off without him. I never took him back because of love, and I’m ashamed to admit that. I didn’t have the confidence in myself to know that I could raise my boys without him.” She paused. “Probably wouldn’t have Jax now if I hadn’t taken him back, so...that’s my consolation prize. I have three wonderful boys and it was worth all the heartache with your father for that reason.”

“I guess.”

“Here’s the thing, Noah, everyone messes up. None of us are perfect. Sometimes we say stupid things in the heat of the moment or sometimes we don’t step up or stand up for ourselves when we know we should. If you love someone, you forgive them when they do these things. But they have to do it too. It can’t all be one-sided. That’s what it was like with your dad. He was quick to put the blame on me for his bad behavior, but never took any responsibility.”

Damn.

“So what do I do?”

“You wait. I know you’re a patient man, Noah, and I believe if this girl means something to you that you’ll know when the time is right to talk to her.” She paused again. “However, you make sure that she takes responsibility for the things she’s done too. And if the two of you can talk things out, then I believe you have a chance, even if her father continues to be an over-protective jerk!”

“Mom...”

“What? Am I lying?”

“Fine, but it just sounds weird when you say it.” Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Baby boy, you can ask me as many things as you’d like,” she said softly. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

That made him smile. “If it comes down to it and I choose my job over this relationship, does that make me a terrible person?”

She didn’t respond right away, and he knew she was really giving this some thought and not saying something she thought he wanted to hear.

“A career is a wonderful thing,” she began slowly. “And after the way we lived for most of your life, I would say that having financial security is a very big thing for you.”

When she didn’t continue, he prompted her. “And...?”

“But living your life for a job is a lonely life, Noah. While you may find comfort in a padded bank account, it’s not a substitute for someone to share your life with.” This time her pause was shorter. “And I’m not specifically mentioning Lily because you don’t know if she’s the one for you. However, if you open your heart up to her or someone else, it can be far more rewarding.”

Right now, he wasn’t so sure.

“And if I chose the relationship over the job?” he asked, just because.

“It shouldn’t come to that. You could sue the pants off of them for wrongful termination! Although that probably wouldn’t go over too well and would complicate the crap out of an already complicated situation...” she sighed loudly. “For

such a cautious and levelheaded man, you had to go and fall for your boss's daughter?"

That made him chuckle. "Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are." His hand raked through his hair again. "And the thing is...I'd do it again. She's just...she's amazing." Then he laughed quietly again. "She's larger than life with this amazing laugh, and she's not afraid of anything. Her smile lights up every space she walks into and she's incredibly talented." Pausing, he wished he'd said all these things to Lily. "And I still can't believe someone like her would even be interested in a guy like me. Me. Boring Noah Wylder. I'd bet you good money that Lily could have any guy she wanted."

"Noah..."

"Hell, Jax came to visit and I was so damn jealous because they were more suited for each other! They had so much in common because of their careers..."

"Your brother can't dance," she countered. "He's got zero rhythm. It's almost embarrassing."

"Mom..."

"Noah..." she mimicked. "I am tired of you putting yourself down and beating yourself up because you think you're not good enough!"

"Come on, even you have to agree that I got shorted in the talent department. I've got a rock star and an NFL player for brothers. And what am I doing? I'm sitting here freaking out about losing a stupid job with one of the top five financial planning firms in the country."

"Okay, it's not stupid," she reminded him. "But you have to know there are other jobs with other firms that don't come with so much drama."

“Yeah, but...I was finally hitting my goal.”

“Here’s the thing, Noah, you hit your goal. Mission accomplished. You have the title and the position and whatever. If you left this job either for Lily or because of Lily, no one can take your accomplishments away from you. If anything, they’re a great selling point for the next position you apply for. Don’t let this be where you plateau. You’ve got so much more to give. Take some time to celebrate all you’ve done and how freaking awesome you are and stop worrying about all the bullshit.”

That’s when it hit him.

He’d been doing his job and finally having a life this entire month with Lily. It didn’t have to be one or the other. He didn’t have to choose.

At least...he hoped Lily wasn’t through with him because when he thought about his life and moving forward, he thought of her there beside him.

He wanted to see her dance and hear her laugh and joke about how she could only bake and not cook. He wanted to pull her into his arms every night in bed and wake up with her there every morning.

For the last month, he’d had it all, and he was so damn busy worrying about stupid bullshit and misunderstandings that he didn’t appreciate it.

Well, that was going to end now.

Or...after he found out how William was and had the chance to make Lily listen to him.

“I love you, Mom,” he said after a moment. “You have no idea how much this helped.”

“I’m glad, Noah,” she said, and he could tell she was smiling. “Now, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Stop being so hard on yourself. Give yourself permission to work a little less and get out and enjoy your life more. I know you had it the hardest out of your brothers—you saw more and you understood how much we were struggling and how much I had to work to support all of us—but that’s not your life anymore. You’ve done it. You made it out and are doing amazing things. Remember to take time to look around and be proud of yourself.” She laughed softly. “You’re a big deal, even if you’re not competing in the Super Bowl or performing at Madison Square Garden.”

With a smile, he nodded. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Are you going to see Simon on this tour?”

“I am. He’ll be here next month and I’m staying with him at the hotel. We’ll only have like a day and a half to hang out, but I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m going to see him at the show after yours. I couldn’t do the five-hour drive. He’ll be in Virginia and it’s only two hours away, so I’ll get to fuss over him a bit too.”

That made him chuckle. “And I’m sure he’ll appreciate it. Like he doesn’t get pampered enough by his entourage.”

“Oh, stop. Simon’s the least demanding person on the planet. If I know my son, I’d say he’s taking care of those people and not the other way around.”

Noah was about to disagree, but...that sounded like something his little brother would do.

Either way, he was feeling better about his life and was ready to handle whatever came next.

FIFTEEN

IT WAS ALMOST midnight when Lily's phone dinged with an incoming text.

Noah: You awake?

She was lying in bed staring at the ceiling for over an hour wondering if she should text him the exact same question. Propping herself up a bit, she yawned and typed out her response.

Lily: Yup. Can't sleep.

All day she had been semi-kicking herself for her behavior. After her mother scolded her, she'd been forced to literally sit there and think about what she did. It had been hours before they got the chance to talk to the doctors, and there had been nothing else to do but sit and wait.

And clearly her entire family thought she was in the wrong, including her father, so that was saying something—not that he'd said too much, just that she was a little rough on Noah.

The more she thought about it, the more she had to admit they were all right.

Noah: Is it okay if I call?

Rather than respond, she was the one to call him.

“Hey,” he said gruffly. She could hear how tired he was and wished she were lying in bed next to him talking instead of just being on the phone.

“Hey,” she replied softly.

“How are you holding up? I heard William’s awake and talking to everyone?”

She frowned. “How’d you know?”

“Jason’s been keeping me updated so I could update everyone in the office.” He paused. “Did you get to see him?”

“Just for a little while. My grandmother showed up and we all sort of let her take the bulk of the allotted time.”

“I’ll bet she was pretty upset. It had to be a shock.”

“Noah?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “I was a total bitch to you today. I don’t have an excuse. It’s just...ugh...it’s kind of just...habit. As I’m sure you remember from when we first met, I tend to say something snarky or...or um...”

“Bitchy?”

It wasn’t funny, but it made her smile. “Exactly. Anyway, you didn’t deserve that. The whole situation today threw me and I lashed out when I shouldn’t have. So...I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said, being the good guy that he was. “We were all out of sorts and...I get it.”

It pained her to say it, but...

“But you shouldn’t,” she argued. “You shouldn’t let me or anyone treat you like that.”

“What are you saying? You want me to fight with you about this?” And yeah, she could hear the confusion in his voice.

“Not fight, but maybe don’t just accept it and let me get away with it!”

“Lily, that’s the definition of fighting with you. You apologized and we’re good. Now, if it turns into something that keeps happening and becomes a pattern...”

So he was still talking about them moving forward.

She just wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

Mainly because it didn’t seem fair to him.

Her life was a bit of a mess right now and between her grandfather’s health, her parents being back, and her career and dance future being up in the air...

For once, she wasn’t going to take the easy or selfish way out.

For once, she was going to do the hard thing and put someone else first.

“Listen, Noah,” she began hesitantly. “Um...things are just...chaotic right now. And with your new promotion, maybe it’s best if we sort of...cool things down for a bit. After all, I don’t want to be the reason anything bad happens. I plan on having a serious talk with my father, but with all the stuff going on with my grandfather, I just feel like...”

“Wait, are you breaking up with me?” he asked incredulously. “Seriously? I sat there today and openly admitted I was with you this morning so everyone knows

about us. And in the grand scheme of things, I should have said something to your father three years ago instead of acting like a coward! We're two adults, Lily! This was one fight and suddenly we're through?"

This wasn't anything she was prepared for because unlike all her previous relationships, this one meant something.

So why am I walking away?

But she knew. There were things she wanted to do that would only hurt Noah, and he didn't deserve that, just like he didn't deserve her hateful behavior earlier today.

She hated things to be complicated and messy and everything about them and the coming days and weeks promised to be just that, so...

"Trust me," she said firmly, "I'm doing us both a favor. I... don't regret this last month and if things were different, this could have been something amazing."

"It's already something amazing, Lily! I love you!" He paused and she heard his slight huff of frustration. "Can we please get together tomorrow and talk? Maybe after a good night's sleep...?"

Her heart was breaking, but she had to stand firm. "It's for the best," she repeated and hated the tremble in her voice. "Take care of yourself, Noah. I know you're going to do great things." Tears were streaming down her face—tears she didn't even realize were building—and as she hung up, she didn't even bother to wipe them away.

And then she was crying so hard her entire body hurt. It was so much harder than she thought it would be, but she had to stay strong. Noah had his whole life planned out and the last

thing he needed was for her to come along and ruin everything he'd worked so hard for.

But damn, did she wish things could be different.

She wished her whole freaking life could be different right now.

Flinging her arm over her eyes, she murmured, "I wish *I* were different right now. Why can't I get my shit together?" And that just made her cry even more.

At some point, she fell asleep. The next time she opened her eyes, the sun was up and her phone was ringing. Groaning, she reached for it and cursed because she didn't put it on the charger after talking to Noah last night.

"H'lo?" she said sleepily.

"Oh my goodness, Lily! Are you seriously still in bed?" her mother asked with mild amusement.

"Um...yes?" Pushing her hair from her eyes, she slowly sat up. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten. We're all up at the house with Grandma and thought you were joining us. We're having a bit of a late breakfast. Why don't you get dressed and come on up?"

"Uh...sure. Sure. Just give me a few minutes."

"Okay, sweetie. We'll see you soon."

She groaned again, flopped back down against the pillows, trying to find the will to get up. Her phone was still in her hand, and when she looked down, she saw she had a few texts. Swiping the screen, her eyes went a little wide when she saw who they were from.

Drea: Hey, Lily! Hope you're doing better! Tryouts are next week, and I was curious if you were coming back to Miami for them?

Drea: Tag was asking about you and said you really should come back!

Drea: I know you moved back to NC, but if you need a place to stay, you can crash with me. Let me know! Call me!

“Well, shit,” she muttered before kicking the blankets off. It would be so easy to throw her things into a suitcase and make the drive back down to Florida just to see what happened. She'd watched enough footage of the performances to know that the group's normal choreography was something she could realistically do for a season and then get her surgery.

Hmm...

Swallowing hard, she stared at her suitcases that were still in the corner of the bedroom and wondered if this was exactly what she needed right now. A little distance between her and Noah would give them both time to heal and by the time she moved back—if she moved back—they'd be fine with running into each other again.

“It could work...”

And if it didn't, she could possibly reach out to Jax and see about tryouts for his team's squad.

Padding into the bathroom, she quickly brushed her teeth and threw her hair up into a ponytail before getting dressed. On her way out the door, she grabbed her charger and barely made it past the hot tub when she caught sight of her father.

Crap.

“Hey, Dad,” she said as he jogged over and hugged her. “I was just on my way up to have breakfast with everyone.”

He held up a bag and grinned at her. “I brought breakfast to you.”

Double crap.

“Oh!” she said with a smile, even though she felt a lump of dread crashing into the pit of her stomach. “Let’s go inside. I’ll make us some coffee.” That gave her a total of thirty seconds to calm herself down without having to look at him. For all her big words about how she was going to sit her father down and talk to him about Noah, this wasn’t the morning she would have picked.

Actually, she would have skipped it all together because it was kind of a moot point now.

Liar.

Okay, even if they weren’t dating, she owed it to Noah to make sure her father didn’t give him any grief when they were all back in the office. With a soft sigh, she made them each a cup of coffee and finally turned to face him.

“I was wondering how long you were going to keep your back to me,” he said with a hint of amusement. “Thank you.” Taking the mug from her, he sat down at the small kitchen island. “How are you doing this morning?”

Deciding to stand on the opposite side, Lily cradled her mug in her hand. “I’m okay. Tired, but okay.” She took a small sip of her coffee. “Have you talked to the doctors this morning?”

He nodded. “They’re doing some tests today so we can all go up after lunch.”

“Oh. Okay. That’s good.”

Lucas simply watched her, looking as relaxed as he could be. “How’s your hip?”

Placing her mug down, she rested her hands on the island. “It’s fine. I’ve been dancing for over a week now with no issues.” Then she laughed softly. “Well, other than being a little out of shape and needing to soak in the hot tub every night.”

He nodded. “You know, back when I blew out my knee, I had two surgeries and things still weren’t right. I was never going to play football again with my knee in that condition.”

She immediately knew where he was going with this. “Dad, it’s not the same thing. You had a catastrophic injury. This isn’t like that.”

But clearly he wasn’t listening. “I suffered for two years because I was too stubborn to get the last surgery. I knew it wasn’t going to change my career—that was over. But it would have made a huge difference in my life and my mental health.”

This story wasn’t anything new. “You also might not have gotten together with Mom, so...maybe it was a good thing.”

Now he laughed. “Okay, you’ve got me there.” Then he let out a long breath. “I get the fear, Lily. I understand it. You want someone to tell you you’re going to go back to being exactly the same as you were before, or even better. But... there are no guarantees, and the way you are after this surgery may be an even better version of yourself. You’ve been pushing yourself so hard with dance ever since you were a kid. Our bodies aren’t meant to be punished like that. As we get older...”

“Dad, please. I’m hardly old...”

“You’ve been dancing since you were three,” he reminded her. “So you’ve been at this for well over twenty years.” Pausing, he took a sip of his coffee. “I get that you don’t want to do this, but the reality is that you need to do it.”

Lily huffed. “And I know that, but I don’t need to do it right now. I just got a text from a friend down in Miami about the tryouts. I’m thinking about going,” she rambled on. “I can dance and cheer for the season and then have the surgery.” She shrugged. “I know my body, and this will all be fine.”

Lucas nodded slowly. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course!”

“Why?”

She frowned. “Why what?”

“Why are you looking to go and try out for this squad when it’s ultimately the style of dance that caused you to get hurt?”

“Because it’s something I’ve never done before,” she replied simply. “And I believe in challenging myself. I feel like I’ve done so many other styles in different arenas and this sounds fun.” She shrugged. “I mean...I’ve been doing this for so long and it’s great to start something new, master it, and move on. Plus, the uniforms are cute.” With a wink, she picked up her mug again. “I love going into each of these things as the new girl and proving to everyone how I am more than up to the challenge.”

Her father’s huff or irritation warned her that whatever he was about to say, she wasn’t going to like it. “Lily, I’m gonna be blunt here.”

“O-kay...”

“Do you want to dance because you love to dance or because you just like having all the attention and the spotlight on you? Because that’s what it’s beginning to sound like. And while there’s nothing wrong with that, per se, it also makes you seem a little...shallow.”

“What?!” she cried defensively. “How could you...?”

“And it doesn’t make me feel good to say that to you, but I’ve never lied to you. Are you doing this to avoid...I don’t know...settling down? Or having to find a job or career that isn’t about dance?”

“I know I don’t want to work for Montgomerys!” she snapped before pacing away from the island and back again. “And I know if I stop dancing for too long, you’re all going to start pressuring me about conforming and fitting in! Hell, that’s what Grandpa did to you!”

His eyes went wide and he seemed to freeze for a moment. “Okay...let’s just...calm down. My position with Montgomerys was something I always thought I’d do after my football career was over. I was a natural at it. When I got injured, I resented having that as my only option. But seriously, I could have done anything else I wanted. I could have gone into coaching or broadcasting. I had a lot of opportunities that I could have pursued, but I was too stubborn. But your destiny has never been to work in finance, Lily. We all know that.”

“Are you sure? Because Grandpa...”

“Your grandfather thinks everyone should work for Montgomerys!” he said with a laugh. “My cousins James and

Carter didn't go into finance! They carved their own paths and no one resents them for it!"

"Pfft..."

"Okay, at one time, maybe there was some resentment, but that has nothing to do with you," he reasoned. "If you didn't dance, you could do anything you want."

"That's just it, Dad," she said miserably. "All I want is to dance." With a shrug, she added, "And you're right; a lot of it is because I enjoy the spotlight on me but that's because it's always been there. I don't know how to function without it."

"Damn," he said gruffly, reaching across the island for her hand. "I had no idea you felt this way."

"No one does," she admitted. "I've kept it to myself because I know it doesn't make me look good. And you're right, it's shallow. But...it's all I have."

"It's not, though. There is so much more to you and you don't have to decide right now what the next fifty years of your life look like." He squeezed her hand. "Have you talked to Noah about this?"

She frowned again. "Sort of, but...it doesn't matter. That's over."

Straightening, Lucas looked at her like she were crazy. "Because of yesterday?"

"That and...other things."

"Lil..." he prodded.

"Look, you should be happy, okay?" she blurted out. "We all know you've been giving him grief ever since I kissed him three years ago! You knew it wasn't his fault, but you still dogged him all this time! Do you think I want to be the reason

you keep doing that to him?” Pulling her hand free, she paced again. “You were always the coolest dad and I was mortified when I heard how crappy you’ve been treating Noah! He’s an amazing person who works super hard for your company and he’s overcome so damn much in his life! He doesn’t deserve to walk around every day in fear of what kind of shit you’re going to throw at him!”

“Lily...”

“No, I’m serious!” she went on. “Did you know what an awful childhood he’s had? Or how his father was basically the worst and was never around? Noah put himself through college and then worked hard so his brothers could have a better life! And once they all got their careers going, they helped their mother go back to nursing school!”

“He told us that in Asheville...”

“He’s got this amazing plan in place so that he never goes backwards, so he’ll never know that level of poverty or helplessness ever again. So you need to back off and leave him alone, okay? Because no one is going to work harder for you than Noah Wylder! You should be thankful to have someone like that working for you!”

“And you should be lucky to be in love with someone like that,” he said carefully.

“Exactly!” Her eyes went wide and she gasped. “I...I mean...”

“Lily...”

But she was already shaking her head wildly. “I won’t do that to him. He’s already had to work for the last several years being afraid of you. I’m not going to make him suffer more. For once, I’m not being selfish!”

“You’re not selfish!” he argued. “And yeah, okay, I was kind of a hard-ass to Noah. But in my defense, the whole thing looked like a setup, and I was more upset with your grandfather about it.”

“Seriously?” she mocked. “Did you treat Grandpa the same as you treated Noah?”

“Well, no, but...”

“So you were actually more upset with Noah because... why?”

Rolling his eyes, Lucas shifted on the stool. “Look, as a father, I don’t want to see any guy groping one of my daughters. That’s a thing, it’s a rule, and it’s allowed,” he said firmly. “I looked at Noah like he was taking advantage of the situation.”

“Okay, but even after I explained the situation to you, you still gave him a hard time!”

Lowering his head, he nodded. “You’re right. I don’t even have an excuse except...I hold grudges. Ask anyone, they’ll all tell you I’m a jerk like that.”

“Yeah, well...”

“But if I promised to apologize to Noah, would that make things better?”

Her heart wanted to yell, “Yes!” but her head was saying the opposite. “This is for the best,” she said quietly. “Noah’s got so much going for him and he’s pretty structured. I’m a chaotic mess and I don’t know if I want to stay here in Charlotte or go dance in Miami or Nashville or Dallas...” She looked up at her father sadly. “I’m not good for him.”

He studied her for several long moments. “But you love him.”

She nodded. “I do. And that’s why this hurts so much.” Swallowing hard, she nodded again. “Didn’t you walk away from Mom to get your life together?”

“Sometimes I hate how much you know about all my mistakes,” he murmured.

“Everyone says we’re a lot alike,” she said, giving him a small grin.

“And I’m sorry for that. I messed up my life a lot by my own making and I’m watching you do the same, Lil. Learn from my mistakes; don’t repeat them.”

For a minute, she let that sink in, but ultimately, she knew she was doing the right thing. “I know what I’m doing,” she told him. “It’s what’s best for Noah.” She paused because even saying his name hurt. “And for me.”

Lucas finally stood and walked around the island and pulled her into his embrace, kissing the top of her head, which was easy because she was quite a bit shorter than him. “I love you, baby girl, and I hate to see you hurting like this.” He sighed. “Tell me what I can do to make it better.”

She held on tight and wished there were something he could magically do, but...there wasn’t. “Just...trust me, okay?” she whispered. “I’m finally growing up and I need to do this all on my own.”

She felt him nod. “Know that I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you too.”



The rest of the week had been a blur of long days and longer nights. Noah worked, doing everything he could to make things as smooth as possible for when Mac, Lucas, and Jason came back to work.

And William too, of course.

But once the weekend hit, he was lost, miserable, and alone.

Basically, he was back to living the way he was a month ago before Lily Montgomery came crashing back into his life.

His emotions were all over the place—he was angry and full of rage one minute, and then sad and depressed the next. It was like riding the biggest, scariest roller coaster and he hated rides.

Actually, he hated everything right now.

Especially himself.

He'd spent so much damn time obsessing and worrying about his job and whining about his career that he'd pushed away the most amazing woman he'd ever met. They were complete opposites and he knew that should be enough of a deterrent to feel thankful that she was brave enough to pull the plug first, but...he missed her.

He missed her so much that it physically hurt.

All day Saturday, he sat in front of the TV and let himself simply zone out—tune out the rest of the world because he didn't want to see or talk to anyone. He ordered food to eat when he was hungry, and watched shows and movies that he really had no interest in just to pass the time.

When he woke up Sunday morning, it was to the sound of someone banging on his door and holding down the doorbell.

“What the hell...?” His first thought was that it was Lily coming to say she made a mistake and that was the only reason he stumbled out of bed, slipped on a pair of sweatpants, and ran for the door. He raked a hand through his hair, pulled open the door, and... “What the hell?”

His brothers were standing there with goofy grins, a tray of coffee and a box from a local bakery. Jax pushed Simon through the doorway. “Quick, before his legion of fans spot him,” he teased before clapping Noah on the shoulder. “Morning!”

“I’ve got to be dreaming...” he mumbled, shutting the door. But his brothers were in the kitchen making themselves comfortable. “What’s going on?”

“Mom called,” Simon said as he took the lid off his coffee and took a sip. “I literally have six hours before a car is going to be here to pick me up, so...what’s going on?”

He looked at Jax, who took a huge bite out of a donut before asking, “You and Lily broke up?”

Shit.

Walking closer, he took one coffee and moved to the living room to sit down. “Yeah. She broke up with me. I don’t see why that means you both had to come.”

“You’re welcome,” Jax said, dripping sarcasm. “Jeez, we’re here because we’re worried, okay? I know I gave you some crap when I was here a few weeks ago, but I genuinely thought things were okay. What happened?”

Leaning back against the cushions, he told them about the day William was taken to the hospital. “It was like a kick to

the chest when she accused me of trying to kiss up to her father,” he said, his anger coming to the surface again. “Like...after everything we’d been through, that was her first thought and...it sucks.”

“Okay, but...chalk it up to a bad day,” Simon chimed in. “I’m sure once she calms down...”

Noah was already shaking his head. “She broke up with me that night. Over the phone.” He muttered a curse. “Now I’m stuck working for her family so every day will be a reminder of what I had and what I lost and why.”

“First, you’re not stuck,” Jax reminded him. “You can go work for a million other financial companies. No one’s forcing you to stay here.”

“Exactly!” Simon agreed. “Come work for me full-time. I can hook you up with a few clients and you can do this all on your own. You don’t need a place like Montgomerys. You’re more than capable of starting your own business. With Jax and me as your clients...”

“And it’s not like you’re poaching,” Jax added. “You kept us personal and not part of your Montgomerys clients, so technically, you’re already ahead of the game. You’re more than ready to take the leap, Noah. You’ve proven that you know what you’re doing.”

Sighing, he shook his head. “I don’t know. That wasn’t part of my plan...”

“Neither was meeting someone like Lily and falling in love,” Simon reminded him. “At least...I’m guessing that’s why this is a big deal, right? Because you’re in love with her?”

Noah shot him a look. “What exactly did Mom say to you?”

“Just that she was worried about you, and it was over a woman,” Simon said with a shrug. “That was a first, so I called Jax and we were able to coordinate this little breakfast surprise! So, how can we help?”

Groaning, he took a sip of his coffee.

“Take a few days off and join me on the tour,” Simon suggested. “I’m heading to Atlanta tonight for a show, then it’s on to Myrtle Beach, and Nashville before coming back here. It’ll be fun! When’s the last time you did something fun?”

Every day with Lily...

“I can’t just take off. William’s still in the hospital and...”

“And it’s not your company,” Jax stated firmly. “You’re entitled to a life, Noah! You’re not responsible for holding everything together for the Montgomerys! Besides, if you want a change of scenery where everything’s happy and upbeat all the damn time, go on tour with Simon. Every day’s like a trip to fucking Disneyland with him.”

Fortunately, Simon didn’t take offense. “Nothing wrong with putting a positive spin on life. What’s the point of being miserable? And why would I be? I’m living my dream! I get to sing all the time and make people happy! It’s a great feeling!”

Jax glared at him. “Okay, Pollyanna. Great. Focus that weird energy on Noah. He needs it.”

“I don’t need any weird energy,” Noah countered. “Not all relationships work. I know that. It just sucks that this one didn’t. There’s no reason for me to skip work and go on tour with Simon—no offense. I’m an adult and I need to act like one. So I’m going to go to work tomorrow, see what kind of situation I’m going to be dealing with now that everyone’s back, and then I can decide. I’ve got it all worked out.”

They both stared at him for a solid minute.

“Then why are we even here?” Jax asked.

“Beats me. Ask Mom,” Noah muttered before getting up to get himself a donut. He missed the look his brothers exchanged, but when he faced them, he was smiling. “I’ve dealt with disappointment for most of my life. This is just another one. Next time, I’ll be more cautious.”

“Dude, if you get any more cautious, you’re just going to stand still and never do anything! And enough with being a damn martyr!” Jax said loudly. “We get it! You struggled because you were the oldest. You were the responsible one who had to help raise us. Believe me, we appreciate it, but it’s time you got a freaking life!”

“I have one!”

“Do you?” Simon asked cautiously. “Because it seems like everything—even your dating life this time—was still hyper-focused on your job and your need to stick to your financial plan. Where’s the fun in that?”

“Life’s not only about having fun.”

At least his life wasn’t.

“Okay, that’s fair,” Simon agreed, “but it should include fun. You’re not just your job, Noah. You’re more than that. What’s the worst that would happen if you called in sick to work tomorrow?”

“But I’m not sick.”

Simon, who never got mad, definitely looked annoyed. “Work with me here. For just a minute. What’s the worst that would happen?”

Noah shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“You’re not dealing with life-or-death situations,” Jax said, reaching for another donut. “There are other people in the office who can take a call. The owners should all be back to work tomorrow, so...”

He was already shaking his head. “I’m not a liar and I’m not going to run away from whatever’s going to come. I need to know how to proceed from here and that’s what I’m going to do and that’s final.” Then he looked over at Simon. “But I will take an extra day or two off when you’re here in a few weeks. Will that work?”

“If that’s the most I’m going to get out of you, then yeah,” his brother said with a smile. “You know we’re here because we care about you, right?”

“Oh, Lord...” Jax groaned.

Simon merely groaned back. “Unclench, Jax. I get that you’re not comfortable talking about feelings, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us aren’t. I talk about them all the time.”

“No, you *sing* about feelings,” Jax corrected. “Two completely different things.”

“You’re not going to win this, Simon,” Noah told him. “But thank you for what you said. And believe it or not, I really am glad you guys are here. I just hate the reason for it.” He walked back over to the sofa and sat down, and his brothers did the same. He glanced over at Simon. “So...six hours, huh?”

Simon nodded. “Unfortunately.”

“We obviously can’t go anywhere because you’ll get recognized, so how about we order more food, I’ll set up the Xbox, and we just fuck around until it’s time for you to go?”

“Yes!” Jax cheered. “I love that idea!”

And while in a perfect world, he would be spending the day with Lily, he supposed spending a day hanging out with his brothers was a pretty awesome alternative.

It was a few minutes later, when they had a game picked and were getting comfortable, that Noah looked at them both and smiled.

“Thanks, guys. I needed this.”

“We got you, bro,” Jax said. “Always.”

For the next six hours, Noah felt better than he thought possible. They ate pizza, wings, tacos, and an almost obscene amount of chips and cookies. More than once, he laughed so hard that it actually hurt. It was a perfect day.

He was far from being over Lily, but it was nice to know his family was there for him. And maybe, just maybe, he was going to be okay.

SIXTEEN

THURSDAY MORNING, Lily stood and looked up at the massive stadium in front of her. There were several hundred women lined up outside, just like her, looking to try out for the cheerleading squad.

She'd left home yesterday and opted to fly down to Miami and rent a car. Leaving Charlotte this time was by far the hardest. Her grandfather was home but had a long recovery ahead of him. Her grandmother was a wreck with worry. Her mother had begged her not to go, but ultimately said she understood. Her father had simply wished her luck.

"I can't believe how many people are here already," Drea said as she stood beside her. "I thought we were early."

Lily nodded. "It just means we'll be standing out in the sun for a shorter amount of time than the rest of them, right?"

"Ooh...good point! Okay, let's do this!"

She grabbed her duffel bag that seemed to weigh almost as much as she did, and then followed Drea across the parking lot to join the line of dancers. It was almost two hours before the doors opened and then they were led inside through queue after queue until they finally reached the area where they could do their hair and makeup and then stretch.

It was ten a.m. and she was already exhausted.

Squeezing in between two other dancers in front of a mirror, Lily checked her hair and makeup and then seriously stared at her reflection and realized she felt...nothing. There was no excitement, no butterflies, just...nothing.

Was she just being arrogant, believing she had this?

No.

Was she maybe just distracted because of her worrying over her grandfather's health?

No.

Letting out a long sigh, Lily took a step back and was shocked when someone nearly knocked her out of the way to claim the spot she'd just vacated.

Ugh...I didn't miss this...

This is what every tryout day was like, no matter what the audition was for—tons of dancers vying for a small number of openings, with everyone practically climbing over one another while trying to get ready.

Yeah, she hadn't missed this.

But...she was here and she was going to do this. She'd studied the choreography before her injury. It wasn't anything like she was used to, but she knew today would be more of a freestyle audition and if the judges liked you, they'd invite you back for semi-finals where you'd actually learn their specific style of dance.

“Attention, Dancers,” a voice called out over the speakers. “Please take your places down in the stadium seating. We'll be starting in ten minutes!”

“This is it!” Drea said excitedly. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Lily told her, forcing some cheeriness into her voice.

After that, it was a lot of sitting and listening to instructions, followed by sitting and waiting for your number to be called so you could get up and dance for two minutes. And then...more sitting and waiting until they announced who will advance to the next round of auditions.

Both Lily and Drea made it.

“Oh my goodness! We should celebrate!” Drea said as they walked out to their cars. “Do you want to grab some dinner?”

“You know what? I’m actually exhausted. I think I’m going to just go back to the hotel and crash. Besides, we need to be back here tomorrow early again, so...”

“You’re right. I know if I go out to eat I’m going to want a cheeseburger and that would be bad,” Drea said with a laugh. When they got to their cars, she hugged Lily. “I really wish you would have stayed with me. I feel bad that you’re going back to the hotel all by yourself.”

“It’s fine. Really.” She hugged her back. “I’ll see you in the morning.” As she got in her car and drove away, she felt mildly guilty about how she hadn’t mentioned that the hotel where she was staying was actually a five-star resort with a phenomenal room service menu.

The drive was relatively short and she went right to her room and ordered a grilled chicken salad for dinner, then immediately went to shower before it arrived. Once she was done, she put her hair up in a towel, put on her robe, sat down on the bed with her phone, and sent out a group text to her parents, sisters, and grandparents.

Lily: Back at the hotel. Made it to semi-finals!

Then she got comfortable and smiled as responses started almost immediately.

Mom: Congratulations!

Becca: Awesome!! Knew you could do it!

Sloane: Amazing!! Yay you!

Grandpa: That's my girl!

Grandma: So proud of you!

Dad: Way to go, Lily!

And as much as she loved their enthusiasm, tears stung her eyes because she wished she were home with them instead. She'd give anything for a hug instead of a text.

“Dammit,” she muttered, wiping her eyes. She was getting really tired of being such a weepy mess lately. So, she chatted with them until her dinner arrived and then wished everyone a goodnight before turning on the TV and eating her salad.

What she really wanted was a bacon cheeseburger.

“After the auditions are over, that will be my reward.”

But the auditions seemed to go on and on and on.

Friday was the semi-finals, and both she and Drea advanced to the final round.

Saturday was a prep class with Tag—something Lily had been reluctant to go to because she had a feeling he was going to push her with choreography that she was trying to avoid. Fortunately, he didn't, but he was overly critical of her solo dance she had prepared for finals.

“You’re playing it safe, Lily,” he said. “That’s not the dancer I remember. There are a hundred other girls who are willing to take the risks to be noticed!”

“That may be, but I’m unwilling to hurt myself and get noticed because I’m on the floor again,” she challenged. “So if my routine isn’t risky enough, but my skills are impeccable, then I’m okay with that.”

He’d merely shrugged her off and moved on to help Drea.

The prep class and practice time took all day. When she got back to the hotel that night, she was tired, sweaty, and hungry, but still ordered her boring grilled chicken salad for the third night in a row.

Sunday was a day of rest and Lily got up early and went down to the pool to get a little sun. Finals were on Tuesday and tomorrow, she and Drea were doing another prep class and practicing their solos.

And she still had little to no enthusiasm for it.

Sitting down on a chaise, she got comfortable. Closing her eyes, she laid back and then groaned when her phone rang, but smiled when she saw her dad’s face on the screen.

“Hey, Dad!”

“Hey, tiny dancer! How’s it going?” he teased.

“Ha, ha,” she deadpanned. “Today is a rest day, and that’s what I’m doing. I’m actually down by the pool. What’s going on up there? Everyone okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I think your grandfather’s going to try to go to the office tomorrow. Not for long, but he wants to go in and check on things. You know how he is.”

She laughed softly. “I do. But this must mean he’s feeling good.”

“He is, but...I still wish he’d stay home another week and just relax. Unfortunately, he doesn’t know how to do that.”

“It runs in the family.”

“And yet you’re sunning yourself poolside, so...”

“Yeah, well...it’s been a tough week,” she admitted, and something in her voice must have given her away.

“Okay, out with it, Lil. What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Really?”

She sighed. “Fine...it’s just...I don’t know...this isn’t... it’s not...” She groaned. “I’m going through the motions, and I honestly don’t care if I make it. Part of me was seriously hoping I wouldn’t make it to finals.”

“Wow,” he murmured. “I’m honestly a little surprised you admitted that.”

“Why lie? It kind of feels good to say it out loud.”

“So, why are you still there? Why not just come home?”

She didn’t have to think about it. “Because I’m not a quitter.”

“And that’s very admirable, but if you stay and, let’s say, make it into their training camp when you really don’t want to, you’re taking a spot away from someone who does,” he reasoned. “And that’s worse than quitting.”

Ugh...she hated when he was right.

“I have until Tuesday to think it through. I want to make sure I’m doing this—or not doing this—for the right reasons.”

“What reasons could there possibly be? You obviously wanted to do this enough that you were willing to head back down to Miami on short notice.”

“I know, but this was my dream five months ago. Is it still my dream now?” With a sigh, she added, “And am I going to want to keep auditioning for the next ten weeks until they announce the squad? I mean...this is a big time commitment.”

“It sounds like it. Are you going to stay in the hotel for all that time?”

“Well...if I make it to training camp, I’ll have to get an apartment. I just didn’t want to have to deal with that until I was sure it was necessary.” Another sigh. “You know, all the other shows and productions I was in weren’t like this. We auditioned and either we got the part or we didn’t. It wasn’t this long, drawn-out thing where you’re essentially in limbo for almost three months.”

“Mm-hmm...” her father hummed. “Take the next day or two and really think about this, Lil. You know you always have a place here at home. And if you don’t want to move back in with us and want to find a place of your own, we’ll help you find that too.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I’m your father and I love you and want you to be happy.”

Happy? What was that like? It might have only been a little less than two weeks, but it felt like a lifetime since she’d felt pure happiness.

She missed Noah.

Unfortunately, she didn't want to admit that to her father but she was also dying to know how he was.

"So, um...how does it feel to be back in the office?" she asked. "I'm sure after a month off it was kind of a drag to go back and have to catch up on everything."

"It wasn't too bad," he admitted. "We have a great team and I had a couple of guys handling my clients for me, so it was pretty easy to step back in. I had several reports waiting for me. Once I read them, it almost felt like I hadn't missed anything."

"Oh, well...good for you!"

And not good for me because that was totally vague!

"What about Uncle Mac and Uncle Jason? They doing okay with being back without Grandpa?"

"Yup! Like me, they read over their reports and could just get back to it."

"I'm sure Sara was glad you're all back," she went on. "You know, what's Montgomerys without any Montgomerys in the office, right?"

"Lily?"

"Hmm?"

"If you want to ask about Noah..."

Dammit!

"I shouldn't, right? It's none of my business anymore. And it's not like you're hovering or hanging out with him where you can tell me anything specific, so..."

"He looks...sad," Lucas murmured. "And before you ask, I haven't talked to him other than to thank him for looking after

my clients. I learned my lesson and didn't want to bring up anything personal in the office, so..."

"Oh." It was crazy to be both happy and sad over him looking sad, but...she was. The question of whether or not she should call him was on the tip of her tongue, but ultimately she kept it to herself. She missed him so much and regretted everything about the way she ended things, but calling Noah would only confuse them both and it wouldn't be fair to either of them.

Or would it?

Ugh...I am so confused!

On the opposite side of the pool, there was a group of little girls dancing around in the shallow end. Lily couldn't help but smile because they looked to be sisters or cousins—they had a definite family vibe—and the girls were laughing and giggling and it reminded her of vacations when she was little. They were just being silly and if she listened hard enough, they were singing along to something by Taylor Swift.

"Lil? You still there?"

"I am. Sorry. I'm looking at this group of little girls dancing and playing in the pool and it reminded me of me, Becca, and Sloane when we were kids."

He chuckled. "You were always trying to get them to dance with you."

"And they always hated it," she said with a laugh of her own. "Listen, I'm going to get some sun and maybe go splash around in the pool with these kids. I feel the need to join the fun."

"You should. You were always a good teacher. Your sisters might not have appreciated it, but your cousins did. Love you,

kiddo.”

“Thanks, Dad. Love you too.”

Standing, she scooped her stuff up and moved over to the other side of the pool and prayed she didn't come off like some creeper. Luckily, it only took a few minutes to introduce herself and join their group, and before she knew it, not only were the kids dancing with her, but some parents too!



It was Sunday night and Noah was clearing away his dinner dishes when there was a loud knock on his door. He seriously hoped it wasn't his brothers back to check on him, but he had no idea who else it could be.

“Lucas?” he croaked. “Um...hey. What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

“Uh...sure. Sure. Come in.” He stepped back and felt a wave of panic wash over him. What the hell was Lucas Montgomery doing at his place? Had something happened to William? To Lily? Was he here to fire him? Swallowing hard, he walked over to the kitchen. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure,” Lucas said, looking around. “Water will be just fine. Thanks.”

Grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge, he handed one to Lucas and then motioned for them to sit down in the living room. “So...what can I do for you?”

Lucas let out a long breath. “First, I wanted to say I'm sorry.” He turned his head and looked Noah square in the eye.

“I’ve been a dick to you for three years, and that’s not acceptable. I kept waiting for you to fight back, but you didn’t. You were always respectful and you could have easily gone to my father or human resources and lodged a complaint, but you didn’t. You didn’t do anything wrong, but you were the only one in that situation I seemed to take it all out on, so again, I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “Thank you for saying that. I know it’s all in the past now, but you have to know that I really didn’t...”

Lucas held up his hand. “Let’s not rehash it. My daughter was being a brat and dragged you into the middle of something, and I didn’t want to be mad at her, but I should have.”

Again, he nodded.

“Next, thank you for the way you handled everything while my brothers and I were away. You were a good leader for everyone in the office and you did a fantastic job with each of our clients. We threw that all at you at the last minute, and you rose to the occasion and did so well. Your promotion is greatly deserved.”

Wow. Color me surprised...

“However...”

Here it comes...

“I need to know if this is truly what you want to do,” Lucas went on. “Do you see yourself staying in Charlotte and working for us, or do you have dreams of branching out on your own?”

He thought of the conversation with his brothers from last week and knew that he was torn.

“I always thought that someday I’d have my own firm,” he admitted. “But I don’t feel like it’s something I’m prepared to do right now.”

Lucas nodded. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, can I ask you something else?”

“Sure.”

“Do you love my daughter?” he asked bluntly.

“More than anything,” Noah responded without hesitation. “But I can’t be the reason the two of you aren’t getting along or the reason she sacrifices her career. There are things she wants to do that aren’t going to happen here in Charlotte.” Ducking his head, he studied his hands for a moment before looking up at Lucas again. “I spent a lot of years focused on my career because I needed that security and stability, but I wasn’t really living. Your daughter made me feel alive. She made me happy. Without her, I’m living a fairly boring life. I fear she’d feel the same way if I asked her to stay.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Lucas replied cryptically.

“What do you mean?”

Standing, Lucas pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket—actually, several pieces of paper. “She’s in Miami, and she’s miserable. She’s doing that audition thing, but I know she’s not into it. I think the two of you deserve better than this. You have the next several days off. There’s a company jet waiting for you at the airport to take you to Miami, and then a car will be waiting at the airport to take you to the hotel.”

Noah shot to his feet. “Um...what?”

Lucas got almost menacingly close. “If you love Lily, then you’ll go to her and make her see that the two of you deserve another chance. If she wants to dance, then we’ll work something out for you within Montgomerys, Noah. Your job is secure—and not just because of Lily, but because you’re an incredibly valued member of our team and we don’t want to lose you.” He took a step back and paused. “So, the choice is yours. If you want to go, I can drive you to the airport right now.”

Looking at the papers in his hands, he saw it was a travel itinerary and the name of the hotel and room number of where Lily was staying. He looked up again. “I...I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say you’ll take care of my girl and make her happy.”

A slow smile crossed his face. “That’s what I want more than anything.”

“Okay then. Go pack!”

For a moment he just stood there, but when Lucas looked at him like he were crazy, Noah sprang into action. He tossed a bunch of stuff onto the bed before asking, “How many days should I pack for?”

“At least three!”

“Done,” he murmured, grabbing a suitcase from the closet, and quickly putting his clothes in it. Then he threw a toiletry case together and put that in the suitcase before zipping it shut. If there was anything else he needed, he’d get it in Miami. After that, he stepped into his closet and changed clothes before re-joining Lucas in the living room. He was about to grab his laptop when Lucas stopped him.

“No working,” he said firmly. “Trust me. The office will survive without you.” Glancing at his watch, he said, “Let’s go. I’ll call our pilot on the way so everything will be ready to go.”

He nodded, but it all felt like an out-of-body experience. He’d never done anything like this before and he kept looking around his apartment in case he was forgetting anything.

“Just grab your phone and charger,” Lucas said as they were walking out the door. “Everything else can be purchased when you land if you need it.”

Locking the door, he followed Lucas to the elevator and was almost afraid to say anything.

Lucas, however, didn’t have the same problem.

“If you hurt her, you know I’ll have to kill you, right?” he said seriously, and Noah’s heart sank. He was about to respond when Lucas burst out laughing. “Sorry! I just had to say it once. It felt like something a dad is supposed to say, but you looked like you were about to pass out, so…”

“Yeah, great. I’m the wimp who can’t take a joke,” he mumbled.

“Hey,” Lucas said quietly. “No one thinks that of you. I think you’re pretty damn brave to be doing what you’re doing. Just like it was brave to admit to all of us last week in the hospital that you were with Lily the morning my father got sick. All I ask is that you not lie to me, Noah. I might not like what you have to say, but I’ll respect you more for speaking up.”

“Duly noted.”

They were out in Lucas’ car and heading to the airport and Noah’s mind was spinning with what he was going to do and

say when he got to Lily's room. Was she going to be happy? Mad? Would she tell him to leave? Would she...?

"Noah, when you get to the hotel," Lucas began, as if reading his mind, "you need to be prepared for something."

He frowned.

"She's down there auditioning because she thinks it's what she was supposed to do, but it's not. I can't tell her that. Hell, I don't think you can either. But if she decides to stick it out and she makes it to training camp..."

"There's a training camp?"

Lucas nodded. "There is. And it lasts for ten weeks. But if she does it and you want to stay, we'll make it work for both of you, okay? There are no obstacles."

He thought about that for a moment. "For me there is."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously. No offense, but I really don't want this to be like...you know...a family thing. I feel like you're meddling and playing matchmaker here—a lot like your dad did with your whole family—and I'm not sure how I feel about it."

Then he waited for Lucas to get mad.

But he didn't. He laughed.

Hard.

"That is possibly the greatest compliment you could have given me," Lucas said with an easy grin. "I learned from the best, and I promise, once you land in Miami, you're on your own and I'll only help if you ask. Is that fair?"

"It is. Thanks."

After that, everything was a bit of a blur. There was a private section of the airport where the Montgomery jet was. The plane was spacious and kind of awesome and Noah felt a little out of his element as the flight attendant got him settled and offered him a cocktail. It was a little after seven and he figured, why not? So, he sipped a glass of wine, watched a movie, and before he knew it, he was on the ground in Miami.

Now came the hard part.

It took a few minutes to find the car that was there for him, and then it took almost thirty minutes to get to the hotel. Noah looked over the paperwork and saw there wasn't a reservation for a room for him and said a silent prayer that he wasn't going to need one.

The entire ride up to the sixteenth floor in the elevator, he practiced what he was going to say, which wasn't much. All he managed to think of was, "Hey, Lily..."

Yeah. He was totally going to screw this up.

The doors opened, and he let out a long breath before stepping out into the hallway. She had the room at the end of the hall and it felt like a mile away. When he finally knocked on the door, he knew he was going to have to think fast.

She opened the door and her beautiful eyes went wide. "Noah? Oh my God!" And then she was wrapped around him, kissing him, nearly knocking him on his ass. His arms instantly banded around her as he held her close, kissing her back.

Definitely not the greeting he was expecting, but so much better!

He reluctantly broke the kiss and carefully put her back on her feet. "Hey, beautiful," he said softly.

Her smile was everything and her eyes shone bright with unshed tears. “What are you doing here? How did you even know where to find me?”

Picking up his suitcase, he nodded toward the room. “Can I come in?”

“Of course!” Lily stood aside as he walked in and closed the door behind her. “I’m so confused right now,” she said with a small laugh. “I mean...”

Putting the suitcase down, he turned to face her and really looked at her. She looked tired and unsure of herself and not at all like the incredibly confident woman he knew.

And yet, she was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

“I missed you,” he said, and then decided to lay all his cards out on the table. “I’ve been miserable since that night. I wanted to call you back and come to the guesthouse and just... make you talk to me, but I also knew you were dealing with a lot so I was trying to give you space.”

Taking a step toward her, he went on.

“I was being my usual, overly cautious self and I’m done with that. I’ve been living my life that way for too long and I’m over it.” He was standing close to her now and reached up to gently cup her face. “You, Lily Montgomery, make my life worth living. You bring laughter and color and music and love to it, and without you, I’m back to being just a sad, numbers nerd.”

She giggled before biting her lip. “You’re too sexy to be just a numbers nerd...”

But Noah was shaking his head. “Without you, that’s exactly who I am. I know you said things are too chaotic right

now and we should...”

Her hand instantly covered his mouth. “I was wrong! God...” Lowering her hand, she took a step back. “In the moment, I swore it was the best option and that it was the least selfish thing I could do,” she explained. “But then you said you loved me and all I wanted to say was that I loved you too, but...but...”

This time, he was the one to silence her with a kiss.

Everything in him relaxed because she loved him.

Other than his mom and brothers, no one had ever said that to him before, and he needed a minute to let it all sink in and savor it.

Just like he was savoring the taste of her.

It was crazy how much he’d missed her, and as much as he would be more than happy to keep doing this and then carry her across the room to the bed, there were things they needed to talk about first.

I hate being this way...

Once again, he was the one to break the kiss, but smiled at the dazzled look on her face.

“You’re really here,” she whispered.

“I’m really here,” he replied softly, resting his forehead on hers. “I think we need to talk, though. We spent a lot of time in our own little world and not talking about things that we really should have been discussing. We need to know what we’re both thinking. I don’t want any surprises like that morning at the hospital.”

“I know. I still can’t believe I even said that to you.” Taking his hand in hers, she led them across the room to the

sofa. There was a pair of sliding glass doors and when he stepped closer, he asked, “Is that the ocean?”

She nodded.

Noah stood there in wonder. “This is the closest I’ve ever been to the beach.”

Lily stood beside him and then slid open the doors to the balcony and led him out. “Close your eyes and take a deep breath,” she told him. “It’s too dark to get the total sensory experience, but it’s even better when you’re down there with your toes in the sand. We’ll do that tomorrow.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle as he opened his eyes and looked at her. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

Moving in close, she wrapped her arms around him. “As long as you hold me, there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do.”

There were a couple of chairs on the balcony and he figured they could talk out there just as easily as they could inside. Noah sat and was about to pull Lily down onto his lap, but if they were going to have a serious discussion, then she should be in her own chair. He waited until she sat to speak.

“How’s the audition process going?”

She shrugged. “Alright, I guess.”

He could tell she wasn’t being totally honest with him, so he simply waited her out.

With a huff, she explained. “It’s just not what I thought it would be. The way I felt when I first came here six months ago isn’t how I feel right now at all. I’m going through the motions, but...” Another sigh. “This isn’t what I want.”

“O-kay...what do you want?”

She didn't respond right away, so that told him she was genuinely thinking about it and not just saying what she thought he wanted to hear.

“That week that I spent renting studio space? I loved just being able to dance, to just put on the music and choreograph whatever I wanted, with no real limitations other than the ones I put on myself. I loved seeing the smile on the younger students' faces when they mastered something they hadn't before...” Pausing, she looked at him. “I think I want to teach. I mean...it was always something I knew I'd do, but I thought it would be later on down the line. I thought I'd be dancing in shows and traveling the world and then when I got tired of it, I'd teach.”

“You can still do all those things now,” he reasoned. “The traveling or performing in shows, but you can also teach. It's not an all-or-nothing thing.”

But she was shaking her head. “I've missed my family,” she said with a slight tremble in her voice. “I've spent so much time away from them that I'm miserable. I've been alone for a lot of years and I swore it was what I wanted, but now? Now I feel like nothing I do feels right if there isn't anyone around to share it with.”

“I'm sure you have friends...”

“I do,” she quickly replied. “But it's not the same. The kind of friends I have are also my competition, and it's exhausting sometimes.”

“Then it seems like a simple solution,” he said quietly. “You don't have to be here in Miami.”

She hesitated. “I don't want anyone to think I'm a failure.” Her voice was so soft that he almost didn't hear her.

“You? Never. Everyone is in awe of you and just because you’re not on Broadway or dancing in the middle of a major stadium won’t make them think any less of you. And do you know why?”

She shook her head.

“Because they love you and just want you to be happy.”

Silently, she shook her head before asking, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What’s next for you?”

Noah took a moment to get a little more comfortable. “For now, I’m staying with Montgomerys. Your father and I talked and things are good.”

Her eyes went wide. “Seriously?”

“Yup. But I might branch out on my own down the road. I’m a little structured and like the safety of the world I’ve created for myself. I know you’re used to a more exciting kind of guy who likes to take risks...”

In the blink of an eye, she was in his lap. “None of them were serious, Noah. I never wanted to stay with anyone like that. It was a way to rebel a bit. I had no idea what it was like to genuinely connect with someone until you.” Her hand caressed his jaw. “And for a guy who claims he doesn’t like to take risks, you took a big one by dating the boss’s daughter.”

That made him laugh. “Technically, you’re the boss’s daughter, granddaughter, and niece. I could easily have an army of Montgomerys ready to kick my ass.”

She laughed with him. “But they won’t because you’re an amazing guy who they all know is way more levelheaded than

I ever was.” Resting her head on his shoulder, she asked, “I just don’t want this to be weird for you—you know, with being involved with me and working for my family. That’s a lot of pressure. What if things don’t work out?”

Tilting her head up, he looked down at her face. “Don’t work out? Lily Montgomery, you are it for me. I was drawn to you three years ago, and that never went away, even when it really should have. When I saw you again, I struggled with how much I wanted you. You’re irresistible to me. Always.” He placed a soft kiss on the tip of her nose. “I know it’s too soon to talk about forever, but...you’re my forever. I love you.”

“That’s good, Noah Wylder, because you’re irresistible to me too,” she whispered. “And I want forever with you because I love you so much.”

This time the kiss was mutual and neither wanted it to end.

Noah stood with her in his arms and carried her back into the room, gently placing her on the bed.

Forever was starting right now and he couldn’t wait to see what tomorrow was going to bring, because as long as he had Lily beside him, he felt like he could take on just about anything.

EPILOGUE

TWO WEEKS LATER...

“OH MY GOD! I cannot believe you got us all tickets for this!” Lily said excitedly. They were in the VIP section for Noah’s brother’s concert, surrounded by her sisters, her mother, two of her aunts, and three of her cousins.

The amount of screaming and hugging that had been happening was borderline insanity.

Still, he loved this girl and was excited to share this night with her.

And her family.

Maybe a little less family, but hey, it was going to be a great night. After the show, he was going to bring them all backstage to meet Simon, and then he and Lily were going to travel to the next two stops on the tour with him. It was going to be a great way for her to meet his mother—something he wanted to do sooner, but life was moving pretty fast right now.

After coming home from Miami, Lily made the decision to have the surgery. This little jaunt with Simon was her last hurrah before having it done. There had been multiple doctors’ visits, some second-guessing, and some tears, but ultimately, she was going to do this. She moved back in with her parents, a temporary solution to help with her recovery. Once she was better, they were going to look for a place together. His condo

was fine, but they talked about it and wanted something that would truly be theirs.

The arena lights dimmed, and the cheering and screaming was almost deafening. And then Simon walked out on the stage and, if anything, it got even louder.

Noah smiled with pride because that was his little brother up there making thousands of people go wild. He had no idea what that must feel like, and he was more than happy to stand back and watch Simon do his thing. He sang, he spoke to the audience, and it seemed like everything he did created an enormous reaction. All around him, people sang along—including Lily and everyone she brought with them—and Noah had to admit, he sang along a few times as well.

Simon sang his last note and waved to the crowd before heading off stage. Lily looked over and asked, “Does he come back for an encore?”

“Sure does!” he said, eager for that himself. Three minutes later, his brother sauntered back onto the stage and smiled as he took his place in the center with his mic.

“Thank you all for coming tonight!” he said happily. “Coming to Charlotte is a big deal for me because this is where my big brother lives!”

The crowd went wild and Lily cheered the loudest.

“Family is important,” Simon went on. “My brothers and I are very close, but we’re all very different. I sing, Jax throws a ball, and Noah’s the numbers guy.” Pausing, he chuckled. “And we’re all lucky to have him because he manages all my numbers and makes sure I’m being responsible!”

More cheering and laughter.

“Noah’s the rock of our family. He stepped up when our dad took off and he’s the most selfless guy I know. He rarely asks anyone for anything, so when he does? I take that very seriously.” He smiled down at where they were seated and gave a curt nod. “So tonight, my big brother asked me for one thing...it was a rather large request...but I’m happy to do it. You ready, Noah?”

He nodded and Lily looked at him in total confusion.

Out of nowhere, a mic appeared and he swore this was the most nerve-racking moment of his entire life.

Here we go...

Turning, he faced Lily, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see they were also up on the giant screens all over the arena. “The day we met, I remember being totally blown away by how beautiful you were,” he began. “I had no idea that you basically wanted to strangle me.”

Everyone laughed, including Lily.

“I felt a connection to you that I’d never felt before, but... it wasn’t our time yet. Hell, I wasn’t sure if it would ever be our time.” He paused. “Some people say we should wait, but when you’ve found your forever person, you just know.”

Her smile was radiant and he could seriously feel the love there.

“I love you and...and every day, I think about the future. Our future. I’m a planner by nature and all I know is that no matter what lies ahead, I want you there with me.” He dropped to one knee and carefully pulled the ring out of his pocket, the one he held up to her. “Be my forever, Lily. Be my light, my love, my laughter, my tears...my everything. Will you marry me?”

“Oh my God,” she mouthed. “Yes!”

And then she was in his arms, someone took the mic, and the noise level in the arena should have blown the roof off. He kissed her with everything he had and felt happier than he ever had in his entire life.

“Now that’s how you do it, guys!” Simon called out. “And now, in honor of this momentous event, I’d like to end the night with a song my brother tells me is his favorite.” He paused and waited for Noah and Lily to stop kissing.

And waited.

And waited.

Clearing his voice loudly, he said, “Congratulations, Noah and Lily!” before launching into *Still of the Night*.

It was a much more public proposal than he thought he’d ever do, but it was perfect for them.

Everything after that was a bit of a blur, but it was alright. The coming weeks were going to be rough for Lily, so he wanted to give her a big night to help her get through her recovery.

Later that night, when they were curled up together in bed, she whispered, “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked quietly, kissing her forehead.

“You did something so out of character tonight...never in a million years would I have imagined you proposing in the middle of a Simon Bennett concert.”

He chuckled. “Technically, it was the end, but...” he sighed. “I hope you’re not disappointed.”

Now she lifted her head. “Why would I be?”

“It’s only been two weeks since we got back together. I don’t want to rush you or put you in a position where you were too embarrassed to say no...”

“Oh my God,” she groaned with a laugh. “Do you even hear yourself? Noah, if it were up to me, we’d be on a plane to Vegas right now to get married! I don’t want a long engagement!” Then she paused. “Although...I would like to be able to dance at our wedding, so I need to get through this surgery first.”

He smiled. “When you’re fully recovered, we’ll set a date. And if you want to get on a plane for Vegas, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“As much as I would love that, I have a feeling that’s when an angry crowd of Montgomerys would come after you,” she teased. “But...now I have something to focus on during my recovery, so...thank you.”

“No need to thank me, beautiful girl. I love you and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.” He held her close and wished her a good night, knowing tomorrow was going to be just as wild when word got out of their engagement.

For the quietest Wylder brother, he was pretty impressed with himself right now. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

LOOKING FOR YOUR NEXT SMALL
TOWN READ??

Meet
THE DONOVANS
In

Dare Me

ONE

IT SUCKED SLEEPING on a bouncy house.

Technically it was just the crappy mattress in her brother's guest room, but to Arianna Donovan, that's what it felt like.

“Ugh...”

She tossed and turned and bounced, all the while cursing the fact that she now had to sleep in the guest room after a year of having the main bedroom to herself. But Liam was finally coming home for good—his contract with the US Marine Corps was over—and that meant he was going to want to sleep in his own bed. And really, she couldn't blame him. It was glorious—king sized, memory foam with cooling gel. Seriously, it was perfect.

This coiled twenty-year-old nightmare of a mattress? Not so much.

With a huff, she flipped onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. Liam wouldn't be home for another few days, so... technically...she *could* still sleep in the main bedroom. She had thought transitioning to the guest room would be a good thing and had hoped if she was settled in there, that her brother wouldn't be too eager for her to move out. But if the choice came down to having to move back in with their parents and

sleeping on their couch or sleeping on this thing, she would almost rather move back in with her folks.

Liar.

Okay, yeah, it was the last thing she wanted to do.

When she'd come home from her internship in San Francisco a year ago, she had figured she'd be sleeping in her old room and it would be a temporary thing.

But they'd turned it into a home gym.

After that, she'd crashed on her sister Ryleigh's couch, but that would not work long-term, and her other two brothers never offered her a place to sleep, so...she'd decided to crash at Liam's. It was sitting there empty. Well...not right away. Her brother had let a friend of his stay there after his time in the Marines was up, but as soon as he moved out, Arianna had moved in.

And when Liam got home, she'd be sure to thank him.

Technically, he had no idea she was staying there, but she knew he wouldn't mind. After all, she was his favorite. There were five Donovan children—Liam, Patrick, Ryleigh, Jamie, and Arianna—but she knew Liam loved her the most. As the baby of the family, how could he not?

Rolling onto her side, she punched the pillow with a loud sigh and was almost comfortable when her phone chimed with an incoming text. Groaning, she snatched it off the bedside table and tapped the screen.

Mark: Had a really great time tonight. Hope we can get together next weekend.

She contemplated replying, but...didn't.

Mark was a really nice guy, but there were no sparks there. Just like there weren't any with John, Paul, Matt, and Greg. They were all great guys and they were perfectly fine to go out with. Once. Arianna knew exactly what she was looking for in a man. Hell, she'd even found the perfect man.

Sadly, he'd completely ghosted her a year ago and she'd been in a dating funk ever since.

And, because she was clearly a glutton for punishment and her phone was in her hands, she tapped on her photos app and scrolled to her San Francisco album. Dozens of photos of her and Will popped up. She looked at his handsome face, his incredible smile, and wondered how he couldn't have felt the same way she did.

Although, to be fair, they'd only had one day together.

One glorious day.

Sighing, she slowly scrolled through the pictures. There was a time when looking at them made her cry, but...she'd gotten past that stage.

Almost.

Her friends had dared her to introduce herself to him after their last brunch together. She was flying home the next day and they encouraged her to have a fling before coming back to Laurel Bay. So, being the sassy, confident woman she was, Arianna had walked right over to Will as he was eating alone, introduced herself, and joined him. Brunch had turned to walking all over San Francisco together, going on a sunset cruise around the Bay, dinner in Chinatown, and then staying up all night up on Twin Peaks and watching the sunrise. They had kissed until they were breathless, but Will had been a total

gentleman and told her he wouldn't sleep with her, knowing that was their only night together.

Plus, they were in the middle of a public park, so...

She'd been devastated when he'd dropped her off at her apartment the next morning, but then she thought fate had lent them a hand when they ended up on the same flight to Atlanta.

Even *that* had been perfect. They'd talked and kissed and napped together and she was certain they were going to try their hands at a long-distance relationship. After exchanging phone numbers, Will had left to catch his flight to D.C. and Arianna had gone to her gate for her flight to Wilmington, North Carolina. He'd promised he'd text her when he got on the plane.

But he didn't.

He'd promised to keep in touch.

But he hadn't.

For weeks she'd tried reaching out to him, but never got a response and there had been no listing for a Will Jameson in Washington D.C.

Or anywhere.

At least, not her Will.

Chasing after a guy who clearly didn't want her wasn't her thing, but every now and again, she wondered just what had gone wrong. How could someone fake that kind of connection?

Why didn't he want me?

Yeah, that one had been messing with her the most. If it weren't for her family—minus Liam—Arianna didn't know

how she would have gotten through the last year.

True, no one knew about Will—except her sister—and there was no way she was going to share with anyone how she'd met this great guy who just disappeared off the face of the planet after spending twenty-four hours with her.

Being part of a large Irish-Catholic family meant that you were supposed to find someone to love and marry and have a bunch of kids. For most of her life, Arianna had gotten around anyone focusing that theory on her. She'd gone away to college and then took an internship on the other side of the country and thoroughly enjoyed having her privacy and independence. But ever since she'd come home to Laurel Bay? The hints and not-so-gentle nudges for her to find a nice guy to settle down with had been a constant.

The only plus side to it? It meant her parents were leaving her sister Ryleigh alone for a little while. Apparently, she had been their prime target for the last four years, and poor Ryleigh was at her wit's end. So for now, Arianna was willing to take one for the team and go out on some dates to make her parents happy. They didn't need to know that she was still harboring a bit of a broken heart. She'd get over it eventually.

Maybe.

And now that she was an adult, no one was scaring guys away like they used to. Just thinking about all the boys her brothers had harassed and threatened back in the day was enough to make her roll her eyes. They never truly succeeded in making anyone run or break up with her, but it was cute how they tried.

Now, no one was getting chased away. If anything, whenever she was down at their family pub, Donovan's, Patrick and Jamie were practically sending eligible guys her

way! It had actually become a bit of a fun family game and maybe it wouldn't be so bad if even one guy had given her even a hint of the feels, but...they hadn't.

Damn you, Will Jameson!

Flopping back against the pillows, she tossed her phone aside with disgust. She couldn't keep doing this to herself. The smart thing to do would be to delete all those pictures and just forget about the whole thing. Maybe she'd be able to focus on meeting a nice guy if she didn't keep pulling up Will's picture and making comparisons.

Maybe.

Her phone chimed again. "Dammit, Mark, I said I'd let you know," she murmured before grabbing it. Her sister's name popped up and it made her smile.

Ryleigh: So? How was your night?

Rather than texting her back, Arianna simply hit the call button.

"I wasn't expecting you to call," Ryleigh said with amusement.

"Well, I know why I'm home and in bed by eleven, what's your excuse?"

"The date went that well, huh?"

"Mark was really nice, but..."

"Ugh...not again, Ari. They can't all be nice guys that you have zero interest in. It's just not possible!"

"Sadly, it is," she said wearily. "We had a great dinner and then he wanted to take me to some bar where a friend of his

was playing in a band.”

“Say no more. I hate when they have a friend in a band,” Ryleigh replied. “It never goes well.”

“Exactly.” The sigh was out before she could stop it. “Look, I’m more than happy to keep going out with these guys if it takes some of the pressure off of you. I know mom and dad have been pressuring you to find Mr. Right...”

“And Gram and Pop,” Ryleigh interrupted. “They joined the campaign too.”

“Oh, no...”

“So did Nana and Grandpa. And Uncle Ronan. I’m telling you, it’s been brutal. I appreciate you stepping in and giving them a new focus, but they haven’t forgotten about me. I’m going out with Gram’s hairdresser’s nephew tomorrow.” She groaned.

“And you couldn’t get out of it?”

“Nope. I said I had planned on working at the pub that night since Saturdays are so busy, and dad said not to worry, that he’d get someone else to cover the shift.”

“Damn.”

“I know.” Now it was Ryleigh’s turn to sigh. “Is it wrong that I just want them to back off a bit? I mean...I’d like to meet a great guy too! Most of my friends are married already and here I am getting old and running out of prospects!”

“Ry, you’re only twenty-six. That’s not old.”

“Tell that to mom and dad. If you listen to them, I’m practically ancient and potentially becoming an old maid.”

“Oh, stop. They did not say that!” she said with a laugh.

“Wait...keep passing up these nice guys and they’ll start labeling you just like they’re labeling me.”

“Doubtful. I’m only twenty-three. I’ve got a few good years in me yet.”

“That’s what I thought too and yet...here I am.” She paused for a moment. “Other than the friend in the band thing, what was wrong with this guy?”

“I don’t know...”

“He wasn’t Will,” Ryleigh stated, because...well...she was the only person Arianna had confided in.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. Look, I’m not trying to be mean, but...it’s been a year. It’s time to move on. You have to accept the fact that he just used you.”

“But he didn’t!” she countered. “How did he use me? We didn’t have sex; we walked around San Francisco and ate dim sum and went on a sunset cruise! Where was the using?”

“Okay, okay...calm down. Don’t go getting all pissy.”

“It’s not fair, Ry. How could the universe find me this perfect guy like that and he just disappears?”

“Something could have happened to him, Ari. Have you thought about that?”

“Why would you even say that?” she cried.

“Um...”

Tears stung her eyes. “I’ve tried not to think like that, but...oh, God! What if it did?” Honestly, she had thought that exact thing far too many times and would immediately tell herself not to think like that.

“This isn’t helping anything,” Ryleigh reasoned. “The important thing here is that you stop thinking about this guy because he didn’t care enough about you to keep in touch. Let’s just say that he was a major jerk and move on.”

They’d had this conversation at least a dozen times in the last year and, as much as it pained her, Arianna knew this needed to be the last time. Swallowing hard, she nodded. “You’re right. It’s been a year and...and I just need to pretend like that day never happened.”

“I’m so sorry...”

“Don’t be. I’m the idiot who fell in love on a single date. I mean...knowing me, I’m probably over-romanticizing the entire thing.”

“Yes! Yes, that’s it! You made it seem like so much more in your head when, in reality, he wasn’t all that.”

Nodding, she forced herself to agree. “Okay, no more talking about this or any other dating topics. Let’s talk about Liam. Has anyone gotten a definitive date out of him yet for when he’ll be home?”

“All I know is it’s next week sometime,” Ryleigh told her. “Have you thought about where you’re going to go? Have you even looked at apartments for yourself?”

“Um...”

“Ari! Come on! You make great money, how is it that you can’t find an apartment? Have you talked to Patrick? He’s always got property available.”

“I haven’t really talked to him about it in a while. Most of the places he manages are out of my budget. Plus, I guess a part of me wasn’t sure this was where I wanted to stay.”

“You mean at Liam’s?”

“No. Laurel Bay. I’ve been looking at jobs...elsewhere.”

Her sister was silent for several long moments. “Like how far elsewhere?”

“Like...back in Chapel Hill, where I went to school. There are a lot of opportunities there, and...”

“Stop. Just stop.” She let out a long breath. “Why are you just now telling me this?”

“Because I don’t know if it’s something I’m going to do. I know everyone will freak out if I move away again.”

“You can’t live your life for everyone else. Trust me. I’m doing it and it sucks.”

“Then maybe you need to stop doing it,” she challenged.

“Please, one crazy Donovan daughter at a time.” She paused. “So...you really think you’ll move away?”

“I’m not sure. I keep looking at positions in bigger cities and...there’s nothing keeping me here in Laurel Bay. Once Liam gets home, you know he’ll only tolerate me staying here for so long. He’s going to want the place to himself and probably resent having his baby sister in the next room when he wants to bring a woman home.”

“Ugh...I don’t need that image in my head.”

“You know what I’m saying. I didn’t want to sign a lease on someplace here if I wasn’t going to stay. Maybe Liam’s coming home is the push I need to make that decision.”

“Damn. I’d really hate it if you moved, Ari. I feel like you just got back. I missed you.”

“I’m only a few hours away,” she said softly. “And you can come and stay with me anytime. Like when you need to run away from all the matchmaking.” Then she laughed.

“Sure, laugh it up, but I’m telling you, soon it will be your turn and then it won’t seem so funny.”

“All the more reason for me to leave town. And who knows? Maybe I’ll meet a nice guy and fall in love in Chapel Hill.”

They didn’t stay on the phone much longer and when they did hang up, Arianna studied her phone and pulled up her photos one last time.

It would be easy to delete all the photos of her and Will right now, but as she scrolled through them again, she just couldn’t do it.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered before putting the phone face down and doing her best to fall asleep.



“It’s decided, you’re coming home with me.”

Will Jameson looked over at his friend and was seriously at a loss for words. Not that he didn’t appreciate the offer—because he did—but...it was complicated.

More complicated that he cared to explain.

“Do you want to go back to California?” Liam Donovan asked him.

“No.”

“Have you made any plans or even thought about where you’re going to go?”

“Not exactly.”

“Will, we’re out of here in two days! How could you not know where you’re going to go?”

With a shrug, he replied, “I’ll figure it out once I drive out the gates of the base.”

Which was a huge lie because he’d done nothing *but* think about it for the last year. In a perfect world, he could very easily agree with his buddy and go with him to Laurel Bay—to Arianna—and have a pretty spectacular life.

But he’d totally screwed that up.

At the time, it seemed like the perfect thing to do—to just never talk to her again once he realized she was related to Liam. He just never told her that he knew. And now, a year later, he wondered why he didn’t just say screw it and let things just play out the way they should.

With his buddy beating the shit out of him for touching his little sister.

Beside him, Liam was scowling as he looked down at his phone.

“Problem?”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing I’m heading home.”

“Why?”

“I think my whole family’s gone mad,” he murmured. “Honestly, I don’t know what’s gotten into them.”

“Yeah, you’re going to have to elaborate, because I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“My sisters,” Liam said. “It sounds like my parents practically have a “Come date our daughters” campaign going

on at the pub! It's insanity! I mean...are they even checking these guys out?"

Will didn't know what to say, but the thought of Arianna going out with a bunch of guys did not sit well with him either.

If anything, he was probably more pissed off than Liam.

"How...um...how do you know this?" he casually asked as he scrolled the local news on his own phone.

"Jamie's texting me and telling me how he's going to set Arianna—she's the youngest out of all of us—with some guy he used to play lacrosse with! *Lacrosse!*" he added with a snort of disgust. "I bet he's a total douche."

Will had to agree.

Liam began to furiously type out something to his brother, but Will needed to know more. "So...what's the big deal? She's obviously a grown woman, right?"

Shooting him an angry glare, he said, "She's only twenty-three and my dufus brother should *not* be setting her up with any of his friends! They're all older than her and...and...just no. Brothers are supposed to protect and look out for their sisters, not set them up with their friends."

"Um...sure, but...how much older? Aren't the two of them close in age?"

"Dude, whose side are you even on? She's young and doesn't need my brother or anyone fixing her up. She doesn't need to be dating. Period."

"That sounds a little unrealistic," Will countered. "You know she's probably dated plenty of guys while she was in college."

The look his buddy gave him told Will that was the wrong thing to say.

And this is why I had to say goodbye to Arianna...

Yeah, he knew Liam well enough to know how protective he was of his sisters and the fact that Will was nine years older than her would not have gone over well.

“Why is your brother even texting you if he knows this is a sensitive topic?”

“Because my brother’s an ass sometimes.” Tossing his phone down, Liam leaned back in his chair and raked both hands through his hair. “I swear, sometimes it’s like he’s baiting me and thinks it would be funny to watch me come home and go off on everyone. It’s so stupid.”

“And yet you’re taking the bait.”

“No,” Liam quickly replied. “Well, yes. Maybe.” He growled in frustration. “I’m not going to go home and create a scene, but it’s good to know what I’m walking into.”

“I don’t see how you’re walking *into* anything. It’s not really any of your concern.” Will knew he was now the one baiting Liam, and yet he couldn’t seem to help himself.

“Will, just...trust me. You don’t get it. You’re an only child. You have no idea what it’s like to have sisters.” He growled again. “All your friends hit on them and it’s just...it’s wrong.”

Well, there was the definite confirmation that he’d made the right decision, but it didn’t make him feel any better.

“You know what? I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Liam said as he got to his feet. They were hanging out in the

barracks while most of their squad was out celebrating the weekend. “I want to know if you’re in on my business plan.”

Liam’s plan for when he returned to Laurel Bay was to form a construction company and his first project was going to be a tiny house community that would either be some kind of fishing resort or perhaps a fifty-five and over one. Either way, it sounded fascinating. Will had an architectural engineering degree and he knew the two of them together could really do something amazing, but the thought of being that close to Arianna and not being with her was really holding him back.

“Before we switch gears,” Will began, “let me ask you something.”

“Sure.”

“What if...say...your sister...”

“Which one?”

“Either one.”

“Okay...”

“Let’s say your sister meets a guy on her own and he’s older than her,” Will said cautiously. “What if he’s a genuinely good guy and you scare him off because you’ve got it in your mind that he can’t be good for her because of his age? Have you thought of that?”

“No.”

His eyes went wide. “That’s it? Just no? Liam, come on. You can’t be so closed-minded.”

“Look, I get what you’re trying to say, but...I don’t know. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a big deal for Ryleigh, but any guy older than Arianna? It would just feel a little creepy. I’ve

beaten the crap out of several good friends just for looking at her.”

Awesome.

“O-kay, so...”

“Why are we still talking about my sisters when we have a serious business opportunity ahead of us?” Liam asked as he took the seat across from Will. “I really think you and I have a chance to make this great. Why aren’t you as excited about this as I am?”

There was no way he could answer honestly, so he had to go with some of his other concerns.

“For starters, I think this is going to take a lot of time and capital to get this project off the ground, Liam. Neither of us has sat down with a bank or lawyers or whoever else we need to, so...I’m just hesitant to make a decision to move someplace where things might not work out.”

Nodding, Liam considered him. “That’s fair. And I realize Laurel Bay isn’t a big city, but you’ve always said how you hoped you could settle down in a small town. And trust me, Laurel Bay is as small as they get.” He grinned. “Personally, I think it’s exactly what you need.”

“I can’t imagine there’s a lot of real estate there...”

“You can crash with me. I’ve got a two-bedroom apartment that I plan on keeping only for a short time, but then you’re more than welcome to it.”

“Why? Where are you planning to go?”

“Not only have I been looking at real estate for our project...”

“Your project,” Will corrected.

“Our project,” Liam stated firmly, “but I’ve also been looking at houses for myself. I’ve spent so many years here in the service either living in barracks or tiny apartments. Before that, I grew up in a small house with four siblings. I’m really looking forward to buying a place of my own and having a yard and not sharing walls or rooms with anyone.” His smile grew. “And I think I’ve found a few places that could work. My brother Patrick dabbles in real estate and property management and he’s going to help me out.”

“Oh, well...good for you.”

“What about you? Are you interested in a house? Condo? Do you want to rent or own...?”

“Hard to decide until I know where I’m going to land. I joined the Marines right out of high school, and I guess back then I always thought I’d go back to Oakland.” He shrugged. “With my mom gone, there’s no reason for me to go to the west coast, but...”

“Then you should try the east coast!” Liam exclaimed.

“But...I haven’t given myself the time to really think about it. Part of me thought this day wasn’t going to come.”

“Seriously? Why?”

Another shrug. “I don’t know. I think I was still considering just staying in so I wouldn’t have to decide. And with no family to go home to...”

“Well, that’s just stupid. I’m telling you, Will, you need to at least come home with me and just spend a few weeks in Laurel Bay. It’s not like you’ve got anything else planned. Just check it out and come with me to look at property—both for the project and for my own personal home purchase—and if you totally hate it there, I’ll let it go.”

It wasn't the worst idea, but...

No, wait. It *was* the worst idea. It wouldn't matter if he went with Liam for a few weeks or a few days or even a few hours. Being around Arianna would be torture and there was no way he'd be able to avoid her.

Hell, he wasn't even sure he wanted to.

Maybe if he could just see her and explain why he did the things that he did...

She'd still end up hating him.

Probably more than he hated himself for it.

"Plus, I have a huge family!" Liam went on. "I guarantee you, once my mother meets you, you'll be one of us!"

Yeah, that so wasn't the way he wanted to become a Donovan...

But...it also had merit.

Maybe if the rest of the Donovan family saw that he was a decent and trustworthy guy, it wouldn't be such a bad thing for him to start dating Arianna properly. They could have the kind of relationship they should have rather than cramming a month's worth of dating into a single day.

Okay, maybe he could get on board with this plan of Liam's. He just had to make sure he didn't appear too eager.

"What about financing?" he asked casually. "You don't know anything about my financial situation, just like I don't know anything about yours. How is all of this going to work? Especially if you're also looking to buy a house."

"I've had the down payment for a house put aside for years and I've lived very frugally during my time in the service. So

the house is a non-issue. As for a business loan, I don't see that being an issue either. If we present a solid business plan, there shouldn't be any problems. As veterans, we're covered and eligible for plenty of programs. And with a veteran business loan..."

Will nodded. Of course his friend would have this all figured out. Everything in him wanted to say yes, but...what if Arianna had moved on?

And why wouldn't she? You never kept in touch.

Yeah. That.

There were so many variables in play here that it wasn't such an easy decision to make.

Actually, it was downright difficult.

"Tell you what," Liam said, interrupting his thoughts. "Just take tonight to think about it. Tomorrow we've got a lot to do with packing up and all that. Promise me you're going to seriously think about it."

"I will. I promise," he said, and hoped this conversation was over. What he wanted most right now was some time to himself to actually think without Liam yammering on and pressuring him.

As if reading his mind, Liam picked up his phone and stretched. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to call my baby brother and threaten to strangle him if he keeps on setting out sisters up with his friends." He clapped Will on the shoulder. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Night," was all he said before putting his attention on his own phone. Once Liam was gone, however, he pulled up his photos and found the ones of him and Arianna. Just looking at her beautiful, smiling face made his heart ache.

Seeing her again would be both pleasure and pain, and he had to be realistic. It wasn't going to be some big romantic reunion. What he did—while right at the time—was still really unfair to her. Knowing how stubborn her brother was, Will had a feeling it was a family trait. If she couldn't forgive him or—worse—if she'd moved on, could he really stay in their tiny town and make a life for himself there?

His gut told him no. It would be too hard and it didn't matter that they'd only had the one day, he knew Arianna was perfect for him.

But could he possibly convince her and her family that he deserved a chance?

That was the million dollar question he wasn't sure he could handle the answer to.

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Samantha Chase is a New York Times and USA Today bestseller of contemporary romance that's hotter than sweet, sweeter than hot. She released her debut novel in 2011 and currently has more than ninety titles under her belt – including THE CHRISTMAS COTTAGE which was a Hallmark Christmas movie in 2017 and WEDDING SEASON which was a Hallmark June Wedding movie in 2023! She's a Disney enthusiast who still happily listens to 80's rock. When she's not working on a new story, she spends her time reading romances, playing way too many games of Solitaire online, wearing a tiara while playing with her sassy pug Maylene...oh, and spending time with her husband of 34 years and their two sons in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

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