

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

# Kissing

MY

BEST

FRIEND'S

BROTHER

ABBY GREYSON



# Kissing my Best Friend's Brother

**An Enemies to Lovers Sweet Romance**

Abby Greyson

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Rescued by my Brother's Best Friend

# Introduction

**A ROUTINE DISPATCH WITH a burning piñata and a smoldering bush is enough to make this man go, hmmm. But the woman staring at me with daggers in her eyes has me worried for my life.**

As a volunteer firefighter, people are usually happy to see me. I don't think my sister's best friend got that memo.

Maya Glenn, the bright-eyed, glowering woman in front of me, is not the awkward girl I remember.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that my high school crush has grown into a beautiful woman.

Based on her reaction, I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm public enemy number one.

**Staying away from Maya is what I should do now that my extinguished feelings just got a surprise spark. Instead, I keep imagining kissing her.**





# Chapter 1

## Kieran

“IS THAT A PIÑATA on fire?” Lane asks as we arrive at the scene of the call we had been dispatched to less than four minutes ago.

There is chaos as one of the engines starts toward the smoldering bushes with a grill sticking out of them. Our three-man team heads for the crackling piñata to put it out.

“Your dad pushed mine,” one boy says, shoving another kid as hard as possible.

“He was saying that my dad is a has-been,” the other boy yells.

“At least he isn’t a used car salesman,” the next kid offers up.

There is smoke everywhere. The toddlers, who are probably the real attendees of the event, are cuddled close to their mothers lining the sidewalk. The older kids appear to be going off the rails. Despite that, a group of dads still work two grills

while several others stand, grumbling, further down from the first.

“I wish there was a video of what went down,” one of the probies whispers in my direction as we start the hose to soak the piñata and jungle gym it is attached to, which is also now catching fire.

“Be careful, or you’ll get the dessert table—” A shriek punctuates the sentence as we turn to see the firehose promptly taking out the table.

There is now frosting spewed on the back fence, candle raindrops falling from the sky, and I’m staring into the very angry face of one Maya Glenn. That is not good news, as I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m public enemy number one, and to be honest, I’m not even sure why. We were all friends once upon a time, but in the years since Lane and I retired from the military and came home, the best greeting I had ever received from her was a snarl.

“What happened here?” I ask as the unreal scene imprints upon my brain.

“Oh, let’s see,” Maya says, crossing her arms and glaring in my direction. “I think we can safely say that male egos once again decided to spar for who could be the biggest jerk. One man’s ribs were too salty, and another claimed that his wife liked them fine, which led to some conversation I would prefer not to repeat, and then the grill went into the bushes.”

“Okay.” I turn to check the distance from them to the piñata. There is no way the grill sparks could reach it. I turn back to

the hanging T. rex piñata.

“Oh, and the first guy’s wife started the piñata on fire when the opposing man’s wife took his side,” Maya grumbles.

“I’m not sure how to even write that in a report,” I mutter.

“I bet you’ll figure it out, as this would be right up your alley, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry, which part? I’m a volunteer firefighter; I put fires out, not toss kindling on them.”

“The ego part. Don’t even try to tell me you don’t have a story or two in your memory banks that started just this way,” Maya spits at me and then stomps off in her pale ballet slippers as best she can on the slick grass.

“What did you do to her?” Lane questions, surprise in his tone.

“I have no idea, but you picked up on the fact she despises me, right?”

“Um, I picked up on that, and I’m not the brightest light, as you all like to say,” a newbie recruit calls out from a few feet away.

“So, it’s not just me,” Lane whispers. “I thought I was losing my mind and that she had just cut ties with me in particular.”

“You mean she’s that rude to you as well?”

“Nah, but she definitely won’t talk to me. Normally, she ignores me or walks across the street when our paths cross,”

Lane says as we continue to work side by side to ensure the fire is out.

“Weird, we were so close to her brother Stephen. So close that I would’ve called him a brother,” I whisper with sadness seeping into every word. “I have at least twice considered approaching her and talking about her attitude, but then I thought maybe it was just grief. Today, though, that was rough. Not to mention it happening in front of people. Might be time to try to figure things out. Did you ever visit with her parents when we got back?”

Lane’s frown deepened, and a white tension line outlined his lips.

“I did go to see them, as I wanted to pay my condolences, but they wouldn’t open the door. I didn’t want to worry you, and then we got so busy. I have to be honest; I just sort of let it go.”

“I get that.” I inspect the bushes to ensure the fire is well and truly extinguished. “I have given little time to anyone who isn’t part of the company or one of the veterans needing my attention,” I admit as we walk back toward the fire engine. “I feel bad that maybe we let something fester that could’ve been handled before. I’ll try to figure out what might be going on with Maya. I feel we owe it to Stephen to care for his family if there is anything we can provide.”

“I agree. If anything comes up that I can help with, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Will do. When approaching Maya, I might need some armor, though, based on today’s interaction.”

“I bet you’ll be able to find some charming way to win her over,” Lane teases. “I thought there wasn’t a soul you couldn’t charm? That’s what you keep telling us at the office.”

“Yeah, for a game,” I grumble. “Maya has grown into a force to be reckoned with and might be a bit tougher to crack with that hard outer shell she wears.”

“Good luck,” Lane quips with a slap on my shoulder.

I don’t know what I will be walking into, and nothing makes sense as to why Maya is angry. It had been years since her older brother Stephen passed from a roadside IED while serving. He enlisted nearly eighteen months after Lane and me, and his death had been a tough loss for all of us. Hearing about him passing and not being able to come home to attend his funeral had been devastating. When I returned home to Briar Glen, I had gone to his grave but hadn’t expressed my condolences to his family. I had been raw when I returned, and then the business took off. In hindsight, that was really just an excuse. I should never have allowed this space to continue to develop between us, and I am long past due on rectifying it.

# Chapter 2

## Maya

I'M TRYING TO FINISH the paperwork my insurance company requires regarding the insanity from yesterday. In all my time working events in this town, I've never seen anything that matched that kind of crazy. Of course, the birthday boy's mother had called and tried to blame me for the entire thing. She wants me to pay for the damages as if I were supposed to control the chaos somehow. Seriously, I sometimes have no idea where people get the gall.

The bell at the door chimes, and I finish the sentence I am working on before heading to the front.

“Oh my goodness,” I say as soon as I see Emma. “How many years has it been?” I ask as she folds me into a hug. I hadn't seen her since my senior year of high school, her freshman year. We were inseparable that whole year after growing close in drama club, but once I graduated and went off to college, we drifted apart.

“Maybe ten or twelve?” she wrinkles her nose, trying to remember.

“You look great!” I step back to take her in from head to toe. “I heard you were back in town, but they said you had gotten into a car accident.”

“Yeah, I’m only now getting out and about again,” she sighs. “The first ten weeks were rough. But I’m getting stronger, little by little, every day.”

“Wow, I mean, it’s surreal seeing you today. So, what brought you back to town?”

“Just miss the smaller-town feel of things. I can write from anywhere, and the idea of reconnecting with home was a strong pull. I moved into my parent’s place, and I’m remodeling it to fit my style a bit more. Plus, it needs a bit of updating. Enough about me. I see you have an amazing event planning business.” She glances around the massive showroom that I’m so proud of finally opening last year.

“For a long time, I was working from the garage, so this has been a big improvement. I’m doing events from birthdays to weddings.” My errant brain returns to yesterday’s fiasco.

“That’s wonderful. You always did love putting together fabulous parties. I remember the idea you had for Stephen’s prom. All the balloons.” Emma shakes her head and chuckles.

“Yeah, I gave the idea to Sarai, who was dating Stephen at the time and she used it. Thinking back, she was probably trying to impress him. Anyway, it turns out Principal Fields was

deathly afraid of the sound of popping balloons. Stephen of course couldn't help himself and had to pop some while she was in the the middle of her speech." I can't help but giggle as I remember Stephen telling me about the incident.

"Kieran claimed he thought she was going to wet herself on stage. You know teenage boys," Emma rolls her eyes dramatically. "They did it over and over and over again until the poor lady finally just left."

"Well, I do love that she had a good sense of humor about it and got even. As I recall, didn't she call them to her office a week later and suspend them for some trumped-up charge?" I ask.

"Oh, that's right. I totally forgot that plot twist. This town does keep you on your toes. I missed everyone knowing everyone else's business. You always believe that it's so annoying until you're gone. It's amazing that you can feel so lonely in a packed city."

"Briar Glen is definitely home for me. When I finished school and my internship in California, I hiked it back here and have been busy building my company ever since. Not that I'm in a hurry to get rid of you or anything, but what prompted you to come by today? Let me guess, your brother told you about the party that literally went up in flames yesterday?"

"No. Kieran was there?" Emma appears genuinely shocked by my statement.

"Yeah," I say, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice. "It was a complete disaster."



“No, we haven’t had time to catch up, actually. I’m here regarding an advertisement I saw. It said that you needed a writer to help with blog posts and some social media. I have extensive experience writing and thought I might stop in to see what you were looking for. I use social media for my books, personal accounts, and such. This position would be a great break from the regular writing I do every day for my books.”

My stomach clenches uncomfortably at her words.

“I do have a portfolio,” she continues, and I can see how sincere she is about this.

“I’m sure you’re more than qualified,” I tell her as my head dips. “Come into my office.” I lead her to the back and gesture for her to sit, as I need a few minutes to gather my thoughts. I have to figure out what the best course of action is to address this sticky quandary.

“Is there something wrong? If you’ve already hired someone or need a different experience, I understand. I will absolutely not be offended.”

“It’s not that,” I say as I flip through her portfolio, looking at the social media posts, graphics, and even some press releases she’s done. “Honestly, your work looks like it would be a perfect fit with my vision,” I respond. I bite hard on my bottom lip, taking a moment before broaching the issue. “I heard you’re dating Lane. Is that true?”

“Yes.” She furrows her brow at that sudden detour in our conversation.

“I’m sorry, I think that would make things super awkward and problematic,” I tell her as I hold my breath, waiting for her reaction.

“Wow, you have feelings for Lane,” Emma starts, shocking me with the conclusion she jumps to. “I’m so sorry I just assumed that Lane wasn’t seeing anyone before I came home. We’ve been friends forever, and you know how I’ve always felt about him. Being Kieran’s business partner, I thought for sure if he had been dating anyone, they would have told me.”

“No, I’m not interested in Lane.” I let out a huge gust of air as I try unsuccessfully to settle my nervous system. “Listen, my parents hold your brother and Lane responsible for Stephen’s death. I know it’s a leap, but that’s how they feel.”

“I’m sorry,” Emma spits out. “Kieran and Lane had nothing to do with that. For goodness’ sake, every loss during their time in the military was hard, but they knew your brother and considered him a close friend. Why in the world would your parents blame Lane and Kieran?”

“Stephen was so in awe of them when they came home from boot camp that first Christmas. When he told my parents he was enlisting, he mentioned that he had talked to Lane and Kieran about it. They were so unhappy with his choice but couldn’t talk him out of his decision. They blamed both of them for him joining in the first place,” I acknowledge.

“You also believe this?” Emma asks as I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“I know that Stephen was stubborn, and it was a terrible accident. I don’t think that they’re the cause of his death, but I’m also pretty upset that neither one bothered to make sure they talked to me, or my family, when they returned home. Nothing. No condolences, or any attempt to make their homecoming less awkward for all of us.”

“Wow.” Emma sits back, taking in all the information. “I’m so sorry you all feel that way. I will say that knowing Lane and Kieran, I’m certain they didn’t mean to hurt anyone. I can understand why, with the history between everyone, these feelings have continued to fester,” she says with a lot of grace, which surprises me based on the information dump I just provided.

“Again, I truly am sorry you feel this way.” She pushes herself up from the chair.

“Emma,” I call, rising from my chair, “I’m so sorry. I know this is tough, but I have to honor my family’s feelings on this one. I’m all they have left, and it’s been brutal for them these last few years.”

“I understand. Sincerely. I know how tough it was worrying about Lane and Kieran when they were deployed. The calls I got in the middle of the night from my mother, trying to keep her spirits up, were some of the hardest moments. I’m not angry at all and appreciate you telling me this. I would ask that you approach Kieran and Lane so that they understand your position as well. Allowing ill feelings to dictate your business decisions, along with any interactions with them, is not the

right path to travel, in my opinion. We live in a small town, and it's something they deserve to know.”

“I'll think about it.” I know there is no negotiating with my parents on this topic, and by extension, I need just to toe the line. “It was great seeing you, though. I'm sorry we won't be able to work together.”

“No worries,” she says with a light wave as she turns to leave.

When the bell chimes once again, my breath comes swift and shallow. She isn't wrong; holding such a grudge without telling the men what they are accused of doing is not the best way to handle the situation. It will just continue to cause scenes like yesterday. I have no idea why I was so venomous toward them, but it wasn't my finest hour. Maybe it is time to handle this problem differently, and while nothing will be resolved, I might feel my family's honor defended in some way. Next time I cross paths with either Lane or Kieran, I vow to finally have the conversation that I should have had a long time ago.

# Chapter 3

## Kieran

“I’M SORRY. ARE YOU kidding me?” I holler at Emma in a tone I never use when addressing my sister.

I can tell from her facial expression that this is not the reaction she was expecting when deciding to stop by the office to tell Lane and me about her conversation with Maya.

“She has the right to feel the way she does.”

“Not if it’s wrong, and it means that she publicly degrades me every chance she gets.”

“Is this because of her being mad, or does it have something to do with your little crush on her in high school?” Lane asks with a smirk from his position next to my sister.

“Oh, wait, what?” Emma’s mouth curves into a huge smile.

“You had a crush on her?”

“That was ages ago,” I quip, though a tiny voice in my head whispers that she looked amazing yesterday. I’m not going to say that aloud, though. I know I will be relentlessly teased.

“That has nothing to do with this. Lane, are you telling me that you thought she was professional or kind yesterday?”

“No. She was under a ton of stress, though, so I figured it was as much that as anything else,” he shrugs.

“We live in a small town, which means we’ll keep crossing paths. She can’t keep this nonsense belief up, or people will begin to talk.”

The idea of someone degrading my memory of her brother stings. I would never willingly have talked Stephen into enlisting if I had known how life would turn out for him. He knew the risks. We had talked about them in great detail before he made his final decision. Maya was totally out of line if she was under some different impression.

“I’m going to talk to her.” Lane launches from his position behind his desk toward me.

“Maybe give it a few minutes,” he cautions.

“Yeah.” Emma comes to stand next to him.

Sometimes, having your sister dating your best friend can cause lines to get pretty muddy, especially when I expect him to have my back. Emma seems to soften him to her will. I can’t fault them, as I pray that my future partner will do the same for me, but it doesn’t mean I like it when I’m outnumbered two to one in these situations.

“If you go speak to her now, it will look like I reported right back to you,” Emma pleads. “Give it just a little time.”

“She won’t even consider you for a job, and she barked at me in public. I’m sorry. I’m doing this,” I say as I head for the door.

The anger buoys me on, and I make the short walk down to Maya’s event planning showroom in less than five minutes. I can’t get my brain to focus. I worry that my words will be incoherent and the message lost. Before my brain can apply logic or get me to slow down and compose myself, I open the door.

“Hello—” Maya’s voice drops the second she turns and sees that it’s me.

We stand like an old-fashioned Western pair of dueling adversaries, staring at each other.

“You and your sister are still thick as thieves, I see,” she remarks, not breaking eye contact.

“I’m so sorry about Stephen,” I come right out and say before I lose my nerve. “I know I should have come to pay my condolences when I got home. Lane and I did request an authorized leave to attend the funeral when we found out, but it was denied. That doesn’t explain why I didn’t immediately come directly to you and your parents when I returned to Briar Glen.”

“Yeah, you should have,” she says as tears form in her eyes. “It was really hard when you came home and Stephen didn’t. I think that for me, especially, talking about him with those who knew him best would’ve helped. You were both part of his world in a way that no one else was,” Maya spills out feelings

I can tell she's been bottling up for years. "It feels like he went from that ridiculous prankster in high school to this ghost that I can't see anymore but is always around. It's been hard."

My head suddenly feels too heavy to hold up, and a deep sigh escapes from my mouth as I realize the damage done with one action not taken. Not being in the right state of mind when I got home no longer feels like a valid reason.

"I don't even know what I would have said. I mean, how do you apologize enough for being the one who came home alive? I always assumed he could get himself out of anything. I mean, he got away with that prank on the front office in high school without even detention," I whisper as I feel a small smile emerge on my face at the memory.

"I'm not even sure how he managed to get that much toilet paper with each of the staff's faces printed on it. You knew he had to be planning that one for a while," Maya giggles.

That sound rings through my body, lifting the heaviness I walked into her office with. I forgot how much I enjoyed the sound of her voice and just talking with her.

"I remember my mom blustering that afternoon when she was told. You would have laughed all over again if you had heard him trying to explain his actions to my parents. Dad could barely keep a straight face, and Mom threatened to send him to one of those camps that scared juveniles straight." Maya smiles as the love she feels for her brother lights up her face.

"I don't think the argument resonated. Do you remember the band prank?" I joke.



“The bubbles in the French horn that the band director played at homecoming?” Maya laughs in earnest. “What he did to that gruff old man who thought he was on the brink of being discovered only to be made into a complete laughingstock was horrible but, in typical Stephen style, hilarious. He was never one to think of a practical joke he wasn’t willing to put into action.”

“Nope,” I chuckle, finding all my anger from earlier fade. “How are your mom and dad doing? I understand the loss of a child can be hard, but I would say, based just on your reactions to me, it’s been really rough.”

“It’s been terrible,” she responds with all the emotions of these last years showing on her face. “I have to worry about them as I tried to build my business. Dad lost his job because he was concerned about Mom, and she doesn’t leave the house often anymore. I’ve even offered to help find a therapist for them to work through their grief. I think them holding on to their anger at Lane and you is the only thing that gets them out of bed.”

“I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Nah, I’ve made it good here. Dad would have retired soon anyway with his pension, and I make sure they have what they need. Tell me, did you see Stephen after he deployed?”

I stop a moment, as the truth is, I did see her brother when he came to Afghanistan. He had been in his element and, frankly, doing amazing. He made friends, took his duty seriously, and was a great brother-in-arms. His loss hit the team, and everyone else that was on base at the time, hard. Sadly, it was

a common scenario with losing so many to senseless situations that could've been avoided had soldiers not been sleep-deprived and overtired. Stephen, however, was tough for me, as he was a piece of home.

“I did. He was at our base when . . .” I swallow hard as a lump forms in my throat, and I can't finish the statement. “He was always Stephen, but the time in training had made a man of him. He had an air of responsibility that I don't remember in him, even when it came to sports or grades in school. He took all his tasks seriously, and trained constantly when he wasn't in the field. He loved sharing those amazing boxes you sent with everyone.”

“Good. Mom always included his favorite sweets. I never knew if those reached him, but I had hoped they did,” Maya replies.

“Definitely made his day. After a tough loss or a rough week, it would seem as if one of the boxes would reach him just in time to lift his spirits up. You all were never far from him. In some ways, I think, it was easier for him than others. Knowing he had all of you back here, missing him and helping to keep him happy with little tidbits you sent from home. I don't think for a second Stephen realizes how upset you all were at him for enlisting.”

“I'm not surprised; we were pretty silent that last visit. Mom didn't want him to leave in a bad frame of mind, so we agreed to stay quiet and love and support him.”

“Well, that’s all he knew right until the end.” I pull out my wallet and dig into the back pocket. “I never found the right time to bring this to you.” I hand a folded picture out to her. “I found this in his bunk after everything else was shipped home. I’m not sure how it was missed.”

She unfolds it, and I notice her upper lip quiver.

“This was the last picnic we threw for him. Mom was going crazy with the photos, and she sent them to him in the first box. Thank you,” she says as she gives me a small smile.

“Maya, I know friendship was something we once enjoyed. I don’t know if there is any way I can make up for the loss of Stephen or the anger your parents hold. But if there is, you need to ask.”

“Thank you. I do appreciate it. I don’t know if there is any hope, but I will keep it in mind.”

I give a curt nod and then retreat out the door. As I hit the sunlight, I feel the weight of the reunion heavy on my heart. I think part of me knew that encounter would be one of the toughest things I ever had to do, but it would never excuse letting it go for this long. I need to find some way to make it right, even if I have no idea what that could be.

# Chapter 4

## Maya

“I HOPE YOU’RE KIDDING,” my mother says, looking up from cleaning my brother’s gravestone. “You know those people will never have a place in our world again. You can’t talk to him, and I have no plans to forgive either one.” My mother is so loud that I glance around to see if anyone is staring at us.

“Sweetie, why would you bring this up today of all days,” my father pleads with me as he turns to look back at the gravestone. “We just want to remember Stephen as a family.”

“I know.” I reach into my pocket, touching the picture Kieran gave me the other day.

In my mind, I can see a picture of my mother losing it altogether. She is a larger lady, and she can work herself up into a lather when she is truly upset about something. This topic will surely be the spark in a powder keg that I don’t want to light here and now.

“You know he would have hated this, right?” I stare into the befuddled eyes of my parents.

I’m pretty certain they are questioning my sanity. I was always the good girl who lived in the shadow of my boisterous older brother. I guess on a day intended to be all about Stephen, it is appropriate that I channel all that authority-testing energy he always wore like a cape around himself. He had been a superhero to me, and I was fast remembering that Kieran and Lane were the sidekicks he adored most in life. I need to try everything I can to help my parents see that.

“How dare you talk about your brother in such a way? You know that respecting the dead is how we honor them.”

My dad rubs her shoulder, trying to calm her before this becomes an incident we can’t return from.

“Mom, I recently got this from Kieran.” I decide I’m already in over my head, so why not just go all in? I take the picture out and hand it to her. “He’s kept it with him all these years. It was found after Stephen’s stuff had already been sent back to us.”

She gingerly takes the photo, and I watch a smile spread across her face. I glance at my father and see a mirror of that sentiment.

“What about this picture?” She asks with a quizzical look in my direction.

“I realized in talking with Kieran and Emma that it was easy to hold on to my hatred for them. When we got together, though,

both of them extended me grace for all of my unkind words. We talked about Stephen and the pranks he would play back in the day. Like the toilet paper episode,” I remind them, and my father chuckles.

“That boy would have earned a scholarship if he had put as much thought into his grades as he did the jokes he planned on others,” my father says.

“Stephen could try the patience of a saint,” my mom agrees, still staring at the picture. “You do know those two people convinced him to enlist, and that’s what killed him.”

“No, Mom. Enemy combatants killed him. Stephen was a great soldier, from what I hear, and he loved being one. He was a great friend, a funny man, an honorable soldier, and all parts of him are worth remembering.” I blink back the tears trying to escape from my eyes.

“We do remember him,” my mother says angrily, waving a hand toward his grave.

“No, we memorialize him, but we don’t remember him. We don’t talk about all the funny things he did and how he made us laugh. We all seem to be standing still, angry over his loss. He would be so angry at us all for hating his friends and being mean to people in his name.” I feel a deep resolve in the core of my being for what I need to do.

I have no idea how I will overcome the loss of my brother, but I do know I will never get over it if I continue to hold on to this bitterness. I can never possibly understand the difference between losing a child versus losing a sibling. That said, I feel

there is a way to live alongside our emotions of grief and anger while still getting on with life. I can now see that by continuing to live in anger we had all stopped living a life that could produce any joy.

“You’re going to abandon the memory of your brother just like that?” my mother snaps.

“I don’t believe that is what she is saying,” my father interjects calmly, trying to do what he does best and play mediator. “She does have a point, though. We don’t leave the house, travel, or do anything we had planned to do after I retired. We’ve put our lives on hold all these years since Stephen left us. Maybe there is a happy medium we can try to reach.”

“Maybe, but it can’t mean ever being in the same room with those Lane and Kieran folks.” She holds firm to her resolve on that point.

“I can’t agree to that for you, Mom. I’m a business owner in a town where BattleBron Tech is a big deal. I have cut them a wide berth, but it has become a problem for my business. I’m not talking about necessarily becoming their best friends, but I will honor Stephen by not being rude to the people he cared about.”

“Then you can’t be around us,” my mother hisses.

“Lorna,” my father shouts. “That isn’t fair. We raised both our children to have their own minds. We taught them how to use their ability to discern and make decisions they could live with. You can’t disown her because her grieving method has started to diverge from ours.”

“I can and I will.” My mother rises to place a kiss on the gravestone and heads to the car without a backward glance.

“Love you, sweetie,” my dad says, looking at me with a sad expression in his eyes. “I’ll work on her. If you need anything, you know where I am, always.”

I give a slight incline of my head as he walks off before turning back to my brother’s grave.

“Man, you’re still causing trouble from beyond the grave,” I whisper. “I wish you were still here, but since that can’t happen, I guess I need to be the one to stir the pot.” I giggle slightly. “Love you, big bro. I miss you.” I turn and head back to town with a renewed sense of purpose.

I don’t know what this change will bring about, but hopefully, we can find a compromise instead of me barking out mean things to Kieran the next time we meet. It’s also way past time I give Emma a call and have a chat about this new role I have for her. I guess we shall see just how crazy things can get around here, I think, finding my footsteps so much lighter as I make my way home.



# Chapter 5

## Kieran

“I THINK THIS IS the year,” Lane says happily from my office doorway. “Time to paaaaaaaarty.”

“Okay, wedding?” I ask as he has been dating my sister for a little while.

Honestly, I expect they will be engaged sooner rather than later since they’ve been dancing around their feelings for each other our entire lives. I wasn’t shocked—okay, maybe just a little—when he finally came out with his feelings for Emma after she returned to Briar Glen. When she was laid up next door to Lane with a broken leg, the man was always finding a reason to go over and visit. It was obvious to anyone watching that they were smitten with each other, so if a wedding is in the making, I’m all for it.

“No, not yet,” he amends. “I think we need to have the celebration we’ve been putting off for the last few years. We should do a release party for this next game. I know we already do so much to help our fellow brothers-in-arms, hiring

them, finding them jobs, and helping them get therapy. But I think we finally have the funds to take it a step further and do nonprofit donation presentations. I was thinking about finding a way to honor Stephen and others who impacted our town, ourselves, or maybe suggestions from others in the form of scholarships that help people in need. We keep saying we are going to do it, but a million other things take precedence, and we never get around to it. This is the year.”

“You don’t need to convince me! I love the enthusiasm. Is there something in particular that prompted this?” I ask, giving him a side-eye.

“Financial numbers,” Lane says as he lays a folder on my desk.

“You know they have this thing called technology, and those spreadsheets could be sent electronically.” I pat my laptop.

“You going to tell Gary that?” he asks, arching a brow at me. “I don’t tell that man what to do, mostly because I think he could bend me in half like a twig.”

That is probably not far off. Gary had been in Special Forces, and he is built like a wrestler—with the temper to match. And for whatever reason, he likes to do his books on hard-copy ledgers. I knew it was antiquated, but he balanced billions to the penny, so I let him do it his way.

“Nope, I don’t think you and I together could overpower that man,” I confess as I open the folder. “Wow. The last game is still outperforming everything before combined. That is

wonderful. I think you're right; a party would be a great thing. We do need to pay this good fortune forward."

"Amazing. I was thinking of making it a community party, but still requesting RSVPs for logistics. Then, we can utilize a handful of social media influencers who have done most of our marketing on a slim budget. Additionally, maybe a contest for people to write in about service members needing scholarships. Last, maybe name one after Stephen. Do you know of any other local military members lost in the line of duty in recent years?"

"I don't, but you know, with a few well-placed questions to the gossip mill, we can find that out."

My brain suddenly focuses on one major issue: the planning side. That is not a project that Lane, I, or any staff member could undertake. We will have to hire a party planner. I have one in mind, but I'm pretty certain she won't want the job. But with the size of our company, I know that others will come out of the woodwork.

"You know we will need to hire an event planner," I tell Lane, who gives me a strange look before lowering himself into the chair opposite me with a small thud.

"Oh no," he sighs. "How are we going to do that? I know that Maya is the only one local, and she will definitely not be interested. I wish she would, as keeping the organizers as local as possible would be perfect. It would also be a great way to tie it to Stephen as we honor him. If we have to go outside the

town, which I dislike, I guess the best way would be to request proposals from firms and see what we get.” He shrugs.

“I know how you hate interviewing, from employees to event planners. So, I will handle the hiring part.”

“You like it only slightly more than I do,” he says, then laughs.

“What a great pair we are. Maybe we could foist it on human resources.”

“No, we need to take this one on personally. I promise I have it. I will also try to be sure that Maya knows we would love to have her organize the event.”

“How are you handling that situation?”

I shrug. “Not much handling happening there. She seems determined to honor her parents, who think we are the supervillain duo that stole their son from them.”

“Yeah. I don’t like that at all,” Lane mutters. “Maya adored her brother, but I always thought she would stand up against the strict control her parents always tried to enforce. Stephen never met a rule he didn’t try to bend. I wish for all of us she was like that.”

I nod in agreement.

“She did age very well, though,” Lane says. “What was it like for you to see her after all these years?”

I figured telling him my heart skipped a beat when I first saw her, and every time since, would get me teased for the foreseeable future. Maya had been one of those down-to-earth, easily-liked girls in school and seemed like a fireball of a

woman. I could see the charms for sure, but she is about as off-limits as anyone's ever been. Her mother, and maybe her father too, would bury me before their baby girl was allowed anywhere near me, so I had to shut off what tiny flicker of something I was feeling in her regard.

"You do remember you're dating my sister, right?" I grumble, trying to pretend I am incensed at him commenting on another girl. If I had any doubts he was devoted to my sister, that anger would be much more genuine.

"Yep, and happier than I could imagine. I'm just trying to find you a little bit of the same."

"Well, I would highly recommend you look elsewhere," I tell him with huge eyes in his direction. "Maya would have choice words if she was to hear you considering her for the role of my girlfriend. I'm afraid that earful would make you blush."

Lane laughs in agreement.

"I'll have my executive assistant help me compile a request for proposals. You also want to look at the calendar and shoot me a few days you think might work for this event?"

"Will do," I say as he stands to go.

"You know, even if it's not with Maya, you could use someone around. Ever think about dating again?"

"You know the entire pool of potential candidates," I tell him. "Not looking great."

"You're a big fan of technology. What about a dating app?"

“I’m good. I believe that when it’s the right time and person, it will work out.”

“You as a romantic is something I’m not ready for,” Lane teases as he exits our office.

I turn to stare out the window, thinking about Maya. She’s smart, stunning, and running her own business. Honestly, I don’t know if she is single, but I saw no ring. Yes, I had noticed that detail, which told me Lane wasn’t wrong about my interest in exploring a relationship with her if things were different. Unfortunately, I don’t have a time machine and can’t change the past. That big wedge between us seems pretty insurmountable. I turn back to the job that I can control, hoping that maybe this honor for Stephen, which is long overdue, can heal some old wounds and maybe give Maya’s entire family something to celebrate. It is absolutely the least we can do, and it should have been done long before now.

# Chapter 6

## Maya

I FINISH THE FLOWER arrangements on a sample table and step back to give it a final inspection. The bride and her entourage are coming in for final selections today for a wedding next spring, and it needs to be perfect. I'm never fully satisfied, and I know that if I continue to fiddle with the settings, it will never end. With everything set and the other two customers being helped by my part-timers, I head to the office to catch up. I roll the tension from my shoulders.

I was up before the sun today as I also had several vendors in different parts of the world I needed to catch up with. Sure, I do as much locally as possible, but from time to time, it is necessary to contract with others for things like linens. This latest batch has nearly a six-month lead, but the price point and quality are right where I need them to be. I guess one early morning here and there won't kill me, even though I don't like it.

Opening my email, I freeze. There is a request to submit a proposal for a massive party that BattleBron Tech will have. I feel my heart leap into my throat as I open it up.

“Wow, I had no idea,” I whisper as I read the information on their nonprofit work.

“Seriously, what are they saints?” I question as I see the portions of profits they use to assist veterans. From the post-traumatic–stress–disorder aid to the number of veterans they employ. It truly is a wonderful organization, even if I might not be currently on speaking terms with the owners.

This is the type of event that will bring out every party planner from coast to coast.

Bile rises in my throat when I think of Rachel from White Glove Events. The woman is the epitome of a snake in couture. Every time we crossed paths was a bad experience.

I can name at least three events in the last year alone she had stolen from me with that slippery tongue of hers. She used her body on the men, her over-the-top glitz on the women, and her charm on everyone. Unfortunately, she also did it in a manner that was not completely on the up and up. I had heard tales of her making grandiose claims to take clients from other event planners, only to charge those grandiose fees for mediocre work. I’d say it’s a safe bet that she would pull out all the stops to get hired for Lane and Kieran’s event. I also wouldn’t put it past her to make a pass at Kieran to better her chances for success. The thought of that makes me uncomfortable in ways I don’t want to examine.



“How much harm can just filling out one form cause?” I send the entire packet to the printer.

I scroll through some other emails before doing a quick search of my social media. I’m immediately inundated by others in various groups talking about the request that came out from BattleBron Tech. They are already trending everywhere, and no one has even started to plan the event yet. Now, that was a testament to how big they were. I sometimes forget as they remain headquartered right here in Briar Glen. From what I am reading, they have employees all over the world, so I can make this work. It would be great for my hometown if kept local but it can also work for those who want the position while living in a different state but don't want to move.

I look at all the posts and again feel that nagging worry about our poor social media presence. It’s not something I’m good at, and the few things I have posted look amateurish. I love the planning, but wordsmithing and graphics are not my thing.

Before I can even second-guess myself again, I pick up the phone and dial.

“Hey, how are you?” I can hear the shock in Emma’s voice.

“To what do I owe this call?”

“Have you heard about this party that Lane and Kieran are planning?” I get right to the heart of the matter. I realize that anything I say to Emma is probably going to make it back to the duo, so I keep it all business.

“Lane told me. I think it will bring a lot of people to town, and the amount they will be giving out to so many deserving

individuals is great,” she replies.

“I was reviewing all the social media, along with some of the information and requirements needed for the request for proposal. Truth be told, I’m not competitive enough in those areas.”

“Wow, are you considering applying?”

I don’t honestly know the answer to that. I glance over at the application sitting on the printer, taunting me. This could be a big deal and catapult my business to new levels. On the other hand, my mother has not spoken to me since the day of Stephen’s anniversary at the cemetery. I’m torn on whether I want to risk being completely disowned by my parents.

“I’m not sure at the moment,” I say, deciding to keep it noncommittal. “I do know that to compete for any events at the level I want, I need help. I have been reviewing resumes, and I have to admit, you have the skills I need. I was wondering if maybe we could do a lunch meeting and hash through some things this week.”

“I would love that,” she says, “I could do Thursday at noon or Friday.”

“Thursday works. Meet at Briar Fresh at noon?”

“Works for me. I’ll see you there,” she says. “Oh, and Maya?”

“Yeah.”

“Please seriously consider applying to plan the event. There are some things happening that I believe you would want to be

part of. The event will honor people like your brother. It's for a good cause. They help so many."

"I was reading about everything the company supports, and I agree it sounds amazing. I promise to give it proper consideration," I offer back.

"Fair enough. I will see you Thursday," she finishes.

"See you Thursday," I say before I hang up.

Turning toward the printer, I pull the application off and stare at it a moment longer, still unsure what the right thing to do is. Storing it next to my laptop, I decide I can consider it a bit longer, as it is not due today, after all. I'm already pretty certain I have to take a shot and apply. I'm not normally a big risk-taker when it comes to my business. But maybe this is an exception to the rule and the opportunity I've long waited for. Though honestly, I'm no longer certain if it's just a great business opportunity or the idea of getting close to Kieran again that is drawing me in. Thankfully, the bell up front announces the arrival of my next appointment, and I can distract myself with the business at hand.

# Chapter 7

## Kieran

I STARE INSIDE THE refrigerator and sigh in disgust. I wish I had paid a lot more attention when my mother was trying to teach me to cook. Since I didn't, that normally meant ordering from the meager selection of restaurants in town; I could only cook pasta and grill a burger in a pinch. I was a great soldier and an even better salesperson, but that didn't feed my belly.

"You know that you could hire a chef." Lane's voice sounds behind me, and I turn to give him a squinted-eye look.

"That seems extravagant for the basic needs I have." I close the refrigerator door. "Did I forget something? I'm shocked to find you here and not with my sister."

"I needed to borrow a cup of sugar," he teases, a stupid grin on his face.

"You don't bake." I scowl. "I might have to barge in on a lot more of your dinner dates with Emma, as I know she can throw down in the kitchen."

“You aren’t kidding. I might have to add an extra mile or two to my morning run routine to keep the extra pounds at bay. You know you’re always welcome, but tonight she is out.”

“Not really too keen on being a third wheel with you and my sister, but thanks for the open invitation.”

“I was just dropping off a new request that came through for a ranch in Wyoming. The ranch would give BattleBron Tech a chance to expand some of our non-profit work. It seems intriguing, and while I know that we could discuss it tomorrow, I figured you would be up with nothing much to do,” he says, laying the folder on the counter. “I’m off for a run. Care to join?”

“Nah, I skipped lunch and need to eat. I’ll go grab something.”

I change into a casual outfit and head to town on foot. It is not as strenuous a workout as Lane is enjoying, but at least it’s something. Just as I get close to the deli, I notice Emma and Maya coming out of a fabric store. I’m caught off guard, trying to remember if Lane said what my sister is doing. I consider interjecting as I stand ready to cross the road, but I notice Emma look over at me and give a quick shake of her head. That’s odd, but I don’t want to make a weird situation worse, so I turn to keep on my original trajectory.

Just as I turn, Maya’s gaze collides with mine. I feel it like she’s touching my skin. Something about her eyes drags me in, and I nearly overcome my better judgment to go to her. I realize that is the silliest thing I’ve ever thought. She is the last

woman on earth I should feel anything for, especially with how she feels about me.

I give a quick wave and then continue to the deli.

As I give my order and stand waiting, I text Emma to give me a call when she is free.

I feel like I'm back in high school, as I have every intention of getting all the details on what they are doing. I find it hard to believe that Maya and her family are so upset at Lane and me but are happy to have her buddy up with my sister. Something is definitely up.

It's nearly two hours since seeing Emma with Maya when my phone finally rings. I grab it like I've won the lottery and this is the call to tell me when I'm getting the check.

"Hey, what was that about?" I ask, not even saying hello before I dive right in.

"Yeah, sorry I couldn't stop by to chat with you today." I sit back on the sofa, waiting for what she will say next. "I'm working for Maya."

I'm at a loss for words for the longest time, but she waits patiently until I speak.

"I'm sorry; I thought you were writing your books?"

"I am, but she needed a writer on staff for several of her marketing projects. I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it, so I wanted to scope things out first."

“But you then accepted the job before you could talk to us?” I question like some father grilling his prepubescent daughter about her first boyfriend.

“Yes. I was going to tell you. Besides, I’m doing damage control for the two of you. I think we can make this situation better.”

“I didn’t do anything that needs you fixing things, Emma,” I bark.

“Okay, down, boy,” Emma replies, not missing a beat. “Stephen and Maya were both good friends with all of us. Does it matter how we get over this bad blood?”

“Yes, if she’s using you to get something over on Lane and me, there is a problem.”

“You need to take a chill pill,” Emma says. “I know you used to have a thing for her, but that was high school. I understand your ego might be bruised over the bad things her family believes about you. That said, I would like to do this job with your blessing, but I will do it without if I have to. It’s a great opportunity for me to reconnect with people here in town. When writing, I have to be behind a computer screen all day and I don’t have an opportunity for that level of interaction.”

“And Maya was the only job in town?” I ask bitterly.

“Do I need to shut this call down now and we can pick it up tomorrow?”

I take a deep breath and will myself to relax. I have no idea why I’m overreacting or feeling this raw. She is not wrong that

her being in Maya's ear might be a good thing. I give her kudos for wandering right into the lion's den and trying to play both sides.

"Okay, I can be kind. I'm assuming she hopes that in exchange for being nice about giving you a job, we will give her the party deal?"

"I don't know; we didn't talk about it other than her telling me she hadn't completed the proposal yet."

"She will need to do that if she wants to even be in the running."

"Good night, Kieran." Emma hangs up.

I stare at the phone and realize my blood pressure is through the roof. "What in the world?"

I stand and pace the room, inhaling as I close my eyes and laugh. I have no idea what that entire thing was or why I'm wound up tighter than a poorly tuned guitar.

My phone rings, and I lunge for it, assuming Emma is calling back. Instead, I see Lane's name on the caller ID.

"What's up?"

"Have you lost your mind?" He demands, and I know he must be with Emma.

"Did my traitor sister tattle?" I ask, keeping my tone sharp, though now there is no emotional heat backing it.

"Yes. She said she got Maya to hire her, and they had a great evening. So, of course, you decide to be a wet blanket and get



upset. I thought the plan was for us to try to soften the anger aimed at us by Maya's family."

"I know. I don't know why I got so defensive, but I feel stupid."

"Why?"

"You do realize we should have just given her the party. I mean, my sister was tough enough to go right to Maya and try to bury the hatchet. Now we have to interview all these companies and pray she puts in a proposal," I tell him as the root of my anger seems to spill out of my mouth before I even fully put it together consciously.

"I did mention this before. You were the one who wanted to look at other options. We can just award her the event based on the application and let anyone else know we've hired someone."

"Which is why I need Emma to help make sure she puts one in."

"Maybe find a kinder way of saying that next time."

"Is this what life is going to be like forever? You defending her honor at every turn, even against me, your best friend and business partner?"

"Yeah. Sorry, eventually she'll be the mother of my children. I've got to have her back."

"Gross, I didn't need that image in my head before bed," I groan. "Gotta go."

“Night.” Lane chuckles as I disconnect.

“Please let her put in an application,” I whisper.

If she doesn't, there will be more drama before things get better. Even with her doing the party, it most likely won't be smooth sailing. But hopefully, it's our in to start making amends for how we handled Stephen's death. Hiring Maya would also allow me to spend time with her, which suddenly looks surprisingly good. Of course, I would never give my sister credit for starting us down this path.

I head to the bedroom, hoping sleep is forthcoming. Tomorrow we might just have new developments to celebrate.

# Chapter 8

## Maya

I REALIZE TODAY IS the day, and I have to put my proposal in the hands of BattleBron Tech or lose my opportunity for good. I've been debating with myself for days, and I am no closer to a definitive answer. As I slide the entire proposal neatly into a manilla envelope, I continue my internal struggle.

"Hey." Emma knocks on the office door. "Did you have time to review that first batch of write-ups I provided?"

"Yes," I respond, laying the envelope and paperwork aside. "I just had a couple of notes I put on them in red. Do you like hard copies or electronic ones better?"

"Honestly, I love the hard copies all marked up. Now that I'm so far away from my editor, I have to track changes electronically, and it just isn't the same."

Emma has been a godsend and is already providing amazing support to my marketing ventures. I'm already seeing results. My advertising materials are all getting a facelift thanks to her

wordsmithing. Additionally, I love having her energy around as we get ready to launch the new branding that I've been trying to get out there for months.

"You fill out the application?" she suddenly asks, drawing my eyes to the envelope at my side.

"Yes, but I'm still not fully committed to turning it in," I admit. "My mom isn't on board with me having anything to do with your brother or Lane. I know it's just her pain, and my therapist tells me grief is personal and that not one timeline or reaction fits everyone. I'm truly trying to give her some grace, but it's hard. This event, though"—I stare at the envelope with longing—"could be the one that changes things for the better. Kieran and Lane have built a company that is so well respected that this event will be a game changer for whoever plans it."

"You do know that Kieran is the one making the choice, right?" Emma asks as I try to read her expression.

"Is that a positive or a negative for me?" I question, cocking my head to the side.

"As long as you don't put a whoopee cushion on his seat during an important meeting, I think you should be fine," she says, referencing an unfortunate incident back in high school.

"Hey, I was trying to put it on Stephen's seat. He had it coming," I tell her as I think back to that terrible day.

It had been the all-school spelling bee where the younger grades were in the audience, and my friends were trying to

exact revenge on my brother. He had soaked all of us with the hose the day before as we walked up to our house. We knew Stephen would just laugh and probably make some huge joke, but we would feel vindicated. When he switched seats with Kieran at the last minute, it was a total disaster.

“I agree, but oh man my brother was horrified. Lane told me this story recently and said that Kieran asked to sit next to you because he was crushing on you, and then the whoopee cushion happened,” she bit down on her lip. “He was mortified!”

“Crushing on me?” This is new information. “Maybe later on, I mean, I was only a freshman; seniors didn’t have crushes on freshmen,” I say, giggling.

“All I can say is that’s the story Lane told me.” Emma shrugs.

My secret crush had a crush on me? I can feel my teenage self getting all giddy and doing a jig at the excitement that a little bit of knowledge imparts. If only I had known then, it’s definitely too late now.

“Boy, how far have we all come, huh?”

“Yeah,” she replies in a much more solemn tone. “I say drop the application off. It’s long overdue for all of us to work together and put the past to rest. I can’t imagine how hard it would’ve been if Kieran never came home, so I don’t ever want to minimize Stephen’s loss for your family. I can even understand that your parents need someone to blame for all their pain. I think this would be a great chance to bring everyone together again, but I won’t push.”

“I appreciate it,” I say sincerely, holding the edited papers to her.

“Thanks. I’ll get them back to you tomorrow,” she says, heading out.

I turn to the application and decide it’s time. I need to rip the Band-Aid off and put my name in the hat. Ultimately, someone more qualified might surface, but it is all a moot point. If I hand in the application, I will know I did everything I could to heal this rift. If I don’t put the proposal in, then I won’t even give myself a fighting chance and I’ll have no one but myself to blame.

“I’m going to run an errand,” I let my part-timer know. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“Kay,” I hear as the door closes behind me, and I head down the street. I can drop the envelope in the mail and avoid personal contact at this point. It will make it by the deadline postmarked exactly as it should be.

As I open the flap on the mailbox to drop in the envelope, I glance up to see Kieran and none other than Rachel Netz from White Glove Events sitting together at the bistro. I feel the instant flare of a raging inferno heat my insides as she giggles at something he says. I turn to the road and see that telltale sports car of hers with the vanity plate WHTGLV. Seriously, that woman is over the top. I don’t understand how Kieran can even stand to be in her presence.

Rachel is the opposite of my low-maintenance routine. She has perfect teeth that must be whitened. Long, perfect blond

tresses without one strand of hair out of place, even in this humidity. Then there is her model's physique and long legs showcased in a sheath dress with sky-high heels to top off the look. I would kill myself tripping around town in those shoes. I prefer slacks, loose tops, and flat shoes. I keep my hair up and out of my face; a little mascara and lip gloss finish my morning routine, and I rarely worry about refreshing them. I work hard, and it shows. I honestly have to believe Rachel has an army of support at her disposal, as being a hardworking woman, who likes to be hands-on, is definitely not what you would think when you see her—unless it is in a negative context that I feel guilty even thinking about.

I guess the decision of who will be planning the event is made if Kieran is eating with her. With anger driving my decision-making, I pull the envelope from the opening of the mailbox and toss it in the garbage just in time to see Rachel lean toward Kieran and say something to him privately. She probably didn't want to risk her hair frizzing or getting out of place in this windy weather. I guess it was possible she just wanted privacy. Whatever, I don't care what her reasons are or what she's thinking.

I sulk the whole way back to the office. I'm angry at myself for waiting and that Kieran would even consider Rachel. I need to focus on the work that I can get and let her have this win. I will never hear the end of it. She will be around town as she works to make the event come together. Maybe it is time to plan an extended hiatus to a country far away until after the big event is over.

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk as I see Kieran's car. You can't miss it with the BattleBron Tech vanity plate and license plate number KIERAN. It's kind of hard to hide that one. I notice that the top on the convertible is down.

I don't know what comes over me, but I turn around and head back to the trash bin. I stick my hand in and grab the envelope. I then walk back to his car and toss it onto the passenger seat. That's better. Now, at least I threw my name in, and it can't ever be said that I didn't submit a proposal. It might be one more reason I resent the man, but you never win the lottery by not playing, right? My guess is that the crazy twists and turns of life give me as fair a shot as Rachel at winning this contract.

It was done. Now I can only wait and see.



# Chapter 9

## Kieran

I SLAM DOWN THE phone, frustrated after another positive recommendation came in for Rachel and White Glove Events. I can see that Rachel has worked hard to put herself at the top of the who's who list for event planning in this state. Her clients seem to love her work, and she is pulling out all the stops to make herself a top contender.

“You good?” Lane asks. I glance up to see him leaning against my office doorframe.

“I’ve finished the recommendation calls.”

“Are they all bad? Did Rachel and her team mislead us about something?”

“Nope, not at all. They seem to be the best choice for getting the event done in the time frame we want,” I say as he bounces off the entrance to come toward me.

We had decided on this event pretty late, meaning many of the expected proposals from agencies hadn't come in. Those that

did apply were all well put together, and it was hard making those first cuts. The company had to have the connections needed to bring in crowds, and vendors, not to mention putting the entire event together in record time. White Glove Events is located in the state capital and not in the immediate area which is a drawback but not a deal breaker. I wanted to hire Maya and keep it in town but she didn't submit a proposal. Besides that, there is no reason not to hire Rachel's company.

"Okay, well, normally, that would all be good news. Besides, Rachel is attractive and obviously interested in you, my friend." He chuckles. "You could kill two birds with one stone."

"Yeah, I'll pass thanks. That woman is a lot of drama in the making."

Rachel reminds me of someone who belongs in bigger cities and probably takes four hours to get ready in the morning. Every detail of her makeup, clothes, and hair is meticulous. She's also a bit too forward for my liking. Lane was not wrong about her apparent interest in me.

"What's your biggest concern about hiring White Glove Events? I, for one, know you can handle an overly aggressive woman and put her in her place so kindly she won't even realize what you did. I was with you in Japan, remember?"

I have to laugh at that memory.

"Okay, that woman was sticking to me like a lost puppy that just found its new home," I say, recalling the episode he's

referencing. “I just unwound her and said that I had a skin disease. It worked effectively, I thought.”

“Until we passed her ten minutes later, wiping herself down with sanitizing wipes,” Lane says, still trying to get his laughing under control.

“Hey, she left all the guys alone after that,” I shrug. “Yes. I would need to talk with Rachel ahead of time and make sure she understands that I am not interested.”

“In her, or women in general right now? I mean, if Maya had applied for the role, would that have been different?” He arches a brow.

“I still find it ridiculous that she didn’t even try to apply.” I shake my head.

“I told you I could have Emma double-check. She could make it look organic, so Maya doesn’t know it is us asking. I’d like to verify that it didn’t get lost in the mail.”

“She is right here in town.” I show my derision for that statement. “She could have just dropped it directly to the office or had Emma bring it to us,” I finish as someone knocks on the door.

“This just came for you,” the receptionist says as she walks in with a wine and cheese basket.

“Thanks.” Lane glances at the card and starts to read it aloud.

“I appreciate the time you gave me to listen to my pitch. Next time, dinner is on me, and we won’t talk business at all.”

“I wonder how many men she does this with to win projects,” I muse.

“Few is my guess,” Lane says. “First, you don’t give yourself enough credit for being a great catch. I know what your background and bank account tell a future partner. That woman is someone who loves the finer things, and you, my friend, are the catch she has been searching for. I have a feeling this will be entertaining to watch play out.”

“Not funny,” I bite out through gritted teeth.

“Are there any other contenders in your mind?” Lane asks.

“No, but I’m going to take all the proposals home for just one more look-see.”

“Kieran, if you honestly don’t feel in your gut that White Glove Events is the company, I’ll follow your lead to another one.”

“Thanks,” I sigh. “Have you received all the numbers for the budget at least?”

“Yeah. I emailed you earlier. Also, I do have another matter we need to chat about,” Lane says. “It will take your mind off this Rachel drama.”

“Bring it on,” I exclaim.

“The captain needs one of us to fill in during his time off. His wife’s sister is having surgery, and they need to take a week’s vacation to help her. I think he felt odd asking me or you to take time away from our company. He mentioned something about our time being better compensated while working here,

but I reassured him it wouldn't be a problem at all to cover for him."

"I get that he is concerned about pulling us from the company, as we're both volunteers. Is there no one with more seniority who can be left in charge?"

"I'm just reporting what he came by to request. I can do it if it is too much for you," he says, but I know that means he won't get to spend as much time every day with Emma.

"No, I'll make it work. What are the dates?"

"I asked him to email us when he firmed up the details. I appreciate you doing this."

"You know, someday we'll have to give up that side of our lives. We would leave a lot of people in a quandary if something happened to either one of us, and the commitment here is more important than ever," I remind him.

"I know. I was going to broach that topic with you as well. I would like to help them with some funding so they can afford more staff and not rely so heavily on volunteers."

"I like that idea."

"Good. I will pull something together, but for now, we'll keep trying to cover as needed," he says. "And let me know what you decide about White Glove Events."

"I don't want to make the decision alone."

"I'm good with whatever direction you choose to move forward with," Lane says reassuringly as he exits the office.

I roll my neck and shoulders. It's dumb to hide from a woman when the event itself is so much more important than a woman's interest in me. I still can't get rid of the nagging in the back of my mind, that I should do something to bring Maya in on this. Maybe we should have told her about the scholarship for Stephen or done more to encourage her to apply. I can't get over the feeling that I need to bring her on to be the one who plans this event.

“Unfortunately, the deadline has passed, and it wouldn't be fair to hedge the odds in her favor by letting her slip in now.” I acknowledge to no one but myself.

Nothing to do but find the least objectionable firm from those who did submit a proposal. The event will be good no matter what; I have all the confidence in the world about that. All the firms were well and truly vetted to be good in their own rights. I know it's just wanting to make everything right with Maya and her family that is continuing to torment me. That truly shouldn't have a place in business, even if our company focus is as much on the people as the work. This is one time I need to stick to the rules that were set and make a hard choice. We have a limited time to pull this off, and we need to get the selected firm started now—whomever I decide that should be.

# Chapter 10

## Maya

I CONTINUE TO WORK through tasks on my project checklist. The wedding plans are in progress, and everything needed has been ordered. The two kids' birthday parties and the Boys and Girls Club event are next on my list. I feel confident and happy about how everything is coming together. Thankfully, I don't see any hard obstacles on my radar.

I do have to make a stop at the firehouse today and chat with the fire captain about the event at the Boys and Girls Club. Every year, we like to have firefighters and police not only bring out vehicles and talk to the kids but also participate. We do a soccer match with them in uniforms. The kids love it, and it's great for community building. If I'm being honest, having all of them on site also provides security and some safety measures in case anything goes wrong. I should have gone down last week, but one thing after another kept creeping up to distract me.

“No time like the present,” I mutter as I glance at the watch on my wrist. I have enough time to get to the firehouse and grab lunch before my next meeting.

As I get ready to walk out the door I can tell it’s smoldering hot outside again. I’m really looking forward to the fall weather that should be heading in shortly. It’s one of my favorite times of the year. I love seeing all the red, yellow, and orange colors that spring up as the leaves start changing. I can’t wait, even if that means the BattleBron Tech Gala will be happening without me.

It was reported that all the event companies in contention had been interviewed. It’s shocking how much information I get online for this event versus on the streets of my hometown.

“Hey,” Emma says opening the door just as I’m ready to walk out. “You headed out?”

“Yeah. Did you need something?”

“I was going to check on the copy of that release for the club event.”

“Oh, I left it on my desk. You can just run in to get it. I keep your items right on the box. If you need me to help find it, I’ll be back around one.”

“I have some other errands, so I will probably just stop by when you’re back,” she says and heads off to my office before I hear her footsteps stop. “Maya?”

“Yes,” I turn to see her worried expression.



“Why did you decide not to submit a proposal for the event?” She asks me boldly, which is the first shock to hit me. The second is the crazy words she just uttered.

“I did turn it in. Who told you that I didn’t?” I demand, ready to defend the apparent lie they must have told her.

“Oh, Lane said that you didn’t. They were hoping to have a local team do it, so I thought you were a shoo-in. He said it wouldn’t be fair to give the event to you after you didn’t even meet the entrance requirements, so I don’t understand,” she replies, looking confused.

“He saw the applications with his own eyes? Or did someone else review them?” I’m starting to panic as I realize all the questions now swirling in my head. Just when I’m working to accept my fate, life goes and flings another monkey wrench into the plan.

“I don’t know. I can only tell you what he said,” she admits. “I’m sorry I even brought it up. I was just so excited when they started talking about the local aspect of things that I felt you were definitely going to get it.”

“Yeah, I probably would have been. Oh well, I heard they are announcing in the upcoming days, and all the interviews are done. So, I’m not in the running, no matter the cause.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Emma says empathetically.

“I understand,” I say, holding on to the mask of indifference on my face as we go in the opposite direction.

I attempt to quash the thoughts running rampant in my mind. I have a job to get done today; no matter what I might find out about this confusion. I don't understand what happened. I put the proposal in Kieran's car. How did he not get it? If he did get it, why would he lie and say he didn't? Ugh. Either way, I have to move on and make peace with the outcome.

My cell phone rings. I pull it out and see my dad's name. This day keeps getting crazier by the moment.

"Hey, Dad," I say, praying it isn't bad news. Things are still a bit icy with my parents.

"Can you come to dinner on Sunday?" he asks without any additional context.

"Is Mom okay with that?"

"Yes. We need to clear the air. We're both missing you."

"Six, okay?"

"Yes. Great! See you then," he finishes and disconnects as my heart aches. I hate this distance between us, but hopefully, this is the first glimmer of things turning around.

"Hey," a firefighter greets me as I enter the station. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the captain," I tell him, finding my head even more worried as I ponder that call from my dad. I try to set Emma, the event, and my dad out of my head as I follow the firefighter's directions to the back of the station. "Just knock," the man tells me before I nod and continue.

“Hello,” I call as I knock.

“Come in,” I hear and push open the door.

“Hey, I came to make my annual ...” I stop as I realize Kieran stares back at me.

I can't breathe and feel like I might pass out. I don't know if I should scream at him, run away, or compliment him on how amazing he looks in that uniform. I have to admit that Kieran was always the better-looking of the two. Time in the military and maturity have made him gorgeous. His muscles are barely contained by the T-shirt he's wearing, and the high, tight hair that frames his chiseled face takes my breath away. I try to find some flaw with him, to explain the lack of a girlfriend or wife, and come up with nothing. Of course, I would rather trade swipes with a viper than admit such things aloud to the man. What the heck is happening to me? This man is driving me crazy. The emotions ricocheting off every one of my nerve endings have me standing mute for longer than necessary, but I still can't get myself to speak.

“Can I help you?” Kieran asks, starting to look concerned.

“Even—kids—I need you to come there,” I babble, sounding like an idiot.

“Are you okay?” Kieran asks, rising to walk toward me.

“Nope.” I hold my hand up to stop his progress. “Stay.”

“I'm not a dog,” he mutters. “What is up with you?”

“When is the captain back?” I ask as I finally manage to speak a coherent sentence.

“A week. Can I help you with something?”

“I need to get the fire department’s appearance booked for an event he authorizes each year. I can wait a week, though, and will talk to him when he gets back.”

I spin in a half circle and immediately start for the door. I can’t be here with Kieran. I’m unsure what I’ll do if I don’t get away. I can’t be certain that I won’t go off on him like a crazy lady, or worse, I’ll continue to stammer like someone who just had a stroke. Either way, escape is the only option.

“Maya,” Kieran calls out, but I continue walking away.

“Maya.” He grabs my arm and turns me toward him again.

I stare at his hand before meeting his gaze.

“I have nothing nice to say to you, so let me go,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Maya, please,” he replies. “I don’t know what is up with you, but I’m not the enemy.”

“Really? Care to explain why you didn’t even give me—” I stop the question, as I honestly don’t want to hear his explanation, and I turn back to the door. “Never mind.”

“Maya, I want to help. Please talk to me,” he begs, jumping in front of me.

“I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Then when? I feel like we have a lot that needs to be said. Lunch, dinner, or even just a meeting to talk. You decide when

and where. I'll be there. I truly want to make things better and finally clear the air."

I swear he looks like he means what is coming out of his mouth, but then his actions say something else. Why not give me at least an interview for the event? That would have been a good time for questions and answers. It is probably just his conscience bothering him into action. I don't want his pity.

"I need to get back to work," I say, not responding to the invite.

"Maya. Please, at least tell me something I can do to make this right?"

"You can't," I tell him a second before the bell rings for an emergency.

"We have to finish this conversation," he pleads.

"I have to go," I manage as someone hollers at him. I slip through the bay doors and onto the street.

Only when I finally collapse into my office chair do I breathe calmly again. The tension drains from my body, and I rest my elbows on my desk. I drop my head in my hands and let the tears I've been holding back fall down my face. This is more drama than I would ever wish on my worst enemy, and I need everything to stop. I also need to take some lessons from Rachel about how she holds herself together no matter what's happening. I totally lost it today. I'm sure it's the nail in my coffin for ever being considered for organizing an event of

Kieran's—which is probably for the best if he has this kind of effect on me.

# Chapter 11

## Kieran

“SHE DIDN’T APPLY,” I mutter into the phone after the mayor disconnects the call.

Of course, when he was on the line, I attempted to quell his concerns about Maya’s exclusion from consideration for planning the BattleBron Tech Gala. This event will be the social event of the year, and with the national media on high alert, it will be great for the area to garner media presence for a wider audience. A local vendor helming everything would be a major boon for Brian Glen. I comprehend that, but this little feud everyone is whipping up between Maya and me is dumb. She didn’t put in an application. Plain and simple.

“You good?” Lane asks as he gives me a smirk.

I have a sudden desire to blurt out anything that would wipe that telling look from his face. I don’t understand the intense interest in this single event. While we are a huge presence in town, this current level of attention is off-putting and not positive. To make matters worse, I feel guilty for not giving it

to Maya, even though it would be unfair since she didn't apply. Those last three words are lost on everyone I talk to, and I wish they would have a chat with her instead of continuing the campaign against me personally—not even Lane is taking this level of heat, thus the smirk.

“You know this is all because you fell in love with Emma, and everyone assumes you're the nice one now,” I growl at him. “I'm her brother, so why not extend that same love in my direction? Instead, I have to defend all my business choices—and apparently, the shoes I wore yesterday were pretentious.”

“No one said a thing about your shoes,” Lane retorts with a barely concealed chuckle.

“Mary at the bakery did, and she said she worries that I might ruin them on our streets. They were those black alligator ones that matched the black pants I was wearing.”

“Oh, those are pretentious.” Lane wrinkles his nose at me in such a way I know he is teasing me.

“I'm going to check in with Emma about lunch and see if I can find anyone who will sympathize with me. You know I would have absolutely considered Maya for the event if she had put in an application.”

“I know you would have,” Lane says, “though I do realize that Rachel being around so much is making people nervous. She's a bit over the top, and there seems to be tension between her and Maya. You know she's made comments about Maya's company and handed out her cards to people around town. I don't want to hurt Maya's business in order to better ours.”



I let a growl loose. “That’s all we need to do, destroy her company on top of the whole debacle with her brother. Rachel is the most qualified contender, I can’t dismiss that. This event is too important and is already being talked about. I haven’t officially given Rachel the gig yet.”

“Really?” Lane asks, arching a brow at me. “I’m pretty certain she is planning our event and your wedding.”

“No,” I emphatically say with a shake of my head. “That is way too much for me to handle every day. I mean, she is beautiful, and you have to admire the drive with which she attacks her job. Seriously, though, that would be a lot to put up with daily. I can’t fathom how we get out of this other than picking one of the two other contenders. Our timeline and location make it tough.”

“I get that. I know that Emma has had some conversations with Maya. Maybe talk to her and see if she has any ideas on how to handle things. It’s possible that having a heart-to-heart with Maya would help alleviate others’ concerns. Or maybe even find out why she didn’t apply, that way we can finally smooth things out. We could also offer her another role in the future.”

“Yeah.” I blow out a long breath, “I’ll talk to her. You need any lunch?”

“Yeah, the BLT and a bag of Kettle chips.”

“I’ll chat with Emma when I stop over to see if she needs anything,” I say as I head for the door.

“Good luck ducking your future wife,” Lane calls out cheerily behind me as I throw a hand in the air and continue on without a quick comeback.

I know that a decision on the event planning company needs to be announced in the near future. I can imagine the drama about to unfold where I will either spend the next few months avoiding Rachel’s overt attentions or playing meek and mild to the naysayers of my hometown. I don’t like either option, and it’s making me wish that I had a magic wand to fix this mess so that everyone is happy. I know that’s a pipe dream, so I need to suck it up and navigate the course I’m on without complaint. The bottom line is the event will benefit so many at the end of it. That has to remain my focus.

I walk through the patio doors of my sister’s newly remodeled home. I head to the office space she uses.

“I just think it’s terrible that he’s so enamored of that woman.” I hear Maya’s voice, and I almost rage through the door. Then, a second before I’m ready to throw the doors open, a cooler head prevails, and I decide to listen a minute longer. It might not be me she’s talking about.

“I know that my brother sometimes seems like he’s wrapped in his own world,” Emma responds.

*Hey! I do not. I’m a giver.*

“Well, I know that Rachel is looking at more than just this event as a way to get in with Kieran,” Maya snipes. “I just want to ensure that I have a great web presence with all my event offerings out there to draw new clients. I worry that she

will do irreparable harm to Briar Glen, BattleBron Tech, and even my relationships around town. I'm pretty sure she is intent on proving to your brother that she's the best person to fulfill all of his dreams, not just organize the event," she finishes with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

"I love the big guy to pieces," Emma says, and I hope she is on the cusp of defending my honor. "But I really do hope that he comes to his senses. I always hoped the two of you would end up together. It would be amazing to have you around all the time again. I miss this girl time."

"Well, the chances of your brother and I ever being anything but sparring buddies again are nil," she snidely replies. "I promise I would never put up with someone that—"

At that moment, I chose to step around the corner and lazily lean against the wall, making my presence known.

"How long have you been standing there?" Emma asks, annoyed. Maya turns bright red as her jaw falls to the floor.

"Just a second," I say. "Please carry on with all the degradation of my person. I just came by to do you a favor and get lunch," I tell her cheekily. "I have plenty of time, though, and find this conversation amazingly informative."

"You enjoy watching me squirm, don't you?" Maya demands.

"If you didn't besmirch my name, there wouldn't be a reason for me to watch you wriggle out of what you were saying." I lean in closer to her.

“I’m only telling the truth. I can’t help that your taste in women has decreased over time.”

“You mean away from small-town girls and to those more sophisticated who go after what they want.” I find the words falling from my lips before I think them through. I want to plant a palm on my forehead as I realize how mean that sounds.

“See, told you,” Maya says to Emma.

“I didn’t mean—” I stop as my sister just shakes her head.

“Chef’s salad for lunch,” Emma calls out, turning all attention from the current hot topic.

“Maya? Can I buy you lunch?” I ask, hoping to redeem a few points.

“Nope. I’m good,” She turns back to my sister and dismisses me to leave.

Once out, I unclench my fist. This woman has me tied in knots, and it appears I can’t do anything right. I’m pretty confident things will only get worse before they get better if they get better at all. I shake my head. I’m not looking forward to this one bit.

# Chapter 12

## Maya

“ARE YOU GOING TO be able to take the cake to the tea party at the community center?” I asked my high school intern, Lila, who just arrived to help for the afternoon.

I try to keep a few students on staff part-time for any walk-ins and customers that come to the office. I am doing well enough to afford it, and it gives them some spending money. That said, it seems like Rachel’s presence in town might harm my business long-term if she stays in town and continues to suck up to potential customers. I don’t figure I stand a chance against that slick tongue and beautiful look of hers. I always thought a good work ethic and strong ties to the community were enough to grow a strong clientele—I guess I can add that to the things I was mistaken about.

“I have homework. I was hoping that I could just watch the shop and do it,” Lila tells me sheepishly.

My shoulders roll forward. That isn’t the answer I was expecting. The truth is, I want to hide in my office as everyone

continues to take sides in this massive showdown for the BattleBron Tech party. The drama is shaking my foundation and truly making me uncomfortable. I knew this town was tight-knit before, but normally, I stay away from any mudslinging. This time, I am smack-dab in the middle of it, getting insults from one side and unwanted attention from the other. Then, the interaction with Kieran happened at Emma's.

I have never been more embarrassed in my entire life. The man is so handsome, and when he raised that eyebrow in shock at me, I had been torn between wanting to kiss him and stomp my foot in frustration. I was begging the universe to let me spontaneously combust, fall into a sinkhole, or otherwise disappear. Of course, I had gotten a bit too big for my britches. It's penance for the exact behavior my mother had always warned me of. Still, it was enough to make me seek shelter and avoid sunlight for several days. The announcement of the event planning company will happen in the next few days, and Rachel will once again reign supreme. Maybe I can take a sabbatical to another continent during the planning stages and possibly return when she is done with her takeover of Briar Glen. I mean, I can find a job anywhere, right? While I am in love with my hometown, this might be the event that runs me out of town.

As I stare at Lila, I realize all the imaginary scenarios in my head need to stop so I can give her an answer. As I am the boss, I guess I should be the one to fulfill the cake order and deliver the bag of goodies that I have just completed for the ladies' club tea party. Cake decorations are a secret talent I

don't offer to all my clients, but those in town love my work and frequently request that additional touch. I could deliver the cake and be back in the safety of my business in no time . . .

"I'm on it. You watch for customers, and then when I get back, I have some calligraphy work we can do," I tell Lila.

"Perfect. You're the best boss," the girl gushes as I gather the materials I need for the run down the street.

"I can do this. Just keep your head down and move it," I mutter affirmatively as I open the door, balancing the boxed cake. In my other hand is the bag of party favors and a stack of cake plates.

One block, then two. So far, so good. Seems like everything is going my way. I'm starting to feel the tension seep out of my body as I stand straighter. The cake is perfectly balanced to not upset any of the delicate sugar flowers I crafted. The sixteen-inch cake looks much bigger with the intricate design of various local flowers. This will be going on social media later. I've already sent the images to Emma to post.

"Hello." Rachel pops out of what seems like nowhere. I feel my entire body stiffen as I nearly drop everything.

"Hi." I try to maneuver around her. "Sorry, on the move."

"I see that," she says, stepping back in front of me and reaching up to open the top of the cake box before I can stop her. "What a cute cake! Did you do that?" There is just a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

“I did,” I mutter. I remind myself not to take the bait. “I have a group waiting for me.” I step to the right to continue on my way.

“I personally love this amazing professional bakery back home for all my baked goods and cakes. You know, just a little detail like the food can make or break an event. I guess here, though, everyone seems to appreciate the home-baked look,” she says, and I feel my anger simmer.

“I like the personal touch and not delegating every aspect of my business,” I come back through gritted teeth as I make a valiant effort to get past her.

I turn this direction and that, hoping that no one is watching. How in the world a woman in three-inch heels can outmaneuver me and stop my progress again is a mystery to me. I need to bring out my best basketball moves to get to the community center finally. I see my goal ahead as I work to keep the cake upright and my patience from wearing thin.

“We need to talk,” Rachel says, once again jumping in front of me. I barely manage to stop the cake from mashing into the front of her body.

A sudden image of that plays through my head, but I eradicate it before it can take hold. I might not like her, but the last thing I need is some major scene with her in front of the entire town. I’m certain it would be high drama and have a little of Rachel’s flair for over-the-top shows. I don’t need this and just want to make the three-block trek to the community center before retreating back to my office.



“There is nothing we need to say to each other.”

“Really? I hear that you and I are competing for the same thing, and in case you didn’t know—I don’t like to lose,” she hisses.

“I’m not your competition,” I respond as I consider doing a little fake out to the left and quickly slide past her on the right.

“I would agree, but Kieran, along with that partner of his, disagrees. They have been musing so hard about why you didn’t apply for the event and what the entire town will say; he is not paying me the attention I deserve,” she spits out.

“I’m sorry Kieran isn’t paying you attention.” I arch a brow at her, shocked by her blatant admission that it is not just the event she’s hoping to snag here in Briar Glen. “I thought you were just here for the event and notoriety of BattleBron Tech?”

She turns a shade of bright red, having apparently not intended to be so obvious.

*Oh, happy day.* There is no way that Kieran would fall for someone like Rachel. I might not know much about the man, but flashy is not his style. He preferred—well, girls like me that weren’t me. He liked women who were much less maintenance, enjoyed fishing, hanging out with friends, and maybe a little simpler in their needs than Rachel. I try to remind my errant heart to settle down.

“He is the kind of man that I don’t find often. Loyal, handsome as sin, and rich,” Rachel replies. “I’m going to do

this event, and by the end of it, I hope he puts a ring on my finger. I won't have you interfering," she snarls as I glance around to see at least three people now staring at us.

"This seems like a you-and-Kieran conversation," I tell her as I put my plan to fake her out into action.

I take a slight step to the left, and Rachel follows suit. Then I take a hard turn to the right and make a break for it.

I have never run down the sidewalk with an open cake box and a bag laden with party supplies before. I guess there is a first for everything, though, and I'm certain I was a sight to see as I head for the finish line. Yes! I see the entrance to the community center and focus solely on that.

"Stop," Rachel shouts from behind me as I feel a tug on my shirt.

*What are we, two years old, tugging and pulling at those we don't like?*

Stop!" I cry as Rachel jerks me to a halt. The cake flies out of my hand. In my desperation, I try to grab at it but somehow swipe it toward Rachel instead.

It's like a slow-motion film as I watch the cake fly up and head straight for Rachel's head. The expression of sheer horror that crosses her eyes is quickly erased by buttercream covering her entire face. I stand there in shock and silence, unsure what to tell the ladies' club as they will obviously not be having cake. I hear voices rising all around us.

“You are going to pay for this,” Rachel hisses as she removes the frosting from her eyes.

I have zero doubt of how much trouble I’m in, and I quickly assess my options. I can run to the community center and seek asylum while explaining what happened, or I can turn tail and make a dash for my office. Neither is looking positive as Rachel can seriously sprint in those ridiculous heels. I expect we’re going to have this out in the middle of the street. Then I’ll just head home and die of embarrassment.

“I didn’t mean it,” I try to pacify her.

“I will sue you for this.”

“For what? Ruining your perfect makeup with buttercream?”

“This is not going to go—” I stop listening and turn to leave.

The woman is insufferable, and to be honest, I have clients I need to give bad news to. I’m not feeding into her superiority complex or drama. She and Kieran deserve each other. They both seem so wrapped up in this little game that is being played. It’s getting old, and I’m tired. I open the community center door and turn to face the line of ladies standing, arms crossed, waiting for me.

# Chapter 13

## Kieran

“OH, YOU NEED TO get over to the community center right now!” Emma barges into the office and shouts in an overly high-pitched tone.

My sister is not one given to theatrics, making this proclamation way extreme for her. After the turbulence of these last weeks and the constant pressure from local gossip, I can only assume this has to do with the event planning decision I am announcing tomorrow. If that’s the case, those town busybodies can pound sand. I’m not getting involved.

“Wow,” Lane speaks up from across the room. “That was an aggressive entrance, and while you know I’m always happy to see you, maybe try knocking next time.”

“You can come,” she says. “But Princess Barbie and Maya will probably be throwing down in the streets any minute.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, lurching from my seat as she turns and immediately heads back out the door.

“Oh, this is going to be epic,” Lane mutters excitedly as he exits close on my heels.

I punch him in the arm at the ridiculous grin he has on his face. I know this is going to be bad, but like a freight train you see coming down the tracks with no way out, you can't look away. I pray that this situation is not to the point where the law needs to get involved but just a bit of a catfight. The fact that these two women might actually use their fists seems outlandish. Hopefully, Emma was exaggerating and it's just a scuffle of words.

As I race down the drive, I pass my car on the right but stop, deciding driving might be faster. Jumping in, I peel out of the lot, not waiting for Lane—in fact, I may have stuck my tongue out for good measure. I know I gave Emma and him some teasing jabs when they started dating, but this is different. This concerns our business and reputation around town. I wish he didn't look so gleeful.

As I approach a crowd just beyond the community center, I realize this is the place. Exiting the vehicle, I part the sea of humans and find Rachel, red-faced and covered in cake from head to foot, attempting to break into the community center. I'm beginning to wonder if I might not be imagining things, considering I've never seen Rachel in any state of disarray.

“Rachel?” I ask as she spins to me in her ridiculous heels.

The view from the front is even funnier, but I can tell from the fire in her eyes that this is no laughing matter. She has flowers in her hair that appear to have been part of the original

confection she is now wearing. Streaks of frosting cover her from head to toe. She looks like the villain in a kid's movie who a pair of juveniles outwit. Unfortunately, as I gaze at the community center, I find a worried Maya staring back.

"I am going to sue the living daylights out of that horrid woman," Rachel shouts as she points at Maya.

"She didn't mean it," someone says from my right.

"What is the basis of suing her?" I ask, working hard to keep from laughing as Lane and Emma come to a halt next to me.

"Oh wow!" Lane says as Rachel glares at him.

"Did you have a fight with a cake?" Emma says, adding insult to injury.

I know these two are team Maya no matter what the facts happen to be, and shockingly, Lane doesn't seem to care if this impacts our business. We are supposed to be professionals, but every once in a while, we're still those slightly naughty high school boys that everyone remembers. Rachel is the outsider and, today, the entertainment. This is not going to end well; I already know it, and thus, I need to be the responsible one. Anyone who believes that's not ironic doesn't know me very well.

"That woman threw the cake at me because she is jealous of you and me," Rachel says, pointing at me.

"I'm sorry," I balk as I see Maya sliding out of the confines of the community center. "But there is no you and me."

“You know what I mean. She’s jealous and thinks she should be given BattleBron Tech’s event. This is her way of discrediting me and taking what is rightfully mine,” Rachel sputters. “I’m not going to take this lying down, and I will own her business by the time I’m done with this.”

“She didn’t submit a proposal to be the company that plans our event,” I inform Rachel.

“I didn’t throw the cake at her.” Maya steps forward to defend herself. “She chased me and grabbed me while I was trying to get away from her. Oh, and I did, too, apply to plan your event. So, don’t go lying.”

I stop short and turn to Lane, who shakes his head. This is news to both of us and would change things drastically. We didn’t get her proposal, but surely Maya isn’t lying.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Rachel says. “You need to announce the winner so everyone here understands that I’m not going anywhere.” She cocks her head and runs a hand through her hair to straighten it. As if that will magically remove all the cake in her tresses.

I turn to Lane with beseeching eyes. “She didn’t turn it in,” I whisper confidentially to him and Emma.

“I did, too,” I hear Maya insist. “I get that you and your fancy business might prefer Rachel to do the event. She has all the bells and whistles that my small-town enterprise can’t promise. I always give everything to my events, and I don’t want to be some flashy woman who gets clients using anything but my talent alone,” she says, walking up to me until

I am staring down into her angry face. “I understand that you might have your little head turned by her, but don’t you dare call me a liar. I threw the proposal in your car before the deadline when I noticed you and Little Miss Thing”—she thumbs a finger over her shoulder at Rachel—“having lunch. That seemed a bit like cheating, but then again, who am I to tell you what perks you should collect from your vendors.”

I’m seething by the time she is done. Her innuendos cut too close to my work ethic and morals. I glance around the crowd and see all the bobbing heads as Rachel looks at me to finally announce her as the winner. If that woman wins, though, my life will be miserable. She will try to get those long, manicured nails into me every chance she can. I’m not sure I can handle that.

“Make the announcement,” Rachel demands, “or you will both see me in court.”

“You can’t sue because you stepped in front of a cake.” Maya’s shiny new backbone comes out. “Besides, battery is a bigger crime, of which I have witnesses that you chased me down the street and attacked me. Also, blackmail, I believe. You can’t use your own stubbornness as the cause of you being a laughingstock for the reason Kieran and his company hire you. The best person for the job should be selected.”

“They don’t have your application.” Rachel moves closer to her.

“Oh my goodness,” Emma says as she moves toward my car.



She opens the back door and glances inside but comes out empty-handed. The crowd sighs, and it's evident that everyone is backing the hometown girl. My gaze falls to Maya, and something inside me shifts. She is flushed and beautiful as always. She's completely unaware of how much her feisty nature draws me to her. Working with Rachel would be horrid. I'd have to dodge her advances for months. The same could not be said for Maya. I figure more time with her might end this feud between our families but reignite a passion I once felt burning deep within for her. There is no good outcome here where I don't end up in a sticky situation.

"Got it!" I hear Emma declare as she pulls out a manilla envelope from under my front passenger seat.

*Oh no, things just got really tricky!*

"That changes nothing," Rachel serenely announces as if she has the ultimate say. "I've been working toward this event, submitted everything through the proper channels, and demand you name me as the company to plan this project. I've suffered humiliation, assault, and other erroneous actions from all of you. I will sue. I promise. You don't want to test me—"

I tune her out and turn to Maya.

"The event is yours," I tell her, and the crowd goes wild.

"You haven't even seen what's in that envelope," Rachel shrieks in an octave not quite human. "You can't do this to me after all the time I've spent here."

“It’s done.” Lane steps forward. “If you need to discuss anything about this unfortunate day’s events,” he says, pulling out his wallet, “speak to our attorney.” He extends a card to Rachel.

“This is ridiculous,” she spits out dramatically. “Good luck on a total flop of an event. Don’t call me when Little Ms. Frumpy can’t pull this off for you.” She holds her head high and walks down the street, attempting to maintain her dignity but leaving footprints of frosting behind.

“Are you sure about this?” Maya asks when she’s finally out of earshot.

“Tomorrow morning at nine in our office,” I tell her with a curt nod.

“I’ll be there,” she says, then she walks away from me up the street to her business.

“That was a bold move,” Lane whispers as he comes alongside me. “You think it’s going to be okay?”

“The alternative was the hoity-toity cake lady there.” I incline my head to where Rachel is getting into her car. “I think I’m going to risk giving the event to Maya and having the town back us.”

“I’m with you,” Lane says, slapping my shoulder.

I watch everyone disperse from the scene as I draw a deep, cleansing breath. I hope I don’t look back on this moment and regret it, but how much worse could it get than this? A tiny voice in my head tries to issue a warning, but I cut it off as I

head for my car. When I get in, I toss the envelope, still unopened, onto the passenger seat. Driving off, I give a little chuckle as that crazy scene plays through my head. It's definitely one for the record books, but hopefully, it's smooth sailing from here to event day.

# Chapter 14

## Maya

“I WAS HOPING WE might talk,” I say as I try to keep my composure.

I’m so nervous my palms are sweaty, my blood pressure is spiking, and I feel like I’m going to throw up. This was not the conversation I was expecting to have with my parents only forty-eight hours before. After what could only be described as a catfight with Rachel, the BattleBron Tech Gala being awarded to me, and a steady stream of customers coming in today to try to gossip, I was overdue in telling my parents about the turn of events. This was not going to be an easy conversation to have though, I have been practicing what I want to say over and over throughout the day. I’m as ready as I’m ever going to be.

“Sure, what about?” My no-nonsense mother asks, putting her fork down to focus on me.

“Maybe we can finish dinner,” my father grumbles as I glance from one to the other.

Something is up. I can tell from my mother's over-interested stare that she knows. Plus, she's never stopped eating before her plate was empty. I think back to what she told me she had done today or yesterday, and nothing in town came to mind. I don't believe she can know about Kieran and the Rachel incident. My best guess for how she might know is the phone tree she had back when I was in grade school. I guess it's still alive and fully functioning. I would have thought grown women had better things to do, but my suspicions heighten as her stare gets all squinty-eyed.

"You know," I mutter.

"That my daughter is a traitor to her entire family? Yes, I know," she comes right back at me as my father groans.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Lorna," my father says, laying his fork on his plate.

"Mom, I'm not a traitor, and I need you to listen." I'm nearly in tears but trying to get through this. "This is not some old family feud, but your hurt feelings and grief. Kieran and Lane did nothing wrong, and I need you to hear me out."

"I will not." My mother puffs up like a peacock. She stands, prepared to walk away from the table. I want to scream.

"Yes, you will," my father says through gritted teeth, and I look at him in sheer disbelief.

I have never heard my father raise his voice or issue such a dictate to my mother in all of my life. My mother looks surprised as well. She sits back down, puffing air into her

lungs like she might have an asthma attack. I don't know when my life became a screenplay for a dramatic comedy, but I don't like it. On any given day in the past two months, I have run the gamut of emotions causing me to feel drained, dizzy, and off-balance. It's not a great look for an adult who feels like she has revisited some strange teen-angst reality.

"I would greatly appreciate you just hearing me out. I know this is a difficult situation for all of us." I try to ease into the conversation. "We all miss Stephen so much." Tears are already surfacing. "I don't think any of us ever considered being in this situation with him gone. I understand that we needed someone to blame after what happened and that Kieran and Lane were the easiest targets."

"They inducted my child into their little cult, and he died," my mother proclaims as she clutches her chest. It's like some scene from a movie. I never realized until this dinner what cartoonish characters we could be. The grief had been real for all of us, but our handling of it, in hindsight, has definitely been subpar.

"They did not," my father says quietly. "Sure, those boys talked to Stephen about military life after finishing up basic training. Stephen adored them. It was not on them to talk him out of a life choice he decided to make. I have tried to stay angry at both of them as well. I might not like the part they played in his leaving, but I'm not certain they could have stopped it."

“Roger, are you trying to say my baby would have left me without them putting ideas in his head? How dare you say something like that!”

“Actually, Mom, I’m the baby,” I tell her, trying to be reasonable and get through this with her acting the part of a fool. “I believe that if Lane and Kieran had had a magic eight ball where they saw what would happen to Stephen, they would have tried harder to make him stay home. I don’t believe for a second any of their talks with Stephen were intended to injure him or us. I’m going to help them put on the BattleBron Tech event they are planning and support them with helping other veterans.” I add the last part quickly in an attempt to pull the Band-Aid off and move the conversation to the next level.

Silence.

Even my father sits with his mouth shaped in a small O, unsure how to respond.

My mother looks like a replica of the Pikachu meme as if what she heard was not computing.

I take a bite of the broccoli in front of me, giving them time to process.

Another minute of silence.

This might be a record for my family. Normally, we all vie to outtalk each other. True, in the last few years, things might have been a bit quieter around this table, but we could all hold our own. We were standing in the eye of a hurricane. I ate

quickly because when you're in the eye of the storm, you know that all hell is going to break loose within moments.

"No. You are not doing that," my father said, picking up his fork as if God had spoken an absolute truth.

"Yes. I am."

"Absolutely not," my mother's highest octave screeching was back, and it made my ears feel as if they might bleed.

"This is where I remind you that I'm an adult. These men run a company that does so much good for veterans. A veteran that Stephen would have been. They put them to work, provide therapies, and give support for those struggling. At this event, they intend to create a scholarship in Stephen's name, specifically for local veterans." I list the quick rundown I had gotten from Kieran. "I don't believe they are bad people, and I, for one, can't continue treating them badly."

"You're just saying that because you and that woman Rachel have some kind of fight going on over Kieran," my mother grumbles. "You should be ashamed, wrestling with someone in the streets of our little town where everyone could see you." She finishes with a cluck of her tongue.

My head whips around to her in stunned disbelief. I don't even know where that came from. When I look at my dad, he is flushed, head down, and not offering any support in the least. I square my shoulders, realizing that I'm losing this battle. Whoever called her today has poisoned the well with the rumors running rampant. My own family is never going to



understand why I feel compelled to do this. I'm so heartbroken I can't think of a response.

I put the napkin on my plate, and I rise from the table to leave.

"I love you both, but this is crazy. You are seriously listening to rumors from I don't know where without coming to me. The fact that you will believe someone else, rather than ask me, your daughter, what happened is the saddest news to come from this week." I push my chair out.

"Sit down and finish your dinner," my mother says.

"Good night," I tell her.

"You aren't even going to deny it?" she asks, and I look up toward heaven. "Have I truly lost both my children to that horrid man?"

I can't handle this level of venom in my own family. I know I fed into it for years, but it's time someone takes a stand.

"Let me guess; you got some twisted version of cake-gate, as people are calling it. You took Rachel's words, a woman who has made my life exceedingly difficult, to heart, as did a small group of people who witnessed that awful situation yesterday. Then you accuse me of being in love with Kieran as some explanation for me being blind to him, what, killing my brother? He didn't. Some insurgent in another country bombed his vehicle, Mother. Kieran, Lane, or a million other personnel could have been the unfortunate souls that didn't come home. I miss my brother every day, but I won't let that hold me or *my* company back. If you have to believe this is due to feelings for

Kieran, then so be it, but I'm done with the craziness, anger, and hatred in this house." I angrily swipe at my tears and head for the door.

Neither of them comes after me, which is probably a good thing. By the time I reach my car, I'm a hot mess. I need a hot shower, some ice cream, and just to forget about everything for a little while. Knowing how my life is evolving these days, I'm pretty certain tomorrow will bring a new batch of crazy antics, awesome rumors, and maybe, if I'm lucky, reconciliation with the last of my family. Until then, drowning my tears in sugar will have to be the only comfort I get.

# Chapter 15

## Kieran

“YOU DID *not* make a vision board for your meeting with Maya today,” Lane states with a teasing lilt to his tone when he walks into my office.

I stare at the whiteboard and cock my head to the side. He isn’t wrong—it looks like a vision board. I have some inspirational pictures from previous events I’ve attended, along with colors, awards, and ideas for a few of the food choices. I know I am going overboard, but I like to be prepared for anything. Working with Maya on this event with the deadline already looming has me completely discombobulated for some reason.

“I just thought it would give us some ideas to start with,” I say, trying to justify the micromanaging display in front of me. “She’s going to hate it, isn’t she?”

“Oh yeah,” Lane tells me with a chuckle. “I get the feeling she takes her job seriously, but good news?” He pats me on the

back. “I bet you aren’t the worst client she has ever had to deal with.”

“Funny. I thought it was the two of us tackling this one.”

“No, sir.” He shakes his head emphatically. “This is all you. I’m meeting with the game’s QA team to talk about the latest update.”

Granted, that all sounds important to the actual mission of the company we run. Maya, though, is an unknown to me in regard to planning parties of this magnitude. After the very public selection ordeal, we can’t afford any more negative attention.

“Chicken,” I accuse. “You’re just worried about a food fight breaking out.”

His eyes shift behind me.

*Please, God, do not let Maya be standing behind me.*

The barely contained smile on Lane’s face tells me my prayer is not going to be granted. I take a deep breath and turn slowly to Maya. She stands in the doorway, eyebrow raised, and gives me what I can only describe as a death glare that doesn’t bode well for the rest of my day.

“Morning,” I say, hoping that maybe no mention of my faux pas needs to be made.

“Morning,” she drawls. “Don’t worry; I got all my food-throwing needs taken care of for a while with your girlfriend. I hope that little cake in the hair and hissy fit of hers didn’t totally turn you off from putting a ring on her finger.”

“Not funny,” I growl at her. “I was never dating that woman or even considered it.”

“Right, because beautiful, successful women aren’t your thing?”

“Not the high-maintenance, over-the-top ones that aren’t smart enough to step out of the way of flying pastries.”

“Good answer.” She moves forward and takes in the board. “Oh good, you’ve started all the planning without me. I wonder what it is that you’re going to need from me?”

I hear Lane snicker as he moves toward the door.

“While I would love to stay and watch this dueling match, I have things to do. Maya, it is great to have you on board, and I’m sure that Kieran and you will put together a fabulous event.”

“Thanks. Great to see you, Lane.” She emphasizes his name as her eyes bore holes into me.

Fine, I only have myself and my big fat mouth to blame for that. For someone who makes a living working with people of all stations of life, you would think I could figure out how not to keep saying the wrong thing. Someone can always be listening. Nope! Turns out, where Maya is concerned, I keep inserting my size-eleven foot in my mouth, and it just gets worse with each interaction. Maybe it is time for a clean slate. We need to see if we can get back on solid ground.

“Okay, I think you and I have done nothing but rub each other the wrong way these last few weeks,” I start, swallowing my

pride and preparing to grovel. “I think we need to start with a clean slate, work on this event together, and maybe put the entire cake incident, along with Rachel, in the rearview mirror.”

“I would love that,” she says, but her eyes move to the whiteboard again. “Are you going to try to control everything having to do with this party, though? I mean, you did hire me because I’m the best event planner in the area, right?” She cocks her head at me.

“Definitely,” I tell her, silently chastising myself to keep a straight face.

For the most part, it’s the truth that I wanted Maya involved all along. The goodwill of hiring locals is always something I want to participate in. The fact that it has gotten Rachel off my back is also a major win. Then there is the fact she is Stephen’s little sister, and we owe it to him to watch over his family for the sacrifices he made. This seems like a long-winded answer, though, so I do my best to keep it short and sweet.

“Um-hm. Clean slate we can do,” she agrees with a curt nod of her head before moving to the table to the left of my desk. “You do have a great office, and everyone here at the company is so kind. I think it took me five minutes to walk here from the front desk with everyone that greeted me.”

“You are a bit of a celebrity—” I stop, realizing that I was about to reference the incident that we just agreed to move past.

“For all the wrong reasons,” she grumbles.

“Do you mind me asking, how are your parents taking you planning the event?”

I can see her bristle and sit up straighter. Maya is not someone who hides her emotions well, so I know right off the bat that that topic should be off-limits. I have two strikes. One more and this day will officially be ruined. No more crazy topics, I tell myself.

“Not great,” Maya finally verbalizes. “My mother is convinced that Rachel and I were having a catfight over you in the middle of the street,” she says, and I cackle.

I don’t mean for the reaction to be so startling, but the thought of Maya fighting for my attention is so laughable I have to wonder what reality her mother is living in. The cake incident, of course, is going to be elaborated on by locals who have no other great gossip to sink their teeth into, but I hadn’t yet heard that spin on the events.

“Did you try to set her straight?”

“She is just raw about Stephen and me making peace with you.” She sighs. “I actually just got up and walked out of dinner the other night after trying to talk to both my parents. I’m tired of the fight and feeling like I’m not good enough. I was confident, loved my job, and everything was going along amazing. Then Stephen dies, you come back to town, and this entire bidding process has been a complete nightmare,” she tells me.

“I’m sorry. I thought you wanted this gig, and honestly, as soon as Lane proposed the event, I knew it was the perfect time to honor your brother. We’ve talked about this for a while now, but time just got away from us. Lane and I, along with our entire management team, are juggling so many balls I think we let some of these community and team-building ideas fall to the wayside. I, of course, don’t want to put you in a tougher place with your family.” Just then her baby blue eyes meet my gaze.

The connection is instant, and I’m transported back years before. I was older than her, and our families were friendly from the time we both came into this world. She was a pain in my backside, as she followed Stephen and some of us around like a puppy dog, along with Emma and others. There were not so many kids in this place that you could ignore any of them. There were soccer games in the streets, and it took everyone who could kick to get a team together to keep it interesting. Somewhere in the middle of those years between basic training and now, the Maya with pigtails and an introverted sweet smile had transformed into this stunning woman.

The difference between her and Rachel is that she has a simple grace that’s not forced. I’m not sure she has an ounce of makeup on, and yet her cheeks are rosy and smooth enough to make me itch to run a finger down her face. Her gaze makes my stomach clench. The need to work alongside her has been driving me since her application didn’t show up with the rest. With both of us looking at each other, I finally realized how impetuous I was when asking her to do this. How can I keep



things professional without trying to see what's between us? The reality of that slaps me hard in the face, holding me in place and hanging on her response.

"I wanted this job more than any I've bid on for a while," she admits, turning as she tucks her hair behind her ear. "I will continue to work on my parents, but that might be a lost cause. I know that grief is something we all have to travel in our own time. I'm beginning to see that my parents and I are on different paths to healing."

"Okay, well, if there is anything I can do to help, let me know." I pull out a chair kitty-corner to her.

"Thank you. I will. Now, let's see if I can take your vision board," she starts, using the same description as Lane, "and make this the best party Briar Glen has ever seen."

"I can't wait," I agree, sitting up as I watch her transcribe things from the board into her notebook.

"Colors?" she says, and we are off to work.

I shouldn't have doubted she would have an extensive checklist. The woman is on fire, and the planning phase officially kicks off when she sets to work. The frantic, organized, and detailed way she attacks the job has me finally relaxing. I know she will not fall short of anything but brilliant for this event—after all, the town and world are watching, and she is determined to rise to the occasion.

# Chapter 16

## Maya

AS I TAKE THE long walk to Emma's house, I rehearse what I want to say.

I'm not exactly ghosting her, but we haven't spoken since the "incident." I don't blame Emma for Kieran walking in on our conversation, but the embarrassment from that situation has taken some time to fade. Cake-gate as some people were now referring to the "epic" face-off that took place, has only put further distance between us. None of this has to do with her. It all has to do with my self-consciousness over the circus that has become my life where her brother and her boyfriend are front and center.

I acted like a petulant child when I didn't think they had picked me to organize the event. I know in hindsight that my emotions were misplaced, and instead of approaching Kieran directly for a response, I stomped around and went toe-to-toe with Rachel. I have no idea why, after years of establishing myself as a competent businesswoman, this is how I would

react to the situation. The idea of having to sit with Emma and clear the air leads to a feeling of dread I am struggling to overcome. It is time, though, to take control of my own destiny and own the mistakes I made.

I knock with a shaky fist and then run my sweaty palms down my black dress pants.

The wait on her porch is under a minute, but it feels like years before she swings open the door.

“Hey, did we have an appointment today?” Emma asks as her forehead furrows.

“Nope, but I come bearing cookies. I’m taking a break from cake.” I make a joke at my own expense to break the ice. “I was hoping we could have a little chat.”

“Of course.” Emma swings open the front door and steps back to invite me in. She leads me into the living room. “I figured I would hear from you, but I thought I would let you get your first meeting with Kieran under your belt. Either he would anger you enough that you needed to vent, or everything would go well, in which case you’d need help with social media, invitations, and such.”

“Good news,” I laugh, “it’s the latter. The meeting started off bumpy, but we recovered and had an amazing planning session. I think I have a great handle on what he needs and wants, and I am formulating a game plan for his approval. He did have a full vision already on the whiteboard with pictures before I got there. I figured he was just nervous and unsure of me. Even so, that was a bit of an arrow to my self-esteem.”

“Nope, that’s just Kieran. I don’t know where the flighty man of our youth went, but he is officially a control freak now,” she says. “Lane is always saying that they divided the company and responsibilities up so he didn’t have to bump up against my brother constantly, or they might not have made it this far.”

“I’m taking it Lane isn’t that organized?” I ask, surprised. Before our lengthy sparring match—planning meeting, as we called it—the day before, I thought it was the other way around.

“Lane is on top of things, just not like Kieran. It’s as if my brother finds the problems before they show up. I know that it’s a good thing with how the business continues to expand to the degree it has, and it doesn’t really impact me, so I just listen to Lane grumble.”

“You are a great girlfriend,” I tell her. “So, I know that things got awkward when I was here last,” I feel my cheeks heat as I recall the conversation Kieran overheard. The entire thing, in hindsight, continues to make me feel like the pettiest of humans. “I didn’t react well when caught by him, and I know it was supposed to be a business meeting.”

“I get that.” Emma chuckles lightly. “I have to say it was quite interesting to see how worked up you could get my brother.” she laughs at me, thankfully not looking upset but more entertained by the situation.

“I don’t know what it is about Kieran, but he gets me so mad.” I roll my eyes as I think about how my heart races, my insides

gnarl up, and my tongue cuts loose with insults when he is around. “I’m a grown woman who works hard to build an amazing reputation here in town, and now I feel as if I’ve returned to high school. I say the wrong thing, do things that turn out awful, and I end up wanting to hide in my house, never to talk to anyone again. Like when everyone was talking about me for weeks when I tried to shave that cat.”

“Oh,” Emma laughs out loud. “I totally forgot about that poor cat. I’m glad you gave up on your dreams of beauty school. Though, I can’t believe you got as much shaved as you did. God, and the bangs!” She laughs so hard that tears spring to her eyes. I find myself needing to sit down as I start laughing uncontrollably, too. “Where did you find that poor beast again?”

“In the alley behind the high school. I thought I was saving him by making him look great. I figured he would be able to have a wonderful family adopt him if he didn’t have matted hair and a smell. But he just ran terrified through town for days afterward.” I shake my head at the memory. “I don’t even think the poor dear had a name until the town started calling him Maya’s Experiment in exasperated tones. It took me years to live that one down. I honestly never thought I could ever be talked about more in this town—until the cake incident. Everyone keeps referring to it as ‘cake-gate’!”

Emma is full-on belly laughing now and not even trying to hide it.

“I mean, when you decide to get the town chattering, you go all out.” She snorts, mocking me with clapping.

“Thanks. I would much prefer to be known for my business prowess or the last event I did,” I grumble, falling into another chair. “I keep hoping that this thing with BattleBron Tech will overshadow all my misdeeds and put my company on the map in a big way. I just need to ensure I don’t kill the CEO of the company with my sharp wit before that.”

“Good news, Lane is the CEO and Kieran the COO, so I think you are safe,” Emma teases but then gets super serious.

“Maya, not a single person doubts your intentions are good, whether it was the cat or the cake. That said, I’m on board to help you make this coming event the pinnacle of your company’s successes to date. What can I help with?”

“You aren’t upset with me for all the craziness?”

“No. Kieran had it coming. If you could hear how much he tormented me and Lane when we finally acknowledged our feelings for each other, you’d understand. I’m here for you taking him down a peg or two. Even maybe date him if all this smoke turns out to be a fire,” she teases.

I groan and put my head in my hands.

“I forgot the fire episode. Seriously, I keep thinking things can’t get worse, right? We can act like adults, get this event planned, and then just be friendly. I mean, I’ve been doing this a long time and managed to navigate tough customers successfully. I can survive Kieran, but no. Dating him is out of the question.”

“Why? I know you both had a thing for each other back in the day. Maybe the two of you can make each other happy?” she asks with a shrug.

“Or, more likely, end up killing each other in some horrible turn of events. Nope, I need to prove he did the right thing hiring me and then be done with this mess. I need help with invitations, press releases, and other materials. Oh, and social media. I can provide a full list, and then you can give me a price?”

“Absolutely. I’m excited.” She claps her hands together. “In all seriousness, their company does so much good. I’m happy to be part of this celebration. Maybe your parents could even attend and bury the hatchet with both Lane and my brother?” Emma asks, looking at me with hope in her gaze.

“I think we might not want to press our luck that far. One big undertaking at a time.”

“Sounds good. Where do we start?”

I pull out my list. We have a lot to get done, and I’m grateful to have her at my side. I might have a strange relationship with her brother, but Emma is and always has been a fantastic person I adore. Having her on the team will definitely be a positive as things progress. The world is watching. I sure hope nothing bad happens that night, as it won’t just be my little town taking notice anymore. The career I have built meticulously over the years could, well and truly, go down in flames.



I put the phone down and stretch out my stiff neck. I have been trying to finalize orders for chairs and tables since this morning. It should have been simple enough, but the volume I'm needing, along with the distance and timeline, is posing a slight problem. I glance at my list and groan.

"Oh, that doesn't sound good," Kieran says from the doorway of my office.

My head shoots up so fast that I worry I might have given myself whiplash. There, in a three-piece suit, looking like an advertisement straight out of a catalog is Kieran. I swallow hard, and my mouth goes dry. He looks incredible. My brain tries to recall the last time I saw him in a suit.

"What is that furrowed brow for?" he asks, moving forward just as I notice him holding a hot beverage cup and a bag.

"First, what is in your hand?" I ask suspiciously. "If you are bringing me food, I will be forever grateful."

"I was in Chicago this morning," he says, glancing at the bag, "and I recalled that debate team trip we took there. Remember the little bakery on Madison?"

"Oh my goodness, those almond pastries were to die for . . ." I trail off as he gives me a lopsided grin that makes my heart skip a beat. He hands me the bag. "You didn't," I gasped. I open the bag and inhale the buttery scent. I can't stop a happy moan from escaping my lips.



“You brought these back from Chicago?”

“I did, and then stopped to get you this with oat milk.” He puts the to-go cup in front of me.

“Wow.” I stare at him with confusion. “Is this to butter me up for something? Bad news, maybe?”

“Not exactly,” he says, unbuttoning his jacket and lowering himself to the chair opposite me. “I know that you also needed a little inspiration regarding the colors. I was visiting an old friend and saw this.” He holds out a tiny, folded cloth triangle. “His grandmother makes them for service members who have been lost, and inside is a space for the family to put a memento in. Memory cloths, she calls them. You can carry them with you, unlike flags and such. I thought maybe you could do something with that.”

I sit there, staring at him, and realize—not for the first time—just how complicated this man is. As a kid, Kieran was the fun-loving football player, my brother’s friend, and a menace to those around town. These days, he has grown into a thoughtful, dedicated man with a mission to improve the world for those who choose to serve. He even volunteers to protect the community he loves in a firefighting uniform, despite never needing to do manual labor again due to his success with BattleBron Tech.

“Thank you,” I whisper, not feeling as if those words are enough, but I can’t come up with anything else.

I take a bite of the pastry and moan. It is soft, flaky, and the most delicate almond-flavored delight I’ve ever had.

“Hmm,” he says, a mischievous smile on his face, “not quite the performance you made the first time.”

My face turns bright red. “You were outside!” I squeal, remembering the scene I had acted out. “The upperclassmen were all outside.”

“I was, and then I stepped in to go to the bathroom at just the right minute.” He laughs a little too hard.

“My group never made it past the regional competitions. When you all did so well, Mrs. Krey called and asked me if I wanted to help chaperone and mentor the team. I had just gotten back from basic training and had some time before being deployed, so I jumped at the chance. I was happy to be there, but the sight of you in the bakery is still one of my favorites. That moaning scene you did when you tasted that pastry,” he breaks into laughter.

“It was from *When Harry Met Sally*,” I grumble, remembering well how loud and obnoxious I had been.

“When I walked by the place today, remembering that trip, I just had to go in.”

“Well, this is the pick-me-up I needed. Thank you. Did you enjoy a Boston crème donut while you were there?” I ask and can tell the moment he understands the question.

Melissa Revere had been a senior that year and who also had a crush on Kieran. She pulled out all of the stops to get his attention, including force-feeding him a Boston crème donut at that very bakery. I had looked out the window to see him

struggling not to drown in the custard but loving every moment of it, if the giant grin on his handsome face was any indication.

“Oh man, I have not thought of Melissa in years,” he said. “I think she and Rachel would have been fast friends.”

“Definitely not. Melissa is cut from the same cloth as Rachel and would have been her competition. I think she would have thrown more than a cake at the woman.”

“True. Whatever happened to Melissa?”

“She went to Nashville to pursue her music career, and I lost track of her.”

“Wow. She wasn’t that great a singer if I recall,” he retorts with a wrinkled nose.

“No, she wasn’t, but her mama didn’t want to hear that. The entire family supported her move and left together. I don’t know if anyone keeps in touch, but I’ve not gotten an update since her going away party.”

“Well, I hope she found someone that likes Boston crème donuts and hopefully is deaf.” I shake my head and giggle just before I take another bite of my treat.

“Well, I do need to get back to the office.” He stands to leave. “I just wanted to get that to you fresh and see if my inspirational piece could be of help.”

“It does,” I say, looking at the triangle as a fresh idea takes shape. “Thanks.”

“Everything else for the event coming along?”

“Slowly but surely. I will have a full update out to you by the end of the day tomorrow. Right now, no major red flags that indicate we are going to be in trouble.”

“Amazing,” he says as our gazes hold another moment. I feel that look like a caress down my arm, and I break eye contact to clear my throat.

“See you, Maya.”

“See you,” I mimic as he heads for the door.

*Dear God, make him turn one last time, like in the movies.*

Just as he pushes the door open, he turns to give me one last long look. Butterflies take flight, and I give the best half-smile I can muster as the nerves throughout my body all take notice. I’m in big trouble, and his thoughtful gesture today sure didn’t make it any easier.

# Chapter 17

## Kieran

“YOU BROUGHT HER PASTRIES back from Chicago?” Lane asks me as I sit at my desk, not understanding the complete look of disbelief on his face. “I thought you were just getting through this event planning phase and then intended to keep Maya at arm’s length. Nothing in the speech you gave me about her the other day included making the woman fall in love with you.”

I grumble under my breath as I realize he isn’t wrong. It was that final look that passed between us on the way out of Maya’s office that made me second-guess my actions. Seeing her sitting there, hard at work, was like eating a steak dinner after a week of fasting. The pastry was just the latest excuse for stopping by to spend a few extra minutes in her company. There had been paperwork, fabric swatches, and about ten other excuses I’ve manufactured of late. I’m worried that the business and personal lines I’m working to keep intact are blurring.

“It was just an almond pastry, nothing that amazing.”

“Oh, like the chocolate chip cookies for Naomi in eighth grade?” he asks as I squint my gaze at him.

“I think I burned them if I recall. Isn’t that when you and I became enthralled with firefighters?” I question in an attempt to get him off the subject.

“Probably,” Lane says with a far-off look in his eyes. “Doesn’t change the fact you were baking cookies for her because she said they were her favorite.”

“Her grandmother had died.”

“And you were hoping to offer solace in your skinny eighth-grade arms after luring her in with sweets,” Lane comes right back at me. The man doesn’t give me a break. You would think I’d be better at sidestepping all the traps he throws at me to get me to admit things that aren’t true—or at the very least, I don’t want the world to know. “I remember how upset your mom was when she came home to that disaster.” He snickers and lowers himself into a chair.

“I was grounded long enough that Naomi had left town with her father by the time I could get out on my own.”

“Not many people stick around these parts,” he says. “Naomi was the pastor’s daughter, and shockingly, we’ve gone through a handful of people in that role since I can recall.”

“For sure, five or six now.” I try to think back over the list myself. “Anyway, I will say Naomi missed out; my cookie-baking skills have improved.”

“Maybe,” Lane says. “You still haven’t hooked a woman yet with your food-buying and -baking skills. Maybe Maya is the one.”

“Definitely not,” I tell him, though a tiny voice in my head is already speaking up to discount my words. “I know that her parents still hate me, and I just think we fight way too much. Sure, I need her to like me, and hopefully, we never get into another situation like the cake thing with a vendor, but I can’t date her.”

“Why not? So, the two of you spar a bit—that keeps things interesting. You are both ambitious, good-looking, and love our community. I can continue with a list of reasons that make sense if you like. Don’t you think that in the end her parents just want to see her happy?” Lane asks.

“What if we date and it turns out terrible?”

“How bad could it be?” Lane asks. “I mean, you’re both adults, and I think with open communication, you can set the boundaries you are content with. If something happens, you keep it peaceful and respectful.”

“Ava Sue. I kept that break up respectful.”

Lane laughs, and then it turns into a full-on belly laugh.

“Not funny.”

“You had three dates with her in eleventh grade,” Lane says, biting hard on his lip to try to stop the laughter falling from his lips.

“Yep, and I thought she was so boring I would jab my eyes out. She only wanted to talk about her pet gerbil, her new braces, and math,” I recall those monotonous three dates. I was, of course, young, a bit naive, and convinced that Ava’s blond hair and blue eyes were enough of a reason to want to be her boyfriend. Of course, this meant hand-holding in the hallways of school and the outdoor movie theater with friends. Little did I realize that quiet nature held a monster in check.

“Boy, you definitely have a knack for picking the unique ones,” Lane said.

“Nice choice of words. I like to think she was ahead of her time and just getting started in her stalking career—if only I had known.”

“Come on, she was harmless,” Lane said. “I mean, other than the gymnasium full of your pictures floor to ceiling. Boy, she did catch you in some crazy poses.”

“At least I had clothing on.”

“And one questionable costume—tell me again why you tried on that dress?”

“I was letting my mom use me to hem it. It was so weird to find out that Ava had been outside the window. I mean, at least it was harmless in hindsight, but still—no dating for me in this town since. I think we need to keep that streak as I’m not sure that Maya’s parents would be nearly as kind.”

“Maybe not,” Lane says. “I like the two of you together, and she makes you smile like I’ve never seen. I, for one, say go for



it should the chance arise.”

“Ugh. Who knew pastries would send you down this trail? Not everyone needs to be as happy as you and my sister are. I manage to do all right all by myself.”

“Yeah, but what fun is that?”

“You want to hear about the actual business I tended to in Chicago? Or are you going to continue busting my chops?”

“All right, how did all that turn out?” Lane immediately switches hats.

I settle in to divulge everything I learned, but in the back of my mind, Maya is still taking up space. She is fast becoming a constant in my thoughts and even dreams. Lane might not be far off the mark on my feelings, but I still am not convinced that dating her is a good idea. That doesn't mean I can stop all the errant thoughts, nor am I going to stop doing little things to brighten her day. Right now, I'm not going to dissect exactly what all that means. I'm going to keep my focus on the event looming on the horizon instead.

# Chapter 18

## Maya

“I WANT IT TO be simple, comfortable, and clean,” Alison says as she flips through the various books on baby themes for her gender reveal. She is my latest client and has apparently been waiting for this moment all her life. I know that Kieran had somehow recommended me to her, as she and her husband, Jay, are new to town. From what little I had learned thus far on the personal side, Jay works for BattleBron Tech.

“I love this,” she murmurs at the zoo motif page.

“That is so cute and works well for any gender.” I take notes. “I’m just going to put down the ones you like, and then we can talk about how best to personalize it for you.”

“Amazing. I’m so grateful for you. I can’t imagine having to do all of this on my own. I have the house to unpack, nursery to set up, and a checklist to get done before the due date.” She rubs her belly happily. “Not having to worry about this is great. I want it to be for the community of moms I’m already

starting to make friends with here, as well as my family, coming to visit for the first time since the move.”

“I can’t wait to help coordinate this special occasion,” I tell her as she flips through pages.

I hear a bell behind me and wait to ensure that Lila answers. I hear her tell the person it will be a few minutes. I tune out as she handles it and dive back into the conversation with Alison.

“How did you end up here to work for BattleBron Tech? Did Jay know Lane and Kieran before, or did they hire him from a job post?”

“We knew both of them,” Alison says, looking up. “Jay served on a team with them a few years before they got out. He, unfortunately, has required some inpatient hospitalizations for post-traumatic stress disorder and physical disabilities. Kieran visited us about a year ago and offered Jay hope. He talked to him about this certification program they offer veterans to help them learn how to code for the games they create. These guys have seen real action, so having them do the game design is so much better than some kid who’s never left his bedroom,” Alison tells me with a small smile.

“I can imagine. I wouldn’t even know how to describe an actual battle. I’ve read online reviews of the games getting positive ratings because of their realism.”

“Exactly. Well, they gave him a laptop and all these classes that he could take while in the hospital, therapist’s office, car—or anywhere he was. It helped to keep his mind busy, and it

worked. I mean, it wasn't some miracle cure, but having a new mission in life helped to turn things around for Jay. I saw him working super hard, even on the tough days forcing himself to get up and out of bed." Alison sighs and sits back with this beautiful expression on her face. "They brought my husband back, and that was something I never thought I'd see. When we discovered I was pregnant, Jay made me promise we wouldn't find out if it were a girl or a boy until he landed a job with BattleBron Tech. See, after the training, you still have to test and interview for an open role. I told him either when the job came through or when the baby came out—I would wait." She sniffles, and I hand a box of tissues across the table to her. "He got the call four weeks ago, and I thought I would hate leaving my family. Jay is so happy, though; there was no other choice to be made. Yesterday, he came home with your name and told me it was time to do the gender reveal."

I am feeling pretty sappy at this point myself and grab a tissue.

"Well, I'm grateful that your husband is doing so well and you all have a fresh start, of sorts, here. I'm helping plan the big end-of-year event for BattleBron Tech, and I love hearing all the amazing stories of the services they provide veterans."

"They are an answer to so many prayers. Not just for me and Jay but for others I've talked to," she says as she lands on a new page. "This—this is it," she says excitedly of the tiny little piglets that look back at us from the page. "I think this would make the cutest party."

“Excellent. I have just a few more questions before I can get started.” I pull out my checklist.

Less than forty minutes later, we rise from the table with all the details agreed upon. I know for a fact we will need to be in touch over the coming week, but the turnaround on this gender reveal party is so fast that few decisions can be changed after this meeting.

“Thank you for trusting me with this important moment in your life,” I tell her as we start toward the door. My heart drops to the floor as I notice my mother seated and waiting in the lobby. I glance at Lila, who gives a little shrug. I return my full attention to Alison.

“I’ll call you with the final details or any questions.”

“Thank you. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for the BattleBron Tech party. I know I might be pregnant, but I’m willing to help in any way I can.”

“I appreciate that and will keep it in mind.” I open the door for her to slip out.

Taking a deep breath, I try to brace for the storm I’m certain my mother is bringing with her.

“Lila, why don’t you go to lunch,” I call out. She scampers out without any additional prodding needed.

As the door closes, I look at my mother.

“Mother, what are you doing here?” I ask, careful not to let it sound accusatory.

“This is the longest we’ve gone without talking.” She fiddles with the handle of her purse.

“Yes. I didn’t want to fight, so silence seemed the best course of action.” I move in closer to her.

I can see the bags under her eyes and that immediately sends panic through me. She’s not sleeping and looks exhausted, just like she did after Stephen passed. It was the worst I’d seen her since. I didn’t mean to cause this level of distress in my mother, but honestly, I’m not sure how else to navigate this situation short of giving up the event I’ve committed to and never seeing Kieran again. I’m not willing to do that, and her solution is this strong-armed approach when it comes to anything to do with Stephen, Kieran, and Lane. I don’t know how else to handle the situation where we can both be happy.

“I get that,” she sighs. “You’re really working for those boys?”

“Well, they are grown men now—but yes, I’m planning their end-of-year event. I think you would be proud of the work they do if you were willing to open your mind and heart. I absolutely know that nothing is going to bring Stephen back and that, as his parent, your grief is beyond mine. I don’t want to take that away from you, but continuing to hate Lane and Kieran is not the way to honor Stephen, in my opinion. I get that we disagree on that, but I hope we can find some middle ground.”

“You’re right that your brother would be mad at me for being unkind to his friends,” she finally concedes.

“I shouldn’t have said that, Mom.” I sit down next to her.

“You weren’t the first,” she admits. “Stephen told me when he enlisted it wasn’t because of Kieran and Lane, really. He loved that they got to travel and weren’t stuck in this little town, but most of all, he said they had a bigger purpose in life after they were in the military. He was lost and just looking for some sort of meaning for himself as well.” She sniffs and dabs her nose with a handkerchief she produces from her shirt sleeve. “He told me he would come back and haunt me if I was mean to them, should anything happen to him. I was already so worked up, and he hadn’t even left yet.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say quietly.

“I feel like my life was a waste and all for nothing.” She sighs as she lays her head back with her eyes closed for a minute. “My son only had this short life, and it seems so unfair. My faith is rattled to the core, and nothing has helped me restore it in all this time.”

I’m shocked at the raw emotions pouring out of her. I have to think carefully, more so than I did the night of dinner, before answering her. The hurt, pain, and unrest are something I wish we could put fully behind us and move forward.

“Your life was not a waste,” I tell her sternly. “Stephen loved you, I love you, Daddy loves you, and you have amazing friends. Remember how much you would volunteer to help foster kids, the homeless, and most of all, how you taught both of us to be the best people we could be. There is nothing wrong with grieving what is no longer here with us and the life

you envisioned for Stephen. The unfair thing is for us to blame others who are still here instead of honoring Stephen's life in the best ways possible. He loved everyone and was so good-hearted, but Mom—he loved Lane and Kieran more than his own life. He wanted to be like them, and he learned the depth of that love from you,” I tell her as a lump forms in my throat, and tears overflow my eyes. “You have to find your peace with the fact he's not here anymore, but his legacy shouldn't be this terrible feud and ugliness left in his place.”

There is a beat of silence as we collect our thoughts.

“I heard that woman talking about her husband and his new job here. It does sound like Lane and Kieran try to take care of soldiers that don't come back okay,” my mother finally says, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “That is a good thing.”

“Yes, just like the efforts with the new charity in Stephen's name that I mentioned. This event is going to be launching that new initiative,” I tell her, gingerly stepping through the minefield of this tough subject. “I wish you would come.”

“When did you grow up into this kindhearted woman and quit being my baby girl?” she says, putting her arm around me and kissing my hair.

“I'm never going to stop being your baby girl. The rest I got from you.”

“I will try,” she whispers. “No promises on exactly how I manage going forward. I did talk to your father, and I'm going to see a therapist. I don't want a repeat of what happened at dinner again. I might not be a hundred percent on board yet,



but I will make an effort to change the horrid feelings I have about Lane and Kieran.”

I squeeze her hard.

A sense of joy comes over me at her words. “I love you, Mom.”

“And I love you, but don’t you ever go this long without talking to me again,” she warns. “I worry, you know?”

“Understood,” I tell her with a little giggle as I back up and try to put myself back together.

It’s been a rough day emotionally, and yet so much good continues to unfold in front of me. I bet my brother is happy, smiling down on us today, and I’m more determined than ever to make him proud. I hope this moment truly is the one that turns around the corner to brighter days with my family as well.

# Chapter 19

## Kieran

I PUT THE PHONE down and tears pour down my cheeks as I stare out the window of my office. I hate when one of our brothers-in-arms is lost because they were unable to get the right help in time. It's difficult when it's someone overseas in the heat of conflict or other line of duty, but it's somewhat more expected. But it's devastating when it's someone who can be helped stateside. It's why Lane and I are so committed to providing the right assistance by helping other brothers and sisters find a flexible new career after their military service. Being able to give back is a blessing after all we've received. Our dedication is particularly strong for those who come home and become casualties of their service by not being able to fit back into society. This is a particularly heavy burden that causes more harm than the actual battles themselves.

I stand, unable to contain the turbulent emotions I'm feeling and head for a walk and some air. Moving through the building, I'm single-mindedly fixated on getting out of the stuffy setting. Finally, I hit the exit, and take a deep cleansing

breath and I immediately start feeling a touch better. I think I need to stretch my legs and allow my brain a tiny bit of a break to process that tough news.

I head out of town rather than toward Main Street. At this time of day, it will most likely be full of people, and seeing anyone is the last thing I want at this moment. Instead, I head to a sweet little trail, only a mile in length. I often come here when life gets rough. It's the perfect place to clear my head. Once you get about halfway through the trail, there is a tiny incline that allows you to sit overlooking all of Briar Glen. Breezy Overlook is my all-time favorite place. It's also the place kids tend to migrate to on Friday nights.

Just as I turn the corner to the overlook, I see Maya sitting there. I feel a smile creep upon my lips despite my dour mood. I'm struck by the pensive look on her face as she sits on a blanket, her knees pulled to her chest, overlooking the town in the exact spot I had been contemplating. She's a statue of quiet contemplation. I'm not sure she would appreciate that descriptor, but the woman has me spouting poetry a lot these days—silently, of course. I don't need her knowing what a nerd I am, though I might be deluding myself that she doesn't already know.

“Hey,” I announce myself in a low tone, hoping not to startle her.

“Hi,” she says, turning slightly hooded eyes in my direction. “What brings you out in the middle of a Thursday to this secluded spot?”

“Mind if I join you?” I incline my eyes to her blanket.

“Of course not.” She pats the ground next to her as her gaze stays on my face. “I thought I was having a rough day, but you look so much worse. Something you want to chat about?”

I sigh as I take a minute, framing the conversation in my head. I feel bad intruding on her quiet time and then hitting her with my heavy news. On the other hand, she asked, and I realize that I just want to tell her and to talk about it.

“I lost a friend today.” I go with the simple truth. “He was someone that I had served with when I first deployed. He was a good guy and had a wonderful family. I remember his mom would always send us these care packages with a variety of odd snacks. I reconnected with him a couple of months ago after his name came up on a roster of service members who qualified for a new specialized inpatient program that BattleBron Tech Nonprofit was funding. Unfortunately, despite the help, he lost his battle. The help came too late and he couldn’t overcome the issues he was wrestling with. It’s so hard. Yet in another breath, I know it’s the reason I need to continue to do more.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Maya replies empathetically. “I’ve heard some really bad things about PTSD and how hard it is to reintegrate back into regular life afterward. I can’t even begin to comprehend the things you must go through when serving away from friends and family. I’m sure it was difficult when you came back.” I pause, thinking about Stephen and how he didn’t come back. I feel my throat get tight and I

swallow to move past the lump forming. “I’m . . . I’m sure it was tough for you and Lane, too, but I love that you took your experiences and used them to lead the charge in making a difference for people in similar situations.”

I have to appreciate how kind she is and how she even chose her words. It’s exactly what I need right now. The pain of losing my friends after we got out of the military is a wound I’m determined to help ease for future families. Today, I lost a piece of that hope as my brother left this world, but something about Maya being here with me soothes the ache in my heart—at least for the moment.

“You know the event you’re helping to organize is being paid directly from our own pockets. Our intention is to have everything raised that night go directly to veteran causes. Additionally, all the veterans who work with us are being honored for the jobs they do, along with the therapists who help and so many others. The list of those who give selflessly goes on and on. I need you to understand this event is a lot of work, but I hope you fully comprehend how vital all the people and activities around this event are to BattleBron Tech’s bigger purpose.” I struggle to find the words to express how thankful I am for her help on something this close to my heart.

“I do know how important this event is and I’m feeling the weight of that for sure. I’ve mostly worked on events that celebrate people’s milestones—birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, and such. I’m grateful for this opportunity, but from dealing with the media to the amount of details involved, my

skills are being stretched,” she says, and then immediately turns to me, “but I have it. Trust me. Admitting that is not me saying I’m going to fail or let you down in any way. It’s just an observation.”

“I’ve seen your project plan,” I chuckle. “I have every confidence that you will pull this off in a spectacular fashion. Those checklists of yours will be marked off before a single person even sets foot on the property.”

“Those checklists,” she comes right back at me with a quirk to the left side of her mouth, “ensure that everything is perfect and that this human brain,” she taps the side of her head, “doesn’t leave out something critical. I could tell stories about how each item on the list comes from a lesson learned the hard way.”

“Oh, that I would love to hear. I thought ‘cake-gate’ was the worst thing to happen.”

“Ugh, I wish,” she groans. “Maybe I’ll tell you stories after your event. That way you don’t lose confidence in me.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible. I have no doubt you’ll carry this off without any new additions to your checklist.”

“Thanks.” We sit comfortably in silence for a few minutes.

“So, what brings you out in the middle of the day?” I ask, trying to turn the conversation in a different direction. “I remember how all of us in town used to use this location for an escape on Friday nights. Man, the worst grounding I ever got

was because I was acting like a complete fool out here,” I tell her as I’m overcome with nostalgia as I recall that night.”

“Is that the ‘Jones incident,’ as I’ve heard it called?” Maya turns to me with a teasing grin.

“They truly have a name for it?”

“Oh yeah.” She laughs heartily this time. “Marty Jones came in with no eyebrows, half his head shaved, and his skin blue for a week.” She shakes her head. “No one can forget something like that. The best part was he thought it was super hilarious.”

“His eyebrows were burned off,” I correct.

“What? I didn’t realize that. I mean the hair—I get the dare regarding the hair, but burned eyebrows and blue skin?”

“If you must know, the eyebrows were him standing too close to the fire, trying to warm up after the ice bath he took in the barrel that was holding all the drinks. The blue was a totally random accident,” I admit, laughing at the memory. “There was this group of girls tie-dying shirts for the cheerleading squad that night. One guy thought it was funny and dumped it on Marty when his hair caught on fire. Then someone dared him just to shave the rest of his hair off. Lane, of all people, produced the shaver from his truck. I think we can all agree a few bad choices were made that night,” I said, no longer trying to explain, as Maya’s gaze told me it wasn’t making any sense to her in the least.

“I’m glad you didn’t get into many incidents like that, or you might not have made it into the military,” she counters.

“Oh, my mother grounded me for an entire year after that night.” I laugh. “It’s all good, and thankfully it was relatively harmless.”

My cell phone buzzes, causing me to startle. I don’t even remember picking it up when I left the office.

I glance down and see the text message and immediately hop up from the ground.

“I have to go. Fire.”

“Of course,” she says with a slight flick of her wrist. “Duty calls.”

“You good?” I question, wanting to be sure I’m not leaving if she needs a friend or something.

Our eyes hold a moment longer before she finally turns from me with a blush staining her cheeks.

“Yep, just taking a break before I get back to things. Be safe.”

I give a little nod before I walk in the direction I had come from a short time before. There is a smile on my face the entire time as I walk away. I adore spending time with that woman and find her fascinating because of the serene, kind way she approaches life. Right now, life is hectic for both of us. Maybe it’ll be calmer after this event, and then I can ask her out. That is a huge step for my heart to even consider, and with everything else going on, something I need to ponder a bit more. To people in Briar Glen that could be akin to



announcing my intentions to marry the lady, which I think is definitely a touch premature. However, I'm not willing to rule anything out if things between us continue to move in this direction.

# Chapter 20

## Maya

I CAME OUT HERE to Breezy Overlook to take a moment to recenter before Kieran happened upon me. I love this place. It's better than any exercise or breathing technique for settling my body and mind when I'm stressed out. Today, I just needed a small break before heading into the thick of things again with all the events on my plate.

I was glad I was here when Kieran needed me. He was having a rough day and appears to have been in need of a friend to chat with. I am happy to be able to help support him over the loss he is suffering through, and it sure made my problems less worrisome. I adore spending time with him and feel fortunate that we appear to be long over the issue with Rachel.

My phone buzzes as I furrow my brow, digging it from my pocket.

“Hey, Mom,” I answer. She never calls during the workday—albeit the day is officially over, and I could head home rather than back to the office if I chose.

“You need to get over here,” she says, not bothering with small talk.

“Mom, what’s up?”

“The house is on fire!”

“Then get out of there!” I hop up and start running.

“We can’t drive in these conditions—you know your father’s night blindness issue.” She gives a dramatic snuffle. “If we die, I want you to know that we love you no matter what happens between us.”

“Mom, get out of the house and just walk to safety.” I’m now nearly out of breath thanks to the pace I’ve set. “Also, it’s not nighttime yet,” I say as I glance at the sky.

“The driveway is now blocked anyway,” she mutters as I grow increasingly concerned.

Thankfully, I enjoy a good run, so this won’t be a totally out-of-the-blue workout for my lungs. But seriously, is she losing her mind? You see fire, you run—unless you’re Kieran, Lane, or other firefighters.

My brain has a lightbulb moment, remembering that Kieran left to go to a fire. It seems highly likely that he went to my parent’s house, considering two simultaneous fires in Briar Glen would be highly unlikely.

“Mom, I know that Kieran was headed to a fire, so I bet he’s there,” I tell her as I stumble and nearly upend myself. OUCH. That really hurt! I silently curse the pain a rock spiked through my foot.

I try to balance the blanket in one hand and the phone in the other, all while jogging to where my car is. If I don't end up in some ditch rolling down this hill, I will be fortunate.

“They all have uniforms on; how does that help me? Roger, you cannot wear your house shorts out. There are a bunch of people standing in our yard.”

*What? Why in the world would she care what my father is wearing to escape a fire, for goodness' sake?*

“Mom, I'm on my way, but please get to safety.” I hear her continue to chastise my father in the background.

I finally make it to my car, which is parked right outside my office. Jumping in, I'm grateful that I locked the office and took my keys with me when I went for a walk. I toss my items in the back and take off toward the outskirts of town where my parents live.

It's not long before I see the plume of smoke spiraling on the horizon. My heart races as I begin to earnestly worry about my parents and their home.

I zip around the bend on the street they live on, and my head bounces back in confusion. There is nothing but a few cars in front of my parents' house, but their next-door neighbor, the Masons' family home, is on fire. I'm not sure what is going on, but the police won't let me get any closer. I park down the block. As my parents' lawn comes into view, I see my father and mother holding each other tight, staring at the blaze next door.

“Mom, your home isn’t on fire!”

At this point, I honestly don’t know if her lapses in conversation and big emotional responses are due to age, or if she just got a bit odd after Stephen’s passing. I’m struggling not to get angry with her due to the mini heart attack I just suffered. Taking a few relaxing breaths, I approach my parents.

“Hi,” I say as they turn to me in surprise. They both grab me and pull me close to them in unison.

“Thank you for coming,” my mom whispers as I back up from them.

“Mom, why did you tell me your house was on fire?”

“I didn’t,” she says, looking bemused. “It’s the Masons’ house. Thankfully they are on vacation, so no one is hurt. I didn’t know if it would spread to our home as well. I was afraid that, if it did, we would need to drive away from the house. I was panicking and needed your support. I’m sorry! You must have been so concerned, thinking it was our house.”

“I was.” I’m working hard to not let the fear that I felt make me short with her. “Maybe try to be a lot more specific next time,” I chastise. I’m still working to get my breathing and heart rate back to normal.

“I’m glad you’re here,” my mother says.

“Looks like they nearly have the fire under control,” my father says, happy as a little kid watching some kind of big adventure.

“Dad—” I start to say when I notice Kieran break loose from the crowd of firefighters a short distance up the cul-de-sac.

I have never understood a woman getting weak in the knees over a man in uniform—until this very moment. He has his fire suit down around his waist and is wearing a black T-shirt that showcases his muscular build. The soot on his face gives him an edge that his normal business casual definitely doesn't. My heart skips a beat as I take him in. I have never seen someone so handsome in all my life.

“Roger and Lorna,” he says, moving past me. Which is a good thing, as I am fairly sure I am drooling over him. “Are you both okay?”

“We're doing just fine,” I hear my mother say.

Kieran approaches my father. “I'm so sorry for your loss, sir. I should have told you both that years ago.” Kieran holds out his hand to my dad. “I am sorry it took me this long, but I cannot tell you how appreciative we all are for everything your son did during the time he served. I know that this might not be the right time or place.” He glances around. “But I guess sometimes you have to take whatever opportunity presents itself. I want you to know how much I appreciate Maya for helping put together our upcoming event. We hope to honor Stephen and other veterans like him with the programs we fund at BattleBron Tech. I believe she'll give the reverence required along with the perfect attention to every detail they all deserve.”

I feel my breath suspend, my lungs stutter, and my heart rate pick up pace. I never knew my body could react in all these different ways at once. Honestly, this moment feels like a movie when the tense musical score starts playing. I don't know how this particular showdown is going to work out, but I am here for the outcome. My entire existence and happiness might hang in the balance.

I glance from hot firefighter Kieran to my parents and back again. I figure if they still disagree with me planning this party and burying the hatchet, dating the man might be a bit of a challenge. Not that he asked, but after this, I'm going to start a prayer for exactly that. I can't name a more compassionate, kind, and handsome human than Kieran. This dance we have been doing since our school days hopefully ends with him realizing that while he can have any other woman on the planet, this humble event planner will do everything in her power to make him happy. Of course, groveling is not something I do well, but I might have to start practicing. For now, I tune back in to see how this situation with him and my parents is working out.

"I speak for my wife and myself," my dad says, putting his arm around my mother, "when I say we accept your condolences, and we apologize for some of the harsh words we have sent your direction. Your coming home was a reminder of all we lost, and it was particularly unfair to heap all that blame on you. We know that you and Lane were only trying to be friendly with our boy. He loved what he did in the military, and we appreciate you giving him the proper

acknowledgment that it sounds like this event of yours will do.”

“Thank you,” Kieran says, shaking his hand. My mother bows her head slightly, and he inclines his in return.

She is a stubborn lady, and that is probably the biggest admission of wrongdoing I’ve ever seen. I am so grateful for the chance to have us all move forward in a positive way.

“You good?” He turns to me.

“Now that all my favorite people are on good terms again,” I say before thinking and feel heat take over my cheeks.

I just admitted, at least in a small measure, how much I think of him.

“Good,” he says, thumbing his finger over his shoulder. “I should get back to helping clean up.” He gives a light wave and heads back toward his crew.

“Mom, what are you thinking?” I ask, noticing her watching Kieran’s retreat for a minute longer than my father and I do.

“If I were twenty years younger, that man would make me start hyperventilating,” she whispers, fanning herself. “When did he become such a fine, upstanding, and smoking hot man?” She turns to me with wide eyes.

“Lorna!” My father grumbles.

I just launch forward to wrap my arms around her.

“I love you, Mom. I hope we can all well and truly get back to normal.”



“I can only promise to try. But seriously, you should hook that one before someone else like that temptress Rachel does.”

“I don’t think Rachel is coming back,” I tell her with a chuckle, “and I’m pretty sure that Kieran has a lot of options in that regard,” I finish as I sneak a peek in his direction.

If he starts opening up applications for girlfriends, though, I will be sure that he knows I want in on that interview process this time. No slipping the application in his car, undercover. I can’t tell Mom that, though, because she and the gossip train around town would have a field day with it, and I will never get a moment of peace again.

# Chapter 21

## Kieran

I AM FAST AT work when I hear the receptionist ring into the office. I quickly glance at my calendar on the screen but see nothing I have scheduled for this afternoon. I'm in the middle of reviewing some tricky code and forgot to put my do-not-disturb on. Punching in the speaker button, I intend to have her put off whatever she is about to try to announce.

“I am—”

“I was asked to tell you Roger is here to see you about a personal matter,” the girl says in a hushed tone before I can get a sentence out.

My fingers freeze before pushing the button again to tell her to let Maya's father in. I thought we had everything settled after our chat the other day, and I assumed we would be on good terms moving forward. Of course, it isn't going to be that simple, right? Nothing with this family ever seems to be. They all tend to keep me guessing, but I'm honestly not sure that I really mind it one bit.

I've lived with only myself and work to occupy my time for a while now. Maybe that's why Maya's family continues to get the better half of our interactions, as they are big, loud, emotional, and unpredictable. They're also kind, grieving family to someone I considered a brother in all the ways that matter. I, of course, can't send the man packing, even if that does mean I will more than likely be working late. When I get interrupted working on code, it's not as easy as just picking up where I left off. It's an inconvenience, but one I need to make an exception for.

"Show him in," I say, punching the button on the phone.

I feel like some errant teenager as I glance about the office and straighten out my shirt. Honestly, I haven't done anything wrong this time—though that was not always the case when I was young. I keep finding that to be one of the downsides of being in my hometown all these years later. I often have flashbacks to my misspent youth and forget for a moment the responsible, successful businessman I am today.

Standing, I make one more adjustment, and I approach the door and plaster a perfect salesman smile onto my face.

"Roger." I hold out my hand as he enters. "I wasn't expecting you today?"

"I appreciate you seeing me," he says as he takes the proffered greeting in his own large palm. "I know we settled things the other day, but I had something I thought you might be able to use." He pats a large envelope he is carrying.

“Come have a seat.” I wave him in and signal to the receptionist that she can go as I close the door behind us.

“This is super nice,” Roger says as he glances around. “You did real good for yourself. I remember you and Stephen always playing those video games back in the day. Who would have thought you could make a living at something like that?”

“Not me until after I got out of the military. I felt this calling to try to make something work. I was always working with code for fun, but then I got serious about it fast. We were then able to get the technical college involved to have other veterans trained, and here we are now. It’s been more than I could’ve ever imagined.”

“Did you always plan to get out of the military when you did?” Roger questions. “When finishing up basic you had mentioned eventually wanting to move into other roles. I even thought it might be a lifetime commitment for you.”

Wow, he’s not pulling any punches today. I guess we’re going from mortal enemies to divulging all of our intimate secrets to each other. I want to believe they’ve turned over a new leaf completely and I guess that starts with me putting in as much effort as they need to feel comfortable.

“I wasn't planning to get out when I did,” I say. “I had just reached a point where my friends were retiring, or worse yet, coming home in bad shape. That is, those who even made it home. I had a scary accident, and all I kept seeing was the future I wouldn’t have if I continued on the road I was traveling. I guess, in the end, I wasn’t strong enough to make

that ultimate sacrifice and came home to find other ways to be of service. I don't know that I would be the same person today had I remained in the military. The losses I suffered were becoming extreme. I have to give big kudos to those that make it a lifetime career—that is truly a special breed.”

“Indeed.” Roger sighs. “I couldn't do it either. I did my time and served when needed, but in the end, I wanted family, kids, and other opportunities as well. I don't judge you for that at all. I think knowing when it was time for you to call it quits is just as important.”

“Thanks.” I know he's right, but the guilt is still something I carry.

“So, not sure if these are anything you can use during the event or in other cases, but I found them recently and thought I would bring them down.” He extends the envelope he brought with him in my direction.

I take it, curiosity definitely piqued as I open it.

Pulling out three pictures, I laugh out loud at the one on top.

“Oh my goodness, I forgot that you all took pictures that night,” I tell him as I laugh. There is Stephen and me stuck together. We are trying to pull ourselves apart and look as if our skin might tear at the seam of our two backs.

“I still have no idea how you found that much glue to make a human sticky pad or why?”

“First off, the instructions to make the sticky compound were not in English—so we probably should have stopped there and

found the right instructions. We were thinking it would cause anyone crossing that little walkway between the gym and the parking lot to stick to the ground and provide a good laugh for onlookers—nothing more. I was laughing at one point, got my foot stuck, and fell backward. Then, in a comedy of fools, Lane pushed Stephen at me to try to help, but the goof landed near my back, and we ended up glued together.” I am belly laughing as I remember the horrified looks on our parents’ faces in the emergency room.

“When we all got a call to the hospital,” Roger says, “it scared me to death. But the two of you couldn’t stop laughing. I honestly believed that would be the last prank,” he whispers as I turn the page.

The nostalgia sucker punches me and squeezes my heart as I see Stephen, Lane, Emma, Kieran, Maya, and others from town posing for the camera. We had a little party when Lane and I enlisted. Okay, little was relative, as I invited most of the town.

“You all threw Jell-O in a kiddie pool that day,” Roger says as I snicker.

“We sure did—lemon. It was a hot mess in the heat.” I wrinkle my nose. “That was the last time we were all together, and I think my ribs hurt for a week after all the laughing we did that day.”

“The last is the one I love to remember him by most,” Roger says as I flip to the final picture.

Roger and Stephen salute each other at his basic training graduation. Maya or her mom must have taken it, and the intense, sweet look on the men's faces was captured perfectly in the poignant photo.

"It breaks my heart that he didn't come home, but that boy made me so proud. I'm sorry we took all the hurt out on you and Lane," he says with a bowed head. "I forgot that you made every moment of his life here so much better than it would have been without you. Despite the year age gap, you two made my boy so happy, and that is what I choose to remember moving forward."

"This is a great one, and I know just where to put it up at the event," I tell him, continuing to look at the final picture. "I am going to give one of each of the others to Lane and myself for our offices, if that's okay?"

"Sounds good. Oh, one last thing," Roger adds as he stands up.

"Shoot."

"Wanna tell me what is going on with you and my daughter these days?" He lifts an eyebrow.

"She is helping—"

"Don't give me that, boy," he interrupts. "I have eyes. At the fire, you two were sizing each other up like I have never seen Maya do before. You don't have to answer but know that I will bury you out in the woods where no one will find you if you hurt that little girl of mine. She is all I have left."

I swallow hard at that look in his eye, as I have zero doubt he would follow through on that warning.

“I promise,” I tell him, happy I never asked her out now.

“Good. I will see you at this swanky event of yours, if not before,” he retorts as he gives a flippant wave and walks out.

I’m in trouble! I’m not sure with the time that I’ve been spending with Maya if I can turn the train around on these feelings I have. But I’m conflicted about moving forward. I just brokered peace with her family and am not sure I should challenge that again so soon. I guess time will tell where this whole thing goes from here, but as I glance at the pictures in my hand, I’m grateful for clean slates, old friends, and more laughs than a man has a right to. Hopefully, I get a shot at even more amazing memories with the people I adore.



# Chapter 22

## Maya

“LILA, TOMORROW I’D LIKE you to work on the seating cards if you can,” I call out as the desk phone rings again.

It has been nonstop busy like this for the last six hours starting from the moment I got into the office. Things were picking up beyond my expectations as the event neared. I also have over ten temporary staff from the local community helping with smaller tasks. Vendors will provide people for the wait staff, the open bar, and any other function needed for the event to run smoothly. Thankfully, my spreadsheet keeps me on top of everything which is definitely necessary for an event of these epic proportions. It’s probably going to get worse the nearer the event gets.

“Hello?” I answer the call. “This is Maya with—”

“Ma’am, I need press credentials for the event at BattleBron Tech,” the entitled-sounding voice demands. There is no request for information, just an order.

“I would need to get your information—”

“Just send the details to this address,” the woman barked like a chihuahua.

We have a media process for those wishing to get into the event just for this purpose. As a private event, we’re limiting press and photographers with a strict contract. Since the woman was not willing to hear me out, I figure I can take the email address and send over the information on how she can properly apply for a media pass.

Yep, might be passive-aggressive, but I have way too many other tasks to get through today to argue.

“Did you get that email?”

“Yes, and I will send the information to you in a few moments. Thank you for calling,” I finish and immediately hang up.

“You need to call the linen company back,” Lila calls out, “they have a question about ecru versus cream or something,” she says with the most confused look on her face.

I honestly don’t care what shade the vendor can come up with for the main tables. I know when it comes to weddings, the bride is often super worried about details, but truthfully, few of my other clients see shades like this. I know for certain that in the grand scheme of things, as long as all the napkins and tablecloths match each other, the colors being a shade off one way or the other won’t even register with Kieran. That call doesn’t even take five minutes to fix.

I’ve just received an email from the caterer trying to change two of the entrées when I hear the bell up front chime. There,

walking in with a paper bag and a smile at the staff, is Kieran. My ridiculous heart jumps about like a happy schoolgirl. I am finding it harder by the second to disguise how much this man has come to mean to me. Making it so much worse is how supportive and helpful he has been to me in the last two weeks.

“I brought a black and white cookie,” he announces, laying it on the desk and giving me a good look.

“Great, what is this bribe for today?” I ask, catching on to the fact that he has begun bringing me sugary treats when he normally has bad news or more work to dump on my plate.

It’s unfair how well he knows me and is able to alleviate my concerns before they become full-blown worrying points. I have not met anyone previously, male or female, who had this kind of intuition with regard to my moods. He is kind in finding ways to support me, even when throwing in the towel or taking up kickboxing to relieve the tension seems like a good course of action.

“Well, I did find out that the tent we are having constructed to house all the tables will have to be a different size than we thought it could be due to code violations.” I feel my lungs seize up, my stomach flip over, and bile rise in my throat.

“Every last detail,” I grit out through my teeth, “from the number of tables to the seating chart is dependent on the square inch of the dimensions you provided.” I start getting out of my seat, feeling panic rise up inside me.

“So, six extra feet on all sides should give us some breathing room, right?” he says in a serious tone.

I want to kill him. Right here and right now. I don't know why he thinks pranking me about something that is that important would be a good idea. It's one of the many heart attacks he's given me over the last few weeks. He's going to pay—that is all I can say. I don't know when or how yet, but I will get even.

“You aren't funny,” I tell him as the phone starts ringing again.

I groan as I wait for Lila to tell me who is calling.

“Some angry lady who wants a media pass?” Lila says as I vehemently shake my head at having the call transferred to me personally. I knew that was going to backfire earlier, but I don't have the energy.

“It's lunchtime,” Kieran says suddenly, “and I get the feeling you could use a break.”

“Why? Do you have some other amazing news for me?” I grumble, squinting at him in what I hope comes off as menacing.

“Nope, you seem to have it all under control,” he says. “I do, however, think you need a break, and I have just the thing to cure what ails you.”

“I don't drink,” I tell him. “Though your event might drive me to start.”

“It’s twelve twenty on a Friday, so I would hope drinking is not on the table,” he says, chuckling. “Lila, we are leaving,” he announces as he grabs my hand and drags me out the door before I can mount a good defense of all the reasons that lunch is ill-advised with all the deadlines I’m trying to hit for his big event.

I instantly feel my nerves take hold of my body when we hit the fresh air. Our business relationship seems to fall to the wayside, and it always feels more intimate between us when we are away from a professional setting. Early on, I was worried about people gossiping, but truthfully, I don’t care about that anymore. There are moments when I feel that we have never fully cleared the air with regard to my family, cake-gate, or even the growing tensions between us. I’m pretty sure that both of us are now keeping our personal feelings for each other in check, as we always keep conversations light and breezy. There is this vibe though, always present, that we are one wrong comment away from some sort of confrontation or romantic escalation. Maybe today is when that spark lights things up. I might be leaning toward a relationship with him if that comes to pass, but my friendship with Kieran is more important in the long term.

“Speak now or forever hold your peace,” he says suddenly, drawing my eyes to his handsome face.

“I’m sorry. Did I miss something?” I say confused. That’s what I get for being completely lost in my thoughts about him.

“When we’re working on the event, you’re great—proficient, on top of things, and a complete professional,” he says as we turn left at the corner.

I have zero idea where we’re headed, but I follow with complete trust.

“Okay, and that’s a bad thing?”

“Nope, it’s one side of you that I admire, and I’m grateful we hired you to organize this event,” he replies without hesitation.

“Then we step outside the office, and you go quiet, more withdrawn, and I worry about it. I can’t help but wonder if you don’t wish to be seen with me unless it’s under strictly professional circumstances. Are you still worried about what people around town might think? Or maybe there is some concern lingering with your family that I’m not aware of.”

*I guess today is the day after all! Oh no! Why couldn’t this have waited until after the event?*

“Nothing with my family, and I don’t worry about what people will think. Everyone around town sees me with Emma and knows we’ve been working on a host of projects for the BattleBron Tech event. I think our friendship is old gossip already. I stop, hoping that might be enough to keep him from pressing.

I just don’t want to be the one to say something and find out I am imagining those longing looks that pass between us. I feel like I’m back in high school crushing on a guy who is oblivious and doesn’t see me that way. My gut is telling me I am wrong, but how many women have believed they found

their Prince Charming just to be heartbroken? If that were to happen with Kieran and me, I would be sorely disappointed. At the same time, that's pretty hard to believe with how close we've gotten and all the effort he's made to clear things up with my parents.

"Okay, so what's the issue?" he says, stopping outside the Superior Nail Tech shop and turning to me.

I swallow hard, not wanting to be the woman who bursts out with something like this in the middle of the street. I throw my head back and pray for the ground to swallow me whole or for divine intervention to provide me with some miracle to redirect our attention, but nothing happens.

"Fine. I'm super attracted to you, and I worry about saying anything. I'm unsure how you feel about cake-gate or being forced to hire me. More importantly, I'm not even sure if a relationship with me is something you would want to pursue." I look anywhere but at him as I'm afraid to see the answer in his beautiful eyes should he not feel the same.

"Okay, so there's a lot to unpack there. Maybe I can keep it short."

"Whatever works," I mutter.

"I wanted you to do the event from the beginning and was frustrated when you didn't apply. The second I realized the mix-up with your application, it was over for me, and I was beyond grateful. Cake-gate is something that I'm not going to hold against you. Except, of course, to make jokes about how you overwhelm competitors with cake." He chuckles as he

puts his finger under my chin to draw it upward so my eyes meet his. “As for the other, I’m definitely interested.”

My heart starts to pound so hard at his words that I’m afraid he might hear it.

“Dating in a small town, with the level of commitments we currently have together, is tricky, though, so that needs to be a much bigger conversation. Let’s say, dinner tomorrow at St. Charles Steakhouse in Riverton, twenty miles away from the prying eyes of town folk—I will pick you up at seven?”

I can feel a full-body blush coming on and have to control the desire to pump the air with my fist and scream hallelujah!

I decide to opt for a low-key response of, “That works,” but on the inside, teenage Maya is jumping up and down.

“Excellent. I can’t wait,” he replies with the sweetest smile. I want to kiss him right here and make sure no other Rachel takes a shot at him. “Now, can we go get these pedicures?”

“Wait, what?” I ask, turning to the nail salon. “You’re going to get a pedicure?”

I’m biting down on my lip because, honestly, this is the last thing on earth I would have expected from Kieran. The thought of a man secure enough to accompany me to an activity like this is shifting my worldview right off-kilter. It’s fantastic.

“Of course. I love them and try to get one every couple of weeks. How about you?”

“Special treat once in a blue moon,” I tell him.



“Well, I guess it is treat day,” he quips, opening the door, so I step inside with this happy gurgling feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I wait for him to tell the receptionist what we want, and then we move to select colors for my toes. He, of course, decides against the pink for himself but I find a color I know will complement my gown for the event nicely.

“So, color on your toes is where you draw the line, huh?”

“Not always,” he says with a tiny curve of his mouth. “Once, overseas, six guys and I went into a salon after an especially long week in the field. Our feet were wrecked, and the ladies seemed a bit put off by the seven of us. When we asked them to paint our toes camouflage so they would blend into the sand, they appeared mortified but did it.”

“Seven soldiers and camouflaged toes,” I say laughing at the vision of that in my head. “I would have thought all your pranks ended with your enlistment, but I guess not.”

“Definitely not. It was a sport over there, all the things we did to each other to pass the time,” Kieran tells me. “I think it was bonding, but it also helped keep us all on our toes.”

“I would expect so. Well, I bet the salon workers still laugh about you guys.”

“I love to be memorable,” he says as our eyes connect.

For just a moment, everyone else in the salon disappears, and it's just the two of us. He has this gentle, happy smile on his face that melts my heart. I believe in my soul that Kieran and I

are headed for amazing things, and I can't wait to see what the future might hold. For now, though, I'm going to enjoy getting to know the grown-up version of him more with each meeting.

We are both reclining in a salon chair with our feet in the water. Without warning, he squeezes my hand, and the feel of my palm in his makes a warm, syrupy feeling seep through my entire body. He really is everything I've ever dreamed of and a heap more.

# Chapter 23

## Kieran

“DID MAYA GET THE attendee list finalized?” Lane walks into the office and catches me daydreaming. The object of those thoughts was the same person he was inquiring after—just for very different reasons.

“Huh?” I look at him as I try to get my brain to process the question.

“The final event numbers,” he says but then cocks his head to the side. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I move suddenly and glance at the computer in front of me. “Oh, it’s here. I don’t see that she CC’d you on the email. Did you ask her to?”

“Nope. I was just curious to see if you had the final numbers,” Lane finishes as he closes the door to my office and walks in to take a seat. “So, the space is going up on the lawn, my phone is ringing off the hook, and from the updates you’ve been providing directly from Maya, we are nearly to the finish line. Is there anything I’m missing?”

“Nah,” I say. I don’t want to add anything to his plate before the event.

We’re going to be doing many veteran events over the coming weekend, culminating in the gala fundraising and announcement of the various awards by the BattleBron Tech nonprofit. The entire board had voted on how best to support the In Memoriam Scholarships and also some service awards to people going above and beyond to help veterans. I think Maya exceeded what I initially imagined for the event. She really did hit it out of the park. I am excited about the weekend and have no doubt it will be amazing. Unbeknownst to Lane, I am also looking forward to spending time with her.

“If you don’t start telling me what is going on in that head of yours, I’m coming over there to give you a noogie,” he threatens.

I laugh at him. “You and what army? You have always been shorter than me and not nearly as built.” I flex my arms as if that should be all the deterrent he needs.

“Well, you’re so distracted you keep giving me monosyllabic responses to all my questions. I can only assume it’s about the event. Unless there is something or someone else you are thinking about,” Lane questions, and he has that look on his face. That stubborn I’m-not-leaving-this-alone-until-you-fess-up look.

“I think I took Maya on a date last night,” I tell him, wincing as I start to relay what happened. “I mean, it was supposed to

be a date, I thought. The other day, she blurts out that she is attracted to me, and I'm all in." I sigh.

"About time," Lane says with enough of a squeak in his voice that I'm caught off guard. "I thought the two of you might dance around each other longer than Emma and I did. That is awesome," he says, squinting his eyes as something new dawns on him. "Why don't you believe it was a date?"

"Well, I went to kiss her and I might have ended up giving her a black eye instead."

Lane snorts so loud that if he had a drink in his mouth, it would have come out through his nose.

"Not literally."

My eyes open wide, and I nod.

"She says she's good with makeup; no one should be able to tell today. She did send a picture last night, and it looked terrible just two hours later. I haven't had the courage to go check on her because I feel like a total dunce. I mean, this is the biggest event she has ever planned and our first date. Which is the first in a while for either of us, and this happens. I am a grown man, and I acted like a teenage boy who messed things up while trying to kiss his first girl."

"Let me see the picture," Lane says. "I can't believe—" he stops and grimaces when I turn my phone to him. "Wow! You nailed her. What the heck happened?"

"I don't know." I lower my head into my hands. "I was escorting her to the car; my hands were so sweaty I tried to

wipe them down on my pants. Do you know that anticipation-building moment when you don't know if you should bob, weave, go for the lips, or just take a quick peck? I mean, my brain was on fire. She has this chain strap on her purse, and I think my arm got stuck. I turned to kiss her and thought something was on my arm, I went to flick it off, and she stumbled. I grabbed her so she didn't fall and then next thing—bam!”

Just retelling the episode made me feel even more miserable.

“How was the dinner up to that point?”

“Amazing. Maya and I had the best conversation, and the meal was great. It's weird dating—or considering dating—someone who knew you when you were a kid. I mean, we haven't had a lot of contact in recent years, and yet she knows my past and we have shared stories. At the same time, it's cool because we can fill the blank spots of stories and get to see how much we have in common. Yet in certain ways, we are so different. I could talk to her forever. Was this how you felt about Emma?”

“Yup. I see the similarities between you and us for sure. I think the biggest difference is that our age gap is bigger than yours. Despite that, my friendship with you, being so close to your family, and small-town life put us in connection for years. How I felt about her just shifted at some point, and there is a certain comfort in being with someone who knew you through every stage of your life and still adores you—just for being

you,” he tells me. “I think that Maya and you have a real shot at making this work with the roots that you have.”

“I feel the same. But what do you think her parents will say when they find out I gave her a black eye?”

“It was an accident. Things like this happen with friends as much as anyone else. I would bet that Maya isn’t going to hold it against you.”

“Hold what against him,” Emma’s voice interjects, and I realize she had opened the door.

“Wow, sneak up on us much? Do you normally barge in where doors are closed?”

“I do when I check with the secretary, who assured me it was just the two of you,” she quips. “What did you do to Maya now? Is it worse than cake-gate?”

“Stop calling it that,” I mutter at my sister. “She didn’t mean to dump that cake on Rachel, and everyone knows it. She’s never going to live that situation down if we continue to talk about it, especially if it has its own nickname.”

“She’s not living that down, just like you aren’t going to live this latest episode down.” Lane chuckles at me. My sister glances at him with so much love in her eyes it’s tangible even at my distance.

“Kieran gave Maya a black eye on their date last night,” he says as her eyes go wide with shock.

“I’m sorry,” she says and waves a hand as her brain processes that information. “You went on a date?”

“Great, right?” Lane says to her.

“We did say it was only a matter of time,” she murmurs back.

“I’m still sitting here,” I say, hoping to break up this love fest a bit.

I adore both of these humans, but my sister and my best friend together is still something I’m adjusting to. Especially as nothing is holding them back from being together and there are full-on public displays of affection. I don’t normally mind, but sometimes it can get to be a lot. Maybe it is that tiny voice of the cynic who lives in my head. That aspect of me is quickly being silenced the more time I spend with Maya, though.

“We just knew you two would start dating. It’s pretty obvious to anyone paying attention,” my sister says in a cocky tone. “But the black eye is unexpected. I’m hoping it was not because of something she said.”

“Emma!” I call out, horrified. “I didn’t hit her with my hand! It was a total accident. She ducked, weaved, and I was stuck in a handbag chain. She just slammed into my head, right below her eye.”

I felt so bad repeating the story as the images played in slow motion in my head. I can’t believe this is how our first date ended. Would she even consider a second? Could this be the amazing story of how our relationship kicked off? Or would this be the death knell, without even a kiss to know how sweet things could’ve been between us?



“Did you at least get a kiss in before that debacle? Or after, I guess?” Emma asks.

“No, I was—” I stopped talking as I realized from their two faces that they are both enjoying this a bit too much. I’m not going to get sympathy from them. In fact, Emma is probably heading off for a chat with Maya after this. I can’t even fathom how that conversation will go—but I will not be put in a good light. That much I am certain of.

“You should have at least kissed her boo-boo,” Lane offers.

“Made it all feel better,” Emma continues, piling on to Lane’s humor.

“I hate you both. There are just days before the event. Maya is busy finishing up and will have work to do all evening. She has a black eye that I bet is worse today than when I saw her, and I’m worried about what happens when that news reaches her parents.”

“Oh.” Lane puts a fist to his mouth. “Her dad is going to kill you for sure.”

“I agree. He gave you a second chance and I’m pretty sure he won’t do that again.” Emma wrinkles her nose. “What are you going to do?”

“You think it might be too late to catch a plane out of the country and leave this event for the two of you to handle?”

“Yes, you are past that,” Emma says. “You know that Maya is going to understand that it was an accident. After the Rachel incident, Maya was embarrassed when she first came to see

me. I told her there was no need as it was truly an accident. We had a great talk and cleared the air. You need to put on your big boy panties and go chat with the lady. This can completely be overcome by talking about it. You still have a very good shot at a second date. Now that her family isn't an obstacle anymore, you need to go for it with everything you have. It's time you find your perfect match and get on with building that future."

"You're right," I grumble. "But if she shoots me down, I'm blaming you."

"Your little sister is the one to blame when you're the one who gave her a black eye? I don't think so," Emma says. "Seriously, though. I think Maya is a great person, and the more I've worked with her these last few weeks, the closer we've gotten to each other. I think the two of you would be an amazing team."

"Thanks. I guess I should get this out of the way and just talk to her. I'll be back shortly," I say as I head out to talk with Maya.

I feel each step getting harder than the previous one. When I get to the office, there is a sign saying that Maya is out. I hope that isn't anything to be worried about, but I am grateful that her absence is buying me some time. I know I need to clear the air before the event. Maybe I'll head up to Breezy Overlook and take a break. After all, I think this apology can wait a little longer as I try to gather my thoughts. I need to escape from the craziness my life has become so that I can finally move

forward with Maya. It's a future I see more clearly with each passing day.

# Chapter 24

## Maya

THERE ARE TRUCKS LINED up along the road for as far as I can see and tons of people milling about. I have so many things on my checklist that I'm beginning to sweat. Sweating will not be good for the makeup I have on to cover the little souvenir from my first date with Kieran. That black eye incident was wreaking havoc in my brain as it replayed on a loop in my mind's eye. I still can't tell who moved first and what exactly happened—all I do know is that it went horribly wrong quickly. I've been so busy the last five days that I've not had time to talk with him about it in private.

“Hey, did you ask for a second cake?” A man with a bakery embroidered on his chest asks. I look at my list to assure myself that I am not expecting this delivery.

“Cake? I don't believe I'm expecting even one cake?” I tell him, my brows furrowed.

“The Maynard Wedding, right?”

“Nope. They are up one street with the huge blush-colored tent you can’t miss.”

Why anyone is getting married tonight, on a Friday of all days, I have no idea. The gala is tomorrow, and maybe due to the proximity, that was a potential cause and effect. That didn’t seem right, though, as most people plan their weddings ages in advance. No matter, I have zero brain power to spend figuring out that mystery as the next person approaches.

“Glasses on the tables or up by the bar area?” a lady I’ve never seen before asks, but I verify from her uniform that she is with the company doing the bar and servicing tonight.

“Bar works, as there is a little meet and greet before dinner.” She nods in acknowledgment before turning to move away from me again.

The people now are forming up in a single file and asking rapid-fire questions.

One by one, I dispatch them in a variety of directions as we start to see the event setup take shape. I can feel things all moving along smoothly as I check again to ensure that nothing is missing. All vendors are expected to have checked in by this time, but I noticed that one has still not arrived.

I start toward the row of trucks to check the signage. Oh, sweet goodness, I don’t see the caterer here. That would be the worst vendor not to have present. We have the alcohol, the servers, and even the dinnerware—the food, though, is crucial.

I dial the number on my phone, but it goes straight to voicemail!

*Don't panic. It's all going to be okay. You talked to them yesterday, and there was no indication of an issue.*

I dial again—voicemail again like the phone is turned off.

Who turns a phone off when catering the single biggest event this year? People all over the country are interested in BattleBron Tech. This vendor didn't seem flaky, came highly recommended, and always responded promptly. We're in the final stretch—and this is the outcome? I never saw this coming.

Crash!

Smash!

“Oh no!”

Those noises and the exclamations tell me things just got worse.

“What happened?” I asked the event staff I hired to help set up the bar area and adorn the tables with the centerpieces.

“We dropped a box of the centerpieces,” the lady with the linen company says, her voice trembling. “I'm sorry.” She looks on the verge of tears.

“No worries, we will recover what we can and then improvise,” I say with a fake smile.

At this point, I want to run and hide until the event is over. I worry that the success or failure of this single event could

make or break my business, and I'm starting to panic. The media attention on this will leave a lasting mark.

"I'll let you know exactly how many centerpieces we are short when we figure it out," Lila says, taking on this task for me.

"Thank you." I'm filled with relief for her help.

The next five questions are from the orchestra leader about where they could leave their instrument cases tomorrow. That would have to be the staff room over in the BattleBron Tech building, as I was not anticipating that. I could remember their contract and nothing about preparation rooms was mentioned. No worries. We will just improvise there also.

The chairs are being laid out, the tables are being set up as well. I see another box truck pull up. For half a second, I think it is the missing caterer—but no, it's another of the florist's trucks. I pull my cell phone from my pocket and try the caterer once again.

Voicemail.

If I throw the phone into a wall, will anyone notice? Everyone I encountered tells me what a fabulous job I have done pulling this all together. Several mentioned how they wouldn't have been able to handle the pressure. Truth be told, I'm not doing that well myself at the moment. Sweat begins to pour down my back.

"Hey," I hear a voice behind me just as my heart does a flip-flop in my chest.

“Hi, Kieran,” I whisper, as my throat unexpectedly goes hoarse when I see him standing there.

I don't have the ability to stave off my attraction to this man, and I let my eyes feast on him.

“How are you doing?” he asks in a tone that seems hesitant in some way.

I wonder if he is second-guessing our date the other night, or maybe the way it ended was a sign to him that we shouldn't go there. I can't really say for sure, but I also know I don't have the ability to worry about it. I have to hold it together in order to get through this mountain of a task list. Not to mention, I need to find the missing caterer.

“I'm making it through.” I smile wryly. “How about you?” I notice his gaze resting on my eye where he accidentally bumped into me.

“The eye?”

“Good. Nothing a little concealer can't fix.”

My phone rings, and I hurriedly bring it up to look at who is calling. My expression drops faster than a child who only got coal on Christmas morning.

“Not who you were expecting?” Kieran asks.

“No, and these people can wait until next week.” I disconnect the call.

“Anything I can help with?”



“No,” I tell him, inhaling as I try not to hyperventilate. I will give them a bit longer, and then I guess I have to call secondary numbers. Maybe I will send an intern to the city to get in touch with someone at the firm. I might be overreacting as they are only forty minutes late.

“Okay. Come on.” He grabs my hand without warning and drags me away from the event area.

When we are a fair distance away, he turns to me.

“Are you mad about your eye?”

“No!” I laugh, but it comes out sounding a bit like a cry.

I’m worrying myself, as cracking up this close to the biggest single event of my life is looking likely. I can’t even fully describe what I’m most worried about. Sure, starving guests at the biggest media-covered event of my career is bad. Kieran and me being in a weird place? Another notch higher on the anxiety chart. My parents being here tomorrow to watch it all go down in flames? Ding ding ding, we have a winner.

“I thought the evening went amazing, and this”—I point to my tender eyelid—“just a souvenir. I would love to try again if I don’t die of worry over the next twenty-four hours.”

“Are you always nervous about your events?”

“Nope, but this one has a few more layers to it than normal. Plus, I’ve been so busy that I’ve missed not seeing you as frequently. I guess that was starting to bother me a bit.”

“I’ve tried to stop by your office to visit with you, but I kept missing you. It seemed like you might be avoiding me. I don’t

know what you could have going on at work that is more important than us talking?” he adds sarcastically.

“Nothing big.” I try to act nonchalant. “Besides, you have to remember I was part of cake-gate, which everyone in town knows about. This eye is our little secret. It made me laugh knowing it will be a great story to tell my grandkids about someday.”

“Our grandkids, or just yours?” He asks as I feel my face start to blush at the slip of my tongue.

“I guess that is still undecided. Are you interested in having kids? Maybe with me?”

“Definitely would like one or two kiddos,” Kieran says as he steps closer to me. “And I can’t imagine anyone I would like to take on a second date to negotiate just how that might come to pass in the future.” He slips an arm around my waist and pulls me close.

“That’s really good news.” I put my arm up and over his shoulder. “Because if you didn’t ask me out before the end of this event, I was going to have to do something drastic—maybe do it myself. I need to know—”

He stops me mid-sentence with the sweetest, most perfect kiss ever. Feather light and just enough pressure to make me sigh. He holds me a moment longer until I finally register that my phone is ringing. I might just let it continue ringing if it means I can stay in his arms a bit longer.

Kieran kisses me a second time before lifting his head up. “I have waited so long for this moment. I can’t wait for that second and third date.”

“Me neither,” I tell him as I hear a large truck pull up to the curb with a screeching of its brakes.

I turn, and my heart sails toward the heavens.

“Thank you,” I whisper, as I glance upward.

“Wow, you’re that happy to be with me,” Kieran questions with a cheeky grin.

“No, that was for the fact the caterer finally showed,” I tell him, deciding to keep him on his toes. “You need to redeem yourself with our second date, and then maybe I’ll get that excited about keeping you around.”

“Liar, I already know I have you hook, line, and sinker.” He kisses me quickly. “Go on now; show the world how amazing you are.”

I plan on doing just that. I head over to the driver of the catering vehicle, who is now coming toward me on the lawn. I glance over my shoulder to see Kieran still standing and staring after me. I feel goosebumps as happiness pierces my heart. I can’t wait to see where this will go. I’m going to make him so proud of this event. This will be my love letter to him for those he believes in.

# Chapter 25

## Kieran

“NO, THESE ARE CONGEALING on the plate,” I hear Maya snap at one of the servers. Then she is off again over to the bar to handle a tiny issue with ice.

The woman has not stopped moving all day. I can't believe how well everything came together and how she is single-handedly orchestrating this day to perfection. Everyone is enjoying drinks, hors d'oeuvres, and a bit of socialization before the sit-down dinner.

“Kieran,” a voice to my right calls out as I drag my eyes from Maya to her parents.

“Roger, Lorna.” I move to meet their approach.

I hold a hand out to Roger, and he gives it a hearty shake. Lorna moves forward and unexpectedly hugs me.

“We saw the honor wall for Stephen,” she sniffles. “I also met a couple of the other families whose loved ones are being

honored tonight. This is so special, and I want you to know how much I appreciate it.”

“Of course. It’s the right thing to do.”

“I saw you used the pictures I gave you,” Roger says, his eyes glistening with tears barely held in check.

“I thought people needed to see the person beyond the military uniform they died in.” I’m holding back my own tears at the memories. “Stephen was so much more than the last chapter of his story, and I’m grateful to share that with the world.”

“I love that,” Lorna says, glancing around. “That girl of ours should have worn roller skates. She is all over the place. I tried to stop her twice to check in, but she was in her serious mode.”

“She definitely is.”

“Did she give you a clipboard as well or a checklist?” Lorna asks. “She’s been doing that technique since her high school science project days. Never wanted to miss a thing, so anything that occurred to her would be on a list. I always thought the lists were too much work, and sometimes she has a list for lists she needs to complete.”

“Oh, we had a checklist of lists for each vendor to sign for,” I tell them with a smile.

I adore Maya, lists and all. This event is going off without a single hitch—at least any I can observe. She might give a different story, but then someone would have to capture her to ask the question.

“I’m glad the career she chose needs those lists and her particular brand of organizing,” Roger says. “I think my house was always cleaner and more organized when she lived there.”

“Hey,” Lorna playfully slaps her husband’s chest. “I still live with you and take care of those tasks. You wish for me to stop and leave everything to your subpar cleaning abilities?”

“I love you,” Roger whispers, leaning over to kiss his wife.

I shake my head, and I see a vision of what I hope Maya and I might have. The weight of that thought doesn’t escape me as I glance up right into Maya’s beautiful gaze. She is wearing a navy blue fitted dress, a perfectly coiffed updo, and makeup that highlights her cheekbones and eyes. If I wasn’t in love with her before, I would be a goner, as I am falling hard into that gaze tonight. She smiles sweetly in my direction, and then she breaks the gaze and is off again.

“Well, can I show you both to your table for dinner?” I ask as I incline my hand toward the tent area where the meal will be served.

“That would be nice.”

Like clockwork, Lila appears, dressed smartly in a black pantsuit.

“I have their spot,” she says, glancing at the clipboard in her hand.

The high schooler is one of Maya’s favorite workers. She told me the girl is taking all her responsibilities for this event

extremely seriously and how much she appreciated it. Tonight, she is putting as many miles on her sturdy shoes as Maya is.

“That would be amazing,” Lorna says. “You look very official tonight, Lila.”

“Thanks,” the girl says as I glance at Roger with a little nod.

“I will talk to you soon,” I tell him as he follows the two women away.

“It’s time for the speeches,” Lane says. “Did Maya approve yours?”

I laugh.

“You can’t be scared of her enough to do everything she dictates,” I mutter with a teasing shake of my head.

“Emma wrote mine, and yes, those two got me. I’m strong sometimes against one of them, but two—” he punctuates the end of the sentence with a firm shake of his head.

I laugh and pull mine from my jacket pocket.

“I thought I would risk it,” I say, showing him the cards. “I didn’t want to ruin the surprise of Stephen’s award in particular. I have a few things here that are hard enough to put words, so I just didn’t want them edited.”

“And Maya understands that,” Maya interrupts sternly from right beside me, “but should you make a mess of this event with your speech, she will make you pay for the rest of your adult life.”

“And why is Maya talking in the third person?” I turn to her with an eyebrow arched heavenward.

“I thought maybe you would take me more seriously,” she says, but all I can think about is how I would love to kiss her and tell the world how lucky I am that she’s mine.

“I take you very seriously,” I tell her in a solemn tone of voice. “I did all the other tasks you assigned me and even turned in a completed checklist. This one little thing is all mine,” I say, tucking it close to my heart.

“I understand, and you’re the boss,” she whispers as something softens in her gaze.

“Well, then, I have one other demand of you.” I take her hand and lead her behind the bar area. “A kiss to see me through the night.”

I hear Lane laughing as we step away from him. The man has a thing about missing my sister, so he better not bring this up, or I will find a way to make his life miserable. My focus is totally on Maya, who is biting the corner of her lip adorably.

“We’re in public, and people might see,” she says, but all I comprehend is that is not a no from her.

“Chicken,” I challenge her as I move a hand around her waist.

“That doesn’t work on me anymore,” she replies, but I can see her weakening.

“Just one little kiss to get me through.”



She moves forward, hands on my chest, and kisses me ever so lightly. It's everything I need at this moment to carry me through the speeches to follow. I'm completely in love with this woman. I don't know when, in the mix of all the craziness of planning the event, this happened, but I know it to be true.

"Now, go give that speech," she finishes, fiddling with my tie. "I will be listening and judging."

"No pressure there," I tell her with big eyes as I bend to kiss her on the cheek. "Thank you for everything."

"You're very welcome," she says sincerely and then points toward the stage.

"If we could have everyone find their seats for dinner. We'll get started with the awards in just a few moments," I hear Lane saying as I greet people, making my way through the crowd.

I am humbled by how many we invited actually made it. There are not many empty seats as everyone settles in, and the crowd is so big it's more than likely doubled Briar Glen's population tonight. This is a great thing, though, as many are staying local, and spending money for meals outside of this single event which will give the community a boost as well. I love these moments when I realize that I get to help the place, and people, that shaped who I am.

"Are you a little humbled by the attendance tonight?" Lane asks. "I mean, in person, it's impressive."

“I am,” I whisper through the lump in my throat. “Imagine all the good for the local businesses and the positive effect of the awards we are going to present.”

“You know we might be the hometown goofballs, but we did all right in this life.” I can’t take it anymore and pull him in for a hug.

“I love you, man, and I’m grateful every day to be on this journey with you.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” He pats my back. “Now, let’s go award some amazing service members and warriors,” he says, swiping at his eyes.

We bring the crowd to attention and get the award ceremony underway. With a few opening speeches, it’s time for the big reveal. I glance out to Maya, Lorna, and Roger in turn. I feel the full impact of this moment.

“This next scholarship is for a personal friend, Stephen Glenn, whom Lane and I grew up with,” I say into the microphone. “He was a big, happy goofball and never met a person he didn’t like. Stephen eventually followed Lane and me into the military. No matter what was thrown at him, he never was without a smile on his face or an encouraging word for his brothers-in-arms. Unfortunately, a roadside IED ended his journey here with us, but tonight, his legacy will move forward. We are introducing the Stephen Glenn Warrior Scholarship for up to forty thousand dollars a year. This scholarship will be granted to one student who will be voted on through an online process that we will be unveiling in the

coming days. This person needs to show a love of community, a strong work ethic, and, most of all, be able to make us laugh with videos, stories, and clips that will be submitted through the new platform. Our hope is that even in voting for this scholarship recipient each year, others will be lifted up, entertained, and, for a moment, share in one vision for the future of a deserving student, just as Stephen made each of our days brighter through his time with us. Tonight, we present the inaugural plaque for this scholarship to Stephen Glenn's parents and sister—Roger, Lorna, and Maya. We also want to invite them to be on the judging panel each year. Maya was the planner for this amazing event, so let's give this wonderful family a round of applause as they make their way to the podium," I finish, and I turn to see Lane clapping as the trio walks to the stage.

"Thank you," Maya mouths as she stands next to her parents.

I move to slip an arm around her. Our eyes catch and hold. I don't think I've ever had a more perfect moment. The feelings of gratitude, and love, along with a touch of sadness mix to imprint this moment forever in my memory.

# Epilogue

Maya

*FOUR YEARS LATER*

“I’m pretty sure that this is not the color the bride ordered,” Lila tells me from behind.

I take a deep, cleansing breath and turn as slowly as I can to avoid falling flat on my face. My hand instinctively goes up to the bump that is nearly due to be delivered. Our baby boy is feisty today and bouncing all over the place, but I can’t afford to slow down.

“Oh wow,” I shudder as I look at the linens Lila is holding. “That is definitely not our bride’s color. Can you please call the company immediately,” I whisper, as if our bridezilla might appear at any moment. “There will be a meltdown to rival all tantrums if she sees that.”

Lila inclines her head solemnly and pivots to turn back toward the delivery. I can see her already on the phone and pray that

she can make the change happen. Our bride is not an understanding soul, and she has a vision for this wedding, which she told us about a thousand times. From the length of the bridesmaid's hair to the exact time of the ceremony for optimal lighting. I will gladly have this one in the books and then be on maternity leave for at least the next six weeks.

"How is our little one doing?" Kieran walks up behind me, and I turn to him with rolling eyes.

"You know, you can't follow me everywhere just to keep track of him." I rub my belly as I feel the baby boy who's already dancing around at the sound of his daddy's voice.

"Says who, exactly?" Kieran teases. "I made sure to be part of the crew of firefighters on duty today. Your lovely bride requested that the department be on hand physically just in case of some disaster. So, I can absolutely follow my beautiful bride and baby boy around," he says happily.

We had been married just shy of three years now, and as much as I would love to find something at fault with Kieran's logic, I honestly don't mind. He is the most attentive husband. Once we got over the initial dating phase, things had moved easily for us, and my parents even spent some time repairing their relationship. Now, they spend the majority of the time traveling, as Kieran was kind enough to make all my mother's dreams of travel possible. I'm not saying she might like him more than me, but there is evidence to that effect.

"How is Lila doing?" he asks, glancing over at the woman who now appears to be taking the vendor of the linens to task.

She isn't shouting, but that jaw-clenched look on her face tells me everything I need to know.

"She is doing amazing. I would never have guessed a few years back that this is what she would decide to do full-time. She is a fast learner, takes all my feedback well, and, honestly, I have even allowed a couple of events to be booked during my leave with her in charge."

"Look at you growing and delegating," he says as I notice the maid of honor stalking me.

The blond had her bride's back as fiercely as a mama bear and had more than once hollered at Lila and me on the bride's behalf. From the look of the fire pouring from her flared nostrils, I need to brace for impact. I quickly take inventory of the checklist in my hand and see nothing done that could cause this level of emotional unease.

"Did you or did you not book the hair stylist that did our hair?"

"Nice to see you, Morgan; you're looking beautiful," I say, trying to get her to take a breath before proceeding.

"Thank you," she says, "but that hair stylist ruined Nina's hair," she says. "She looks like that woman from the horrid movie with her hair out to here," she says, waving her arms wide.

"Okay, I did book the stylist, but Nina and you should have given directions what style you wanted to have done," I say

just as a shriek that mimicked that of a dying animal came from the main event lodge.

The bride in a robe is flying out of the building, followed by the hairstylist, holding what appears to be a wig. I have to clamp down hard on my lips to stop the laughter from bubbling up. I seriously should write a book about these weddings.

“Nina,” I say just as she comes to a stop in front of me, “what is going on?”

“She is incompetent,” the bride screams in my face.

“I was just trying to put in the hairpiece that you asked for.” The stylist I have hired numerous times before looks on the verge of tears.

“So, you didn’t like the hairpiece?” I ask, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“She burned my hairpiece.” Nina starts crying, which is okay because her makeup is spackled on with a trowel and doesn’t move an inch, or that would have been our next issue.

“I did not,” the stylist says, holding out the massive wig. “You did something to it before handing it to me and then want to make me responsible,” she responds. “You want it flattened, but you teased it to beehive heaven.”

“I think your hair looks amazing without that addition,” Morgan finally jumps in.

“Are you sure? You know I have to live with these pictures for years, and I can’t afford for anyone on social media to not see

me at my best.”

“You’re stunning,” Morgan says and then turns to the stylist. “You are dismissed, as this is your fault. I won’t pay for your services.”

“That is not possible,” I tell her calmly. “Are all the other hairdos done based on the schedule we made up?”

“Yes, but I’m not perfect,” she said. “What good are twelve amazing hairstyles if I’m subpar,” she pouts.

I look her dead in the eye.

“We talked about this, and I told you that payment was not optional unless there was a valid reason,” I inform her, holding tight to my belly. “You have five minutes, and then I must begin dealing with your guests arriving.”

She gives a dramatic huff and does a one-eighty-degree turn before heading back to the prep area.

“I don’t know how you handle those types of brides,” Emma says as I turn to her and nearly belly-bump her.

“Wow, we really do need to talk about these bellies,” I chuckle as I see Emma rubbing her smaller one. She is due three months after me with her sweet baby girl.

“These two are going to be lifetime besties like Lane and Kieran,” Emma says.

“I know, and I can’t wait.” Lane and Kieran pull up next to us, wrapping their arms around each of us.



“You both were much easier brides than some you have to deal with, Maya,” Lane reassures.

“Aw, you say the kindest things. I’m just grateful to do what I do each day, and I’m not going to quit taking on those more challenging clients, because I love doing this for a living.”

“Fair enough.” Kieran kisses the top of my head. “We are officially on duty, as it would appear the guests are starting to arrive,” he says, looking over as I notice Lila putting out the last of the perfectly colored linens.

“I’m going to head in to help with the kitchen coordination,” Emma says.

“See you all after,” I tell them as I smile at each in turn.

I love that we live, work, and exist in this tiny town. I get to live out my grandest dreams. I hope my son and Emma’s baby girl love this place as much as we all do. I hope they find their true love, whether in Briar Glen or the big world. It doesn’t matter to me what they want to do with their lives; I know we will all support them and be here with deep roots in this amazing place we call home.

THE END

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*Read chapter one on the very next page!*

# Sneak Peek

## Rescued by my Brother's Best Friend

**THE PAST COMES RUSHING** back at the sound of his voice...my brother's best friend and my new next-door neighbor.

Lane Kincaid was my secret crush for as long as I can remember.

He's also the one I had every intention of avoiding when I came home.

But fate had different plans,  
I got into a car accident.  
And he's the first person to come to my rescue.

As my gaze collides with his, all thoughts flee.  
My icy indifference begins to thaw.

He's even more handsome than I remember.  
But I must stay away.  
He shattered my heart.

Each interaction weakens my resolve,  
And puts a dent in my protective armor.

There are times when he looks at me, and my breath catches.  
I can't help but wonder if he feels the same.

**Now, I'm being rescued by my brother's best friend in  
more ways than I ever dared to dream.**

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## Chapter One

### Emma

I turn toward the sound of knocking on the window, groggily lifting my battered head from the steering wheel it crashed into moments ago. My body struggles to breathe, and the pain shooting along my nerve endings steals my breath. As my gaze collides with the face on the other side of the window, all thoughts evaporate, and I give a wry laugh to the universe that twisted all my best intentions into this ridiculous reunion. Those blue eyes have haunted every dream since puberty hit, and my love for Lane has only blossomed.

*This trip has become a nightmare, and I haven't made it home yet!*

“Emma, can you unlock the door?” Lane asks as my brother’s face pops up next to his.

There they are, the dynamic duo of my big brother, Kieran, and his best friend. Side by side, as always. They are volunteer firefighters in our hometown, and I should have guessed they would be the first ones on this scene. I am the wayward sister, a constant bother, and the introvert to their big outgoing personalities.

Reaching a hand as far as I can, I hit the unlock button with a fingertip. The effort is all I can muster as my lungs scream and pain shoots the length of my leg, still pinned under the dash.

“Oh my goodness, is she dead?” An old man that I don’t recognize joins the party of paramedics and firefighters standing guard. I can barely see his shadow from the corner of my eye, but I guess he was the big old Caddy that veered in front of me seconds before I met the tree I was currently resting against.

“I’m not dead,” I hoarsely whisper, the effort sending me into a coughing fit.

“I didn’t see you coming; I was looking at the deer I swerved to miss,” the guy offers back.

*Thank you, Captain Obvious!* I figured the man hadn’t seen me coming around the bend on the country road leading into Briar Glen. I knew this was an unfortunate accident and that the old, backcountry route into town was hardly ever traveled on but by locals. I thought it safer than the highway option, but apparently, I was wrong. Now my entrance to my hometown would not be as low-key as I had been hoping.

“It’s okay, Mr. Olson,” I hear Kieran say. “Why don’t you let these nice men take you to the ambulance and check you out?”

“You sure know how to make an entrance,” Lane whispers as he holds my hand and the paramedics brace my neck. “Try to take it easy, and we’ll get you out shortly.”

I would be a little more relaxed if someone else was attending to me—anyone else on the planet but him. Lane was the person that had kept me from this place for years now, and I had big plans to avoid him as much as possible while settling back into the groove here in Briar Glen. I had missed so much

about my childhood home, and the nostalgia finally overcame the glow of the big city. I know coming back is the right move, even if I have to be in the personal space of this amazing human that never had left my heart or mind. Though he doesn't know that, and I intend that to remain the case until they lay me in the ground.

"I just want to make sure everyone knows I'm home," I tell him, deciding on humor to lighten the tension. I start coughing up a storm at the effort that comeback cost me.

"Welcome home," he whispers in that low, gruff tone that I adore. "I would have thrown a different kind of party if I had known you were coming," he says as my gaze finds his.

I have dreamed of this moment for eight years since we last saw each other. In every daydream I've had of our reunion, I was at least standing, usually with a blowout and some fabulous dress on. Bloodied and stuck in a weird position in a now banged-up ten-year-old Toyota on the side of the road was the furthest impression I was hoping to make. I was a gangly high school graduate when our paths last crossed, and lifetimes of experience had put Lane even further from my league.

As they unceremoniously lift me from the battered car, I wish that Lane would carry on helping with other parts of the scene.

"I'm sure we can catch up later," I tell him in dismissal, hoping I might be upright and wearing something not blood-stained the next time we crossed paths.

“I’m going to ride with you.” Worry is etched in every crevice of his face. “Kieran has a trainee team and will meet us at the hospital.”

I feel a tear sneak down the side of my face. The pain in my leg is becoming unbearable, but I don’t want him to see me cry. I know it’s dumb and I shouldn’t care about such things now, but this person is the epitome of the perfect man. Having him witness me at my lowest point is breaking my spirit. I had been planning the perfect homecoming and how sophisticated I would act when I returned to my hometown.

“How bad is the pain?” Lane asks, bending low to my cheek as they wheel me into the ambulance.

I look at him, worried that I might have said something aloud. That is the thing about Lane and Kieran, though; even as kids, they could understand me better than the rest of my family. Neither of them thought my quiet, introverted nature was anything to poke fun at and instead had long taken to be my voice to the world. He could finish my sentences, fulfill unspoken requests of mine, and settle me with one grin from that handsome mug of his.

“You are one tough cookie, but I know that look,” he murmurs, glancing down at my leg.

“How bad does it look?”

“Well, you are definitely going to need a cast,” Lane quips.

“You can tell that just by looking at it?” The paramedic gives Lane a warning look. I know he is good at his job, but I can’t



recall anyone touching my leg.

“Um, I don’t mean to say this to freak you out,” Lane says, looking apologetic. “The bone might be peeking out through the skin a bit.” The look he gave me would have made me belly laugh under other circumstances. However, this was my appendage we were talking about, and that news was not what I was hoping to hear.

“What?” I ask as fresh coughs hit my chest, and I feel light-headed. “That sounds bad,” I add as I realize my voice is super unsteady.

I see the ambulance start to spin. Nausea takes hold of my midsection. If I wasn’t already lying down, I would need to do so immediately. I can’t pinpoint a single issue at the moment, as everything hurts; my stomach is lurching at the movement of the fast-paced ambulance. It takes every ounce of willpower to stay alert.

“Lane,” I whisper. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Well, you look great, even bloodied and battered,” he tells me, squeezing my hand. In a haze, I realize he never let it go. When I pivot slightly to glance in his direction, those eyes aren’t lying or teasing.

“I missed you so much,” I hear myself confess, feeling like I might pass out.

I feel his warm, large palm squeeze mine again. He doesn’t say a word as the ambulance lurches forward; that is all my stomach can handle as the contents hurl from my body. I’m

pretty sure this can't get any worse, but thankfully I choose this moment to pass out, blocking any other embarrassing moments.

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