

never
plan a,
billionaire's
wedding



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIA KENT

Never Plan a Billionaire's Wedding

WHATEVER IT TAKES

BOOK ONE

JULIA KENT

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Never Plan a Billionaire's Wedding

(Whatever It Takes series, Book #1)

Stalker exes. Momzillas. Drunk uncles. Hurricanes. Jealous siblings. Paparazzi.

You name it, Kari Whitevelt has seen it all.

And that's why brides and grooms hire her.

Because she makes it *all* go away.

Wedding Protectors, Inc., is here to make sure that special day stays special.

Whatever it takes.

No matter what.

But when her newest client turns out to be her own long-lost high school sweetheart, rising tech star billionaire Caleb Mikelmas, suddenly Kari's not sure whether she's protecting the wedding couple —

Or her own heart.

Tech billionaire Caleb never thought he had a chance, much less a *second chance* with his first love and high school sweetheart, Kari. When a case of mistaken identity turns their reunion into a big misunderstanding, unraveling his feelings about the one who got away while supporting his brother's nuptials means facing old demons.

And kissing Kari.

He likes kissing Kari far more than that whole demon thing.

But if kisses were enough, Kari would already be his wife.

Maybe it's time to revisit the past and right some wrongs.

One vow at a time.

The Whatever It Takes series:

Every bride needs something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue -

But you know what brides don't need?

Complications.

Welcome to Wedding Protectors, Inc. Have a spritzer or a latte or some lovely Zen tea and sink into a comfortable chair in our sunlit offices as we listen to your wedding problem – and form the perfect solution to every possible contingency.

We plan for everything.

Except our own love lives.

But that's not your problem. ;)

Chapter One



Kari Whitevelt sat at the \$45,000 mistake that was her new dining table. Her laptop was open in front of her, her fingers buried in her shoulder-length blonde hair, manicured tips digging into her scalp with just enough force to feel cathartic as she processed the current fiasco.

Fiascos were her job.

Her calling, even.

It wasn't *her* \$45,000, of course. This custom-made table for twelve, with its graceful, hand-carved pedestals and matte white finish—she had removed the sheer white underskirt—was supposed to be the head table at the wedding reception of the daughter of a '90s sitcom star and her equally wealthy shoe-designer husband whose last name was now synonymous with a certain high heel.

Unfortunately, the hot furniture designer of the moment was a little *too* hot, and the former sitcom star had taken too long to ask Kari, their wedding consultant, to put in the custom order.

The table was delivered three weeks after the happy couple had departed for their honeymoon in Bali. Or... Bora Bora? Buenos Aires? One of those.

Something that started with a B.

Just like the bride.

As for the table, mistakes happen. When they happened at weddings, Kari fixed them. And sometimes the evidence just

needed to go away.

Because wedding memories were *exclusively* happy. If they were slightly uncomfortable, then they must at least be charming.

Or idiosyncratic at the very least. Something that made a great story.

Weddings were all about stories. *How-we-met* stories. *How-we-almost-didn't-meet* stories. *How-we-broke-up-and-got-back-together* stories. *Romantic-proposal* stories.

They're modern fairy tales.

Life may be messy and unpredictable. Weddings, too. But it was Kari's job to protect the bride and groom on their special day.

Literally her job to protect them.

Even from \$45,000 errors.

No, she wasn't in private security. Kari was the last person anyone would mistake for a bodyguard, although she had a team of them on call. She wasn't a private investigator, though she had plenty of outstanding sleuthing skills. At 5'8" and a normal weight, thirty-one-year-old Kari Whitevelt was the epitome of *average* when it came to physique. In no way, shape, or form was she physically imposing, intimidating, or even marginally competent in a personal protection crisis.

What she offered was a different kind of protection. Emotional, operational, psychological—pick a label.

The bottom line: her company, Wedding Protectors, Inc., did whatever it took to make your special day special, *yours*, and drama free.

Results guaranteed.

For example?

Last summer, at a wedding in northern Vermont on a mountaintop purchased – yes, *purchased* – solely for the sheer privacy it offered as a venue, featuring a well-known rapper marrying the only daughter of a Russian oil oligarch, a family

of skunks wandered innocently into the outdoor rehearsal dinner.

The proper term for a group of skunks is a surfeit.

How appropriate, right? Even one skunk is too many.

What it amounted to was a stampede. The thing about skunk spray is that it didn't really disappear by the next day, and no amount of Chanel Cristalle was going to cover every lingering trace. You could bring in a crop duster of the stuff, and the guests would still sniff the air and ask each other nervously, "Do you smell skunk?"

A contract with Wedding Protectors will get you, and your entire wedding party, a tractor-trailer load of tomato juice and six industrial fans, all within forty-five minutes. Also included is a notarized testimonial from the ASPCA about the humane removal of the animals, because if you're not within the danger zone, ten baby skunks staggering across the grass are undeniably cute.

These services came at a price, of course. But could you put a price tag on happiness?

Actually, um, yes. Kari and her business partner, Katie Gallagher, could.

And did.

Like Saturday, two days ago. The Grunren-Miller wedding. Perfect example. NFL quarterback marrying an Instagram eyelash influencer.

Multimillion-dollar budget. No expense spared.

Kari caressed the artisanal table absentmindedly, comparing the two weddings. A waft of steam rose off her fresh cup of coffee, catching her eye. As she took a sip, she looked at the binders in front of her, tablet to her right, open to an electronic document requiring review and a signature – or an email with requested revisions.

Two pens rested cockeyed next to a white binder that suddenly threw off a glare as the sun peeked in behind her through the blinds. An early riser, she was typically working

long before the rest of her team, and as she sipped again, she let out a long sigh, eyes lingering on the table.

It wasn't the worst addition to her life.

But Katie had a fit about the cost.

Mistakes could be discussed, negotiated, finessed. Tables didn't require careful eye contact and the soothing voice of a hostage negotiator.

But the Grunren-Miller wedding had.

Her phone rang. Her partner, Katie. Oh, boy. Here it came. She'd have to talk about eating the forty-five grand. Katie would want to force it through their insurance, but that was going to be a stretch. Swallowing her mouthful, she braced herself.

And picked up.

"Hey."

"You are *amazing*," Katie started.

A smile filled her face at the unexpected accolade.

"I am? After what happened Saturday?" A tingle of horror made her shudder.

"You smoothed it out and did damage control. We're not miracle workers. I can't believe his ex-fiancée showed up. How did she even get in?"

Kari reached up and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, closing her eyes. If Katie wanted to focus on the Grunren-Miller wedding, she was all for anything that postponed the inevitable conversation about the table.

"Oh. That," she said, reaching for her coffee again, peering out her apartment window, Boston starting to rise and shine. She was high up enough to see traffic copters covering the early morning rush. "Nothing special. There was a huge crowd at the door, and she's eight months pregnant, so not exactly hard to miss. I think they just wanted to get her to a seat as fast as possible. She was wearing five-inch heels."

“That’s a center-of-gravity problem, for sure.” Katie chuckled, the sound low and tired. Both of them had worked around the clock all weekend, and they’d absolutely, positively dodged a bullet. Kari closed her eyes, the visual of the wedding ceremony filling in instantly, like the denouement of a bad horror film where the audience is screaming at the main character not to go into the basement.

But they always go in the basement, don’t they?

Talia Cuban, the mother-to-be, had been stalking NFL pro Whitfield Grunren for seven months after an alleged one-night stand resulting in pregnancy. Both the bride and groom had been painfully upfront about the situation and had specifically hired Wedding Protectors to protect their perfect day.

From Talia.

Who had decided to violate the protection order Whitfield Grunren had successfully obtained. Discretion wasn’t just the better part of valor. For Katie and Kari, it was a highly lucrative, sought-after service their company provided, so rather than ban Talia from the wedding and have her make a scene, or worse – hire a TikTok influencer company – they had crafted a careful plan.

That had nearly backfired.

“Until we can do mobile retinal eye scans, we’ll never have wedding security locked down, Kari.”

“Job security,” Kari said as they both groaned. “Plus, she wasn’t exactly, um... calculating.”

“The disruptive ones rarely are,” Katie muttered.

“Who knew Whitfield and Sasha had *seven* different wedding guests who were hugely pregnant? And three of them looked just enough like Talia to be possible targets. We only had two security guards for her, and suddenly there were three of ‘her’!”

“I know,” Katie commiserated. “Plus all those fillers in her face. She looked like a completely different person.”

Kari felt the flashback in her bones as she relived it all. “She ended up in the middle of a long pew, so when she stood up and started waving the paternity papers, it wasn’t easy to get her out. I basically had to crawl over about twelve elderly guests.”

“Now there are two hundred cellphone videos of her screaming that the baby’s name is Whitfield Grunren, Junior. Reputation management is on it, but this is going to be a tough one to control.”

“*Grunge* gave us one hell of a budget to contain it all.”

“I feel bad for Talia,” Katie confessed.

“Me, too. Whether she’s delusional or telling the truth, in the end she’s a pregnant woman who needs help.”

“We sent Dana,” Katie said softly. Having a social worker on retainer for situations like these always made Kari feel better. “But there are still so many videos.”

Some of the celebrity magazines were more flexible and understanding than others about this kind of thing. The ultimate challenge, of course, was the *viral* video.

The one that emerged as the true winner in the attention sweepstakes.

Wedding Protectors had a team of lawyers who knew exactly how to convince even the most ambitious influencer guest that fifteen minutes of social media fame were *so* not worth it.

“And all those stitches on TikTok.”

Kari snorted. “And then there was the part where she described the conception. In detail. No one needed to know that Whitfield Grunren—um, *Senior*—has a mole right on the tip of his—”

They both cleared their throats.

“But thanks to you, the wedding went on as planned, pretty much. You are the best in the business,” Katie marveled, clearly cutting her partner off intentionally. “Think he’s really the father?”

“Does what *I* think matter?” Kari stood.

“No!” they said in unison, collapsing into laughter until Kari got a stitch in her side.

Slack lit up with a message.

Coffee service just left. They don't have our non-dairy milks and took the decaf espresso machine in for servicing. Workaround? Carly asked.

Their receptionist arrived at headquarters even earlier than Kari, handling calls from Europe and early-morning deliveries. She was fairly new and still needed some handholding.

Instacart whatever we need. And who does decaf espresso? We still have the Keurig?

Yes.

Then you've got this!

“Is that Carly asking about coffee in Slack?”

“Yes.”

Katie laughed through her nose. “I wish she were more confident.”

“Me, too. It's only been six weeks, though. She'll figure it out.”

“True. Hey - how does your pricey new table look in your condo? I know you don't cook, so what are you going to do with it?”

“Have sex on it?”

“Ha!” Katie giggled. “That would require you to find a man.”

“Let's talk about something else. *Anything* else.”

“Agreed. If we're going to talk about your love life, it needs to happen in person, with a bottle of wine.”

Kari looked at the table again. “Why can't we have \$45,000 wine mistakes? Or a designer wardrobe from Milan in my size? *That* I could at least enjoy.”

“No kidding. Did you follow up on the insurance claim?”

Dread filled her. “If we push it, our premiums will go up. Our insurance company is already side-eyeing us about the zebra.”

Wincing, Kari felt the twinge of a headache begin between her eyes.

Katie sighed. “Please. We agreed never, *ever* to speak of the zebra.”

“Hey. *We’re* not the ones who covered it in real gold paint.”

“That poor thing.”

A beep interrupted the conversation, Katie gasping.

“Let me call you right back.”

Call ended.

Kari stared at the profit and loss sheet on her computer. Her eyes glazed over. This had never been her thing.

Skunks were her thing, in a manner of speaking.

Kari considered herself an adrenaline girl, which was the good news *and* the bad news. While helping that weeping baby mama outside the church at the Grunren-Miller wedding, Kari watched her closely for signs of labor, called 911 for an ambulance just in case, alerted security, left messages for the cathedral office and *People Magazine’s* editor-in-chief, called Dana the Social Worker, and put the entire Wedding Protectors social media team on high alert.

And that was just between the pew and the exit.

Katie was better suited to client relations: new business, marketing, orderly meetings—over tea or perhaps a dry martini—with PowerPoints and contracts. Katie was calm and collected, inspiring confidence in anxious brides and risk-averse grooms. In spite of her tiny frame and big, innocent-looking brown eyes, no one ever doubted Katie’s ability to get the job done and done *right*.

She never name-dropped—theirs was a business based on leak-proof confidentiality and unbreachable security, after all—but she managed to convey the sense that when she called Vera Wang, Vera picked up the phone.

They were a dream team, making dreams come true.

Kari shook her head at Line 97 of the spreadsheet.

“Extraordinary expenses”—seriously?

Helicopter rental to and from the Canadian glacier for the supermodel bride, groom, and the Tahitian chieftain who was officiating. With frostbite insurance, because the bride wanted to wear a silk slip dress that Narciso Rodriguez designed especially for her, and because Tahitians were not accustomed to 40 degrees below zero.

You could call that *extraordinary*.

Not one but *three* security teams for the press conference to announce the engagement of a major movie star and a pop singer, who had just starred together in an Oscar-winning film. They were visibly in love and glowing. It was quite touching.

And unbelievably viral.

The extra security turned out to be a good idea, though, because the only person on the planet who was surprised by this announcement was the singer’s current husband. And when he showed up, he was not happy.

Definitely extraordinary.

“Every single line item for Wedding Protectors’ entire operating budget is an extraordinary expense. That’s what we *do*,” she muttered.

Not that every Wedding Pros event was an over-the-top extravaganza. Privacy and intimacy were actually much harder to provide, protect, and defend than a media circus. A three-day wedding at a Scottish castle with 2,000 guests in period costume arriving on horseback was far less worrisome to Kari and Katie than a couple saying their vows to only each other on a mountaintop.

Or a tiny island off Cape Cod.

Or in a former president's backyard.

For one thing, a meteor could hit the lawn of that castle, and nobody would pay much attention, but two people intensely focused on each other and the deep personal meaning of their once-in-a-lifetime moment? They noticed every detail.

But whether a wedding was top secret or televised to the world, twenty minutes or in twenty time zones, details mattered.

Like a cat dressed in a kilt, acting as flower girl.

Kari snorted to herself, the memory of how Wedding Protectors came about floating across her thoughts, as it often did when there was a screw-up. The famous Declan McCormick-Shannon Jacoby wedding fiasco at Farmington Country Club outside of Boston. How the bride and groom escaped in a helicopter from their own celebrity wedding, off to Vegas to flee the bride's crazy Momzilla.

Back then, Kari had worked at Fokused Shoprite, a small mystery shopping company, one that fought bitterly with their competitor, Consolidated Evalu-Shop, for new contracts. The bride and her best friend had been employed there, the rivalry all-consuming. Kari had started there straight out of college as a marketing manager handling mystery shoppers, an entry-level position that had required being a mystery shopper herself from time to time, whenever her workers no-showed.

Always pattern-matching, she'd found the job simultaneously fun and extremely frustrating. How could people not notice details? And calibrate their behavior to improve? While she'd reveled in making processes better and improving bottom lines, she'd found herself constantly on edge when she could see a future problem but faced obstacles in preventing bad outcomes. Within a few years, they'd made her VP, which meant she had more power.

But not enough.

At the time, Katie was the head of the event department at Anterdec Holdings, the McCormick family's Fortune 500 company. When Shannon and Declan were getting married,

Katie worked on the wedding and all the related events, a trial by fire if ever there was one. Kari was an invited guest, a former colleague of Shannon's, the invitation coming as a surprise but a welcome opportunity to network.

Billionaires? Farmington? An open bar and lobster? Sign her up.

Shannon and Declan had been so overwhelmed—mostly by Shannon's Momzilla, but Declan's dad hadn't helped—that they had eloped.

From their own ceremony.

As the bride and groom escaped from their wedding in an Anterdec helicopter, Kari and Katie sat speechless on a garden bench, watching chaos erupt around them. Kari's archrival in mystery shopping, Amanda Warrick, was the maid of honor, and even watching her get pulled into the pool by a dog and the flower... cat – yes, the flower girl was an actual *cat*, in a McCormick tartan kilt – in her Scottish-themed dress had not provoked the shallow *schadenfreude* it should have.

Instead, she and Katie had just sat there, blinking in abject shock.

"I guess I should try to do something about this," Katie finally ventured, but she didn't move.

Shannon's mother was screaming and leaping into the air, as if she could pull the helicopter back down through a bionic jump. At that moment, a tall man in black tie had burst out of the hotel door, running at full tilt toward the pool, ripping off his tuxedo jacket as he sprinted. He dove in without slowing his pace, aiming straight for the drowning wedding party members.

Kari and Katie tore their eyes from the hysterical mother of the vanished bride and turned their attention to the pool, which was now filled with a flailing dog, a pissed-off cat, a sinking maid of honor and –

"You know, that looked an awful lot like Andrew McCormick," Kari commented. Andrew was the groom's brother and then-CEO of Anterdec.

“It was,” Katie confirmed. She picked up a half-empty glass of champagne that someone had left on the stone wall next to the bench and sipped it thoughtfully, phone beginning to ding with an ever-growing onslaught of texts.

Then rings.

A moment later, Andrew surfaced in the pool with a half-naked woman in his arms, covered in wet tartan, her dress pulling down to reveal more than is legally permitted in public. Kari squinted at them.

“I’m not actually seeing what I’m seeing, am I?” she had said dispassionately, as if they were debating two shades of sage for flower ribbons.

“Amanda Warrick. Shannon’s best friend. She works at Consolidated Evalu-Shop,” Katie supplied. “Isn’t Consolidated your biggest competitor?”

“Yes. I’m supposed to hate Amanda. She’s my biggest rival. But I kind of like her.” The words came out like a guilty confession. “At least, I feel bad for her.”

Amanda, now sitting on the edge of the pool, was clutching a tiny teacup chihuahua and a furious, wet cat in a kilt.

“I should really find her a towel.” But instead, Katie picked up her tote bag. “Want to go get a drink?”

Thus began the friendship that led to Wedding Protectors. That was quite a few years ago now, and that major wedding catastrophe had led to the creation of a business that turned a tidy little profit.

And kept Kari and Katie nicely busy doing something they both loved.

Her phone rang again. Katie on FaceTime.

“Hey,” Katie said. “Sorry for hanging up. We have a client meeting offsite, and I need you.”

Kari groaned. “I’m swamped! I was planning to work at home today!”

“It’s a first-timer. Big money. I need you there.”

“First-timer? Big money?” That was often code for *pain in the butt*.

“And she’s detail oriented.”

“They’re all detail oriented! That’s why they hire us. Every rose petal, every swirl on a Swiss-chocolate truffle, the direction of the wind. The shape of the crystal flutes and the exact temperature of the champagne in them. The name of the boat that ferries them to the island—it better not be the *Mary Jo* if his ex-wife is Mary Jo.”

“No ex-spouses involved,” Katie sighed.

“Excellent.”

“But this bride seems reasonable. So far. Ish.”

“You’re really selling it, Katie.”

“Her fiancé is apparently a tech millionaire. Or billionaire, whatever. They can afford us. He and his brother founded a biotech firm, and they’re in town to give talks at Harvard and MIT. I’m going to meet with them this afternoon. The bride wants both partners there. Only the principals for direct contact with her.”

Kari knew what *that* meant. A diva. A diva who was marrying a billionaire. She’d either be the kind of perfectionist Kari adored working with, or...

Well...

Or:

“What’s the wedding date, again?”

“September 21st. At least we have a pretty good chance of beautiful weather.”

“Who are the planners?”

“YPD.”

“Nice.” YPD – short for Your Perfect Day – was an A-list wedding planning company. Wedding Protectors often partnered with. Explaining to friends and family that she and

Katie didn't run a wedding *planning* company but instead a wedding *protecting* company had been as readily understood as trying to clarify the difference between a pinot grigio from Napa Valley versus Maipo Valley.

No one cared.

And they got it wrong all the time.

"Why do you need me so much today? You've done this hundreds of times. What's different about this couple?" Kari asked, facing the last gulp of her coffee, the sun shining a bit higher in the sky. She pushed her fingers through her mussed hair, scalp tingling as blood rushed to the surface.

"I've only talked to the bride, and it was a pretty short conversation, but I have a funny feeling. It sounds like she and her fiancé are on completely different pages about what they want."

"Say no more. Diva marrying a billionaire."

"Yep. DMB."

After years of working together, they had a kind of shorthand. Katie didn't need to elaborate. "Fine. I'll be there."

"When did you become such a sourpuss?"

Kari stared at the mountain of paperwork, then down at the leggings and sweatshirt she was wearing. No bra. Desperate need of a manicure. And her hair wouldn't need a conditioning treatment, would it? She hadn't showered since yesterday.

"Good question."

"How was that Tinder date last night?"

Oh, boy. Could they go back to talking about the table?

"If this is your way of buttering me up, you're failing."

Katie just snorted.

Kari sighed, setting the paperwork aside and stretching, trying not to groan as her thighs came to life, blood rushing into neglected muscles. "He collects superhero toys. He watches superhero movies. *Only* superhero movies. His dog is

named Zemo, and it wears a little cape. He barely looked up from his phone because there was an eBay auction for a 1969 Batmobile in the original box and he was the high bidder. Ignored me most of the time. He's thirty-five-years-old, for god's sake! He's an associate *professor!*"

"Oh, no," Katie said in a whimper of sympathy.

"I know! Tenured!"

"That's not what I was groaning at."

"When I told him what I do for a living, he went into a long story about how his mother used to work in a shoe store dyeing silk shoes for bridesmaids, and how we'd get along perfectly because we worked in the same business."

"That's, um..."

"And apparently he is looking for a bigger apartment because he needs more room for his collection, but I will never know because I will *never see him again*. And I will never get back the forty-five minutes I wasted having a drink with him."

"Okay, sweetie," Katie soothed. "Let's do this client meeting this afternoon and go out for drinks after. Put all thoughts of men out of our heads for a while."

"Now you're talking. I am done with men. Done! There isn't a bone in my body that has any interest right now. The guy before Professor Superhero ran into his ex on our date and ghosted me, then three months later texted to ask if he and his new fiancée could *hire me* for their wedding."

"Easiest no we've ever dealt with," Katie declared.

"And the guy before that! Remember him?"

"Mr. High-sValue Woman?"

"Right. He had a tattoo of that famous men's rights activist on his torso! He said it was so you could see the master while going down..."

"I need brain bleach now. Thanks for that reminder."

"Three dud dates in the last six months. Maybe you're right. Set men aside and focus on work."

“It’s not as if I’m in any better shape.”

“James is still...?”

“Being James. All flash, no substance.”

“Billionaire flash is kind of impressive, though.”

“It is. But I’m not with him for his money!” Katie said defensively. She’d been dating billionaire James McCormick, founder of Anterdec, on and off for a couple of years. With a thirty-plus-year age difference, the couple were viewed very differently by James’ social circle versus Katie’s friends.

Kari didn’t judge the age gap.

She judged James’ assholery.

“I know you’re not,” Kari said, returning the soothing. “I just wish he treated you better.”

“If I try to get him to talk about his inner life, he tells me his heart is nothing more than ten ounces of fine Glenfiddich whisky encased in fascia.”

“I... could believe that.”

Katie’s sigh sounded like a motorboat.

“And you’re right,” Kari said.

“About what?”

“Doing this DMB meeting. Focusing on work. Maybe I should be the lead on this new wedding.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Where are we meeting?”

Katie gave her the name of a four-star hotel on the harbor. Kari programmed it in her phone and made a vow to herself right there as she touched the \$45,000 table.

She was done with love. Love was great for business.

But bad for her.

* * *

Kari and Katie walked through the vast lobby of the Omni Boston Hotel in the Seaport District, headed for the banks of elevators, Kari in a dove grey pantsuit with an open jacket and cream silk shirt, Katie in a black dress with a pencil skirt and high heels. Where Kari kept her blonde hair layered and at shoulder length, framing her face, Katie's fair hair was longer, often pulled back at the nape of her neck. Kari's makeup was earth-tone based. Katie wore fire-engine red lipstick that matched the heels of her shoes.

They were a study in contrasts yet complemented each other well.

Which made them great business partners, too.

Katie carried her laptop, with the Wedding Protectors portfolio of photos. They preferred to meet with potential clients in the office, where they could present the slideshow of their expertise in a larger format, introduce staff members, and generally control the flow.

But this bride insisted they come to her, and if Wedding Protectors was known for anything, it was customized solutions.

Divas *loved* being customized to.

Kari pulled out her phone and tapped, finding the briefing members of her staff had compiled.

"Nilly's notes say it's the sixteenth floor."

Nilly was part of Wedding Protectors' carefully curated team. Overly responsible and unwaveringly kind, she designed client dossiers the way fine pastry chefs create the perfect Pavlova.

Kari found the right button. The red light showing the elevator's location began counting down, stopping every few floors.

"The bride is Carolina Pickett," Kari continued, reading the memo. "Thirty years old, originally from Mobile, Alabama. University of Alabama. MBA from Harvard." Instantly impressed, Kari paused for a moment. "Wow. Says she is communications director for a tech start-up. Hmmmm...."

Not *a* tech start-up – the *groom*'s tech start-up. She lives in Palo Alto. Groom's family is from Boston." Kari frowned. "I haven't read his file yet. Sorry, I'm playing catchup on this one."

"It's no problem. I barely know the details myself. This one was an assistant push."

That meant the bride's assistant was the go-between for everything. No direct contact, ever, with the bride—until there was a problem.

Or she called them.

See? Diva.

Now Kari was about to learn whether Carolina Pickett was a good diva or a Divazilla.

The elevator door slid open. A family with a toddler and a baby in a stroller emerged, then a well-dressed middle-aged couple. Last off was a tall man in running shorts and a t-shirt. He was staring at his Apple watch, face obscured, pressing buttons. He bumped someone, who then bumped into Kari as he moved off, and her phone went flying. She gasped and bent to retrieve it.

The runner evidently didn't see the chain reaction he'd caused. He walked up to another man in similar gear, though heavier, and they headed for the main doors.

"Oh, no!" Katie said. "Is it broken?"

Kari straightened up, phone in hand, following the guy with her eyes, though her hair was in the way, causing a wave of textured shadows. No. It couldn't be...

"Kari," Katie asked again, "is your screen okay?"

"No. Yes. I think so," Kari said absently. "Did you see that guy's tat?"

"What? No! What are you talking about?"

"He had a little tat on the back of his calf... kind of a squiggle. Never mind." She shook her head. "I must have imagined it. Let's get upstairs." She pressed the button again.

“What did you mean about a tattoo?” Katie asked as they rode up, smoothing the front of her dress, checking her makeup in the elevator’s shiny, reflective door.

“It’s so strange! I thought that guy... I had a boyfriend who had a tat on his calf—he got it for me—it was our initials, an M and a W for our last names, written together like a little wave. I’d forgotten about that.” She made a squiggle in the air with her finger, as if she could illustrate it. “Oh well. I’m sure he had it removed long ago.”

“Bad relationship?”

“Oh, no. Just... we faded away.” Kari’s stomach soured a bit. “*He* did. Went off to college, got an internship on the other coast, and we just drifted apart.”

“Mmm.”

When the door opened at the sixteenth floor, they were confronted with directional signs pointing down four possible hallways.

“What’s the room number again?”

“1632.” Katie squinted at the signs. “This way.”

At the end of the long hall to the left, they found the right number. Katie knocked, and the double doors were opened by a young woman in a white pantsuit. She had long, very straight brown hair with bangs, and she wore black-framed, rectangular glasses.

“You must be Ms. Gallagher and Ms. Whitevelt,” she said. “I’m Natasha, Ms. Pickett’s assistant. Please come in.”

The hotel room was actually a suite and looked to be larger than Kari’s entire condo. They followed Natasha down a hall and into a living room, where a wall of windows overlooked Boston Harbor. The sun sparkled on the water, sailboats were gliding along with no apparent effort, and seabirds wheeled in the air, the view a panoramic extravaganza of both ocean and city.

It was breathtaking.

A woman wearing what looked to Kari like an Oscar de la Renta dress was sitting on the sofa, her back to the windows. Blonde hair carefully highlighted in what Kari guessed had to be a half-grand procedure every six weeks, she looked like she was ready for a Hollywood photo shoot, carrying herself like someone who expected to be observed at all times.

Demanded it, even.

Impossibly long lashes – mink treatments, for certain – made cat-like green eyes distinct and ethereal. She was idly flipping through an issue of *Garden & Gun*, which she tossed onto the cocktail table when Kari and Katie entered. Assistant Natasha had disappeared.

“What an amazing view!” Katie exclaimed.

“Y’all do love your ocean,” the woman drawled, “but it just looks so *cold* and *gray*. It makes me shiver. Oceans shouldn’t be cold! So dark! In the South, we have the nice warm Gulf, and it’s a beautiful turquoise color.” She gave a polite smile. “I’m Carolina. Please sit down.”

She pronounced it *care-oh-LEE-na*.

“Carolina, I’m Kari Whitevelt and this is my partner, Katie Gallagher. We are so happy to meet you and have the opportunity to talk about protecting your wedding.”

After her standard greeting, Kari smiled while Katie moved to sit on the sofa next to Carolina. Kari took the upholstered chair across from them.

Kari continued. “I’ll be on the scene at your wedding, should you decide to go with Wedding Protectors. We’ll both be closely involved with every detail, but I’m mostly in the field, between the advance work and the event itself. Katie focuses more on the organizational aspects—things like unique venues and sub-contracts. Katie is the very best.” Kari smiled.

“We’ve heard that you’re both the very best, that’s why we’re here. My fiancé will be back in a few minutes. He’s just gone for a workout. His meeting started early and ran late, so he didn’t have time this morning.” She made a displeased little

face. “His meetings always do seem to start early and run late.”

“Of course that happens. I’m sure he’s a very busy man.” Reading Carolina carefully, she added, “Someone that important is always being chased by movers and shakers.”

One eyebrow lifted, Carolina turning more of her attention on. “You do understand.”

“Of course. High-profile people like you and your fiancé have incredible demands on your time.”

Carolina’s body language changed, angle turning so her whole body faced Kari.

Bingo.

“It’s no problem at all.” Kari took the tablet out of her bag. “Why don’t you tell us a little bit about the two of you and what you envision for your big day?”

At her own words, Kari winced a little, and Katie met her eyes with a tiny smile. They tried not to use clichés like Big Day, or Vision in White, or (especially) You Only Do This Once. But it was very hard to avoid.

Weddings were about traditions, and there’s nothing more clichéd than a tradition.

Which meant Wedding Protectors had to work all the harder to make each client’s day *truly* special.

“Well, he’s found some little island, in something called Buzzard’s Bay? I really can’t imagine a more horrible name. *Buzzards!* I don’t know why he would want to get *married* there. It’s some crazy idea he’s had since he was a teenager. This island is private, but my fiancé knows the owners. He has a letter of permission to use it for our vows. But that will just be for the vows. We’ll have to have a *real* wedding that everyone can attend, our families and all our friends, and the press, of course. With dancing, and different dresses, and toasts... I mean, there’s nothing on this island but sand dunes and a bunch of old cows. There’s probably not even cell service!”

Kari looked up from the notes she was taking. She felt a little dizzy.

First the tattoo on that man's calf.

Now this bride was talking about a special island in Buzzard's Bay.

"I think I know the island you're talking about. It's pristine and really quite beautiful. You'll have perfect solitude there," Katie said approvingly as chords of danger chimed inside Kari's head.

Tech start-up.

West coast.

Groom was from Boston.

"Exactly. Who wants *solitude* for their *wedding*? It will be just the two of us out there!" Carolina looked horrified.

"Ah, right," Katie said, trying to catch Kari's eye, but all Kari could do was stare dully at her tablet, the cursor blinking like a doomsday clock.

Smooth as could be, Katie pulled out her computer. "I might even have photos of the island. We have a wonderful photographer on staff, Candace Kohlman. I'm pretty sure we did a clambake there once for a morning-after brunch."

"You did? How did you handle the news feed? I imagine you can rent boats to transport all the guests, but what about power for the caterers? Do you have generators? Did you bring out port-a-potties?"

The word *port-a-potties* was spoken with a wrinkled nose.

"It was a clambake, so the food was cooked on the beach. It was very casual, just family and a few friends," Katie answered, dodging the toilet question. "It was a beautiful day. Here are some photos—we have permission to use them, of course."

Carolina leaned toward the screen. "Oh. Oh, well, this is not what I have in mind at all. These people are wearing shorts and swimsuits and... flip-flops!"

Kari interrupted, unable to stop herself. “Your fiancé is the one who found this island—do you have a sense of what he has in mind? And can you tell us about your specific protection issues?” She was trying to steer the conversation away from discord and toward something more productive.

Pretending to bury herself in her notes, she instead opened an internet browser and began typing in the search bar:

Caleb Mikelmas engagement

She managed his first and last name, but her fingers froze.

Before Carolina could answer, there was a noise in the front hall, the door opening and closing, voices, footsteps, a general bustle.

Carolina turned, a brilliant smile materializing on her face for the first time. “Hello, darlin’! I’m so glad you’re here!” She turned to Katie. “Here’s the man who’s had all these brilliant ideas for the most romantic wedding ever!”

A tall man stood in the hall, shadowed slightly. As he walked into the room, Kari could see that he had a healthy tan and his thick brown hair brushed his collar. He was wearing running clothes, with a nylon jacket over his t-shirt and shorts. Intelligent blue eyes, straight white teeth that reflected two years of braces, and somehow, even in sweaty running gear, the impression of capability. Like Kari herself, this man could do what needed to be done.

Oh, how well she knew what he could do. With his hands, with his mouth...

With his heart.

She’d been right about the tattoo after all. She didn’t want to be right. It would be so much better to be completely wrong, imagining things, finding patterns where there were none.

But no.

This was a pattern, all right.

And this was an obstacle she couldn’t fix.

No matter what.

“I’m Katie Gallagher.” Her partner stood, smiling easily, and held her hand out to the groom as Kari wished for a sinkhole to open up.

Not happening on the sixteenth floor of a skyscraper, but a girl could dream.

He took Katie’s hand. “Good to meet you. Caleb Mikelmas.”

And then he looked right at Kari.

Mikelmas and Whitevelt.

M and W.

Chapter Two



Carolina was introducing him to his former fiancée.

Fine. *Near* fiancée. It had been a promise ring, not an engagement diamond, but still.

The run he'd just finished was apparently unnecessary from a cardio standpoint, since his heart was now racing, crashing into his ribs as if it were fleeing a crime scene. Not that he was the bad guy. But still.

Kari. No way.

It was *his* Kari. And okay, maybe she was never formally his fiancée, but until college and distance broke them up, they always planned on it. He'd given her a promise ring in high school, so that was close enough.

When Carolina had mentioned she was meeting two wedding professionals named Katie and Carrie, he'd heard it as the more familiar spelling. She'd never spelled it out, and she hadn't bothered to tell him *Kari*'s last name.

“Caleb, have you swallowed your tongue along with your manners? Shake the poor woman's hand, for goodness sake!” Carolina crooned, giving him side-eye while managing a puzzled smile at Kari as the two stood awkwardly in front of each other, gaping.

Kari had changed in some ways, for sure, but it was her, alright. Her brown hair was a darker shade but still thick and shiny, framed in soft layers around her face, brushing the edges of straight, strong shoulders. He recognized those whiskey brown eyes, deceptively sleepy unless you knew her,

knew that behind them, her brain was working constantly at warp speed.

She was taller now—or anyway, she didn't wear four-inch heels back then—so instead of having to bend to kiss her lips, he could just dip his head.

If he wanted to kiss her.

If wanting to kiss her wasn't the only thing he could think about.

“We've met,” he said to Carolina, but without taking his eyes off Kari. For her part, she had fixed her eyes on the little logo of his jacket, refusing to meet his gaze.

No one looks directly at the sun. You'd burn yourself.

“Really?” Carolina looked a bit miffed, as if anything that could possibly take attention away from her or the wedding was an intrusion. “How do you two know each other?”

Kari looked at him, eyebrows up. “I believe you knocked into me downstairs in the lobby.”

Flustered, he took her cue and played along. If she didn't want anyone knowing about their past, she must have good reason. “I did? I'm sorry about that.”

Waving him off, Kari let out an anxious laugh. “No problem.”

“Well,” Katie ventured. Something was obviously up here, but Caleb could see she couldn't figure out what it was. “I guess you're the man who thought of this romantic island for the ceremony?”

“Yes,” Caleb answered, still not moving, still looking right at Kari. “My girlfriend and I found it when we were teenagers, and I showed it to my brother at the time. I always wanted to get married there.”

At that, Kari seemed to come awake. She yanked her hand out of his, resumed her seat on the chair, and picked up her notes.

“What a lovely idea,” she said in a neutral tone. “It’s a beautiful place. Unforgettable, really. You’ll have amazing wedding memories, Carolina.”

Her voice cracked the tiniest bit on the word *amazing*, but she covered it by clearing her throat. He glanced at Carolina, but she was focused on the laptop screen, paying no attention to anyone else.

Which was her default.

“Maybe we could bring out a really big boat,” Carolina said doubtfully, pressing the key to scroll through the photos again. “They could do my hair and makeup on the boat, and I guess I could get dressed on the island. We can have a quick ceremony and get back on the boat for champagne and hors d’oeuvres. A great photographer can make it all look fine.”

The way she said *boat* was like hearing Bill Belichick talk about his team before a game.

“Or maybe it’s not about how it looks,” Caleb said tightly. “You’re getting married. Maybe it’s about how you *feel*.”

“Of course it’s about how I feel, but it can be pretty, too! What do you have against pretty?”

His eyes jumped to Kari.

“Nothing.”

“Then let’s make it as beautiful as possible, given the circumstances,” Carolina said, peering at the pictures. “Really?” she said skeptically. “That’s where I’ll have my once-in-a-lifetime wedding?”

He took a deep breath. “Where’s Christian, anyway?”

His brother had practically begged him to sit in on this interview. Carolina had now gone through what seemed like dozens of wedding-services providers, adoring them at first but then finding fault with every detail until she finally broke the contract. Those firms had been down on the Gulf Coast.

Caleb wondered if Kari had heard about his future sister-in-law’s personality... quirk.

If she and her partner, Katie, knew, they weren't showing it.

He knew from Christian that they had finally found a fourth planner, one called YPD, which made him think of police departments. What Carolina was doing to this wedding was a crime, so it fit.

Carolina looked surprised. "I don't know where Christian is. I thought he was with you. And I cannot get over what you said. What do you mean, 'not about how it looks'? It's a *wedding*—of course it's about how it looks! You have some strange ideas, Caleb."

Strange ideas, he thought. I have strange ideas. Like standing before your soulmate and looking into her beautiful eyes as you promise her that you will be with her forever, as eternal as the sea, as the wind, as the grains of sand beneath your feet. As you promise each other that you will grow old together, that your children will arrive, and eventually they will leave, and still it will be the two of you... these are not words for an audience. They are words for one person only, and what she is wearing or how her hair is arranged could not possibly matter less.

His gaze shifted to Kari, who caught his eye and stared back, as if reading his soul.

He squinted at Carolina. The idea of marrying someone who didn't comprehend that...

Seeing Kari again, here, was getting to him – fast. Worlds collided. Memories flooded him with emotion that made his heart pound, his hands sweat, and his body was hijacked by their shared past.

A past that made him wish it wasn't a past.

Look at her. Kari was so ... adult. Sophisticated. Calm and self-assured, even when she was a bit rattled, as he could tell was true. Whatever he was feeling as the seconds ticked by and the moment grew more intense, he knew she felt, too.

Which just made this moment bigger. Intense. Powerful.

Explosive.

He shook his head and pulled out his phone, leaning on the universal modern diversion device.

“I’m giving Christian a call,” Caleb announced. “We did five miles together, then he wanted to go for another three. But he should be back by now.”

Katie looked from Caleb to Kari, and then to Carolina, clearly trying to read the room. This meeting had gone off the rails somehow, and he knew what she was thinking.

It was her job to get it back on track.

Caleb had to give Carolina a heaping dose of credit. She’d chosen well. It was obvious that Wedding Protectors would take care of every detail, from loose ribbons to rude uncles.

If she stuck with them. Carolina went through consultants the way pro athletes went through bedmates. The headlines about the Grunren wedding flashed through his mind’s eye, and he almost laughed, turning to his phone instead, calling his brother.

A rush of heat took him over, making him sigh. An irritated look from Carolina made it clear he was violating some unwritten rule of hers.

She had so many.

“Let’s talk about your ideas for your big reception,” Katie started, working hard to shift the energy in the room. “Have you decided on a date for that? Any idea how many guests?”

A muffled song started up somewhere in the suite: “Brothers in Arms.”

“Damn,” Caleb muttered. He walked to the hall table, his phone still held to his ear, and looked under a Red Sox cap where his brother’s iPhone continued to play. Caller ID read *Bro*. He pressed End Call with his thumb, and the music stopped.

Something in his gut dropped.

Carolina wasn’t going to be happy if this meeting didn’t go as she had planned, and if Carolina wasn’t happy, the next few days in Boston were not going to be fun. Where was Christian,

anyway? He pocketed his own phone and went back to the living room.

Katie was now running through a slideshow of client weddings and related events, pointing out subtle enhancements and protections that Wedding Protectors had put in place. He overheard the words “Krav Maga” and “jellyfish antidote.”

This was not your typical wedding planner, for sure.

Kari was still in her chair, but she appeared to be staring out the window at the harbor. Following her gaze, he watched a sailboat cut through, making him yearn to be on that boat.

Anywhere but here.

“Of course this is just a small sampling,” Katie was saying. “NDAs prevent us from sharing the majority of our work in detail, but these close-ups don’t reveal any identities or sensitive information, and we have full permission to use them.” She looked up at Caleb. “The same level of security will apply to our work with you. As far as privacy goes, we’re very proud that we’ve never had a breach of any kind on our end, and we’ve even been able to mitigate most leaks from other sources. For more serious issues, we have a security team in-house, and they will be fully briefed on all details of your situation.”

“I’m not worried about that,” he replied, looking at Kari, who was looking anywhere but at him.

“Oh,” Katie said, nonplussed. “Well, good. Do you have any particular concerns you’d like to address?”

“Not me,” he answered. “I’m just along for the ride here. I’ll show up when and where I’m told, hopefully wearing the right thing.”

“You’re very hands off,” Katie laughed.

“A little too hands off,” Carolina said softly, not looking up.

Caleb frowned. Kari and Katie exchanged a glance.

A thought made him ask, “Did your company handle the Grunge wedding mess?”

“Caleb!” Carolina gasped, but then she leaned toward Kari, eager. “Oh, my goodness, did you? That was positively horrifying!” The giddy way her eyes lit up made Caleb regret asking.

“We never divulge our clients and maintain the utmost – ”

Carolina pulled out her phone and tapped, suddenly turning on a video. “That’s *you!*” She pointed to Kari. “How did you lunge over seven – no, eight! – people in a church pew like that!”

“Whatever it takes,” Kari said weakly, cheeks turning a blistering red from embarrassment. “That’s our motto. We are scrubbing all of those videos right now, working hard for our – ”

“*If* the Grunrens were our client, we would be,” Katie said in an arch tone that made Caleb smile broadly.

“Do you do Pilates?” Carolina asked Kari, the non sequitur bizarre. “Because you must have some serious core strength to do all that.”

Caleb decided to rescue her.

“Look, Kari, can I talk to you for a–” Caleb’s phone interrupted him. He checked the ID, then stood, walking to the doorway. “Caleb Mikelmas,” he answered.

Carolina sighed. “Neither one of them can disconnect for a second,” she said in a petulant tone. “This is an important meeting. Caleb’s taking calls and Christian’s not even–”

Carolina’s words became a blur as the caller, frantic and rushed, asked, “Is this Caleb? Caleb Mikelmas?”

“Yes.” Hadn’t he just said his name? And how had someone he didn’t know gotten his private number? Typically, his executive assistant filtered all his calls. Unexpected phone conversations didn’t happen to him. Days were tightly structured, so –

“Your brother,” the person said as he heard a low moan in the background. “I’m so sorry! But your brother Christian gave me this number and – oh no! He just passed out.”

“What?” Caleb shouted, adrenaline spiking through him.

“He’s in the road. Hit by a car.”

“Hit by a *what*? Did you just say – ”

“Yes. Car accident. The ambulance is on the way. Someone already called – ”

“WHERE?”

Carolina shot Caleb a suspicious look.

“Corner of Summer and D.”

Downstairs. That was *right* downstairs.

“On my way,” Caleb barked into the phone.

“HAH!” Carolina said to Caleb with so much acid in her voice he nearly choked. “That was the fakest rescue call ever. You’re not getting out of helping me with the wedding, buddy.”

“Carolina, we have to go.” Caleb’s voice was urgent. “*Now*. That was someone downstairs. In the road.”

“Caleb, you’re talking a bunch of nonsense!” Carolina looked nervously at Kari and Katie, as if she were more embarrassed by him than upset by what he was saying about Christian.

“There’s been an accident.”

Kari stood and stepped forward, looking into his eyes with a serious, active presence that made gratitude roar through him.

“What happened?” she asked, not moving. “What is it?”

“Caleb!” Carolina snapped. “You’re not making any sense!”

“Christian was hit by a car!” he boomed, Kari’s face instantly empathetic, every reaction she had what he wanted from Carolina.

But he knew he’d never get.

“Now!” he barked, striding to the sofa, grabbing Carolina’s hand, and pulling her up. “Get your bag, we’re going!”

Kari touched his arm while Katie raced to the door to open it, murmuring something into her phone.

“I’m sorry. Christian was hit by a car. Natasha will show you out. *Natasha!*”

“He’ll be fine, Caleb,” Kari said, squeezing his arm. “*Fine.* We’ll conference with Natasha and handle everything wedding. You focus on what’s important to you.”

“Nothing is fine right now, but thank you,” he choked out before rushing to the suite’s outer door. Hand on the doorknob, he looked back.

No Carolina.

“What the...?” he muttered as Kari pointed to a door. Carolina had disappeared into a bedroom.

“What are you *doing?*” Caleb yelled from the main entrance. “Where are you, Carolina? Let’s GO!”

“I am *looking* for my *lipstick!*” It wasn’t quite a screech, but close enough. Rustling sounds from an adjacent room were followed by a flurry of blonde hair as Carolina skittered across the room. Her nose was powdered and her perfume was fresh.

So was Caleb’s temper.

She made a face at Kari. “I am *so* sorry, he can be *so* rude sometimes!” Then she paused in the doorway, adjusting her shoe strap. “We can finish up by Zoom. Send me a contract.” An appalling thought seemed to occur to her. “I just hope this doesn’t mean we have to delay the wedding!”

Caleb grabbed her purse from the table and stormed out of the suite.

“Caleb! My makeup is in there! Caleb! What are you doing?” she called out as he looked at the elevator, then made the snap decision to take the stairs.

Why not?

More cardio couldn’t hurt.

And Carolina was sure to follow.

He'd kidnapped her prized possession, after all.

* * *

Caleb held the taxi door open, shifting impatiently from one foot to the other. Carolina's delay had meant Christian was already in an ambulance, although the accident had happened right downstairs.

Taking the stairs had been both brilliant and stupid. Brilliant because he reached the lobby quickly.

Stupid because it gave Carolina a chance to reverse course, go back into the suite for her makeup, and then wait for an elevator.

An elevator that took twelve minutes.

Twelve minutes that gutted him to the core.

More than enough anger had built inside him, a rage that didn't simmer so much as it exploded. Damn close to grabbing an Uber or a taxi without her, he'd instead taken the time to call their parents and leave a message on their respective voice mails, then contact the Mikr0 executive team to keep them abreast.

The hotel doorman stood respectfully to one side since Caleb was doing his job for him. By the time Carolina emerged from the revolving door, Caleb thought the top of his head might blow off.

She saw him and headed over, but between her heels and the cobblestone drive, she wasn't making much time. When she finally arrived at the cab, she paused, her eyes moving hesitantly from the back seat upholstery to her skirt and back again.

"Doesn't the hotel have a limo?" she asked, brow furrowed, which was a miracle considering the amount of Botox in her. She showed more concern for her clothing than she had for Christian so far.

“Get in,” Caleb ground out, handing the doorman a folded pack of twenties.

She did as told. Another miracle.

“Mass General,” he barked at the driver. “It’s an emergency.”

Carolina took possession of her bag and pulled out her phone.

“I already called Mom and Dad,” he told her. “Not worth calling the hospital yet. We’ll be there in fifteen. The doorman told me from what he saw, there’s at least one broken bone.”

“I’m texting Natasha,” she said, not looking up from the screen. “She has a lot to do.”

“Right. You can give her Christian’s phone and his insurance info,” Caleb said, relaxing a little. Maybe Carolina wasn’t so bad in an emergency after all. Turning her assistant into another helper was smart.

“Um, okay?” she responded absently. “I guess I could. But I need Natasha to call *People Magazine* and offer them the story first. And we need a photographer at the hospital. It would be great if she could get a stylist there for me, but it’s late in the day now and we don’t have that many Boston contacts.” She brightened. “Maybe Katie knows someone! She seemed so much more – I don’t know – attuned than that Kari person. I mean, Kari was nice, but she certainly seemed to give you more attention than she did me. I’ll text Katie, too.”

Caleb tried to form words. He really did try, but nothing useful came to mind. He looked out the window and worked on remembering how to breathe.

And not scream.

When they finally pulled up to the hospital entrance, twenty long-suffering minutes later, Caleb ran his card through the machine to pay the cabbie so fast, he had to re-run it three times. He signed with a scrawl. Carolina was still texting with her assistant, though he caught her taking two selfies with the hospital sign in the background.

Opening the door, he practically dragged her out of the cab.

“Would you please be careful?” she protested. “You’ll smear my tan. What is your problem? You are so moody!”

“My problem? *My problem* is that my brother—your fiancé—has been hit by a car and is in the emergency room, and we don’t know how badly he is hurt! *That* is my problem! And how your hair looks right now is of zero interest to *anyone!*” A thunderous bellow was the best he could muster under the circumstances.

There were two ambulances unloading in the covered entry where the cab had dropped them off. EMTs were hustling and red-and-white lights were flashing, which was probably why Caleb didn’t notice the paparazzi cameras going off around them.

“It appears,” Carolina said with evident satisfaction, “that you are wrong about that.”

She slipped enormous black sunglasses over her suddenly distraught face and took his arm. He resisted the impulse to shake her off, at least until they were inside the automatic sliding doors and hospital security had denied admission to the “journalists.” Then he dashed to the information desk.

A woman consulted her screen and then stepped out from behind the desk. He followed her through a door, leaving Carolina to trail behind, phone in one hand. Halfway down a long hall, his guide stopped, tapped on a door, and opened it. Christian was propped up in the bed, bandages on his head and one arm immobilized. Pale and tense, he winced as he tried to move. The poor guy gave Caleb a rueful smile, dark eyes filled with stress.

“I forgot about Boston drivers,” he said with a slight chuckle, then gasped, chest pulling to the right slightly.

Great. Had he broken a rib?

“Are you okay? What happened? What did the doctors say? Jesus, Christian!”

“Haven’t seen a doctor yet. Paramedics did basic stuff first. Bone broken. They think—”

Carolina had caught up. She swept in front of Caleb, leaned forward slightly, and gave Christian an air kiss in the vicinity of each cheek, European style.

“Well,” she said to Christian, looking him up and down like she was assessing his state. Or maybe just determining which filter to use for her next picture. “You certainly gave me a scare.”

“I—I did? I didn’t—I mean, I’m so sorry, sweetheart, I didn’t realize...”

“You didn’t *realize*? I am your *fiancée*, of course I have been just *terrified*! Haven’t I, Caleb?” She glanced at him but continued on before he had time to speak. “Why, I just *ran* out of the meeting we were both supposed to be at, with the wedding people, the one you didn’t even show up to. I did book the date, though, before I ran out on them—Christian, you don’t think you’ll need rehab or anything, do you? Or,” she looked at the bandages closely, “reconstructive surgery?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think...”

“Good. I mean, we’ve got YPD working our wedding at the *highest* level, I’ve just got my heart set on September...” Her voice caught on what sounded almost like a tiny sob.

“No, sweetheart, oh, don’t cry! I’m so sorry, I should have been more careful... nothing will change your plans. Don’t you worry.”

Crisis averted. Christian was stable, and if he was catering to Carolina’s emotional state, then he was going to be fine.

Because catering to Carolina was Christian’s default.

At the mention of the meeting, Caleb’s mind wandered back to a place that warmed his heart.

Kari.

Who would ever have thought he would run into her again, and at a meeting to plan his brother’s wedding? He believed in science, not fate, but what were the odds of this happening?

When you wake up in the morning, you have absolutely no idea what is going to happen by the time you go to sleep that night, good or bad. He wondered which one this would turn out to be. It was a miracle anyone had the courage to get out of bed.

But she sure did look great. The years had been so fine to her. She'd always been independent and capable, and now she had a successful company. And probably a successful relationship, too.

Unlike him.

A quick tap on the door, and a nurse stepped into the room with an assistant, who would take Christian for X-rays and scans. The anemic smile his brother gave him as the assistant helped Christian stand told him his brother was in a lot of pain.

Which made Caleb's heart hurt.

Maybe he should have stayed with Christian and run those three extra miles. If he'd been with him, he could have seen the car before it hit Christian. Shouted out a warning. Helped with immediate first aid. Done...

Something.

If there was anything in the world Caleb hated, it was feeling helpless.

And right now he felt that, and so much more as Carolina dragged his family through all this wedding planning. It was tiresome. Wasteful. Indulgent.

And most of all: trivial. Caleb wasn't one to suffer fools gladly, but he did have to give Carolina credit where it was due. Her ridiculously fickle wedding tastes meant he'd run into Kari.

That was worth something.

Carolina's phone buzzed.

"Natasha's here," she announced. "She rented a car, since it looks like we'll be here for a few extra days. She made some appointments for me. Text me if there's any news." She

checked her lipstick, which was perfect, then blew Christian a kiss from the doorway. “Gotta go. Bye, darlin’.”

Christian was wheeled out of the room right behind her, the assistant deciding that Christian was in no shape to walk. Caleb sat down at a small round table with two chairs, preparing for a long wait. Carolina’s departure was par for the course.

Come for the photo op and the credit, leave before anything truly important happened.

Was he being fair? Didn’t care. Carolina was a thorn in his side, but his brother adored her, and Caleb loved his bro, so here he was:

Helping plan a wedding, and now – the sole emotional support for Christian.

He didn’t have a lot more information about his brother’s condition than he had when he arrived, but he was reassured just to see him conscious, and he was certainly in good hands. He’d had the good sense to get run over near one of the world’s finest hospitals.

Caleb closed his eyes and sighed.

Kari.

He didn’t believe in fate.

But maybe fate believed in him.

Chapter Three



Kari couldn't believe that in five minutes, she was attending a strategic planning session for her first love's wedding.

Okay, her *only* love.

"People change," she whispered to herself. "I'm not the same person I was in high school, and neither is he. If I'd met him for the first time yesterday, I probably wouldn't even like him. He's rich and powerful now. He lives in California. He likes women like Carolina." She marveled at that one for a moment. "He has *definitely* changed."

But his love for his brother hadn't. Even in high school, they'd been inseparable, best friends in every way. She'd felt like Christian was her brother, too, in some ways. And when she and Caleb had broken up, she'd lost two friends.

She headed out of her office toward the conference room. As she passed through the staging area, back by the freight elevator, she saw Ranney Martini off in a corner, with a coffee in one hand and a tablet in the other, standing in front of a black plastic case the size of a bathtub. Ranney was part of the Wedding Protectors team, her official title simply, "Concierge Associate." Long ago, Kari and Katie had decided that team members should be on a horizontal, rather than vertical, org chart. Everyone knew who the bosses were. All employees who were hands-on, in client-facing roles where they worked the weddings were Concierge Associate.

Plus, careful market testing showed that clients loved the word *concierge*.

Clients like Carolina Pickett.

Kari knew that on the tablet was a checklist of the standard equipment that traveled to every wedding, rehearsal dinner, shower, bridesmaids' weekend, or any other event in the wedding-industrial complex.

They were once interviewed about protecting a divorce party, but the couple got back together. Which was just as well because she and Katie thought a divorce event might be bad for business. No one getting married wants to think about what could go wrong on the other side.

On the other hand, they occasionally did vow-renewal ceremonies. Sometimes things went very right. Nothing like watching two people in their late forties or early fifties grinning like lovebirds madly in lust, surrounded by everything silver and some graying friends and family who were there for the original ceremonies. Vow renewals were projects she and Katie competed for at Wedding Protectors.

They tended to be low-key, extremely happy affairs, and you couldn't say *that* about a wedding.

And certainly not the kind Carolina McDiva wanted.

Ranney would be prepping for the Musselman-Khan wedding in Southampton this weekend. Because Kari knew the drill, she could tell that Ranney had already taken inventory of the smaller kits on the list: tools (hammer, nails, measuring tape, pliers, etc.), clothing (sewing, stain removal, steam iron), transportation (motor oil, lock de-icer, snow brush—it was spring, but you never know). They were stacked to one side. She would be about to start on personal care, which always took forever (tweezers, tampons in all popular brands, hairdryers, personal fans, personal heat packs, makeup palettes with every possible shade of lipstick and eyeshadow...).

And then there was the anti-anxiety protocol. Alcohol could take the edge off nerves, but Xanax was a bit tricky.

Thank goodness for the newest craze: CBD-infused *everything*.

“What are you working on?” Ranney asked someone. Kari paused.

“I’m helping Nilly put together the new marketing materials,” a voice replied.

Ah, Nessa. She was Ranney’s daughter, interning for Wedding Pros while she figured out what to do with her life. Besides being a semi-professional bridesmaid, as she described it, now that her ninth friend was engaged. So far, her most valuable contribution to Wedding Protectors was her weekly report on the latest wedding trends. Goodness knows, she’d seen them all. Up close, too. This month, it was bridesmaids carrying puppies instead of flowers.

In various shades.

“That sounds interesting,” Ranney said dryly.

“I guess, but Nilly wants me to be here at *nine a.m.* and stay until *five!* Three days a week! I don’t think she understands my schedule. I explained it to her twice, but she just looked at me.”

“Looked at you?”

“Like you do when I ask for money.”

Kari could hear Ranney suppressing a sigh.

“What do you mean by *your schedule?*” Her mother sounded confused.

“I have hot yoga on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and my standing manicure appointment is Wednesday morning. I mean, *maybe* I could change that to Saturday, but I doubt Tranh has any openings then. And I tried to tell Nilly that I am just not at my best before 10:30!”

Kari rolled her eyes, but she smiled a little as she turned the corner and encountered a lovely scene.

Their food and all-around everything expert, Ashanti Bagdosian, appeared silently with a porcelain mug in one hand and a small plate of sliced fruit in the other. Dark hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, with his collar open and beige linen shirt perfectly pressed, he was as serene as a beach and warm

as the sun. The only hint of age was a little salt in his eyebrows, which were as thick as Eugene Levy's and as kind as Mr. Rogers'.

He set the plate down on a linen napkin, resting it on the packing case next to the one Nessa was sitting on. When he handed her the mug, his sleeve pulled back a little and revealed the Om symbol tattooed on his wrist. Nessa smiled, shoulders dropping.

Just being in Ashanti's general vicinity made everyone settle down. He was perfect for Wedding Protectors.

"Ash, we should clone you," Nessa said, sipping.

He tipped his head in her direction with a modest little smile. He had heard this before.

"I just remembered I need my dry cleaning picked up before I leave for the Musselmans'!" Ranney gasped, looking up. "Ash, can you get it? Please?"

"Of course. Put it on the list," he answered.

Ashanti handled food and beverages for the Wedding Pros office. He shopped for, prepared, and served the beautiful little snacks and mini-meals that kept them all going, even through early mornings and late nights. When clients were in for meetings—which was often—Ash wheeled in a cart of exactly the refreshments that no one realized they were craving, but they were. No glutinous sesame bagels or packaged power bars for him. No boring bottles of Pellegrino or appalling cans of diet soda.

His client presentations were based partly on mood, partly on what inspired him at the market in the morning. It might be Asian: sweet rice cakes, little cups of lychees in a light sauce, delicious drinks made from green tea and fruit juice, and maybe a little ice-cold sake.

Or it could be Italian, but not the Italian you would find in the North End tourist traps. Ashanti's Italian had to do with thin, crisp almond cookies, with flutes of prosecco, hints of rosemary and lemon.

For the staff, he stocked the office kitchen with protein, veggies, and fun. If you had an eating plan, he supported it. He was beloved by all, ruffled by none.

And when not serving the gods of gastronomy, Ashanti facilitated everyone's daily life in other ways. He made the reservations, he scored the tickets, he picked up the dry cleaning. He knew the car detailers who used Q-Tips and all-organic carpet shampoo, the most reliable dog walkers, and the head seamstress at the Armani boutique.

He was never stressed or upset.

Ashanti claimed to manage this by meditating three times a day, and these times were respected. If the door to his tiny office was closed, no one entered or even knocked. In return, Ashanti took care of you. He called himself the Buddhist Butler.

Kari was still convinced he wasn't quite real.

A bustle in the hallway up ahead told her that Katie had arrived. Ashanti disappeared in the direction of the espresso machine, and Kari went to meet her. Strategic planning sessions were generally attended by most of the staff, and as she walked through the big, open work area, people were starting to gather up their coffee mugs and notepads. Nilly was behind Katie, ready with both tablet and legal pad, and she followed them both into Katie's office.

Katie put her tote bag in the closet and started changing her shoes.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here earlier," she said. "I intended to, but Maggie called, and I couldn't get off the phone. She wants to throw an anniversary party for Mom and Dad. A surprise. In September."

Katie's younger sister Maggie lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, with her husband and their triplets. All boys. Age four.

"The last thing I want to do in my spare time is manage an event, and especially one involving my family!" Katie continued. "Maggie wants to recreate their wedding from 1986. She wants to serve Long Island Iced Tea and dance to

Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album. I'm supposed to find a source for some beverage monstrosity called a Bartles & Jaymes wine cooler, for goodness sake! I suggested we have a nice family weekend in Bermuda with the grandchildren instead, but she said with a sister in the reception business, we should have a *reception*." Katie looked like a trapped animal.

"Why don't you have Nessa work on it?" Kari offered. "She could use a project, and the '80s might seem charmingly nostalgic to her."

"Perms and padded shoulders are charming to no one," Katie said darkly. "Gazpacho. Dear God."

"Apocalyptic," Kari drolled.

She looked hard at Kari. "How are you holding up? How do you want to handle this planning session?"

After the crazy appointment with Caleb and Carolina, Katie had turned to her, instantly picking up on Kari's reaction to her ex. A confession punctuated by mid-day drinking at a local tapas bar that elevated broiled Manchego to an art form had ended with too many tears and plenty of resolve.

"I don't. I don't want to handle it at all. I want to wake up and find out that this is all just a bad dream."

"Kari, do you want to turn down the project? We don't have to do this wedding."

"No. It's a big contract, and it could lead to more work from the West Coast. Tech bros culture is brimming with stupid money."

"And we love money, smart or stupid," Katie murmured. "It all spends the same regardless of IQ."

"I love it when you get mercenary like that," Kari said, though they both laughed.

"You know me," Katie said dryly. "So bottom line."

While they were excellent at financials, they weren't in the wedding business for the money. Not in the traditional sense. There were far better ways to make a killing than this.

This was about making money, having fun, and delivering perfect days.

Whatever it took.

Kari's chin went up. "I'm going to be a grown-up about Caleb. The past is past. I am a professional."

"Why don't we put Ranney on this as your second-in-command? Then we can keep your daily involvement to a minimum. And Marlo can be on the team, too—they're both open after the Musselmans this weekend."

"I'm still going to have to be there for most of the meetings, and the wedding. They specified that a principal be on site for the wedding."

Nilly cleared her throat. "Do you mind if I ask what's going on?"

Kari and Katie exchanged a glance.

"The new clients—it turns out that Kari knows them. Well, one of them. The, um, the groom."

"Oh, that's fun!" Nilly enthused. "You'll be kind of like a guest, only working!"

"No, Nill," Kari explained slowly. "He's my ex-boyfriend." *Almost fiancé*, she thought, her thumb instinctively stroking the soft spot on her ring finger where his promise ring once resided.

"Oh. Huh." Nilly thought for a moment. "That's never happened before, has it?"

"Right, and if it ever happens again, I am going back to mystery shopping. I would rather visit every auto parts store east of the Mississippi to compare product placement of synthetic motor oil and wiper blades than spend the next five months ensuring the absolute perfection of the day that the love of my life marries Scarlett O'Hara in a pair of hot pink Jimmy Choos."

"Your ex-boyfriend wants to wear pink Jimmy Choos..?"

"NO! *She*... oh, never mind."

“I think I’ll just go on down to the conference room and make sure it’s set up for the meeting,” Nilly said nervously, her voice a higher pitch than usual. She was out the door before she finished her sentence. Ash never messed up a meeting, but Nilly was a caretaker by nature. She couldn’t bear for her loved ones to be upset or unhappy if the problem was beyond her ability to fix.

“Confidential, Nilly!” Katie called after her. She pulled out her lipstick and a hairbrush. “We should get down there, too.”

“Ladies.” The room darkened slightly as the doorway was entirely filled with the massive form of Francis Archibald McDougall, Wedding Protectors’ chief of security, USMC (Ret). Big as a wall, he’d let his hair grow out from his active-duty days, the gray hair turning his dark locks into a salt-and-pepper look that screamed *Daddy*.

Though Kari didn’t like to think of Archie as anything other than paternal – and only in a professional way – she knew that plenty of mothers of the brides and grooms had slipped him their numbers over the years.

And if Archie had called any of them, no one knew. Discretion was the better part of valor, and Archie had valor in *spades*.

“Morning, Arch,” they replied in unison. Archie had been their first employee, having been a division head in security at Anterdec, working with Katie on corporate events. She’d told Kari more than once about the day she watched Archie spot a shooter, knock the gun out of the guy’s hand, and hustle him over to a police cruiser with zero casualties—and also about finding him cutting out paper dolls with a lost four-year-old while they waited for her mother to retrieve her from the security tent.

The little girl only cried when she had to leave him.

Archie hadn’t been unhappy in his job at Anterdec; he was well paid, the work was challenging although not usually dangerous, and the hours were predictable enough for him to get home in time to fix dinner for his elderly mother, who lived downstairs in their triple decker in Roslindale.

But he wasn't about to let someone else protect Katie—or her clients—and for that reason, he left with Anterdec founder James McCormick's blessing. He would have both Katie and Kari microchipped if he could, and he suggested it regularly. Protecting them wasn't just his job.

It was his mission in life.

“About the Musselman-Khan event,” Archie started. “I've been going over the aerial photos, and I want three more guys on the perimeter. There's been more chatter online than we anticipated. Do I need sign-off, or can I go ahead?”

Five seconds passed in silence as Kari and Katie mentally toggled over to a different window.

“We'll have to at least get a verbal okay,” Kari said. “Can you Slack me with the details?”

“Right after the meeting.” He moved out of the door frame, and they all headed for the main conference room.

The quiet buzz of conversations spilled out into the hallway as they approached, along with the clink of spoons in coffee mugs and the general rustling of people filling plates and pulling out chairs. The chatter ceased when they entered.

Client meetings at Wedding Protectors tended to have no more than ten attendees: of course the engaged couple, maybe some or all of their parents, Katie, Kari if she was in the office, and possibly the team leader for the event.

Archie attended when security needs rose to the level of obsession suppression.

They usually used a smaller meeting room or Katie's office. This big room had become more of an internal gathering space, although that wasn't its original intent.

Ash had laid out a light breakfast; Kari could see artisan cheeses, brioche, pots of jam and honey. Some uncured ham at one end, blood oranges at the other. Lavender and rosemary perfumed the air: Provence in the spring.

Ashanti liked to post his food details on a small chalkboard, and Kari noted that the cheese was supplied by

Anderhill Cheese Company. Commercial symbiosis was not lost on Ash. The owners of that small but growing concern were new clients, with a wedding date set for next year. And it was going to be a challenge.

Hastings Monahan, the bride, had been duped by her ex-husband into a front-page investment scandal just a couple of years before. Her fiancé and now business partner, Ian McCrory, was the ninth richest man in the world. Kari smiled at the bizarre whims of fate, and then sighed. She was distracting herself from what they were here for.

A very different billionaire's wedding.

“Good morning, everyone,” Katie started. She set her laptop on the table and opened it, tapping keys. The words *Pickett–Mikelmas* appeared on the screen, with the date underneath, *September 21 and TBD*. “So, we have a new client, and some new and unusual challenges. As you can see, the timeline is short. It's May now, so four months and running. The wedding planners are YPD, so we can get schematics from them.”

She tapped a key and the next screen appeared, listing the team assignments.

Team leader: Ranney Martini

Support: Marlo Peterman

Advance: Candace Kohlman, Archie McDougall

Ranney sat up straighter and looked around till she caught Marlo's eye. Marlo, unprepared for this development, was borrowing a pen and a piece of paper from Nilly.

The next image on the screen was one of Candace's spectacular shots of the deserted island, ablaze in a summer sunset, glimmering waves washing up on the beach. Seagrass blew in the background. Kari's stomach dropped to her shoes. She remembered the day they discovered it, she and Caleb, tooling around the little group of islands in the Boston Whaler

they pulled up on the beach. A perfect August Saturday for two teenagers on summer vacation, too young to realize how perfect it really was.

This should be *her* wedding, damn it.

Hers and Caleb's.

“There will be two events: a ceremony on this private island with just the couple and an officiant, and a vastly larger public wedding, probably in Mobile, Alabama, at a later date to be determined. There was a fairly serious accident this week, but it looks like a broken arm and some cuts and bruises. Nothing that should delay the wedding.”

As she clicked to the next screen, Katie glanced apprehensively at Kari. A close-up photo of Carolina's smiling face appeared, larger than life and twice as gorgeous. It was taken on the dance floor, over Caleb's shoulder, so you couldn't see his face, but she was looking up at him with an expression that could only be described as adoration.

“Wow,” someone said softly.

Kari's jaw clenched so hard, she nearly felt a tooth chip. Damn again. She looked away from the screen.

“The couple lives in California, where Mr. Mikelmas is a biotech entrepreneur. He is the co-founder of Mikr0, which you've all probably heard of, and they are about to go public. Ms. Pickett is an assistant director of marketing at Mikr0. The IPO is expected to be worth about \$2.3 billion, and there will be lots of press on that, so that's one of our challenges. Archie and Claire, please take note.”

Claire Gordon was the head of PR at Wedding Protectors. Unlike most PR execs, whose goal was always maximum exposure for their clients, Claire's department actually spent more time keeping things quiet than promoting them. When Wedding Protectors first got started, they'd been clients of Claire's small firm, but very soon, they combined forces. It turned out Claire liked covert ops better than overt anyway.

Apparently in her own life, as well; she dressed almost exclusively in grey and beige, and after working together

closely for six years, Kari knew only that Claire lived within a fifteen-minute Uber ride of the office and that she owned a cat named Presser.

Probably grey or beige.

“How did Cal – er, Mikr0 make its money?” Kari asked, embarrassed to realize she could have Googled it.

“Fintech,” Archie said glumly. “They build a better mousetrap.”

“Speak English, please,” Marlo said drolly.

His mouth made a strange noise. “Finance technology. Mikr0 built a faster algorithm for trading.”

“That sounds common,” Kari said, thinking that Caleb was anything but.

“Common, sure,” Archie replied. “Lots of things are common. But if you can be the best, doesn’t matter. Mikr0 is the best. Two-point-three billion dollars’ worth of ‘best.’” Few things impressed Archie, but Caleb’s success clearly did.

“Another challenge, obviously, is the intimate island ceremony,” Katie continued. “If you’re unfamiliar with Annoquin Island, take a look at Candace’s amazing photos. Along with its incredible natural beauty, anyone working at Wedding Protectors will immediately notice that it is without electricity, completely exposed to the elements, and inaccessible except by private boat—and even then, there’s no dock. You have to anchor offshore and either swim or take a small dinghy.”

“I doubt the bride will be swimming,” Kari commented, mostly to herself.

A cellphone rang, and Kari glanced up, surprised. Active phones in meetings were forbidden for all except team leaders of events taking place within 72 hours, those with sick children, and of course Kari and Katie.

Nessa jumped up and made for the door.

“Oh my God, I totally forgot!” Her voice floated back into the room from the hallway. Ranney winced and rubbed her

forehead, although whether from the lack of any infrastructure on Annoquin or from her daughter's utter lack of professionalism, Kari was unsure.

Katie cleared her throat. "There is no cell service. There are no structures, so flyovers have a clear shot, photographic or otherwise. And while the island is privately owned, and uninvited visitors would be illegal trespassers, there is no police force. Medical services are non-existent unless you can wait 45 minutes. In good weather."

Ranney was typing furiously on her tablet, ostensibly taking notes, although it occurred to Kari that she could just as easily be updating her resume on LinkedIn.

"Does anyone have an antacid?" Archie muttered.

"Just one more thing to be aware of..." Katie concluded.

"Starlink," Archie whispered to himself. "Need a dish."

Kari took a deep breath, steeling herself. Here it came. Her utter humiliation in front of everyone she worked with. She was about to be revealed as hapless and hopeless, a loser in love who had built a career serving its winners.

Unable to spot the real thing until it was long gone. Replaced by a bridezilla belle more concerned with her Instagram photo grid than her vows. The only person in the room with a more pathetic love life than Kari was Nessa... and she wasn't even *in* the room anymore.

How far had the mighty fallen.

"I know what you all must be thinking," she burst out. Her voice broke. "It's quite, well... controversial, but I really should reveal it to all of you. There's something about the wedding – the island – all of it, that you need to know. It's about –"

Katie looked at her strangely. "...cows," she interrupted, the word spoken with a firm defiance that made Kari peer at her.

"Cows?" Ranney echoed in a faint voice.

“Cows?” Kari said slowly, her tongue suddenly thick with molasses. What on earth was Katie talking about?

“Long-horned Scottish Highland cattle,” Katie clarified, shooting Kari a weird look. “Free range, on the island. They keep the vegetation under control. Apparently someone realized that if they could withstand their natural habitat in the Scottish Isles, the coast of Massachusetts would be like a holiday for them.”

“Better than skunks,” Archie contributed, with something that sounded suspiciously like amusement.

“Coo!” Nessa chirped. “They have coos!”

“No, cows,” Katie corrected her.

“If they’re Highland cattle, then it’s *koo*,” Nessa said firmly. “*Heilan coo*. I’ve watched enough funny interviews with Hamish McCormick to know that.”

“What’s a soccer player doing talking about cows during press conferences?” Archie grumbled.

Nessa leered. “You clearly haven’t watched him on camera. Funny guy. Nice to look at. Talks about koos.”

“There you go!” Katie said cheerfully. “Coos.” She paused, glancing around, her voice picking up pace and going a bit higher than usual. “Also, Mr. Mikelmas is an old friend of Kari’s, so, ah, some history there. Just so you know.”

She closed her computer abruptly. “Okay, thank you, everyone. Thanks in advance, Ranney and Marlo. We’ll meet in a few days to go over what we know at this point about cakes, décor, clothing, those details.”

No one moved.

“Are there questions?” Katie asked, pretending to be puzzled, giving an attitude that made it clear there shouldn’t be.

At that, people seemed to remember where they were and stood, pushing in chairs and picking up their napkins and cups.

The office phone could be heard ringing, and a moment later, the intercom spoke.

“Kari?”

“Yes, Carly?” Kari caught Katie’s eye. Their stare was telepathic. Cutting away from the gaze, Kari looked at the intercom, wincing.

How much worse was this day going to get?

“Mr. Mikelmas is here. He has a special delivery for you.”

Chapter Four



Kari's walk to the reception area felt exactly like following the dental assistant down the hall for a root canal. You know you've got to do it, but it takes supreme self-control not to turn around and run in the other direction.

And you'll drool embarrassingly later.

He was standing with his back to her, studying the large, framed photographs on the wall. Aerial shots of brides and grooms on floating icebergs and volcano rims; a twelve-foot-high spun-sugar cake replica of the Tower of Pisa, with the identical 5.5-degree lean; a couple departing their reception in a restored World War II Spitfire, bride in the pilot's seat, her veil flowing back in the sky like a contrail.

The biggest-selling female pop star in history kissing her twenty-something groom on a deserted beach, inscribed, "To Kari and Katie, how can we ever thank you?"

No autograph was necessary to identify her.

Their receptionist, Carly, was not at her desk. For a moment, with no one to see her, Kari just looked at Caleb. Even after all these years, the lines of his body were so familiar that her impulse was to step behind him and run her palms over his shoulders, then wrap her arms around him, fingers linking at the top of his abs.

Still nineteen when they'd broken up, he'd filled out a bit from his teenage self, thanks to some obvious time with a trainer as well as a decade of maturity. His hair was still thick, dark and curled over his collar at the ends, layered and a bit

rakish. Broad shoulders filled out a tailored business shirt, the cuffs rolled up, the blue a few shades lighter than his eyes.

Under one arm was a 3-inch-thick binder.

“Caleb?” she asked, as if there were some bizarre chance she wouldn’t recognize him and needed to be sure.

He turned.

“Hey,” he said, smiling, not flustered, perfectly comfortable as those blue eyes took her in. Like anyone would be who just ran into an old high school friend, pleased and slightly amused but no big deal if you’re successful and rich and engaged to be married, certainly not a game changer, not something that stops your heart or makes you unable to breathe or to figure out why in God’s name you decided to wear these hideous shoes today or even buy them in the first place...

Take a breath, Kari. Before you pass out.

No big deal for him, no big deal for me, she thought.

She was a terrible liar.

“Your suit is lovely,” he said softly, making her feel every inch of her skin going all the way back twelve years.

“How is Christian?” she asked, knowing the answer because Katie had followed up with Carolina and gotten a short update from Natasha, but Kari was concerned on her own.

“He’s, well, he’s lucky,” Caleb said, one corner of his mouth going up in a wry grin that made time disappear. That same smile. Same dimple. “Very lucky. Some kid was texting and driving while Christian was in a crosswalk. Damn lucky he wasn’t going faster. Broken arm and some bruises and scrapes.”

“Thank God that’s all.”

“A laptop bag saved him from a head injury.”

“What?”

“Of all things, right?” Caleb gave a strange laugh, the sound a mixture of relief and absurdity. “The kid hit Christian and another pedestrian. Some businessman with a laptop. The bag fell first. Hit the ground and acted like a pillow for Christian’s head. Without that, the accident could have been so much worse.”

“Thank goodness for serendipity,” she said softly. Their eyes locked.

“Are you... is this a bad time?” he finally asked, breaking their gaze, looking away as if he’d done something wrong.

But wanted to do it again.

“No! No, not at all, we just got out of a meeting. About the Mikelmas-Pickett wedding, actually.”

“Oh, well, that one’s gonna be a challenge for you,” he said lightly.

You have no idea, she thought.

“But,” he continued, waving at the photos on the wall, “obviously you’re up to the task. That cake—it defies gravity. What happened when they cut into it?”

“Two white doves flew out,” she answered seriously. “And the orchestra played ‘That’s Amore.’”

“No.”

“Yes. You don’t go to a lot of weddings, do you?”

“Not so far. I’m already learning a lot.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place.”

There was a tiny beat of silence, and his intense eyes met hers again.

“I think I have.” He seemed to remember the binder in his hand and held it out to her. “Carolina sent this. Pictures of things she likes.”

She took it from him. It was completely filled with plastic sheet protectors. Color-coded tabs with typeset names like “Centerpieces,” “Men’s handkerchiefs,” and “Grass Shades.”

Choosing shades of grass was the newest Divazilla trend. If Kari never saw another piece of sod getting a green spray tan, she'd die happy.

“Well,” Kari said with a friendly laugh. “The good news is she obviously likes a lot.”

“Not usually,” he muttered.

She glanced up in surprise, but he was looking over her shoulder at the office. “Can I have a tour?” he asked. “You’ve built quite a business, Kari.”

“This is nothing compared to what *you*’ve accomplished!” she replied with a self-deprecating laugh.

“It’s wonderful,” he said softly.

“Oh—of course—well, Katie’s responsible for most of our success.” She turned in the direction of the open area. “This is where event management happens. We believe collaboration fosters maximum creativity and gives every employee a stake in every project. In theory, any team member can step in as needed on any project and be totally up to speed. Everyone here is a Concierge Associate. Only Katie and I, and our security chief, have closed offices. Legal and PR are more sensitive, but they’re on a different floor.” She chuckled. “Well, Ashanti has an office, too, but that’s another story.”

“Ashanti? Is he – she – ?”

“In a class of his own.”

Nessa was sitting in front of a computer, and Kari was momentarily thankful that they couldn’t see whatever was on the screen. On the far side of the room were banks of drawers and floor-to-ceiling shelves.

Ignoring Caleb’s questioning look, she nattered on nervously. “Over there is the library. We aren’t the wedding planners or designers in the typical sense: We don’t choose colors or fabrics or flowers, but we need to know exactly what we’re dealing with in case of an emergency, so we have samples of everything. We can source any shade, any extra, any resupply on the fly. We work very closely with all the planners and other services and vendors.”

“Emergency? Why would you need flowers and samples – of what?”

“Fabrics. Specific plants. Candies. Candles. That sort of thing. Allergies happen. Items catch on fire. You can’t put a grease fire out with water, just like you can’t extinguish a flaming tulle wedding veil with the wrong chemical.”

“What do you use for that?”

“Water.”

They both laughed, the ease she felt with him a tug from the past, one she wanted desperately to bring into the future.

She had really, really missed him.

Kari had given this tour to clients more times than she could count. Which was lucky, because he was standing so close to her, original thought was not possible. Something in the air between them charged, electrons lining up just so, until her body heated with a tingle and a warmth that made it hard to walk.

Breathe, too.

“And we have storage in the back, and here are the offices,” she said rapidly, needing distraction before she did something humiliating like leaning in for a kiss.

It would be so natural. So easy.

Too easy.

Inhaling around him was becoming dangerous.

Inside Katie’s office, they could see just the back of her blonde head as she talked on the phone, her chair turned toward the windows. Kari opened the door to her own office and was immediately treated to the sight of FedEx boxes and envelopes piled high next to her desk, the usual daily delivery of flame-proof fabric swatches and allergen/gluten/GMO-free fair-trade vegan chocolate samples.

On the desk itself was a floral arrangement that could only be described as spectacular, with miniature plastic footballs on sticks interspersed with the flowers. It looked like a half-time

performance at the Superbowl, without the music. She put Carolina's binder down and pulled out a football.

"This must be Grunge," she said.

"Oh, it's not *that* bad," Caleb responded. "A little over the top, maybe, but I wouldn't say grunge."

"Grunren," she explained. "Grunge. The quarterback. I worked their wedding on Saturday."

He laughed. "If the Marshfield High football team had known of this future friendship, you would definitely have been Homecoming Queen."

"That's nothing," she shot back. "When the Marshfield school superintendent finds out that the Mikelmas brothers, those well-known local geeks, are about to become the hottest biotech billionaires on the planet, she's going to hit you up for a new football field. With a stadium. And a jumbotron."

Caleb looked at his shoes, clearly embarrassed, and said nothing.

Oh, *why* did she say that? Kari cast about frantically for something to smooth over the awkward moment.

"I'm sure Carolina will want to help you set up a foundation," she tried.

He looked surprised.

"Carolina's idea of meaningful philanthropy is more about being the highest bidder at a charity auction for a yacht trip to Richard Branson's private island," he said in a derisive tone that Kari had never heard out of his mouth. "I have some ideas about setting up my own thing if all goes well with the IPO. They can do their own."

"They?" she asked, confused. Why would he use the word *they*? Did Carolina identify as nonbinary? She really needed to read up on client files and check pronouns in advance of meetings.

His phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket to check. He silenced the ringer, but looked up at her, distracted.

“I have to return this call. Is there somewhere I can do that?”

“Of course.”

As she closed the conference room door after him, Kari let out a long exhale. She knew him so well, so intimately, and yet... not at all. Not anymore.

The boy she'd loved had become a young man she'd drifted away from, but this fully grown adult was foreign to her.

Yet so hard to resist.

A text dinged on her phone.

You OK? Katie asked.

K, Kari replied.

You are SO not okay, Katie said back.

What are Carolina's pronouns? she replied.

She/her/hers, Katie texted back. *What's wrong?*

Hmmm.

Nothing someone's leftover pinot grigio can't cure. Don't we have two cases from the Grunren wedding that the bride deemed the label too crooked to serve? Kari shot back.

Ranney is saving that for the debriefing after the Tougas wedding, Katie said with a frown emoji.

Oh, no. The Tougas wedding. Fourth marriage each for the bride and groom, with six bio kids, twelve stepkids from former marriages, and something like five mothers of the bride.

Right. We'll need it, with an ibuprofen chaser, Kari wrote back. *Get the pediatric kind. Berry flavor. Six-pack.*

If we just mix it with straight vodka, we can kill two birds with one stone, Katie replied.

I think you invented a new cocktail. We'll call it the Wedding Protector.

She got a thumbs up.

“Hey,” Caleb said, walking back into her office and closing the door. He had a look on his face that made her think of a six-year-old boy who just saw Spiderman in real life, swinging from the State Street Bank building.

“I turned the wrong direction down the hall after my call-back by the freight elevator—you have a small warehouse back there?”

“Yes. For upcoming events and some stuff from past weddings that we’re stuck with, for whatever reason.”

“Stuck with?”

“If nobody wanted it afterwards, or it wasn’t right and couldn’t be returned. You should see my dining room table.”

“There’s a motorcycle back there.”

“I know.

“It’s a 1979 Triumph Bonneville. The same model that appeared in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. That Richard Gere rode.”

“Actually, it *is* the bike from the movie.”

Eyes gleaming, he stepped closer, cologne and musk filling her senses. “How much do you want for it?”

“Want?”

“I’ll pay your company twenty-five grand.”

“Absolutely not! It’s—”

His hand covered her mouth as he entered her personal space, breath hot against her forehead. “*Shhhh*. Nice bargaining, but come on. It’s not like you’re going to ride it.”

“Mphh mubh bu—”

With his other hand, he made a revving motion. “Vroom vroom. Thirty’s my final offer.”

“I can’t!” she shouted from behind his hand.

Which he removed.

Leaving her lips raw, like she'd just been kissed all too well.

Except she hadn't been. Kissed, that is.

Pulse racing, she whisper-hissed, "It belongs to a client—they're leaving their wedding reception on it!"

"Tell them my offer, then. They can leave on a jet ski or something. If they accept, I'll throw in a coffee date along with your finder's fee."

"Date?" She cleared her throat and tried to drain the eagerness out of her voice. "To talk about the wedding?"

"Why would I want to talk about the wedding with you? No."

"No?"

"I'm asking you out for coffee, Kari, because I want to spend time with you."

Her mouth dropped. Katie knew what it was like to have a groomsman hit on you in the middle of wedding plans, but this was a first.

A groom!

And of all the guys...

"Caleb!" she gasped. "You're asking me out on a *date*?"

He smiled. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"No! You're getting *nowhere*!"

"Got to second base back in high school. Remember my mom's old Explorer? We used to park it down by the beach—"

THWACK!

With a snap of her wrist, she hit him, hard, in the chest.

The hard part came from the three-ring binder full of Carolina's ideas.

"What about Carolina?" she asked as his hands deftly caught the binder before it broke his foot.

"What about her?"

“You’re *cheating* on her? Now? With *me*?”

“I’m *what*? No! How could I be cheating? Carolina doesn’t care if I go out with you!”

A rush of ice-cold numbness took over her body.

“Caleb Mikelmas, you are not the man I once knew! Maybe all that success and money turned your morality into a hormone-filled lust swamp, but that is not how I live. Silicon Valley is full of all those tech bros orgy parties, and I cannot believe you’re one of them!”

“Orgy? Kari, what are you – ”

“You can’t just ask me out when I’m planning your wedding!”

“I still can’t believe you said the word orgy.”

“And I cannot believe you’re jeopardizing your wedding to try to get me into bed!”

“Bed? What? I said *coffee*! And hold on. MY wedding? Kari, *my* wedding? I’m not getting married!”

“You’re breaking up with Carolina so you can mess around with me?”

Full-throated laughter was the very last item on Kari’s short list of Things Caleb Would Do After Asking Her to Help Him Cheat on His Fiancée (Who Hired Wedding Protectors for Their Wedding).

But laugh, he did.

So she did what any self-respecting woman would do.

She shoved the heel of her Jimmy Choo stiletto into his arch.

Which made him fold in half and drop the binder.

As color-coded spreadsheets and post-it tabs went flying, she turned on said heel to storm out, her pride damaged but not destroyed, her exit so teeth-rattlingly livid that she didn’t feel a single bit of remorse for hurting him.

Until he shouted:

“Kari, *I’m* not marrying Carolina! My brother, Christian, is!”

But by then, she was running down the hall to the safety of Katie’s office.

His words didn’t sink in until she’d shut the door, collapsed on Katie’s New Zealand wool carpet, and stretched out on her back, staring at the ceiling.

I’m not marrying Carolina, he’d said.

Had he really said that?

I’m not marrying Carolina! My brother, Christian, is!

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

What had she done?

Chapter Five



Limping down a hallway with various workers staring at him, Caleb gathered the long, ropey strands of his shredded dignity and burst through the door of Katie Gallagher's office, pulsing with nothing but raw emotion.

As Katie's blonde head snapped up from where she sat in her office chair, he nearly tripped over a body on the floor.

"Eep!" Looking down, he realized his injured foot had connected with Kari's waist. Thankful he still played pickup basketball regularly for fun, he balanced himself on calves and thighs that worked double-time with his core, able to adjust in mid-step and avoid another embarrassing catastrophe.

"Caleb!" Katie said smoothly, standing quickly and pivoting to come around the desk, inserting herself between him and Kari, who remained on the shaggy cream carpet, though she rolled over onto her stomach, hiding her eyes. "What's – what's going on? How can I help?"

"You can make Kari look at me. Kari, get up."

"No!" she said in a loud but muffled voice.

"Kari," he and Katie said in the exact same tone, one that he would have laughed at if he weren't processing his pain-filled foot, his confused heart, and didn't have a growing erection the size of his wounded ego.

Which was... big.

"Get up, Kari. Talk to me," he insisted, trying to control the strange brew of lust, anger, and disbelief that coursed

through his veins.

“I can’t! I am too embarrassed.”

Katie shifted away from them, leaned against the edge of her desk, and looked down at her business partner. “What did you do?”

Kari just shook her head.

“You’re wearing an Armani suit, Kari. All those long strands from the New Zealand merino are going to make you waste an hour with a lint roller. If you stay on the floor too long, you’ll look like a Yeti.”

“I don’t care!”

“Kari seemed to be under the impression that I’m the groom,” Caleb explained to Katie, whose brow folded down like a set of window blinds.

“What?”

“I AM SO STUPID!” Kari groaned from the floor.

Katie looked down at her, one long strand of flaxen hair flowing over her shoulder as she peered at Kari. “Why would you think that? It’s Christian, Kari. *Christian* Mikelmas is the groom.”

“I KNOW THAT NOW.”

“It’s on all the prep reports.”

“I DIDN’T READ THEM!”

“Oh. *Oh!*” Katie caught Caleb’s eyes, her breath going out like a slowly collapsing hot air balloon. “Now it makes more sense.”

“What does?”

“How weird you’ve been.”

“I AM NOT WEIRD!”

“No,” Caleb said, with a snort. “It’s not weird at all to impale your old boyfriend’s foot with that dagger doubling as a high heel, run into your business partner’s office, fling

yourself on the ground, and hide your face in a sheep rug while we're trying to have a grown-up conversation."

"You're the weird one for liking mayo and banana sandwiches!" she shot back.

Katie grimaced at him. "Seriously?"

"We're talking about Kari right now," he said pointedly. "Not my food preferences." Reaching down, he placed his hand on her shoulder. "Come on, Kari. You have to get up."

"No, I don't. I live here now. I can just have Nessa bring me coffee and DoorDash all my meals. This rug is soft, and sleep will make me forget this ever happened. Katie, do you have that emergency leftover Klonopin from that breakup you had in 2013? I'll take it now, please."

"I used the emergency Klonopin when I went out with that guy who made a collage of all my feet pics from my Instagram feed and sent it to me as a thank-you card after our one and only date," Katie said with a sigh.

It was Caleb's turn to grimace.

"And," Katie added, "you cannot live on my office rug."

"A *good* friend would let me," Kari whined.

Katie threw her hands up in the air and looked at him. "Was she like this when you dated in high school?"

"You – you know about that?"

She gave him a *duh* look.

"Right. Of course you do. You're not just business partners. You're best friends, like Christian and me."

"Yes."

"She was always a tad dramatic."

Kari lifted her head and spat out a piece of wool. "HOW DARE YOU!"

"Nothing like Carolina, though," he said, something in his words finally making Kari look up, rolling onto her back. As he looked down at her, arousal fought with amusement, and if

he didn't get hold of himself, the wrong one would win out in front of Katie.

That rug really did look soft.

And perfect for making love.

"You take that back!" Kari gasped.

"You really are nothing like Carolina."

"THE *DRAMATIC* COMMENT!"

"Oh. Okay. Sure. I, uh, take it back."

Katie shot him side-eye and said nothing.

"I couldn't believe you would pick someone like her!" Kari gasped, red-faced and instantly livid. "Her! You! She's so shallow, Caleb. Thank God you're not marrying her."

"Kari," Katie said in a low voice. "We never disparage the client."

"I don't understand the attraction either," Caleb confessed, relieved to be able to say it. "She's as deep as a finger bowl."

Katie looked like an owl as Kari scrambled up, standing before him, disheveled and more beautiful than ever.

"We always say there's someone for everyone. And yes, we're wedding planners. *More* than wedding planners," she corrected, her hand going up to shield herself from what looked like Katie's criticism. "But Carolina is -"

"Our *client*," Katie said through gritted teeth, her hand going to Kari's forearm. "And you're in the office, on work time. If you're going to continue this conversation, I highly recommend you do it off the clock and out of the office, but especially out of earshot. We literally have a non-disparagement clause in all our contracts, Dear Highly Ethical Business Partner. Remember? You drafted it!"

Kari's eyes closed tight as she muttered a curse.

It was time to step in. Take charge. Take command.

"Coffee. Now. You and me," he said, stepping forward into Kari's personal space as she looked up at him, confused and

oh, so kissable. “I’m not your client, so you can’t refuse. And I’m buying, so this isn’t on the client’s tab.”

“We don’t charge our clients for business meals,” Katie protested, but by the time she said the end of her sentence, Caleb was pulling Kari out of the office, her legs still wobbly enough that he was forced to pause, his hand on her elbow, her sweet breath in his face as she looked up at him.

Those doe eyes. The way the skin between her eyes wrinkled in confusion. How her whole face softened as they held their gaze. Her hair was mussed, and her cheeks were pink, all of it from emotional volatility, and he wanted nothing more than to kiss her right now.

First things first, though.

Caffeine would cure all.

“I’ll handle your two o’clock with the Whistlers!” Katie called out as Caleb and Kari took two steps forward.

Kari halted and groaned. “I forgot to tell you. The wedding is paused.”

“Paused?” Caleb asked, imagining a pause button on a video.

Katie began tapping on her keyboard. “Is it in the notes?”

“Of course,” Kari said, a bit piqued. “I document everything in the client record.”

“You have a database?” Caleb asked, suddenly curious.

“CRM,” they both said, making him smile. He had worked with similar systems and would love to search Kari’s database for dangling pointers. Operations here must run like a Fortune 500 company, with top-level concierge service for every detail.

“Give me the TL;DR,” Katie asked Kari.

“Mother-in-law was caught trying on the wedding dress.”

“Another one?” Katie said, a noise of disgust making Caleb’s gut clench.

“Mmm hmmm.”

“I do not like this trend.”

“It was the groom’s grandmother’s dress from the 1950s. So the mother-in-law’s mother-in law.”

“I need a flow chart.”

“Bride walked in on mother-in-law forcing the zipper at the hips. Mother-in-law freaked out and ripped the zipper open. Groom walked in to find his future wife and mother in a standoff, his mom in bra and panties, fiancée hosing her down with pepper spray.”

“Ugh,” Caleb said. “That’s horrible.”

“I know!” Kari said in agreement. “Pepper spray is awful on silk. It’s never coming out.”

She was worried about the *dress*?

“I meant that poor guy.”

Both women gave him a narrow-eyed look that made it clear his strategic mistake of saying a single word was going to cause significant downstream effects.

“How is this about the *guy*, Caleb?” Katie asked him, crossing her arms over her chest, the lapel of her open jacket floating under her elbow.

“Yes, please do enlighten us,” Kari added, hands on her hips.

“Just that he’s in a no-win situation. I can sympathize.”

Four eyebrows shot up in the room. None of them were his.

“Come on,” he added, letting out a long breath. “His mother’s being clingy and entitled, his fiancée’s freaked out, and now an expensive dress is destroyed. He loses if he defends his mother, and he loses if he protects his future wife. Meanwhile, everyone’s out money, time, and goodwill.”

“His mother is the one who started everything,” Katie said in a voice meant for explaining the physics of gravity to preschoolers.

“Of course she is. And she’s in the wrong. But that doesn’t change the fact that the whole mess exists. It has to be managed. And the future groom is the one stuck managing it.”

Katie’s head tilted slightly as she examined him. Kari was quietly breathing, the gentle hush of air flowing through her a sound he rather enjoyed. It settled him. Grounded him.

Made him want to hear more of it.

Their silence wasn’t unnerving, but it left him in limbo. Had he put his foot in his mouth? Instead of jumping to conclusions, he waited them out. Reading the room was one of his strengths, but these women were more polished than most when it came to emotional intelligence.

It was Katie who spoke first.

“That’s how we operate at Wedding Protectors,” she said in an executive’s voice, the kind he shifted into when presenting a deck to a group of investors. “Blame does not matter. Managing the situation is all we care about. We smooth. We fix. We anticipate. We mediate. The goal is to get to the other side of the conflict, no matter how big or small, and find the joy.”

“Joy,” he repeated, staring into Kari’s eyes.

“Coffee,” she replied, making him laugh. It felt good to laugh with her.

“Coffee,” he said firmly, taking her hand, releasing it in the hallway, instinctively understanding that she had a professional demeanor to protect.

“Bye,” he called back to Katie, but the door shut before the word was out.

Message received. Dismissed.

“I know a place,” he said as Kari led the way to the elevator bank, pressing the Down button, clearly avoiding eye contact with her co-workers. He got the sense that Wedding Protectors was a small, close-knit company, and there would be questions.

That was for Kari to deal with. Right now, he had her undivided attention and wasn't about to share.

"You really thought I was marrying Carolina," he said as the elevator arrived, thankfully empty.

"I figured you had changed."

"I would need a personality transplant to marry her."

"Then what do you think about your own brother? He's marrying her!"

"I'm not Christian."

"You never were." As the elevator slowly descended, she smoothed her hair and turned to look at the wall, the reflection distorted in the burnished metal walls. "Ack! I'm a mess."

"You're beautiful."

"How can you say that! My hair's in tangles, my lipstick looks like I'm auditioning for the next season of *American Horror Story*, I'm covered in enough white strands to look like a malamute, and—"

Unable to stop, he touched one of her shoulders, his other hand cradling her face, fingertips sinking into the loose hair behind her ear.

"You look lovely."

Leaning in, he didn't hesitate, the kiss so close, the scent of her so tantalizing, so —

DING!

As the elevator doors opened on the second floor, all light was blocked by a man the size of a small mountain, dark hair interwoven with shocks of gray. Eyes like a hawk alighted first on Kari, who was smoothing her hair like her hands were irons, then on Caleb.

The guy inserted himself intentionally between them.

"Kari," he said in a gravelly voice that sounded like he ate kidnappers for lunch. "Having fun on the job?"

“Archie,” she said in a tone of warning. Who in the hell was this guy? “I believe you know Mr. Mikelmas.”

“Pickett-Mikelmas wedding?” the guy said, taking one hand from behind his back and letting it hang to his side. “Groom?” The way the man’s thick brow shot up made it clear he knew exactly what Caleb and Kari had been about to do seconds before.

“Brother of the groom,” Caleb said, extending his hand for a shake and getting his bones crushed in return. The handshake felt more like a hazing ritual than a formality. The guy could rent out his hand to a mammography center.

“Archie!” Kari said sharply, looking at their handshake. “Caleb needs his hand intact.”

“For what?” the guy growled but let up the pressure a smidge.

Caleb took the chance to crush him back. He got a toothy grin in return.

The kind that made him feel like he was hours away from being pieces in a burlap bag with cement blocks attached to it, being driven to Cold Storage Beach at midnight.

“Archie is head of security for Wedding Protectors,” Kari explained. “And a paternal pain in the patookie when he wants to be.”

The elevator reached the lobby, and Caleb pretended his hand hadn’t turned into a blinking red traffic light.

“She means I’m a pain in the ass for anyone who acts out of turn,” Archie said with that same grin. Guys like this didn’t intimidate Caleb. In fact, he found himself drawn to the man, who was clearly ex-military.

“Your job is to protect Kari?” he asked, knowing the answer.

“My job is to make sure no one gets hurt. *Ever.*” Archie held his arm out, ushering Kari out of the elevator. As Caleb passed, the guy hissed, “You got that?”

“Glad to hear it,” he replied confidently. “We’re on the same side, then.”

The skin under Archie’s eye twitched as he looked Caleb over. “We’ll see about that.”

Before either of them could say a word, the man vanished through a small door in the lobby’s wall, the kind only accessed by a biometric scan. If you couldn’t activate it, the door was seamlessly integrated into the room’s lines.

Kari shook her head. “Now I need a double.”

“Archie’s not your favorite employee?”

“He absolutely is wonderful,” she countered, a grin tickling her lips. “But he acts like he’s herding a group of daughters more than a professional security team leader working with high-level business professionals.”

“Is he patronizing to you? Because no employee should treat their boss like that.”

The blast of air as they reached the street made his anger surge. While the guy had seemed cagey, protecting the workers and clients made sense.

If he was being rude to Kari...

“Oh, no! Never,” she said as she pointed to a storefront with a coffee cup on the awning a few shops up the block. “Let’s get coffee there.”

“Grind It Fresh!? I’ve met the owners.”

“Me, too! One of my biggest rivals married into the McCormick family.”

“Rivals? As in wedding planner rivals?”

“No. Mystery shopping rivals.”

“I knew Declan married a mystery shopper, but Shannon McCormick is so sweet. How could she be a rival?”

“You know Shannon and Declan?” She shook her head. “Of course you do. Billionaires and all that.”

“I’ve met them at charity affairs. Nice people. How could Shannon be a rival at anything?”

“Not Shannon. Amanda. She married Declan’s brother, Andrew.”

The walk was short enough that they reached the Grind It Fresh! door, Caleb holding it open for Kari, and to his surprise, the place was quiet. They approached the counter, a young woman with electric blue hair, half her head shaved, looking up. She wore a black t-shirt with a band logo on it and a pin that read: *My pronouns are She/Her*.

“What’s your poison?” she asked, winking at Kari.

“Hi, Mimi. You know my drink.”

Mimi’s eyelashes barely fluttered as she typed it into the iPad screen. “What about your new *beau*?”

“Beau?” Kari’s nervous laugh made him smile. “Oh, no. Caleb is a business associate.”

“Something’s going on between you. I can pick up the vibe.” She looked Caleb up and down and said, “Americano. Single or double?”

“How did you know?”

“Just do.” Before he could stop her, Kari had her credit card in the reader, typing as the transaction finished.

“I was going to pay.”

“I know you were. I beat you to it.”

“I’ll get dinner, then.”

“Who said we were going to dinner?”

“I did. Just now.”

“Not today, buddy. I have client meetings all day until nine.”

“Then tomorrow night.”

“Bannister pisco tasting.”

“What tasting?”

“Pisco. It’s a liquor made from — ”

“I know what pisco is. Why do you need a tasting? Just pick one.”

An audible gasp, like the whistling of a train through a tunnel, made Mimi look up.

Kari shook her head. “You can’t say things like that, Caleb! When my clients want to choose the absolute perfect pisco for their wedding, we do whatever it takes.”

“Seems like a giant waste of time.”

“Like finding the perfect vintage motorcycle?” she shot back, forcing him to reconsider.

“Got me there.”

“I mean,” she said as Mimi handed him his Americano, “a motorcycle is a motorcycle. Just buy a Yamaha and consider it done.”

His palm flattened against his heart, he winced at her. “Ouch.”

“Right. Each couple is an entity. A distinct entity, with individual needs. What’s important to you might not be important to other people, and vice versa. We don’t have any attachments to a specific flavor, color, texture, or location. Wedding Protectors is attached to the perfect outcome.”

“I want that, too,” Caleb said as Mimi handed Kari her coffee.

“Want what?”

He touched her hand.

“The perfect outcome.”

Caleb wasn’t a man to waste time, energy, or emotion.

Which meant this coffee meeting had a purpose.

Earlier today, he’d convinced himself that dropping by Kari’s place of business was a formality. Carolina had asked her assistant to deliver paperwork and he’d overheard, easily lying to take the errand off her hands.

He wasn't a delivery boy. His time was certainly worth more.

But there wasn't a specific dollar value on the shade of brown in Kari's eyes as she peeked up at him above her cup of coffee, motioning to a table. As they sat, she took a sip, then paused.

"I am so, so sorry," she said, turning that adorable pink tone that came from a blush.

"For what?"

"For hurting you. For thinking you were the groom and coming on to me."

"No need to apologize."

"I was so out of order."

"As long as you were more offended by the groom part than the coming onto you part, we're good."

"Caleb!"

He reached for her hand and smiled. "I mean it, Kari. This whole wedding has been bonkers. Carolina loves Christian, but she's a major disruptive force. And Christian's up to his eyeballs in gooey love with her. The wedding dominates everything. *Everything*. Even our IPO."

"Is that why you're grouchy about pisco tastings? Because the details annoy you?"

"I'm grouchy about the pisco tasting because it takes you away from me. I want to go out with you, Kari. Seeing you again makes me wonder what the hell I was thinking when we were in college. Why did I ever let you go?"

"Because we were naive and stupid and young."

"You may have been naive and young, but never stupid."

"One of us was," she said under her breath.

"I know. But I am none of those now."

"Neither am I."

"Then..." He rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb.

Bzz

Bzz

They were buzzing in unison.

Dropping his hand, Kari quickly fished her phone out of her small bag, while Caleb found his in his back pocket.

“Oh, no!” Kari gasped as he read his own text, from Christian:

Carolina wants a prenup.

Relief he didn't know he had inside him came pouring out. The fear that Carolina was only interested in Christian for his money was not a baseless concern. While it seemed odd that a money-grubber would want a prenup, this was not bad news.

“Carolina wants a prenup!” Kari whispered, eyes big.

“Christian just texted the same. I'm a little confused, though. Christian has more money, and he was already going to do a prenup.”

“I am getting a bad feeling about this.”

“You and me both. This marriage is going to be a disaster,” he confessed, so happy to be able to have a real conversation about his real emotions for once.

“I meant the prenup. Why would Carolina push for it?”

“Drama? Chaos? She's an agent of whimsy. She's a disruptive technology in Louboutins.” He took a few swallows of his cooling coffee, grateful for the energy. “Mmmm. Really good coffee.”

Kari followed suit, sipping a bit and nodding, then looked at her phone.

“Katie says Carolina called crying because she heard Christian would ask for one. Wants to get the jump on being the first to ask. Says she needs to make sure she's taken care of. That a prenup will make sure.”

Anger filled him, the rush a familiar one. Building a multi-billion-dollar company from scratch meant learning to shift

internally, faster and faster as success came swiftly. No one with instant success stayed the same.

The process of the world wanting a piece of you changed every aspect of Caleb's identity.

Maybe that's why sitting there with Kari was so inviting. She remembered the Caleb from before.

Before everyone wanted a piece of what he had.

And now Carolina was chopping off a little bit of Christian.

"She wants a prenup with a guaranteed payout if they split up," he said, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "I'm sure of it." Bitterness filled him, a foul mood descending that he tried to fight off.

"You sound so negative."

"Because that's how this works, Kari. Once you crack through a success barrier, you don't know who to trust. Are people being nice to you for money or for friendship? Are they chatting with you at a party because you're interesting or because you're an investment target?"

"That sounds exhausting."

She got it. She understood.

In that moment, he stopped thinking, his body leaning in, his hand on her arm. As he went for a kiss, he suddenly felt fingertips on his lips.

Definitely not a kiss.

"Caleb. No."

"No?"

"You're a client."

"*Christian* is a client."

"But still."

"But still – what?"

"Until the wedding is over, I can't do this."

“Do what?”

“This.”

“Can’t have coffee with me? Or dinner?”

“Business coffees and dinners don’t involve kisses.”

“I’ll make an exception for you.”

“You know what will happen.”

“I’m *hoping* something will happen. I’m actively trying to make something happen, Kari.”

“And until the wedding, we can’t.”

“Because of some Wedding Protectors policy? You’re the owner. Change the policy.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

He gently tugged on her arm. She didn’t resist, their faces so close, so yearningly close.

“Uncomplicate it,” he whispered. “I feel the spark between us. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why hold back?”

“I don’t know.” Something in her eyes told him she did know but was holding back. “I need you to respect this.”

“I respect you. Always have. Always will.”

“Yes,” she said with a smile before finishing off her coffee. “You always did.”

“And do,” he noted.

“Thank you.”

“So I have to wait until their wedding’s done before I can go on a date with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I have no other choice. Now I have to not-date you.”

“What does that mean?”

“We can be friends who go out on not-dates.”

“Caleb.”

“What?”

“That’s not the point. You’re following the letter of the law, but not the spirit.”

“I have never been particularly spiritual.”

Her laugh made his heart lift. She thought he was joking. Of course, he would respect her boundary, but Kari was under the wrong impression about how right they were together. Just spending these short moments together reinforced a hard truth:

Young Caleb had been an ass.

He’d let the perfect woman go.

Current Caleb (he refused to name himself *Old* Caleb) was a man who learned from his mistakes.

And never repeated the same one twice.

Her phone rang. She held up one finger.

“Hi, Archie. You – what? She *what*? Oh, no! Call the bail bondsman. I’ll be there as fast as I can.” On her feet before she’d ended the call, Kari gave him a frantic look. “I’m sorry, Caleb but — ”

“Bail bondsman?”

“The mother-in-law is pressing assault charges against the fiancée.”

“Excuse me?”

Kari waved him toward the door. “The mother-in-law who tore her future daughter-in-law’s dress? The pepper spray standoff? Apparently, it got so bad the mother-in-law called the police and now the bride is being booked on assault charges.”

“You – you have a *bail bondsman* for this purpose?”

She nodded. “Several. On retainer. You have no idea how often we need them. And state laws vary, so...”

“Good to know in case Carolina gets ferocious.”

A black car pulled up next to the curb, the tinted window slowly rolling down. A very familiar face leaned across the passenger seat.

“Heya bud,” said Archie. “Sorry to interrupt, but we need to go to jail.”

“Kari, I — ”

Nothing he said would matter. Kari was on a mission.

Through the window, she grabbed his hand, giving it a warm squeeze. “Thanks for the coffee. I’ll see you as the wedding planning continues.”

Before he could correct her and thank her for buying coffee, she and Archie were off.

Leaving him more frustrated than ever.

Chapter Six



Kari sat in the tiny waiting room of the tiny terminal at the tiny private airport outside Boston. It was early Friday afternoon, and the weekend get-away traffic was starting to pick up. Blasé couples toting travel-worn Louis Vuitton duffel bags and cartons of live lobsters packed in ice began to drift in, asking for bottles of Pellegrino while they waited for their jets to be brought out on the tarmac.

One pair was accompanied by an equally unimpressed five-year-old wearing a Hello Kitty backpack, to whom a Gulfstream was apparently a kind of airborne SUV, only smaller.

Kari spent plenty of time in these terminals, as brides and grooms or their parents sent planes to transport her and any last-minute or unshippable necessities. Prescription refills, Yorkshire terriers, crates of orchids from Madagascar, even heavily insured wedding rings had been strapped into the seat next to her at one time or another.

Once, a pet cockroach, the kind that hissed on and off, sounding like a rogue tire going flat.

Today she had three carry-ons. Her own travel bag had gone ahead on the truck, so she only had to carry a small black Longchamp tote with her toiletries, laptop, and spare underwear. She also had a small box containing two pairs of night-vision goggles for the extra security personnel that Archie had requested. More awkward, and more worrisome, was a large plastic crate.

With airholes.

“It’ll be just a few minutes, Ms. Whitevelt. They’re fueling the Musselmans’ plane now.” The woman behind the desk looked harassed.

“No problem at all,” Kari answered, but the woman was already answering the ringing phone.

Kari found a seat and pulled out her phone. Sensing a pair of eyes on her, she turned to meet the interested gaze of the five-year-old. Her silky black hair was cut with bangs over dark, serious eyes.

“Where are you going?” the little girl asked.

“To a place called Southampton,” Kari answered.

“That’s where we’re going. My nanny got sick, and she cried, and now Mama and Daddy have to take me to the wedding. I like brides.”

“I do, too,” said Kari. “Most of the time.”

“Are you going to the wedding?”

“Yes—at least, I’m going to *a* wedding. Maybe it’s the same one. I work on weddings.”

The little girl’s face lit up. “You do? Weddings can be a job? That’s what I want to do!”

Kari laughed, and the girl’s father glanced up from his own phone screen. He was wearing a Red Sox baseball cap and shorts that had seen better days.

Hedge fund, Kari thought. His year-end bonus is more than our annual revenue.

He went back to his screen.

“What’s in there?” the girl asked, trying to peer into the openings in the crate.

“Pink rabbits,” Kari said.

“No, really. What’s in there?”

Kari smiled. “It’s really pink rabbits. They’re for the wedding.”

“Wow! Can I hold one? Please?”

“Sweetie, I don’t want to take them out, but you can pet one. Here.” She opened the top of the crate.

“They’re so soft! I didn’t know there were pink rabbits. I’m going to ask my daddy for one!”

“There aren’t actually pink rabbits,” Kari explained. “We—someone I work with—turned them pink. They were white. The lady who’s getting married writes books about imaginary animals that are pretty colors.”

Mindy Musselman—pen name Skyfall Gawain—was indeed a fantasy author, and a very successful one at that. Her wedding theme was taken from her books and involved a menagerie of baby animals in a pastel rainbow. Kari and Katie had been wary of the request for lavender goats and pale blue lambs.

But as always, they had found a way.

Wedding Protectors’ contract had a specific clause outlining their zero-tolerance policy toward animal cruelty. Ashanti began researching and experimenting with harmless, temporary dyes, and it was weeks before he finally arrived at just the right solution of natural vitamin B12 red drops for the rabbit herd. The office was littered with cotton balls in a spectrum from magenta to the palest seashell. The winning shade was named Fairy Bunny from Hell, courtesy of Nessa, a veteran of one too many lipstick collections.

“Did you use a wand? When you turned them pink? Or a spell?”

Kari laughed again, causing the man in the baseball cap to look over.

“Alexandria!” he said sharply.

“Bye,” Alexandria whispered to Kari, who gave her a small wave as she carefully closed the container of bunnies.

“Maybe I’ll see you there,” she whispered back.

Kari went back to her phone. The red dot showed 27 new emails and 12 texts. She hesitated, then opened the texts. Two

were from Katie, two were from Nilly, and the rest were cautiously identified as *Maybe: Caleb*.

Thanks, Verizon. I say the word mouse out loud one time and get forty ads for exterminators, but you can't commit to a positive ID for a specific phone number?

Without opening the thread, she could see only his last post, which read: *Please?*

Her thumb hovered over *Maybe: Caleb*.

“You mean, y’all don’t have a private waiting area? A club lounge?” an all-too-familiar female voice drawled.

“Carolina, honey, it’s already a private airport,” a man’s voice pleaded.

Kari froze. After coffee with Caleb two days ago, she’d needed a break. Turning him down meant white-knuckling it through sheer willpower, something she had plenty of when it came to standing up to a rogue biological father showing up uninvited to a wedding and starting a fistfight with the stepfather walking the bride down the aisle, but had very, very little of when it came to not throwing herself at Caleb and inviting him to her place for a week in bed.

But she had to remain strong. For the good of the company, because he was a —

Oh. Right. Not a client. Just the groom’s best man.

Kari had no truly good reason not to date him.

So why was she avoiding him?

Carolina made a dismissive sound. “There are an awful lot of people here for a truly private airport, Christian. Caleb, darlin’, *you* agree with me, don’t you?”

The whole preup issue was on pause for now, Carolina’s need for attention more important than the legal technicalities. Christian had made it clear, involving much fawning and repeated promises in writing, that he would always, always take care of her, ‘til death did they part.

So for now, Carolina was happy.

For now.

Kari was seated with her back to the reception desk. Keeping her face over her phone, she slipped her sunglasses on and scrunched down lower in her seat.

Please let their plane be ready to go, she prayed. Just let them board. I'm a good person, I send money to the Boys and Girls Club and the animal shelter. I recycle. I donated to that GoFundMe for the musician who lost his hearing, please let them all fly off to California and not see me—

“Ms. Whitevelt, your plane will be ready in five minutes.”

She sighed. Good to know. If she lived that long.

Then, “Kari!” and Carolina was rushing over, a cloud of Chanel Allure filling the waiting room. Christian trailed behind her. Even in high school, he'd been shorter than Caleb, and stockier, and she recognized him immediately. His right arm was in a sling made from an Hermès silk scarf, tied behind his neck; with his left he was pulling a cart piled with bags. Sunglasses hid most of his face, but an angry red scrape on his nose made Kari cringe in sympathy.

Caleb was in conversation with someone behind the desk.

“What a great coincidence!” Carolina exclaimed. “I was just going to text you! I need the name of the website designer that Megan Markle used for her wedding to Prince Harry, you have that contact information, right?” Her diamond ring sparkled in the sunlight, momentarily blinding Kari.

Or maybe she was having a stroke.

“Um, not with me,” Kari stumbled. Apparently her stock had risen with Carolina now that she'd been discovered in the right kind of place. “I'll, uh, get back to you with that.”

“Christian, maybe you were right. I'm glad we stayed here in the public room after all. Kari and I can go over some more of my ideas while we wait. I need you to get drone footage of the grass situation on that sad little buzzard island. We'll need to choose a shade and order enough gallons.”

“How are you, Kari?” Christian smiled and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “It’s been a long time.”

“Hello, Christian. I think the real question is, how are *you*?” She looked at his broken arm.

“Oh, I forgot,” Carolina said. “Y’all grew up together, right?”

Against her will, Kari’s eyes cut to Caleb, who seemed to be finishing up at the desk. Just then, he looked directly at her, smiling broadly, making her stomach flutter. He tucked his wallet into his inside jacket pocket and started toward them. He wiggled his phone at her, as if to say, *Why haven’t you replied to my texts?*

Her jaw dropped, mind scattering like dandelion seeds in a breeze.

The rabbits in the box made a series of movements that jolted against her leg, making her look down at them. An involuntary smile took over, the memory of the little girl’s joy at petting them filling her with a momentary calm.

“The Chang party, please,” announced a man in a uniform, jolting her.

The man in the baseball cap stood and began gathering his things. “Alexandria?” he said. Her open pink backpack lay on one of the chairs. “Where—?”

“Alexandria!” said the woman with him. She dropped her magazine and jumped up, looking around. “Alexandria!”

Everyone in the room was now paying attention.

“Oh my *God!*” The woman screamed, pointing out to the tarmac, racing to the glass door and opening it. Time seemed to slow down unbearably as they all watched the small girl trotting toward the flight line.

The pilot of the nearest small prop lane yelled out, “Clear!” To adults, this meant something: danger, keep clear.

To a five-year-old, not so much.

Alexandria kept chugging toward the action, a stuffed rabbit under one arm. She was approaching from the rear, and she was small enough not to be in the pilot's line of sight. The pilot started his engine, and the sudden, tornado-like whoosh of air from the propeller made her hesitate the slightest bit, her yellow dress suddenly whipping furiously around her.

Caleb bolted out the door so fast, Kari literally did not see him going. But she—and every single other person in the terminal—saw him skid to a halt on one knee about ten feet from Alexandria. It was too far away and too loud to hear anything, but the little girl stopped and turned to look at Caleb, who was holding out his arms and speaking to her.

At that moment, the movement, and Caleb's much larger form, caught the pilot's attention, and he cut the engine.

Suddenly, Alexandria's mother's terrified sobs were the only sound. Her father reached the door just as Caleb came through with the girl in his arms.

“Daddy, that plane made too much wind!” she complained, leaning toward him. “Why are you crying, Daddy? Did the Red Sox lose?”

On her four-inch heels, Carolina tottered over to Caleb and threw her arms around him. “You saved her life! You're a hero!”

Thirty or so iPhones were now recording the scene, as Carolina wept and clung to him.

An extremely blonde woman wearing a red cocktail dress and sneakers had risen from her seat in the corner and pushed her way through the crowd, followed by a short man recording her. She spoke to his phone camera, her back slightly turned to Caleb and Carolina.

“This is Saoirse Cannon, for Northeast Cable Network,” she announced. She stumbled slightly over the name of her current affiliation, an internet-only news station with three full-time employees and a handful of stringers. Her planned ascent to Fox News or CNN had hit a speed bump, Kari knew.

A speed bump named Congressman Parker Campbell and his fiancée, Persephone Tsongas. The scandal was more rumor than anything else, but the whispers in Boston were clear: Saoirse Cannon was *persona non grata* in higher circles after her slimy participation in a social media smear campaign that nearly ruined the couple's lives.

“We're here on the scene of the courageous rescue of a small child from certain death on an airport runway. You've seen our exclusive footage of the unfolding drama, now let's speak to the hero of the hour.”

She turned to Caleb.

“Tell us your name, sir,” she said. Caleb stared at her for a second, then walked away.

“His name is Caleb Mikelmas,” Carolina supplied. She stepped close to Saoirse, wiping under her eyes and giving the camera a brilliant smile. “He's the chief technology officer of Mikr0 Systems and a true American hero.”

“And you are..?”

“Carolina Mikelmas,” she responded, adding in an undertone, “Almost.”

A wave of revulsion rippled across Kari's skin, nerves firing in outrage at Carolina's craven attempt for media attention. The implication that she was Caleb's fiancée – a smooth transition so swift it was clear her brain operated on finding patterns that gave her as many eyes as possible in any given situation – made Kari dislike her even more.

“Ms. Whitevelt, your plane is ready.” A young man in a uniform had materialized at Kari's elbow.

The employee lifted the crate of rabbits and headed for a side door. Kari picked up her bag and the box of goggles. She didn't look back.

When they reached the steps to the Gulfstream, the young man climbed up first and settled the crate onto a leather seat.

“Your pet is all set,” he said politely. “Have a good flight.”

“They’re not my pets...” she started, but he was already at the door.

Kari sighed, then sat down next to her temporary pets and pulled out her phone. The red circle now showed fourteen unopened texts. She opened the app, pressed Select Messages, and took a breath.

Maybe: Caleb.

Was that a label – or a prediction?

Chapter Seven



Caleb stepped out of the Uber in front of the Wedding Protectors' building in the Seaport District, putting his phone away as he looked back at the driver, slowly closing the door.

Her mouth was a perfect O of shock as she looked up from her screen.

“Thank you SO much!” she choked out. “Or... is this tip a mistake?” While he typically preferred silence on his rideshares, Nalya had recognized him from a magazine article about Mikr0 and asked him a series of incisive questions in a thick Ukrainian accent about how to help her daughter to become a high-level coder.

Said daughter was only nine, but you could never start too young. He admired her spirit.

“No, no mistake,” Caleb answered with a smile, sliding a wad of hundreds toward her hand. “The app limits how much I can tip. With what you see on the screen, and this,” he said, her hand shaking as she accepted the cash, “you can get a pretty good laptop if you shop around. Have your daughter check out Girls Who Code.”

“I will! I... thank you! America is a... very good place.”

He saw the tears coming as she dabbed her eyes and turned away with a quick wave.

It was fine until they cried.

When he opened the office door, the receptionist looked up. *Damn. What was her name? Marley? Carla? Something*

like that.

“Oh, Mr. Mikelmas!” she said. “They’re in the small meeting room. I’ll let them know you’re here.” She scooted around the corner, then stuck her head back in. “Can I get you anything? An espresso or a latte? Vitamin C fizz? Housemade protein bar?”

“No, I’m all set. Thanks. I’m just here to meet my brother and—”

But she was gone.

He was not “all set.” Not even a little set. Why on earth had Carolina insisted he meet them here instead of at the restaurant? His guest lecture at Harvard’s famous CS50 computer science course had gone fine, but there weren’t as many questions as he had hoped. The students seemed overwhelmed. He was back out on the street half an hour after class ended, and that included shaking hands with the university president.

So here he was, in Kari’s offices. As he sat down, he thought he could detect her perfume in the air, but maybe that was just his imagination. He had no idea if he was going to see her—she hadn’t responded to his texts.

And how many times could he text without crossing the line into unwelcome communication?

His palms were sweating. Was it hot in here? For Pete’s sake, he wasn’t seventeen anymore.

The receptionist reappeared.

“They’d like you to join them,” she said, smiling.

“You know, I think I’ll just wait here. I can return some emails...”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Okay,” he said, getting up and following her.

“Caleb, thank goodness!” Carolina exclaimed when he entered the room. She jumped up from her chair and rushed over to him. Kari, Katie, and a woman he hadn’t met sat at a

round table, along with Christian, who was tapping a pen on the table with his good hand and looking like he would give anything to be someplace else.

Katie was typing on her laptop and barely noticed his entrance, but Kari met his gaze like a deer in the headlights. The woman he didn't know was leaning in to look at Katie's computer screen.

"Our legal department says their prenup specialist can meet with you tomorrow at 2:00," Katie said, finally looking up. "Hi, Caleb."

Prenup.

Were they back to fighting over this again?

Carolina put her hand on his arm and smiled up at him.

"Caleb, I just need to feel secure, you understand that, don't you? I just need to know that I'll be taken care of, no matter what." Though her head stayed pointed toward Caleb, her eyes crept toward his brother.

Christian jolted. "Do you think I would ever not take care of you? And what do you mean, 'no matter what'?" He was still wearing a sling, and he winced slightly, although Caleb wasn't sure if the pain was from his broken arm or Carolina's words.

"Horrible things can happen to people. Like – like what happened with Mama."

Kari shot Caleb a look that said, *What happened with Mama?*

Christian spoke before he could try to telepathically explain.

"Honey, your mother dying suddenly has nothing to do with a prenup."

"It has everything to do with us! What if something terrible happened to you, Christian?"

"That's what life insurance is for. Not a prenup."

She pursed her lips. “I think we should agree on the terms, that’s all,” she answered, a tiny shade of stubbornness coming into her tone. “I mean, look at MacKenzie Bezos. She got \$60 billion dollars.”

“It’s MacKenzie *Scott* now,” Caleb said, correcting her.

Carolina’s nostrils flared.

“And she’s given billions away,” Caleb added pointedly. “It’s her *mission* to give it away. A calling, even.”

Carolina looked like he’d asked if she wanted sushi rolled in pig excrement for lunch.

If she thought Caleb would side with her against his own brother, she was sorely mistaken. For someone who oozed Southern charm and had his little brother completely under her spell, Carolina was peculiarly inept at reading Caleb.

Unlike Kari.

Who was watching him like a hawk, soaking in his emotional tenor. Being the center of *her* attention was far more preferable than having Carolina’s claws in him, turning him into a pawn.

Christian cleared his throat. “The terms, Carolina, are that we love each other, and we are getting married. Because we want to spend our lives together. At least, that’s what I *thought* the terms were.”

“Well, I thought so, too, but if you don’t even love me enough to sign one little piece of paper that would make me feel safe and beloved and—and like I’m truly your wife, then maybe you don’t really love me at all! Maybe you think I’m some kind of common gold digger! Is that what you think, Christian?”

“I’m sure we can work all this out,” Katie soothed, clearly accustomed to interrupting couples in conflict. She was using the reasonable, big-sisterly tone that he imagined she had to develop as a coping technique over the years for just this type of situation. “Prenups really aren’t unusual at all, and of course they’re customized to each couple’s circumstances. The

word can sound negative or maybe a little cold, but they can actually be quite positive and helpful.”

“Of course Christian wants to take care of you, Carolina—I’ve known him most of my life and I know what a great guy he is,” Kari chimed in with a big smile, the kind you use to soothe big egos. “How did you two meet, anyway? We’ve all been out of touch for quite a while.”

Katie shot her a grateful look. Smooth save. Caleb admired their teamwork. The two women really were protecting the wedding, weren’t they? When Carolina had first mentioned hiring something called Wedding Protectors, he’d imagine beefy security guards with earpieces and frowns.

Navy SEALs. Grizzled old mercenaries. Bouncers.

Guys like Archie.

As he took in the soft curve of Kari’s blouse against her elbow and the way she smiled as she waited for Christian or Carolina to tell their meet-cute story, how sunlight glinted off the small gold earrings she wore and made her glow, he was very, very glad that instead of bouncers, he got his beautiful ex.

Emotional intelligence was sorely underrated. Wedding Protectors’ success was clearly founded on it.

“It was at Mikr0,” Christian began, clearly reluctant to start, but Carolina was giving him a wide-eyed, annoyed look that said *You go first*. “Caleb and I realized we needed a communications manager, and Carolina had this great resumé.”

“You make it sound like you plucked me out of a temp agency pile, Christian!” she protested, looking at Kari, then Katie, her long-suffering sigh managing to sound deeply southern. “I came highly, highly recommended by a former director whose niece works in PR for the Kardashians,” she said, her voice dropping low with emphasis at the mention of the famous family.

It took everything inside Caleb not to groan.

Christian's voice had sounded distracted at first but began to soften as he remembered, looking at her with a nostalgia that made his head tilt, shoulders relaxing. "The minute I saw her, in the conference room, I knew my life was going to change. She was wearing a beautiful, tailored blue suit." The corners of his mouth turned up.

"It was gray. It was *Prada*," Carolina corrected, again looking at Kari and Katie for emphasis. "I remember it perfectly. Fit like a glove." As if her hands remembered, they smoothed her current dress along the lines of her waist and hips. Christian watched, transfixed, before shaking his head like a dog that got wet.

"She accepted the job, and then she accepted *me*. I couldn't believe my luck." Christian chuckled quietly now, a broad smile on his face, dark brow softening with love. He was gazing at Carolina with such open-hearted adoration, it made Caleb's chest contract.

It was like watching a puppy trying to befriend a cat; she might tolerate him, might let him follow her around for a while, but sooner or later, he was going to annoy her and then the claws would come out.

This prenup request was the beginning of Christian's pain, he feared. Why did money – especially huge sums of it – ruin relationships like this? If anyone had learned that lesson, it was Caleb.

There was a reason he was single these days.

"He took me to the French Laundry for our first date," Carolina said reflectively. "It was kind of far, but he had a Targa 2s, so it went fast." At the memory of the car, she lit up, giving Christian the first authentic smile in this entire conversation.

Christian looked at Kari with something like embarrassment. "You know, that car was the first thing I bought when we started to make some real money. Black on red. I went a little crazy."

Kari grinned wider and looked at both of them, ever the focused professional. “Sounds like you two got off to a good start.”

“I knew she wasn’t the kind of girl you took out for pizza and a movie.”

Involuntarily, Caleb and Kari’s eyes met.

Their first date was pizza and a movie.

But Carolina seemed to be softening slightly now, too.

“It was a lovely evening. Gavin Newsom was at the next table. He ordered the duck. I believe I knew my life would change, too.” For the first time, she seemed to really see Christian. “They looked so happy.”

“They?”

“The governor and his wife.” Her tone was dreamy. “My lawyer says *they* have a prenup.”

Caleb flinched.

See? *Claws*.

“Your *lawyer*? What *lawyer*?” his brother protested.

“My *lawyer*, Christian. You have a lawyer. I have one, too. I am an adult. Adults have lawyers. Even in Alabama.”

She gave a little sob, turned on her Manolo Blahnik heel, and ran out of the room.

As best she could in those shoes.

So much for Kari’s obvious attempt to get them past the conflict by bringing up their shared past.

Christian heaved a sigh and stood up.

“Chris...” Caleb said as his brother passed him.

His brother’s sigh turned into a groan. “It’s okay. I got this.”

But he didn’t sound sure.

Caleb couldn’t help but compare.

It was wrong of him, he knew, but sitting at a table with Carolina and Kari made it hard not to. Their names even began with the same syllable.

But that was as similar as the two women would ever be.

Eyebrows up, Katie leaned forward as she closed her laptop, giving Kari a sensible look. “Here we go.”

Kari just shrugged, squaring some papers in front of her. “They’ll figure it out.” Her eyes caught Caleb’s. “Is this really the first time she’s brought up a prenup?”

“As far as I know.”

“Any new financial information about Mikr0? Something that might tip off a family member of hers?” Kari was treating Carolina’s little outburst like it was nothing. Unflappable, she treated that whole little scene like it was nothing more than a glitch.

Something to handle.

An issue to work around.

“No.”

“Nerves,” the other woman in the room – *Randi? Ronnie?* – an older, sophisticated employee with a smooth voice and polished manners, said in a bright tone. “When you marry a powerful, rich man, it causes some serious central nervous system twanging.”

“If anyone would know about that, it’s you, Ranney,” Katie said with more sympathy than Caleb expected.

Ranney. Right.

“Prenups that go both ways protect everyone,” Ranney said smartly, her eyes shifting to a flat affect when she looked at Caleb. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Mikelmas. We shouldn’t be talking about me. This is about your brother and future sister-in-law.”

“Experience matters,” he said diplomatically, giving her as warm a smile as he could muster. “I take it you’ve had your share of experience in this arena?”

“Love, marriage, a child, and the divorce of all divorces.”

“I see.”

“We don’t throw the D word around much here at Wedding Protectors,” Kari interjected. “Too much D just inserts a lot of pain into an otherwise pleasurable experience.”

Katie began coughing. Ranney pulled her lips in as if redistributing lipstick. Closing her eyes as if in pain, Kari’s face tightened a bit, then she blushed.

“Not *that* D! Divorce! D is for divorce!” she sputtered, the sentence uttered at the worst possible moment, for Carolina reappeared, eyes on the ground, searching for what turned out to be a small bag from a local boutique.

She froze in place, hand on the bag’s looped baby blue ribbons, Christian in the doorway.

“You’re talking about *divorce*?” she said in an icy tone. “You don’t believe my marriage will last?” For some reason, her vitriol was focused on Caleb.

“We were talking about someone else,” Katie began, but Carolina walked up to Caleb and poked him in the chest, her long fingernail like a tack on a bulletin board.

“Just because *your* relationship with Jennifer fell apart before the finish line doesn’t mean mine will. Divorce! Hmph. How could you, Caleb?” Turning to Christian, she asked, “Do you think we’ll end in divorce?”

Poor Christian looked as confused as Caleb felt.

“What? No! Of course not, Caro – ”

Carolina huffed, glared at Caleb with a laser focus that would have turned anyone else into a flaming cherry bomb, and left the room quickly, poor Christian on her heels, sputtering.

The four who were left exchanged glances. Caleb guessed this kind of scene wasn’t entirely unprecedented at Wedding Protectors, but obviously he wasn’t used to it.

“Ranney is right.” Katie declared.

“I am?” Ranney seemed genuinely surprised.

“Nerves,” Katie said. “It happens to every bride. And most grooms.”

“I can’t say I didn’t see it coming,” Caleb replied. “I guess I was hoping it was my imagination.”

Tap tap tap

Everyone pivoted toward the sound. “Ashanti! Perfect timing,” Kari gushed.

The man chose that moment to enter with a basket of warm cheese puffs and a bottle of cold crémant. He hesitated, picking up on a negative vibe, looking to Katie for a hint.

“Just put it down here, Ash,” she directed. “We have a stressed-out bride, but I’m sure they’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Some guests just left the office, but perhaps they went out for a breath of fresh air.” He set the basket and the open bottle on the table, gestured to the cabinet that held glassware, and left as unperturbed as when he’d entered.

“Caleb, have you officially met Ranney Martini?” Katie asked him. “Ranney is the team leader for your wedding—um, your *brother’s* wedding. She’s handled many of our high-profile events, and she’s raised a grown daughter, so she’s basically unshakeable.”

Ranney stood up and extended her hand to Caleb. “I wouldn’t say I’m unshakeable, but I certainly know when to shake and when not to.”

He shook her hand and smiled. “A valuable skill in any business.”

“With a last name like mine, I get to make that joke.”

It took a few beats, but he started laughing.

“Good one.”

Her wink was infectious and joyful.

“I think I’m going to go make a few calls,” she said. “If we reconvene, I’ll just be at my desk.”

“Looks like not today,” Caleb said, frowning at his phone. “Christian sends his apologies. Carolina is off to something called the O Spa to recover from the stress of this morning.”

“Ah.” Katie and Kari met Ranney’s look with amusement.

Ranney started tapping on her phone. “I’ll be sure to ask that Henry take care of her.”

“You know this O Spa place?” Caleb asked as the women seemed to share a secret that made him feel distinctly out of place.

“O Spa is a very unique venue,” Kari said diplomatically. “Henry is one of the massage therapists.”

“I see. Good for Carolina. Maybe someone can finally rub her the right way.”

“Caleb!” Kari gasped, that embarrassed blush back in her cheeks.

“Well, then,” Ranney said, looking up from her phone. “I have details to manage. It was so nice to meet you.”

“I’m right behind you. Wait one second.” Katie gathered her laptop, folders, and pens, then paused and went to the cabinet. She took out four stemless wine glasses and filled two, handing one to Ranney. “It’s 5:30, and we all deserve this.” She glanced between Kari and Caleb. “I’ll leave the rest for you two.”

Kari had been mostly silent since the awkward scene began. Carolina had brought up her prenup in the meeting, he supposed, because she expected support from Wedding Pros. But it had been painful to watch Christian’s face as his fiancée put a price on their love.

Or *her* love, anyway.

And that Jennifer comment had stung. His future sister-in-law knew how to land a punch. Ouch.

But as he watched Kari, took in her scent with each breath, let himself admire the brush of her hair against her shoulders, those sweet warm eyes, and how she was so deeply present, he felt the sting fade.

Because Jennifer was his past.

Technically, Kari was, too.

But second chances were worth a shot, even if it was a long shot.

And if Caleb had learned anything in business, it was this: Long shots paid off big.

Chapter Eight



This was getting messy.

And who was *Jennifer*?

Kari had known Christian since he was fourteen, when the Mikelmas family had moved to Marshfield, and she started dating Caleb. Christian had been a serious kid, nerdy and quiet, but sweet. She didn't remember him ever having a girlfriend, although that was a long time ago, of course.

Now he was a successful entrepreneur and about to be fabulously wealthy.

Along with his older brother. Who was sitting across from her, texting intently, thumbs flying. An older brother who had been Kari's first love.

An older brother who had, apparently, been in a long-term relationship with someone named Jennifer.

A relationship that hadn't made it to the finish line, whatever that meant.

She cleared her throat.

"I still cannot believe there was such a big misunderstanding," she started, smoothing out her racing heart as she tried frantically to separate her professional responsibilities from her private needs.

Needs that grew exponentially the longer she was in the same room as Caleb.

He looked up from his screen, distracted. “A very big one, if she thinks my brother is going to sign a premarital contract that favors *her*. I’m talking to our lawyers now. Luckily, it’s three hours earlier there.”

“No—I mean the part where I thought you were the groom, Caleb.”

“Right. That.” His face filled with a look she could barely handle. “You actually thought I would marry *Carolina*?”

She hesitated.

“It seemed odd, but... people change. I hadn’t seen you in years.”

“I learned that lesson the hard way, but at least I learned it in time.” He grimaced. “My last girlfriend, two years ago. Jen. She was... great.”

Kari’s heart twisted in her chest.

“She’d go rock climbing with me, or whitewater kayaking, but she could put on a ball gown and look gorgeous. Her smile would light up a room. And she was really smart, she could talk about anything with anyone! We had so much fun—I couldn’t believe my luck.”

Jen. Jennifer. Okay, then. The perfect woman.

Wow.

Kari swallowed hard. Funny how you could really want to hear every detail about something and at the same time, not want to hear another word.

“Oh. What happened?”

Caleb leaned forward and filled the two remaining wine glasses. He walked around the table and handed her one, then sat down next to her, bent forward, his elbows on his knees.

“Things were going really well with Mikr0, and I was starting to think about the future. I figured she’d be part of it. I asked a philanthropy consultant to come by one Saturday morning. I wanted Jen’s input.” He gave a little snort.

“And?”

“I’m giving away ninety percent of my net worth,” he said slowly, watching Kari’s face. “After the sale goes through. Nearly a billion dollars. I’ll keep enough to be comfortable for the rest of my life, and probably keep at least three or four generations after me in relative luxury. But I’m pulling a MacKenzie Scott. She’s doing a better job than I ever will, but...”

She absorbed that. “Caleb, that’s incredible! You can do so much good in the world! I—I don’t know what to say.”

He gave a bitter laugh and took a drink of his wine. “Jen sure knew what to say. She said I had lost my mind. She said she wasn’t going to live in some little house in the suburbs and change diapers and take one vacation a year. She said she deserved better.”

“*That’s* what she took from your conversation? I mean, ninety percent of your half of a 2.3-billion-dollar sale leaves you with – ”

“Right. I’ll still have extremely high net worth, but I can’t fund a rocket ship. Jen wanted more.”

“Ouch.”

His pain made her stomach clench, made her want to wipe the frown lines off his forehead as he remembered something awful.

“Yeah.”

Kari held herself back from touching him, pulling at her earlobe instead, emotion radiating through her chest. “What happened?” she asked softly, her words, her tone – who knew which? – making his shoulders relax, his eyes go warm.

Warmer.

Then bitter.

“We fought about it all weekend. Neither of us would budge. She moved out that Monday.”

“Oh, Caleb. How awful.”

“Not for her. She lives in Switzerland now, with the son of some Saudi prince.”

“Oh, Caleb,” she repeated, failing to find words that could possibly be enough to convey how she felt so much for him in that moment. Felt his sorrow. His sense of betrayal. His frustration.

His hurt.

“You know what’s funny? Until the end, she kind of reminded me of you.”

Kari stared at him. Her thoughts—and her pulse—were racing, out of control as she wondered what was happening right now. Pulled in so many directions, she couldn’t deny the ripple of excitement tingling her skin.

And her sadness for Caleb’s dejection about his past love.

“And now Christian..?” She wanted to change the direction of the conversation, give herself time to think. To get a grip. Things were moving too fast, in unexpected directions. The past collided with the present, Kari from twelve years ago remembering being ghosted by the man before her, who was pouring his guts out to her about billion-dollar problems.

Empathy pumped through her blood, a force of nature she couldn’t control.

And yet there were old fears blended in there, too, frothing as fate floated along.

She stood up and walked to the window.

“I can’t believe he’s making the same mistake after he watched what happened with Jen.” Caleb shook his head. “But when it’s happening to you, you just don’t want to see it.” He joined her at the window, and they stood in silence, looking out. The sun was getting low, dipping behind the city buildings and spreading a soft amber glow.

“You think Carolina is like Jen?”

He snorted, laughter pouring out of him, so genuine and light that Kari felt a wave of unreality wash over her. “Hah. No. Carolina is *nothing* like Jen, other than the fact that

they're both ruthless about money. At least Carolina's upfront about it."

"Sounds like you're projecting a lot of your pain from Jen onto Carolina."

Her eyebrows lifted as their eyes met, his face contorting with a sequence of realizations that made her want to laugh.

Kari held back.

"Good grief," he said in a hushed tone. "You're right. You really are perceptive. Always were." The way he took her in, analyzing her as his eyes crawled over her face, reading the angles of her face, watching her as if she were a work of art, made Kari's breath halt.

"It's not something I can control," she confessed, one shoulder going up in a shrug. "I see patterns."

"You'd make an incredible QA analyst. Or a crime profiler," he said, then smacked his forehead.

Her turn to laugh. "I don't need any job offers, Mr. Mikelmas."

"No, Kari, you don't," he said quietly, taking in a long breath. "You're doing just fine on your own."

"Thank you. And some days, I feel like a crime profiler," she added, thinking of pregnant Talia and the Grunren-Miller wedding.

"Really?"

She waved the thought away. "It's not a billion-dollar tech company, but I like to think Katie and I have built something special."

"That's because *you're* special."

"You don't need to flatter me."

A serious tone in his words made her heart speed up, electricity zooming through nerve pathways. "I never flatter. Take the compliment, Kari. Your company is wildly successful because you're so emotionally attuned to the world. I miss that."

If she were a risk-taker, she would throw herself into his arms, desperate for the old comfort of his body, intrigued by the newness of their mutual chance. Caleb wasn't a lanky adolescent anymore, and she wasn't the young woman she once was. Being held by him, kissing him, making love with him this time would be so different.

Higher stakes.

"I was supposed to have dinner with them," he said, cutting through her thoughts, "but I guess that's off. Would you have dinner with me? We have a lot to catch up on. I might have to break away to talk to the attorneys, but we—"

She wanted, more than anything, to say yes. Take the risk. Give herself over to the new-old.

And yet, she couldn't.

Really couldn't.

"I can't, Caleb."

"Oh, of course, you have plans—"

"No. I don't have plans, but you're a client! I mean, not the way I thought you were, but you're still part of this wedding. It would be totally against our policy. I can't see you personally in any way."

"Kari—"

And then she was in his arms, and his mouth was on hers, and it was like coming home—no, better than that, like finding your way back to the only happy, safe, warm place in the world, the only place you ever belonged. But the boy she remembered had become a man, and she was filled with a desire so overpowering, she literally felt faint. Pulling back, she dropped the tiniest bit, and he held her tighter, closer, as his lips moved to her neck, sliding down, so hot that she moaned.

And her primal sound echoed through the room, returning to her from every direction... or from one direction... or... a startled shriek burst into her awareness.

Caleb's head snapped up, and they both turned to see Nessa backing out the door, her expression of shock turning into a grin of delight that she covered with her hand.

“Sorry!” she called.

“Oh, no!” Kari burst out, running after her. “Nessa!”

Leaving Caleb standing alone.

Chapter Nine



“Okay. Tell me the whole thing. From the beginning.” Katie curled her legs under her on Kari’s deep white sofa.

“You know the beginning,” Kari said miserably. She was stretched out on the other end of the sofa, crumpled white tissues scattered around her like the losing side in a long, fierce snowball fight.

Katie had prepped the area: Three new boxes of tissues were stacked on the floor beside Kari. She had pulled the cocktail table closer to the sofa and laid out all the recommended food groups: a plate of cupcakes from Flour Bakery (sugar), a bowl of Ashanti’s guacamole and a basket of fresh tortilla chips (salt), three bottles of wine in a big bucket of ice (alcohol), and—in the freezer for later—two pints of espresso gelato (caffeine).

They could survive here for days if necessary.

“Tell me again,” Katie instructed. “We need the whole picture.”

“He moved to my town in high school,” Kari began. She blew her nose and took a big gulp of wine, then lay back down.

“I was tall, and he was taller than me, so that was a big deal right there. He had long, wavy dark hair, and he played basketball *and* guitar, and he was taking all the AP classes... I don’t know, Katie, I guess it all sounds silly.” She propped herself up on one elbow. “I read that baby ducks totally bond to the first creature they see, whether it’s the mother duck or a

cat or a human. It's called imprinting. I think we imprinted on each other."

"If I never see my high school boyfriend again, it will be too soon," Katie said, shuddering. "I heard he has a podcast selling courses on how to flip houses by paying back taxes on old people's houses and evicting them."

"What a creep!"

"Exactly. So tell me all about your amazing first high school boyfriend who turned into a *billionaire*," she said flatly.

"I could tell him anything," Kari continued, lost somewhere fifteen years in the past, the memory hazy golden and warm inside her.

Or maybe that was the wine.

"He was my best friend. Only better because..."

"And he was the first boy you ever..?"

"Of course. Eventually."

Katie smiled at her. "It's too perfect, Kari."

"I know, right?" Kari wailed. "And you know what they say..."

"If it's too good to be true, it's too good to be true," they finished together.

"What happened?" Katie asked. "Why didn't you just stay together?"

"We went off to college—he went to Stanford and I stayed in the East. And he didn't come home that first summer, he got an internship in Silicon Valley. Which paid off, I guess, but we were only nineteen. We grew apart."

Skepticism didn't look good on Katie, but it was an expression she wore often.

"'Grew apart' is a lame cover up for something else."

"It's hard to admit when you're the one who's been ghosted," Kari choked out, shoving down all the old feelings with a bite of salted caramel cupcake.

“Ghosted?”

“Mmmph.” Suddenly, the mouthful of gooey, salty-sweet cake tasted like rejection.

“He ghosted you?”

“Basically. I went to Simmons, thinking I’d become an occupational therapist. Caleb went for the big guns and got into Stanford. We saw each other at Christmas and spring break. Emailed, video chatted here and there, though tech wasn’t as video-easy as it is now. Loads of instant messaging. But he was so busy, and then he got an internship with the biggest tech company in the world.”

Katie remained silent, just listening.

“That’s when it fell apart. He didn’t come home for the summer. And I tried to get him to take a weekend for me to visit, but he ‘couldn’t.’”

“What?”

“He worked 100-, 120-hour weeks. Slept under his desk. Back then, Caleb was just another guy who wanted to be the next Steve Jobs.”

“He’s close.”

“I know! He gave up our relationship for it, too.”

“He dumped you?”

Discomfort, complicated and fuzzy, filled her chest and head.

“No. I did. He wouldn’t let me visit – said he couldn’t take time off – and he couldn’t come home. Said he’d see me again at Christmas. Maybe. Because they hired him to work part-time. He was that good. It hurt so much, Katie. So much. To be rejected for an internship. That wasn’t the Caleb I knew.”

“He wasn’t the ambitious type in high school?”

“Sure. Smart. Valedictorian. Basketball player, musician – the whole package. And yet, there was always balance. Once he moved to the West Coast, there was no balance. No time for me. I couldn’t just wait and hope. And he was always so

excited about all the progress he made at his internship. Excitement he used to have for looking at the stars with me on the beach or going to a music festival at a town common. Suddenly, Caleb was nothing but work. Work, work, work. And he wouldn't even squeeze a few days out of his work work work life for us. For me."

"Oh, wow."

"Exactly."

"I never tried to stop him from pursuing his dreams. Whatever Caleb wanted, I wanted for him. There was no room for me, though. And I was mature enough to see that I'd always be waiting for table scraps."

"Wise for a nineteen-year-old."

"I credit my mom. She listened. Pointed out some issues. Let me decide on my own."

"So you dumped him by phone?"

"Worse. I kept calling him. Leaving voicemails. He was 'too busy' with a deliverable. I mailed him back his promise ring with a letter."

"Low tech."

Frozen by her friend's words, Kari just stared at the frosting on her cupcake.

Their phones buzzed at the same time.

Carolina.

*I'm sorry about the meeting, but it all worked out for the best.
Christian agrees we should be married in a more suitable
place*

*An island is fine, but in the South, and with lots of room for
everyone, and a golf course for Daddy*

*I'm sure you have some suggestions, just put a proposal
together*

Cost no object

“Well,” Katie said, “it will be easier to protect. Easier for you and Ranney. And Archie. Archie always loves a moat.”

Kari snorted at the moat joke, which wasn't a joke. The man once sent them a detailed proposal, complete with a construction company's quote, for building an *actual* moat around a small castle in northern California when two Hollywood stars married each other.

Archie had included a line for forty alligators.

And no food for the beasts.

“Keep 'em nice and hungry,” he'd said. *“Paparazzi need to learn to respect boundaries.”*

Kari shook the memory away and focused on the texts from Carolina.

“She doesn't say anything about her prenup. Do you think this means he signed?”

Katie shrugged, as Kari's phone buzzed again.

Maybe: Caleb.

PLEASE READ! said the first text bubble.

Three bouncing dots. Kari held the phone like it might explode any second and blow her to bits. Then:

I am so sorry, Kari. I hope it did not cause a problem for you to be caught like that. All my fault.

Nothing more.

She handed it to Katie.

“What actually happened in there? I heard a little noise, but nothing much.”

“He was telling me about his girlfriend, and he asked me to dinner, and I said no, and then he was kissing me. And I

was kissing him! And then Nessa walked in.”

“That’s... really bad timing.” Katie was processing. “Wait—he has a girlfriend?”

“No, no, his ex-girlfriend—they broke up because he’s going to give all his money away. Or most of it.”

“And he asked you to dinner? Why did you say no? Go now, while he can still afford to pick up the check!”

Kari was in no mood for humor.

“What do you mean, *why*? We have a specific clause in the employment contract about that! Absolutely no personal fraternizing between Wedding Pros staff and the client side. It could not be more clear, Katie!”

“That was intended more to keep Nessa from going home with an usher, or God forbid, a minister—even professionals are subject to random acts of wedding romance. Not that I would call Nessa a professional.” She chuckled. “But this is completely different. Caleb is an old friend of yours. He predates the contract.”

“The rules have to apply to everyone, Katie.”

Kari looked at her phone again. A new bubble.

Kari? Are you there?

“Arrrgh!” She buried her head in a toss pillow.

“Answer him!” Katie urged. “Remember your date with Professor Superhero? Caleb’s way beyond that. What’s the matter?”

“It’s against the rules, and—and—I’m so scared!”

“Scared of what? He’s hardly a stranger—if he does something wrong, you can tell his mother, for goodness sake. I’ll bet she loved you. Still loves you.”

Kari couldn’t argue with that.

“You don’t understand. For my whole adult life, he’s been in the back of my mind. He’s been The One. Everyone I’ve dated has been measured against Caleb. But I haven’t seen him in twelve years—people change. I knew him as a teenager, but really, I don’t know him at all now. What if he’s not The One anymore? Then there’s *nobody!*”

“Like, if you had a huge crush on Chris Hemsworth for years, and then you meet him, and it turns out he’s a huge Coldplay fan?”

“Sort of. Not exactly.”

Katie finished a sip of wine and tilted her head, musing. “I would still sleep with him, Coldplay aside.”

“He’s happily married with kids!”

Their phones buzzed. More Carolina.

I should have the featured wedding in The New York Times, it read. In the Vows section. Please arrange

“Uh oh,” Katie said. “Remember when I said Carolina seemed pretty reasonable?”

I asked Kari for Meghan Markle’s website designer, but when I called, they said they’re booked. Call and tell them to find time. I don’t think they know who I am!

Katie looked at her watch. “I think she’s had a few cocktails. Shouldn’t they be having make-up sex right about now?”

“I find that almost impossible to imagine,” Kari said, trying. “Unless maybe something with role-playing—”

“STOP!” Katie laughed. “Anything more from Caleb?”

Kari opened her texts.

Okay. Maybe you're asleep.

Then:

I will respect your wishes. Leaders have to set examples. Good for you. Sorry if I've overstepped. I can't undo what's already been done.

Her heart sank.

“I guess that’s it. He says he will respect my wishes.” She looked up at Katie. “I just wish I knew what my wishes were!”

She burst into tears.

“Oh, sweetie,” said Katie, “Oh, honey. Here—have a chip. Ash made them, I think he ground the corn himself. No? Just one? Avocado is very good for your skin. And you’re going to get wrinkles if you keep crying like that. Oh, Kari.”

Sniffing, Kari obediently accepted a chip loaded with guacamole, but she didn’t take a bite.

“I told him no, I ignored his messages, I basically sent him away, and when he actually listens to me and goes away, I just want him back—what’s *wrong* with me? *You’re* not like this—you knew what you wanted, and you have it, and you’re happy.”

Katie smiled a little. “Not every minute of every day. It’s not that simple. Plus, I’m single like you.”

“I just mean in general! You have your act together and I don’t!”

“No, I don’t!”

“Yes, you do.”

“Two words, Kari: James McCormick. Proof I certainly don’t have my love life act together.”

The doorbell rang. They both jumped a mile.

“That’s weird,” Kari said nervously. “I don’t think I ordered anything. And it’s kind of late.”

“I’ll go with you,” Katie said. She looked around the room. “Don’t you have a doorstop, or a cast-iron pan, or something?”

“You know I don’t cook, and who has doorstops? Why would you need those?”

“Something heavy to defend us with.”

“You’ve been spending *waaaaay* too much time with Archie.”

“Fine. I’ll just take my phone and video everything.”

“That’ll scare them, I’m sure,” Kari said sarcastically.

“It’s how criminals are apprehended,” Katie responded grimly. “Let’s go.”

At the door, Kari squinted through the little peephole. “Nothing. Nobody. Maybe it was a mistake.”

“Just one sec.” Katie was occupied with setting her phone to Record. She took a step back, framing her shot. “Okay... open it!”

Leaving the metal security hook in place, Kari turned the deadbolt and cracked the door open.

Silence. She peered to the left. She peered to the right. She closed the door and unhooked the metal bar, then swung the door wide open.

Kari’s gaze dropped, Katie’s video lens following. There was a medium-sized box on the doormat.

“Don’t touch it!” Katie gasped.

“Kate, no one is sending me an exploding device.” Kari bent down and picked up the box. She carried it back to the living room, where she pushed aside platters of food to make room on the cocktail table. “Even the baby-mama wedding crasher wasn’t *that* mad at me. Now, Grunge, on the other

hand, probably shouldn't open any mysterious packages without a full bomb squad at the ready."

She peeled up the tape and lifted the flaps. A smaller box was inside.

"Binoculars," she said in a puzzled voice. "Big ones."

She pulled them out. Underneath was a book, pocket-sized. "*Guidebook to the Stars: Astronomy for Beginners*," she read.

"Kari, what is this? Who is it from?" Katie was still videotaping.

"I'm not... oh, my God." Folded in the bottom of the carton was a navy-blue blanket. "Oh, my God," she repeated.

"*What?*" Katie asked. She put down the phone.

"I think... I think it's from Caleb. We used to go to the beach at night and try to figure out the stars and the constellations. It must be from him, he must have sent this."

On the very bottom was an envelope. Kari opened it, sliding out a folded sheet of paper.

Katie cleared her throat. "Are you seriously going to stand there and tell me you and your high school boyfriend were out on a blanket on the beach at night, and what you were doing was *astronomy*?"

But Kari didn't answer. She didn't even hear the question. She was reading the note:

I will see you at the wedding. Save the last dance for me. Because when it's over, I won't be a client anymore. And I want to see heaven with you again.

Chapter Ten



Three months later

Kari stood up from her desk and stretched. The wedding of the past weekend had been more physically challenging than usual.

She'd taken a moment toward the end of the country-club reception to brush her hair and reapply lipstick, and she was standing in front of the ladies' room mirror when she heard chatting from the stalls.

"Trip says the guys from Phi Delt are meeting up to throw Meredith in the pool. If we hurry, we can get down there to see it."

"Seriously? I wouldn't miss that for the world—those mink eyelashes could probably swim to the edge by themselves."

"I can't *believe* Charlie is marrying her. When *we* were dating, he said he only liked natural, sporty girls. Like me."

"Meredith's idea of a sport is the hundred-yard dash to the shoe department at the Neiman Marcus sale."

Their laughter was still echoing as Kari bolted out the door and made for the pool, pausing briefly to pull off her heels. This was exactly why she never wore tight skirts on the job. She careened around the corner just as a drunken group of men in tuxedos appeared behind the diving board, carrying the giggling, apparently delighted bride.

“My goodness,” she was saying. “If I’d known Charlie had so many big, strong, handsome friends, I might not have said yes so quickly! Just where are you all taking me?”

The wedding photographer, with the intuitive sense for impending drama that had made him such a success, followed closely behind. The bride’s tipsy pleasure at the hijinks morphed quickly into panic, however, when she realized where they were headed. She began to struggle.

“Boys, you’re very sweet, but I think I’d like to walk. Boys?”

“Walk?” one of them replied. “*Walk?* Why walk when you can swim? Ol’ Charlie always liked the girls on swim team. You’re gonna be on our swim team—where is ol’ Charlie, anyway?”

“I don’t want to swim! Put me down!”

“Fabulous!” the photographer shouted. “Turn this way a little, Meredith!”

“Put her down now, gentlemen, or I will have to tase you,” Kari said calmly. The authority in her voice caught their attention, and they hesitated. She stepped between them and the water.

“I’m quite serious,” she continued, hands on her hips in a position of authority. Archie had taught them that this triggered a flood of testosterone through the bloodstream, conferring power.

Kari needed every drop.

“I have a license, I am authorized by the bride’s parents to take appropriate action, and I promise you, I will not miss. Now put her *down*.”

Momentum carried them another few steps forward, but they were uncertain. Kari snapped her purse open.

They stopped.

“Let’s see the weapon!” The photographer had forgotten all about the bride and was focused on Kari. She could

practically hear him thinking *Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Photography*.

A few seconds of silence passed; even the bride had ceased her shrieking. The former fraternity brother on the far right let loose his grip on Meredith's ankles. That was all it took; they dropped her. Literally dropped her.

At that moment, two women staggered down the path, presumably the Schadenfreude Sisters from the ladies' room. They rushed to the fallen Meredith, helping her up and brushing off her \$35,000 gown with hand-stitched feather trim, mercifully still dry and fluffy as a baby chick. A very well-dressed baby chick.

Kari closed her bag and turned to the photographer, who was clearly disappointed. "If even one of those shots *ever* appears *anywhere*, Franz—and I mean, even in the Brockton Rotary Club newsletter—you will be photographing children on Santa's lap at the Bass Pro Shop. Dressed as an elf in waterproof green tights. Am I clear?"

Franz's face went flat. "Sure, Kari. Nothing to see here." Palms up, he backed away, camera hanging around his neck like a millstone.

The rest of the wedding had gone off without drama.

She had definitely earned Wedding Pros' fee, but she thought she'd maybe pulled a hamstring doing it. All day Sunday, she'd done only two things: soaked in a bathtub full of Epsom salts and avoided Caleb's texts.

One felt therapeutic.

The other made her need a therapy appointment.

She sat back down at her desk and Slacked Ashanti.

Any chance of a sports massage appointment tomorrow?

Sports?? he responded. *Who is this for??*

I did a pentathlon Saturday. Ran cross-country to a pool. Verbal fencing. Target shooting event was canceled. Shut up.

LOL sounds more like a horrible triathlon. I'll see what I can do

xoxo

Ranney knocked on the open door. “Kari? Can we go over some of the details for the Mikelmas wedding? I have to start shipping everything to St. Alban’s Island tomorrow.”

“Yes, sure. Are you in good shape?”

Smoothing her hands along her hips, Ranney frowned. “Well, I work out with a trainer twice a week, and I spin—”

“I mean, for the wedding!” Kari smiled.

“Oh. I think so. It’s just that it’s the biggest wedding I’ve ever done—800 guests is a lot. A lot that can go wrong. And the bride is very... particular. I have so many lists, I actually have a list of my lists.”

“Let’s start at the beginning,” Kari prompted. “The first event is a cocktail party, right?”

“Yes, Wednesday night. By the pool at St. Alban’s golf club—”

“The *pool*?” Kari interrupted, sitting up straight. “Damn. You need to stick close to Carolina. What’s she planning to wear? And you have to watch closely for anyone who might have too much to drink. Tell the bartender to let you know. She can swim, right?”

Alarm filled Ranney’s face. “I don’t know. I can find out. What’s this about?”

“I had a bad pool experience this weekend.”

“The party designer plans to have floating candles surrounded by magnolia blossoms—”

“Water *and* fire? Seriously?” Kari snapped.

Ranney just stared at her.

“I’m sorry,” Kari said. “I pulled a muscle, and it’s making me testy. And I almost tased some people two days ago

because of a pool incident, and I really want the Mikelmas wedding to go smoothly.”

“Tased?” Ranney grinned at her. “Archie will be so jealous.”

“*Almost* tased. Almost.”

“You’re such a pro,” Ranney cooed. “The *almost* part is why you’re so in demand, Kari. Real power comes in not needing to use it.”

“Sometimes I wonder, but thanks.”

“I’m sure the Mikelmas wedding will be as smooth as the last one.”

She rubbed her forehead. She did indeed want it to go smoothly. She wanted to arrive at St. Alban’s Island, somewhere off the coast of Georgia, without incident or delays. She wanted to supervise quietly, in the background, while Ranney and Marlo and Archie’s team did the heavy lifting. She wanted to go back to her room at night and have a quiet glass of wine and an uninterrupted night’s sleep.

And she wanted Carolina to have the picture-perfect, drama-free wedding of her dreams (if her dreams really were drama-free).

But what she wanted most was to greet Caleb as the old friend he was, fondly but distantly, and then go back to work. She hadn’t heard a word from him since the night he sent the package, months ago, and that was fine with her. They were long-ago lovers, and sure, when they met again by chance, there was a crazy little spark. But the reality was that they lived very far apart and led very different lives.

And she was totally fine with that. Totally. Totally *fine*.

When the time was right, she would meet the right person, and everything would fall into place. Right? All her friends said so. Katie agreed.

Katie, who was in Paris this very minute, with James, posting a constant stream of Instagram photos. Platters of

oysters, piles of orange boxes from Hermès, Parisian children playing in the Parc Monceau.

Single Katie had caved in yet again when local billionaire James McCormick had called, *again*.

Proving that there are many, very different versions of happily ever after. Right?

“Kari?” She became aware that Ranney was speaking to her, a concerned look on her face. “Maybe Ash could get you in with a physical therapist for that pulled muscle.”

“He’s on it. How many people are we expecting at the pool cocktail party?”

“It’s open-ended. It’s a kick-off event, so the idea is that people can wander in as they arrive. Umm, low key, sorta. Bluegrass music. Celebrity mixologist who will be, and I quote from the welcome package materials, ‘imagining cocktails inspired by the South’s traditional private-label distilleries—’”

“Is that another way of saying moonshine, like from stills?” Kari interrupted.

“Possibly. But I’m a Jewish girl from New York who was married to an Italian from Boston. Before he ran off to London with the teenager from Minsk. This wedding is outside all of my cultural wheelhouses.”

Kari laughed. “That’s Wednesday night. Moving on to Thursday morning?”

“Pro-am golf tournament.”

“Who are the pros and the ams?”

“The pros appear to be most of the PGA tour, and the cons—I mean the *ams*—appear to be most of the bride’s family members.”

“And Thursday night..?”

“New Orleans jazz night. Creole dinner for about 200, catered by Antoine’s, and featuring their signature cocktail, the French 75. I looked it up—it’s champagne, cognac, simple

syrup, and lemon juice. Or you can use gin, that's optional." She was reading from her notes again.

"That's a hangover in a pretty glass. Remember to keep an eye on the pool."

"There are actually four pools on the property. Five, counting the indoor lap pool."

"Talk to Archie about adding security. I'm sure he's on it."

"He's had a lot of extra work with the tournament, but yes, I'm sure he is. The next day is Friday when most of the guests will be arriving. Rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. Surprise musical guest—they wouldn't even tell us who, but Nessa thinks it's Ed Sheeran or Billy Ray Cyrus."

"That's a big difference between the two."

Ranney shrugged. "They travel with their own security, so not our problem."

Both their cellphones buzzed, a few seconds apart. They both silenced them.

"Ranney, I'm thinking—this is such a big event, and it's really important to me that it go off perfectly—what do you think about taking Nessa to help?"

"That sounds—"

Kari's phone vibrated. Then Ranney's.

"That sounds—"

A knock on the office door. They looked at each other.

"Yes?" Kari called.

The door opened a crack and Nilly peeked in, then swung open wider when she saw Ranney. Marlo rushed up behind Nilly, then Candace and Nessa.

"What? What is it?" Kari asked, suddenly nervous.

"Carolina's posting on Instagram Stories," Nilly said, holding up her phone.

"And?"

Nessa was breathless, chest heaving, perfectly-made-up eyes wide as moons. “And she’s on her bachelorette-week trip—”

Footsteps could be heard, running, coming closer. PR head Claire skidded into view, slightly out of breath.

“Are you *watching* this?” She pushed through the crowd at the door and handed Kari her cell. “Ranney, you’d better come around here.”

All of them bent over the small screen. Carolina was wearing big round sunglasses and a straw hat with a wide brim that filled the frame.

“Since I was a little girl,” she was saying in a whispery voice, “I have always been shy and retiring. It has never been my way to draw attention to myself or to put my own wishes first. My mama taught me to be quiet and demure, at all times, and I am a mama’s girl at heart. No, my friends often say, ‘Carolina, you just work tirelessly in the shadows, never losing sight of your goal. Absolutely *nothing* deters you from achieving what you set your sights on.’ That’s what they say. And—with the deep modesty that I am told defines me—I must agree with them.”

Kari and Ranney exchanged glances. A snicker was heard in the hallway, but quickly muffled.

“Which makes the news I am about to share with you even sadder. And when I think of all the joy that I was about to bring to the entire world, the shining example of a life well lived, the sharing of my natural southern graciousness and harmony with the sad and tasteless masses...”

Someone off camera said something unintelligible.

“Well.” She cleared her throat and took a sip of... sparkling water? Gin and tonic? Impossible to say. “Although my heart is irreparably broken, courage and dignity will sustain me.”

Kari was so riveted to the screen she almost didn’t notice when Ashanti draped a warm rice pad over her neck and shoulders. Moving around the office in a clockwise direction,

he placed small dishes of white sage bundles in strategic locations, lit them, then cracked the windows open. Shrugging philosophically, he departed. He'd done all he could.

Claire made a comment about moving the PR offices to this floor.

Meanwhile, Carolina was soldiering on. “So although I will tragically be unable to join you next week, I want you all to carry on as though my hopes and dreams had not been cruelly shattered...”

Kari scanned the crowd in the hallway, seeking immediate assistance from her receptionist.

“Carly?” she barked.

“Yes?”

“Get me Caleb Mikelmas on the phone. *Now.*”

Chapter Eleven



“She WHAT?” he barked into his phone, half expecting the damn thing to bite him back.

This was not what Caleb expected when his phone rang and Kari’s name appeared on the screen. A video call, even. He didn’t actually know what he’d expected after months of silence from her, but this was definitely *not* it.

“Carolina dumped him? On *Instagram*? Did she give a reason? What exactly did she say? Is it some kind of bad joke?”

Kari sighed, running her hand through her hair, tucking loose strands behind one ear. “I... don’t know? It’s hard to say. It’s her bachelorette week, so who knows? Have you talked to Christian?”

“Not since yesterday. He’s flying in any minute.”

“Where are you?”

“At St. Alban’s.”

“Already?”

“We decided to meet Mom and Dad here a few days early. They’re coming tomorrow. Just the four of us for one last time.” He grimaced. “Or so we thought.”

Compassion filled her voice, eyes filled with emotion. “Oh, Caleb. I hate to think of them finding out about this before we – before *you* can tell them.”

He loved the way she said his name. Adored it. *Needed* it.

Needed *her*.

“I know. Me, too. Kari, I—can you meet us here? I think it would really help my parents get through this. They still love you. And you were going to be here on Wednesday anyway, right? Can you come early?”

She was silent, looking down. He had no idea what to read into that, if anything. A smart man would take her distance as an obvious cue she wasn't interested.

And Caleb was a smart man. Very smart, he knew.

When it came to Kari, though, he felt clueless. Helpless, even, in the dark moments when he admitted that to himself. For the last few months he'd thrown himself into his work and his new foundation, the transition going smoothly. His brother's wedding was an afterthought, even if Kari wasn't.

No matter how hard he'd tried, he couldn't put her on the back burner. Respecting her boundaries was key. He wouldn't cross them.

But this time, *she'd* called *him*.

“I know you have a company to run. We would obviously pay you for your time and of course your expenses and...”

Still nothing.

“Never mind. Bad idea. I shouldn't have asked—”

“Um, sure. Dave and Anne are great. This must be so hard on them.”

He snorted. “In every way you can imagine.”

“What does that mean?”

His eyebrows shot up and she gasped.

“They don't like Carolina?”

He just blinked at her. His parents had adored Kari. Been stunned when they broke up. He hadn't been living at home when it happened, and his mom and dad weren't the type to pry. Over the years, they'd bring her up with a wistful tone.

When Caleb had met Jen and they'd moved in together, his parents had always been polite. Friendly, even.

But they'd never connected with Jen the way they had with his first love.

"I... I think I can rearrange..."

His heart jumped three stories. "That would be great, that would really... thank you, Kari. I'll call Christian now and find out what he knows. I'll let you know."

"Don't worry too much. This is what Wedding Protectors does. This is why you hired us."

"You protect guys from having their hearts broken? I should have hired you years ago."

"Better late than never." The screen went fuzzy as a text must have come through on her end.

He smiled, but of course she couldn't hear that.

Then again, this was Kari.

Maybe she could.

* * *

"Being dumped on Instagram Stories has a certain irony to it, given that I was part of the coding team for one of the first big social media platforms," Christian grouched, more than half drunk. It sounded like *Inch-ta-gram*.

When Christian's plane landed, he'd texted Caleb with two words:

It's over.

In-flight wireless internet was a blessing and a curse. So was a four-hour flight delay that had his brother arrive in the middle of the night. Christian had known before he arrived, and when Caleb woke up, he found a text from 3:02 a.m.:

Liquid lunch?

Now they were seated at one of the hotel's patio bars, the first patrons of the day, although others were starting to drift in. Four men in golf clothes headed for a table under an umbrella, and an older couple carrying tennis racquets took seats on the other side of the bar. The sun shone brightly in the sky, and the day was young.

Plenty of time for poor Christian to process his pain, one drink at a time.

From the looks of things, Caleb assumed his brother had been here since they opened.

Which meant, since breakfast. Caleb had some catching up to do.

"Karma is a trickster," he said with sympathy.

"Karma is one of the names Carolina picked out for our first dog."

"First dog?"

"She had a plan. We were going to start with a dog. Karma."

"A female, right? Because everyone knows that Karma is a—"

"Don't say it!"

"—bitch? You do realize you were going to hear that joke every single day?"

"*Were*. Past tense, right? No dog. No fiancée. No wife. Nothing." He took a swig of his mint julep. Neither of them had ever been big drinkers—they mostly stuck to beer and wine—and a mint julep was a deceptively delicious drink. You don't realize it's basically just bourbon until you try to stand up.

But it had sounded like a suitable cocktail for lunch.

"Just a million-dollar tab for a wedding, a deposit on a honeymoon in the Maldives, and the down payment on a six-thousand-square-foot house overlooking the Pacific Ocean."

“Plus the engagement ring, don’t forget that,” Caleb helpfully reminded him.

Christian smirked. “I think I can write that off as a charitable contribution.” He shoved his fingers in his hair. “Except it’s Grandma’s ring. Dad’s family heirloom.” He muttered a curse.

Caleb’s phone buzzed. Katie Gallagher.

“Hi, Katie.”

“Caleb! I just got back from Europe, so I’m playing catch-up. Kari’s on her way down there. She’s the partner assigned for everything. I’ll help from Boston. What is going on?”

“Um, good question. I got here earlier yesterday, and my brother arrived in the middle of the night. We haven’t been here for long. Christian and I are, ah, talking about it now.”

If you counted Christian’s snort as “talking.”

“Do you want us to cancel anything? Should we wait? We’re well past the cancellation deadlines anyway, so another day isn’t going to change much. What do you want us to tell the press? I’ve got a lot of messages here, and Carolina’s assistant is keeping the lines of communication open while remaining a steel trap about access to her.”

The full extent of this public disaster was beginning to dawn on Caleb.

“Katie, let me talk to Christian. I’ll call you back.”

“Sure. Give him my best.”

“Absolutely. Thanks.” He signaled to the bartender and pointed to his poor brother. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

Christian, meanwhile, was hunched over his half-empty drink, staring into it. A small puddle was accumulating on the bar in front of him—Caleb wasn’t sure whether it was tears or condensation from the julep cup.

Cups. Christian was on his third or fourth. No food plates littered the area around him, and it wasn’t because the service was impeccable.

The bartender returned with yet another icy silver glass of crushed ice and mint leaves that she set down in front of Caleb. She filled it to the brim, then poured the rest of the contents of the cocktail shaker into Christian's cup.

"Thanks, Amber," he said without looking up. Oh boy. If he was on a first-name basis with the bartender, Christian was way drunker than Caleb had first understood.

Then again, who could blame him?

"No problem, buddy. Plenty more where this came from."

Caleb caught Amber's eye. "Could we get some kind of platter with protein and vegetables?"

She eyed Christian carefully, nodding. "We have a charcuterie lunch special I'll get to you shortly."

"Perfect." Food wouldn't stop what was coming, but it would soften the biological blow.

"Chris." Caleb took a swallow, then a deep breath, his mouth delighted by the sweet and slightly smoky taste. He could see why Christian drank so many so fast. Delicious and refreshing, the drink made him feel better, and he wasn't the groom who just got dumped. "What exactly happened here? Why would Carolina do this?"

"No clue. She's blocked my calls. And my texts. And so have her friends."

"No contact at all? She disappeared?"

"Oh, no. That would be so much easier. She's just... on Instagram. Posting weird stuff."

"I saw." Cryptic posts that made no sense drove everyone a bit mad. The latest said:

All I've ever wanted was love. But can you trust love? People who have meant the most to me have left me. I am so afraid. I need an anchor.

What in the hell did that even mean?

Speculation online was turning every one of Mikr0's social media accounts into expensive marketing devices, as reports

from his assistant, Fay, poured in. Christian was facing death threats, for goodness sake. People accused him of mistreating her. Their buyer wasn't shaken, thank goodness, but if this dragged on...

What was Carolina doing? What kind of sick game was this?

"Did you have a fight? Even something little?"

"Not that I know of. But then again, I can't always tell when we've had a fight," Christian groaned.

Amber delivered a small bowl of warm cashews, then began clearing off the counters behind the bar, stowing condiments and fruit in the refrigerators. Resort employees, dressed in embroidered-logo polo shirts and khakis, were folding table umbrellas. Caleb looked at the darkening sky; sure enough, it was clouding over, and the wind was starting to pick up. How appropriate.

"Working on that charcuterie plate," she said, looking at Caleb. "But you might need to take it back to your room."

Light faded suddenly as clouds thickened. "That bad?"

She shrugged. "Just being careful."

He pulled out his phone and texted Kari.

What's your ETA? Have you landed?

Three bouncing dots, then:

Arrived JAX about an hour ago. Nessa's driving. How is everything there? Any news?

Trying to find out. I just met up with Christian.

I'll be there in maybe half an hour.

K. We're at the terrace bar. We probably still will be.

Better take cover, bad storm coming, Kari wrote.

Caleb sighed.

“Chris, you remember Jen, right? I wanted to marry her.”

“Sure. Jen. Free-solo Jen. Climb El Cap in the morning, model for La Perla in the afternoon. Then give a speech in Mandarin at the embassy ball. She was like an android. She out tech bro-ed the tech bros. What happened to her again?”

“She found out about my plan to give everything to my foundation.”

“Not everything. Ninety percent.”

“She couldn’t see the difference.”

“Right.” He chuckled. “Mom used to call her Jen-X. She couldn’t stand her.”

Caleb looked up in surprise. This was news. “You know, that would really piss me off if she hadn’t turned out to be right.” He smiled in spite of himself. “Which really pisses me off.”

“Mom’s never going to like anyone after Kari. Dad, either, actually.” Christian drained his julep cup, then pulled a mint leaf off its stem and chewed it thoughtfully. “They’re definitely not fans of Carolina.”

“What makes you say that?” Caleb said, fighting to maintain a diplomatic affect.

“Give it up, bro. It’s so obvious.”

“All that matters is that you love Carolina.”

“That doesn’t matter one bit,” Christian said glumly, then sighed. “You always find these amazing women.”

Caleb shook his head sadly. “I may find them, but I can’t seem to *keep* them.”

“Must be genetic because apparently I can’t, either.”

“We should just swear off women. We’ll be the mysterious Mikelmas brothers, eccentric billionaires, like... who was it? Howard Hughes? The Hunt brothers? Well, *you’ll* be a billionaire. I’ll be the crazy one who gives away his money. We’ll be chick magnets.” Caleb signaled to the bartender. “Amber, another round.”

She looked at the sky, then at the counter, and started mixing, pouring the drink into a to-go cup.

“I’m already a chick magnet. Do you know how many PMs I’ve gotten since Carolina dumped me in front of the entire world? Other than the weird death threats.”

“How many?” Caleb asked, interested.

“The number is too big to fit in the red circle. Thousands. Literally thousands.”

“That’s a lot of offers.”

“It’s the pictures and the videos that are—” His eyebrows shot up. “Wow. I had no idea so many women were so, ah... uninhibited in their willingness to send naked videos of themselves. It’s like they’re trying out for the marriage version of Shark Tank.”

Bourbon hit the back of Caleb’s throat, burning as it mixed with mint.

“Huh.” Caleb digested that. “Maybe I could get Kari to post a video about how she broke up with me twelve years ago. That might get some action.”

“She didn’t break up with you, though, did she? Didn’t you just sort of drift away from each other?”

Caleb’s turn to stare into his drink.

“Technically,” he finally said, searching through the thick regret of recollection, “she’s the one who mailed me the promise ring I gave her in high school.”

“That doesn’t mean she’s the one who dumped you.”

Caleb made a noncommittal noise and rattled the ice in his glass. Who had dumped whom? He wondered, blinking hard,

worried that he couldn't remember. Until he'd run into Kari a few months ago, he'd thought of their breakup as a drifting, fading, dissipating event, one that had unthreaded years of being together as if it were just... natural.

Different coasts. Different priorities. Different choices.

Looking back, though, he could see it was all on him. He was the one who had slowed down emails. Stopped calling as much. Getting that Silicon Valley internship the summer after freshman year had been huge. Enormous. Caleb could taste success – quite literally some days, eating free lunch in the cafeteria, where filet mignon was as likely on the menu as pad Thai – and he'd gone for it.

Kari had been disappointed. The cross-country flight was affordable. She'd begged him to take a week off. Offered to fly out to see him for just a weekend. But the start-up where he worked fired interns who didn't sleep under their desks in sleeping bags, and the 120-hour weeks blurred until he'd gone back to Stanford for sophomore year, straight from the internship, and –

And faded away from her.

When the promise ring arrived in a certified mail, return-receipt box, along with a gracious note from her about staying friends, he'd just come home from a 29-hour coding marathon.

She'd ignored his calls, emails, and texts.

He'd deserved the silence.

And soldiered on at work.

Amber delivered the new round in plastic cups, as well as a charcuterie platter in a to-go container, carefully taking the empty glass from his hand.

"It's not the best presentation," she said dryly. "But it's highly mobile."

Caleb chuckled at her practicality and reached for his wallet, sliding five twenties onto the bar. "Thanks for taking care of us."

Her smile widened. "Any time."

Christian lifted his julep in a toast, he said, “To defeat.”

Caleb halted midair. “I refuse to toast to that.”

Chris shrugged and pounded back the drink. “Fine. Then, to celibacy.”

An internal wince made Caleb’s stomach flip. Maybe drinking with his brother hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“You have thousands of PMs. Celibacy won’t be a problem.”

Christian shook his head. “I don’t want some new woman who’s just trolling social media for a meal ticket. I want the one I had.”

Caleb raised one eyebrow.

“What I mean is,” Christian clarified, “I want Carolina.”

“No offense,” Caleb ventured, emboldened by the drink, “but *why*?” Sliding the food toward his brother, he mentally cheered when Christian took a piece of cheese and a cracker. The man needed more than alcohol in that gut Carolina was twisting.

Christian sighed. “I know what you think, but... she’s a challenge. You never know what she’s going to do or say.”

“That’s for sure,” Caleb muttered. A gust of wind picked up his paper cocktail napkin, and he grabbed for it. There was a crash from the other side of the terrace as something blew over.

“I know she seems dissatisfied sometimes, but she just wants me to be my best—she wants us *both* to be our best. She has high standards. Women who just go along with everything are boring. And she’s smart, and... and she always smells really great, and... there’s this thing she does with her tongue...”

“Got it,” Caleb said quickly.

“You know,” Christian said, then hesitated. “You know, everybody thought Jen was perfect—except maybe Mom and

Dad. But she wasn't. She wasn't perfect for *you*. It's not something that other people can decide for you, who's perfect and who isn't. You just know."

Caleb just stared at him.

"Carolina is who I want. You can't explain your feelings to anyone else because feelings aren't rational. Love isn't, either. I want her." He sniffed. "I can't believe she's gone."

"I'm sorry, bro."

Chris continued, mouth twisting ruefully. "We all thought Kari was perfect, but you obviously didn't. Right?"

"No, that's not exactly..." Caleb felt a light touch on his shoulder. He turned.

"Kari!"

"I conjured her," Christian murmured, the look on his face making it clear he actually thought he had. He stared at his drink and slid it away from him, reaching for a piece of fig in the to-go box.

"Hey," she said, shifting her bag to the other arm. "Why are you guys even out here? There's a tropical storm about to make landfall, and they think it might even be a Cat One hurricane. How can you not know this? We were the last plane to land. You should be inside!"

"Kari!" Caleb repeated. She looked good, the wind blowing her thick blonde hair at a horizontal angle across her face, those warm, smart eyes taking everything in.

Better than good. She looked *beautiful*. Gorgeous. She was his Kari, miraculously come back to him in his moment of need.

Well, *Christian's* moment of need, but whatever.

He picked up his most recent drink and finished it. "Kari! Let me get you one of these mint things! You've got to try this!"

He looked around for Amber but the only resort employees in sight were three guys busily chaining the chairs together,

linking them to a pole that looked like a support beam.

“Um,” Kari said, squinting at them both, “I’m good. It’s pretty early, and I have a lot of work to do. We should maybe go inside and talk?”

“Kari!” Christian echoed. “We were just talking about you! I said your name three times and you magically appeared.” He slid off his seat and wrapped her in a bear hug. “You smell pretty great, too. Not as great as Carolina, but pretty great. Smell her,” he said to his brother. “Pretty great, right?”

“I know,” Caleb said glumly. He did know. He knew all her smells: her dressed-up smell, her beach smell, her just-back-from-a-run smell, her waking-up-in-morning smell. They were all more than great.

Kari looked from one Mikelmas to the other. Caleb knew that look. Someone in her profession spent enough of her working life surrounded by celebratory drinkers to recognize their condition, although it was earlier than usual and not exactly a celebration. Caleb did a quick inventory of himself.

At least Christian was *way* worse.

“Guys? Let’s go inside,” she suggested, tugging gently on Christian’s arm. “It’s starting to rain. Come on. You, too, Caleb.”

“Sure! Sure, let’s go inside!” Christian agreed. “There’s nobody out here, anyway. We’d have to make our own drinks.” He peered over the bar, clearly considering his options, but luckily Amber had battened down the hatches for the storm.

With padlocks.

“No, no!” Kari said quickly. “You don’t know the recipe. Let’s go inside and maybe have some coffee.” Her eyebrow shot up. “A few cups of coffee. We have lots to talk about.”

“Espresso martinis!” Christian exclaimed. “Genius! That’ll sober me up—lots of caffeine in those.”

Caleb grabbed the to-go container of food, but pointedly ignored the remainders of their drinks.

His brother leaned in confidentially. “She dumped me, Kari. Terrible thing. You can fix this, right? You’re the wedding protector! Protect *me!* Please, Kari, talk to Carolina.” His voice broke. “Tell her I love her. I just want her back. Help me get her back. Anything to make this ache inside me go away. There’s a Carolina-sized hole inside me.”

Caleb was moving, somewhat unsteadily, toward the entrance. At the change in his brother’s tone, he turned. Christian’s Roll Tide cap was on backwards and his shirt was half untucked. Kari had one arm around him, like a big sister. She looked so distressed, he thought she might cry.

Her face looked like Caleb’s heart felt.

“I will,” she told Christian. “I’ll fix it. You’re right, this is what I do.”

Christian’s eyes searched her face. “I believe you,” he said softly. Then he brightened. “Kari’s on it,” he announced to Caleb. “Let’s get drunk.”

“A little too late for that, bro. You already are.”

Christian’s smile broadened. “Then let’s get drunker.”

Chapter Twelve



Kari sat at a table in the middle of the bar, as far away from the big plate-glass windows as possible. Outside, a named storm was raging, sheets of water making it impossible to see much. Vague outlines of palmetto trees were bending wildly, huge branches occasionally breaking and disappearing with the wind.

“Give me a nor’easter over this hurricane mess any day,” she muttered to herself.

Caleb and Christian were off in one corner of the room, fiddling with a karaoke machine, punching buttons and tapping microphones. She felt the relief that she imagined a mother of toddlers feels when her children entertain themselves by unloading the folded clothes from a laundry basket and she gets a chance to enjoy a few sips of coffee in peace.

“Kari?” An older couple, her parents’ ages, walked into the bar and she gasped.

“Anne? Dave?” Jumping up from her spot, she raced across the room as her own enthusiasm was matched by Caleb and Christian’s mother, the hug so powerful it almost had as much force as the brewing wind.

Almost.

Swaying back and forth as she embraced her, Caleb’s mother gushed, “It’s so, so good to see you! What a strange coincidence Carolina hired you!”

“She hired only the best, Mom!” Christian called out from across the room. His face lit up like a lightbulb as he turned to Caleb and said, “Put ‘Simply the Best’ on the karaoke machine!”

Kari groaned silently.

“Give me a turn, Anne. You can’t hog her forever,” Dave said, his fatherly hug comforting and familiar. Both of Caleb’s parents had dark hair and dark eyes, and their sons had taken after them. But Christian favored his mother, while Caleb looked like a younger version of Dave. A little gray around the ears and wonderful laugh lines creased his face.

It was like getting a preview of Caleb in twenty-five years.

“Wedding Protector, huh?” Dave said as they pulled apart. “Whatever got you into this line of business? I thought you were going to be an occupational therapist?”

Kari laughed. “I thought so, too, until I couldn’t pass Anatomy and Physiology II. And forget about Organic Chemistry. Just buying the textbook made me burst into tears. I changed my major to business and went from there.”

“I heard your company is wildly successful,” Anne said. “And you and Caleb have been catching up?” The implication could not have been more clear.

“Catching up” was a hopeful euphemism for “getting back together.”

“We have.”

“You heard about Carolina – of course you have,” Dave said with a frown, looking behind her at his sons. “How drunk is Christian?”

“Testing testing 1-2-3,” Christian said into the microphone. “‘I Can’t Make You Love Me’ by Bonnie Raitt coming up next.”

“Oh, no,” Anne said in a low voice. “That bad?”

“Carolina is all over Instagram leaving, ah, cryptic messages.”

Anne squeezed her hand. “I believe what you meant to say is that she’s all over Instagram saying whatever it takes to draw attention to herself.”

“Same thing,” Dave muttered. He frowned, looking out a window, and wrapped his arm around Anne’s waist. “Our room service is being delivered right now.”

“How do you know?”

“They texted me.”

Anne shook her head and laughed. “Fancy stuff here. When we were first married, our idea of travel was borrowing Dave’s parents’ tent and going to Nickerson State Park in his old Honda Accord hatchback. Now we’re on a private island where room service texts you, and our sons are about to be billionaires.”

“Isn’t it great, honey? The kids bought that filet and salmon. I ordered a bottle of your favorite pinot, too.” Dave leaned in to give Kari a kiss on the cheek, then winked. “See you later, kid. You’ve got your hands full.”

“It wouldn’t be a job if it were easy,” she said with a smile.

Dave thumbed toward Caleb and Christian. “I meant those two. Once they start singing, watch out.”

As their father dragged their worried mother away, Kari watched them leave, instantly missing her own parents, who were back in Marshfield in the same house she’d grown up in, a four-bedroom, two-story home in a development that had turned over these last ten years, now filled with so many new families Kari didn’t know most of them. Caleb had lived on the other side of town, where smaller ranch houses dominated. A few years ago, Dave and Anne had moved to a larger home in Newton, paid for by their boys.

Dave was right. She sure did have her hands full.

She rested her chin in the palm of her hand and thought. She probably shouldn’t have promised Christian that she would fix this debacle, but he was like a kid brother to her. She might find him incredibly annoying, but she couldn’t stand to see him suffer.

The contractual aspects of the situation were the least of her problems. In fact, they weren't her problem at all—if the wedding had to be canceled, the office team would take care of negotiating all that. And the social obligations could be finessed, once they had a plan, gifts returned, airline vouchers distributed. But Carolina...

Carolina was a problem. An Instagram menace. A loose cannon with a million followers.

Unpredictable at best, and an agent of chaos at worst.

Kari needed to talk to her, find out what was wrong, fix it, and get her here by Friday at the latest. It was now Monday afternoon. Carolina wasn't answering her phone or messages. And there was Hurricane Zoe, now an angry Cat 2 according to Archie's steady stream of texts, and just making landfall.

As if to prove the point, the outside door banged open so hard, Kari thought it might smash. The wind rushed in, lifting her hair and blowing a stack of paper napkins off the bar. There were maybe a dozen people scattered around the room, and every head turned to see a drenched Nessa staggering in, business outfit clinging to her skin like a liquid bandage.

"Hey," Nessa said glumly.

St. Albans Golf and Beach Club was a very big property, and Kari and Katie had thought Nessa could be a big help. They envisioned her zipping along the paths in a golf cart, silver AirPods in her ears, checking place settings for the correct napkin folds, delivering wedding-themed sunscreen tubes for the fishing tournament, and inspecting CPR certificates for hotel babysitters.

Kari privately thought that Nessa might also make a good human shield if she needed to escape an awkward encounter with Caleb or some well-meaning Mikelmas cousin who remembered her from the distant past.

As potential employers, they would also get to see how their intern performed under pressure and dealt with unexpected problems. That test, Kari saw, had already started. Nessa's hair was soaked and dripping rainwater. The raincoat

she was wearing was really more of a jacket, and it was not waterproof, so her skirt was plastered to her legs. The silk flats were a total loss. She bent down and took them off, padding over to the table barefoot.

She looked stunned, like a kitten that had fallen into a bathtub and been pulled out just in time.

“Wow,” Kari said to her. “Want some hot tea?”

Just as Nessa opened her mouth to reply, the opening chords of “Take Me to the River” exploded from the sound system, along with a cheer from Caleb and Christian. The bass line was so loud, Kari could feel it vibrating her sternum, threatening to reset her heartbeat.

Nessa nodded silently. Catching the barista’s eye, Kari mimed pouring tea from a teapot. She got a thumbs-up in return.

The insistent beat of the music was now accompanied by loud, staccato tapping as Caleb moved on to connecting the microphones. Behind him, Christian was—what else?—playing air guitar. A few people were clapping, apparently happy at the prospect of any entertainment whatsoever.

As the lyrics registered, Kari’s horrified gaze slid over to Caleb, who was, dear God, pointing at her as he sang.

Sang about loving *her*.

The server arrived with the teapot at that moment.

“Friend of yours?” she asked.

“A client,” she clarified quickly. Okay, maybe he wasn’t a client anymore, technically, but she was here in her professional capacity.

The server smiled and shrugged. “Hot client.” Her wink made something in Kari go a bit feral.

Nessa turned around to see what they were talking about, but fortunately, Christian had taken the mic.

Caleb was scrolling through the song list. His face lit up, he punched a couple of buttons, and a slower rhythm filled the

room. Part of Kari's brain began scrolling through its own archives—she knew this song, so what the heck was it?

Caleb stepped forward and draped one arm around his brother's shoulders. They began to sway together with the music. She had to admit—even drunk, disorderly, and singing off-key—he looked incredibly sexy.

Nessa was absorbed in taking pictures of her ruined shoes, for some reason Kari could not fathom, but as she watched, the song title suddenly popped into her head.

“Walking in the Rain’!” she exclaimed.

Nessa shot her a dark look.

“I had no choice, Kari. It's a hurricane.”

“No, I mean—it's the song title. They're singing songs about rain.”

The small crowd at the bar began laughing and clapping again, this time with the beat. The hurricane/rain/general deep-water theme was not lost on them, although the unrequited love subtext probably was. A few joined in, their own natural-disaster cocktails beginning to kick in.

Unfortunately, the audience participation only served to encourage the performers.

“Have You Ever Seen the Rain?’!” someone called out. “Creedence Clearwater!”

“Waterfalls’!”

“Stormy Weather,” an older woman suggested, moving her hips a little. Her husband smiled and pulled her close.

The lights flickered. Everyone in the room audibly drew in their breath, and applause broke out when the flickering stopped. Kari knew the hotel was equipped with generators for just such an event; that information was a standard part of pre-event research. No matter how rich or famous or powerful you are, fall is hurricane season on the East Coast, and storms will happen. You'd better be prepared.

And speaking of preparations... she picked up her phone and texted Ranney.

I think Nessa needs a pair of rainboots, she typed. And maybe rubber flip-flops. Please bring. Any word from airlines on flights after the storm?

Three dots appeared instantly.

No word yet, but I'll be on the first plane, Ranney replied. What's happening? Are you safe? Stay inside!

You're such a mom, Kari answered. Next thing, you'll ask me if I have cash and dry clothes.

You have cash, right? Did your suitcase get wet?

LOL, Kari typed. Keep me posted on arrangements. Any luck tracking Carolina down?

Nothing. Radio silence. Even her family doesn't know where she is. Natasha is a brick wall. Just saying Carolina is safe.

Damn. Okay. Thanks.

Kari sighed. Nessa was alternately sipping her tea and double-thumbing her phone, paying no attention to the Mikelmas Brothers Live in Concert. Her hair was still dripping and her makeup was gone, but somehow she managed to look both chic and adorable—the benefit of youth, Kari reflected.

“Nessa,” she said, leaning forward and raising her voice over the music, “I have to find Carolina. Like, today. Do you have any ideas on how I might do that?”

Nessa looked up and started to speak, but at that moment, there was a frightening crash outside and the power died, leaving the room dim and silent, except for Caleb and Christian, who were belting out the final chorus to “Riders on

the Storm” and did not appear to notice that the music had stopped.

Nor did the group of forty-something women who had moved from a table at the back of the room to a spot directly in front of the karaoke machine. They kept right on singing along, swaying to the beat—or swaying, anyway—and sipping tall, pink cocktails.

The server had reappeared. “Divorce party,” she informed Kari and Nessa. “They’ve been here since Friday. They were supposed to leave today. This is definitely the most fun they’ve had.”

“It’s gonna get hot in here!” one of the women shouted.

“...so take off that shirt!” two of her friends supplied, laughing hysterically.

Caleb began to unbutton his shirt and his fans began to cheer.

“Speaking of fun,” Kari said to her, one eye on the entertainment as Caleb’s tanned, muscled chest came into view. He was actually undressing. Her heart stopped, and her temperature shot up two degrees.

She lost focus as he stripped one arm, then the other, free of the cloth and balled up the top, shirtless now and singing something lost in the cheers.

Shy Caleb from high school, intense nerdy Caleb, quiet guitar-playing Caleb was replaced by...

This.

And oh, how she wanted all the Calebs.

All to herself.

“Kari?” Nessa asked, “Um, what do we do next?”

Right. Her job. She turned to the server, a petite short-haired woman who looked to be somewhere in age between her and Nessa. “There’s a generator here, right? So the power will be coming back on?”

One eye on half-naked Caleb, one eye on Nessa, she felt herself tear into a million tiny pieces, wishing she didn't have to be rational, wishing she could ogle her ex-boyfriend, the man who drifted away, the one who *got* away.

The one who chose to leave her when they were young.

The guy who ghosted.

The ghost who returned.

The server balked. "Oh, gosh, I have no idea! I've only been working here since June. I can ask?"

"No, that's okay. I'm sure they'll get it back on as soon as they can."

"Can I bring you anything? It's on the house."

The music—or at least, the singing—had stopped. The divorce party was giving the Billionaire Brothers Band a standing ovation. A woman in a flowered jumpsuit and red heels had rushed up to talk to Christian, who looked a little puzzled but not entirely displeased.

Kari addressed the server. "No, thanks, we're actually work—"

"I recommend the mint julep," Caleb's voice cut in, his mouth close to her ear, hands on her shoulders. Heat radiated off him, rippling through the cloth of her shirt, and if she just took one step backwards, she could have his skin against her. He looked closely at Nessa. "You're over twenty-one, right?"

"Of course I am!" Nessa was indignant. "But..." She looked at Kari uncertainly.

"I know, you're supposed to be working. There's not much you can do without power, right? C'mon, they're delicious." He smiled at the server, whose name tag said Sofi. "Can the bartender see well enough to make those?"

"We have a lot of candles. As long as it doesn't require a blender, I think it's okay."

Meanwhile, the center of Kari's universe was her shoulders.

Where Caleb squeezed gently, the massage threatening to melt her into a puddle at his feet. How did he know to press his thumb into that one knot she perpetually had, just to the left of her spine, by her shoulder blade?

Somehow, he did.

Nessa's phone made an indefinable sound, somewhere between a joyful chorus and a public-emergency alert. She leaped to her feet and scooted across the room to an empty corner.

"I guess we only need two juleps," Caleb told Sofi. "And could you light this candle?" He held up the glass votive from the table.

"Sure." She pulled a butane lighter out of her apron pocket, then picked up the votives from the two nearest tables and added them. A soft glow lit the table. Outside the big glass windows, the storm was raging, making the afternoon almost as dark as night, but those three little candles made Kari feel somehow safe.

The candles, and maybe... Caleb's presence. *Shirtless* presence.

She didn't normally need reassurance in dicey situations—*she* was the protector, after all—but this hurricane wasn't normal. Trees didn't normally snap in half; transformers on power lines didn't normally explode overhead. This was a natural disaster.

Normal was not in this wedding's vocabulary.

This was an Act of God, the very situation that every legal contract has a specific exclusion for, and it was getting worse by the moment.

On the other hand, Caleb didn't exactly look like he was on top of things right now, even in semi-darkness. He'd never been much of a drinker, and today had been quite a marathon, she assumed. His hair was ruffled and damp with perspiration. His shirt was long gone, and Kari couldn't help but notice the eight-pack on him, little rolls of skin curling up along the

muscled ridges. His pecs were covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and he grinned as he watched her taking him in.

“Like what you see?”

Their eyes locked over the candles. Kari lost all capacity for language because...those eyes. Losing herself in them would be so easy. That kiss a few months ago hadn't been enough for her, even though she was the one who kept Caleb at bay. As her eyes lingered on his mouth, she remembered his heat, his arms around her, the passion and intensity of that simple, interrupted kiss.

Why was she holding back?

Twelve years ago, he'd ignored her.

Three months ago, she'd ignored him.

Weren't they even by now?

Did being even really matter?

He leaned in, hand reaching for hers.

“I guess they can't make coffee, but they must have bottled water,” she suggested. She was trying hard to raise her eyes from his exposed chest, her hand burning from his touch. “Maybe you should hydrate.”

“I want to tell you something.”

“What?”

A huge tree limb hit one of the windows with a bang so loud, it brought startled screams from all over the room. He jumped up, moving to her side, his hand on her shoulder, bare skin so close she could lick his arm.

Don't lick his arm, Kari!

“Okay, people,” the bartender called out. “Everyone needs to move away from the glass. Please come over here—if we have to, we'll hunker down behind the bar and in the storage closet. That's the safest place.”

Kari looked over to where Nessa had been talking on her phone.

Not there.

She scanned the room, but it was dark, and the booths along one wall blocked her view.

“Do you see Nessa?” she asked Caleb, at the same moment that he asked, “Do you see Christian?”

They both moved, suspended in that moment of disbelief as their brains tried to process this development. The pool bar was a free-standing building, not connected to the hotel itself. Surely they wouldn't have ventured outside? Surely someone would have stopped them if they had tried? It was as if Christian and Nessa had vaporized.

Ranney's face flashed in Kari's mind. Her most basic responsibility here had been to keep Nessa safe, and she had utterly failed. Christian was a grown man—not that hurricanes respected age—but Nessa was inexperienced and young enough to feel invulnerable. Would she be reckless enough to go out into this storm? What would make her do such a thing?

Kari's phone, lying on the table, buzzed with a text, and she grabbed it. Maybe Nessa?

It was Nilly. She'd sent a screenshot of an Insta post, a hurricane photo, mostly grey but you could make out the shapes of palmetto trees bent to the ground. The caption said, “Storm.” She didn't need this, she thought in frustration. If she wanted a weather update, she could look outside. She enlarged it with her fingers, and then she saw why Nilly had sent it.

It was Carolina's feed.

Huh. Well, that was progress, but she didn't have time right now to think what it could mean.

“Carolina posted a—” she started to tell Caleb, looking up. He was gone.

Seriously? Was this some kind of prank? Were they all hiding under a booth table just to terrify her?

Then she spotted him, talking to the bartender, shrugging into his wrinkled shirt. They walked around the corner of the bar and stood for a moment at the door of the small kitchen,

still talking. The bartender gestured to something inside, then clapped Caleb on the shoulder and hurried back to a group of nervous guests.

Caleb turned slowly, scanning the room. His eyes landed on her, and he strode over to the table.

“They’re not here,” he said. “Bartender didn’t see anyone leave, but they’re definitely not here. There is another exit, but it’s in the kitchen.”

“What about the bathrooms?” Kari asked.

“I checked.”

“Where would they go? What about the woman Christian was talking to, is she still here?” Kari looked around. Even in the semi-darkness, that jumpsuit was hard to miss. “There she is.”

Caleb right behind her, Kari hurried over and touched the woman’s arm. “Excuse me, could I ask you something? You were talking to Christian, right? My friend’s brother? The guy who was singing?”

The woman nodded, already freaked out by the storm and now by the questions from strangers.

“Did he say anything about leaving or where he was going, by any chance? We can’t seem to find him. Or my assistant.”

“No, I was just telling him what a good singer he is,” she said nervously. “I just thought—I just thought he was cute and—I don’t know where he is! I was just waiting for my sister and brother-in-law, but they’re in their room and the storm got too bad. Did he go outside? He seemed like he’d had a lot to drink.”

“We don’t know, but he’s not here. And neither is my assistant. If you think of anything, let me know, okay?”

“Of course! I didn’t talk to him for very long. He did say his fiancée broke up with him... you don’t think he’d do anything..? Was he depressed?” She looked outside fearfully, but there wasn’t much to see. It was very late in the afternoon

and getting dark for real now. Only the roar of wind told them the storm raged on.

Kari and Caleb exchanged glances. She put her hand on his arm.

“Check your messages,” she told him. “Maybe something’s come in.”

He pulled out his phone and frowned. “Dead,” he said.

She gasped.

“No, not *them!* My phone! Battery died. Damn.”

“I have a battery pack in my bag,” she said, turning back to the table. She handed him the device then checked her own phone.

Sixteen messages. She scrolled down quickly, but none were from Nessa.

Nine were texts from vendors; she skipped those. One auto confirmation of her dentist appointment, a reminder of normal life that was so surreal under the circumstances, it might have been sent from Mars. Two from Katie, a little worried and trying to touch base. Two from Ranney: The first was about possible flight changes, but the second was four words long.

Nessa’s with you, right?

Kari bit her lip.

Then two from Nilly, both screenshots.

“Caleb, look.”

He moved behind her, one hand on her shoulder, and bent over to see. She opened Nilly’s earlier text, Carolina’s storm post.

He squinted, then reached down and enlarged it. “Huh.”

Then she opened the second text. It was also from Carolina’s account, and showed the inside of a dark window,

completely covered on the outside in rainwater. A votive candle burning at the bottom right of the frame cast the only light, causing the droplets to glitter like diamonds. The caption read “Sanctuary.”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed.

Kari tapped the screen, her fingers trembling a little. The third shot was a closeup of Carolina’s left hand. More accurately, it was a close-up of her diamond engagement ring *on* her left hand, and it was glittering way more than the raindrops.

Caption: “Safe.”

“What the...?” Caleb took the phone out of her hand and went through the texts again.

“Let me see that second one again,” Kari said, taking the phone back. “Look at that candle, Caleb. It’s the exact same one they have on all these tables.”

As they stared at each other, trying to make sense of what they were seeing—and *not* seeing—the noise outside lessened. The bar brightened a bit, although still dim in early evening light. People started to stand up and stretch, and some cautiously approached the windows.

“It’s the eye of the storm,” the bartender called. “It’ll be clear like this for twenty minutes, maybe half an hour, but then the rest of the storm will pass over us. Please stay put! It’s going to be just as dangerous out there before you know it. We want everyone safe and accounted for.”

“Stay here,” Caleb said. “I’m going to check Christian’s room and see if he’s there—if *they*’re there.”

“I’m coming with you!”

“Absolutely not! Did you hear the guy? It’s going to get bad again.”

“Caleb, I am coming with you! Maybe Nessa’s there, too! And you don’t seem all that steady on your feet.”

“First of all, did those photos look to you like Nessa was there? And second, what if she comes back here? You have to

stay. And third, I am fine.”

She was so frustrated she actually made a growling sound. He laughed, and she briefly considered slugging him.

“Use your words, Kari—or maybe, on second thought, *don’t*. I know how that can turn out.”

“I can’t just sit around waiting! I am *responsible* for her—her *mother* is texting me! I don’t know—”

“What’s going on?” a voice asked. A familiar voice. “It got quiet. Is the storm over? Kari, Carolina just posted on my Insta page!”

“Nessa,” Kari whispered, turning around. “Nessa.”

“Yes, look at this! It sounds like—I know this is crazy, but it sounds like she might actually be *here*. At St. Alban’s, I mean!”

“Nessa,” Kari repeated, still in a very, very quiet voice. “Where exactly have you been?”

“In the kitchen, drying my hair. I was looking for a place with better cell reception, and I noticed that the pizza ovens were still lit, and no one was using them. They work great, look at this!” She combed her fingers through her hair. “I think there might be a market for this in the home. I’m going to look into it.”

Her hair did, in fact, look perfect.

“Nessa, are you telling me that you have been in the kitchen with your *head* in a *gas oven* for the past hour?”

“Well, no, it only took maybe twenty minutes for my hair. Then I was posting. And then Carolina commented on my post, so I came to show you.”

The growling noise came out of Kari again.

Nessa looked at Caleb, nonplussed. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” he answered, “not really. Can I see that post?”

“Sure.” She handed him her phone. “I’ll be right back. My shoes are still in the oven.”

“The thing is,” Kari said thoughtfully, watching her go, “she’s actually solving problems on site. This is the exact capacity that we look for in project managers. It’s just that...”

“Diamond in the rough?”

“Something like that.”

“Can I see her phone?”

They bent their heads over the screen.

“Wait a minute—do you see that?” Kari burst out. “She has almost a million followers! That can’t be right!”

“Carolina’s popular.”

“Not Carolina – *Nessa!*”

Peering at the phone, he made an impressed face. “Good for her. You have an influencer on your staff.”

“She’s an intern.”

“Anyone who can amass a million followers should be on staff.”

“The woman put her head in an oven to fix her hair, Caleb. You really think we should offer her a full-time job?” She imagined thousands of Nessa’s Instagram followers dropping their phones and rushing outside to stand in the rain. Hair dryer sales were going to be negatively affected.

“We can talk about that later,” Caleb said, laser-focused. “The eye of the storm is passing; we don’t have much time.”

He scrolled down with his thumb, but there were a lot of comments. *A lot.*

Nessa reappeared, holding her shoes. “They’re too hot to put on, but I think they’re going to be fine.” She tested the insole gingerly with one finger. “Carolina’s username is @southern\$weet.”

“Of course there’s a dollar sign in there,” he muttered, reading from her feed. ““Storms blow past. True love lasts.

Back where I belong.””

“Nessa,” Kari cut in, “do you really have a million followers?”

“Kari, I told you, we can talk about that later,” Caleb said. “I’m going to check Christian’s room. I’ll text you.” He reached over and disconnected his phone from the battery pack.

“And I told *you*, I’m coming with you.” She gave him the don’t-mess-with-me look that she used on gatecrashers, pushy paparazzi, and inebriated best men who want to give toasts.

He caved.

“Okay, but let’s go before the storm starts up again.”

They started for the door, and Nessa followed.

“Ness, stay here, it’s not safe. We’ll be right back.”

“If you leave me here, I’m going to put my head back in that oven.”

Kari hesitated, then smiled reluctantly. “When we get back to Boston—*if* we get back—we’ll be making you a full-time job offer. You have what it takes.”

“What?” she squealed. “You’re giving me a full-time job because I put my head in an *oven*?”

Caleb flashed her a beautiful smile. “Just remember, when you hit the big time – I’m the one who told her to hire you.” He puffed up. “My business instincts are unparalleled.”

The joke made Kari laugh. “Okay, Mr. God’s Gift to Business.”

Nessa’s head was down, all attention on her phone. “I think I know where they are.”

All laughter faded instantly as Caleb gestured for Nessa to go first.

“Lead the way,” he said, suddenly serious.

Chapter Thirteen



“It’s that one – the one that looks like it belongs on a private island in the South Pacific,” Nessa called out from in front of them, pointing. Caleb looked in the direction of her arm and, as his eyes adjusted, saw the glow in the window of a small building, the roof made to look like it was thatched, a meticulously sculpted stone patio with a retaining wall surrounding the tiny structure. If they weren’t walking through a hurricane, he imagined the greenery around it would be cultivated and manicured, the planning designed to evoke a sense of calm and relaxation.

The little cottage glowed.

Candlelight.

The flashlights on their phones provided just enough light to keep them from tripping on branches, downed wires, or unhappy snakes heading for higher ground. The air smelled fresh and piney from all the broken trees. They made it across the property to the area where private guesthouses nestled into carefully planted foliage, hidden from each other and from golfers hunting for wildly off-the-mark balls.

“It’s right up here,” Caleb called over his shoulder to Kari, following Nessa and the faint light in the distance, his loose legs adeptly dodging obstacles, his emotions churning within. Everything was happening all at once, and all he could do was put one foot forward at a time.

They followed the path up a little rise, and there was the black shape of the cottage. Completely dark, except for a faint,

flickering glow—like candlelight—on the upstairs veranda.

“Hello?” he called out. “Christian?”

“Caleb?” Christian’s voice was muted, loose and extremely happy. A deep rumble in his brother’s voice sounded like a man who’d just gotten laid.

That was impossible.

Or... his brother had way more game than Caleb could ever fathom. Geeky Christian had come a long way.

“Christian, is Carolina here?” Kari called impatiently, making a leap Caleb couldn’t.

“Kari?” a female voice responded.

Laid. Yep.

“Carolina, where have you been? What’s happening?”

Mussed blonde hair, followed by a face, came up over the railing, Carolina’s grin covered a bit by shadows, but there, nonetheless.

“What do you mean, what’s happening? We’re getting married!”

“We’re getting something else, sweetheart,” Christian said, the words followed by giggles.

Behind Kari, Nessa made a tiny, amused sound. Other than that, there was a momentary silence. The expression on Kari’s face said it all: relief, exasperation, amusement, and something that made a chamber of his heart skip slightly:

Yearning.

Seconds passed as he watched her, their eyes meeting, her bemused smile turning to a wide grin as her tongue poked out between her lips and licked once, teeth biting her lower lip slightly.

“Do you two have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused, disappearing like that?” Caleb interrupted, outrage making his blood boil in spite of the alcohol that should have loosened him.

The look on Kari's face had nothing to do with his yelling, of course.

"Caleb, *shhhh*," Kari said. "It's fine."

"It is NOT fine! What in the hell were you doing, Carolina, with all that Instagram crap? Christian is getting *death threats* from your followers. They think *he's* the one hurting *you*! You can't just pull stunts like this and get away with it!"

A muffled sound, then a sigh, came through from the cottage. "Calm down, bro," Christian said. "There's an explanation."

"There better be."

"I, ah," Carolina said from inside, the sound of fabric rustling making Caleb even angrier. "Can this wait?"

"NO!" Caleb bellowed, surprised by his fury.

"I've got this, honey," Christian said in that mollifying tone that drove Caleb bonkers. He emerged from the cottage wearing boxers and a grin, closing the door behind him. One hand went to Caleb's chest. "I know you're looking out for me."

"No shit. She dumped you on social media, Chris!"

"No, I didn't!" Carolina called out from the cottage, clearly listening. "It was all part of the plan!"

"Plan?" Kari, Nessa, and Caleb all gasped in unison.

"Yes, *plan*." Shuffling sounds inside the cottage made Caleb understand just how naked the two were. When the door opened, Carolina appeared, wrapped in a sheet, looking like a sorority pledge at a fraternity toga party. "*Plan!* Christian knew all along about it."

"You didn't say a word to me," Caleb grouched at him.

"That's because, I, uh –"

"He *forgot!*" Carolina said with a huff. "I told him all about how I could create the best wedding drama ever," she said in a breathless, excited voice. "We could turn this

wedding into a social highlight of the year. And we succeeded!”

“We,” Caleb said, giving Christian a hard look.

“My followers ate it up! People were so worried. So compassionate. So kind.”

“You manipulated them!” Caleb snapped back. “You played with their emotional heartstrings. And my brother’s, too!”

“I’m so sorry about that, darlin’,” she said to Christian, then hit his chest. “But it’s your own damn fault for not listening to me! I told you my plan.”

“You have, uh, a lot of plans,” Christian said sheepishly. “I might not have caught every detail.”

Translation: he hadn’t been listening.

“How on earth could you ever doubt my love for you?” she insisted, poking him. “I would never really pull out of our wedding. I love you too much!”

They began kissing, their embrace deepening, Caleb beginning to become embarrassed.

Kari cleared her throat. *Hard.*

“And the prenup? Was that part of all this,” Kari asked, waving her hands around, “plan?”

Carolina had the decency to look down, her shoulders dropping. “Ah, no. That was real.”

“That was real, alright,” Caleb started.

“Christian and I talked it through. I was scared.”

“Scared?” Kari pried gently.

“Yes, scared. Scared of losing Christian.”

“What does a prenup have to do with losing him?”

“I didn’t say it made sense, Caleb!” she shot back, clinging harder to his brother. “Since when do emotions make sense?”

He was starting to see how Christian and Carolina fit together so well.

“I – all this wedding planning made me miss my mama. And Mama wasn’t an easy woman to deal with, let me tell you.”

“The apple didn’t fall far from the tree,” he responded.

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you want me to finish explaining, or do you want to insult me?”

“I’m struggling with the choice.”

Her eyes flared.

“Caleb,” Christian cut in. “I’ve talked it through with her. We’re good.”

Caleb strongly doubted that.

“Carolina was terrified of losing me like she lost her mama. Emotions are funny things. It’s kind of like the prenup was a test. Some part of her thought that a locked-in prenup would make it harder for me to ever leave her.”

“That’s ridicu – *what?*”

“It doesn’t have to make sense to you, bro.” Christian kissed her, then gently guided Carolina back into the cottage. “And we’re all good now. Bye.”

With that, he shut the door.

And locked it.

Kari took Caleb’s arm. “As outcomes go, this is a success,” she whispered, moving closer to him, his hand itching to touch hers.

“He’s drunk,” Caleb whispered back.

“Clearly not too drunk to navigate a storm and find his way to this remote little cottage.”

“And do the deed,” Nessa murmured from behind.

Kari laughed through her nose before she said, “And find his way back to the person who completes him.”

Caleb's chest tightened as the other three chambers of his heart faltered.

The person who completes him.

That was it, right? Carolina might be a wacky, pompous, arrogant Southern belle, but she did something for Christian no one else could. Why would his brother fight so hard for someone so... distasteful?

Because for Christian, she was the exact right flavor.

His fingers brushed against something warm. Suddenly, Kari squeezed his hand, just once, letting go quickly. Nessa was right here, after all, and he knew professionalism and decorum were key for Kari.

Not that the storm cared one bit about any of that.

And frankly, neither did Caleb.

Finally, he shouted to his brother, "Good to know you're safe. We didn't need to come to your rescue after all."

"We're coming along just fine, bro!" Christian shouted, the last word muffled as Carolina shrieked.

Caleb let out a grumbly huff of air and turned on his heel, grabbing Kari's hand as he walked past her, decorum be damned. Nessa followed. No one spoke a word until they reached the door of the pool bar. With his free hand, Caleb pulled the door open for Nessa, but made no move to follow her inside, holding Kari back to give them privacy.

"Look," he said to Kari, pointing up.

"What?" she answered anxiously. "What now? An asteroid strike? A tsunami? Part of the International Space Station falling from the sky? Starlink satellite launch failure?"

"Just look," he repeated.

"Stars! It's so clear! So many!"

"Nope. Heaven."

He pulled her in and kissed her, kissed her as if he would never stop, as if to make up for lost time, lost years, as if to

promise her heaven on Earth.

And she kissed him back as if to accept it all, and more.

A drop of water landed on Kari's nose, then another. And another. The air, which had been still, began to move around them in tentative gusts. Caleb gently brushed the drops from her face.

"We should go in," he said, "unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless... we could still make it back to my cottage before the other side of the storm really hits. It'd be more comfortable than sitting on the floor behind a bar, and I don't think it's any more dangerous, and—"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, Caleb." Her laughter was loose and floating, the kind of giggle that frees instead of binds. "Let's just go with *yes* and take it from there."

They ran.

Sprinting through the soggy landscape felt like fleeing a mistake, heading toward the fork in a trail where you get to try the path not taken. Years stripped off his shoulders as they raced to his cottage, fat raindrops splashing his cheeks as his foot touched the patio stones.

All the alcohol he'd had with Christian coursed through his veins at breakneck speed now, and while he was loose and warm, buzzing with excitement, he was stone-cold sober emotionally.

And he knew exactly who he wanted.

Her phone buzzed as they reached the bed, his hand slipping into her purse and throwing the damn thing in the closet, a perfect three-point shot into a small hamper inside. They were too busy kissing for her to notice.

Or care.

Soaked to the skin, their clothes were like wet cling wrap, peeled off more pragmatically than romantically, but the struggle was worth it.

“You’re more beautiful than ever,” he murmured as he stepped forward, pulled her into the embrace he’d wanted more than anything – and then they both got what they needed.

Wanted.

And could find nowhere else.

Chapter Fourteen



Kari opened her eyes to soft morning sunshine. She was dreaming, she knew, because she was in a room she'd never seen before. And—as she turned her head ever so slightly—Caleb was asleep beside her, his arm over her, tucked in close. It was one of those very intense, detailed dreams; she could smell his breath, which was familiar and delicious, but she was too warm and a little sticky.

And she needed to pee.

It wasn't the first time she'd dreamt of waking up with him, but it was the first time she'd ever had to pee. Her dreams of Caleb generally had to do with other needs.

She moved her legs experimentally, and he stirred in response. He pulled her closer, so that his mouth was against her ear, and whispered urgently, "Aspirin."

Even for a dream, that was unusual.

And then it all came flooding back. The storm. The karaoke. The search-and-rescue mission to Christian's bungalow, and—oh my God—Carolina! The silent walk back to the hotel bar, Nessa—oh my God—*Nessa!* She'd left Nessa alone in a hurricane!

The rest of the night came flooding back, too, but she pushed it to the edges of her consciousness. Right now, she had more important things to think about—or at least, more pressing things.

One delightfully hard thing that pressed against her, at least.

“Mmm,” he said against her neck, his soft lips so delicious. The feel of his breath along her skin was so good. So right. So perfect.

Just like your perfect day.

Wait a minute. Perfect day. Your perfect day. No matter what it takes.

Her job.

The wedding.

Carolina and Christian.

“Where is my phone?” She jumped up, realized she was naked, sat down again, stood up, and looked around frantically for the bathroom.

“*Shhhh!* Not so loud!” Caleb pulled his pillow over his head, his other hand flailing for her, as if he could rope her back in.

The first door she tried was a closet, which left only one other option. She barely made it, but as she rinsed her hands and splashed water on her face, her head began to clear. This wasn't an actual, physical hangover—she hadn't had *that* much to drink—it was more of a feeling of overwhelm, of too much input and not enough time to process. Katie sometimes talked about a “love hangover,” so maybe that's what this feeling was?

She flipped the light switch to get a better look in the mirror, but nothing happened. Right. The power was out, which would also explain the lack of air conditioning.

She needed her phone, which was in her bag, which was still in the bar?... she hoped. Along with everything else she'd brought to this disaster zone.

Great.

Desperate times require desperate measures. She picked up Caleb's toothbrush, examined it, and hesitated for a second.

Then she set it down.

A fuzzy memory, of pulses racing and breath long overdue for a kiss, filled her from last night. Caleb throwing her buzzing phone... did that really happen?

Not to mention the incredible sex, images of his body over her, under her, of the glorious sensation of being connected and cherished, sweaty and slick, hot and bothered.

Then released.

She wanted a shower badly, but the idea of stepping under a stream of cold water held no appeal, and while generators would provide limited electricity, were the water pumps working? She had literally nothing with her—no hairbrush, no makeup, not even sunglasses to hide behind. That was all in her bag at the bar.

Yesterday's clothes, dirty, wrinkled, and slightly damp, were the only available option. On the plus side, there'd been a serious hurricane and the power was still out—surely she wouldn't be the only disheveled person walking around outside. Her walk of shame might not even get a second glance. She poked inside his shaving kit, found a comb, and did what she could.

When she emerged, Caleb was lying perfectly still, on his stomach, bare ass like a sculpture. The little wave tattoo on his calf, the perfect blend of M and W, made her heart flutter. She hesitated, watching him closely for signs of regular breathing, his slumber like drinking a calming tea. His body was so familiar, so beloved, but as she looked at his perfect ass—and it was objectively perfect—she realized that he was also new to her.

Her Caleb was a boy.

This Caleb, lying naked before her, was undoubtedly all *man*.

He lifted a corner of the pillow and opened one eye. "You're beautiful," he said weakly. "All three of you."

"I'll try to find you a Coke," she said, retrieving her skirt from a chair and looking around for any other familiar articles of clothing. Something black peeking out from under the bed

led her to her bra, and she pulled it out and put it on. She had no clear recollection of the moment it came off.

Just a sense of unbearable erotic wetness.

“Don’t leave me,” he groaned.

“I have to—I’ve got to find Nessa. And I have to talk to Carolina and Christian and find out what’s happening. There’s a wedding still! And my phone, and my computer, and—” She picked up an empty bottle of champagne from the floor and set it on a table. “Did we... did we drink that?”

“Probably. I think it was in the fridge. Did you say there’s a Coke? Could you...” he took a deep breath, “...look for some aspirin in the bathroom? Or find a mallet and knock me out?”

“You’re not that bad off,” she said with a laugh, but sympathy made her find a sad little trial-size packet of ibuprofen in his kit.

In search of the kitchen, she fumbled along. Daylight helped but drawn curtains didn’t. The cottage had been dark last night, so she was seeing it for the first time. The resort had gone with the obvious beachy theme, with lots of blue-and-white striped linen and bleached wood floors. With the air conditioning off, it was stuffy, though, so she went to the French doors and pulled one open.

A blast of hot, humid air hit her, so thick that it was hard to breathe. She closed the door again in a hurry and drew the curtains over the glass to keep the heat out as long as possible. If the wedding was going to happen—and signs seemed to be pointing in that direction—they needed power.

She had to find out if Wedding Protectors had any pull with FEMA. Time to call in that favor with Archie.

It was Tuesday morning. On Wednesday afternoon, the first of 500 guests—give or take—were scheduled to arrive, expecting a cocktail party.

And if a cocktail party was on the schedule, by God, there was going to be a cocktail party. This was exactly the reason that Wedding Protectors existed. She felt the kick of adrenaline

as it started pulsing through her bloodstream. The main thing was to get her phone and computer and start calling; time was ticking by as she stood here.

In the kitchenette, she opened the refrigerator and groped around in the dark interior. She pulled out four bottles of water. There was no Coke, but maybe she could find some when she got back to the bar.

Caleb hadn't moved since she left the room. Still face down, still naked, still gorgeous. She experienced a wave of desire so strong, she had to brace herself for a second on the doorframe to keep from lying down next to him.

He moaned very softly, and she remembered the painkiller she was holding.

"Caleb," she said, trying to keep her tone low and soothing, "I'm putting ibuprofen and water on the table here beside you. If I had my bag, I'd offer a sleeve of Liquid IV, but this will have to do in a pinch. Try to drink the water. You need to hydrate. And just sleep." She walked to the window and pulled the curtains all the way closed.

He tried to sit up and held his head in his hands, arms going up, showcasing thick biceps with veins that popped out at his effort. "Can't sleep. Why does 'Take Me to the River' keep playing in my head? It won't stop." He raised his eyebrows and – was he *pouting*? "Come back to bed and make me feel good again."

She smiled. "'Take Me to the River' – well...tell you later—in fact, I think there's video. I have to get my stuff and start making calls. And find Nessa! And I haven't even checked in yet. I really have to go."

"Kari."

"Hmmm?"

"You can't leave me like this."

"I'm sorry! I have to work. You of all people understand that. I wish I had more than a painkiller and water, but — "

“I mean,” he said, climbing up on all fours on the bed, prowling across the mattress to bury his face in her waist, “you cannot leave without kissing me.”

She patted his ass. “That I can manage. I have an unlimited supply of kisses for you. Those don’t get left in a bag somewhere accidentally.”

In spite of his headache, Caleb managed quite nicely to pull himself to a position on his knees that left them head-to-head, his arms steel bands around her waist, their kiss nothing but fire on skin.

This was what she’d wanted her whole life. Nothing but this, more of this, and this to infinity. Caleb infused every cell of her being with a lust and certainty that defied description, and as the kiss deepened, she felt the draw of the bed, the pull of his heat, the –

RING!

She startled, the sound making him loosen his grip, and then she spun, following the sound of her phone, until she found it, mysteriously buried quite deep in a pile of dirty laundry in Caleb’s hotel closet hamper.

It was Archie.

Blowing Caleb a kiss, she toed on her shoes and answered the call.

She turned and headed for the door before she lost what was left of her mind and got back in bed. So far, absolutely nothing was going according to plan at this wedding.

But then again, that was when she did her best work.

* * *

Kari sat in the blessed cool and bright light of the hotel conference room, a cold glass of sparkling water—a glass miraculously full of ice cubes!—in front of her.

Electricity. Such a seemingly simple, basic utility, until you didn’t have it.

Also at the conference table were the resort's head of catering, the event manager, Carolina's wedding designer, and Nessa. Ranney and Marlo were en route from the Atlanta airport. Laptops and phones were charged, hair had been blow-dried, and like Kari, they all had a cold drink in front of them.

Civilization had been restored to St. Alban's.

Civility, however, had not.

"What do you mean, the causeway is going to be undergoing repairs? Do it on Monday!" The wedding designer was unimpressed by Acts of God or the plans of FEMA. "Our guests will begin arriving tomorrow, and the first thing they see is *not* going to be dirt and construction vehicles and men in hardhats! Yellow is *not* our theme color!"

The event manager breathed deeply. "Remy," he said to the designer, "They won't be arriving at all if we don't get the causeway cleared and inspected."

"And speaking of arrivals," Kari spoke up as Remy sputtered, "what's happening with food? And flowers? I assume the liquor supply is fine. What else had to be special ordered?"

"We were lucky that the storm was coastal. Everything was delayed two days, but most of it is on the way. We may have some problems with local shellfish."

"Shellfish?" Remy shrieked. "The entire welcome party is built around local shellfish! This is unacceptable! Kari, do something!"

"*Local* is a relative term," she answered calmly. "It was an Atlantic hurricane. We'll get Gulf Coast oysters and roast them instead of a raw bar. Crab from Mobile instead of Maryland."

The event manager nodded at her. "Exactly. Otherwise, we're all set. Flowers and fresh produce were scheduled for tomorrow anyway. The timing of the storm was really perfect."

"Perfect," Nessa repeated, glancing at Kari with a not-so-innocent smile.

Oh, no.

How much had she seen last night?

Perfect was how Nessa looked this afternoon, in a sleeveless linen shift dress and flat sandals, her hair pulled into a ponytail. She'd been calm and collected when Kari found her this morning, sitting at a table in the bar with a cold brew coffee in front of her, tapping on her phone. Cots had been set up, perhaps two dozen of them, and Nessa did not look like she'd had a sleepless night. She was pretty much the same as any other workday, but maybe just a tiny bit smug as Kari apologized for her disappearance.

"I never should have left you like that," Kari had been saying.

"It's fine," Nessa interrupted her. "The hotel brought in these beds, and there's coffee... sort of. And I knew you were okay. I mean, obviously you were with Caleb, so I wasn't worried."

"Yeah," Kari said uncomfortably. "About that..."

"Kari, don't stress. He's your ex, right? It happens all the time, like, nostalgia sex or something. Plus the storm. It's not like he's the client. I was fine last night, the manager here is great. Sam. He's been through, like, a million hurricanes."

As if to prove just how great he was, Sam had appeared at that moment with a carafe of cold brew and a glass for Kari.

"How do you take it?" he asked. "It's not that cold, but it's caffeine."

"Straight," she answered absently. "No sugar."

She got it now. Nostalgia. Plus the storm.

Of course.

What had she been thinking? That her One True Love had miraculously reappeared in her life? That everything was going to change, to be the way it was supposed to be? Thank God she'd gotten out of there in the morning before she said something embarrassing.

Something like “I never stopped loving you,” or “I’ve waited for this for so long,” or “There’s never been anyone else for me.” Nessa had it exactly right.

Twelve years ago, he’d cracked her heart in two. The thick line of scar tissue she’d formed as she put it back together, bit by bit, couldn’t be formed again. Kari didn’t have it in her to be hurt by him again.

Being ghosted turned her into a shell of herself.

Whatever this was between them had to be all-in, one hundred percent, the real thing.

Forever and ever.

Last night he’d been tipsy, nostalgic, scared by watching his brother get dumped then not dumped, and the whole mess was... messy.

Sleeping with Kari was probably just a fun pastime for Caleb.

Nostalgia, as Nessa said.

Nostalgia.

That word looped through her mind, dark and glowering, taking on a sinister tone as it raced through her until the pit of her stomach ached and her mouth went dry.

With an effort, Kari pulled her attention back to this afternoon’s meeting. Bring on the crises—the more, the better. Solving other people’s problems would keep her mind off her own. And off the buzz of her phone as Caleb’s texts came in.

When are you coming back?

Hey, what’s happening?

All good?

Kari?

Chapter Fifteen



Caleb woke gradually, without opening his eyes. He was thirsty, and the room was stifling. Little flashes began to drift into his consciousness—singing? Weird thing to imagine. Must have been a dream.

Standing outdoors in total darkness, talking to Christian and... Carolina? Who were both sitting somewhere above him? Now that was some deep psychological shit. What could it represent? Back in 2016, he'd dated a therapist a few times, and he tried to guess what she would say, but he hadn't known her all that long.

He cracked one eye open and looked around. It was dim in the room. The curtains were drawn, and the bed was a mess. The sheets smelled so good, so sweet, so sexy.

Mmmm.

Like Kari.

A hotel room... Right! St. Alban's—the wedding, the hurricane, the bourbon—*Kari!*

He sat up.

“Kari?”

No answer. He began looking around for clues. The bottles of water on the bedside table? Could be a standard hotel amenity. An ibuprofen packet wrapper? Okay, no hotel was *that* thoughtful... Aha! An empty champagne bottle!

But he was pretty sure he remembered more. Soft laughter, soft brown hair. A familiar scent of roses and some spice—

cloves? A long sigh. A cry of passion.

His name.

His name spoken in the most sensual of ways.

Above him with Kari riding him, breasts in his hands, a visual feast to accompany the pleasure.

And now the sheets were turning into a tent...

Where was his damn phone? He found his pants, which were hard to navigate given the wood he was tucking into them. There it was in the front pocket... dead. This was more than a person should have to handle with a pounding head and the love of his life in absentia.

Moving slowly, he dug the battery pack out of his backpack and plugged the phone into it. The room was unbearably stuffy and hot. No wonder his head hurt. He pulled the curtains and the afternoon sun poured in.

Clicking the lock open on the door, he stepped out onto the porch, where he was assaulted by a wall of humidity. Actual steam was rising from the golf course in front of him. How did Southerners stand this? He was a New England guy, through and through. If he wanted to live in a sauna, he'd build one.

Not *inhabit* one.

Gasping for breath, he staggered back inside and slammed the door.

Without much hope, he flipped the switch for the ceiling fan. No such luck.

At that moment, his energy gave out, and he lay back down, knees bent at the end of the mattress, eyes on the ceiling fan that was most definitely *not* moving.

The good news of a hangover was that, unlike the flu, it would be gone in twenty-four hours.

The bad news was that, unlike the flu, it was your own fault.

And in this particular case, the *really* bad news was that Caleb struggled to piece together the timeline of what had

probably been the best night of his entire life. Yes, he remembered the sex, and the bottle of champagne had come after the sex.

Or, at least, the *first* round of sex.

Ah, how Kari's body had changed. So had his. What he first thought would be a homecoming had instead turned into time travel, a particularly fluid (ahem...) version, as Caleb the teenager collided with Caleb the Man as he touched Kari everywhere.

And she touched him right back.

Twelve years of time folded like a tesseract as he made love to Now Kari and Then Kari and desperately tried to enjoy and enthrall all the Karis in between.

Now Caleb felt inadequate. Frustrated.

Stupid.

Oh, so stupid.

The sex was phenomenal. So much better than it had been when they were young, and not just from experience or skill. There was a depth to how they touched each other, how her mouth found his, how her hands and tongue roamed over him with so much attention. She focused solely on him, her whole self in every sigh, every lick, each kiss, each thrust.

And his whole heart gave right back, matching everything she gave.

He missed her. Wanted her back here. Needed to talk, to fix this mess, to be vulnerable and real, authentic and open.

If Christian and Carolina could figure it all out, for Pete's sake, so could Caleb and Kari.

Certain they could bridge the gap and find a way to be together, Caleb sat up, knowing he needed to find her.

Hating his pounding head.

Hydration and ibuprofen were his only hope. Like Obi-Wan and Princess Leia.

Too bad he didn't have a droid to help him out here.

He would lie nice and still until his phone had charged sufficiently to send a text. Then he would text Kari. And Christian. And his executive assistant, Fay.

Beyond that, he had no plan.

Yet.

Chapter Sixteen



Three Days Later

Kari sat in a white wooden folding chair, overlooking the water, where the ceremony had been held. Resort staff were folding up the chairs and stacking them on the bed of a pickup truck. The wedding party and all the guests had moved on to the reception, in a pavilion around the bend and out of view. She knew she should be over there, but her team was handling it and, to be honest, the longer she sat here, the longer she could avoid Caleb.

She was thinking that she had seen every possible style of bride that could be imagined, from bikinis to matching white tuxedos to satin gowns with twenty-foot trains held up by a troop of six-year-olds dressed as angels. Little black dresses, bright orange saris, white ski suits, leather, fur, fluffy feathers. Chanel couture to H&M.

Once, an Elsa costume. That bride had forced all the bridesmaids to dye their hair platinum and wear blue contact lenses. The wedding photos had been... chilling.

But never, in all this time, had she ever seen as lovely a bride as Carolina.

Carolina's dress appeared to be made of hundreds of delicate white flowers, stitched together strategically to cover her graceful form. The soft chiffon petals trembled slightly as she moved. Her golden blonde, shoulder-length hair was loose and simple, but enormous South Seas pearls dangled from her

ears. Because she was basically wearing the bouquet, she carried only a small white prayer book. Her other hand had rested on her father's arm as he walked her down the aisle.

Her father, whose name was Buell, was a hoot. He was maybe an inch taller than his daughter, and he was what used to be called portly—presumably the result of decades of business lunches and country club dinners. His wife, Carolina's mother, had died years ago, and he doted on his only girl. Carolina appeared to return his adoration.

Since he arrived at St. Alban's, Buell had held court in classic Southern style. Cocktails flowed, cigars were passed out, and he somehow knew the name of every employee in the place. Every male guest was made to feel like Buell's oldest and most trusted friend, and every female felt like the most fascinating and beautiful woman in the room.

The man knew how to *woo*.

"I hear you're in charge of disaster management for this important event," he said when introduced to Kari. "Makes me want to stir up some trouble just to see you in action."

His wink was almost comical in its predictability.

And charm.

"I have a feeling stirring up trouble comes naturally to you, Mr. Pickett," she replied, smiling broadly, "but I've already handled a hurricane, a power outage, and bridge reconstruction this week." She diplomatically did not add, *And a runaway bride*.

"That's a lot," he agreed.

"Don't you think I deserve a rest?"

He chuckled. "I'm Carolina's father," he said. "Don't you think *I* deserve a rest?"

The man had her there.

When Buell Pickett met Ranney Martini, his natural charm and social skills went into overdrive. Kari could tell he had never seen anything quite like her.

Men like Buell Pickett loved to pursue the unknown.

Buell ran a very successful law firm with offices in Birmingham and Mobile. His three sons were partners. He had a beach house, a fishing camp, and box seats at Bryant-Denny Stadium in Tuscaloosa, where he and his friends watched the Crimson Tide march to victory on Saturdays in the fall. His life ran like clockwork, smooth and pleasant and predictable, and Kari guessed that he was bored to tears.

Until he saw Ranney.

For her part, Ranney had already survived a marriage to, and divorce from, a successful man of small stature, large personality, and even larger bank account. She had a job she liked, a not-quite-launched daughter she loved, and Kari knew she had no interest whatsoever in flirtation with a geographically undesirable clone of her former husband.

Albeit with a much better accent.

Besides, she was working. It was inappropriate, if not expressly forbidden by her employment contract.

Kari knew *allllll* about that.

Kicking herself was swiftly becoming part of her personality, at least when it came to Caleb. For the last two days, she'd ignored him. Avoided him.

Outright hid from him.

Sharing an island while being part of the wedding crew and managing to be elusive wasn't just a skill.

It was a superpower.

A really pathetic one.

All of Caleb's texts, voicemails, and even two handwritten, delivered letters with his flat, even writing had done nothing but set her into freeze mode. Cowardice didn't wear well on her, but she just... couldn't. Hunkering down and hiding was involuntary. Unable to reply, she just pretended she wasn't ignoring him.

Surely that would make all her moral ambiguity and emotional turmoil disappear.

Sleeping with Caleb had been magic. Beautiful and poetic, hot and steamy, they'd come together so perfectly.

And literally.

Every rule – every freaking rule, even the ones she had personally written into the Wedding Protectors, Inc. work manual – she had broken.

Along with, maybe... a few deviance laws. They were in the South, after all.

“Kari?” Ranney interrupted her reverie, and a heaping dose of guilt poured through her veins. “I’m going over to the reception. Do you want to come with me?”

“Not really.” Kari sighed, standing up. “But I will. The resort did a nice job of cleaning up the debris after the storm, didn’t they?”

“Yes. It’s all piled up on the other side of the island. The manager tried to talk Remy and me into having a bonfire tonight instead of fireworks. He was obviously hoping to kill two birds with one stone. We told him thanks, but we’d stick with Plan A.”

A golf cart pulled up, and a woman in a sage green St. Alban’s polo shirt stepped out onto the grass. She was carrying a cube-shaped white cardboard box, and she headed toward them.

“Uh oh,” Ranney said under her breath.

“What?” Kari asked, instantly on the alert for problems.

The woman smiled at Ranney conspiratorially. “Here’s today’s offering,” she said, handing her the box, then turned back to the golf cart.

Ranney sighed and put the box down on a nearby seat, unopened.

“What’s that?” Kari asked. “What’s this about?”

“It’s flowers.”

“Did something get forgotten? Is it a boutonniere or..?”

“No. It’s for me.”

“For you? I don’t...”

“Buell.”

“Buell?”

“Kari, that man has sent me flowers every day since I got here. And champagne, and chocolates. He even sent a solar-powered, purse-sized air-conditioner.”

“A what?”

“I know. Over the top, right?”

“No,” Kari mused. “I’m thinking we need to buy those in bulk. Makes a great wedding guest favor.”

Ranney continued. “And a Sweet Home Alabama t-shirt that he must have had his secretary send. I swear I haven’t encouraged him—I’ve barely spoken to him!”

“Is he making you uncomfortable?”

“No! Not at all—he’s a perfect gentleman and very sweet. It’s just that I’m working, and he’s the bride’s father, and... that’s not what I’m here for, you know? We’re supposed to be invisible.”

“Invisibility,” Kari mused. “I used to want to teleport, but now I think invisibility would be the best superpower to have.”

Ranney raised a questioning eyebrow. Normally, Kari kept her private life private, but Ranney’s caring look lowered her defenses.

“Caleb,” she said simply. “We, um... something happened the other night, the night of the hurricane, and we haven’t really talked about it.”

“Why not?” Ranney had instantly forgotten her own problem, if you called being lavished with gifts and attention by a wealthy widower a “problem.”

“Well, the wedding—I was busy and then he was busy, and...”

Ranney gave her a well-practiced version of the Mom Stare.

“Kari, you need to talk to him. Why haven’t you?”

“Nessa said something that made me think—”

“*Nessa?* You listened to something *Nessa* said about *relationships*? She’s a good girl, she means well, but her longest relationship lasted two weeks, and that was in college! She got ‘the ick’ about a guy because he didn’t answer a text within twenty minutes! What pearls of wisdom did she share with you, exactly?”

Kari had no idea what *ick* was.

“She said it probably happened because of nostalgia—you know, reliving the past more than being in the present, or the future.”

“Nostalgia? She’s twenty-four! Her idea of nostalgia is watching old episodes of *iCarly!* Kari, you need to get over there and talk to Caleb.”

“I can’t talk to him now, it’s the reception. And it’s probably too late, anyway.” She bit her lip. “I’ve kind of avoided him and not really returned his messages, so he probably thinks—”

“You have no idea what he thinks. It’s time to find out. This isn’t like you, Kari.” Ranney’s brow dropped with concern. “You always face obstacles head on, calmly and coolly. Hiding like this must be so distressing for you.”

Kari’s stomach turned to acid. “Weren’t we talking about *your* problems?”

“What, Buell Pickett? *Pffft.* He’s not a problem. He’s a cultural experience. Like hosting an exchange student.” She winked and picked up the flower box, shaking it slightly, then sniffing. “Let’s go, we’re late.”

* * *

Kari stood in a corner behind a floor-to-ceiling cascade of pale pink roses resembling a waterfall. The floral designer must have bought up every pink rose in the Western Hemisphere. The walls of the pavilion appeared to be made of roses. It was both over the top and somehow perfectly tasteful. Amazing what you could do with an unlimited budget. In any case, it made it very easy to keep out of sight, for which she was grateful.

Her earpiece beeped, and she tapped it.

“Where are you?” Archie snapped.

“On a float in the Rose Parade, apparently. Northwest corner. Near the band.” A jazz sextet was playing “It Had to Be You,” which, according to her copy of the set list, meant that cocktail hour was drawing to a close.

Archie was in a mood. His arrival on site, like Ranney and Marlo’s, had been delayed by the hurricane. He had not been there to protect Kari and Nessa, presumably by diverting the storm through sheer force of will, and he took this failure personally. He certainly wasn’t going to allow anything else to go wrong.

Too bad he couldn’t manage her romantic life.

“Be right there.”

While she waited for him to appear, she checked her phone, which she had silenced for the ceremony. There was the usual text from Katie, with maybe a little more interest than normal.

Did the knot get tied? How’s the weather? How did Carolina look? Anything unusual going on?

Knot tied, hope it’s good and tight. Carolina looked amazing, she typed. She was scrolling for a photo to attach when a man’s voice said,

“You look so familiar.”

Frozen again, she felt like the ice sculpture Buell had insisted on having to the right of the dance floor.

Venus in a clamshell.

“I feel like we’ve met somewhere,” the man persisted.

She turned and—Caleb. Of course.

The best man in more ways than one.

In his black tuxedo, which fit him like the custom-tailored suit that it was. She’d seen him from a distance at the ceremony, of course, but up close was different. Again, she had the disconcerting sense of deep intimacy with a complete stranger. A gorgeous stranger.

She felt a little faint.

“I…” This moment was inevitable, but now that it was here, she didn’t know where to start.

A veil of cold aloofness shrouded his eyes. “It’s okay, Kari. I get it. You’re just not interested in me anymore. You made that pretty clear this week. I’m glad the other night happened. I’ll always have that memory. Kind of. Parts of it, anyway.” His frown almost made her smile at the memory of his goofy charm, how he kissed her, how easy it was between them.

Almost.

“But you’ve avoided me for long enough now. I get it. Message delivered. Sorry about all the texts and voicemails. And those notes – ” His bitter chuckle broke something inside her, like a piece of her heart plunked down to the bottom of her ribs. “ – just burn them. Obviously you were just feeling some kind of nostalgia.”

She gasped, but he held up a finger.

“Let me finish,” he said firmly. “I had time to think about what I wanted to say, and it’s pretty simple. I never should have let you go, Kari. Twelve years ago, I was a dumbass. Clueless. It’s convenient to use that as an excuse, but it’s all I have. I keep trying to figure out how I could have done that, been so stupid. I guess I was just too young. Too… something. Then Carolina hired you, and when I saw you again, I started to think maybe there’d be a second chance.” He smiled sadly. “And I actually convinced myself that you wanted it, too.”

Again she tried to speak, again he shook his head.

“I’m almost done. I just wanted to say thanks, and you don’t have to feel uncomfortable, or avoid me, or anything like that. We’ll just be old friends from now on, people who used to know each other. Nothing more, nothing less. It’s good to have the closure.” His sad smile didn’t help.

Especially because it didn’t come close to touching his eyes.

Frozen once again, she tried to speak, but all she could manage was a dry sound from the back of her throat that sounded like a death rattle.

“Again, apologies for trying to talk this week. I should have gotten your obvious message sooner,” he added, just as a very pretty blonde bridesmaid in—what else?—rose-pink silk spotted them and came rushing up to Caleb, teetering a bit on her high heels.

“Caleb, they want us for photos before dinner starts!” Her Southern accent was light, lilting, and flirtatious as she looked up at him. “I found you—now do I get to keep you?”

She grabbed his hand, laughing, and started to pull him away, cutting Kari a glance that said, *Mine – stay back*.

Already moving, he glanced back at Kari with a half-smile and shrugged. Off they went.

Kari swallowed. She still hadn’t spoken.

Even if she could, all she could think was one long scream.

Caleb had said to her everything that she had intended to say to him. So why did she feel so utterly miserable?

“You okay?” Archie asked, suddenly at her side. It wasn’t that he was unusually tall or large—he was maybe six feet—but he gave the impression of being completely in charge. He made Kari think of a term from high school physics: *potential energy*.

“I’m fine.”

“You want me to beat him up for you?” He was staring after Caleb and the bridesmaid.

“What? No! No, of course not.” She looked at him nervously. “You’re joking, right?”

He didn’t respond.

“What’s up?” she asked, changing the subject back to business.

“Nothing yet. Nothing unusual, anyway. A few small boats with paparazzi, but only two have tried to land. With luck, the hurricane will be the worst of it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Archie tapped one of his earpieces and stepped away, speaking quietly.

He wasn’t gone for two seconds when Ranney appeared in his place.

“Hey. I made a final check of the place settings, everything looks fine.”

“What’s your least favorite color?” Kari asked.

“Purple. Why do you ask?”

“Mine is rose pink. I hate rose pink.” She was watching the wedding party, who were laughing and goofing around as they posed on the lawn near the dunes.

Ranney followed Kari’s gaze.

“Did you talk to him?”

“Yes. Well, no. He talked to *me*. He said we’re ‘old friends.’ ‘People who used to know each other.’”

“He said that?”

“He said he thought we had a second chance, but it was just nostalgia.”

“He *said* that?”

“Yes, but...”

“But what?” Ranney narrowed her eyes.

“He said it was *me* feeling the nostalgia. He said—he said he never should have let me go, that it was a big mistake.”

Ranney’s mouth was open in amazement. “And you stood there and didn’t say a word?”

“I didn’t have time! Pretty-in-Pink over there came running up and that was it.”

“Kari, go over there and talk to him again! What happened to the Kari who can handle literally anything? Tase him if you have to! Where’s your bag?” She looked around.

“Archie offered to beat him up, and now you want me to tase him? We need to take a hard look at our corporate culture.”

“You’re stalling. Get over there!” Ranney gave her a gentle push.

“What am I going to say?” Kari had a deer-in-the-headlights look that Ranney had rarely seen before.

“You’ll think of something on the way. From what I’ve seen of Caleb, my advice is, say what’s in your heart.”

“My heart? The one that’s made of more scar tissue than muscle after what he did to me twelve years ago? That heart?”

“Oh, sweetie.” The arm that came around her shoulders for a motherly squeeze felt so good, Kari could feel the tears threatening to pour. No, no, no.

She was *working*.

A waiter passed by with a silver tray of champagne flutes. Kari grabbed two, handed one to Ranney, and held up her own. They clinked and—in total defiance of one of the most basic rules she had ever set for her employees or herself—Kari downed her glass like a shot.

Ranney took a tiny sip of hers and watched Kari cross the manicured lawn in the direction of the wedding party. Archie appeared at her side.

“Pretty sure we’re in charge now,” Ranney said to him.

Kari heard it.

And felt nothing but relief.

Chapter Seventeen



“Gentlemen! Over here, please!” The photographer pointed to a spot in the dunes and looked around for his assistant. “Maylie, you can pass out the cigars,” he said as Caleb groaned. The scent of cigars? No problem.

The taste? Ugh.

Years of climbing up financial classes had taught him that rich people imitate richer people and acquire their hobbies and tastes in an effort to fit in and be viewed as “one of them.”

Truly wealthy people just indulge in who they are, holding the frame at all times.

The cigars were going to taste like crap if they were photo ops.

“Cigars?” one of the ushers spoke up. “I don’t smoke tobacco.”

“Makes a great shot,” the photographer soothed. “You don’t have to inhale.”

“I just love the smell of a good cigar. My daddy smoked Cohibas, and he taught me to cut them when I was four.” The giggly blonde bridesmaid, whose name was Gates, was still clinging to Caleb’s arm like pink moss on a willow tree. “Cigar smoke is just so... masculine.”

“Mmm,” he replied absently, thinking the opposite. He was looking over the top of her head. Across the lawn, Kari appeared to be headed in their direction. He supposed it was

part of her job to oversee all wedding activities, just standard procedure, but his pulse jumped anyway.

Then flatlined.

Because Kari didn't want him.

Not one bit.

He felt foolish. Deflated. Crushed and disappointed in himself. Reading Kari had come so naturally, but clearly he'd blown it somehow. It wasn't the sex – he knew it couldn't have been because what they did in bed together was so good, so hot, so unbelievably extraordinary that she wasn't avoiding him because of that.

It must have been something he'd done.

Or he'd misread her.

For the last two days, he'd tried to find the optimal strategy for respecting her while not losing his mind. Texts went unanswered. Voicemails were left as if his missive floated into the clouds. By the end of the first day, he'd gone in search of her, every member of her team suddenly unsure of her whereabouts, which had left a lead ball in his gut.

Once was an aberration.

Twice was an answer.

By the time a third member of Wedding Protectors had gotten that look, the fake confusion followed by a furrowed brow, he'd gotten the message.

Kari was actively avoiding him.

The handwritten notes on day two were plain old desperation. Asking Nessa to deliver the first one, then running into Archie and holding his tongue. The man appeared to be fluent in Grunt and there was no way Caleb was putting a heartfelt letter in that man's hands.

He'd slipped it under her room door, hoping a maid didn't find it.

Nothing. Not a single word from her. What he'd hoped was a new beginning, a fresh start, a re-connection was

nothing but a *false* start.

Whatever you wanted to call all that sex three nights ago, it definitely wasn't a beginning. Because if it were, there would have been, oh, contact. Replies to his messages.

Something.

Kari had given him nothing. Worse than no contact. She'd avoided him like he had Ebola.

He had a disease alright. He was *lovesick*. And the only cure for it was doing everything in her power not to let him near her.

If she wanted nothing to do with him, he could make this easy for her. Stepping away from the chaotic group, he headed toward a small clubhouse, where a familiar men's restroom sign gave him an easy out. The path he took got him out of Kari's line of sight, but he didn't head for the bathroom.

As he reached the main door of the small building, which appeared to be an event venue that would hold about sixty people, the small bar clean and shiny, the building less arctic than most, his phone buzzed.

Where are you? Nessa texted.

How did she get his number, he wondered, then realized Wedding Protectors knew everything about everyone in the wedding. Of course she had him as a contact in her phone.

Looking toward the door, he noticed a sign.

Willow Building. Why?

Courier's here with something for you. I'll send him over.

Caleb frowned at his phone. Back home, Mikr0 hummed along as usual, his philanthropic work separate from the company itself. Since he'd been here, he'd spent at least three hours in meetings every day – yes, even hungover – and signed countless digital contracts.

This would be the third courier delivery he'd received.

Taking advantage of the momentary peace, he reflected on the scene a few hundred feet away. Carolina might be a pain in

the butt, but he had to hand it to her – the wedding had been spectacular. A light wind blew her floral dress like she was one with nature, and Christian looked like his heart was bursting with love so strong it threatened to float him away to the heavens. Gone was the preening, prissy bridezilla version of Carolina. The second she and Chris were at the altar, she only had eyes for his brother.

The look of love she gave him was so genuine Caleb felt like he was an unexpected voyeur, peeking in on a precious, intimate moment.

His chest ached at the thought.

Because he wanted to feel that. Wanted someone to feel that way about him.

And he'd thought...

Tap tap tap

Startled out of his feelings, he looked up to find a worker in a sage green polo shirt, a hastily parked golf cart behind him. "Mikelmas?"

"Yes?"

"Here, sir." The small box was handed off easily, and before Caleb could reach for his wallet to offer a tip, the worker disappeared.

A box? Most packages couriered over were thick folders filled with —

"Oh, no!" he groaned, feeling even more stupid.

Because he'd done this to himself.

He'd asked his assistant, Fay, to have this delivered to him.

Carrying around something of this size would ruin the wedding pictures, so he opened it, tossing all the packaging away to get to the tiny, bubble-wrapped item inside.

If he were a man who cried, he'd have tears prickling his lids.

Good thing he wasn't that kind of man.

The sun caught the thin gold band of the promise ring, the same one he'd given Kari in high school.

The one she'd mailed back to him all those years ago.

The other day, he'd asked Fay to go to his home and find the ring, hidden in a bottom drawer of his dresser, tucked away in a small wooden box. Every move, the box went with him.

Every single move.

When Kari had mailed the ring back to him, he'd been in California, the package from her making his heart sing. A sweet gesture, he'd thought, until he'd seen what was in it.

And read the note.

Dear Caleb, she'd said. Good luck in all your ventures – and venture capital. I'll always remember what we had, and when you are back in town, please stay in touch.

Love, Kari

Unable to process it, he'd been caught up in a meeting, the ring and note shoved into his laptop bag, the reality hitting him as he worked more crushing days and earned his space on the internship team.

By the time their first deliverable was over and the new semester started at Stanford, any email or letter he could send in reply seemed vapid. Unfair.

Unworthy.

Taking the coward's way out, he'd said nothing.

Not one damn thing.

And now Kari was doing it right back to him.

He deserved it.

Every damn bit of her silence, he deserved.

Asking Fay to send the ring after the night with Kari had been an impulsive gesture, his idea hopelessly romantic and

now, seeming foolish. The resort had a telescope he'd asked to borrow, and his idea had been so perfect:

The beach at night. The stars. The promise ring.

And a future together.

Their night in bed had been unexpected and deliciously appreciated, but it had also been a rushed, frenzied affair, the hurricane turning them both into chaos agents. Maybe she just slept with him for fun.

Maybe it was stress relief. Nostalgia.

Maybe it didn't mean for her what it meant to Caleb.

Too many maybes.

Kari's silence and avoidance, though, was anything but ambiguous.

"CALEB!" The blonde bridesmaid – Gates, right? - appeared in the building doorway. Hastily shoving the ring in his pocket, just like twelve years ago, he marched over to her as she held her hand out.

"Where on earth have you been?" she said in a voice meant to sound lighthearted, but there was steel behind it. "Everyone's looking for you!"

"Work," he said. "A quick issue."

"Work?" she said, laughing as she took his arm. "Aren't you and Christian the bosses of your multi-billion-dollar company? You decide when to work and when to play." She squeezed his arm, smiling up at him. "I guess I'll just have to teach you how to play."

Her wink left him dead inside, but he faked a smile as they headed toward the bridal party, the photographer fussing around them.

"Caleb!" Christian called jovially. "Get down here, best man!"

"Excuse me," he said to Gates, gently disentangling himself.

“I’ll be right here,” she assured him. She reached up and adjusted his tie proprietarily, then smoothed the hair over his right ear. Her touch felt like cardboard.

“Uh, right.”

Kari seemed to discover him and headed in his direction. He turned and joined the groomsmen, accepted a lit cigar, and took an experimental puff.

As he suspected, it was crap. Expensive, of course.

But not good.

“Excellent!” The photographer went into action. “Christian, move forward! Best man, shake his hand! Great!”

Caleb rolled his eyes. If and when he ever got married, this was the very last kind of wedding he would have. The *very* last. So much fakery took its toll. While he didn’t judge other people for liking this (okay... he judged a little), the sheer level of intensity this wedding required was too much for him.

Being a good sport was the least he could do for his only brother. He had signed up for this, and by God, he was going to see it through in good style. He shook hands. He puffed. He roughoused gently with the other guys in tuxedos. He smiled.

And all the while, he kept one eye on Kari, who was now standing maybe ten feet away.

“Bridesmaids! You’re on!” The photographer, at least, seemed to be enjoying himself. His assistant was adjusting the big bank lights set up on tripods. “Kick your shoes off, ladies, and come on over here. You, too, Carolina. Groomsmen, don’t go away, we’re not done with you. There’ll still be plenty of whiskey left at the bar when we’re finished.” He chuckled, the men joining in.

More than enough had already been consumed.

Caleb had abstained.

Although the path through the dunes was wide, Gates somehow managed to make full body contact with him as she passed by. She cast her eyes down modestly and dimpled.

“Caleb?” Kari half-whispered, suddenly before him.

He looked up, met her gaze, and forgot all about cameras, cigars, and pink silk dresses. The ring in his pocket felt like a meteor.

“Hey,” he said, sounding a little surprised, feeling his own vulnerability and hating himself for it. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, I... no, I have to talk to you. I—”

The Interruption Queen, aka the bride, appeared. “Kari! Oh, thank goodness! Can you come over here?”

Reflexively, she moved toward Carolina, who wanted her skirt fluffed, her hair checked, and several other little tasks that were, strictly speaking, someone else’s responsibility. Caleb knew Kari would leap to help, no matter what, because she took her job seriously.

She just didn’t take *him* seriously.

Finally, the photos started, and Kari hurried back to where Caleb stood.

“I have to tell you something.”

He steeled himself. “Okay.”

“I don’t want to be your friend,” she blurted.

He swallowed, stomach dropping. “No pulling punches, huh?”

“Yes! I couldn’t let you go without telling you—Ranney helped me realize how important it was to talk to you. I’m so sorry about this week, and I guess I gave you the wrong idea. That whole nostalgia thing you were talking about—”

“Groomsmen! Break’s over! We need the whole wedding party!” Caleb’s eyes cut to the photographer as Gates once again bounced over to him like an enthusiastic pink puppy.

This time Caleb didn’t wait for her to get there. Moving toward her, he said coldly to Kari, “By all means, tell Ranney thank you. She was right. Now I know all I need to know.”

Chapter Eighteen



Kari's stomach dropped to her shoes. Wait—what just happened? Something went wrong... she tried to replay the conversation in her head. She'd helped Carolina, then she ran back to Caleb, then she said... *that she didn't want to be his friend.*

Oh my God.

Oh, no.

“Caleb!” she yelled frantically.

He gave no indication whatsoever of having heard her, but the entire rest of the wedding party turned in her direction. The photographer, whose directions she had interrupted, shot her a nasty glare.

Kari felt the prickles of perspiration breaking out along her hairline. The group began to arrange themselves as they'd been told, and she hurried to the spot that was closest to Caleb yet still out of the frame.

“*Caleb!*” This time, she lowered her voice to an urgent hiss.

His eyes flicked briefly in her direction, but he maintained his photo-ready smile.

“What I said wasn't what I meant!”

“What else is new?” he muttered.

“You don't understand!”

He just snorted, still smiling for the camera.

This was cold, cool Billionaire Caleb. In a flash, she saw the man who had risen up the ranks to dominate in tech. He was six feet of ice in human form.

Frigid terror shot through her.

She edged closer. Carolina glanced up at her, frowned the slightest bit, then resumed her adoring gaze at her new husband. Gates backed up a few millimeters, so that her perky rear end was just brushing Caleb's thigh.

"I didn't mean I don't want to be your friend! I meant I want to be *more* than your friend!" Kari urged, fighting the instinct to melt into a puddle of tears. She was using a lower tone now, trying to be heard but not *overheard*.

That led to mixed success: Caleb finally looked up, but so did everyone else. The photographer had reached the limit of his patience.

And that blonde bridesmaid – Gates, she recalled – gave her a murderous look.

"Kari, could we have a few minutes here?" the photog said pointedly. "The sun is not going to stay in that spot forever."

"Oh. Of course. Sorry." She took two steps backward, casting an imploring look at Caleb.

He nodded slowly. Gates backed up another millimeter, shook her hair gently, and smiled up at him with a tiny eye roll in Kari's direction, arching her back just so, ass curving even more.

"I'll be right over there," Kari mouthed to Caleb, gesturing behind her.

The photographer took a step back from the camera and put his hands on his hips.

"Maylie," he said, voice heavy with sarcasm, "start a sign-up sheet for Caleb. His time seems to be in great demand."

Kari retreated to a stand of palmettos, and the photo shoot continued uninterrupted, murmurs and sighs, pads of fingers fixing makeup, a rush of wind drifting the sickly-sweet scent of too much hairspray her way. She pretended to be absorbed

in her phone messages, tapping and scrolling intently. There actually *were* a lot of messages, and she did glance at them, but mostly she was texting with her oldest friend, Suzanne Wright.

Suzanne knew the backstory of Kari and Caleb's relationship, but of course she had no idea of the recent developments. Their friendship was the kind where they could have no contact for months, then gather for coffee and pick up conversations as if no time had lapsed at all. Low-demand, high-support friends like Suzanne were rare.

And treasured.

She was married now – to Gerald, an old flame she'd reunited with in an odd series of events involving an ancient artifact and a billionaire – and had a baby.

Kari frowned. Second chances. Billionaires.

Huh.

Suzanne was juggling new motherhood and her job as an attorney, so they didn't talk as often as they used to. But Suzanne knew her whole history and, maybe more importantly, had gotten back together with the love of her life—now her husband—after years of being apart.

Which meant there was hope for Kari and Caleb.

So you're not going to believe this, Kari had opened.

What? Suzanne responded immediately. *Is it good?*

K: *No*

K: *Yes*

K: *Not sure*

S: *Is this multiple choice? I choose yes*

K: *Remember Caleb? He's here*

S: *OMG where?*

K: *At this wedding. St. Alban's*

S: *And?*

K: *It's really complicated, but there was a hurricane and I slept with him and then I kind of ghosted him and now I'm trying to tell him I-*

She paused. What exactly *was* she trying to tell him? She backed up her response and started again.

K: *Suze, when you got back together with Gerald after all those years, were you scared?*

She waited.

Then suddenly, the bank lights were switched off. She looked up and saw the wedding party begin moving toward the waiting golf carts. Caleb said something in Gates' ear, and she smiled, nodded, and stepped into a cart.

Kari's phone dinged.

S: *Call me, too much to text*

But Caleb was striding across the grass in her direction.

Suddenly, Suzanne had to wait. Luckily, Kari knew she'd understand.

And pump her for all the details later.

She powered off her phone and took a deep breath.

Showtime.

Jaw clenched, he rolled his tongue in his cheek and stared at a spot over her head.

“Okay, here I am. What is it that's so important, Kari?”

“I... I've done everything wrong, and I'll probably say this all wrong, too. I am so sorry, Caleb. The other night? It was the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me. It was perfect, except for, you know, the disaster.”

His face changed; confusion replaced irritation. Aha.

A crack in the shell.

“You have a life someplace else now, across the country, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life watching you on social media and wishing for something I can’t have. I don’t want to be just your old friend. I want to be your friend—your *best* friend—and your great love and I want to be with you every single day. I know that now.”

“You waited three days to tell me this? This makes zero sense. You wouldn’t return my calls—you didn’t even answer my texts or two handwritten letters—for *days!*” Irritation had returned, followed by indignation and ramping up to outrage. “Is this some kind of stupid game? You know, that was one thing I always loved about you, you didn’t play stupid games. You used to be a straight shooter.”

“I am! I still am, ask anyone! But I think maybe when the very first person that you ever love is The One, it gives you the wrong idea. It makes you think it’s always that easy, that all the other fish in the sea are just as good, or maybe even better. People say there’s nobody out there, but you know what? There’re a million people out there. I’ve dated all these perfectly nice guys—even Professor Superhero wasn’t a bad guy—but they weren’t perfect for *me*. You’re the only one who’s perfect for me.”

She stopped. She was out of breath from talking as fast as she could, trying to get it all out before he walked away.

Professor Superhero? he mouthed, tilting his head.

“So,” she said in a very small voice, “if you don’t feel the same way, if you don’t want to be with me...”

Sure enough, Caleb turned on his heel and walked away. He took five long strides and stopped. Then he spun around and strode back to her.

“If I don’t want to be with you? What are you talking about? Ever since I saw you again at the hotel, for that meeting, I have made it perfectly *clear* that I wanted to be with

you! You have ignored me, dodged me, run away from me, ghosted me. I do not understand you!”

She held up one finger to make a point. “But I also kissed you back and I did sleep with you...”

His eyes narrowed. “That doesn’t make it easier to understand!”

They stared at each other. He spoke first.

“Kari, I have loved you...it feels like my whole life. What you said about finding the perfect person—Christian said almost the same thing to me about Carolina. And I think you’re right about finding that person right out of the box. Maybe it was too easy. Maybe it was a curse to date you in high school. No one’s that lucky, right? I took you for granted back then and I see that now. I’ve never, ever found what we had with anyone else. Trust me. I’ve tried.”

“Me, too.” Tears filled her eyes. “It was so hard when you stayed in Silicon Valley, Caleb. It felt like my best friend rejected me. Not just my boyfriend.”

“I was nineteen. Nineteen-year-old guys are statutorily stupid.”

Her shaky laugh didn’t help the gravity of the moment. She was failing. He was turning nostalgic and letting her down easy. Ignoring him for two days hadn’t been part of some big strategy.

It had been fear. Nothing but good old-fashioned fear.

“But now we know, right?” he said plaintively, running a hand through his dark locks. “I can’t keep doing this. I’m exhausted.”

Heart sinking like an anchor, she felt her stomach twist.

“Right. I’m sorry I bothered you. I blew it, ignoring you. I’m just scared.” Her shrug was a plea. “Scared. Scared to try again. No – ” She sniffed. “Scared to fall in love with you all over again and then lose you because I’m not enough. My heart can’t take that again, Caleb. I have all these scars on it from twelve years ago, and there just isn’t room for more.”

“Not enough?” His stunned look made her feel sadder.

“Like last time.”

“Last time?”

“I wasn’t enough for you. You chose Silicon Valley over me. You wouldn’t even give me one day. One single day out of an entire summer.” Anger flared in her at the memory. What did she have to lose now? All that fear was so wasted. Ranney said to tell Caleb how she really felt?

Here it came.

“I know,” he said, head dropping. “I just – ”

“ONE DAY! I wasn’t worth ONE DAY to you!” The shouting felt so good. So freeing. Tired of trying not to be dramatic, to stay focused, to be in control, letting loose was a joy, even if it came at a cost. “I offered to fly. I offered to see you. I offered to come to work with you, to just be around you. I made myself so small, reduced what I needed to the teeny, tiniest amount, and I still wasn’t enough for you – you *asshole!*”

Head reeling back, Caleb stood stock still, every drop of attention on her.

It felt so good.

She began to pace. “I sent you the promise ring and you just... faded away. Like stardust. Poof. No real goodbye. We didn’t so much break up as we just drifted. Except you’re the one who drifted. Not me – *you!* You had a meteoric rise, and I worked in marketing here in Boston, and my best friend and first love became someone who was so powerful, so successful I realized you must have thought I’d hold you back.”

“Hold me back?”

“I spent years trying to figure out why you left me, Caleb. *Years.* Thousands of scenarios running in the back of my mind and heart like an algorithm,” she said, her laughter high and reedy. “Like a computer figuring out the secret. The real reason I wasn’t good enough. And I just became afraid. So

afraid. Afraid there was something so fundamentally wrong with me that my best friend walked away without a word.”

“Kari, I – ”

“I’ve never had a relationship that’s lasted more than six months since you,” she said, deflated and defeated, peeling away all her armor. This was her one and only chance to say it all to him, so why not? “I’d date guys, and something would be off, just enough for me to walk away. Or worse – with Mark, the one guy I think I sort of loved – there was no flaw. None. Not a single one, but I still left because I was so afraid that one day, when I least expected it, he would find something wrong with me and ghost. It all became a self-fulfilling prophecy. And it all started with you.”

His face changed then, eyes widening, brow down as he let out a small sound.

Like grief.

“Kari. No. *No*. You were enough. More than enough. What happened twelve years ago was one hundred percent my fault, and don’t you dare think it had anything to do with you. I failed you. *I* failed you. I failed *us*.”

Shock made her throat tremble, Caleb’s hand going to the curve of her jaw as if he could steady her.

“I hate myself knowing I hurt you like that. You’re right. I’m an asshole. I was an asshole then, and I’m a bigger one now.”

“Caleb, I shouldn’t have called you that. I’ve never called you a name before, at least not to your face, and that’s not who I want to be – ”

He slid one finger across her lips. “*Shhh*. Let me talk. I owe you an enormous apology. And I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t accept it, but I have to say it regardless.”

All she could do was nod.

“I am so sorry, Kari. I was a stupid kid. I know that’s a cop-out, but it’s true. You were my best friend, my first love, my cool girlfriend, and when I went off to Stanford I thought I

had it all. Great girl back home. Awesome, prestigious college. The summer internship was the icing on the cake, but once I started working it was a grind. Worse than a grind. I was a piece of meat in a factory, but meat with expectations placed on him. The drive to do well and excel was so strong, I let it override everything else. I assumed you'd just... wait for me."

"I did!"

"I know you did. I know," he groaned. "And then you sent the promise ring back."

"Because you ghosted."

"I ghosted," he acknowledged, owning up to his failure. "I worked too many hours and had too much in my head and didn't know how to prioritize. I took you for granted, assuming you'd just magically be there when I stuck my head up from the fray, and that was so unfair to you. You never deserved to be ignored like that. I set everything on the back burner, including our relationship. And when you sent me this – " he said, reaching into his pocket for the promise ring, "I didn't know what to say back."

Her hands flew to her mouth, covering them in surprise. "Caleb! The promise ring!"

"The same one."

"You kept it? All these years?"

He held it up, close to her face, the sun glinting off the gold. "All these years, Kari. Every work achievement filled some hole in me, but nothing ever left me satisfied. This cheap little ring – "

"It's wonderful! Don't you dare deride that ring. I wore it proudly for years."

He reached for her hand, the sadness in his eyes draining away, replaced by something she hadn't seen in him since their night in bed.

Happiness.

"Will you wear it again? It isn't fancy, and I'm pretty sure that ruby in there is nothing but red Kool-Aid mixed with

some polymer compound to make it seem like a gemstone, but
—”

“Of course!”

He slipped the ring on her trembling hand.

“Kari. Come here.”

He opened his arms and she stepped into them, wrapped in his familiar but longed-for warmth. Her arms went around his waist, and he rested his chin on her head.

Her sigh vibrated through him like a tuning fork. “I’m exhausted, too.”

They stood there for a minute, and then she felt the rumble of his laugh.

“Really? Because you seemed pretty energetic down there during the photo shoot. You were really hopping around.”

“I had no choice! That bridesmaid was all over you!”

“I think you ended up in more of the photos than she did.”

“I don’t know how it is in biotech, Caleb, but when you’re a wedding protector, you do what needs to be done. Whatever it takes.”

They relaxed into shared laughter, the kind that only comes after years of intimacy.

She lifted her head and looked up at him, still laughing, but his expression had changed.

And when his mouth covered hers, it was as serious as a vow.

Chapter Nineteen



Caleb sat on the sand, barefoot, his shirt cuffs rolled up. He was watching the evening sky. His happiness felt tenuous, as if it might disappear at any moment.

Looking up at the emerging stars made him feel better.

You couldn't see the stars all the time—it might be a cloudy night, or maybe there was too much ambient light, like in a city. Sometimes the whole sky looked different, in another hemisphere or season. Sometimes you just forgot where they were supposed to be, looked in the wrong place at the wrong time. But that was your own fault; the stars were always where they were supposed to be.

Thus his relationship with Kari: It was always there, where it was supposed to be, even if it was out of sight for a moment.

Or maybe a decade or so.

He turned and looked at her, next to him. He had spread out his tuxedo jacket so her dress wouldn't get damp and sandy. Her heels lay next to her. The breeze lifted her hair, and he could smell her perfume.

“Does this remind you of anything?” he asked her, and she smiled.

“A little bit, but you weren't as well dressed the last time we did this.”

“Ha! Neither were you, although that thought never crossed my mind at the time.”

A light swept across the shoreline, then returned, and they jumped up. Someone was running toward them.

“Caleb!” It was Nessa. “The toast! They’re ready for you!”

“The toast! I forgot all about it!” He scooped up his jacket and shook it frantically, then began struggling into it. Kari tried to help, but it was stuck at the shoulders. Seams ripped audibly. “Damn!”

When he could move, he tossed the jacket over his arm, pulled Kari close and kissed her, then took off at a run.

“Caleb, wait, your shoes!”

He pivoted, grabbed them, and was gone in a spray of sand.

They followed, to his surprise, so he slowed down.

“Ranney said to tell you everything’s fine,” he heard Nessa say to Kari as they rushed. “She said to tell you Pretty-in-Pink threw up after the main course, either from champagne or her own sickly-sweet fakery.”

Caleb burst out laughing and turned back to look at them. “Pretty-in-Pink?”

“Gates,” Kari said as she huffed, making him laugh harder – and slow down even more.

“Marlo got her cleaned up,” Nessa continued, somehow walking *and* double-thumb typing on her phone. “Carolina broke a heel dancing and we used one of the backup pairs. Archie’s team picked up four paparazzi on the property. So far, we’ve held him back from breaking the Geneva Convention. Oh, and the flower girl went missing for ten minutes but Archie found her under the cake table, eating frosting by the fistful. The chef patched the cake. Nothing unusual so far.”

Unusual, he thought to himself. What a strange company Kari had created. Fixing everything at a wedding for a living. What seemed like paradise on the outside – Weddings! Love! Flowers! Dancing! – was nothing but one big operations project.

Kari would make a fantastic certified scrum master.

“Thank you. It’s been pretty unusual for me,” Kari said as Caleb shifted to a fast walk and took her hand, the press of her promise ring against his fingers making him smile harder.

Soon, it would be a full-blown engagement ring, with a diamond worthy of her.

Nessa didn’t bat an eyelash. “You know, I think I’m going to really like this line of work. There’s free travel to nice places and parties every night. Beautiful clothes, men in elegant tuxedos, and everywhere you look, it’s a feast for the eyes. So beautiful! My mother’s room is full of flowers, and you hooked up with a billionaire! What a great business to be in!”

Caleb laughed again as Kari sputtered, “Nessa, it is NOT normally like this!”

“*And* I’ve gained 85,000 followers since I got here.”

“I did NOT ‘hook up with a billionaire’!” Kari countered.

Nessa smiled, gave her a knowing look, and, wisely, said nothing.

Caleb halted at her words. “Actually, you did.”

“I did not!”

“I am a billionaire, Kari.”

“No, you’re not. You’re giving away ninety percent of your wealth. That just means you’re a plain old millionaire.”

“Oof,” Nessa said, her voice a mixture of admiration and pain. “Downgrading yourself. That takes guts.”

“Boo-hoo,” he said, picking up the pace again, shaking his head. “How will I ever live with only a hundred million left? Time to clip coupons.”

“The fact that you even know what a coupon is fascinates me,” Nessa said, giving Kari major side-eye.

“We grew up normal. Middle-class,” Kari explained. Her *we* made his heart sing. “Caleb isn’t a typical billionaire.”

“Sure isn’t,” Nessa said. “How many guys just give away a fortune?”

“MacKenzie Bezos,” Kari said. “MacKenzie Scott, I mean. Bill Gates. Warren Buffett. Lots of them. Look at the Giving Pledge, after all.”

“But ninety percent? And when you’re in your early thirties?” She let out an impressed whistle. “You’re a trailblazer.”

All he could do was shrug.

As they approached the cocktail tent where the staff busied themselves clearing hors d’oeuvres, drinks being refilled constantly by catering staff, it was Caleb’s parents they encountered first.

“You!” his mother pointed, grabbing Caleb’s tuxedo jacket from his arm, her face a mask of horror as she took in all the sand on it. “Where on earth have you been?”

His dad’s eyes jumped to Kari, and a knowing smile took over. “I think I can guess.”

“By the way, Mom has a spare jacket for you. One with intact seams,” Nessa said as Ranney made a beeline for him, then glanced at the jacket in his mother’s hands. The two mothers seemed to have a mindmeld, Ranney calmly extracting the torn coat from her hands and offering a new one, slipping away with a wink to her daughter.

Kari cleared her throat and said pointedly to Nessa, “Ask our security team for an update.” Nessa disappeared on her mission, a dutiful employee.

“Best man speech?” his mother asked, checking the inside pocket.

He tapped his temple. “All up here.”

“No! Caleb, you can’t be serious?”

“Anne,” Kari said in a soothing voice, taking his mother’s hand in hers. “It’s fine. Caleb will do a fantastic job.”

His mother squeezed her hand. “It’s not that I actually care, Kari. I know Caleb has written something wonderful. Carolina, though! She’s running around like a dragon ready to burn down the village if Caleb doesn’t perform perfectly.”

“I thought she was calm today?” he asked.

“That changed. Fast.” Anne’s eyes jumped to her son, who was slipping into his tuxedo jacket. With dark hair and eyes like her son, Anne was an elementary school teacher, the strict kind who helped third graders reach their full potential. “And you,” she said to him.

“What about me?”

Dropping Kari’s hand, she grabbed Caleb’s arm and said fiercely, “Don’t you dare marry a Bridezilla! My blood pressure cannot take this again.”

Kari burst out laughing, her hand going to her mouth, his dad joining her with a big guffaw.

Closer to the tent, Nessa waved her arm, trying to get his attention. Caleb held up a finger to buy himself a minute.

One he desperately needed.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that anymore, Mom,” he said, taking Kari’s hand – the one with his promise ring on it. He kissed the back of her hand gently, eyes jumping from his mom’s face to his dad’s.

Dave grinned wider. Anne’s eyes turned into saucers.

Then she squealed.

“Oh, my goodness!” She whacked his father’s arm. “I told you!”

“Told him what?” Kari asked as the band in the background stopped, the music fading down.

“CALEB!” Nessa ran up to them. “Now!”

Before he could find out what his mother had said to his father, he cantered off to the tent, Kari and his parents on his heels. Hundreds of guests, all spread out at circular tables, looked to the bridal party table, where Gates was chatting up a

minor-league hockey player groomsman, and Carolina gave him a veiled look of happiness with an undertone of violence in it.

His testicles tightened a bit.

The best man speech was a ritual, a tradition, a timeless moment in most weddings where the man closest to the groom took a moment to reflect on the couple and to wish them well. That part wasn't hard – he loved his brother dearly and wanted only the best for him – but when Caleb had composed his speech, he'd been less than convinced that true love was real.

Now? Now he had some improvisation to do on the spot.

Eyes on Kari, he stepped into the spotlight, polite applause fading as he pulled the microphone off the stand, grateful it was wireless. Kari stood off to the side, to the right of the wedding party, and his parents took their seats at a big table right in front, his mother beaming at him, alternating her attention between Kari, Christian, and Caleb.

Notably not looking at the bride.

“Thank you, everyone, for tolerating my tardiness.”

The crowd tittered, and Carolina pretended it didn't matter.

“I'm not good at giving speeches like this. PowerPoint presentations to get angel investors? Sure. But Carolina said she'd kill me if I showed up with a projector screen, laptop, and a deck, so I have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

A genuine laugh came out of his new sister-in-law, the crowd roaring along.

“Speaking of old-fashioned, let's talk about love. *Real* love. Not the kind you find by swiping right – although if that's how you met your soulmate, good for you. You beat the odds.”

More laughter.

His eyes landed on Kari. “I'm talking about the kind of love you work hard for. Fight for. Go to the ends of the earth to hang onto. Love that is so real, you strip yourself naked and

reveal all the terrified pieces of you. You hand them over to the person you love and have to take a leap of trust.”

“Leap of *faith*, son!” someone shouted, the thick Southern accent making him assume it was one of Carolina’s relatives.

He smiled and nodded. “Faith too, for sure. Faith involves believing even when you get to the end of hard evidence, right?”

A few nods from the crowd.

“Trust, though – handing all the raw parts of yourself over to someone else and displaying them without filter, revealing your deep, dark fears – and trusting the other person not to hurt you. I guess,” Caleb chuckled, looking into the crowd, “I guess that’s a kind of faith, too.”

Licking his lips, he looked into Kari’s eyes again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Christian take Carolina’s hand and close his eyes.

“We have to trust ourselves, too. Christian told me once that you can’t choose who you fall for. And you can’t explain why you love someone to anyone else. It’s so personal, so heady, so visceral and intense. How do you describe passion? Sure, we can give definitions, but here–” He tapped his heart through his jacket. “How do you explain how the heart feels love? You can’t. You just experience it. That’s what Christian and Carolina have – a kind of love no one else can understand or experience. Which makes it divine and unique.”

Carolina’s throat fluttered with emotion. Gates passed a Q-tip over to her and Carolina gently dabbed her lower lids with it, collecting tears.

“Everyone deserves that kind of love. Sometimes we have to chase it.”

Carolina gave Christian a sly look as he raised his eyebrows at her.

“Track it down. Go the distance. *Earn* it,” he said, Kari transfixed at his words.

“Hear, hear!” someone shouted, the crowd turning raucous.

In the chaos, Caleb let himself feast on Kari, how her mussed hair shone under the firefly lights, how her cheeks were pink with emotion, the bit of sand still on her shoulder. The promise ring on her finger made him see that he'd let love slip away and been so, so lucky.

He'd never make that mistake again.

"To Carolina and Christian," he declared, Nessa discreetly next to him suddenly, handing him a champagne flute so he could, you know, *actually* toast the bride and groom. "May the love you have both so thoroughly earned and faithfully worked for flourish as you grow old together."

Carolina broke tradition and simply began clapping, on her feet, cheering as if at a football game, an opera, a concert. Following suit, the wedding party all stood, many guests mimicking them, but then they all drank, Christian holding champagne to his bride's lips.

Caleb swallowed a mouthful, the movement reflexive.

All he wanted right now was to kiss Kari.

Kiss her and *earn* her.

Tradition over and duty fulfilled, Caleb set the microphone back in the stand and walked straight over to Kari, who was walking away. Just at the edge of the tent, she had one foot on the grass when he caught up to her, pulling her aside.

"Every word of that was for you," he whispered as she reached up and embraced him.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll come back to my room with me. This time, I've only had one sip of champagne."

"Me, too."

"I want a night alone with you, Kari. I want to make love with you. Stretch it out. Take my time, Explore you and appreciate you. I want to earn my way back into being loved by you."

"Oh, Caleb."

Their kiss was nothing but faith, trust, hope, need, and love all rolled into one passionate gesture, all the words he couldn't say coming out with his lips, his tongue, his hands, his –

“Hey,” Ranney whispered, startling them both, Kari taking a step back. “Get a room.”

“I have a room,” Caleb said sharply.

“No!” Kari said, fluffing her hair. “I'm – this is so unprofessional,” she moaned, giving Ranney an awkward look.

“That ship sailed a long, long time ago, Kari,” Nessa said with a grin. “My mom and Archie can manage the rest. Why don't you go do whatever... you need to do.”

He squeezed her ass and whispered in her ear. “That's a lot of need.”

“Caleb!”

But Kari winked at Nessa and took his hand as he led her toward his private room.

And their future.

Chapter Twenty



One month later

“You don’t have a problem with ordering that many snakes?” Nilly asked Kari, giving her a look that said this wasn’t the first time that question had come out of her mouth.

“Snakes?”

“For the herpetologist’s wedding?”

“Her-pe what?”

Nilly gave her a long-suffering grin. “Earth to Kari? The guy with the television show that’s huge in Asia? K-drama hero? Marrying his longtime girlfriend? They’re doing the Indiana Jones recreation, and Harrison Ford is a guest. Remember?”

“Oh. Right. I don’t think you can have too many snakes for this one.”

“Great. I’ll put in the order. Is Archie on, uh... snake detail?”

“Sure am,” said a gruff voice from behind them. “Hate the buggers myself.” He shuddered, mouth turning down in a frown deeper than Kari had ever seen, and that was saying a lot. “But I’m a professional. A job’s a job.”

Kari hid a smile. She also knew Archie was a huge Harrison Ford fan and hoped for some signed memorabilia. Fringe benefit of the job.

“We have professional animal handlers for the snakes, Archie.”

“I never planned to touch them, Kari.” He squeezed one eye shut. “But I’m not above shooting one if it gets out of line. My aim is good.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Nilly said hastily. “It’s fine. Just need confirmation of the buy.”

“You have it,” Kari said, eyeing Archie, who walked away in a huff, muttering about anti-venom, Han Solo, eBay scammers, and silly trends.

The walk into Katie’s office felt like the precursor to a scolding. They were holding a meeting on professionalism.

Professionalism was the last thing Kari was good at these days. Sleeping with a client was still a no-no.

Even if Caleb wasn’t technically a client.

“Hey there,” Katie said as Kari tapped on the door. “Come on in. Let’s talk for a minute before the big meeting.”

Kari’s face turned into one big flame.

“I know. I know what you’re going to say. I broke all the rules. I promise it’ll never happen again.”

“Of course it won’t,” Katie said flatly. “Because you did it.”

“Did... what?”

“Found your soulmate.” Katie frowned, then took a sip of coffee from her go-cup. “Or re-found him? I’m not sure what to call this. You’re back to the first guy you ever loved, which is so romantic it’s making me jealous.”

“Katie!”

“And we can’t even use it for marketing,” she said, laughing. “Nessa pitched that one to me earlier.”

“Nessa? Huh?”

“She’s pretty adept at social media. Said Carolina was a genius, but that what happened between you and Caleb should

be, and I quote, ‘exploited in the most wholesome way possible.’”

“*Exploited?*”

“Used to push Wedding Protectors. Give us more visibility.”

“We don’t want visibility! We’re the iron hand in the velvet glove.”

“I know that. You know that. Nessa doesn’t quite understand our business model. She’s insisting we get on TikTok, for God’s sake.”

“WHAT?”

“And wanted video of you and Caleb, front and center. She was particularly upset when I told her we absolutely were not creating social media accounts just so the clip of Caleb singing karaoke shirtless could go viral.”

“No, no, no!” She rubbed her chin. “Though shirtless Caleb is quite the thirst trap.”

“Don’t worry. I set her straight.” Katie shot her major side-eye. “And *eww*, Kari.”

“Sorry!” Kari groaned. “Technically, this is all my fault. I got involved with a client.”

“He’s not a client.”

“Come on, Katie. You know that’s splitting hairs.”

“He’s client... adjacent.”

Their eyes locked, Katie’s filled with mirth. Whatever shame Kari felt at breaking her own ethical standards melted as her best friend and powerful business partner burst out laughing.

“Client-adjacent,” Kari said, laughing so hard she had to wipe the corner of one eye. “That’s a new one.”

“It was bound to happen.”

“Not to you. You would *never*.”

“No, you’re right. I wouldn’t,” Katie said firmly, mouth twisted with a strange look. “If any of my exes suddenly appeared as part of a wedding party, I’d run screaming. But I need someone other than James.”

“Again, Katie? He’s back *again*?”

One shoulder lifted reluctantly. “Paris was nice. Now he wants two weeks in Vienna. He’s no longer CEO, and Andrew McCormick is leaving. All his life’s plans are changing. He’s worried about his legacy. James needs to be... distracted.”

“I heard he’s distracting himself by moving closer to zygotes.”

“Kari!” Her face filled with pain. “I know. You’re right. Archie did some fieldwork on him.”

“You had Archie follow *James McCormick*?”

“God, no. Archie did it without my permission. Said he had to. James was with someone so young he couldn’t bring her to a bar easily.”

“That young? Under 21?”

“Archie was outraged.”

“He’s not wrong. You deserve better.”

Her head bowed. “Thank you. Maybe I need to expand my dating pool.”

“Maybe? Anything but James. Anyone. Please. *Please*.”

“Is that an order?”

“I can ask Caleb if he has any nice, single friends we could hook you up with.”

“NO! I am not a pity case.”

“Hooking you up with a smart tech bro wouldn’t involve pity,” Kari said slyly. “And you don’t have to marry the next guy you date. You just need a little... you know.”

Katie’s eye roll was flawless. “You’re insufferable when you’re getting some.”

“Talk about unprofessional!”

“You’re really worried about it, aren’t you? Being perceived as unprofessional.”

“Not perceived – I was! Am. Continue to be.”

“No, Kari. You’re not. Caleb was an exception.”

“I don’t like being an exception. The rules apply fairly to everyone.”

“You’re so cute when you’re idealistic.”

“Suzanne says the same thing. What is with you two?”

“You’re so hard on yourself. You have unrealistic expectations that apply only to you. It’s not fair. The rest of the staff doesn’t care at all.” Katie thought for a second. “Except for maybe Archie. He’s still trying to decide whether Caleb is good enough for you.”

“Archie is *what*? How can a guy I’ve known since high school, who turned into a billionaire giving away ninety percent of his wealth to charitable causes, *not be good enough*?”

“It’s Archie. Caleb could hold the world’s record for home runs in a World Series game, the highest IQ known to man, and rescue a thousand drowning kittens, and Archie would still ask him why he didn’t open the door for you that one time in 2011.”

“Archie needs a hobby.”

“Archie needs a lot of things.”

Kari looked at the clock. “Time for the meeting,” she said, just as someone knocked on Katie’s closed door. A knowing smile crossed her partner’s face as she said, “Would you get that, Kari?”

Crossing the room, she felt her pulse jump slightly, intuition kicking in.

It was Caleb.

“Hey,” he said, arm around her waist, lips on hers before she could say hello. The kiss was perfect, warm and

welcoming, and she melted into him, professionalism be damned.

“What,” she finally gasped, as Katie giggled in the background, “are you doing here?”

“Taking you out to lunch.”

“That’s not on my schedule!”

“The best things in life are spontaneous.”

“Caleb, honey, I can’t just disappear like that. We have a very important staff meeting we’re about to begin.”

“No, *we* don’t. *I* do. You go,” Katie said to her, giving Caleb a look.

A look Kari instantly deciphered.

“You two planned this?”

“He planned it. I’m just his henchman.”

“Wingman,” he corrected her.

“Whatever,” Katie said with a laugh, pushing past them. “Have fun!”

As Kari watched her partner stride down the hall toward the conference room, she gaped at Caleb. “Seriously? Lunch?”

“It’s special.”

“Time with you is always special.”

“That’s my line, Kari.”

* * *

She had to hand it to him: the man knew how to go all out.

“I cannot believe you rented the entire planetarium here at the Science Museum just for our lunch!”

He fed her a small triangle of manchego. “I didn’t.”

“Mmph,” she tried to argue as she took a sip of the lovely merlot he’d brought. The two of them were on the softest wool

blanket she'd ever felt, spread out on the floor below the front row of seats in the large planetarium. A woven picnic basket filled with a charcuterie board, a bottle of this beautiful red wine, and two sparkling waters was Caleb's idea of lunch.

Or, more likely, all arranged by his outstanding executive assistant, Fay.

One swallow later and she laughed at him. "Then how did you get this place all for us and us alone?" Stadium chairs, the simple kind her parents had used to attend football games fifteen years ago when she was in high school band, propped her and Caleb up, though these were sleeker than anything they'd used back in the aughts. At a perfect 60-degree angle, they could eat and sip but also watch the glory of the star show above them.

No professional narration for this show. Just beautiful symphonic music, a little Copland, a lot of Williams, and maybe even some Glass. Everything was calibrated just so.

This was heaven.

"I bought it."

"You can't *buy* a planetarium!"

"I did. Sort of. It's a bit... unusual."

"Tell me." The strawberry dipped in dark chocolate and rolled in candied pistachios made her feel like the gustatory version of a supernova.

"I donated so much money they're renaming the planetarium and we get to use it alone once a month."

"*We?*"

"It's named after us."

She swallowed hard. "It is *what?*"

Caleb rolled onto his side, holding his wineglass aloft, the inch or so left inside the goblet sloshing slightly. His shoulder touched hers, and she relaxed slightly, following his gaze.

"It's the heavens. Closest we'll ever get to it. And the best money I'll ever spend."

“That’s saying a lot,” she choked out. “Because you’re spending truckloads.”

“Donating,” he said with a grin. “Donating and relaxing. I am never, ever going to make the same mistake I made twelve years ago, Kari. Burning through my life with overwork was a huge blunder. Putting work ahead of you was unforgivable.”

“No. I forgive you. You need to forgive yourself.”

“The best way to be forgiven is to make amends.”

“Just a little tip, Caleb: you can make amends without buying me an entire planetarium!”

“How about I give you something else?”

“I don’t need more!”

The wink was light, almost undetectable. His glass touched hers, the sound light and gentle, more a connection than a toast. “To the stars.”

“Hold on there. You can’t go from telling me the planetarium’s been named after you and me to a toast!”

“I can. I did.”

“Caleb!”

“Finish your wine, Kari.”

“Why?” she asked with a chuckle, though she did as told. “So you can take advantage of me? For the record, I don’t care how alone we are in here, I’m not getting naked with you under these fake stars.”

“We’ll see about that.” He stood then, reaching into his pocket, and then—

And then —

He dropped to one knee before her.

The rush of adrenaline blended with a spiral galaxy in the domed ceiling, the light shining from behind him, Caleb’s face in the shadows, his body ethereal.

“You,” she whispered, the word too much, not enough, just right.

“I could spend every penny of my billion dollars and never be as happy as I am when we’re under a moonlit sky, being spied on by specks of light millions of years old, Kari.” She sat up, the light shifting, their eyes meeting as the music swelled, shining stars moving across Caleb’s chest, the moment making her blood race with happiness.

“I – ”

“I love you. I’ve loved you since we met sophomore year, when we manned the donut stand together before homeroom. I loved you when you tutored me in French, and I loved you when your high heel broke at prom and you had to dance barefoot on the tips of my rented black shoes. I loved you when I ignored you, and my heart broke when you sent back my promise ring. I’ve loved you since that light,” he said, pointing to a lone star at the top of the room, “sent the first shaft of brightness toward earth, millions of years ago. And I’ll love you long after I’m gone, when my own light is out. You brighten everything for me, Kari, and give me everything. I got this planetarium named for us because I want you to know that no matter where you are, if you just look up, my light will always be on you.”

“I love you so, so much,” she whispered back as he opened the small, black velvet box.

For a man worth nine figures, it was modest.

But perfect.

“Your mother’s ring!” she gasped.

“And her mother’s. And her mother’s mother’s.” When they’d graduated high school, Anne had talked casually about the family heirloom, the hint nothing more than a tease. They were eighteen then and far too young to make concrete plans, but something about that summer had changed with Anne’s comment.

And then...

“I thought – I thought Carolina got it?”

His face faltered. “Can we not talk about her?”

She kissed him while laughing.

“Christian gave her Dad’s family ring. I wanted Mom’s. It’s small. Just a quarter carat with rubies, but – ”

“It’s everything, Caleb. Everything I could ever want. And so are you.”

“Will you marry me, Kari? I know it’s only been a month, but can we turn back the clock and pretend we’ve been together for sixteen years? Because that’s what my heart says.” He rested his fingers over her heart. “And if I could erase all those scars I put on your heart, I would. I’ll spend the rest of my life doing everything I can to make your heart whole again. Will you let me make up twelve years we’ve missed?”

“Yes, yes, yes, of course *yes!*”

He slid the ring on her finger, the fit like a glove, the band nestled next to her promise ring.

“And there is nothing to make up for, Caleb. We’re here now. Our hearts are together. You’ve always been the only one for me. That’s all that matters.”

As they kissed, a meteor flew over them in a perfect arc while the show went on, the Earth spinning on its axis, the Sun in rotation, the stars in formation.

The universe in perfect alignment.

All just for them.

Epilogue — 10 months later

Kari opened her eyes. She could hear Caleb moving around in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards, then the unmistakable sound of the coffee grinder. This, this right here, was true luxury—lying in bed listening to someone you love make the coffee. Which they would then deliver to you, in bed.

Because they love you.

She breathed out a long sigh of deep gratitude.

“I will never take this for granted,” she promised herself. For more than a decade, she had gotten up every single morning to make her own coffee. She chuckled quietly. “Every *single* morning. No more of those.”

Then she remembered: Today was the day.

Caleb came in, wearing a pair of blue boxer shorts, dark hair mussed, stubble dotting his face. His biceps strained slightly with the effort of carrying in coffee as he handed her a ceramic mug. It was white, and the word *Bride* was printed on it in gold script. A gift from Nilly, of course.

“Good morning,” he said, holding back a yawn. “Time to get up.”

“It *is* a good morning.” She sat up and smiled back. “I love Saturdays when I’m not working.”

“Which is hardly ever.”

“Weddings are my job, Caleb, and weddings usually happen on weekends. You know this by now.”

“Well, whoever’s lucky enough to be getting married today has a beautiful day for it,” he commented, opening the curtains wider. The sky was intensely blue. “Get up! Let’s get going.” Arms going up, he stretched like a cat, fingertips to the skies, muscled calves going tight as he stood on tiptoes, touching the ceiling in front of the window.

Kari swung her feet to the floor and stood, stretching as well. She disappeared into the bathroom, emerging twenty minutes later, freshly showered and wearing a new white tank suit. Delicate pearls on fine gold chains dangled from her ears. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and she’d sprayed the air with cologne and walked through the cloud. She pulled a cotton voile coverup, also white, out of the drawer and put it on.

Caleb was in the kitchen, packing a big cooler. He turned, and his face lit up when he saw her.

“Pretty glamorous for a day of sand and water! Is that lipstick?” He kissed her. “In high school, you used to wear a bikini and my old t-shirt. Zinc on your nose passed for makeup.”

She pulled back and took a closer look at his chest. The design was so faded, she could barely make it out, but it might have once been green. “Wait a minute... is this the *same t-shirt*? Is that *Rocky the Ram*? The Marshfield mascot?”

He grinned. “I found it when I was packing to move back here.”

“Caleb, you’re a billionaire! You could have literally *any* shirt you wanted! Why in the world are you wearing a fifteen-year-old holey t-shirt from our high school?” She was laughing in bemusement.

“First of all, I’m a philanthropist, not a billionaire—or not for long, anyway. But you’re right, I *can* have any shirt I want—and I want this one. I remember exactly how you looked in it when you were seventeen and your hair was wet and your face was a little sunburned. I love being with someone who’s in all my memories.”

“Awww...”

“Plus, it means I never have to worry that I’ll forget your name. That’s a big advantage for a guy like me.”

She smacked him. “Very funny. Go change your shirt. Just because I remember it doesn’t mean I want to be seen with it in public.”

He stuck his lower lip out but headed for the bedroom. She peeked inside the big cooler he’d been loading up. A bottle of champagne, four Corona Premiers and a little bag of lime wedges, six cans of Pellegrino. A little wheel of double-cream brie from Anderhill Cheese, a jar of fig preserves, and a package of rosemary crackers. A bag of tortilla chips and container of salsa. It looked like a cross between a picnic in a Parisian park and a Cinco de Mayo party, but all delicious, she had to admit. And what could be more appropriate for today than fusion cuisine?

The food and beverages were Caleb’s responsibility. She had already taken care of the other necessities, packing a big canvas tote with a beach blanket, towels, sun lotion, hats, and whatever else she thought they might want or need.

Caleb reappeared, now wearing a navy-blue polo shirt over his swim trunks.

“Better?”

“Much. At least it’s not a \$4,000 tuxedo, right?”

“Right—and you’re not wearing a \$50,000 gown.”

“And we’re not having hundreds of people who we barely know to dinner afterwards... just our families and a few friends next week at our reception.”

“Right.” He wrapped his arms around her. “I’m marrying *you*, not five hundred other people. You’re the only person I want to think about today.”

“If we were having a big wedding, with all the trappings and all the people and everything that can go wrong, I would feel like I was at work.”

“The only other person we have to worry about is the minister. We’re supposed to call her when we get my dad’s boat in the water, and she’ll meet us at the island. Nothing can go wrong.”

“Caleb, trust me, something can *always* go wrong. I am in a position to know.”

“Well, nothing is going to go wrong *today*. I won’t allow it.” He turned away and began rummaging in the refrigerator, emerging with two boxes. He stowed the smaller one in the cooler and handed her the larger one. She smiled, puzzled, then pulled the top off and found a small bouquet of white roses nestled inside the florist’s tissue paper.

She burst into tears.

“I take it back—that is the wrong response. Kari, why on earth are you *crying*?” Caleb looked completely mystified. “Don’t you like them? I thought white roses were a safe choice!”

“I’m crying because I feel like a bride! I go to a wedding almost every week, and I thought the magic was pretty much gone. After a while, it gets very routine. But there’s always something special about the bride, even after thousands of weddings—and it’s me. This time, it’s *me*.”

“No. This time, it’s *us*. And only us.” Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her temple.

“Eloping,” she said through laughter. “Katie thought I was joking when I told her.”

“It makes sense,” he murmured. “Like you said, a wedding would just feel like you’re at work.”

“Marrying you is anything but work.”

“Good. Because I plan to have nothing but fun with you, Mrs. Mikelmas.”

“Not so fast, bud. We’re not married yet.”

He gave her another squeeze, then scooped her up in his arms as she whooped.

“Let’s go fix that. Right now.”

* * *

“Best beach day ever.” Kari looked out at the blue-green water of the bay and sighed with pleasure. As she brushed some sand off her left thigh, her new ring sparkled, brighter than the sunlight glinting on the waves. It was a circle of diamonds, with no beginning and no end, the perfect symbol of their relationship.

“Best *day* ever,” Caleb corrected. “Best day of any kind. Ever.”

“Better than the day Mikr0 went public?” Kari teased.

He made a dismissive sound. “What’s a billion dollars compared to this?”

A moment of silence passed, then they both burst out laughing. “Well, okay,” he conceded. “It’s not nothing. But I can certainly live a happy life without a billion dollars. I can’t be happy without you. I tried really hard, and I failed miserably.”

Kari swallowed. She wanted to respond—she had so much in her heart, a heart that truly was losing old scar tissue, one kiss at a time—but everything she thought of seemed inadequate. How do you express something so huge, so all-encompassing? Something that defined her very existence and yet almost slipped through her fingers? And she was a wedding professional!

If anyone should be able to put words to love, it was her; it was the language she heard every day.

“I loved the quote you put into your vows,” she told him. “About the stars. Tell me again?”

“‘We are star stuff, which has taken destiny into its own hands.’ Carl Sagan said it.”

“It’s perfect, Caleb. It’s us.”

She jumped up, totally overwhelmed and needing to move.

“Let’s walk down the beach,” she suggested. “I want some shells for souvenirs.”

“Sure,” Caleb responded cheerfully. “Just let me check the anchor first.”

He walked down to the water and waded out toward the boat.

Kari surveyed their blanket and the cooler and big tote bag sitting in the sand next to it. There was no wind, and since they were the only people on the island, there was no need to worry about theft, but it was ingrained in her to guard against anything that could possibly go wrong. Short of a tsunami, she couldn’t see any potential problems. She picked up her bouquet from the blanket and set it inside the cooler.

Caleb was waiting for her at the water’s edge. They walked mostly in contented silence, holding hands except when Kari bent down to pull a clam shell out of the sand or examine a starfish. They were so lost in their own world that when a small plane appeared in the sky, the distant buzz of its engine was jarring. It was still far off on the horizon, but they could make out the shape of an advertising banner flapping behind the tail.

“He must be headed to Martha’s Vineyard, where the tourists are,” Caleb commented idly. “I wonder what the ad’s for. Sun lotion?”

“Hard seltzer,” was Kari’s guess. “Or lottery tickets, maybe.”

“That could be my next gig. I’ll get my pilot’s license and we’ll fly over beaches and ballparks. It’ll be like Van Life, except in the air. We’ll be flying influencers.”

“But we’ll only carry responsible messages. Our banners will say ‘Use SPF 35 or higher’ and ‘Don’t drink and drive,’” Kari laughed. “‘Adopt a pet today’ or ‘Don’t forget to floss!’”

“And eventually, we’ll be global, spreading good advice in every language. Our tagline will be ‘Upload Your Message to the Clouds!’”

Kari groaned. “But first you’ll have to invent renewable plane fuel.”

“I’ll call Elon when we get back.”

She looked up to see if he was joking, but he was watching the plane. Instead of heading for the crowded beaches of the Vineyard as they expected, it seemed to be on a direct course for their tiny, empty island. The plane banked off in a wide curve, then straightened, flying parallel to the shore but still over the water. The pilot, evidently seeing them below, wagged the wings in greeting, and they waved.

“What does the banner say?” she asked.

Caleb shaded his eyes with his hand, then started to laugh.

“What is it?” she asked again.

The banner was long and narrow. In red letters, it read, “Congratulations, Caleb and Kari! Love, Christian and Caroline.” He snickered. “*Caroline.*”

“That is so sweet—” Kari started, then paused, squinting at the message as it went past. “Wow. She is going to be really, really mad. I’d hate to be that print shop owner right now.”

“She’ll never know. We didn’t bring our phones, so no photos.”

“Of course—and it was such a thoughtful thing to do! Especially since we know what Carolina thinks about the idea of getting married here...”

The plane, meanwhile, had made a 180-degree turn and was headed back along their small beach for a second fly-by. The opposite side of the banner displayed the same typo.

“You know, normally, it would be up to me to be sure that those names were all spelled correctly. A mistake like that would be my responsibility. And it would be a calamity.” Kari shivered involuntarily.

“It would never have happened at a Wedding Protectors event,” Caleb pointed out.

“No. We would have checked the banner in advance, in person. And if there *was* a mistake, even if the plane was just about to take off, I would have found some red paint and repainted that *e* into an *a* myself if necessary. But it makes my blood run cold just to see it.”

“I can see why your clients want every detail perfect,” Caleb said thoughtfully. “I really can. People’s feelings might get hurt if their name is misspelled, or they might be upset if they get served the rare filet when they’re vegan. And the bride and groom want everyone to have a perfect time and be as happy as they are, and always have this incredible memory of the day. I understand that. And that’s why I am just so glad we planned a different kind of wedding. We didn’t have to worry about any of that. *We* know how happy we are, and that’s all that matters, today and forever.”

“I am *so* glad, too! Imagine if I had to be protecting my own wedding—or worrying about someone else doing it! I know too much about how the sausage is made.” She smiled up at him. “Today has been absolutely perfect and totally stress free.”

They walked on in grateful silence. Kari was now carrying her hat, which she had filled with the shells she gathered, and the afternoon sun was warm on the back of her neck. They had walked far enough to be out of sight of their blanket, and when it came into view, she wanted nothing more than to lie down and luxuriate.

“Do we have time for a nap before we have to head back?” she asked. “I think we’ve earned it.”

“Absolutely,” Caleb answered. “Brilliant idea. I married a genius.”

He put one arm around her neck and kissed the side of her head.

And then he stopped dead in his tracks.

Their picnic basket wasn’t on the blanket. A blanket that was pulled about twenty feet from its original spot, now one long strip of fabric coated in sand.

A large furry beast chewed on the wicker basket, its colleague's nose deep in the basket itself, a whiff of Camembert making it clear the Scottish coo was enjoying their wedding day feast.

“Oh, no,” Kari said with a low groan. “I didn't plan for *this*.”

“GIT!” Caleb shouted.

Both cows looked up at them, looking as bored as a teenager with overgrown bangs. A deep auburn color, with long fringe that fell down their crowns and over their eyes, the longhorn Highland cows clearly viewed the newlyweds as the intruders and not vice versa.

“It's okay,” Kari said softly. “They got what they wanted. They'll walk away soon.”

“We didn't get what we wanted. That nap sounds lovely.”

She reached for his arm and whispered, “We can rock the boat with a little afternoon delight.”

“Oooo, I like that.” Her kiss made the coo issue moot. As they broke their embrace, he looked out on the water.

“The boat,” he said in a strange voice.

It was gone.

He took off at a run toward the now-empty place at the shoreline where the boat had been anchored. Kari hesitated a second, then ran to what was left of their blanket, spilling shells as she ran. She rummaged through the tote bag and pulled out a small pair of binoculars, scanning the horizon from her slightly higher vantage point. Off to the left, a sandspit stretched out into the bay. Just beyond it, she spotted their boat. It was drifting out slowly, lazily, as if it were enjoying the afternoon.

“There it is!” she yelled, pointing. “But it's too far out!”

Caleb was already pulling his polo shirt over his head. He dropped it on the sand and tossed his sunglasses on top of it.

“I’m going to swim out and get it,” he called. “It’s not too far!”

“Caleb!” she shouted back. “NO! The tide is going out, you’ll never catch it!”

She took another look through the binoculars, moving them quickly across the water. Halfway between the shore and the boat, something caught her eye, and she slid the glasses back to it. A small, dark shape—no, two—no, three—like small triangles—

She dropped the glasses and screamed to Caleb, who had dived in and taken his first few strokes: “SHARKS, CALEB! NO! COME BACK!”

* * *

The Coast Guard patrol boat sped across the darkening water toward the lights of the mainland. Kari and Caleb sat in the cabin, holding hands and talking to one of the officers. He handed them each a mug of tea, carefully poured from a huge thermos.

“You were lucky,” the officer was saying. His nameplate said Lt. Murphy. “Sharks don’t generally attack swimmers, but you never know. There’ve been a couple of pretty bad incidents off the Cape in the last few years. Better to let a boat go than lose a limb or your life.”

“Absolutely,” Caleb agreed. “But if it hadn’t been for my wife, I never would have seen them.”

“What made you think to check?” Lieutenant Murphy asked her. “Most people wouldn’t bring binoculars on a beach outing.”

Caleb chuckled.

“It’s kind of a habit,” Kari explained. “In my line of work, I have to be prepared for anything to go wrong.”

“And to fix it when it does,” Caleb added. “Which is why she had the binoculars, and the satellite phone, and God only

knows what else in the bottom of the tote bag. It certainly was heavy.”

“Signal flares,” she told him. “A better-than-average first aid kit. A diving knife.”

“Okay,” the lieutenant said. “I’ll bite—no pun intended. What is it that you do for a living? Forest ranger? Ski patrol, maybe? CIA agent?” His tone made it clear he was kind of hoping for that last one.

“I’m a wedding protector.”

“A *what?*”

“My company protects weddings. So the bride and groom don’t have to worry about anything. A lot of our clients are famous, or it might be a very unusual wedding, like on a glacier or, you know, a tiny island in shark-infested waters.” She smiled ruefully.

“They’re the best in the business,” Caleb chimed in proudly.

“Do you have a card?” Lieutenant Murphy asked. “Or a website? I’m getting married, and my fiancée really wants to do something different. She’s been talking about maybe having one of those underwater weddings, but we’re not too sure. Her father is, well... *famous* is one word for it. Boston famous. No – he’s more famous than that. My fiancée and I are looking for something exactly like what you describe. A wedding protector might be exactly what we need.”

“Hey!” Caleb exclaimed. “I just remembered something.”

He leaned over and opened the lid of their cooler. Inside was the small white cardboard box he had stowed away that morning. He set it on the cabin’s built-in table and lifted the lid.

“A cake!” Kari’s eyes filled, not for the first time that day. “You remembered to bring a wedding cake!”

“And the only food the cows didn’t eat,” Caleb muttered.

“Lieutenant Murphy, will you join us? There’s no champagne left, but you’re on duty anyway. Cake’s allowed,

though, right?”

“Sure, I’d love to.” Braced against the motion as the boat ran through the waves, he turned and opened a drawer. “I know there’s a knife here someplace.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got one,” Kari told him, pulling the diving knife out of her bag. “I knew this would come in handy.”

“You think of everything.” Caleb kissed her.

“That’s what wedding protectors do. We think of everything.”

“Sorry I made you work on your day off,” he said as he pulled away, fingers stroking her cheek.

“*Work?* What do you mean?”

“You protected our wedding. You saved me from a shark.”

“Sharks,” she corrected him. “And technically, Lt. Murphy here saved you.”

Said Lt. Murphy could not say a word because his mouth was full of cake.

Plus, the man could read a room. Discreetly, he walked up to the deck, leaving them alone.

“I think,” Caleb said, taking a dab of frosting and putting it on Kari’s nose, “we saved each other.” Then he licked the sweetness off, making her squirm and laugh.

Their kiss was sugar and fire, love and laughter, all in one passionate embrace.

Kari had protected her wedding, after all.

Together, they’d created their perfect day. No matter what.

And they did whatever it took to find their happily ever after.

One star at a time.

THE END

READERS!

THANK YOU so much for spending your valuable time with my newest book. Your work and effort is so appreciated as the romance novel world offers so many options. I am grateful you chose to read *my* book!

Caleb and Kari are together, exactly the way they should be. I hope you enjoyed the first “Wedding Protectors, Inc.” book in my Whatever It Takes series.

Book 2 is next, featuring Katie Gallagher and her own happily ever after. Get ready for *Never Fall for the Bride’s Father*, an enemies-to-lovers, silver fox, “age gap” romance (and no, it’s NOT James McCormick!!!) with so much art, heart, and *soooo* many leaps of faith.

Here’s the description:

Power outages. Runaway brides. Collapsed wedding cakes. Tainted caviar. Handsy grooms.

And the always classic: jealous MILs who wear white.

No wedding catastrophe can faze Katie Gallagher, because when you plan for the worst, you deliver the best.

The best wedding *ever*.

Her company, Wedding Protectors, Inc., promises happily ever afters. Guaranteed. Whatever it takes.

But always-prepared Katie? She’s steering clear of her own HEA. Years of dating older, wealthy, alpha businessmen who treat her like an ornament has left a bad taste in her mouth.

And some bruises on her ego.

Love is her job. Not her destiny.

So when she falls for silver fox and self-made millionaire Patrick Cooper, she breaks a rule so taboo, it doesn't technically exist:

Never fall for the bride's father.

Enter Patrick, a widowed art dealer with salt-and-pepper charm. He can't resist trying to share an Uber with the captivating, enticingly stubborn blonde. Their encounter? Classic enemies-to-lovers. Sparks fly, but not the good kind... at first.

Starting off on the wrong foot left a terrible impression, but when a series of coincidences pushes them together, the more time they spend with each other, the more the lines blur.

Chance favors the risk-takers, so when he takes a leap of faith and gets a passionate kiss that rocks his world, Katie opens closed doors in his heart.

Can he really have a new soulmate —

Or is this just a May-December fling?

I can't wait for you to meet Patrick and watch Katie get her HEA!! You can preorder *Never Fall for the Bride's Father* right now!

[Amazon](#)

Meanwhile - *Never Plan a Billionaire's Wedding* is the first in my all-new wedding series.

REVIEWS are so important, so if you have time and are so inclined, I'd really appreciate if you could go to:

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to leave reviews.

And then there are retailer reviews!

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Reviews are for your fellow readers, to help them find new books, and to make decisions. You help spread the word when you write them, and I am forever in your debt.

<3 You're the best!

BONUS EPILOGUE

When I decided to write the Whatever It Takes series, featuring the concept of Wedding Protectors, Inc., I knew I wanted to write nothing but wedding romances, so I started.

And found myself writing with a little less... spice, shall we say. Lower heat. ;)

Most of my books are what you would call “medium heat” and plenty are “scorching hot” (hello, Random series, Her Billionaires series, and Obedient series...).

When I finished the draft for *Never Plan a Billionaire's Wedding*, I asked all of my editors and beta readers if they thought the “closed door” sex scene should be “open door” - and the answers were overwhelmingly that the book is great as it is.

But.

But a few outliers (*coughcoughClarkcoughcough*) thought it could use a little more heat. A few beta readers thought that a bonus epilogue would be the perfect balance between open and closed door, so...

Here you go. Sex scene optional, and zero judgment if you opt to read it or take a pass. That's the great part about customized choices: you get to do what YOU want.

A bonus epilogue that flashes forward, on a wonderful day after Kari and Caleb are married and living together, settled in Boston, and getting it on ;) .

Because “happily ever after” means the “ever after” part is fun to read about.

ENJOY!

[Click here for the Bonus Epilogue.](#)

About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Julia Kent writes romantic comedy with an edge. Since 2013, she has sold more than 2.5 million books, with 5 *New York Times* bestsellers and more than 23 appearances on the *USA Today* bestseller list. Her books have been translated into French, Italian, and German, with more titles releasing in the future.

From billionaires to BBWs to new adult rock stars, Julia finds a sensual, goofy joy in every contemporary romance she writes. Unlike Shannon from *Shopping for a Billionaire*, she did not meet her husband after dropping her phone in a men's room toilet (and he isn't a billionaire in a rom com).

She lives in New England with her husband and children in a household where everyone but Julia lacks the gene to change empty toilet paper rolls.

Join her newsletter at <http://www.jkentaauthor.com>



Also by Julia Kent

Never Plan a Billionaire's Wedding

Never Fall for the Bride's Father

Love You Wrong

Love You Right

Love You Again

Love You More

Love You Now

Love You Fiancee

Shopping for a Billionaire

Shopping for a Billionaire's Fiancée

Shopping for a CEO

Shopping for a Billionaire's Wife

Shopping for a CEO's Fiancée

Shopping for an Heir

Shopping for a Billionaire's Honeymoon

Shopping for a CEO's Wife

Shopping for a Billionaire's Baby

Shopping for a CEO's Honeymoon

Shopping for a Baby's First Christmas

Shopping for a CEO's Baby

Shopping for a Yankee Swap

Shopping for a Turkey

Shopping for a Highlander

Little Miss Perfect

Fluffy

Perky

Feisty

Hasty

Tasty

In Your Dreams

Her Billionaires

It's Complicated

Completely Complicated

It's Always Complicated

Eternally Complicated
Random Acts of Crazy
Random Acts of Trust
Random Acts of Fantasy
Random Acts of Hope
Randomly Acts of Yes
Random Acts of Love
Random Acts of LA
Random Acts of Christmas
Random Acts of Vegas
Random Acts of New Year
Random Acts of Baby
Maliciously Obedient
Suspiciously Obedient
Deliciously Obedient
Christmasly Obedient

Our Options Have Changed (with Elisa Reed)

Thank You For Holding (with Elisa Reed)

Join My Substack!

What the heck is a Substack, you ask? It's like a blog/newsletter/podcast, all rolled into one.

You don't just get an email from me saying "Hey, buy my books!"

Instead, you get a richer, more fun experience, with posts/newsletters that are designed to be savored over a long stretch in a comfortable chair, sipping your beverage of choice while you laugh, imagine, and stay entertained.

[You can read one \(or more\) of my posts here, and sign up on the spot to get my "Julia Kent's Writing Cabin" delivered to you at least once a week.](#)

<https://juliakent.substack.com>

Many posts include an audio conversation between me and my husband, Clark. We talk about my books, ideas about romance, and so much more. Sometimes we're even funny! ;)

I'm having so much fun reliving into topics ranging from wedding romance to one-night stands to cover design to food insecurity and volunteering. Designed to be a free-flowing place for ideas, my little online writing cabin invites you to come on in, take a seat by the fire, and chat with me and other readers in the comments.

Or just read. It's all up to you.

<3