

A romantic couple embracing outdoors. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a white and black striped shirt. The man has a beard and is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt over a white t-shirt. They are looking at each other and smiling. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

PASSION
AND

promises

A COLLECTION OF DOGWOOD COVE NOVELLAS

JULIA JARRETT

PASSION
AND
Promises

A DOGWOOD COVE NOVELLA COLLECTION

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Julia Jarrett

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INTRODUCTION

Wheels and Devotion was originally included in a special anthology, *Small Towns Wild Hearts* that was released early 2023. It is now only available here, in this collection.

Dean and Riley show up throughout the Dogwood Cove series, and their love story was asked for often by readers. Please note, this story is set before the main Dogwood Cove series begins.

Special consideration for Riley's unique character was given, and my deep gratitude goes to my dear friend Karen, who both inspired the character and read the story for authenticity and sensitivity.

I hope you enjoy this super short and sweet peek into one of Dogwood Cove's treasured couples!

XOXO Julia

CHAPTER ONE

Riley

“No. No, no, no, no, no,” I cry out as my car bumps unevenly over the road, courtesy of what I’m guessing is a flat tire. Despite the tears of frustration running down my face, I manage to get over to the side of the road and put my hazards on before I drop my head to the steering wheel, letting the tears fall.

You might think a flat tire is no big deal. And for someone else, it wouldn’t be. But when you’re paralyzed, changing a flat tire isn’t so simple.

This isn’t the first time I’ve run into a problem that I cannot solve without physical help from someone. But with my family all on the mainland, in Northern British Columbia to be exact, my current options for help are pretty limited. Thank God Dad insisted on me having extra coverage for roadside assistance. Swiping away my tears on the sleeve of my sweater, I reach for my phone from my purse on the seat next

to me and grab the card with my roadside assistance number on it. Hopefully, the wait isn't too long and I can be back on my way to the ferry terminal soon.

But five minutes later and those freaking tears are falling again. "Two hours. Sure, it's fine. I'll just sit in my car for two hours, miss my ferry, no problem." My head falls back against the headrest in frustration. I don't often dwell on how much more difficult my disability makes my life. There's no point. A car accident as a teenager left me with a partially severed spinal column and no feeling or mobility from my waist down. I have some sensation in my abdomen, and thankfully, my upper body is strong, courtesy of using a wheelchair. But my legs are purely for decoration at this point, and now, thanks to one stupid tire, I'm going to miss my ferry home.

"Damn it!" I slam my hands down on my steering wheel just as my phone vibrates with a text message. When I look at it, I see it's Mila Monroe. We met in our final year of university, and she's the reason I'm on the island right now. Somehow, I let her convince me to visit her small hometown, Dogwood Cove, when I told her I needed a weekend away. We had a ton of fun, but now I'm just trying to get home.

Not that there's much waiting for me there. Mila's suggestion of moving to the island is pretty tempting with the current state of my life.

MILA: It was so great seeing you this weekend, you'll have to come back again soon!

Letting out a huff of frustration at my current situation, I thumb out my response.

RILEY: It was really great, thanks for having me and making everything so easy. If only getting to the ferry was the same

MILA: What do you mean?

RILEY: Flat tire, currently stuck halfway between Dogwood Cove and Victoria, waiting for roadside assistance.

MILA: OMG why didn't you call me! I can come and get you?

RILEY: Thanks, but it's okay, I can't leave my car. I'll just have to wait. They said it would only be a couple of hours, so I'll just see if I can change my ferry to a later one.

MILA: No way. I'm sending someone to help you.

Here's the thing about Mila — she's a force to be reckoned with. And I have to admit, the idea of not waiting two hours only to then have to wait longer at the ferry terminal for whatever boat I can get on is tempting.

RILEY: Okay, if you're sure Ethan won't mind?

MILA: He's out of town. But don't worry, I'll find someone to come and help.

I chew on my lip nervously; Mila knows how I feel about strangers. I hate being vulnerable, but it's my reality

sometimes. But a minute or so later another text comes through.

MILA: Okay, he's on his way. And because I know you're freaking out, listen to me. Don't worry. Dean's a good guy, he'll be there in twenty minutes.

That makes me smile. Mila's a good friend, and I'm determined not to let so much time pass without seeing her again.

RILEY: Thank you.

MILA: No problem. I'll talk to you soon.

Nothing to do now except wait for my help to arrive.



I'm not sure what exactly I expected, but the big pickup truck that pulls up behind me half an hour later isn't it. Nor is the ridiculously sexy man who's climbing down from the truck's driver's side. I stare at him openly as he walks up to the passenger window of my car, unabashedly drinking in his muscular torso wrapped in a fitted white T-shirt. He's got a thick dusting of scruff — nah, it's basically a beard — and dark hair. He's got a nice smile, friendly and open. I open the passenger side window with a small wave.

“Riley? I'm Dean; Mila sent me.”

“Hi, thank you for coming,” I say in return, and I mean every word. The rush of attraction I initially felt for him quickly gives way to immense gratitude that this man, this stranger,

didn't hesitate to come to my rescue. He gives me a nod and another smile then turns to crouch down and examine my back tire. I crane my head around as best I can to watch him. After a quick minute he stands up and walks the few steps back to the front.

"You've definitely got a flat tire," he comments, brushing his hands off on his pants. "We can get that changed pretty fast; you've got a spare?"

I nod. "Yes, a full size. It's in the trunk."

He seems confused by the news that I've got a full-sized tire just sitting in my car, but he won't be once he discovers why. I can't exactly let myself be stranded with only a spare tire that I can't drive on for long.

"Okay, well, if you just hop out, I can deal with this pretty fast. I can teach you as I go, if you want, so next time you don't have to wait for help." His wink tells me he's just being friendly, not patronizing. But it doesn't matter.

"Ahh, yeah, that's easier said than done." My hands twist together in my lap.

Dean's brow furrows as he leans down to place his forearms on the open window. "Why?" It's an innocent question. Curious, that's all. And it's a question I've had to answer in many different situations time and time again. Still, it sucks. Because I know as soon as I answer, there's a very good chance he'll look at me differently.

“Because I need to get my wheelchair out, and that takes quite a bit of space.” I gesture to the road beside me, and with perfect timing a giant semitruck goes roaring past. “This isn’t the safest location for that.” I keep my gaze steady on him, waiting for that moment where his perspective of me changes. To my surprise, it doesn’t happen. He stands up straight, walks around to my door, opens it, and crouches down.

“Okay, would you feel comfortable with me setting up your wheelchair over on the side and then lifting you into it? Or I can carry you to my truck to wait while I deal with the tire. Whichever is best for you.”

He says it so calmly, as if it’s no big deal to him, an everyday occurrence, needing to deal with the girl with the wheelchair. It’s...refreshing.

“That would be great,” I say in a rush. “Waiting in your truck, I mean. That way you don’t have to worry about my chair.”

Dean shrugs, raising those muscular shoulders and lifting the corner of his mouth slightly. “I don’t mind. Whatever you prefer, Riley.”

Good grief, this giant man is making me feel all kinds of strange things. I’ve tried to date since my accident, but it’s never gone well. Most men can’t see past the chair, at least not enough to get close. Dean’s clear acceptance of my disability and willingness to work with me, even in this bizarre circumstance, means a lot.

He stands up, then bends down. But before his hands even touch me, Dean pauses. “I’m going to lift you into a cradle position, okay?”

All I can do is nod. Then his large hands are sliding carefully under my legs and around my back, and I’m lifted from my car as if I weigh nothing. The trip to his truck is over too soon and a silly part of me wishes I had a reason to stay in his arms longer.

I watch out the front window as he competently jacks up my car, switches the flat tire out for the new one, and gets it all back together faster than I thought possible. I’m almost disappointed I won’t get to watch him longer. Then he walks back over to the passenger side of his truck and opens the door with a sweeping bow.

“Your chariot awaits, madam.”

I can’t hold back a giggle. “Thank you, good sir.”

His eyes take on a gleam when I laugh, and I feel an answering flush cover my cheeks. Then I’m back in his arms and we’re walking to my car. The air is getting cool out now that evening is falling, and I’m suddenly so thankful it isn’t raining. Early fall on the West Coast can be a mixed bag when it comes to weather, and I would have felt so guilty if Dean had to work in the rain.

Dean lowers me into my seat with such gentle strength and care. It’s been a long time since anyone helped me that way. The respect, consideration for my comfort, and absolute

acceptance of my disability is something I rarely experience outside of my family and close friends.

“Thanks again,” I say softly once I’m settled in my car. Dean stays crouched down beside me as if the cars on the road beside us are not a concern at all. His deep blue eyes are focused on me, and the intensity of that gaze has me biting my lip.

“It was my pleasure, Riley.” He stands up and drops his hand on the roof of my car. “I hope I see you again sometime.” He taps the roof, then turns and walks back to his truck, and I finally let out a deep whoosh of breath.

“I hope I see *you* again, too.”

CHAPTER TWO

Dean

When Mila called to ask if I could go and help her friend who was stranded on the highway with a flat tire, it was a no-brainer. I needed the break from staring at paperwork for hours on end, and any friend of Mila Monroe's is a friend of mine. Or at least someone I want to help.

I was *not* prepared for the beautiful woman I found.

Or for the hesitation in her eyes when we both realized she'd need my hands-on help, literally, to get out of her car. I can't imagine having to give that kind of trust to a total stranger, and it's not lost on me what a significant thing that must be for her.

But that's not why turning my truck around and driving away from Riley is a lot harder than it should be. I drive slowly and keep checking my rearview mirror, only relaxing once I see her car pull out onto the road, headed in the opposite direction from me.

The entire way back to Dogwood Cove, I'm occupied with thoughts of her. Her curly hair cascading down her back in a dark, riotous mess, framing big brown eyes any man could easily get lost in for hours. She's gorgeous. I've never been a romantic kind of guy. Love at first sight seemed like one hell of a cheesy marketing tactic for Hallmark movies.

But even so, I can't deny that something inside of me woke up and took notice the second I saw her sitting in her car. And the protective rumbling in my chest at the thought of anyone taking advantage of her mobility situation has me seeing red.

Thank fuck Mila called me.

Pulling up to the small house I own on the outskirts of Dogwood Cove, I cut the engine and sit in silence for a second before pulling out my phone and dialing Mila's number.

"Dean? I owe you a coffee and a muffin next time you come in, buddy."

That causes me to crack a smile. Nobody makes better muffins than Mila.

"You owe me more than that. A little heads-up would've been nice."

"Heads-up about what?" The defensiveness in Mila's tone takes me by surprise. "Don't tell me you're about to give one of my closest friends shit just because she uses a wheelchair. Oh my God, Dean Hastings. If you were an ass to her I'm going to —"

“Calm down, tiger,” I interrupt. “I didn’t give her shit, and I don’t care about her chair. I’m just saying it would have been nice to know ahead of time. I don’t think she could tell I was surprised, but fuck, I mean, what if I hadn’t got there fast enough? What if someone else stopped, someone not...not nice?”

I’m flustered, fumbling my words, as the raw intensity of my reaction hits me from all angles.

“Dean,” Mila starts, then pauses. “Riley knows how to protect herself. Besides, we were texting all the way until you pulled up.”

That helps settle the beast inside of me slightly.

“Still, I dunno, Mila. I just feel bad I didn’t know. I had to lift her out of her car, for fuck’s sake. She had to trust me to do that. That just feels big.”

Mila’s quiet for a second, which is pretty fucking weird for a woman who never stops talking or nosing her way into everything.

“That’s why I sent you, Dean. There’s no one else, aside from my brother, that I’d trust with Riley.”

I climb down from my truck, holding the phone to my ear. “Thanks, I guess,” I reply gruffly. The truth is, that means a lot. And makes me find the balls to ask the next question. “Have you talked to her since she left? Is she...is she okay?”

“She’s great. On her way to the ferry terminal and not in danger of missing her sailing, all thanks to you, big guy.”

I let out a sigh that Mila must hear, given her giggle.

“You know, you seem awfully concerned. Maybe you’d like to check in with her yourself?” she teases, but I tense up. Of course, Mila interprets my silence perfectly.

“Ooh! You want her number, don’t you?” She sounds way too fucking delighted in my discomfort, which apparently is obvious, even through the phone line. “It just so happens, Riley was somewhat taken by you as well, my friend. Which means I am more than happy to play matchmaker. Just remember me in your wedding vows.”

“Mila,” I groan, even though on the inside I’m pumping my fist at the thought that Riley might actually be interested.

“Do you want her number or not?”

“Yes, please,” I mumble, running my hand over my close-cropped hair.

A beep sounds in my ear, letting me know of an incoming message.

“There. Sent. Now, I have muffins to bake, and you have flirting to do. Make me proud, big guy.”

Mila hangs up before I can say anything, and I look down at my phone to see a new contact.

Riley Novak.

I wait till I’m inside my house, ignoring the fact that mentally, I’m already thinking about the low ramp I would need to install up to my front door if Riley ever comes over.

Don't get ahead of yourself, you dumbass.

I bypass the table that's covered in all the licensing and permitting paperwork I need to complete by the end of the week if I ever want to get my bar open. Grabbing a glass of water, I go straight out onto my back deck. It might be late September, but it's still nice enough to sit outside.

Riley's number is typed into a new message window before I can second-guess myself, and then I'm thumbing out a message.

DEAN: Riley, hey, it's Dean. Mila's friend who changed your tire earlier today

That's fuckin' stupid sounding. What other friend of Mila's would be messaging her? I hit the backspace button and try again.

DEAN: Hey Riley, this is Dean – Mila's friend. Just wanted to make sure you made it to your ferry.

Still sounds kind of redundant, but better than stating the obvious. I press send, and stare at my phone for a minute before I see the three dancing dots I'm waiting for.

RILEY: Hi, Dean. Thank you for your help earlier. And yes I made it. *happy face emoji*

DEAN: That's good. I gotta ask, why the full-size spare?

RILEY: LOL I wondered if you'd ask. As you probably realized, dealing with car issues isn't exactly simple for me. My family gets a bit anxious about these things, so my dad made me put a full-size tire in place of a spare just in case.

DEAN: Smart.

Well, this conversation is boring as fuck. I really do suck at flirting if the first chance I get to text with a woman I'm attracted to, I talk about tires, of all things.

RILEY: This is kind of awkward, but I also want to thank you for how you handled my needing some extra help, you know, carrying me to your truck. You were super respectful, and that means a lot.

DEAN: You're welcome, but it was nothing.

RILEY: It wasn't nothing, not to me. I know we just met, and barely spent any time together, but I feel like I can say this. Mila was right when she said you were a good guy, Dean. I'm glad it was you she sent.

DEAN: I'm glad too.

CHAPTER THREE

Riley

DEAN: Hey beautiful, sorry again I missed our chat last night. How was the job search today?

When Dean's nightly text comes through, I'm already in bed trying not to be too obsessive about watching my phone for his message. This has become a routine over the last few weeks. We text during the day and every night. Except for last night when Dean had some meetings for his bar that opens in less than a month.

RILEY: How did your meetings go? Find a manager yet? I've got two more interviews scheduled with some non-profit housing organizations, but they're both in Victoria.

DEAN: That's awesome. Not gonna lie, wish they were closer *winky face* but I'll be cheering you on no matter what. And no, no manager yet. Too bad I can't just hire you... That would solve all our problems.

It's a good thing I live alone right now because the smile on my face is a mile wide. Over three weeks of almost daily texting, Dean has made no attempt to hide how much he wants me in Dogwood Cove. Not that he's said *why* exactly, so I'm not entirely sure he wants me there as a friend or as something more. But every time we talk, it seems like the line between friendship and romantic relationship gets a bit blurrier.

It might seem weird to be developing feelings for a man I've only seen in person once, and not at my finest moment, but there's something about Dean that calls to me, draws me in, and makes me never want to leave.

RILEY: Not so sure I'm bar material LOL. But thank you. I'm holding out hope for something closer to Dogwood Cove as well. Mila is desperate for me to be in town.

DEAN: Mila's not the only one who wants you here babe.

I chew on my thumbnail trying to decide how to respond. He's upping the flirt factor big time tonight, and I'm not experienced enough to know how to handle it. God, why are men so confusing?

RILEY: Thanks, Dean.

Nope, that's dumb. I delete, and try again.

RILEY: I want to be there too.

Definitely not. Third time's a charm I hope.

RILEY: Hopefully I'll be there soon, even if it's just a visit. If I end up working in Victoria I mean.

DEAN: Hopefully. Okay, I better let you sleep so you can rock those interviews. Orrrr.... Do I keep you up so you bomb them and don't get the job? *devil emoji*

RILEY: Omg. You're terrible. I should get some sleep though.

DEAN: g'night Ri.

RILEY: Night Dean.

I put my phone down on my bedside table and close my eyes. Something tells me I'll be falling asleep smiling again tonight.

The next morning, as I'm getting ready for my phone interviews with the Victoria-based organizations, my phone buzzes again. When I see Dean's name, I can't deny my heart skips a beat.

DEAN: Morning babe, just got out of the shower and had to send you this.

A photo accompanies his message, and it's a selfie of his handsome face with the most spectacular sky in the background. I blush, both from the photo *and* from my mental image of Dean fresh out of the shower...

DEAN: I let Ethan and Reid drag me out at the ass crack of dawn for a run this morning. The sunrise down at the beach was incredible. Can't wait to show it to you.

RILEY: I can't wait to see it.

DEAN: Soon I hope. And hey I was joking last night about you bombing the interviews. You know that right? I'll totally be thinking of you, sending good vibes and all that shit.

RILEY: I know. So good vibes, huh?

DEAN: Yeah, rainbows and unicorns. That's what you need, right?

I giggle before sending back a laughing face emoji.

RILEY: Sure, I guess?

DEAN: Seriously though, I hope they go well. You need a job so you can get your cute butt over here.

RILEY: How do you know my butt is cute?

RILEY: Wait. Omg forget I asked that.

DEAN: LOL Not a chance beautiful. Have you forgotten already how I was your knight in shiny pickup truck? I learned all I needed to know that day to have full confidence that your butt and everything else about you is cute.

DEAN: Now go rock that interview.



Funny how a month doesn't seem that long, but so much can happen in that short amount of time. Forget working in Victoria, I've landed my dream job — only thirty minutes

from Dogwood Cove. Which brings me to this moment, where I'm parked outside of Mila's house.

"It's about damn time!"

Mila's voice hits me, bringing a huge smile to my face as I finish levering myself out of my car and into my chair.

"Well, hello to you, too," I reply, spinning around to see her standing outside her house with her hands on her hips. One thing I love about Mila is she knows exactly when to offer help and when to let me do things for myself. There's nothing worse than a well-intentioned person interfering in a process I perfected years ago, like getting in and out of a car by myself.

She leans down and wraps her arms around my shoulders, and I return the hug just as firmly. Everyone needs a friend in their life like Mila Monroe.

"You do realize it's only been a month since I was here, right? Could you *be* any more impatient?" I tease, but Mila just rolls her eyes.

"Whatever. I'm excited you're here, so sue me. Now, your room is all set, but are you sure you don't want to move in more of your stuff? Keeping it in storage on the mainland seems kinda silly."

We make our way in the front door of her house, Mila carrying my suitcase for me.

"No, I told you I don't want to impose any longer than I have to, and there's no point in moving everything until I know where I'm going to live permanently." We've had this

conversation many times over the last couple of weeks. Mila wants me to just move in with her and stay, but I need my own space. Besides, with her bakery, she gets up crazy early, whereas I'm a definite night owl.

“Fine, fine. But don't think for a second that Ethan or I will let you settle for a less than perfect place just because you don't want to put up with me long-term.”

I glare at her, knowing she's joking, but still. “Oh hush. It has nothing to do with putting up with you and everything to do with the fact that our schedules are completely opposite.”

We make our way into Mila's open living room, and I stop by the window in the same spot I always use when I don't feel like lifting myself onto the couch. She sets my suitcase down, then heads to the kitchen, returning with two glasses of white wine. I take mine eagerly; it's been a long day of traveling, after all.

“I have to admit, I'm surprised a certain bar owner wasn't at the ferry terminal ready to swoop in and kidnap you,” Mila says smugly over her wine.

“Oh, come on,” I say, blushing furiously.

“I'm serious! I think he's been into the bakery almost every day, always fishing for more information about you and when you're moving to the island.”

“Well, he has no idea I'm here; he thinks I'm coming next month.”

“What?” Mila squeals. “You didn't tell him? Why not?”

I shrug and give her a small smile. “I wanted to surprise him. He doesn’t know about the Westport job, either. He thinks I’m just coming for some in-person interviews.” Tugging my lower lip between my teeth, I finally give voice to the niggling worry inside of me. “Do you think he’s going to be happy I’m here? Like, really happy?”

“Trust me. When Dean Hastings sees you, he’s going to think he died and went to heaven.” We both giggle, then Mila lifts her wine glass. “To making Dean’s dreams come true.”

I sure hope she’s right.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dean

“Seriously? This shit tastes like cat piss.” Ethan Monroe, Mila’s older brother and another one of my good friends, grimaces as he pushes the glass back to me. “You serve beer like that and you’ll scare people away, dude.”

“Glad it’s not just me. I’m all about supporting local breweries, but I don’t think anyone is gonna like that.” I dump the rest of the bottle out. The meeting this morning was a disappointment from start to finish. And not only because it was so goddamn early that I don’t know if my brain was fully functional.

I put two clean glasses under the only tap I have filled right now with a different lager Ethan and I both like. Sliding the glass over the top of the bar to him, I take a long sip before broaching the real reason he’s here.

“Are you ever going to tell me about my permits?”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “Did you really think they’d be declined? Come on, you went over the paperwork how many times? Five? Six?”

“It was only three,” I mutter, and he just laughs.

“Everything is in order, you’re good to open next weekend.”

I slam my fist down on the bar with a whoop, and Ethan raises his glass of beer in a salute before drinking deeply.

“That’s fucking amazing.”

I take a drink myself as the only thing that would possibly make this weekend even better crosses my mind for the hundredth time.

I wish Riley was here for the opening.

She’s been with me, over text and phone calls long into the night, through all the last-minute pieces of opening, for the last few weeks. Her advice and help, courtesy of her MBA, has been so fucking valuable, I don’t know how I’ll ever repay her.

That girl’s gotten under my skin in ways I never expected, especially for someone I’ve only seen in person once. But she’s real, open, and authentic. She hasn’t held back, and we’ve had some of the most honest conversations I think I’ve ever had with someone. Maybe it’s the distance, maybe it’s the ease of talking only through phone calls and text messages. Whatever it is, I can’t stop thinking about her, wanting to see her again, and wanting to tell her how much our friendship means to me.

And how much I want it to be more than just a friendship.

Ethan leaves the bar, promising to email me all the documents I need by the end of the day so I can file them and check that task off my list. I wander around the empty space that will hopefully be full of people soon.

Hastings Bar is finally opening for business.

I just wish I wasn't doing it alone.



It's late afternoon by the time I lock up the bar, ready to head home and shut my brain off for a few hours in front of a Nashville Fury football game. As I turn to head around the side of the building where I parked my truck, a familiar-looking car parked down the street catches my eye.

A small red hatchback. There are tons of those around. But not so many with a woman sitting in the front seat whose wild hair I would recognize anywhere. My heart doesn't want to believe what my eyes are clearly seeing.

Riley Novak is in Dogwood Cove.

I walk slowly over to her car, and yup, it's really her. Her head shoots up from whatever she was looking at, and her eyes widen when she sees me standing there. I lift my hand in an awkward half wave when what I really want to do is open her car door, lift her into my arms, and just hold her.

She rolls down her window with a half smile. "Dean! Hi!" Her voice sounds nervous, and I want to ease whatever has her

feeling that way, but I think I'm still in shock that she's really here.

“Hey yourself, beautiful. I can't believe you're here!”

“Surprise?” she says, still sounding nervous. I drop down into a crouch outside her open window and reach my hand in to rest on hers.

“The best surprise. I thought you weren't coming till next month.”

She nods, chewing on her lip. “Well, yeah, but then I got a virtual interview for a society in Westport, and it went well, so they asked me to come and meet them in person, and...” Her voice trails off.

“Westport? Babe, that's amazing! You're gonna be working in Westport?”

“I am,” she replies softly, and when I see the smile creeping over her face, I decide to say fuck it and not hold back my response any longer. I open her door and reach in carefully to wrap my arms around her.

“That's the best news ever. I'm really fucking happy you came to find me at the bar to tell me. So happy that I'll look past the whole part about not telling me you were coming to town early,” I say teasingly.

“What bar?” she says, her brows furrowing in confusion.

I fight back a grin. She did say she was terrible at directions. “My bar.” I gesture at the sign reading “Hastings Bar” in what I *had* thought were pretty big letters.

Her eyes widen a comical amount. “Uh, wow. I didn’t even notice that.”

“Hopefully, the fact that you didn’t notice it is more about you being lost than it is about my marketing efforts.”

Riley ducks her head, blushing adorably. “Oops. Sorry. I promise, it’s me, not the sign. I was so distracted thinking about the new job I forgot to set my GPS and got all turned around trying to get back to Mila’s house. I wish I could claim I came here on purpose, but it’s really just my terrible sense of direction.”

“Babe, I don’t care about the sign. I’m just happy to see you. And I’m really fucking glad your shitty sense of direction landed you here. It’s the perfect coincidence.”

I can visibly see the tension leave her, and finally her lips curve upward into the perfect smile I’ve only seen on a phone screen. It’s so much more blindingly beautiful in person.

“That’s good. That you’re happy, I mean. Because, umm, I might have also neglected to mention that I, umm, I moved here for good last night.”

I almost topple over from the surprise of her statement but manage to recover at the last second. “What? That’s great, Ri. But why didn’t you tell me?” My knees, aching from being in this position for too long start to give me grief, so I reluctantly straighten up. “Look, do you have somewhere to be, or can you come inside for a minute and catch up?” I gesture to the bar behind us. “I don’t have food, but I’ve got beer.”

“Yeah. I’d like that,” she says softly, and that smile I think I’m addicted to grows even bigger.

“Perfect. Just park right out front and I’ll unlock the door.”

I jog back over to the front door to my bar, my head running a mile a minute with excitement and questions. So many questions. But I know the most important one I’ll be asking her.

I want to ask Riley out on a date. Right after I find out why she didn’t tell me she was moving here.

Turning on the lights, I flip over two chairs at one of the low tables close to the bar, cursing silently that I didn’t think about accessibility when I designed this space. Riley would never be able to reach the top of the bar counter, and that’s something I’ll have to fix quickly. Not just for her, but for anyone who needs a lower surface.

Heading back to the bar, I grab a couple of glasses just as I realize I probably need to go and open the door for her. What an asshole I am not to think of that sooner.

But before I can take a step, it opens easily and Riley wheels on through. Damn, that girl must have some muscles on her.

Framed by the light from outside, she looks like an angel with her hair exploding everywhere. My hands itch to run through it, to see if the curls are as soft as they look. I want to tangle my fingers in it, mess it up, and spread it out over my pillow.

Fuck. That's a train of thought I need to halt right-the-hell now.

"Want a drink? I do have more than just beer if you would rather a soda or water," I call out as she easily weaves her way around the tables and over to the bar.

"A small beer would be great, actually. I do drink sometimes, you know," she replies, and I can't help but tease her.

"Oh, I know you do, beautiful. I haven't forgotten that night you finished the bottle of red wine and then called me."

"It was a bad day at work," she cries out indignantly, her arms folding across her petite chest. I just chuckle as I round the end of the bar and sit down, waiting for her to make her way to the table before passing her a glass of a fruity lager I think she'll enjoy.

"So, this is your bar," she says after taking a sip.

I nod. "I've got an obvious statement of my own. You're on the island a month early and living in Dogwood Cove."

Riley winces, and I immediately reach out and cover her hand in mine. The instant we connect, our eyes jump to each other, and something settles inside of me. And in that instant, one thing is certain. I'm not the only one blindsided by the crazy connection between us.

"I wanted to tell you," she starts softly, her gaze dropping to our hands, still touching on the table. I thread our fingers

together, and finally, she looks at me with a twinkle in her eyes. “But I also kind of wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you did that.” I chuckle. Squeezing her hand, my voice turns serious. Because she needs to know I mean this. “Riley, I’m thrilled you’re here.”

Her chest lifts in a deep inhale and she lets it go in a slow exhale before once again giving me that stunning smile I’m growing addicted to.

“Since you are here, and here to stay, at that,” I start, suddenly nervous. I’m pretty sure she’ll say yes? Yeah. She’ll say yes.

I hope.

I clear my throat. “I was wondering if I could take you out for dinner tomorrow night. Like, on a date, I mean.”

Her fingers tighten in mine.

“I’d like that.”

Thank. Fuck.

CHAPTER FIVE

Riley

As excited as I am that Dean clearly has similar feelings for me like I do for him, that excitement does next to nothing to diminish my nerves as I get ready to meet him tonight.

“I swear to God, Riley. You’re going to make a permanent wear mark on my floors if you don’t stop. Tonight is going to be amazing, and don’t worry about letting me know if you aren’t coming home after your date. I’ll just assume you aren’t.” Mila winks, and its all just so ridiculous — Dean asking me out, me being so nervous, and Mila being so certain I’m going to have sex — that I just start laughing, then crying.

“Riley, what’s wrong?!” Mila drops down beside my chair, one hand resting on my shoulder, the other tucking an errant curl behind my ear.

“N-nothing,” I hiccup through a fresh wave of tears. Great, at this rate I’m going to be a splotchy mess when I see Dean.

“Maybe I should cancel.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Mila says firmly. “Dean is amazing, and so are you. And two amazing people should be together.”

She makes it sound so simple.

“Mila, you know I don’t date much. This is why I’m crying. Because the stress of it all is so high. What if he wants to be spontaneous, but it turns out wherever we go or whatever we do isn’t accessible for me? What if he gets weirded out if people stare at us? What if my leg twitches and I kick him under the table? What if —“

“What if you go out with a guy whose heart is as big as yours, and you have an amazing time with someone who is compassionate, understanding, and genuinely interested in you, chair or no chair?”

That manages to stop my crazy spiral of self-doubt, and I look at her through bleary eyes. “Do you really think he is?”

“Girl, I know he is,” comes her enigmatic reply. “Now let’s get those tears cleaned up and you in your car, because you have a dinner date to go to.”

Ten minutes and a fresh coat of mascara later, I’m in my car, giving myself a mental pep talk on the way to Bella Mia, the Italian restaurant where I’m meeting Dean. He wanted to pick me up, but I needed to feel like I had some control over my situation, and having my own getaway car is the best way to do that. I’m all too familiar with guys quickly realizing they

don't really want to date a girl who needs a set of wheels to get around.

When I pull up to the restaurant, Dean's waiting, standing beside the accessible parking spot out front. He's looking drool-worthy handsome in a black collared shirt tucked into dark maroon pants. I wouldn't have thought a manly man like him could pull off pants that colour, but they look good. Tailored to perfection. I may spend longer than necessary turning off my car and gathering my things, just so I can cast surreptitious glances his way.

But apparently, I'm not as subtle as I thought.

Dean lifts my wheelchair out of the back, unfolding it with an ease that surprises me before bringing it around to my door.

"Need me to stand back so you can get a better look?" he says, laughter evident in his voice, making me roll my eyes in return.

I lift myself into my chair, get settled, then finally look up at him. But I'm not prepared for the warmth and respect I see in his eyes. Or the open desire.

"You look amazing, Ri."

I glance down at my simple blue shirt I paired with a long black skirt. It isn't all that revealing, but the shirt does show off my arm muscles — a fortunate side effect of using a wheelchair.

"Thanks?" I say, hating how it comes out as a question. Dean must notice it as well, because he immediately drops down on

his haunches.

“I mean it. You’re always beautiful, but something about tonight, maybe because you’re here with me and not on a phone screen, makes you look even more spectacular.”

Well, crap. It’s a good thing I’m already sitting down because that’s got to be the swooniest thing a guy has ever said to me. We start to make our way to the front of the restaurant, and when I feel Dean’s hand casually come to my shoulder, I falter.

“Is this okay?” he asks, noticing my pause.

I nod quickly, fighting my blush.

Once inside, we’re escorted to a table that already has one of the chairs removed. Dean waits until I’m settled before sitting down next to me.

“I hope it wasn’t presumptuous of me; I called ahead and asked them to set up the table like this. I assumed you’d be more comfortable in your chair, but if you’d prefer, I can get one moved back.”

His nerves are freaking adorable, and the consideration he’s showing is so touching, I don’t think about my reaction, I just do it. Leaning over, I swiftly press my lips to his cheek.

“This is perfect. Thank you.”

The warmth in his eyes settles me, and I realize it really is perfect. I’m here, on a date, with Dean. The feelings that have been growing inside of me over the weeks of texting and calling are not one-sided.

We both pick up the menus laid in front of us, and I take a quick glance. Everything sounds delicious, but there's a seafood pasta calling my name.

Over a glass of wine, fresh bread, and warm butter, Dean and I talk. And just like it used to over the phone, our conversation flows. I finally come clean about the plan to stay with Mila for the short term, and my hope of finding an apartment close by. And despite how wonderful the night has been, I watch him closely for his reaction. But I clearly had nothing to worry about.

His eyes light up, and his hand reaches out to take mine, his thumb slowly stroking across my knuckles. As someone with limited sensation in so much of my body, small touches like this light me up inside.

“I'm so happy you're here, Riley. At the risk of sounding like a sap, I truly believe everything will work out for you exactly the way it's meant to.”

With that enigmatic statement, he gently squeezes my hand before removing his and lifting his wine glass to his lips. I follow the movement, devouring the sight of him drinking his wine, the way his Adam's apple bobs slightly when he swallows. Good Lord. That shouldn't be anywhere near as sexy as it is.

Everything about him is sexy.



“Excuse me, I’m so sorry to interrupt, but we’re actually getting ready to close.” The apologetic waitress slides the folder holding our bill onto the table, giving both of us a small smile.

When I look around, I’m filled with surprise to see that the restaurant is empty, and sure enough, staff are slowly moving around cleaning tables, casting glances our way.

“Oh crap,” Dean says, and obviously, he’s just as surprised. His throaty chuckle slides over me. “Guess we lost track of time.” He puts a card in the folder, and hands it back to her before looking at me. “You’re pretty distracting, beautiful.”

“You’re one to talk,” I murmur back with a smirk. Flirting with Dean comes so much easier to me now that we’re here together. The glass of wine I’ve had definitely helped as well.

Once we’re outside, Dean walks me to my car, standing there with his hands in his pockets. “I wish tonight wasn’t ending.”

I tilt my head to the side, looking up at him. “Me too.”

He takes one hand out of his pocket, bending forward to lift mine to his lips. “I’ve thought about this — about taking you on a date, touching you, holding your hand — so many times over the last month. And I gotta say, reality far outweighs my imagination.”

My eyes flutter closed. This man says all the right things and does all the right things, and he’s making me believe that I might finally have a chance at something real with someone.

I still have my eyes closed, but I can feel the movement in the air when Dean crouches down, and the spicy fresh aroma of his cologne hits me.

“Riley, can I kiss you?”

Opening my eyes, I find his face close to mine, his gaze intensely focused on me. I nod slowly. Because I don't have it in me to form words right now, not with my heart beating so quickly. His large hand comes up and his fingers weave into my hair, running through it softly to cup the back of my head. Both of us keep our eyes open as he leans in, slowly, carefully, angling his head just so, so that our lips line up, and then...

Then he kisses me.

And it's magic.

CHAPTER SIX

Dean

“Okay, your Instagram and TikTok accounts are up and running with a ton of posts saved in drafts. If you can keep up once a day posts, you’ll build a big following on both. The website needs some work, but we can do that later once we have the merchandise store ready to go. Oh, and I heard back from Red Dog Brewing and they’re excited to sponsor the food truck for opening day tomorrow.”

I could marry this woman. Like, right now.

Riley is a force of nature, and her business sense is incredible. In the few short days since our first date, not only has she started her job at a non-profit in Westport, she’s also managed to streamline my entire launch plan for the bar and given me ideas for future plans I hadn’t even considered.

“Beautiful, you know you didn’t have to reach out to them,” I try to chide her, but she just rolls her eyes and spins her chair

back around to the computer set up on Mila's kitchen table.

"I didn't *have* to do anything. I wanted to."

It's the same response she's given every time I've tried to thank her for her help. And just like every other time, she's tried to brush off her assistance. I take it as an opportunity to push her computer out of the way so I can lean down and rest my elbows on the table in front of her and kiss her.

Not that I need a reason. I could kiss this woman until the day I die and never get enough.

Her arms twist around my neck, holding me in place as I greedily slide my tongue between her lips, drinking her in.

"Dean, we have to finish your opening weekend schedule," she murmurs against my mouth. I just growl in response and kiss her harder.

I feel her hands trail over my shoulders, squeezing my biceps. I've noticed Riley's got a thing for my arms, and never have I been more grateful for the upper body workout of reno'ing the bar and carrying heavy kegs. I haven't exactly had time to go to the gym.

Straightening slightly to ease the pressure building in the front of my pants, I kiss her again before backing away. It's fucking hard not to take things further with Riley, but we haven't talked about how or what we might need to do differently for her. I'm not scared away by it, but I do want to make sure that she's in charge of how fast we move and what happens next.

Once opening weekend for Hastings is over with, I plan on googling the shit out of “intimacy for people who have spinal cord injuries” and figuring out how to talk to her about it without sounding like a sex-crazed creep.

Even if the sex-crazed part is true, especially when it comes to Riley Novak.

“Fine. You’re a cruel taskmistress; let’s look at a schedule instead of making out. Sounds like a great plan.” I let my voice fill with teasing sarcasm, and Riley’s answering giggle is everything I hoped it would be.

A couple of hours later, when all the scheduling for not only opening weekend but also the first week is done, and I’ve finalized everything for tomorrow, we make our way to Mila’s living room. Riley lifts herself onto the couch, and only once she’s settled do I sit down and lift her legs into my lap.

The fact that she’s comfortable enough around me to let me do this so soon in our relationship is not something I take for granted. Mila’s told me that Riley has a hard time with people wanting to do things for her that she’s perfectly capable of doing herself, and even more so with people touching her legs since her accident.

But last night when we were watching some stupid rom-com movie at my house and talking about all the cliché things the characters were doing, Riley confessed she had never cuddled on the couch with a date. It took some maneuvering, but eventually we figured out a sort of spooning position, with her head resting on my arm and my leg in between hers. What

started as an awkward confession became a turning point in our physical relationship.

It was probably a good thing that she couldn't feel how much it affected me having her in my arms at last.

My hands start rubbing up and down Riley's legs. She's wearing these leggings that are so fucking soft, I wish it was acceptable for a dude to wear them because I would. Every day.

"Is this okay?" I ask quietly. She nods.

"Just because I can't feel it doesn't mean it doesn't feel good, if that makes sense. Like —" Riley huffs an adorable little noise "— I know you're doing it out of affection, so it feels good mentally, even if I can't feel it physically. And I still remember what it felt like for people to touch my legs affectionately. My mom used to rub my calves when I would get growing pains as a kid. So I guess seeing you do it, and mentally remembering what it feels like makes me happy. Does that even make sense?"

I lean over, thankful for my height making it easy to reach her face, and kiss her. "It does. And I'm glad. Because all I want to do is make you feel good, whether it's mentally or physically."

Her hand cups my cheek as she pulls me back down for another sweet kiss. "You do, Dean."

Our kiss deepens. I shift up toward her, needing to be closer, and lift my hands to my favourite place, her hair. But just as

I'm about to get all tangled up in there and kiss the shit out of her, everything goes wrong.

Riley lets out a noise of alarm and her head shoots up, crashing into mine at the exact second that I feel her legs slip off my lap and her body twists.

“Fuck!” I grab her legs, her arms tangling with mine, as I carefully lift them back onto the couch, scrambling to get out of the way. My eyes are watery from the impact of our collision. “Fuck, Riley, I am so sorry! Are you okay?” My hands drift over her, but I'm scared to touch her. She adjusts her own legs, her eyes cast down, not meeting my gaze.

“Riley, babe, I'm sorry, I got caught up in kissing you and I forgot —”

“It's fine, Dean. I'm fine.”

But she is definitely not fine.

“Riley,” I start, but her hand flies up to stop me, and finally, she looks at me. The tears building in her eyes and the redness in her cheeks does me in.

“Dean, can you please give me a minute.”

I stand up awkwardly, not knowing what the hell I can do to make this better, except listen to her. “Yeah. Of course. I'll, umm, go get us some water.”

She gives the barest of nods and looks back down at her lap.

I go to the kitchen sink, and with my hands on either side of it, I let my head fall down. How could I be so stupid? I let

myself get so carried away with being close to her that I forgot about Riley's needs.

I can tell she's embarrassed about what happened, and nervous, and hell, so am I. If I want to connect with her on a deeper level, I need to make sure she knows I'm not turned off or annoyed at all. And I need to do better in the future at remembering these little things we have to do differently.

I wait another minute or so before filling two glasses with water and venturing back into the living room. Riley's moved herself so she's sitting upright on the couch, her legs crossed. I put the glasses of water down on the table and sit down next to her, keeping distance between us until I see how she's feeling, even though my instinct is to wrap her in my arms.

"I'm sorry, I kind of overreacted." She looks at me, and I ache to take away the embarrassment I see on her face. Taking her hands, I shift closer so that our legs are lined up.

"Don't you dare apologize, beautiful," I start gently. "You did nothing wrong. I'm the dumbass that lost track of myself. I'd blame pheromones or the fact that you are just so damn incredible it drives me to distraction, but I don't want you taking that as blame at all."

A smile cracks on her face, and I take the chance and wrap my arm over her shoulder, gently guiding her to rest against me. When she does, willingly, I mentally heave a sigh of relief.

"I'm committed to learning anything and everything about what you need from a partner, Riley." My voice takes on a

more serious tone, and her head tilts toward my neck. “This isn’t some short-term fling for me. I know we haven’t had very long together, but you should know that the day I changed your tire was the day I knew my life was going to change.”

“Oh, Dean,” she murmurs, her lips finding the pulse point in my neck. I tip her chin up so I can see her eyes.

“I mean it, Riley. Whatever is growing between us, it’s real. I’m in this all the way. Don’t hide yourself from me, or think that you being paralyzed is any sort of problem for me. Okay? Because the reality is, I’m probably gonna fuck up somehow again, but that’s not your fault. That’s on me. I’m the one who has to learn what I need to do to be with you. And I *want* to learn all of it. Because I *want nothing more* than to be with you.”

This time when her lips meet mine, it’s more than just a passionate kiss.

It’s a promise.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley

It's amazing how a couple of weeks can change, well, everything.

Ever since that day at Mila's when the fiasco on the couch happened, Dean has shown himself to be a wonderful, caring, and considerate man. The trust and connection we built over a month of texting back and forth made it easy for us to feel comfortable asking questions and learning about each other. I've lost count of the number of times he's texted me or called me with sensitively thought-out questions about my injury, and life without the use of my legs or about how he can make the bar more accessible for everyone. And every time, he's respectful and open to my feedback. In return, he's told me all about his childhood, including a few juicy details, like just how old he was when he finally stopped sleeping with a blankie.

But the best part is, he doesn't treat me like I'm made of glass. I know he's still worried about getting caught up in the moment and forgetting about my injury, but he has somehow found a way to balance that with making sure I know just how much he wants me.

I know he's waiting for me to make the first move at taking our relationship further physically, and I know I'm ready to do that.

I've reached out to some friends I met when I played wheelchair basketball for a few years who are a lot more experienced in the world of dating and intimacy than I am, and despite how awkward and embarrassing it was to ask, I got some great advice from women I trust. I know what I'll need, and what I want to try.

I just need to pick the right time. And now that Hastings is open and running well, I think this is it.

“Stop overthinking this.”

For the tenth time tonight, I regret telling Mila about my current head space when it comes to sex with Dean. But she plied me with wine, and since she's got a rare morning off tomorrow, we decided to make the most of the evening by giving each other pedicures, ordering takeout, and drinking an entire bottle of rosé.

“I'm not overthinking it, I'm rationally thinking it,” I protest.
“Sex is a big deal for me.”

Mila's head rolls to the side along the back of the couch so she's semi-looking at me. "I know. I've kept your twenty-seven-year-old virgin secret for years. And as much as I can, I understand. All I'm saying is, you've got a wonderful guy ready to take care of you, and I do mean *take care of you*. All you need to do is tell him you're ready. Let the rest happen naturally, instead of obsessing about what day and time."

"It's just, well, it probably won't be very easy for me, especially not the first time. That's all." My voice is barely above a whisper.

"And? Do you think Dean's going to mind working a little longer to get you off? Because I seriously doubt it."

"Location matters," I blurt out. "I can't just do it anywhere. And I don't know what positions will feel good, if any at all. What if...what if I can't?" I finally voice my fear. *What if I can't give Dean an intimate, sexual relationship?*

"Riley. I say this with nothing but love and open curiosity. I know you have your v-card, but you do realize there's more to intimacy than just intercourse, right?" Mila asks gently.

My face turns bright red. "Well, yeah, but isn't the main event kind of what most guys want?"

She shrugs. "I mean, maybe? But how will you know if you don't talk about it with him instead of me? If a guy really cares about you, loves you, even, then shouldn't he want to meet you at your level? It's like me with not wanting kids. I'm not going to settle for a man who wants them, just like I would never expect a man who wants to have kids, to settle for me.

True love, or at least a truly serious relationship, should include being on the same page about whatever is important for you. If sex doesn't work for you, and Dean is really committed to being with you, then he'll be willing to figure something out."

I lift my wine glass to my lips and drain the last few sips as I consider what she's said. I've never been close enough with a man to even need to start considering all of this. But Dean, well...

"Ri, at the end of the day, you can drive yourself crazy thinking about all the what-ifs and maybes with me, or you can just call your man, tell him you want to get freaky, and figure it out together."



"Just tell him. That's all you have to do. Dean, I wanna get freaky."

"You what?"

"Jesus Christ!" I yelp, my body jumping in surprise at Dean's voice. "What are you doing here already?"

He leans down and pecks a kiss to my lips. "Well, see, it's my house. I live here. And apparently I came home just in time to hear you say some very interesting things to yourself."

"Thanks, Mila," I mutter to myself, wishing I could just roll myself into a hole and die of embarrassment.

“What does she have to do with it?” Dean asks as he walks up to his front door carrying a bag of groceries.

“Nothing,” I answer quickly, wheeling after him. “But really, what are you doing here? I thought you said you’d be gone a while.”

I follow him into the house, pushing the door closed behind me. He’s in the kitchen, unloading some fruit into the fridge.

“I thought so, too. But then you said you wanted to come over, and I wanted to see you, so I finished up faster than I expected.” He flashes me a dimpled grin. “Can we get back to what you were saying to yourself when I showed up?”

My teeth tug my lower lip in. “That depends on how much you heard.”

He casually saunters over to me, his thumbs hooked into the pockets of his worn jeans.

Don’t. Drool.

Easier said than done. Ever since a few days ago when I decided Mila was right and I just needed to go for it, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about, well, it. Getting Dean naked, seeing his body for the first time, *feeling* his body for the first time.

I’m not completely inexperienced. I’ve given a guy a blowjob before. But it was short, and gross, because he didn’t give me any warning at all before shooting off in my mouth. The point is, I’ve seen a cock before. But I know. I just *know* that Dean will be different. Better.

Spinning a chair around backwards, he sinks down into it and crosses his arms over the back. His nearness is enough to already start getting me excited.

“Babe. Did you come here to tell me you wanna have sex with me?”

“Maybe,” I whisper, my eyes locked on his.

“It’s a yes or no question, Riley.”

My tongue darts out to moisten my lips. Dean’s eyes drop down to my mouth and darken.

“Yes.”

His lips tip up in a smile. “Good answer.” His mouth crushes mine, but then leaves it all too quickly as he stands up. “I’ve done some research in hopes that we’d get to this point. But I need you to promise me something.”

I think I’d promise this man anything right now, so I just nod.

“Promise me you’ll talk to me. We have to communicate through everything. I need to know what feels good and what doesn’t.”

“I’m a virgin,” I blurt out, and his smile is exactly the reassurance I needed to know that isn’t an issue for him.

“It’s a fucking honour that I get to be your first, and your last if I have anything to say about it. Thank you. We only do what you want to do, and we only go as far as you want to go. You’re in charge, beautiful. But I also need you to trust me.

Trust that I want whatever you can offer. As much or as little as you want to give.”

“Stop talking,” I whisper, and Dean frowns in concern. I lift my arms up toward him. “Stop talking and take me to your bedroom *now*.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dean

I set Riley down on my bed, then quickly pull my shirt off over my head. Her eyes drop to my chest and flare wide. Her hands go to the hem of her shirt but I drop down in front of her and stop the motion.

“Can I?”

She nods. I slowly peel up her shirt, revealing creamy skin underneath, then her small breasts covered in dark grey lace. Her hair falls free of her shirt, cascading down over her shoulders as my hands trail down the bare skin of her arms to plant on either side of her on the bed.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Riley.”

Her head tips back slightly and I cover her mouth with mine in a long, slow kiss. I’m determined to take my time tonight. To enjoy every moment and feel every sensation.

Wrapping one arm around her body, I lift her slightly and slide us both up toward the head of the bed before gently laying her down. I let my finger drift down her neck, dusting lightly over her collarbone until I'm stroking her breast. Her small gasps and the way her upper body twists and shifts underneath my touch is giving me a roadmap to what she likes. When I dip my head and take her lace-covered breast in my mouth, she moans out my name, her hands coming to my head to hold me there.

"More," she pants as my tongue slides underneath the cup of her bra, zeroing in on her nipple. My hand finds its way to her other breast, and I start lightly squeezing, kneading, teasing until her head starts to fall side to the side.

"Oh my God, Dean."

"What do you want to try, baby?" I rumble against her skin. Her bra has a front clasp, which makes my life a lot easier. I flick it open before moving my mouth over to the other side, giving that breast just as much attention as the first.

"I...I don't know," she says, and there's a thread of disappointment that I refuse to let slide. Lifting my head, I kiss her lips softly.

"Then will you trust me to try some things? I want to see what makes you fly, babe."

"Yes. I trust you Dean. Please."

Reaching over to my bedside drawer, I pull out the small black toy and bottle of lubricant I ordered online a week ago.

Call it overly optimistic, but I like to think I'm prepared. And all the research I did said women with injuries like Riley's need extra lube and extra stimulation. And I'm man enough to be perfectly okay with seeing toys in the bedroom as partners, not enemies.

As soon as I turn the device on, Riley's eyes grow wide as saucers.

"Have you ever used one before?" I ask in a low voice as I lightly drag it over the skin of her soft stomach. Her nod is barely there, but I see it. "And where do you like it the best?"

"My nipples," she whispers.

I start to draw small circles around the mounds of her breast, slowly drawing closer and closer to the dusky brown tips. My eyes are trained on Riley's face, watching the waves of pleasure play across her expression. The flush of pink on her chest darkens as I move the vibrator over to the other side.

"Your mouth," Riley moans. "Use your mouth, too."

Fuck, it's hot hearing her ask for what she wants. I waste no time in meeting her request, covering her sensitized skin with the heat of my mouth. I suck her nipple in, releasing it with a pop while somehow maintaining control of the toy on the other nipple.

I switch sides, moving the vibrator to the shallow valley between her breasts as I suck her nipple, swirling my tongue around and around, mimicking the motion I was just doing

with the toy. She starts to cry out, her chest lifting to meet my mouth.

I'm only dimly aware of my own situation — the ache in my cock as it strains against my pants — until, that is, Riley reaches her hand down to brush against me.

“Babe,” I breathe against her skin, my forehead dropping down as I fight for control.

“Can you take these off?”

When I look up, I see nothing but fire burning in her eyes. Not a hint of hesitation or nerves. I climb off the bed and make quick work of removing my pants and socks until I'm standing in just my underwear. Riley's legs are still covered in those crazy-soft leggings she wears, but she's bare from the waist up, and I swear my bed has never looked better than it does with her in it.

She lifts herself up onto her elbows. “Dean, I...I want to touch you.” She bites that damn lower lip, and my thumb reaches out to tug it free. “I want to make you feel good, too.”

“You already do, beautiful.” I climb back on the bed, and my hands find their way to the hem of her pants. I slowly start to slide them down her legs, peeling them away with her panties at the same time until she's naked before me, like some dark-haired goddess. Her legs are slender and pale, and my eyes drink in every inch of her. The trimmed patch of dark hair at the juncture of her thighs the only contrast on her body. The light pink flush on her chest and face. And those beautiful brown eyes watching me closely.

“I don’t know how I got lucky enough to be here with you, but I hope you know how much this means to me.” My voice is hoarse with emotion, emotion that’s choking me inside right now. Things I never thought I would feel so soon after starting to date someone are bubbling up, desperate to come out.

Instead I lay down, stretched out beside Riley, my head propped in one hand. Taking her chin with my other, I turn her face gently and kiss her, trying to infuse it with the words that seem too soon to say. Reaching across her body, I pick up the sleek black toy and turn it back on.

“Let’s try moving this around. I want to experiment and see what turns you on.”

Riley’s head nods so fast, it’s adorable. I draw it down slowly between her breasts, watching her start to writhe under my touch. As I move lower, her reaction lessens, and when I reach the level of her hips, she pauses.

“Can you feel that?”

“Sort of?” she says softly. “But also, not really. It feels as if you’re touching me through a heavy blanket. Like it’s muted or something. I know how intense it should feel, but it just doesn’t.”

“Okay, we’ll keep playing.” I shift my body so that my lips are hovering over her stomach and start to press kisses all over her bare skin as the toy moves lower in slow circles. Her hands come to cup my head, and she lets out a soft moan.

I move lower still until my chin is hovering over the thatch of trimmed hair between her legs. “Can I kiss you here?”

“I won’t feel it,” comes her reply.

“That’s okay, I want to anyway.”

“Okay.”

I start by lightly drawing a line with the vibrator down her pubic bone, and right down the cleft of her sex. Her flesh pulses, but Riley’s face is unchanged, focused on me and what I’m doing. I keep my eyes on hers as I lower my face and press a kiss to the top of her mound. Opening my mouth, I flatten my tongue and swipe it up the length of her, letting her essence coat my mouth with musky sweetness.

I can’t hold back my groan, simply because of the pure ecstasy I’m feeling, finally being with Riley like this. But it isn’t all about me right now. I bring the vibrator up to her clit and draw light, small circles.

“Oh!”

My head jerks up. “Did you feel something?”

“Inside, yes, I think. Wow. Do that again,” she begs.

I repeat the same motion, over and over, and Riley’s head falls back, her chest arching slightly as her hands clutch at my shoulders.

“Oh my God. Dean.”

“Let it happen, babe. Whatever you’re feeling. Don’t fight it.”

I move the toy slightly lower, so it's pulsating right over her entrance as my mouth sucks her clit in again.

"Dean, Dean, Dean!" she chants my name, her voice getting higher and higher. I know she might not fully climax, but the fact that I can still give her this much pleasure is enough to make me start leaking precum in excitement.

"I need you, Dean. I need to touch you." Riley's babbling, but I'm quick to comply. Lifting away from her, I peel off my underwear and move to lie beside her so I can kiss her.

"You have no idea. I didn't think I could even get that close. Oh my God, that was *amazing*," she says in between kissing me sloppily but enthusiastically.

Her small hands wrap around my cock, but I can tell it's a strain for her from this angle given our height difference.

"Babe, it's okay."

"No, I want to," she insists. "I want to feel you." She does some sort of wiggle motion to slide herself down the bed until her head is in line with my chest.

Now it's her lips pressing onto my skin, and I'm torn between what feels good. The familiar sensation of a woman's hands around my cock, or the new experience of a woman's lips on my nipples. The fact that it's Riley's hands, and Riley's lips, only make everything that much more intense.

She takes the beads of precum dripping from me and uses them to moisten her hand as she slides up and down my shaft, slowly turning her hands with the perfect amount of pressure.

“Damn, Ri,” I groan, tangling my hands in her luscious curls and tilting her head up so I can kiss her forehead. “You’re perfect, you know that?”

“I want you inside me.” Her voice is laced with arousal.

Rolling over, I grab the condom I stashed away earlier and roll it on before covering my dick in lube. When I turn back to Riley, she has an impish grin.

“Someone’s ready, I see.”

I pretend to glower at her, but I can’t deny she’s right. “Let’s call it optimistically prepared.”

Her giggle is perfection. And when I line up with her sex, the tip of my cock just barely nudging at her, I pause to take it all in. This amazing woman is trusting me with something so special, so beautiful.

“Tell me if anything doesn’t feel right,” I say in a gravelly voice.

“I will.”

CHAPTER NINE

Riley

Everything feels right. Every single second of tonight, from the moment Dean lifted me out of my wheelchair, has felt right.

And now, as I watch him slowly slide his cock into me, in and out, carefully going deeper every time, I realize something.

I'm in love with him.

This man who has shown me more consideration, more compassion, more respect, and more affection than anyone else in my life outside of my family.

I love him. And when he finally settles all the way inside with a low groan, my heart and mind start singing my love for him so loudly I'm positive he can hear it.

"Are you okay, babe?" he says in a guttural voice, but I'm too consumed by both my newfound emotions and the waves

of exquisitely heady sensations I'm feeling.

"Mmhmm," I say dreamily, my hands traveling down the muscular expanse of his back to the globes of his tight butt. "I'm great."

His low chuckle sends a shiver through me. I notice him start to move, and even though I can't actually feel him penetrating me, I can, somewhat, feel him inside. Some sort of neuro pathway is connecting the sensations from below my waist to my brain, and the pleasure I'm feeling is undeniable.

It doesn't matter that my legs don't work. It doesn't matter that I can't actively participate as much as I wish I could. It doesn't matter that I don't think I can properly orgasm.

All that matters is that Dean and I are connected — intimately connected — and the desire, pleasure, and pure freaking happiness I'm feeling is echoed back at me from him, over and over.

His movements start to become more choppy as he starts to grunt in my ear. "Riley. Babe. Shit, I'm gonna come."

"Yes," I moan in response, grabbing his biceps and just holding on. He thrusts a few more times, then stills, my name a prayer on his lips before he withdraws slowly and lowers himself to my side.

"I'm sorry you didn't..."

"No, no, no," I interrupt with my finger on his lips. "That might never happen, Dean. And I'm okay. I'm more than okay."

I'm flying high, perfectly happy and gosh, I don't know. I'm feeling all the things right now."

He nuzzles in between my neck and shoulder and kisses the spot where my pulse is beating wildly. "Me too. All the things."

Dean lifts himself away and walks into the en suite bathroom. I hear him doing whatever it is guys do after sex and take the minute alone to catalogue my body. No dizziness, that's good. Heart rate is fast, which is to be expected. Nothing hurts, and I don't think I'm in any bad positions. Yay. But then I glance down, and I guess I make a sound of dismay at the flecks of blood I see there.

"It's normal when it's your first time, babe."

I look up to see Dean coming back to the bed, a wet cloth in hand.

"May I?" he asks, gesturing between my legs. I nod, suddenly embarrassed. But as always, Dean is nothing but gentle and respectful as he cleans me up. When he's done, he tosses the cloth toward the bathroom door and stretches out beside me, pulling the blanket up from the bottom of the bed to cover us.

"How do you feel?" he asks, and I turn my head to face him.

"Incredible."

Dean's hand comes up to stroke my hair. He's obsessed with it, but I don't mind at all. It feels so good to have him play with it and run his fingers through it.

“You know what would feel even better?” I murmur, giving him a cheeky smile.

“What?”

“If you’d help me get in position so we can cuddle.”

“Say no more.”

Dean helps me roll onto my side so my head is cushioned on his arm. Lifting my top leg, he drapes it over his, adjusting it until I let out a soft sigh of contentment.

“Good?”

“Great.”

His lips find the top of my head. “Thank you, beautiful.”

“Shouldn’t that be my line?” I tilt my head up to look at him, my hand coming up to stroke his cheek.

“Nah. You gave me a gift. And I will always treasure that. Just like I’ll always treasure you.” His hand takes mine, and he lifts it so he can press a kiss to my palm. “I love you, Riley.”

I feel my eyes brim with happy tears as I look at the man who I just know will be by my side forever.

“I love you, too.”

Seduction and Song

Julia Jarrett

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CHAPTER ONE

Emma

Sweet Caroline...bah bah bah....

My head bounces from side to side as those familiar lyrics fill the air. The music comes from a cover band currently performing on the stage set up at one end of the large grassy field that is home to the Dogwood Cove summer solstice festival. So far that stage has hosted a kids' dance school performance, an honest-to-God barber shop quartet, and now this band from Victoria who has played all kinds of covers, from U2, to Neil Diamond, to Garth Brooks.

The small-town fair is everything I imagined it would be when my best friend Allie invited me to come on vacation with her for a weekend on Vancouver Island, just off the West Coast of Canada. Kids are running around with balloons and cotton candy, music and laughter fills the air, and the unmistakable aroma of fried food is making my mouth water.

Allie taps me on the shoulder, leaning in so I can hear her over the music.

“I’m gonna grab a lemonade, you want anything?”

“No, I’m going to find something a little stronger than lemonade,” I reply.

“Yeah, they would make a killing if they started spiking that stuff.”

I snort at Allie’s comment, but she’s not wrong. We walk together over to where all of the food vendors are set up, and she heads toward the iconic yellow stand that sells the lemonade she’s after. Taking a quick look up and down the row of stalls, I see the logo for one of my favourite breweries. Making my way over to the tent, I walk over to the table and greet the man standing behind it with a smile.

“One Gobsmack Citrus IPA please,” I ask, taking the plastic cup filled with beer when it’s handed to me. I cast a glance around for Allie and notice she’s still in line for her lemonade, so I turn back to the stage. Just then, the cover band switches gears and starts to play a song that brings up all kinds of memories. Memories of stolen kisses at a packed bar, strong hands gripping my ass tightly, and a cocky smile that I can’t escape seeing everywhere. After all, it does belong to the man Rolling Stone magazine recently declared the hottest man on the country music scene.

Nash Parker.

The best thing to come out of Canada since Ryan Reynolds.

I had a backstage pass to his show at the Calgary Stampede two years ago, thanks to some graphic design work I had done for one of the sponsors of the event. Before that night, Nash was nothing more than a hot celebrity to me. I wouldn't have bothered going backstage except my co-worker at the time begged me to get his autograph for her. Then he looked at me, and I swear the second our eyes met, electricity crackled between us. I remember the surreal feeling when he pulled me in close and whispered that one word to me, *stay*. Curiosity and no small amount of lustful attraction made me hang around until the meet and greet was over. Then Nash Parker surprised the hell out of me by asking if I wanted to go dancing. He took me to one of the saloons set up at the fair, his security guards following along discretely, and he spun me around the dance floor, two-stepping for hours. When the bar closed, it was clear neither of us wanted the night to end, which is how I ended up in his bed, in his hotel room, having the hottest sex of my life.

We must have fallen asleep at some point, because in the middle of the night, when I woke up sprawled on top of him, I panicked. I was fresh off a bad breakup and only looking to have some fun that weekend. Just not the kind of fun that ends with me getting caught sleeping with a celebrity. I snuck out at some ungodly hour of the early morning, doing a walk of shame from his hotel room that no one saw but the clerk at the front desk. I went home and never told a soul about any of it.

But I haven't since experienced the same kind of connection we had that night. It was more intense than anything I have

ever felt before. Which is why I've spent two years secretly pining over him, watching him in the media and remembering the feel of his hands on me and the sound of his voice whispering dirty things in my ear.

Of course, over the years he managed to get even hotter, letting his hair get a little bit longer and growing the perfect amount of scruff. The man can wear a pair of Wranglers and a tight T-shirt better than anyone I have ever seen. And when he opens his mouth to sing, pure sex pours out. It's a good thing I haven't had the opportunity to see him perform in person again; who knows what my reaction would be.

Unfortunately, the guy on stage might be singing a Nash Parker song, but he is definitely not on the same level in terms of talent. I can't hold back a wince when he tries to hit one of the lower notes and fails miserably.

“Think I should go up there and put him out of his misery?”

The voice that haunts my dreams rumbles in my ear, making shivers dance up and down my spine. I whirl around, gasping in surprise.

“Nash? What are you...why...I mean...you're here.”

He nods, and a slow, easy smile stretches over the face that I have memorized.

“Hey, Emma.”

Everything around us fades into a blur as I drink in the sight of him, standing in front of me wearing a faded ball cap and aviator sunglasses. A poor attempt at a disguise in my opinion,

but maybe it's working, because no one else around us seems aware of the fact that the sexiest country singer of the year is standing right here.

“Good grief, that line was huge,” Allie moans. I jump, not realizing she had walked up to us. “Oh my God, you're Nash Parker!” I wince as her shriek pierces my ear.

The smile on Nash's face morphs into something else, something that seems less authentic and more practiced. He sticks out his hand to shake Allie's. “Nice to meet you.”

It's totally irrational, but I want my best friend to get lost so I can see if his smile changes when it's just the two of us.

“Allie, don't you want to go and watch the concert?” All she does is nod, without even looking my way. She's fixated on Nash, not that I blame her. He's worth fixating on.

“Allie.” I say her name louder, and finally her eyes come to meet mine. “Why don't you go and get our seats, I'll be there in a minute, okay?”

Thankfully, our best friend intuition kicks in and I see her eyes widen in understanding. Of course, then they immediately narrow and I know I'm going to have a lot to answer for.

“Yeah. Sure. Our seats.” Allie looks longingly at Nash again but thankfully his eyes are fixed firmly on me. Did I say thankfully? I meant...for some insane reason, I give Allie a gentle shove, and she finally walks away, leaving Nash and I alone again.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.” He puts his hands in his pockets and glances down. “Hell, I didn’t expect to *ever* see you again.” It’s crazy, but I think I detect a thread of hurt in his voice.

“That makes two of us,” I blurt out.

His eyes darken into pools of molten chocolate. I guess that answers the question of whether he remembers our night together or not. Before I can answer, some guy wearing dress pants and a collared shirt, making him look so ridiculously out of place at the small-town festival, walks up to us.

“Nash, buddy, we gotta move. You’re on in fifteen.”

Nash frowns at the man before looking back to me. “Are you going to be around after the concert?”

“Yes...” Understanding dawns on me in that second as I see stagehands taking equipment on and off the stage. “Wait. Are *you* performing?”

His boyish grin is equal parts charming, adorable, and hot. “Yeah. My drummer is buddies with the mayor of this town and set it up as a small gig for me. No one knows it’s me, though. We weren’t sure we could make it, so the organizers decided to leave it a mystery. Shhh.” He puts his index finger to his full lips and winks, and I pretty much melt. “Can I see you after?”

It takes everything in me not to let my jaw drop open at his question. Nash Parker wants to see me again, even though I ran out on him in the middle of the night. Holy. Shit.

“Yeah. I’ll stick around,” I say quietly. His answering smile is everything.

“Awesome. Why don’t you and your friend come up to the VIP section?”

My eyebrows lift in surprise. “The Dogwood Cove Summer Solstice Festival has a VIP section?”

He chuckles at that. “Nah, but I do.” He gestures to the guy wearing dress pants. “Roberto’s my manager. He can show you where to sit.”

The man in question looks up from his phone and gives me a distracted nod. “Yeah. Yeah. Come with me. Nash, buddy, you gotta go.”

Nash actually looks torn, as if staying with me is more tempting than going on stage and performing. The flicker of indecision is gone in an instant, and Nash picks up my hand and presses a kiss to it before saying “I’ll see you later.”

How can four words be so loaded with promise and anticipation...and how can four words make my entire body light up instantaneously? As I watch him walk away, escorted by two huge men who must be bodyguards, I know there’s only one answer. Because the man saying them is the man I haven’t stopped thinking about for two years.

I follow Roberto over toward the seats that are set up for the audience. This is definitely a much more intimate venue than what Nash is probably used to, and I smile to myself thinking

about how surprised everyone will be when he comes on stage. Allie sees us and darts up and out of her chair.

“Emma, what the hell. You know Nash Parker? Why did you never tell me this! What is he doing here? He’s so fucking hot. Seriously, Emma, you have some major explaining to do, lady!”

“If you’ll just come with me please,” Roberto interrupts Allie’s ranting. He gestures to a small area near the front where sure enough, I see a few empty chairs.

Allie grabs my arm again and leans in close to whisper. “What is going on?”

“Nash and I...have a past. He wants to talk later, so we’re going to the VIP section to watch him perform.”

“Nash Parker is performing?” she screeches.

Roberto frowns at us as people around us start to murmur and look our way. Guess his secret performance isn’t so secret anymore.

“Ladies. Please.”

I hurry Allie over to the chairs waiting for us, and we sit down.

“I’ll tell you everything, I promise.” And, taking a gulp of my now warm beer, I lean over and in a hurried whisper I fill her in on the concert two years ago, and my night with Nash. When I tell her how I left in the middle of the night, Allie gasps and slaps my arm.

“You’re kidding me. What the hell, Emma! You walked out on Nash Parker? A *naked* Nash Parker?”

I wince at the memory. “Not my finest moment. But in my defense, I was lost back then. Remember? I had just discovered Jeremy was cheating, got fired from my job thanks to cutbacks, and was moving across the country to start over. I had no idea what I was doing with my life, so realizing I had a one-night stand with a freaking superstar made me panic.”

Allie huffs out a loud sigh and slumps down in her seat. “And now he’s here, and he wants to talk to you.”

I nod. “He is and he does.”

“If you end up in bed with him again, no running away. Got it?”

The very thought of being with Nash again gives me a delicious shiver. “Got it.”

Just then the stage lights dim, and a voice comes over the speaker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mayor Monroe here with a surprise for all of you. Headlining tonight’s Summer Solstice Festival is none other than — Mister Nash Parker!”

The small but enthusiastic crowd bursts into loud cheers as the lights go up, and there he is. Standing on the stage, a guitar strapped across his chest and his hat now on backwards. He grins at the crowd before looking down at me and winking.

“Hello, Dogwood Cove. Thanks for having me here tonight. It’s my pleasure to perform for y’all. I’m gonna do things a

little differently and open with a song that isn't one of my own. This is by my good buddy Jake Owen, and it's for one special person out there tonight. I never expected to see her again. She's *the one who got away*."

He starts to sing, and my heart starts racing.

"Emma," Allie murmurs.

"I know."

CHAPTER TWO

Nash

The entire time I'm singing I have to force myself not to stare at Emma. I still can't believe she's here. In Dogwood Cove. Of all the fucking coincidences. It's not much of an exaggeration to call her the one that got away. For two years I've wondered what went wrong, why she left, and if I would ever see her again.

Never in a million years did I think when I agreed to Archer's request that we play for his buddy Ethan's town fair that I would see her. Emma. I don't even know her fucking last name, but I know I need her in my life, and in my bed again. Those few hours we spent together made me feel more alive than anything. Alive as Nash, the man, not Nash, the musician.

When I finally finish my set, encore and everything, I hustle my ass off the stage and bypass Roberto, heading straight for where she was sitting. When I see her, my soul exhales in relief. She didn't leave. She's here. As my footsteps draw me

closer, I catalogue every inch of her. Her deep, dark brown hair that's longer now, hitting well below her shoulders. Her heart-shaped face that was so full of expression, and still is from what I can tell. Her body, the curves that I lost myself in for hours. I can't see the tattoo that covers her ribs, but I remember it. The peacock feather with all of its vibrant colours. I spent a long time tracing every line with my tongue.

“Nash, we need to get you—”

I wave off Roberto. We've been working together for several years now and I know he means well. But I don't give a flying fuck what he wants me to do right now. I need to see Emma.

When she sees me, she stands up, her hands fidgeting in front of her. I reach out and take them in my own, lifting her knuckles so I can kiss them. Her face softens into a smile.

“You were amazing up there,” she says softly.

Her praise means a lot to me, for reasons I can't explain. “Thanks.”

“Best surprise concert I've ever been to,” her friend adds in. I turn to the other woman, with a camera-ready smile. “Thanks, Allie. Listen, could I steal Emma for the evening? I really want to catch up with her.”

“You certainly can. Go, Emma, I'll see you later. Or not. Maybe tomorrow. Whenever. Just be good, and safe, and yeah, I'm leaving now.”

I watch as Allie leans in and whispers something that makes Emma blush. The two friends hug, then Allie walks away and

I'm alone with Emma again, at last. Well, not really alone. Emma's eyes dart around at the growing crowd just beyond my security guards.

"Can we go somewhere a little more private?" she asks. I can't hold back a startled laugh.

"Oh my God. I totally didn't mean it like *that*." A blush is covering her cheeks, and I squeeze her hand that is still holding mine.

"It's okay. I was thinking the same thing but couldn't figure out how to say it without sounding sleazy," I respond, then when her blush darkens, I lean in closer. "Not that I wouldn't be interested in that kind of private time, but I really do want to talk to you some more as well."

A soft gasp, barely audible except for the fact that our faces are almost touching, escapes her.

"Let's go." Her voice is breathless with anticipation, and I grin at her as we turn toward the parking lot where I know a car and driver is waiting for me. Unfortunately, we don't get far before Roberto stops us.

"Nash, you were going to do a small meet and greet back at the stage," he says.

Shit. I've never once missed an event, especially not if it involves my fans. They're the only reason I get to do the job I love and sing every night. I've always put my career first. Always. But I've never had anything in my life I've wanted as

much as that. Until now, a second chance with Emma suddenly in front of me.

“Give me two minutes, ‘Berto, and I’ll be there.” I turn my back to him, my attention on the woman in front of me. The woman I seriously don’t want to disappear again. Acting on impulse, I reach into my pocket and pull out the key card for my room at a hotel in the neighbouring town.

“I’m sorry, but I did agree to do a quick thing with the fans. Will you go to the hotel and wait for me? Please?”

Emma’s eyes widen. “Are you sure?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” I say firmly. After a second, she nods and takes the key card from me. I walk her over to the car that was meant to take me back to the hotel and instruct the driver to take Emma there instead.

She slides into the backseat, and I lean down to kiss her cheek. “Room 425. I’ll be as fast as I can,” I whisper, before pressing one final kiss to her soft skin.

I watch the car pull away then force my head back into the game. I head to the stage where my band and the group of fans are waiting for me. I ignore the curious looks on the guys’ faces, knowing I’ll have to explain why I bolted right after the show with a woman they probably don’t remember.

Archer’s friend, the mayor of Dogwood Cove, walks up and says “Mister Parker, thank you for coming today.”

“Ethan, please, call me Nash. And it was our pleasure.”

We exchange pleasantries for a minute, then I spend the next hour meeting people, taking pictures, and signing autographs. I've never been so grateful for a small crowd of fans before, but it still doesn't feel soon enough before we're down to the last couple of people.

As soon as we're done, I'm dying with anticipation to get out of there. I give my bandmates a quick wave, not missing Roberto's meaningful look when he reminds me of our schedule tomorrow.

"Don't forget we're due down in Victoria at noon tomorrow for a radio interview, and a photo shoot for Celeb Magazine, then the float plane to Vancouver leaves at four so you can be in the city in time for the Saints Awards."

I stifle a groan. Seeing Emma again made me forget how packed our schedule is.

"Right. Fine. But listen, can you move things around and get me some time off, a week maybe?"

He looks at me closely, his eyes narrowed. "What's up with the girl, Nash?"

I don't know how to tell him; hell, I don't even understand it myself. All I know is I need more time with Emma. I need to know what this is between us, and what it can become.

"She's...special. Can you get me the time or not?" I ask gruffly.

Roberto nods. "Yeah. I'll get you a week off when I can."

I clap my hand to his shoulder. “You’re the best, man. Thanks.”

He shrugs off my hand, and rolls his eyes with a smirk. “Just keep payin’ me the big bucks and we’ll be fine.”

I take off to where my miracle worker of a manager has a car waiting for me and climb inside. When I go to open my phone, intent on sending Emma a message, I realize something. I don’t even have her number.

With a chuckle, I lean back against the cool leather car seat. It’s insane that I feel so strongly about someone I know so little about.

But I’m going to change that.

CHAPTER THREE

Emma

This is crazy. Completely fucking crazy. How did I go from wandering around a summer festival to sitting in the back seat of an Escalade being driven to Nash Parker's hotel? I pull out my phone and call Allie to check in.

“Why the hell are you phoning me? You should be naked by now.”

I snort with laughter. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not. He had to do a meet and greet. I'm...I'm in a car, going back to his hotel room.”

Nothing but silence comes down the line for half a minute, then my best friend lets out a loud whoop of excitement. “Get it, girl!

When she settles down, we talk for a few more minutes until the car pulls up at the hotel in the nearby town of Westport.

“Oh my God, I’m at the hotel. Am I really doing this?” I bite my lip as I’m suddenly filled with nerves.

“Yes, you are. You are Emma Walters. You are confident, strong, and sexy as fuck. And Nash Parker wants *you*. Stop freaking out, enjoy your second one-night stand with a hot musician and call me in the morning.”

My lips turn up at the way she describes mine and Nash’s relationship. But at almost the exact same moment my heart drops. Is that all this is? Another one-night stand, and nothing more?

“And Emma, don’t lose your heart to this guy just because he gives good orgasms, okay?”

Allie’s intuition is impressive. She’s always been able to read me, apparently even from a distance.

“I won’t. I can’t. He’s a world-famous musician and I’m a self-employed graphic designer. Our lives are so different, there’s no way this could ever work as anything more than some crazy fling.”

No way. I just hope it’s not hard to remember this when he’s standing in front of me, all six feet of him with that tousled hair, chiseled jaw, and sexy smoulder.

“Okay, I’m going in.”

We say goodbye and I put my phone into my purse. Then I get out and walk inside the hotel lobby. I can see why he’s staying here and not at the motel in Dogwood Cove where

Allie and I have a room. The motel is cute, don't get me wrong. But it's not exactly fit for a star.

When I get upstairs and open the door to Nash's suite, the sight takes my breath away. There's opulent, and then there's *opulent*.

A massive bed sits in the center of the room, and a wall of windows covers one side, overlooking the hillside. In front of the window is a huge soaker tub, and next to that a sitting area, where I can see a sweater that I assume belongs to Nash draped over one chair. The bed is made, and a suitcase is sitting beside it. A faint smell permeates the air; it's fresh and spicy. *Nash*. I remember that scent from our night together and my body shivers in response.

What the hell am I meant to do now? It dawns on me that I have no clue how long he'll be. And even though he said he doesn't have any expectations of what we'll do tonight, I know that's not true for me. I want him. I never stopped wanting him, and in two years I haven't had sex that comes even remotely close to what I experienced with Nash. So he had better plan on giving me a few orgasms tonight.

After half an hour scrolling through social media and pacing the room, I wander over to one of the chairs and sink down, staring out at the view. It might sound shallow, but I could get used to this level of luxury.

I'm in the middle of a game of Candy Crush on my phone, desperately trying to keep myself distracted, when there's a knock at the door. The sound makes me jump, until I

remember that Nash gave me his key card. Walking over to the door, I take a deep breath in and out before opening it.

Nash's eyes meet mine immediately, and I see his handsome face relax into a ridiculously happy smile.

“You're here.”

“Yup.”

In that moment, something shifts inside of me. Seeing him here, in front of me, with no one else around, I'm brought back to our first night together. In between orgasms we talked. Not about anything deeply personal, but enough to make me fall for him as a man, not just a sexy celebrity. And now, by some crazy twist of fate, I've been given another chance with him. A light switch inside of me turns on, and the energy between us changes into something more sensual. The memory of his hands and lips on my body is crystal clear, and I start to feel an ache between my legs. He closes the small distance between us, and when he reaches me, his finger ghosts across my cheek, drawing a sigh of pleasure from my lips. He leans in close, and I feel his hot breath against my ear.

“Don't leave me tonight, okay?”

My heart cracks open at the vulnerability behind his words. But all I can do is nod, because his lips are tracing a line down from my ear, across my jawline, and down my neck. My hands come up to twist in his hair, but he pulls back.

“Emma, I want to talk. I swear I didn't ask you to come here for sex,” he rasps. “Well, not *just* for sex.” The wicked smirk

he gives me makes my heart pound. I need him. I pull his head down to meet mine, and for the first time in two years, we kiss. It's just as explosive as I remember. His lips are soft, but they press firmly against mine. He tastes like mint, and our tongues slide against each other's as he moves his hand down to cup my ass. Lust and arousal thunders through me at his touch.

“Can we talk later?” I hear the words fall out of me, and I don't care how they make me sound. I need him. Now. His eyes search mine, only for a second, before his hands go to the bottom of my shirt, and he lifts it up and over my head, then swiftly pulls his off as well. I drink in the sight of his bare torso greedily, my eyes travelling the planes of muscle that, if anything, are sharper and more defined than I remember. His palm covers my tattoo and I look up to see him staring at me hungrily.

“Nash,” I murmur, letting my eyes fall closed as his hands travel up my sides to cup my face. His mouth comes down over top of my own, and we kiss again, slower this time but no less deep.

“Emma, I want you. I want all of you tonight.”

“Yes,” I breathe.

He drops down to the floor in front of me and brings his hands back to my ass. When he goes to unbutton my shorts, sliding them down my legs, taking my panties with them, all thoughts are erased by a wave of pure arousal.

“God you smell good.” The rumble of his voice sends a puff of warm air against my legs. He helps me step out of my clothes and then I’m bare to him. At the first swipe of his tongue on my clit, I groan, and my eyes fall closed. His talented mouth can do more than just sing hit songs. Thank God there’s a wall behind me, because when he lifts one of my legs over his shoulder, I sag against it, my other leg trembling from the force of the climax I can already feel thundering toward me. This I remember from last time. Nash commands my body with the same skill and passion that he plays guitar.

My pants turn to moans and before I know it, I’m crying out his name and praying no one is walking down the hall at this moment, because there is no goddamn way that I can be quiet. When I finally stop shuddering from the intensity of my orgasm, Nash stands up, licking his lips. Why the fuck is that so hot? Then he picks me up and carries me over to the bed. I don’t even have time to protest being carried like a child before he tosses me onto the soft mattress and comes down right over top of me, so that his hips are pressed firmly against mine. The roughness of his jeans is an exquisite pain against my still throbbing clit, and I can feel the rock hard impression of his dick straining against the denim.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I say, even as I rub myself against him.

“So are you,” he growls in return before sliding his hand underneath me and flicking open my bra with an impressively quick move. His mouth dives down and captures my nipple between his teeth. The gentle scrape across my sensitive skin

makes me gasp, but when he sucks deeply, I start moaning his name again. My hands move frantically to the waistband of his jeans, trying desperately to push them down. It's impossible without undoing them, so I push at his hips to get him to lift up just enough so I can take care of that. His mouth keeps torturing me, teasing each nipple into a stiff bud.

It should be impossible to climax again so quickly after the first time, but I clearly forgot exactly how powerful our sexual chemistry is. Because there's no denying my body's reaction to every single thing he's doing to me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nash

She tastes like heaven, moves like a seductress, and looks a fucking goddess. I lift my head, needing to catch my breath. Whatever I did to deserve another chance to be with this woman, thank fuck for it.

I stand up and take my pants off the rest of the way, then freeze when I remember one crucial thing.

“Shit. Emma, I don’t have a condom.”

She lifts up on her elbows and looks at me, her expression skeptical but not judgmental.

“Really? Isn’t that like, against the rock star rule book or something?”

I chuckle at her comment, even as my mind starts thinking ahead to how I can get some discretely delivered to the room. As I’m reaching for my phone to text Roberto, Emma climbs out of bed. I drop my phone and watch as she goes to her

purse, and pulls out a familiar foil packet, waving it at me triumphantly.

“Allie figured she and I should be ready for anything this weekend.” She shrugs. “I didn’t plan on getting laid, but I knew better than to argue with her.”

As soon as she’s within reach, I grab her around the hips and toss her back down on the bed. “Allie is officially my favourite person,” I growl, bending down to kiss her. Then I pull back. Something about Emma makes me want to be open and honest. My voice is sober when I continue. “The truth is, I don’t sleep around. Finding you was the best fucking surprise I’ve had in a long time, but a surprise I’m not prepared for.”

“I guess Allie knew something we didn’t know,” she says with a small smirk.

“And what was that?” I ask.

“Always be prepared.”

I laugh, and Emma’s answering giggle is low and sultry as she makes quick work of opening the packet and rolling the latex over my cock.

“Now, where were we?” she purrs.

I lay down on my back and lift her over my hips. When she takes me in her hands, and lifts up to line me up with her entrance, I find myself holding my breath in anticipation. She slides down on me agonizingly slow, and my breath comes out in a low groan of pleasure.

“Fuck, you feel so good inside me, Nash.”

Those filthy words coming from her beautiful mouth send me into overdrive. My fingers dig into her luscious hips as I guide her up and down my length, varying speed and tempo with my own hips thrusting up underneath her as well. Emma's hands come to my chest, her fingertips digging in. She drops her head forward with a moan and her hair falls around us in a silky curtain.

I can feel myself growing impossibly harder inside of her tight, wet heat and try to stave off my release. There's no way I'm coming until she does again. I move one hand to her clit, circling it with my thumb. Judging by the sounds she makes, she's close. She leans back, moving her hands to rest behind her on my legs, and arches her hips and chest upward. I stare greedily at her tits as they bounce with every movement.

"You are the hottest fucking woman I have ever seen." I reach a hand up and cup one of her breasts, rolling her nipple between my fingers, watching her face to see the reaction.

"I'm gonna come, Nash. God, I'm gonna come so hard," Emma moans. Her head is tossed back and her face is pure ecstasy. She chants my name, a whisper at first, growing in volume as she slams down on me harder and harder. Our movements become frenzied and we both lose control, shooting off into our orgasms within seconds of each other.

Emma collapses down onto my chest, my dick sliding out of her. She feels good in my arms, in my bed. Like she belongs here. And that sends me into a weird spiral of unfamiliar emotions. I've never felt this way with a woman, and it's

freaking me out a bit. Eventually she rolls off of me and onto her back with a contented sigh.

“Wow. That was, umm, that was amazing.”

I let out a low chuckle. “I could say the same, baby. That was incredible.”

Emma’s quiet for a moment, and I watch her tug her lip between her teeth and a small frown furrow between her brows. Just as I’m about to reach out and smooth it with my fingers, she rolls over onto her side.

“So.”

As soon as that one word leaves her luscious mouth, I know she’s starting to think about leaving. And there is no fucking way I’m letting that happen again. Not yet.

“I’m starved,” I announce. “Want to order room service?”

Her eyes widen briefly. “Umm, sure. I could eat.” She still sounds uncertain, but at least she isn’t leaving.

“Why don’t you look at the options while I clean up.” I press a quick kiss to her lips, and dart into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. After dealing with the condom, I wash my hands and splash some water on my face. I open the door to see Emma sitting on the bed wearing my T-shirt, looking over the room service menu. I shouldn’t be ready to go again but when she looks up at me and gives me a smile that is the perfect mix of sexy and sweet, I can only think of one thing. *Damn she looks good in my shirt.* Good enough to make me

want to flip her over and take her again. But my stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven't eaten anything in hours.

Food first, fuck later.

We eat burgers, sitting in the chairs over by the massive window in my suite, Emma in my T-shirt and me in my boxer briefs. It's dark out, but the view is still impressive with the lights of the town below shining at us.

"So who is Emma...shit, I don't even know your last name," I laugh to myself at my attempt at conversation.

"Oh, wow, yeah I guess you don't," her laugh is low and sweet. "Walters. My name is Emma Walters."

I lift her hand to my mouth and press a kiss to the back of it. "Good to know. So, Emma Walters. Tell me everything about you. All I know is you're beautiful, captivating, and completely irresistible. That, and you have a bad habit of disappearing on me." I give her a mock glare, hoping she senses the teasing in my words.

Thankfully, she rolls her eyes and doesn't tug her hand away. "Come on. I doubt you were short on company these last couple of years."

That makes me frown for real. "Emma, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since our first night together."

Her jaw drops open. "Seriously?"

I nod slowly. "When I say you're captivating and irresistible, I mean it. When I woke up that morning to find you gone, I was fucking bummed. I had no way to find you again."

Emma's eyes are brimming with emotion, and the smile she gives me is full of wonder. And a shadow of doubt. It makes me want to be totally honest with her.

“Look, I won't lie, you're right that there are always willing women around. But most of the time, they're only interested in me because I'm famous.” The self-deprecating tone in my voice hopefully downplays just how arrogant my words sound. But she needs to hear the truth. “I've learned the hard way how to tell when a woman wants nothing more than to be able to say she banged a rock star. But with you, it felt different. That's why it hurt when you left.”

She stands up, and walks over to my chair, sitting down on my lap. My arm automatically wraps around her waist, holding her close. “I'm sorry Nash.”

A voice in the back of my head tells me not to be a fool. Not to fall for her after just one night. But having her in my arms, being open and vulnerable like this, it's more intimate than even the orgasms we shared earlier. And that intimacy makes me believe I can trust her.

I consider my next question carefully. “Why did you leave that night?”

She's quiet for a moment and won't meet my eyes.

“You're Nash Parker.”

When she doesn't follow that up with anything else, it stings a little. As if me just being me was reason for her to leave.

“What does that mean?” I ask, working to temper my mounting frustration.

She climbs off my lap and I don't stop her. She goes to stand by the window, looking out at the night sky. “It means you're a superstar, famous all around the world. I design logos for a living and have never traveled outside of North America. Our lives are so different. And,” Emma lets out a long breath. “And, I panicked.” She shrugs her shoulders, and I realize that's all the answer I'm going to get tonight. I don't like it, but for now, it'll have to do.

“For the record, I might be Nash Parker, but I'm also just Nash. A guy who happens to really like you.”

Emma looks at me for a long moment, and I feel her gaze stripping me bare. I can only hope she's seeing the truth in my words. She must, because eventually she walks back over and straddles my legs, bringing her heat close to my dick, two thin layers of fabric separating us. We kiss and she grinds down on me, until we're both breathing heavily.

“We might have to get creative. I only had one condom,” she murmurs as she sucks on my earlobe.

“I'll send my guys out for some.”

She leans back and slaps my chest. “No, you will not. I'll go. Don't make them get out of bed this late.” She climbs off my lap and to my dismay, walks over to her shorts, pulling them on.

“Seriously, Emma, it's their job.”

The look she gives me makes me wince. “It’s their job to get you condoms?”

“Okay, well, not exactly. But we could have the concierge send them up.” I hope she can’t hear how desperate I am to keep her with me.

“And have it all over the media tomorrow?” she fires back. Damn it. She’s got a point. I try to keep a low profile when it comes to women ever since some bad publicity, courtesy of a fling a while back.

I sigh dramatically, but reach for my wallet and hand her some cash. No way am I letting her pay for what we need. “You better come back quickly, baby,” I say with mock seriousness.

Emma rolls her eyes at the money I’m holding out and ignores it. Instead, she walks over to the table, tears off a piece of paper and scribbles something down on it. Then she walks back to where I’m still standing by the window, and presses it into my hand, kissing my knuckles after she folds them over.

“Text me if you think of anything else we might need.”

With a wink, she turns and leaves. I wait until the door closes behind her before opening the paper and reading the note.

604-555-1313.

Be naked when I get back.

Xoxo Emma

I quickly grab my phone and type out a message to her.

NASH: Make sure you get the extra-large pack. And maybe some champagne that I can lick off your body.

I hesitate for a second before pressing send. Her reply is almost instant.

EMMA: Jesus, Nash. It's hard to walk normally when my panties are this wet.

NASH: Hurry up and I'll take care of that for you.

EMMA: You better.

Holy hell, this woman. She's fucking perfect. And when she returns half an hour later, I show her just how perfect I think she is, three more times.

When I wake up the next morning, the bed beside me is empty. *Not again.* For a few seconds I panic, then I hear the shower turn on in the bathroom, and a soft humming comes from the bathroom. Not just any humming, but the song I sang for Emma last night. Except this time, she isn't the one that got away. She's still here.

Grinning, I get out of bed and walk to the bathroom. When I pull the shower curtain back, her eyes open and she gives me a seductive smile that has my dick turning from a morning semi to fully erect and ready to go. Thank fuck I grabbed a condom on my way from the bedroom.

"Mind if I join you?" I say, the words coming out as a low growl, not waiting for her answer before stepping into the shower with her. She backs up and I step forward, crowding

her against the shower wall so I can kiss her. Mid-kiss, she pushes on my shoulders and we spin around so that now I'm against the wall. It takes me a minute to realize her intentions, but when Emma drops to her knees and takes my cock in her hand, I catch on quickly.

“Baby, you don't have to—”

“I know I don't have to; I want to.”

Then she takes me in her mouth, sucking me in deep. I curse and grab her head, not forcing anything, just needing to anchor myself against the overwhelming pleasure coursing through my body. She licks and sucks up and down, over and over, until my abs contract under the pressure of trying to stave off my release.

“Emma. Oh fuck. Emma stop, I don't want to come in your mouth.” I pull back, and she releases my dick with a pop. I haul her up and into my arms and capture her mouth with mine, not even caring that she tastes slightly salty and musky.

“You make me crazy,” I whisper between kisses.

“Same.”

Over the sound of the water, I hear a pounding on the door to the hotel room.

“Expecting someone?” Emma asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Fuck, no. Think we can ignore them?”

Before she can answer, I hear the unmistakable voice of my manager, coming from inside the goddamn room. I forgot he

always has a key to my room.

“Nash? Get out here. Dressed, preferably.”

Emma squeaks in surprise. “Shit,” I swear, leaping out of the shower so fast it’s a miracle I don’t fall. “Hang on, man. What the fuck are you doing here so early?” I yell through the closed bathroom door.

I wrap a towel around my waist and hurry out of the bathroom, leaving Emma in the shower. Of course, with her clothes strewn around the room, it’s no secret that I’m not alone. Not to mention Roberto helped get her here last night. Obviously, he has to know what’s going on.

“Look buddy, sorry to interrupt your fun, but we’ve gotta go. The station called and they pushed your interview to eleven. We have to leave in twenty minutes for Victoria.”

“Fuck.”

“I know. You gotta say goodbye to the girl and pack up. Meet me downstairs pronto.”

“Okay. Yeah. I’ll be there in a minute.” I run my hands through my wet hair, trying frantically to figure out what to do.

Once the door closes behind him, I hear the bathroom door open slowly.

“Is he gone?” Emma says quietly.

I turn with a frown. “Yeah, baby. He’s gone. I’m so sorry about that.”

She shrugs, but I see that she's disappointed. I am, too. I figured we still had time to figure things out. Instead, all I can do is watch as she gathers her clothes and pulls them on. In no time, she's dressed, while I'm still standing like an idiot in a towel. She walks over until she's standing in front of me. But when I reach for her hand, she flinches, and pulls back.

"This was fun," she whispers, her eyes downcast.

What the fuck — fun? Part of me can't believe what I'm hearing, the other, more cynical part is telling me that's what I get for trusting a woman again. Unfortunately, I have no time to try and figure out what the fuck is going on because if I'm not downstairs soon, Roberto will be back up here hounding me. So I go into self-preservation mode and give her what I call my media smile. "Yeah, it was fun."

When she eventually looks up at me, I hate the sadness I see in her eyes. But I have no idea what to do about it, so I take a step back. Then I watch as the woman of my dreams walks away from me for a second time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emma

This is not how I imagined our morning turning out. Me sneaking out of his room, not making eye contact with Roberto or anyone else. Once I'm outside, I send a text to Allie letting her know I'm on my way back to the motel. She doesn't respond right away, and I'm glad. I don't think I could handle explaining anything to her just yet. I decide to walk around for a while before figuring out a way to get to Dogwood Cove. I head down the street away from the hotel. Part of me keeps foolishly hoping to hear Nash's voice calling me back. Even a text from him would do. But my phone and my surroundings are silent except for the birds, and my loud, opinionated thoughts.

Last night was by far the best night of my life. It wasn't just the sex, but God, was that ever incredible. It was more than that; it was the connection. We talked, not just over dinner but in the dark after our second — or was it third — round of sex. I

cuddled with Nash Parker. We spooned. I fell asleep to his warm breath on my neck, and his legs tangled up in mine. It was...perfect.

And then I left. Again.

I mean, he could have stopped me. I didn't sneak out this time. But he didn't even try. He just agreed with me when I said *it was fun*. Which, in retrospect, was a stupid thing for me to say, but I was beyond overwhelmed. For one blissful night, I managed to forget the differences between us. It didn't matter that he lives his life in the fast lane while I'm content living as a homebody who visits her parents for dinner every Sunday. We were just two people, wrapped up in each other. Having his manager interrupt what was probably going to be the sexiest shower I'll ever have in my life popped the fantasy bubble and brought reality crashing down on me.

A little while later, I find myself somewhere downtown, in the heart of the city. At least I'm guessing that's where I am, based on the tall buildings and busy sidewalks. It dawns on me that I have no clue how to get back to Dogwood Cove, which means I need Allie to come and get me.

A glance at my phone shows me that she hasn't answered my last text, so I decide to call her. Judging by the groggy sound of her voice, she's just waking up.

"Hey sleepyhead, you realize it's after ten, right?" I tease, but even I can tell the words sound hollow.

"Yeah, yeah. Why are you calling me and not having hot sex with the musician?"

I chew on my lip for a second before taking in a deep breath. “He had to go to Victoria for an interview, so I left.”

I hear rustling, which I assume is Allie sitting up in bed. Then her voice yells into my ear. “You left? Again? No wait, he didn’t even make sure you had a way home? What the fuck, Emma, I can’t decide who I’m more upset with — you, or him! Why the hell did you leave? Why did he *let* you leave? I saw the way he was looking at you last night, and that is not the look of a man who would let a woman just leave. I swear you’re both just—”

“Allie, can you just come and pick me up, please?” I interrupt, not wanting to hear her go on any longer about how messed up this all is.

“Fine. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I send her my location and hang up. I know I’ve got at least half an hour until she’s here, so I make my way to a bench in a park across the street.

Forty minutes later, I get a text from Allie saying she’s close by, so I cross the street to the Starbucks and line up and order some coffee and pastries as a thank you to my best friend for driving out to get me. I see her pull up, and hurry over to open the door, only to hear Nash’s voice coming from her car stereo.

“Seriously?” I grumble as I slide in and hand her a coffee.

Allie takes a sip, and shrugs. “He might be an idiot for letting you go again, but it’s a good song.”

I let out a long sigh and turn to face the window.

Allie seems to sense my need for more time to process, because she doesn't make me talk on the drive back to the motel. Once we're in our room, however, that all changes.

"Okay. Spill. What the hell happened?" She sits down on one of the beds cross legged, holding her coffee in one hand and taking a bite out of a muffin with the other. Crumbs spill onto her legs, but she doesn't seem to notice, her attention is so focused on me. I roll my eyes as I go to lay down on the other bed, propping myself against the headboard.

"It's pretty simple. We had an amazing night, then his manager showed up and said he had to leave early. I panicked, I left, and he didn't try to stop me. End of story."

"No."

I look over at her with a raised eyebrow. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"I mean, *no*. That's not how this ends. Not again. Did you get his number?"

I nod, reluctantly, uncertain if I want her knowing that.

"Then let's call him!"

I shake my head emphatically. "No way. I'm not embarrassing myself like that. He's got my number as well. If he wants to get in touch, he will. Besides, did you miss the part where he didn't stop me from leaving?"

Allie comes over to sit beside me and pats my leg. “Girl, you know I love you, but sometimes you’re an idiot. He’s a man. Men are fragile. He probably didn’t realize you wanted to stay and didn’t want to risk his ego by saying anything.”

“What about my fragile ego,” I grumble under my breath. But she’s right. I said *I had fun*. Those are not the words of a woman who wants more from a man than just one night. Those are classic one-night stand words.

“Shit. I screwed up.”

“Now she’s catching on.” Allie climbs off the bed, goes to her side of the room, and begins tossing things into her suitcase.

“What should I do, Allie?”

“I can’t tell you that, girl. You need to decide if you have the guts to call him after you walked out on him again. But decide fast, we have to head to the ferry terminal soon.” She turns back to her packing and I lay back down on my bed.

She’s right. We have to go home to our boring, normal lives. And my second night with Nash Parker will go down in history like the first one— as inspiration for future ménage à moi sessions, and a cool story I pull out at girls night. Minus the filthy details, of course.

Eventually I get up and throw all of my own stuff into a bag, put it in the back of Allie’s car, and we go to the ferry terminal. She doesn’t say another word to me about Nash the

entire journey home but I don't miss the looks she gives me every time I check my phone.

My very silent phone.

CHAPTER SIX

Nash

“What the fuck is wrong with you, man?”

Archer, my drummer, drops his sticks down with a clatter and glares at me. He’s got good reason to be pissed; that’s the third time I’ve fucked up this song in rehearsals. And seeing as it’s one of my most popular singles, and I’ve sung it a thousand times, I shouldn’t be making these mistakes.

I sit down on an amp and look at my band. These guys have been the rock supporting me on this crazy journey since day one. We’ve traveled the world together, performed in front of millions, watched our star rise and rise until it could go no further. Two Grammy’s, another two nominations, one Super Bowl halftime show, countless interviews and award show performances. We’ve done it all, and now I’m acting like a fucking amateur who can’t carry a tune. All because I let Emma walk away from me four weeks ago. Yeah, I’ve been a grumpy asshole for a month now. Thank fuck we aren’t on

tour anymore; at least my mistakes are only in front of the band. That's embarrassing enough.

Eli, who plays bass, walks over and drops to the floor nearby. "You've been a mess for a month, dude. Ever since that show on Vancouver Island."

Archer and Lennox, my guitarist, walk over to join us.

"Is this about that girl you hooked up with?" Archer asks, and I shrug, not really sure what to say, or how much to say. It's not that I'm a guy who hates to talk about feelings, hell, the group of us have been through more breakups and makeups than I can count. We've talked about all kinds of shit. But this is different. Emma is different. And something makes me not want to share that just yet.

"Yeah, it's about her. Sorry guys, I'll pull my head outta my ass and get it together. We're not here to talk shit about women. We're here to practice. I'll pull myself together. Let's run it again."

I stand up and walk back to my mic before I look back at the guys. None of them are buying it, but they know when to let me be. We launch back into the song, and this time I make it through without a mistake. The rest of rehearsal goes a lot better, mostly because I force all thoughts of Emma away into a vault. Can't quite bring myself to lock it and throw away the key, however.

Later that night, at home in the penthouse I purchased a few weeks ago that looks out over the downtown Vancouver skyline, I sit in the dark and crack the door to the vault. I close

my eyes and let memories of Emma wash over me. Her body moving over top of mine, the smell of her hair tickling my nostrils while we slept tangled together, her laugh sounding sweeter than my favourite melody.

She's somewhere out there in the city, and knowing she's close by is a special kind of torture. Our record label has studios in Nashville and in Vancouver, and when it came time to decide where to record our albums, we were unanimous that it had to be here. Something about coming home always brings out the best in us as musicians. Yet for some reason, I never bothered to get a place, content to just stay in hotels. That is, until I learned that Emma lives in the city. Buying this place was probably a rash decision, seeing as I haven't talked to the woman who motivated the purchase in weeks. But I just needed to be close to her, even if I never see her again.

Maybe if I had asked her to stay, I wouldn't be such a pathetic lovesick fool, but I didn't. All because of what she said. *It was fun*. If that's all it was to her, then I sure as fuck am not calling her after all this time. All I would be doing by reaching out is rubbing salt in the wound on my heart. My stupid fucking heart that wanted more. Instead, I'll just keep tormenting myself every time I see a woman with long brown hair walking down the sidewalk.

The next morning, I pull on some clothes, grab a ball cap, and head down the street to a local coffee shop that I discovered the first week I moved in. The staff is cool and they don't treat me any differently just because I'm famous. That's

honestly the best part about being back in Vancouver. It's a lot easier to keep a lower profile up here.

Coffee in hand, I decide to go for a walk down by the beach. It's early enough in the day that it isn't too hot, and the sidewalk isn't crowded with tourists. My phone rings, and when I look down, I see that it's Roberto.

"What's up?" I say as a greeting, tossing my empty coffee cup in a nearby trash can, turning to start walking back to my apartment building.

"Have you been online yet today?"

I stop walking. Nothing good ever comes from that question. "No, why?"

"Because Sierra Sloan decided to share some interesting photos of the two of you. Judging by what I can see in the background, it's from the Rumble Records party last year, but she's trying to make it seem like it was recent."

"Shit." I was a mess at the Rumble party last year. Our record label's annual bash is always a crazy night, with booze overflowing. Last year I overindulged and ended up getting a little too close to one of the label's other artists. Sierra loves the limelight and is known in the industry for doing whatever it takes to get the media to focus on her. If she's sharing those photos where we are both far too drunk and way too handsy, it can only mean one thing. She's craving attention. And with the Rolling Stone cover of me that came out six weeks ago, she clearly thinks she can get some by being associated with me.

“Can you get it pulled? Have her manager issue some sort of retraction statement? This is bullshit, Roberto.”

“I know, I know. I’m trying.” My manager sounds annoyed. I know this kind of crap causes a ton of work for him, but then again, that’s what he’s paid for. “If your drunk ass hadn’t decided to flirt with her last year, this wouldn’t be happening.”

I laugh darkly. “Yeah, well, how was I to know she’d turn out to be a PR nightmare.”

Roberto lets out a dramatic sigh that has me rolling my eyes. “Whatever. I’ll deal with it. Just keep yourself out of the press for a while until it dies down.”

“Got it.”

I hang up the phone and speed up my walk home. My thoughts are fragmented between worrying about what Sierra’s stunt will do to the band’s image and wondering if Emma has seen the photos. Fuck. What if she doesn’t realize the photos are old? What if she thinks I went straight from her and into the arms of Sierra fucking Sloan?

When I get to my apartment, I drop down on my couch and open my web browser. I’ve got a news alert set for my name courtesy of Roberto, so it’s right there, staring at me. Fuck. Those photos are worse than I remember. I look sloppy drunk, which I was, if I remember correctly, and I’m groping Sierra in a way that would make my mother slap me. I cringe, looking at them. Honestly, that night and my behavior is why I don’t drink much anymore.

I toss my phone down and lean back with a groan. What the hell do I do now? Do I text Emma and tell her it's not what it looks like? Would she even care? No. Reaching out now after nothing for an entire month is insane. Her silence must mean she has moved on, and I'm the idiot who hasn't. Time to grow a pair and let her go. There are bigger things to deal with than my nonexistent love life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emma

A few days after we got home, Allie made me promise not to talk about or look at anything related to Nash for a month. I guess she could tell I was still hung up on him, our night together, and whether or not I had made the right decision about not reaching out to him. And even though she had no way of knowing if I stayed true to the promise or not, I did, just to see if cutting myself off cold turkey would help me move on. News flash, it didn't. Not in the least. In fact, if anything, being told *not* to talk about Nash just made me think about him even more.

But now the month has passed, and I can satisfy my morbid curiosity about him without breaking my promise. Which brings me to this low moment in my adult life.

Sitting on my couch in pajama pants and an oversized T-shirt with no bra on, a large glass of wine in one hand and my phone in the other with the web browser open, I'm about to

start a search for his name. I take a large sip of wine, and a very deep breath, and hit enter on google.

Country music singer Nash Parker caught in compromising position with Sierra Sloan.

Sierra Sloan and Nash Parker seen together. Is it love?

Nashville's hottest star and newcomer to the music scene Sierra Sloan attend party together. Sources claim the couple is closer than ever.

What the actual fuck. Photographs accompany each headline; photographs of Nash with another country singer, one I didn't care much for, even before seeing these pictures. In one, his hand is on her ass. In another, they're dancing, and his face is dangerously close to her cleavage as she arches back. Together it paints a pretty clear picture. Nash didn't waste any time finding someone else to hook up with.

Tears blur my vision and I swipe at them angrily. He doesn't deserve that. He's not worth crying over. Except, I thought he was. Or at least could be.

I open up my text messages with Allie and start typing furiously.

EMMA: I want to go out tonight. Let's hit some bars. Get drunk, dance the night away. Anywhere that does NOT play country music.

ALLIE: You googled him.

EMMA: I googled him.

ALLIE: I'm on my way over.

Twenty minutes later, I hear a key in my door and Allie walks in wearing leggings and a hoodie and carrying a bottle of wine and a bag that smells delicious.

“You’re not dressed for the bar,” I say half-heartedly. Truth be told, getting drunk and eating takeout sounds way better.

“Neither are you, so shut up.” She dumps the bag and the bottle on my coffee table, then goes to the kitchen for plates, forks, and a second wine glass.

We eat spicy Chinese food in silence for a few minutes before my best friend since childhood, my sister from another mister, the woman I would die for, calls me out on my bullshit.

“You know, you’re the one who left — twice — if I recall correctly. Can you really blame him for moving on?”

“No,” I answer sullenly. “But he didn’t ask me to stay.”

“And you didn’t call him, and he didn’t text you, and you’re acting like a spoiled brat who had her favourite toy taken away.”

I don’t respond, because that is exactly how I feel. Except he was never mine. How could he be? Still...

“He said I was irresistible. He made me feel special, like we were meant to find each other again.” Out of nowhere, those goddamn tears start again.

“Oh, honey, don’t cry.” Allie wraps her arm around my shoulders and pulls me into her side. “Maybe it’s a mistake.

It's not as if the media gets things right all the time, you could still text him. See what he says."

I shake my head vehemently. "No way. Even if the headlines are exaggerated, look at the photos. I can't reach out to him now. It's been a month. He hasn't tried to call me, and now we know why."

Allie's quiet for a minute. "I'm only going to say one more thing, then we can move on and finish getting drunk on cheap wine and Chinese food. Maybe you shouldn't believe everything you read online. The way he looked at you at the concert, that wasn't a man who only wanted a night of hot sex."

I nod and drink my wine, thinking about what she said. Maybe she's right and the media is blowing the Nash-Sierra thing out of proportion. But I still don't know if I can take the risk of rejection, especially after all this time.

We spend the evening eating, drinking, and catching up on stupid reality shows. Eventually things hit the point where we're throwing popcorn at the TV screen every time someone says something stupid. When the show finishes, there are two empty wine bottles and there is no way Allie can drive home, so she decides to sleep over. I go to the linen closet to pull out sheets and a pillow for her to use on the couch.

My phone starts to vibrate on the coffee table right as I drop everything down on the couch. When I look to see who is calling this late at night, my mouth drops open.

“Oh my God. Allie. He’s calling me.” I hit decline and immediately regret it. “I can’t talk to him. Can I? Wait. Why is he calling me now?” My best friend has an incredibly guilty look on her face, and I narrow my eyes at her. “What did you do?”

“What needed to be done,” she says, blinking her eyes at me somberly.

I look down at my phone and check my text messages. Sure enough, the most recent message was sent to Nash. She must have sent it while I was getting sheets, the sneaky woman.

EMMA: I miss you. I should never have left that morning. Can we talk?

“What the fuck, Allie,” I cry, smacking her in the arm. My phone starts to vibrate again. “Shit, he’s calling again.”

“Answer it, silly!” She starts bouncing up and down on the couch, jostling my arm and almost making me drop the phone. I stand up and walk over to the window, then answer.

“Hi Nash,” I say quietly, biting on my fingernail.

“Emma. Fuck, am I ever glad to hear from you.” His voice washes over me like a soothing wave of sexy warmth.

“Really?” I ask in disbelief. “Then why didn’t you call me sooner?”

A sigh, laced with regret, comes down the line. “Trust me, I’ve asked myself that countless times. Look, can we talk in person? I want to see you.”

“What’s he saying?” Allie’s loud whisper has me waving a hand at her. I can’t concentrate on anything more than what Nash is saying.

“You want to see me?”

He chuckles. “Yeah, baby. I really do. I owe you an apology for everything. I miss you, too, you know.”

For some reason, that makes me angry. “No, Nash. Actually, I don’t know that. You let me walk out the door, and never got in touch with me. You’re a fucking superstar and I’m just me. So why the hell would I know that *you miss me*.” The biting and sarcastic tone in my voice makes Allie wince from her spot on the couch but I don’t care. He deserves to know how I feel.

“Emma, I miss you so goddamn much. Don’t you realize how I felt when you told me you *had fun*? God, I thought our night meant nothing to you. It killed me to watch you leave, but I honestly didn’t know what to do. I’ve been a mess ever since. The guys in the band are ready to kill me because I’m so distracted thinking about you, I keep fucking up in rehearsal.” He pauses, and his voice shifts to a more intimate tone, one laced with affection and emotion deeper than I’m prepared for. One that gives me shivers, remembering him whispering in my ear while sliding his cock into me. “I messed up. I freaked because I thought what we had meant more to me than it did to you. I’m so sorry. Please, let me see you so we can talk.”

I can feel my resolve crumbling with every word he says.

“Okay,” I say quietly. “Are you going to be in Vancouver any time soon?”

He clears his throat. “Ah. Well, that’s the thing. I’m already here.”

I freeze mid-step back to the couch where Allie is still waiting. “What?” I ask incredulously. That was the last thing I expected to hear.

“Yeah, so, I bought an apartment downtown a few weeks ago. The guys and I use a recording studio up here instead of in Nashville, and I figured it made sense to get a place to stay instead of hotels.”

“Rumble Records,” I mumble, remembering what I read in one of the articles about him and the model.

“Right. I’ve been here for a couple of weeks now. I kept thinking about texting you, then I wasn’t sure if you would want me to. Can you believe me when I say I regret that I was too fucking scared?”

I nod, then realize he can’t see that. “Yes.”

“Thank God.” Relief is palpable in his voice. Then, hesitantly, he continues. “Did you...have you seen any news about me lately?”

“You mean you and Sierra Sloan?” I drop down onto the couch beside Allie. “I saw it tonight.”

“Fuck,” he swears. “Emma, those pictures are old. From a party a year ago. It’s the last time I ever got drunk. I don’t

know why she leaked those photos now, but Roberto's working on it. I haven't seen her in months."

I know it's crazy to believe him. I need to be cautious, even though part of me wants to run to him right now, just to feel his arms around me. But I need to see if there's something between us. Which means I have to put on my big girl panties and face him. Looking to my best friend for support, I take a big breath.

"Meet me at Lost Lagoon tomorrow at ten."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nash

I'm awake early. Like, really fucking early, especially considering how hard it was to fall asleep last night. Honestly, I feel like a little kid on Christmas morning, waiting to see what Santa brought.

When Emma's text came through last night, I thought I was hallucinating at first. And when she actually answered my call, it was such a relief to hear her voice again. I don't know how I got lucky enough to earn her forgiveness, or her acceptance of the truth about the Sierra mess, but I'm sure as shit not going to mess up with her again. Today she is going to know, with zero uncertainty, that I want her in my life for a very long time. She's meant to be mine, and somehow, I'm going to get her to see that.

When I get back up to my penthouse after hitting the gym downstairs, I step into the shower and quickly scrub myself clean. With closed eyes turned up to face the spray of hot

water, I open my mind to the memories of showering with Emma. Instantly, my cock starts to harden, remembering the incredible sensation of her mouth on me. I've tried to lock these memories away, but never really could. She's a part of me, under my skin, connected to me, whatever cliché you want to use, she's it. I turn the temperature to cold, get some semblance of control, and then shut off the water. I dress casually and grab my sunglasses and ball cap on the way out the door. Lost Lagoon is a fairly popular tourist stop, but now that it's September, the peak season is over, and I hope it won't be too busy. The last thing I need is to be mobbed by fans when I'm trying to win Emma over.

When I get to the park, I'm early. It's only then I realize we never specified where exactly to meet. There's a path that goes around the lake, so I take off to walk around it, partly to try and rid myself of the excess anticipatory energy coursing through my body, and partly on the off chance that I run into her on the way.

My plan doesn't work, however, and I make it back around to the parking lot without seeing her. But just as I'm contemplating whether or not to text her, the sweetest sound in the world reaches my ears.

“Hi Nash.”

I pivot and see her standing just a few feet away, twisting her hands in front of her. Fuck me, she's even more gorgeous than I remember. Her hair is swept up in a ponytail, her face is clear of makeup and her eyes are shining at me with what I hope is

happiness at seeing me. I stride over and take her hands in mine, lifting them up to my mouth in a move that reminds me of when I first saw her in Dogwood Cove.

“Emma,” I rumble against her skin. “I’m so fucking happy you’re here.”

As soon as I say that, I see the tension release from her body. Her shoulders drop, and a smile curves across her face. I don’t hesitate, pulling her in closer so that her arms go around my waist. My lips dip down to cover hers, softly at first. We take our time, relearning each other. Her hands roam my back, eventually landing on my bare skin underneath my shirt where I feel them branding my soul. I deepen our kiss, letting our tongues tangle together. My focus zeroes in on the feel of her underneath my hands, the quiet sounds she’s making, the way she’s pressing her body against mine.

Eventually I pull back, not because I want to, but because the part of me not driven by arousal knows we have to talk. She deserves to hear my apology again, and to have me beg for another chance.

“Emma, I don’t know how to begin to tell you how much I regret letting you leave. If I could turn back the clock, I would beg you to stay, or to come to Victoria with me; anything to give us more time. I never wanted you to go, I honestly thought seeing you again was a sign that we were meant to explore whatever this insane chemistry between us means. But when you left, I suddenly didn’t know if that chemistry was one sided or not. So I foolishly let my pride stand in the way

of telling you what I really want. I want you, Emma, for a lot longer than just a night.”

When I finish, my heart is beating so loudly I’m surprised she can’t hear it. I stare at her, trying to gauge her reaction. Even though she kissed me back, I need more.

“I’m sorry, too, Nash,” she begins softly. I squeeze her hands in mine, and when I notice she’s trembling, I lead her over to a nearby bench to sit down. “I’m so sorry I left you — twice. The first time, I was overwhelmed from being with *Nash Parker the country music superstar*. The second, I panicked. Because I saw you as so much more than just your singing. What we had felt real, so real. But then Roberto was there, and the way he was talking to you made me question if I was just another notch on your belt.”

I cringe at hearing her blunt assessment of that morning. Roberto isn’t a bad guy, but he’s not exactly tactful, either. “You could never be just another notch, Emma,” I start to reassure her, but she puts her hand up, signalling she isn’t finished.

“I know. And please, believe me when I say *you* never once made me feel that way. I know now, it was all in my head. I would never want you to feel like I was only with you because of who you are. Because honestly? It was the opposite. Your fame and the differences I imagined between us freaked me out. Roberto interrupting us just reinforced all of my insecurities. In that moment that he was talking to you, I

managed to convince myself that all we had was some hot sex and it was time for us to go our separate ways.”

“It was more than just sex for me, Emma. Please, tell me it was more than just sex to you, too.”

I’m cut off by her lips on mine, pressing hard. Her hands are on either side of my face, holding me in place. I grab her hips and it doesn’t even take a second before I’m kissing her back.

“Yes, Nash. It was more than just sex. Although, that sex was freaking fantastic.” She quirks a smile as she slides her hands around to cup the back of my neck before reaching up and kissing me lightly one more time. “I know we probably should talk more; we have a lot to figure out. But it has been a long four weeks and being this close to you again is driving me crazy. So, unless you’re okay with public indecency, I suggest you take me home.”

“Fucking hell, baby,” I growl, taking her hand and pulling her across to the parking lot. I open the passenger door to my SUV and once she’s inside I round the front and climb in beside her. “I’ll drive you back to get your car later.”

“I took the bus,” she says with a grin.

“Perfect. Then I can keep you to myself all weekend.”

“I hope so.”

The short drive back to my building has never taken so long. Every second sitting next to her is torture, because I know that if I touch her now, I won’t be able to hold back. But the second we’re inside the elevator that only goes to my penthouse, I

push her against the wall, and lift her shirt up. Bending down, I cover one of her breasts with my mouth, sucking her nipple through the thin fabric of her bra. She gasps, and her fingers grasp my shoulders tightly. I make my way down, kissing her bare skin, acutely aware that the ride to my apartment is not long and I can get her naked soon.

We crash through the door to my place, and before it has a chance to fully close behind us, our clothes start to come off in a frenzy. But as soon as she's naked in front of me I freeze, my hands on her hips. I take a moment to just look at her, and marvel at the fact that I'm getting a third chance with this stunning woman.

As if she's reading my mind, Emma smiles up at me. "Third time's a charm, right?"

I break out laughing, then sweep her up and into my arms before walking quickly down the hall to my bedroom.

"Third, fourth, fifth, forever baby."

I take her straight through to my en suite before setting her down on her feet in front of my giant shower. I've got plans for the wide stone bench and multiple showerheads.

"Why are we having a shower?" she asks, an adorably confused frown on her face. I kiss between her brows in a gesture that is almost too sweet for the dirty things I plan to do to her.

"Our first shower together didn't end the way I wanted it to. I want a redo."

Her eyes darken with understanding and she steps into the large stall before turning and reaching her hand out to me.

“Sounds good to me.”

I follow her in and immediately crowd her against one wall. The hot water is pounding down on us from all angles and steam quickly fills the air as I kiss her until we're both breathless and panting. I guide her back to the bench, and as soon as she sits down, I drop to my knees. The stone floor is hard on my knees, but any discomfort disappears the second my tongue hits her skin. I lick and swirl and suck her skin, dancing around her clit but never landing on it, until her cries echo, bouncing off the walls of the shower. Her fingers are tangled in my wet hair, tightly enough to sting in a way that turns me on more than I thought it would.

“Nash, please. God, just, please.” Her begging gives way to gasps and moans as I give her what she wants. Two fingers slide in and out of her heat as my mouth closes over her swollen clit. She detonates around me, her legs squeezing my head and her core clenching around my fingers. I keep it up, unrelenting until I feel her body relax. Only then do I kiss my way back up her body, taking a moment to lavish attention on her breasts before I finally reach her mouth. She slides her way up to standing, kissing me deeply.

“That's what I wanted to do last time,” I growl against her mouth. Her eyes are closed but she smiles and tips her head back so I can kiss her neck.

“You better have a condom this time,” she says, her voice sliding over me like silk. I chuckle.

“I do.” Then I thump my head against her shoulder. “But they’re all in the other room. Fuck.”

Her peals of laughter fill the room, and soon I’m laughing, too.

“Seriously, Nash. When are you going to learn to just stash condoms everywhere we might go?” she teases, and I grin at the insinuation behind those words.

“Sorry. How about I make it up to you in the bedroom, and then we can figure out where else in the apartment we need to leave them. I think the process might require some hands-on research.”

“I hope you bought a lot of them.”

Christ, she’s perfect.

CHAPTER NINE

Emma

You never truly realize how blinding camera flashes are until you're faced with a wall of them going off at once.

Stepping out of a limo and into the arms of the man I love never gets old, even after several months of it. Nash's smile is for me and me alone, even if the media is there to capture it. Tonight is the American Music Awards and Nash was nominated for Album of the Year. He's nervous, even though I'm confident he will win. So confident, we made a bet early this evening. If he wins, we're having celebratory sex in the limo on the way home. If he doesn't, we're having consolation sex in the limo on the way home.

It's a win-win situation for both of us, really.

We sit through the first half of the show, his hand clutching mine and his knee bouncing. Then he and the guys hit the stage to perform, and if I didn't know better, I would never

guess that he's nervous. Nash is the ultimate performer, singing a new song from their album that he wrote while we were on vacation together in Tahiti in the fall. It's about second chances, and he said it's inspired by us. Never in my wildest dreams would I have envisioned sitting at the AMA's, watching my boyfriend perform a chart-topping song that was written about me.

But here I am. And tonight, we'll go back to our hotel room together. Then tomorrow we'll fly home to Vancouver. I moved in with Nash about two months after we started dating. Was it fast? Yes. Was it right? Also yes.

When he returns to his seat beside me, Nash is much calmer. Performing always does that to him; it centers and grounds him in a powerful way. He leans over and kisses me chastely on the cheek, but his hand is dangerously high up on my leg, his pinky brushing close to my core.

"Nash, unless you want the world to see me get all hot and bothered, I suggest you stop," I whisper out of the side of my mouth, covering his hand with mine and moving it to a more appropriate location. He just smirks but doesn't try to move his hand back.

Half an hour later, it's time for Album of the Year to be announced. Nash sits up straighter, and his hand holds mine tightly. Tonight is a huge deal for him, and I know that if he doesn't win, he'll be devastated, even if just getting nominated is incredible.

Secretly I think that the fact that one of Nash's best friends in the industry is presenting the award is a sign that he'll win. And I'm proven correct when the presenter opens the envelope, and his eyes zero in on Nash with a wide grin.

"And the winner of Album of the Year is...*Dirt Roads* by Nash Parker!"

Cheers erupt around us as Nash sits in his seat, frozen in shock for several seconds. Then he blinks, and turns to me, grabbing my face in his hands and pressing a kiss to my lips. Happy tears are streaming down my face, and I've never been more thankful for waterproof mascara.

"I love you, baby," he whispers, then stands up and joins his band on the stage. I watch him with pride and love exploding out of me like fireworks. It hasn't always been easy adjusting to being with a man as famous as Nash, but every single day he finds a way to show me it's worth it.

And hours later, when we finally fall into the limo that will take us back to our hotel, I don't waste any time showing him just how *worth it* being with him is to me. The limo partition is up, and the windows are dark. We're in our own secret world.

I straddle his lap, smiling to myself for my dress choice. It's got enough movement in the skirt that I can easily hike it out of the way for what I have planned.

"I love you, Nash Parker. And I am so damn proud of you." He smiles against my mouth as we kiss, and his hands settle on my hips. But that's not enough. I promised him limo sex.

My hands find their way in between us, and I manage to undo his pants quickly enough. Soon his cock is hardening in my hands.

I've had enough champagne to make me relaxed and Nash has been torturing me with heated glances and sly touches all evening at the after party. I'm wet and more than ready for him. Which means that as soon as he's rigid in my grasp, I lift my hips and slide down his length with a groan.

"God. Emma. Fuck, yes." He grips my hips and starts to move me up and down, his head dropping back against the seat of the car. Making Nash lose control is one of my favourite activities. And as I rock my hips back and forth, my own sounds filling the car, I know that I can handle any pressure or challenges that come from dating a star, as long as he keeps on loving me the way he does.

I can feel my orgasm building inside of me, a fire turning into an inferno. Our movements become more hurried, as we both climb toward the peak. And moments later, we fall, wrapped up in each other.

"You seduce me," Nash murmurs against my forehead where his lips are pressed. I lift my head to smile at him. I can't seem to stop smiling around him. When I go to move off his lap, he stops me, and reaches over to grab a towel from the bar area of the limo. He tenderly wipes me clean, then settles me back in his lap. I lay my head down on his chest, suddenly exhausted from the day.

“You know what my favourite thing is?” he asks, his voice soft and low. “Knowing that I get to wake up every morning with you in my arms. I get to come home to you, no matter where I am in the world. Because you are my home, Emma. I love you so much.”

He shifts underneath me and pulls something out of his pocket. He’s looking me in the eyes, but my gaze is riveted to the beautiful ring he’s sliding onto my finger. A halo of clear diamonds surrounds a stunning yellow diamond.

“Marry me.”

He’s not asking a question. And I know that’s because he knows my answer before I can even say it.

“Yes.”

Then I kiss him. A kiss that sings of love, and commitment, and forever.

Flowers and Flirting

Julia Jarrett

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Once upon a time, five author friends came together to create a Facebook group dedicated to reading romance. The Steam Room became a place of fun and friendship, and of course all things spicy romance.

One day, the friends decided to have a fun challenge in the group. Members would choose what the authors had to write for an exclusive short story, using weird and wacky prompts.

The project was dubbed “Just Doing What I was Told” and this story is the result of it. A virgin hero with an odd job, a reverse age gap, and a unique pet were just some of the prompts I was given, and I hope you enjoy this quirky side story set in the Dogwood Cove world.

XOXO Julia

CHAPTER ONE

Bridget

“Seriously, Suzie? What the fuck are we doing here?” My eyes widen, whether in morbid curiosity or total horror, I don’t know.

“Come on Bridge, it’ll be fun. Loosen up. Drop the stiff lawyer act and just relax.”

My best friend could not possibly be more opposite from me in every conceivable way. I’m five ten in flats, ‘long and lean’ as my mother would describe me, with hair that can best be described as straw-like. As in yellow and straight. I work as a corporate attorney and am perfectly content to spend my evenings at home with my pet hedgehog Winston.

Suzie is petite, barely coming up to my shoulder. She’s got curves that make men drool and curly hair that women pay big money to replicate in the salon. She’s a tattoo artist and firmly

believes in letting herself enjoy anything and anyone that crosses her path.

Despite our differences, she's my ride or die. The one person I know will always be there for me and only ever wants the best for me. Even if, right now, we are at odds over what exactly is *best* for me.

“There. *That's* why we're here, babes.” Suzie spins me around dramatically so that my eyes land on the main attraction — apparently. A mechanical bull is in the center of the room, surrounded by scantily dressed women, and men wearing more plaid than I've seen in years.

“No way. No freaking way. Dream on!” I start to step back, but Suzie grabs my hands and drags me forward.

“No arguing. That was the deal, remember? You promised I could either tattoo you or take you out for a night where I make all the decisions for you. And since I don't see any ink on that perfect body of yours...”

Damn it. She's right. This is my own fault. Well, mine and two very nice bottles of merlot. After one too many awful dates with men I'd met either through work or online dating, I swore to Suzie I was done. Content to live a quiet, single, solitary life. What's so bad about becoming a spinster at thirty-eight, anyway? I don't want kids, never have. So, who needs a man? That's what vibrators are for.

Yeah, Suzie wasn't buying it, either. My best friend was horrified by my proclamation, and somehow strong-armed me into making this deal. I could have refused, but then she

reminded me of the time when we were kids and I accidentally pushed her off the slide and she broke her wrist. I owed her, and this is how she chose to have me repay her. By either allowing her to give me my first tattoo, which the little sneak *knew* I would never go for given my phobia of needles, or by spending one night where she would be in charge of everything. And I do mean everything, from what I'm wearing, to what we're doing.

Which brings us back to this moment. My jeans are so tight I'm surprised I can move, my hair has been braided into some intricate thing that baffles me, and the shirt she put me in... let's just say it leaves little to the imagination. And now I'm standing in front of a terrifying-looking contraption that I'm certain will cause injury.

Suddenly the tattoo isn't looking so bad.

"Don't be silly, you'll be fine. Come on, you're next." Suzie pushes me through the gate and I stumble onto the inflatable mat that surrounds the bull. People are cheering, or are they laughing? Damned if I can tell the difference. This is like high school all over again, only instead of walking out onto the football field with my cheerleading skirt tucked into my panties, I'm about to voluntarily (sort of) climb onto a freaking mechanical bull. When did I turn into a thirty-something country girl who doesn't even need a bra instead of the sophisticated lawyer who can afford the fancy bras from Victoria's Secret?

“Okay, come on, Bridget. You can do this.” Muttering under my breath does absolutely nothing to quell the nerves, and everything to increase my self-consciousness. Especially when I hear a low chuckle from nearby that definitely sounds jeering and not supportive. Fuck, I’m really doing this, I guess. I clamber up onto the bull, and my only hope is that I don’t make a complete fool of myself.

Things start out okay. I can hear Suzie whooping and hollering my name as the machine starts to move. Somehow, I manage to rock back and forth, keeping one hand in the air like I was instructed to do. Then it speeds up. What the fuck? My eyes dart wildly around, trying to find the person in control, when I see my evil best friend cozied up to the guy in front of the controls. I yell out her name, but she either doesn’t hear me or chooses not to because the bitch turns it up even more. There’s no way I can stay on.

My sad, pathetic, lonely life flashes before my eyes as I grip the bull with two hands as tightly as I can. There’s only one way this ends in my mind, and that’s with injury and mortification.

Good thing I don’t plan on ever coming here again. Or speaking to my best friend ever again.

Damn you, Suzie.

CHAPTER TWO

Topher

I've had my eyes on the beautiful blonde ever since she walked in. It was obvious that a country bar was not her scene, but her beauty overrode my senses. I couldn't look away if I tried. Which is why when she climbed onto the fucking mechanical bull, I made my way closer. But now I feel my frown deepening. Is no one else seeing this? That woman is not having a good time.

I use the entirety of my six-foot, six-inch frame to shoulder my way through the half-drunk crowd over to the opening in the flimsy barrier that surrounds the mechanical bull. God, the day my friend Rich put this damn thing in his bar, I told him it would be trouble. He just laughed and said I shouldn't worry so much.

But the look on the blonde's face right now tells me I was right to worry. Her lithe body is starting to slip, and I know what's coming.

“Ah, fuck it.” I step onto the inflated mats just in time for her to lose her grip and come flying off the bull with a shriek, sending her straight into my arms.

“Easy there, cowgirl, I got you.” My lips are close to her ear, and she’s pressed up against me fully, her hands clutching my shoulders. I can feel her heart racing and hear her rapid breathing. She’s freaking out. Don’t ask me how I know, but I do. She’s headed for a panic attack, and I know if it were me, I wouldn’t want to be surrounded by the idiots in this bar when it happens. I move quickly and swing her up into my arms and carry her out of the bull pen. I don’t stop moving until we’re in Rich’s back office, and I settle down on the couch, still holding blondie in my arms. Only then does she lean back and look at me with a mixture of relief, confusion, and nerves.

Shit, did I really just carry a complete stranger out of the bar without their consent? My mama would fuckin’ kill me if she knew.

“Hey, I’m sorry, lady, you just looked like you needed to get out of there and somewhere quiet. I’m real sorry I didn’t ask first.” I gently lift her out of my arms and set her on the couch beside me, registering an odd sense of loss when she’s no longer touching me.

“That’s...that’s okay,” she stammers out. This close, I can see her eyes are a shade of light blue that reminds me of springtime.

Like a hydrangea.

She drops her face into her hands with an audible sigh. “I’m just amazed I survived. How the hell do they get away with that without making people sign some kind of waiver? The potential for lawsuits is insane.”

A low chuckle escapes me. “I told Rich that myself.”

Her eyes dart up to me. “Rich?”

I gesture around the office. “The guy who owns this place is a friend of mine. My shop did the flowers for his wedding.”

Shit. I didn’t mean to tell her about my job so soon. Women tend to make one of two assumptions when they find out I’m a florist. Either I must be gay, or I must be lying. Apparently, a twenty-five-year-old guy with tattooed sleeves can’t be straight and a florist.

But I love flowers. Mama’s garden was her pride and joy, and she instilled a love of plants and all of their meanings in me from a young age. She always dreamed of opening a flower shop, and when she died and left me all alone, I vowed I would do just that. Three years later and Wild Rose’s, named after my mama, is doing better than I could have ever hoped. Maybe it’s the draw of a tattooed dude making flower arrangements. I don’t know and I don’t care; all I know is that I’m happy and I make other people happy.

I have a good life, doing a job I enjoy, in a town I call home. Dogwood Cove isn’t where I figured I would settle down, but the rent on my shop space was good with the landlord being the mayor of the town, and hell — the small town kind of grew on me.

Best part is, no one there knows I'm also a twenty-five-year-old virgin.

Not for some deep moral reason or anything, believe me. But after watching Mama go through one too many bad relationships with assholes who only wanted a warm bed for a night, I vowed never to treat a woman that way. It needs to mean something.

Unfortunately, that's another thing that women are either obsessed about or confused about. If they don't want to be the one to take my virginity, then they simply don't understand why I'm not giving it up. Because being a dude means being obsessed with sex, I guess.

I learned the hard way they didn't want to hear me say I just wasn't into them enough to go that far. After the second slap to my face, I stopped even bothering with women.

But looking at blondie right now, something is stirring in me. Something I've never felt before, right in the center of my chest. And she isn't running, or looking at me like I'm crazy. She's staring back at me, like she's trying to make sense of something as well.

"You're a florist?" she asks, and I'm relieved that I hear only curiosity in her tone, not judgment. I nod.

"You're also a freaking hero! Thank you for getting me out of there." Her head cocks to the side, and somehow, I just know she's one of those curious ones. "I know what you do for a living, and I don't even know your name," she says in a matter-of-fact way.

“Topher. Short for Christopher, but only my parents call me that.”

She smiles, and damn, it lights up the whole fucking room. “I’m Bridget. Thank you, again, Topher, for saving me back there.”

“Aww, you were fine, darlin’. I just provided the escape route.”

Bridget. I roll her name around in my head. It’s elegant, just like she is. I open my mouth to say something, anything, to keep the conversation with this beautiful woman going when the door to Rich’s office bangs open.

“Bridge? Oh my God, there you are. Are you okay? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to turn it up that high.” A pint-sized brunette comes in like a whirlwind with Rich on her heels.

CHAPTER THREE

Bridget

As a lawyer, I keep my temper on a short leash. It's important, especially when I'm in a boardroom staring down some middle-aged man who thinks he's a better lawyer than me just because he has a dick. But as Suzie, who has the best of intentions, I'm sure, hustles me out of the office and all the way through the crowded bar to a waiting Uber out front, all I can think of is how badly I want to scream at her. She just pulled me away from the most gorgeous man I've ever seen, whose arms felt like bands of steel around my body, and who, if I'm not mistaken, had the beginning of a pretty impressive erection going on while I was in his arms.

"I am so, so sorry, Bridget. Oh my God, I had no idea you would be abducted by a stranger. Like, holy shit, that is *not* how I wanted to get you laid. Oh shit, he didn't touch you, did he?" My best friend is twisted in her seat, facing me and

running her hands all over me, as if trying to find some evidence of wrongdoing.

“Suzie, stop. I’m fine; he didn’t abduct me, he *caught* me, after *someone* cranked up the goddamn speed on that death trap.” I glare at her, but it’s pointless. Because Suzie has moved on from concern to...I don’t know what exactly, but with her, that’s never a good thing.

“Whatever, he carried you off like a caveman!” Suzie cocks her head. “A hot caveman. Wait. You liked it, didn’t you? Oh my God, what happened in that office before I found you? Were you? Did you? Bridge...you little hussy, I’m so proud of you!”

I shake my head. “Actually, no. You interrupted before I could be any sort of hussy.”

“Damn. Wanna go back? We can turn around.”

I shoot out my hand to stop her. “No way. I’m not going to appear that desperate, don’t be ridiculous.”

Suzie slumps back in her seat, folding her arms across her chest and pouting at me. “You know, I could enforce the whole ‘I’m in charge’ thing.”

My eyes narrow. “Really? You want to go there after having me thrown off a mechanical bull?”

“Fine. No. But he was hot. You’re sure you don’t —”

“Yes, I’m sure.” I make sure to infuse my words with as much finality as possible, and thankfully, she lets it go.

After Suzie drops me at my house that night, I head inside. This place is my pride and joy, and the one big expense I indulged in after becoming partner at my firm. I love it, even if it is a little too big for one person. Well, one person and a hedgehog.

“Hi Winston,” I coo, reaching between the bars of his cage so he can nuzzle my finger. “You’re the only man I need, right?”

Except Winston doesn’t keep me warm at night. And it’s been so long since I had sex, I’m not sure I remember how. After meeting Topher, all my previous arguments about not needing a man when I have a vibrator seem silly and wrong.

It’s only once I’m in bed, cozy in my flannel pajamas, that I let myself think about him. About Topher. Yes, he was hot. But I also got the distinct feeling he was young. Like, really young.

“Too young for me, that’s for sure,” I murmur under my breath wistfully.

Yet even with that in mind, the last thing I think of as I drift off to sleep is how good his hands felt holding onto me...and how good they might feel on other parts of my sex-deprived body.



“Yes, okay, just have it to me by noon tomorrow.” I hang up the phone and take a deep breath, my eyes drifting out the window to the Westport city skyline. The last two weeks have

been beyond hectic, prepping for a client's merger. But I wrapped the case yesterday, and today has been all about catch-up. Just as I turn to the next task on my never-ending to do list, my phone buzzes with the tone that indicates it's reception.

"Hello, Tina," I say into the phone.

"Ms. Waters, there's a delivery here for you, courtesy of Banks and Klein. As your assistant isn't in today, I wanted to check with you before sending them back."

Her voice sounds odd. Normally, our front desk admin is smooth, calm and collected even in the face of lawyers panicking over deadlines and clients panicking over lawsuits. But Tina sounds...excited. I've never heard her excited. And seeing as our clients normally send bottles of alcohol or gift baskets as thank-you presents, neither of which generate much excitement anymore, I'm even more perplexed.

As much as I don't have the time or energy for an interruption, maybe there's some good chocolates I can devour as I finish up for the day.

"Yes, that's fine, you can send them back to my office."

I hang up and stand, intent on meeting the delivery person at my office door, but when I look up, I realize there's nothing I could've done to prepare myself for this.

CHAPTER FOUR

Topher

By some small miracle, I manage not to drop the heavy vase full of flowers in my hand when I see her standing there.

“Bridget?” I say hoarsely, still not quite sure if I’m dreaming. The woman who has starred in all of my fantasies for two weeks is standing before me, dressed in a tight-fitting pencil skirt and a cream blouse that hints at some fucking spectacular tits. Suddenly, I’m not annoyed at having to drive from Dogwood Cove to Westport to deliver this order.

“Topher, what are you...you...oh my God, you’re here.”

I step into what I assume must be her office and put the flowers down on the small wooden table next to the door before turning to her. She’s frozen, staring at me, but now that I’m a little bit closer, I can see her pulse fluttering in her neck. The realization that she’s just as affected by our reunion as I am hits me, and I have to fight back my grin. The sparks I

thought I had imagined at the bar are back in full force, leaping between us.

“Flower delivery for Ms. *Bridget* Waters, courtesy of Wild Rose’s Florist. Aka me.” I sweep my hands out in front of me sheepishly.

Her head tilts slightly, sending her hair cascading over one shoulder. Then I swear I hear her mutter something under her breath that sounds suspiciously like “fuck it” seconds before she launches herself across the short distance that separates us. My hands come up instantly to catch her and drag her against me; then her lips are on mine, and it feels like I can breathe normally again for the first time in weeks.

Her lips fit mine perfectly, and we melt together into a kiss that beats any other kiss. Bridget has taken control of things and I am happy to let her. I’ve kissed plenty of girls, but I’ve never kissed a woman like Bridget. It doesn’t take a genius to realize she’s older than I am, which is intriguing and sexy. She’s clearly not afraid to go after what she wants, and I just count myself lucky that I seem to be what she wants right now.

Hopefully, that doesn’t change when she finds out about my...experience, or lack thereof.

But that’s a conversation for another time, when she isn’t kissing me like her life depends on it. When her phone rings, I want to slam it to the floor because I feel the exact second she comes back to reality and realizes we’re making out in her office.

“Oh shit,” she blurts out, stepping back from me unsteadily.
“I...I can't believe I just did that.”

Her phone keeps ringing. But her eyes are focused on me.

“I'm not complaining,” I say, my voice rough with the desire to go back to what we were doing. The phone stops ringing, and I take a step forward, then freeze when she steps back.

“Topher, I can't. Not here.”

“Then will you let me take you out?”

Where the fuck did that come from? I'm pretty sure I just blew my chance. I start trying to think about how to backtrack and save face because obviously, this gorgeous woman doesn't want to go out with me, but then I see it. The flare of heat in her eyes and the softening of her shoulders.

“I'll be done here by seven,” she says with a soft smile that somehow still manages to be seductive.

It's all I can do to not pump my fist in the air, but I don't think we need the reminder of how much younger I am. So instead, I slide my hands into my pockets and try to be cool. Making my voice sound as calm and mature as possible, I give her a nod.

“See you then.”

And before I can make a fool of myself, I force my feet to turn and carry me out of her office and all the way to the elevator. It's only when the doors slide closed, leaving me alone, that I let out a loud, “Fuck, yeah!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Bridget

At ten minutes before seven, I shut down my computer and grab the small cosmetics bag I keep in my desk drawer. I'm not exactly dressed for a date, but there's no opportunity to change. And thinking back with a smirk, Topher seemed to enjoy my outfit.

Once I'm freshened up, I've got nothing to do but wait. Thankfully, the elevator dings a few minutes before the hour, and when it opens, my breath catches.

Topher's standing there with a small bouquet of large pale blue blooms that bring back so many memories.

"Are those hydrangeas?" I ask.

"Your eyes. The color reminds me of these flowers." He leans forward and kisses me sweetly on the cheek. Reception is empty, Tina having gone home hours ago, along with most of the other staff. I lift up onto my toes and pull his face to

mine for a proper kiss. This man is like a drug, and I need another hit. Visions of taking him into my office, closing the door, and living out one of my deepest fantasies fill my head. I reluctantly pull away from him, only to give him my dirtiest smile.

“Come with me.” Taking his hand, I lead him down the darkened hallway to my office. I close the door and lock it behind us; then I indulge myself, taking a second to lean against it and just look at him. He’s so tall he even towers over me in heels. He has muscles everywhere, bigger than what I’m usually attracted to, but they’re so damn sexy. And the tattoos...I can’t make out exactly what they all are, but his arms are works of art, with ink trailing all the way up and under the sleeves of his shirt. His clean-shaven face seems at odds with the rest of him, and it emphasizes his youth. But in this moment, I don’t care.

He’s far from my normal type of buttoned-up suits, but look at how well that’s worked out for me. And there’s no denying my attraction to him. Slowly my hands drift up to the buttons on my blouse. His gaze instantly drops to my fingers as I undo the top two buttons. I feel possessed by some sexier, sultrier, braver version of myself. A version that wants the man in front of her to fuck her sideways on her desk.

I like her.

“Bridget. This isn’t what I came here for. You need to know that. I...” I lift a finger up to place it against his full lips.

“I know you didn’t. Honestly? This isn’t what I expected, either. But...I’m interested in seeing what happens next. Aren’t you?”

His eyes darken with lust as I undo yet another button, my lace-covered breasts now spilling out of my blouse.

“Fuck...” he growls, his large hands cupping my hips, then sliding around to squeeze my ass. “Bridge...”

I shiver at the way he says my name. He’s little more than a stranger, yet it doesn’t feel that way. Not with how much I’ve thought about him lately.

“There’s something I’ve always wanted to do,” I whisper, leading him around and pushing him to sit in my chair. I can feel the moisture growing between my legs in anticipation. It’s not often that I feel the desire to take the lead in intimate moments, and maybe it’s because I suspect Topher is quite a bit younger than me, or maybe it’s just the intensity of my need right now, but I want to be in charge of this.

He reclines in my chair, his eyes unwavering from mine. When his tongue darts out and runs over his lips I lean forward and kiss him, my heavy breasts brushing against his chest. “We need to take off some of your clothes,” I murmur against his lips.

Topher does that sexy thing only guys can manage and pulls his shirt off with one hand. Good Lord, this man is pure walking temptation, and I’m powerless against it. His hands go to the button of his jeans, and he hesitates.

“Bridget, I should tell you something.” His voice is laced with lust, and a thread of uncertainty.

“Are you clean?” I ask, earning a bark of laughter that has my brow furrowing in confusion.

“Umm, yeah. Definitely.”

“Okay, then. I’ve got a condom in my purse. If you’re into this and I’m into this, enough said. Got it?”

I finish unbuttoning my blouse and toss it to the ground before sliding the zipper down my side and letting my skirt pool at my feet. That seems to be all it takes for Topher to take action as he lifts his hips up and hurriedly pushes his jeans and boxers down.

Good God, he’s hung. It’s perfect. Never before have I seen a more beautiful penis. Long, thick, rigid and curved just right.

I drop to my knees. This dick is begging to be sucked. Topher shifts in his seat, his hand lifting to run through my hair.

“Wait. If you do that, I won’t last a minute.” The nerves are back in Topher’s voice as he lifts me up to stand between his legs. His lips press to my bare torso, peppering my skin with heated kisses. Suddenly I’m in the air, and my ass comes to rest on my desk. Oh Lord, have mercy.

He flashes me a wicked grin, then crouches down so he’s eye level with the part of my body that is aching for him. I’m consumed with need. Slowly, too slowly, he peels down my panties so I can step out of them. And the first pass of his

tongue is like pouring gasoline on a fire, making my back arch as his name escapes my lips on a cry.

Topher lifts his head. “You like that? There’s more where that came from.” He winks at me, then dives back into me. He nibbles and sucks, his tongue somehow finding all the right places. Fuck, it’s like he was given a road map to my orgasm. He slides two fingers in, and does some sort of twisting motion that has me grinding onto his hand. Every pass of his tongue over my clit sends me soaring. He was made for this. For me.

A moan leaks past my lips as my hands tunnel in his hair. I never want him to stop. And yet, I need him to stop. Because I need a different body part of his, and I need it now.

“Topher. I need you. I need you to fuck me.”

He surges up to his feet. My hands grapple for my purse which, thankfully, is in the side drawer of my desk. Fumbling through the contents, I find what I’m looking for and hold it up triumphantly. Topher takes the foil packet and tears it open, rolling it down his rigid length clumsily. I chalk that up to nerves, and it’s endearing in a way. When he’s done, I push him gently until he sits down in my chair. Then, straddling his legs, I climb onto his lap.

“This has been a fantasy of mine for a while,” I purr. His eyes widen at my confession, then quickly darken with desire.

“I’m honoured I get to be the one to make it come true.” His voice is hoarse and deep.

“Me too.”

The weird part is, I mean that. I am glad it's him; I can't actually picture anyone else I would want to be here with me right now. He's perfect. He's sweet, he's sexy, and he's got this adorable innocence that intrigues me.

My hand wraps around his cock, and I notch it to my entrance as I lift my hips. Then, at an agonizingly slow pace, I slide down his length.

“Holy fuck,” he groans, his hands gripping my hips tightly. His eyes are screwed shut and his chest is heaving, as if he's holding himself back from something. But I don't want him to hold back. I want it all.

Slowly my hips start to move. He fits inside of me perfectly, filling every space with sensation.

“Bridget, slow down.” His voice sounds pained, but I can't slow down. Not now, not when I feel my orgasm barreling toward me.

“Topher. Oh my God. I'm coming.”

“Fuck. Bridge. Yes. Oh fuck,” he groans, his hips pumping up into me with reckless abandon. His style is unrefined, but his enthusiasm is unmatched, and combined with the passion in the air between us, I'm skyrocketing into oblivion within seconds. Judging by the ecstasy written on his face, and the grunts he makes, Topher follows immediately after.

When my body finally stops rocking back and forth, I collapse onto his sweaty chest.

“Damn,” he pants. “I’m sorry I couldn’t last longer.”

“That is just fine,” I mumble against his neck. “Trust me. Totally. I’m all good.”

“Yeah?” Topher asks, and I lift my head so I can look at him, sensing he needs confirmation.

“Oh, yeah. More than good.”

I lay my head back down after I see the look of satisfaction on his face.

CHAPTER SIX

Topher

So that's it, then. I'm no longer an adult male virgin. Fuck, yeah! Not gonna lie, part of me is kicking myself for waiting this long, but then again, who's to say it would have been that incredible with someone else? Bridget is fucking perfect. The way her body responded to mine was the sexiest thing I've ever experienced.

The only thing bothering me is the fact that I didn't tell her it was my first time. It may not be that big of a deal to me, but I can't help but worry that it will be to her.

"You're like, really good at that," Bridget murmurs quietly, running her fingers down my bare chest. I capture her hand and lift it to my mouth, pressing a kiss to her palm.

It's now or never.

"Bridget, I need to tell you something," I start, and her hand snatches away from me as she lifts up and stares at me with a look of horror.

“Oh, God. You’re married. No, you’re —”

“I’m a virgin,” I blurt out, interrupting her. “At least, I was until a few minutes ago.”

Stunned silence fills the room. I swear, all I can hear is my pounding heartbeat as I wait for Bridget to say something.

“Topher...I...” She lets out a small sigh and my stomach drops to my knees. Shit. “I’m shocked. And I truly hope I didn’t pressure you into anything you weren’t ready for.”

I reach for her, desperate to reassure her and take away any misplaced guilt. “God, no. Bridget, this was amazing. I wasn’t saving myself for any particular reason, it just never felt right. Until you. Until now. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you, I tried, but then I was just really...*really* into what we were doing...” I trail off lamely.

Bridget squeezes my hands. “Okay. All I can do is trust you’re being honest right now.” Her eyes widen. “Wait. Please tell me you’re over eighteen, at least.”

I bark out with laughter, “Holy shit, yes, woman. I’m twenty-five.”

“Oh, thank God.” She sags back down with relief. “Taking your virginity is one thing. Taking the virginity of a minor is...” She shudders.

I wrap my arms around her and gently tug her back into my embrace. The chair isn’t the most comfortable, and my ass is starting to stick to the leather, but I don’t fucking care. “So you’re okay with this? With me?”

Her head tips up to look at me, and this time it's *her* eyes that seem to have trepidation in them.

“Yeah, but I think I should probably tell you something, too.”

“What?”

“I know guys are never meant to answer this, but you have my permission. How old do you think I am, Topher?”

“Seriously?”

She nods. “Yes.”

I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear before I answer. “I honestly don't care. You're older than me, I get that. It doesn't bother me. You're beautiful, smart, brave, and sexy as fuck. Age is just a number.”

“Good answer, flower boy.”

Our lips meet once again. Jesus Christ, I can feel my dick hardening for her already. And Bridget must feel it, too, because she moans into my mouth as her hips shift in my lap.

“Okay. Oh my God. We need to find a bed,” she says, breaking away from me with a gasp. “Because you need to do that thing with your finger and your tongue again, soon.”

“Works for me,” I rumble in response.

“My apartment is just down the street.”

We're dressed in a flash. Bridget picks up her purse and turns to me with a mischievous smile. “There's something else you should know.”

My brow crinkles in confusion. “Unless you’re going to tell me you’re a spy or an alien, I really don’t think there’s anything you can say that will make me walk away, babe.”

An adorable giggle-snort escapes her. “No, no. Just, I do have a man at home. He’s a bit...*sharp* sometimes, but overall, a total sweetheart, I promise.”

“Umm.”

Bridget bursts out laughing. “It’s a hedgehog, Topher. I have a pet hedgehog. His name is Winston.”

“Fucking hell, woman,” I exhale. “I don’t care about your pet.”

She’s still giggling as we turn out the light and walk hand in hand to the elevator.

“Good.”

As the doors slide shut on us, I spin her in my arms so that her back is to my front. God, I love her height. It’s perfect for what I’m about to do. My hand inches up the hem of her skirt.

“What...what are you doing, Topher?”

“You said you wanted me to do that thing with my fingers.”

“Yeah...”

I kiss the side of her neck. “Well, I’m just doing what I was told.”

Secrets and Mistletoe

A Dogwood Cove Novella

Julia Jarrett

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CHAPTER ONE

Abby

When I push open the door to the bar in Westport where I'm hoping to escape my reality for an hour or two, I'm assaulted by the aroma of beer and fried food. My stomach rumbles in response and I realize that yet again, I forgot to eat since breakfast. In my defense, we drove all day yesterday to get to my uncle's farm as quickly as possible, and today my time has been filled with relearning the ropes of running the tree farm and petting farm that Uncle Steve has run since I was a child. I used to spend so much time here when my parents and I still lived on Vancouver Island. Dogwood Cove was my second home, and just driving through filled me with memories. Memories that I hope I can now pass on to my daughter, Layla.

Lord knows we could use some happy ones.

Resolutely, I push back the thoughts that threaten to crowd my mind. Nobody ever said being a single parent would be

easy, but this year has been particularly hard for Layla and I. My parents decided to become snowbirds and moved down to Arizona, Layla's best and only friend in school left for Alberta, I lost my job as an insurance claims adjustor thanks to cutbacks, and our cat died.

When Uncle Steve called me to say he'd broken his leg and desperately needed some help on the farm, I jumped at the chance to come back to Dogwood Cove. Layla was skeptical at first, but as soon as I told her about all of the animals, she was on board. Thank goodness she has my adventurous spirit.

I slide onto a stool at the bar, and when the bartender comes over, I ask her for a sleeve of beer from a local brewery and a plate of nachos. She nods, and goes to enter the order. When my beer is slid across to me, I take it with a grateful smile and take a sip, letting the cool liquid trickle down my throat. I can feel myself relaxing, simply by being out, by myself, responsible for no one else. I love my daughter so much, but it sure as shit gets exhausting always being the sole parent, the only one in charge of her health and wellbeing, not to mention her safety, happiness, entertainment, and all the other thousand things a parent has to worry about.

But not tonight. Tonight I'm just Abby Martin, enjoying a beer and some cheesy nachos with an hour to myself.

"Is this seat taken?"

Say yes. Just say yes and enjoy the solitude, Abby.

Do I listen to that little voice? Nope, of course not. My mama raised me right, and manners dictate I must be polite.

“No, go ahead—” I trail off when I glance up and trip over my own words.

Holy shit. *Holyyyyyy shit*. For once I’m glad I listened to Mom because the man smiling at me as he sits down on the stool beside me is nothing short of panty melting gorgeous. Broad shoulders, chiseled jaw covered in the perfect amount of beard, deep eyes that crinkle at the edges, and perfect dark brown hair. He smells amazing, the spicy scent of his cologne wafting over to me, making me drool for more than just my plate of nachos.

“Thanks. Hard to find a seat in here sometimes.” The deep voice rumbles over me, making my spine tingle in a totally delicious and totally unfamiliar way. The last time I was this affected by a man was...well, never.

“No...no problem,” I stammer out, then turn back to my beer. *Get a freaking grip, Abigail Martin*. I don’t always talk to myself, but right now it seems my libido needs speaking to. When he puts out his hand, I try to surreptitiously wipe mine on my pants before shaking his. It’s a firm, strong handshake, and combined with that devastating smile, complete with dimples, it’s a wonder I don’t swoon right off my stool.

“Name’s Reid. Can I buy your next round as thanks for the seat?”

I feel my face heat up. “It’s really no trouble, it’s not like I was saving it for anyone.” Oh Lord, could I possibly sound any more lame? He chuckles and flashes that smile again.

“Well, still. I’m glad you’re letting me take it and not someone else.”

He’s looking at me expectantly, those brown eyes searching my face so intensely I start to wonder if I have salsa smeared on my cheek. I’m embarrassed by how long it takes me to figure out what he’s waiting for.

“Oh! My name is Abby.” Before I can stop myself, I’ve stuck my hand out again, but I quickly snatch it back. “Right. We already did that.”

Reid signals to the bartender, who walks over and leans across the bar, putting her impressive chest on display.

“What can I get you, honey?” Her voice is syrupy sweet, a lot sweeter than it was when she took my order, that’s for sure. I got a coolly polite response and Reid is getting something far more enthusiastic. I watch out of the corner of my eye, curious about how he’ll handle it. Why? I don’t know. I don’t even know this guy, why would I care how he talks to a flirtatious bartender? But there’s no denying the internal fist pump I give myself when Reid’s eyes don’t ever drop from her face, and after he gives her his order, he turns to smile at me. “And another round of whatever my new friend Abby is drinking.” I fight back a smirk when the bartender stands up, gives Reid a nod, and flashes her eyes at me.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do that.” My heartrate has slowed to normal, and I’m feeling slightly more like my usual composed self. You don’t spend seven years raising a little girl all by yourself without learning how to hide nervousness and

uncertainty. Fake it 'til you make it became my mantra. And I damn well am exercising that right now as I try to not let him see what a hot mess I really am.

“Buying a drink for a beautiful woman is absolutely what I have to do.”

And with just one sentence, Reid manages to send my heart racing again.

“I bet you say that to every woman.” The words slip out before I can think about the way they might sound, and I see Reid wince. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair. I don’t even know you.” My eyes drop back down. I can pretend the melted cheese on my nachos is fascinating long enough for him to get bored and leave, right?

“No, Abby, I don’t.” He speaks quietly, so it’s hard to hear over the noise of the bar. When I chance a look back up at him, he’s studying me intently. His eyes shift forward when the bartender returns with our drinks. He pushes mine across to me, then lifts his glass. “To meeting new people?”

I feel myself smiling, and magically relaxing as I lift my glass to cheers him. “Sounds good.”

“I want to say *do you come here often*, but I feel like that’s just way too cheesy.” Reid’s grin tells me he’s teasing, and I feel myself relax. I can do this. I can dust off the rusty flirting skills I used to have.

“Well, if you *were* to say that, I would probably follow it up with something equally cheesy like *no, it’s just your lucky*

night.” I give him an exaggerated wink, and he chuckles in response.

“Okay, corny pickup lines, here we come. So aside from being sexy, what do you do for a living?”

I’m in the middle of taking a drink of beer when he speaks, and I have to fight back a snort of laughter and try not to choke on the liquid. His hand comes to my back and I know he can feel me shaking. When I finally manage to swallow, I turn to him.

“Oh my God, that’s terrible.”

His deep laugh is full and warm. “I’m just getting started.” He gestures over to the entry of the hallway that I assume leads to the back of the pub. There’s a small green thing taped to the ceiling. “I just got some mistletoe, how about we go back to my place and try it out?” He waggles his eyebrows at me, but I just roll my eyes. “Nice try. I don’t kiss strangers, mistletoe or no mistletoe.”

Then my mind flashes back to a magazine article I read last week while waiting at Layla’s dentist appointment. It was one of those ridiculous lists of funny things, and this one happened to be pickup lines.

“Are you a broom? Because you’ve swept me off my feet.” I can’t hold back my giggle when I say that one, and his head tips back into another laugh.

“Abby, I might have met my stupid pickup line match in you.”

“I’m awesome, you’re awesome, wanna go somewhere and be awesome together?” I retort.

His eyes widen and he lifts his glass. “Did you just pull a Barney Stinson line on me? Because that was legend — wait for it — dary.”

The next hour flies by. We don’t dive too deep into sharing details about ourselves, but I learn Reid moved to the island about ten years ago, and that he works in the school system. I tell him I’m here to help out family for awhile. The conversation flows, even once we switch our drinks to water, much to the bartender’s chagrin.

When I feel my phone vibrate with the alarm that I set earlier to tell me it’s time to head home, I want to ignore it. But the responsible mother side of me knows I can’t. Reid has been so attentive to everything tonight, and he notices right away that something has shifted.

“I’m guessing our time is up.”

I can hear the regret in his voice, and I answer it with a small frown. “Yeah. I’m sorry, I really should be going.”

Reid stands up, and helps me put on my coat. “At least let me walk you to your car.” He puts some bills down on the bar, and signals to the bartender. I quickly realize he’s paid for my drinks as well as his own, and the nachos that we both ended up snacking on.

“Reid, you don’t need to pay for me,” I chide as I rummage in my purse for my wallet. His large hand comes up to cover

mine and I look up at him to see a warm smile on his face.

“Please, just let me. I had a great time tonight, thanks to you.”

I hesitate, and his hand gently squeezes mine.

“Okay. Thank you,” I murmur back. This man is seriously too good to be true. We walk outside to the parking lot, and over to my car, which is under a streetlamp. “So, this is me.” I don’t know how I want tonight to end, but Reid makes the decision for me when he leans down and softly kisses my cheek.

“I know you said you don’t kiss strangers, but we aren’t strangers anymore, are we?” His warm breath tickles my cheek.

We are, considering I know nothing about this man and have kept everything important about myself a secret, but I don’t care in this moment. Who knows which one of us makes the decision to turn our heads, but we do. And now it’s not my cheek that he’s kissing, it’s my lips, and it feels amazing. He groans and slants his head to take it deeper. His hands are threaded in my curly brown hair, and he’s holding me with the perfect amount of gentle strength. I can feel the intensity of all his focus being on me, on us, and on this kiss. It’s powerful, heady, and it’s sending warm waves through my body that coalesce between my legs. I bring my arms around his waist and let them drift down his back. I don’t know what’s come over me, I’ve never felt this sensual and forward in my life. But something about Reid makes me lose all inhibitions, and I

swear if we weren't in the middle of a parking lot, I would be begging him to tear off my clothes and take me.

But we are in a parking lot.

And I have a daughter waiting for me.

Layla.

The thought of her snaps me out of the lust-filled spell Reid has me under, and I take a step back. We're both breathing heavily, and my hand comes up to touch my lips. They are swollen from our kisses and the fire in Reid's eyes is almost enough to elicit a moan. Whether it's a moan of disappointment that this can't go any further, or pure desire, I don't know.

"I have to go, Reid."

He nods and takes another step back, sliding his hands into his pockets. When he speaks, his voice is rough. "Goodbye, Abby."

He watches as I get in my car and start the engine. As I drive out of the parking lot and turn toward Dogwood Cove and the responsibilities waiting for me there, I glance in my rearview mirror.

As Reid grows smaller and smaller, and the distance between us becomes longer and longer, I slip into mom mode, relegating my memories of tonight into a little box in the back of my mind.

For one night, I wasn't Abby Martin, single mom and unemployed insurance claims adjuster turned stand-in farmer.

Tonight I was simply Abby, single woman, spending an evening with the most handsome man I have ever met, and probably will ever meet.

Too bad Abby will probably never have another night like tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

1 month later

Reid

“Mr. Corser, we have a problem.”

Words no principal wants to hear at four o'clock on a Friday, especially not two weeks before winter break starts. I lift my head from my computer where I'm trying to finish up some emails for a districtwide anti-bullying protocol I'm in the middle of updating. One of my grade one teachers is standing in my doorway, twisting her fingers together nervously.

“What's wrong?”

She takes a nervous step into my office, her eyes going everywhere except at me. “Well, see, next Monday is the annual grade one field trip to the Martin Farm. The kids look forward to it all year. They get to explore, meet the animals, and learn all about Christmas trees. The problem is, we need to have enough chaperones, and one of our parents just backed

out with the flu. I've reached out to the other families, and to all of the support staff, but no one is available on such short notice. So I was wondering if maybe you would join us."

The last sentence is said in a rush, as if she's hoping that saying it quickly will soften the blow. It's not that I don't *want* to go on a field trip to a farm, it actually sounds like a lot of fun. It's more the fact that as Miss Denton herself knows, I'm under multiple deadlines right now, both for our school, and for the district. Plus, our winter concert is coming up, and I stupidly agreed to help construct the set. Granted, my friend Ethan is helping — okay, more like he's doing most of the work and I'm helping, but still. My workload is maxed out and losing an entire workday to head to a farm isn't going to help. But part of the job of being principal of a small-town elementary school like I am is pitching in to help whenever it's needed.

"No problem, Miss Denton. I'll clear my schedule for Monday."

The look of relief that comes over the young teacher's face is almost comical.

"Thanks, Mr. Corser. Have a good weekend." She's sounding far happier than she was when she first walked in, which I guess means I did my job. I give her a nod and a small smile, effectively dismissing her. Now I really need to buckle down and finish these goddamn emails. Looks like my weekend won't be spent heading into Victoria to meet up with Finn, Ethan's college buddy who's moving to town in the new

year. Nope, I'll be deep in work mode trying to wrap up all of my administrative work so that next week isn't a total disaster.

I open my phone and text Finn, cancelling our plans for the weekend. Not that they were anything special, just a session at the rock climbing gym, and maybe hitting a bar. Still, it would have been fun. I haven't been out since the night I ended up at the bar in Westport after a spectacular failure of a date. Granted, that night ended up being pretty fantastic, thanks to the gorgeous woman I ended up sitting beside.

*Abby...*I've kicked myself many times for not getting her number, or hell, even her last name. But at the same time, there was something about that night, knowing nothing was ever going to happen between us. I know I let my guard down, shared more of myself than I would have normally. And I'd like to think she did, too. That doesn't mean I haven't thought about the feel of her soft lips under mine, or the way her curves fit against my body perfectly, or the hot little moan she made when I nipped her lip.

Nah, I haven't thought about that at all.



Monday morning I'm putting away some paperwork in my office in-between sips of coffee when I hear the sound of the school bus rumbling to a stop outside. That's my cue to head down to the grade one classrooms and help wrangle the kids outside.

Half an hour later, my coffee is empty and I'm trapped on a bus with forty-seven small children who all seem to be talking at the same time. The teachers have them under control, and I know my job as chaperone won't really start until we reach the farm and split the kids into groups. Which means I can zone out for a few minutes.

"Mr. Corser?"

A small voice interrupts my thoughts and I turn around to see one of our newest students, Layla Simpson, looking at me.

"Yes, Layla?"

"Didja know that my mom is gonna be there today?"

I lift my eyebrows and feign interest. Normally I love the chatty nature of kids, but today I'm just damn tired. "Really? She's one of the chaperones?"

"Nope." Layla pops the p, and her face breaks into a grin. "We live at the farm. My Unca Steve hurt his leg, so we came to help. Mom is the boss."

I vaguely remember Ethan mentioning that Steve had hurt himself. As Dogwood Cove's mayor, he knows what's going on with most of the town's residents. "Well, that's nice of you. Is your mom going to lead the class around today?"

"Yup." She pops her p again and a smile quirks at the edge of my lips. This kid is full of sass. "She even said that I could help. If my teacher said so. An' Miss Denton said I could. I'm gonna be teachin' everyone how to brush the goats."

The pride in her voice makes me smile. This kid is something else. “That sounds great, Layla. I can’t wait to learn all about the goats.”

She settles back into her seat with a grin. I don’t have kids myself, unless you count the two hundred students I’m responsible for, but I have to admit she’s cute sitting there, swinging her legs back and forth as she looks out the window.

A short while later, we pull up to the Martin family farm. In the winter, Steve has Christmas trees for people to come and cut down, a pumpkin patch runs in October, and if I remember correctly, he’s got some farm animals he raises as well. Goats, cows, chickens, that sort of thing. I can recall Ethan’s sister, Mila, saying something about a live nativity this year, which confused me until her boyfriend, Jackson, who happens to be one of the vets in town, mentioned his business partner was overseeing the Martin Farm animals for it. I’m curious to see how *that* all works out....

My focus is on getting the kids off the bus in a sort of organized fashion and split into their groups. The teachers have already given me the list of who goes in what group, and mine is filled with seven rambunctious kiddos who are filled with hyper wiggles of excitement.

I’m busy attaching brightly coloured stickers to all of their coats, so I don’t realize Steve has come up on a pair of crutches with someone beside him until I hear a familiar voice speaking to one of the teachers. When I turn around, for a

moment I wonder if I'm still asleep and dreaming. But then her eyes meet mine and widen.

“Abby?”

“Reid?”

Okay, she doesn't exactly sound happy to see me. Not gonna lie, that's disappointing, even as I am still filled with confusion about what she's doing at the farm.

“Mom!”

Understanding hits me with the force of a Mack truck as Layla breaks free from her class to run over and hug Abby around the legs.

Well, shit.

The woman I've been lusting after for a month...is the mother of my newest student. And to make matters worse, she's standing under a sprig of plastic mistletoe.

Shit just got awkward.

CHAPTER THREE

Abby

Oh my God. Does the universe hate me? *What is going on right now?!* I'm having a hard time breathing, much less formulating thoughts or words. Reid is standing in front of me, looking absolutely delicious in a long-sleeved Henley and a puffy vest. The hat slouched low on his head frames those eyes that drove me wild, and even though he looks just as surprised to see me as I am to see him, he also looks... hopeful? Happy, even. His eyes dart up, and when mine follow, I mentally curse. I forgot Steve asked me to decorate the barn for Christmas. What the hell was I thinking, hanging up mistletoe?

Whatever. If this guy thinks he's getting a kiss in front of my daughter and all these other kids, he is majorly mistaken.

My daughter's voice breaks through my internal freak out. "So then Mr. Corser said he wants to learn about the goats from me. But Robby Macintire said I didn't know anything

about goats, and I said I did, and I said that I would make him pick up their poop.”

My head whips down to look at her and then back up at Reid in horror. Mr. Corser is the name of her school principal, I remember that from the emails I received. But she can't be saying...Reid...he's the principal? Oh God.

“Layla, we won't make anyone pick up poop,” I say. His lips quirk up into a small smirk and I clench my hands. It's so hard not to touch him, to see if he's real. But then opportunity falls into my lap when Miss Denton, Layla's teacher, walks over.

“Oh good, you've met. Mr. Corser is our principal, and Abby is Farmer Martin's niece. She's going to lead our field trip today.”

Reid holds out his hand, and I place mine in his. The warmth of his touch draws a small gasp from me, but no one notices. No one, that is, except Reid, judging by the flare of heat in his eyes.

“Yes, we've...met,” he replies, eventually dragging his eyes to Miss Denton. She looks between us, and I snatch my hand away from his. The last thing I need is my kid's teacher thinking I'm some kind of slutty mom flirting with the hot principal. *Even though that's exactly what I'm doing.*

I'm saved from any further interaction with Reid by Miss Denton cheerfully introducing me to the group, and then I'm explaining to the kids what we do at the farm, and what we'll be learning today. There's a cow milking session set up, the goats they can feed and brush, and we'll show them the

chickens and bunnies as well. Then Uncle Steve is going to be doing a wreath craft with them using some branches from our trees. It's the only thing he can do while sitting down, and even though he griped and complained about doing the "artsy-fartsy stuff," I saw how much fun he had making a practice one with Layla last night.

For a couple of hours I'm able to put Reid aside and focus on showing what feels like a thousand small children how to milk a cow. Thank goodness Betty, our heifer for the day, is the most patient and calm animal ever. She handles the noise, the petting, and the chaos with nothing more than a flutter of her eyelashes and chewing of her feed.

But then Reid's group walks into the barn where I'm set up and suddenly it hits me. I have to milk a cow in front of the hottest man I've ever spoken to. Nothing says sexy quite like that. I avoid making eye contact with him, instead focusing on the rambunctious kids bouncing in their seats. Betty looks at me from the corner of her eye and winks slowly. I swear she's judging me. My demonstration has the kids giggling as I had hoped it would when I squirt the milk right onto a bullseye I'd placed on the floor. After that, they lined up to have a turn trying to milk good old Betty. I'm so engrossed in helping the kids squeeze and roll their hands the right way that I don't realize Reid is standing next to me until I look up after helping the last child.

There's an odd expression on his face, one I can't quite figure out. Until he leans down and murmurs softly, "Watching your hands move like that is giving me all kinds of ideas."

That...squeeze and tug technique? That would feel pretty damn amazing somewhere else.”

I duck my head so the kids don't see the fierce blush I'm positive is covering my face. Good Lord, it's never been so hot and steamy in this barn. “I...I...well...” Words are hard right now.

“I only wish I had the chance to show you what *I* can do with a nipple or two.”

My mouth drops open and my head flies up to look at him. Did he seriously just say that? But Reid just winks and turns to walk back to the kids, clapping his hands to get their attention, leaving me feeling completely turned on and beyond confused.



Thank God the kids leave soon after Reid wound me up tighter than a spring. Layla gives me a hug before she climbs on the bus, and she doesn't seem to realize her mother is a hot mess. When the bus pulls away, my shoulders sag.

“Alright missy, care to share what's got you all flustered? I haven't seen you like this since that summer I hired the Walters boy to help out.”

I drop my head with a groan. “I had forgotten about that.” Cameron Walter was two years older than me, and at fourteen, I was obsessed. Watching him lift heavy hay bales was my favourite pastime that summer.

“It’s the principal, isn’t it? That Reid Corser?” I sit down on the bench next to my uncle and nod. “He is a handsome fella, I’ll give you that, and obviously good with kids. But it might not be the best idea to start something up with him.”

“Trust me, I know. It’s all kinds of inappropriate,” I mumble.

“Now, I didn’t say that. You’re two consenting adults, and it was certainly obvious to me that the attraction goes both ways. I just meant that it might make things awkward for Layla.”

I let my head fall back against the wall behind us with a thud. “Trust me. Every decision I make, I think about Layla. This is no different. Nothing is going to happen between Reid and I. It can’t.”

But here’s the funny thing about words. They don’t mean much unless you put the actions behind them. And for the rest of the afternoon until it’s time for me to drive into town and pick Layla up from school, Reid is never far from my thoughts. I thought it was bad enough picturing him when I’m alone in bed at night with nothing but my trusty vibrator for company. That’s nothing compared to how awkward I feel while working alongside my uncle and training the seasonal employees hired to help with Christmas tree sales. I swear every time Uncle Steve walks past, he chuckles or shakes his head. When I catch a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror, I realize why. My face is flushed and my hair is a mess where I keep pulling at it and twisting it around my fingers. I try to quickly tame the wild waves back into a braid and splash some cold water on my face. It’s slightly better. But really,

what are the chances I'll even see him? I've been picking Layla up from school for weeks now, and I had no idea Reid even lived in Dogwood Cove.

Turns out the universe is against me today because when I pull up to the front of the school, who's chatting with my daughter? Mr. Corser, the *principal*. Neither of them notice my head drop down to the steering wheel, but when I hit the horn by mistake they both look over. No big deal, just totally mortifying. It's fine. I'm fine.

Reid strolls over, looking cool, calm, and collected. Reluctantly, I roll down the passenger window, letting the precious heat out into the cold winter air, and unfortunately letting Reid's delicious scent waft in.

"Hello again, Abby." He flashes me that smile and I shiver. It's the cold. I'll blame the cold. But based on his knowing smirk, he doesn't think it's the cold. "I was hoping to chat with you about future field trips at the farm. Would you mind if I gave you a call sometime?"

Oh. He wants to talk to me about field trips. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was disappointed, but I mask it and give him a quick nod. "Sure, that would be fine. Do you need my number?"

He shakes his head. "No, I can get it from Layla's student file. Is it a cell or home number that we have?"

"It'll be my cell."

"Perfect."

Later that evening, after Layla is in bed and Uncle Steve has gone to his room to watch some television, I sink down into the ancient green couch that has been in the living room of the farmhouse since I was a small child. I lift my glass of wine to my lips and am about to take a much-anticipated swallow when my phone vibrates with an incoming call. The caller ID says unknown, but my heart starts to race anyway. I know it's Reid.

"Hello?" I keep my voice low, even though I know my daughter will sleep through a hurricane and Steve has his TV so loud I can hear it out here.

"Hi, Abby."

His voice should come with a warning label: may cause spontaneous orgasm.

"Hi, Reid."

"I gotta say, it was quite the surprise seeing you today." He sounds amused, and a lot more relaxed than I feel, but I try to calm myself down. This is just a conversation. That's all.

I let out a small laugh. "At least you weren't the one wearing muddy boots and probably smelling like a barn."

"You made those boots look good," he flirts and I'm instantly transported back to the night we met, the night when I was just Abby and he was just Reid. Two people interested in each other, spending an evening flirting. I can almost forget the complicated situation between us now. "In fact, I was hoping I could see them again."

My smile fades. Crap, did I read this entire thing wrong? He wants to see my boots, does that mean he really does just want to talk about more field trips....

“Oh. Umm...well, yeah, we can definitely make that happen. But once the Christmas tree sales pick up we won't really have time for any school tours. Can we do it in the—”

“Abby, no, I don't mean...shit, I'm messing this up,” Reid says with a low groan.

“What do you mean?” I ask cautiously, trying not to get my hopes up again.

I hear a deep inhale over the phone. “I swear I'm not normally this awkward when I'm asking a woman out on a date.”

The breath I didn't realize I was holding comes out in a whoosh. “Oh my God, you *are* calling to ask me out.” I smack my head. “Okay, can we pretend I didn't just say that? This has to be the most messed up conversation I've ever had.”

Reid's deep laugh settles my nerves like a warm blanket. “Sweetheart, trust me, no one is more embarrassed by how ridiculous this has gone than I am. Can we start over?”

I giggle. “Sure. Hi, Reid.”

“Hey. It was really great seeing you again today.” I can hear the smile in his voice, and knowing that he's calling because he wants to see me makes me feel lighter than I have in a long time.

“Yeah. It was a surprise, but a good one.”

“A really good one. Can I see you again sometime soon? Maybe not at the farm or the school?”

At the word school, I pause. I need to see his face. Without giving myself even a second to overthink it, I click the video icon to switch from a voice call to a video one. When his face fills the screen, I see a smile stretch across it.

“Hey, pretty lady.”

I watch as Reid leans back against whatever he’s sitting on, putting that muscular torso of his on a little tease of a display.

“Reid, what are we doing? Can we even date? You’re my kid’s principal. Isn’t that illegal? Not illegal. Against the rules?” I’m babbling and I know it, but he’s just so handsome, and I want to give in to temptation, just this once. I want to take something just for me, and say screw the consequences. But I can’t do that to Layla....

Reid sits up and looks at me through the phone. He’s still smiling, but he also looks serious, thoughtful even.

“Abby, I would never do anything that might jeopardize the safety, happiness, or well-being of one of my students. If it was against any rule or guideline for me to ask you out, I wouldn’t, no matter how much I want to. But I’ve checked, and it’s fine. No rules are broken if I take you to dinner.”

I nod slowly, and he continues. “The only question I have is, how do you think Layla will feel about me seeing you?”

I take a minute to think about that. She’s had nothing but good things to say about Dogwood Cove and her new school,

but this is definitely something new we've never had to deal with before.

"I don't know. I think...I think I should try to talk to her about it first."

He smiles at me, and I know he accepts and understands that. "No problem. For what it's worth, I've never gone out with a parent from my school before. Hell, I've never gone out with a parent, period. So this is all new for me. But that night we met, after you left, I kicked myself for not getting your number. There's something here, Abby, something strong. And I don't want to ignore it."

"Neither do I," I answer honestly. "I just need some time to talk to her. Feel her out about it, about us."

His eyes light up with anticipation, and it makes his whole face look more youthful with the excitement and happiness I see there.

"Yeah. Of course."

I can feel my answering smile stretch wide across my face. "Great. Well, I should go, life on the farm starts early."

"Goodnight, Abby. I hope I hear from you soon."

"You will," I say softly. After we end our call, I grab a pillow from beside me on the couch and muffle my scream of excitement in it.

Reid just asked me out.

Now I just have to get my daughter on board...

CHAPTER FOUR

Reid

“Wait. You’re telling us...that the woman you were mooning about last week over beers, the woman you spent hours flirting with, but never sealed the deal with...that woman, is the mother of a student? Oh, dude, you are so fucked.”

I swear, if we weren’t in the middle of a run in the freezing cold, I would smack that smug look off of Finn’s face in a heartbeat. Not that he’s wrong, it just sucks having it laid out like that.

“Look man, I told you about Abby because you poured shots of tequila, not just beer. And yeah, we didn’t hook up the night we met, but we had a connection.”

“Never thought I would hear the word ‘connection’ come from your mouth when you’re talking about a woman.” Ethan slaps my back, not breaking his stride. “Our boy is growing up.”

“Fuck off, both of you.” I slow to a stop and drop my hands down to the tops of my legs. Ethan bounces in place for a minute, but Finn joins me in sucking wind. Don’t ask me why Ethan isn’t suffering, out of all three of us, he should be hurting the most. After all, he’s the one who’s so love drunk happy, half the time he misses our workouts.

“I don’t see the problem. You’re both adults, it’s not like it’s against the rules for you to date a parent, is it?”

“No, it’s not,” I’m quick to reply. The guys don’t need to know I spent almost an hour yesterday pouring over policy manuals at school before I called Abby, just to make sure it wasn’t a problem to ask her out. Not that I can say with any certainty that I wouldn’t have asked her anyway, but it sure as fuck was a relief to realize there were no rules that said I couldn’t.

“Okay, so, boy meets girl, boy likes girl, boy asks girl out. Simple as that.” Finn spreads his hands out with a wide grin, as if he just solved world hunger or something.

“This coming from the man who hasn’t been in a serious relationship in years?” Ethan replies drily and we both laugh at the glower that covers Finn’s face.

“Just because you’re settled down and attached at the hip to Summer doesn’t make you the only expert.”

“Your expertise at one-night stands doesn’t exactly play into this situation, either.” I cross my arms and smirk at Finn as Ethan laughs behind me.

Finn lets out a huff. “Whatever.”

Ethan slugs him in the arm and turns back to me. “He’s got a point, dude. But we aren’t here to dissect the wino’s love life. We’re here for yours.”

“I thought we were here to run,” I mutter under my breath, but both of my nosy friends just ignore me.

“Here’s what I’m thinking. You find some reason to call her that’s related to school. Then when you’re talking, you can feel out the vibe she’s giving. If she seems totally turned off because you’re the kid’s principal, back off. If she seems open, take your chance.”

I look at Finn in surprise, because he essentially just suggested exactly what I did. “Yeah, dude, that’s what I did last night.”

Finn lets out an excited whoop, and even Ethan looks pleased. “And? Don’t leave us hanging.”

I roll my eyes at his ridiculously over the top reaction. “She wants to talk to her daughter, make sure she won’t feel weird about it. But if that’s all good, she agreed to go out with me.”

Ethan’s expression turns serious. “Are you sure you know what you’re getting into if you go out with her? You’re ready to be a part of her daughter’s life like that?”

I hold up my hands. “Hey, don’t move so fast on me, Mayor Monroe. Her kid’s awesome, but I’m not trying to be her dad. I just want to date her mom.”

“Yeah, but the two things kinda go together, don’t they?”

I pause and think about that. I'm not an idiot, obviously the second I realized Layla was Abby's daughter I understood that they're a package deal. And even if I've never thought about having kids myself before, it's not like I don't enjoy their company. I'm an elementary school principal, for Christ's sake. Still, being involved in a child's life in a personal way is different from seeing them at school.

Maybe Abby and Layla aren't the only ones with some thinking to do.



When I see Layla at school the next day, she waves at me happily from the hallway. I don't get the sense that her mom has spoken to her at all. I do my best not to look at her or treat her any differently, but over the next few days I find myself gravitating toward her anyway. She's a cool kid, with a unique spin on life, one of those goofy, upbeat attitudes, and enough confidence she could run the world someday.

Now, if only I could get her mom to call me.

Friday night I head home from work, already thinking about where I'm going to order takeout from. The short drive to my apartment also gives me time to debate whether it would come across as pushy for me to call Abby again. But as soon as I pull into my parking spot, I get a text message that solves everything.

ETHAN: We're all headed to the Martin Farm to pick out Christmas trees tomorrow, thought you might want to

join....

I grin. Looks like my best friend is playing matchmaker. This once, I won't give him a hard time about it, since I desperately want the excuse to see Abby.

REID: Sounds good. What time?

ETHAN: Meet there at 10. Just to warn you, Summer and Mila want to scope out your girl.

Crap. They mean well, but if those two or their friends Paige and Serena get in Abby's business, it could definitely scare her off.

REID: Shit. Can you tell them to back off? I haven't heard from her yet.

ETHAN: I'll try, but you know how they can get.

REID: I do, which is why I'm asking you to tell them to keep a lid on it.

ETHAN: I'll do my best. See you tomorrow.

Heading inside my building, I feel a weird combination of anticipation and nerves. What if she hasn't called because Layla isn't on board with us dating? Granted, I don't think that's true, seeing as the kid was just as lively and chatty with me today as she has been all week. So maybe Abby is the one who changed her mind?

Either way, I guess tomorrow I'll find out. But somehow, even knowing that I'll see her in just a few hours and get an answer, hopefully, isn't enough to let my mind stop wondering

what if. I never understood how a woman could ever consume someone's thoughts the way Abby does mine. If I'm being honest, she has from the night we first met. But as I lay in bed, trying to get some sleep, all I can do is picture her hair spread out on the pillow beside me, her lips on mine, and her body underneath me.

After a night tossing and turning, I drag myself out of bed at seven. Three more hours until I can hopefully do something about this insanity bubbling up inside of me. For how long the night felt, the morning seems to fly by, and soon enough I'm driving to the farm, regretting the third cup of coffee I downed after my shower. Everyone is already there and the excited look on Ethan's sister Mila's face makes me inwardly groan. I shoot her a glare, and she seems to get the message because I see her shoulders drop in acceptance. But my warning might be for no reason since Abby isn't at the entrance or anywhere to be seen when we walk through the farmyard.

"So where is she?"

I startle at Serena's voice. "Where's who?" I say, trying to play dumb. I should have known Mila and Summer wouldn't keep things to themselves. The downside to having such a large, close-knit group of friends is that everyone knows everybody else's business.

Serena shoves at me with her shoulder. "You know who, your farm girl."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Don't call her that. Her name is Abby."

She lifts her hands in defense. “Oooh, touchy touchy. Sorry. Where’s Abby?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t tell you,” I mutter, but Serena just laughs.

“Oh, Reid. Don’t you know we’re just messing with you? We won’t really embarrass you. Not when it’s obvious you actually like this one.”

I pause in the middle of running my fingers over my jacket and frown at her. “How would you know, you’ve never seen her before.”

“Because my brother wouldn’t warn us to keep quiet and leave you alone if you didn’t.” Mila walks up and slings her arm over my shoulders. “Not to mention, you’ve been looking for someone ever since we arrived and you can’t stop fussing with your clothes.”

I drop my head in defeat. Apparently I was way more obvious than I thought I was. “Alright, fine. Yes, I like her. Abby, she’s different somehow. So just give me some space, please?” I look at the two women in turn, and they both nod. “And make sure Summer steers clear, too. Abby’s got reasons to want to move slowly.”

“You mean like the adorable little girl beelining her way over here?” I turn at Serena’s words, and feel a grin cover my face. Sure enough, Layla is marching over here in a green Martin Farm T-shirt that is about three sizes too big, over top of a pink sweatshirt. The toque on her head has a giant pom-

pom, and her rosy cheeks tell me she's been outside in the cold air for awhile.

“Mr. Corser! You're here! Did you come for a tree? I can show you where the best ones are. My Unca Steve told me. But I only told one other person, and that's my best friend Carly's dad. I'm going there for a sleepover after the tree lightin' festival. Did you know there's a giant tree in town that they light up? And Mom n' Unca Steve are gonna bring some animals for a nativity scene. I dunno what that is, but it has animals, so I guess it's cool. I'm gonna help with the goats maybe. But maybe not. I might just play with Carly. Mom says I can. So can I help you find a tree? I'm good at cuttin' them down.”

By the time Layla stops talking, I can hear Serena, Mila, and Summer all fighting to keep quiet. I manage to hide my own amusement and crouch down to her level. “Hi there, Layla. Wow, I'm glad you found us.” I turn and point to my friends. “I'm not here for a tree, I'm just here to keep my friends company. But they would probably love to see the really good trees.”

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't the look of horror on her face. I stand up, quickly trying to figure out what's wrong. I've never felt such an immediate worry, but I can't stand her looking so upset.

“Mr. Corser, why don't you need a tree? Everyone needs a Christmas tree.”

The adrenaline surge leaves my body as quickly as it came. Thank God, not a crisis, just a misunderstanding. “I live by myself, and most of the time I spend Christmas day with my friends or with my parents on the mainland,” I say, only after realizing this is more personal information than any other student of mine knows. “I don’t need a tree just for me.”

“Layla, are you helping our visitors?” Steve Martin’s booming voice interrupts whatever the little girl was going to say, and I’m relieved for his distraction. I could tell she was winding up for another long speech.

“Yeah, Unca Steve. I was tellin’ Mr. Corser about the good trees. But he says he doesn’t want one.”

The indignant tone makes me chuckle, and Layla frowns at me. But once again, Uncle Steve steps in. “Why don’t you take Mr. Corser’s friends to the good trees. I’ll show him one of our mini trees that’s in the pots. Maybe that will work better for him.” Steve turns Layla’s shoulders, and with one final shrug of her shoulders at me, she dances off to where my friends are all standing, smiling at us.

“If you’ll come this way, Mr. Corser, I think you might enjoy the potted trees that I’ve got in the barn,” Steve says, taking my arm.

“Thanks Steve, but really, I don’t—”

“If it’s my niece you’re looking for, she’s in the barn as well,” he says in a much quieter tone.

I look at him in surprise.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, I can tell when a man has a woman in mind.”

I drop my head and chuckle ruefully. “I really am that transparent, huh?”

Steve claps his hand on my shoulder. “Only to anyone looking. Now, I’ll keep Layla busy. You go.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Abby

“Thank you, have a happy holiday.” I smile as the last customer walks out, then sink onto the small stool I’ve got set up behind the counter in the barn. I’m exhausted, and it’s not because running a Christmas tree farm this close to Christmas is busier than any other job I’ve had. And it’s not because I’m a single mom of an energetic, curious, talkative little girl. Nope. And it’s not the animals that need caring for at five o’clock every morning. This exhaustion is from one thing and one thing only.

Reid Corser.

The man has haunted my dreams every night, keeping me awake with filthy fantasies playing out in my head. And the daytime is no better, as my thoughts keep wandering to him, what he’s doing, and whether he’s thinking about me, too. But every time I go to talk to Layla about him, I freeze. It’s not that I haven’t dated, but it’s never been serious, and Layla has

never met them. There seemed no point when it was just casual. Something tells me if Reid and I start something, there's no way we can keep it casual. Which means I need to feel positive that she won't be confused or upset in any way. She's never even hinted at missing having some sort of male figure in her life, which has filled me with endless amounts of relief, seeing as her biological father was nothing more than a sperm donor who signed over all of his parental rights days after I called him to say she was born. Someday, I'll tell her about him if she asks. But telling her I want to date Reid feels big. Really big. Because if I'm being truly honest, it will be more than just dating. Don't ask me how I know that, I just do. And while that should scare the crap out of me, it doesn't. It feels like, dare I say it, a Christmas miracle.

I'm laughing to myself at that cheesy idea when the rich voice that I hear in my head every night fills my ears.

"Whatever's responsible for making you smile like that is making me jealous."

When I turn around, Reid is filling the doorway, looking downright delicious in jeans, a dark green sweater, and a leather jacket that's unzipped. He walks toward me with purpose, and comes to a stop on the other side of the counter.

"Hi." God, the way his lips tip up in a small smile when he says that one word makes my insides turn to complete mush.

"Hi," I reply, the short word coming out as a whisper. A quick glance tells me we're alone in here, so without saying another word, I tilt my head toward the entrance to the back of

the barn where we keep extras of the local crafts and canned goods that we sell. The smile on Reid's face grows until he's beaming. He quickly rounds the counter and follows me through the small curtain. It's barely fluttered shut before he spins me around and presses me up against the wall, his lips covering mine in a kiss.

"God, Abby," he groans against my mouth. I pull him in closer, until I feel his rigid body pressed tightly against mine. His hips grind into me and my head drops back in a moan. I want *more*.

"Reid," I gasp as his lips travel down my neck. Thank God I never put on my coat, even though I was getting chilly earlier because now he's got access to the sensitive skin of my collarbone. And who knew collarbones could be an erogenous zone. Not me, that's for sure. But Reid's lips are dancing light kisses everywhere, lighting me up. My leg lifts up to wrap around him, and one of his hands immediately goes to my hip, securing me there. The position brings us even closer, and if he can't feel the heat and moisture pooling between my legs already, I swear he will soon because I'm about to combust.

The sound of voices out front breaks through the lusty haze surrounding me and I push him away. "Oh my God," I pant, my hand coming up to feel my racing heart. He's breathing heavily as well, and the hooded look in his eyes promises so much more. A small shudder goes through my body.

I turn to go out front and deal with the customers, but Reid stops me with a hand on my hip.

“Tell me I can see you again, Abby. Please.”

I turn back to look at him, and for the first time since Layla was born, I make a spontaneous decision without thinking of her.

“Tomorrow night.”

He pulls me back toward him and I go without any resistance. His large hands cup my cheeks as he presses a sweet kiss to my lips. “Can I pick you up here?”

That makes me wince. “No. I...I haven’t been able to talk to Layla yet.”

Reid draws back, and his eyes search mine. I can hear more people out front and I know I have to get out there soon before my uncle — or Layla — catches us.

“Abby, we can wait.”

As if my heart wasn’t melting enough, he had to go and put my daughter’s feelings ahead of his own wants.

“No. I’ll talk to her. It’s just...it’s hard.” I bite my lip. His eyes darken. “But I need to see you again. Can we just be discreet for awhile? Just until I can talk to her.”

He nods and I can’t deny I’m relieved he’ll go along with keeping things private for now. Dating a single mom isn’t for the faint of heart; I just hope he’s ready for that. His hands drop to hold mine, and he gives them a gentle squeeze.

“My friend Summer owns the Oceanside Beach Resort just outside of town. It’s closed for the season, but she’ll give me

the keys for a cabin if I ask her.” My eyes widen at the suggestive nature of his words, and he groans and shakes his head. “I’m sorry. That came across wrong. I swear I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I was just thinking it would be a private place for us to have dinner and talk for a while. The cabins have gas fireplaces in them, and kitchenettes. I’ll cook if you bring the wine.”

A giggle bursts out of me at the look of chagrin on his face. “Okay, Casanova. You cook, I’ll bring wine.” I lift up on my toes to press one more kiss to his lips before I hurry out to the front. When I see Uncle Steve behind the counter helping customers, I feel a blush creep across my cheeks. But when Reid follows me out and Steve chuckles, giving me a knowing look, that blush burns stronger. Reid winks and walks out of the barn without another word, and I make a point of ignoring my Uncle, turning to the next person waiting to make a purchase.



The next evening, I tell Layla I’m going out to meet some new friends as Uncle Steve tries to hide his smirk. I know I shouldn’t lie to my daughter, but really — at this point, Reid is just a friend. A friend I like to kiss, but a friend nonetheless.

I follow directions to Oceanside Resort, and drive slowly down the dark gravel driveway until I see Reid’s truck parked behind a small cabin that looks out over the water. It’s cold but beautiful with clear skies twinkling with stars. There are lights on inside the cabin as I walk around to the front, and the door

opens. Reid steps out and takes my hand, spinning me around so we're facing the ocean. My back is pressed to his front and I can feel his strong warmth covering me from head to toe.

"I'm so happy you're here," he murmurs into my ear.

I simply nod, letting the sensation of his body touching mine and the sound of the waves gently lapping at the shore lull me into relaxation. Time passes, I have no idea how long, and we stay there in silence. Peace.

Eventually, Reid turns me in his arms, bringing his hands up to thread through my hair. He kisses my forehead and it's like every romance novel I've ever read has come to life. Here's the handsome hero and the bumbling, nervous heroine in the romantic setting, and the forehead kiss. The biggest aphrodisiac of them all.

"How about some dinner?" Reid asks and I smile, finally finding my voice.

"That would be great." But when I spin around, he's got a mischievous tilt to his mouth that I can't make sense of until he stops in the doorway and looks up.

"I never got to take advantage of the mistletoe at the farm, so I figured we needed a do-over."

My laugh gets engulfed by his kiss, which he keeps sweet and simple, but still makes my entire body tingle with excitement. When Reid pulls away, he places his forehead on mine again. He's breathing heavily and secretly I'm thrilled that he's obviously turned on. We head inside where the

fireplace is blazing, which warms me up from the chill I hadn't even noticed I was feeling outside. Reid takes two plates from the counter and sets them on the table, which is set with everything from cutlery to cloth napkins and even a candle.

“You really pulled out all the stops,” I say, half teasing, half admiring. Reid gives me a mock bow.

“I aim to please.”

And that he does. Without even realizing it, Reid has given me the most romantic evening of my entire life. Never before has someone put so much effort into a date with me, and I can't deny how it's making my heart feel full.

We sit down and enjoy an incredible dinner of roasted chicken, sweet potatoes, and a vegetable casserole that feels indulgent and warming. Everything is delicious and I make sure to tell him so in between bites.

“Seriously, where did you learn to cook like that?” I say in wonder as I put my fork down on a bare plate. Reid gives me a bashful smile, but I can tell he's pleased.

“My mom. She loves to cook, and when I was old enough to join her in the kitchen, she made sure to include me in everything. It was our favourite thing to do together. Still is, when I make it back home to visit.”

I shouldn't be turned on by the fact that he obviously loves his mom, but I am. And when he stands to clear our dishes, I stay seated, my eyes fixed on the man who is surprising me at every turn. With freshly filled wine glasses, we move to the

loveseat in front of the gas fireplace. It's a small couch, and our legs are touching when we sit side by side. I turn so my back is against the arm of the couch and I'm facing Reid. When he lifts my legs up into his lap, I'm so startled I don't protest. His eyes are on mine as his hands drift up and down my legs in a move that should seem like no big deal, but is actually turning all of my nerve endings on fire. Reid must see that in my eyes because he leans in closer and pauses, waiting for me to close the distance.

When my lips touch his, I taste wine and desire. It's a heady combination, and I quickly lose myself to the sensation.

"God, Abby, your lips are heaven," he says in a low rumble against my skin. I turn my head to kiss his scruff covered cheek, and his hand tightens in my hair. I hear him set his glass down on the table, then he takes mine and puts it down as well. Suddenly I'm airborne and swung around like a rag doll to straddle his lap.

"Reid," I moan when his hands squeeze my ass, pulling me flush against his hardening cock. Between the heat of the fireplace and the inferno building between us, it doesn't feel like we're in a small cabin during the cold West Coast winter. I'm burning up, the intense arousal inside of me bubbling like a volcano.

Words are lost to me as Reid's kisses turn into gentle sucks and nips on my neck and his hands go to the bottom of my sweater. He pulls back for an instant, and I nod before he lifts my sweater up and over my head. Thank *God* I decided to put

on my one good set of lingerie tonight. The way his eyes smoulder at the sight of the navy blue lace covering my breasts tells me I was right to prepare for anything.

“Abby, you’re the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen.” His voice rings with sincerity and I fall even further for this man. My hands fumble with his shirt, and he covers them with his own, lifting my fingers to his mouth to kiss them sweetly. Then in one swift move he’s turned us and laid me down on the couch so that he’s hovering over me. His shirt comes off next, and my sharp intake of breath makes his eyes darken even further. He’s a work of art, carved muscles covered in a smattering of dark hair — pure masculinity.

“Just so you know, I wasn’t lying. I truly didn’t invite you here with any expectation of...this,” he says, and I see the concern in his face. My hand comes up to cup his cheek as I pull him down to kiss me.

“I know. And I don’t think I can, you know, go all the way. Not yet. But this...” My voice trails off lamely as I struggle to balance the warring arousal and caution in my heart.

“It’s okay. I understand. Feeling you here with me, just like this, it’s enough.”

My eyes dart up to Reid’s face, searching to see if he’s serious. All I find there is open honesty, and it soothes the nerves I didn’t know were lurking in the background. It makes me feel like I need to be honest with him.

“It’s been a while.”

His hand strokes my hair as he settles onto his side on the edge of the couch. It's a bit ridiculous that we're squished together on this tiny thing when I know for a fact there's a bed close by, but this feels safer.

"How long?" he asks, and it doesn't feel intrusive for him to want to know the answer. It's more like we're getting to know each other the right way. But that doesn't mean I'm not nervous about his response to my answer.

"Umm, a couple of years. And before that, well, the last time was what led to Layla."

As I expected, Reid's head moves back in surprise. "You've only had sex once since you conceived her?" He sounds astonished, and something more. Something...heated.

I nod.

"Where is the guy who led to Layla?"

I love that he doesn't call him her father. Because he's not and never has been. "He was a mistake. The only good thing he did, aside from create her, was sign over his parental rights the day she was born."

Reid's hand comes up to caress my hip, and he looks at me with such wonder. "She's an amazing kid, Abby. Thank you for telling me all of this. I don't know what I did to deserve your attention, but I swear to you I don't take any of it, any of you, for granted."

This time when I pull him down for a kiss, we don't stop. Somehow we shift until he's on top of me again, and when his

lips travel down to the slope of my breasts, my body arches into his touch. It's more action than I've had in years, and the temptation to give in is strong. Reid's hands go to the top of my pants and he lifts his head to look at me.

“Can I taste you, Abby?”

Jesus Christ. I don't think I've *ever* had a man ask me that. There is absolutely no way I can say no. I lift my hips in invitation, and he quickly undoes the button and zipper to my jeans, and slides them down my legs, taking my panties with them. Yet again, I give myself a silent thanks for taking the time to groom earlier today. My brain may have been saying there was no way things would get even this far, but clearly my body and my heart knew better.

Reid takes his time peppering my hips and legs with kisses, his hands running up and down my bare skin, teasing me until I'm writhing underneath him, desperate to have him where I truly need him. Finally, his lips come to the top of my thighs and he turns his nose toward my center and nuzzles me, making me gasp and clutch the back of his head.

“You're fucking delicious,” he growls right before swiping his tongue up the length of my sex. My hips shoot up in response, and I'm moaning his name as he sets to work devouring me. I've never had a man devote his energy to pleasing me the way Reid is, like his very life depends on making me see stars.

“Oh my God, right there. Oh God!” I'm rambling, my voice getting higher and higher when he slides in two fingers and

turns them to curl around and find my G-spot with impressive accuracy. “Reid! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes...” My head starts to thrash as I chase the orgasm that I can feel pressing in on me. I want it, I need it, but I just can’t....

“Let go, Abby, I’ve got you.”

I detonate.

CHAPTER SIX

Reid

It took everything I have in me not to fuck Abby at the cabin. Having her laid out underneath me, naked and wanting, was just as hot as I thought it would be. And I know that if I hadn't put the brakes on after her spectacular orgasm, she would have been just as willing as I was to go further.

It's been three days since that night, and we've texted nonstop each night. Last night Abby switched to video and seeing her beautiful face made me want to get in my truck and drive to the farm just so I could kiss her.

But I resisted. And now it's the night of the town Christmas tree lighting, and I know Abby will be there with some of the animals from the farm for the live nativity. The whole concept of a live nativity scene is bizarre to me. I guess it'll be fun for the kids, but it sure seems like a lot of work. This is the first year they've done it, and I guess Steve and Abby didn't want to back out, despite his broken leg.

When I walk into The Nutty Muffin, Mila's café, all of my friends are already there. Mila and her boyfriend, Jackson, are whispering to each other over by the counter, Serena, Paige, and Summer are all talking and laughing about something, and Ethan is scrolling on his phone. The final member of our motley crew, and the newest resident of Dogwood Cove, comes in looking frustrated.

"Hey man, what the hell happened to you?" Ethan asks.

"Don't. Ask." Finn clips out. "Mila, tell me you've got that bottle of peppermint schnapps we stashed here last year. If I can't have boozy hot chocolate tonight, I'm going home."

That makes me raise my eyebrows, but Mila grabs the bottle of schnapps and gives everyone a healthy dose in our mugs. We cheers and as I look around at my friends, I wonder how Abby would fit in with us all. Perfectly, I suspect.

Half an hour later and I feel like a lovesick teenager for how many times I keep stealing glances over at Abby, who's tending the animals in the nativity. Steve is sitting in a chair next to everything, and I've seen Layla running back and forth a few times, going between some friends she must be here with and her mom. My body craves Abby, and it's getting harder and harder to stay away. The pull I feel toward her is driving me crazy, and I've had to work to ignore the curious looks coming from my friends. Thankfully, they don't say anything, but I know they've noticed how I'm orbiting her like a satellite.

When our group makes our way to where the nativity scene is set up, Abby's face lights up. She bites her lip and I stifle a groan.

"Hi, Reid," she says demurely, then her eyes widen. "Wait. Should I call you Mr. Corser in public?" I chuckle, but before I can answer, Mila steps in.

"Nah, don't make him feel more important than he already thinks he is. The kids are used to him being called Reid outside of school."

"Save the *mister* stuff for the bedroom," Serena chimes in and I see Abby blush furiously. Damn women just can't keep their mouths shut. I shoot them both a glare before I respond to Abby.

"Reid is fine. I don't worry too much about formalities outside of school." Abby nods, and relief covers her beautiful face. I move in a little closer, but still far enough away to be respectable. "And don't worry about Mila and Serena. They're just teasing, but they won't say anything inappropriate if Layla is around." This time when I look back at my friends they appear suitably remorseful.

"He's right. Sorry Abby, we're just so excited to get to know you, and Reid has been so adorable mooning about you."

"Oh my God, Serena, shut up," Mila squeals, smacking her friend on the shoulder. "You're going to embarrass him."

I wince, because she's not wrong. I don't exactly need Abby to know how obvious it has been to my friends that I can't stop

thinking or talking about her. Thankfully, my best friend has perfect timing.

“Alright, time to mayor up and get this tree lit,” Ethan says. He holds out his hand to Summer, who takes it and tucks herself into his side. *I want that.* With Abby, not Summer, of course. “See you guys in a bit. Abby, thanks for handling the animals.” Ethan gives Abby a warm smile before walking over to the tree.

A few minutes later and the crowd around Abby and the animals dissipates. I hang back, waiting until it’s clear that everyone’s attention is on the massive tree in the center of the square, then I close the distance between us and come to a stop inches behind her where she’s focused on Betty the cow.

“What is it with us and cows? Isn’t there a Christmas song with lyrics about maids a-milking?” I murmur in her ear, earning a throaty chuckle.

“Yeah, except I’m no maid.”

I lean in closer and run my nose up the column of her neck. “No, you’re not.”

She turns around slowly, her eyes dancing. “Hi.”

I bend down and kiss her softly, once, then harder. “Hi. I missed you.”

“Yeah, I gathered that from what your friends said.” She giggles, and I’ll be damned if the sound of her happiness doesn’t make my cock stir. Making Abby happy is becoming the most important thing to me.

Abby's eyes dart around quickly and I hold back, knowing she's making sure the coast is clear. Fuck, I cannot wait until I can kiss her properly, in public, and not worry about Layla or anyone else seeing. I want to claim her as mine. I want to claim both of them as mine.

Her hands thread their way into my hair, and I'm glad I didn't bother with a toque tonight. She tugs her lower lip in between her teeth again and I'm powerless to resist the temptation. My thumb comes up and gently frees her lip before I cover it with my own. Our tongues dance together, our breaths become one, and the rest of the world fades away until the only thing that exists for me is Abby.

But a kiss isn't enough. Nothing will ever be enough, I'm coming to realize. My hands drift down to palm her ass and then I'm lifting her into my arms. Her mouth tears away from mine.

"Reid, what are you doing?" she asks, panting heavily. Fuck, I'm so hard my dick is throbbing against my jeans. It's painful, but it's the best kind of pain.

"I'm moving us somewhere a little more private."

I make quick work of the short distance to the truck and trailer that Abby obviously used to transport the animals. The farm smell doesn't make for the best ambiance, but we're even more secluded back here. When we get to the truck, the front door is ajar, which seems odd, but Abby doesn't even notice. I set her down on the hood of the truck and tug her forward. Her legs wrap around my waist, and she grinds into me as we kiss.

Her hands sneak under my jacket, finding bare skin. I'm too busy squeezing her luscious ass to even notice what she's doing, but based on the moans coming from her, it's good.

Time stands still and it isn't until a cheer goes up from somewhere behind us that I realize the tree is lit and people will be heading this way soon. It takes an immense amount of strength to pull back, but I somehow do. The sight of Abby, with her cheeks flushed and her hair mussed is pure sinful temptation, but it's the words she says that just about do me in.

"Layla's at a sleepover tonight," she whispers. "I could...I could come over. And stay?"

The very fact that she says it like it's a question makes me growl. My tongue dives into her mouth and tangles with hers again before I pull back. My heart is beating wildly as I look into the eyes of the woman I'm falling in love with and say the one word that will seal our fate.

"Yes."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Abby

You are a grown ass woman. You are a mom. You have had sex before. This is not a big deal.

My inner monologue is doing absolutely nothing to calm my nerves as I finish loading up the animals, say goodbye to Layla and confirm plans to pick her up in the morning from her friend's house, and make the drive back to the farm. Uncle Steve said he'd get a ride from a friend, wanting to stay a while longer and have a drink at the pub. His questioning gaze when I said I was going out with a friend made me blush, but thankfully he didn't push for any more details.

Which brings me to this moment, driving toward Reid's apartment. I know what is going to happen. This is essentially a booty call. My first one, I might add. But it feels like more than that; we're in a relationship. Sort of? Truthfully, I don't know what Reid and I are doing, but I like it, even as I'm afraid of it.

I have to talk to Layla. But how do you ask a seven-year-old her opinion on her mother dating her school principal? She doesn't even know what dating is — thank God — and she's never seen me in a relationship. The truth is, she has never even met a man that I've been with because none of them were ever important enough to get that far. But Reid...not only does she already know him, he already feels important enough to know her outside of school.

Which is crazy. I know.

I pull into the parking lot outside Reid's building and find the visitor spot he told me to use. I kill my engine, and just sit there in silence for a minute gathering myself. Well, it must be more than a minute that I sit there because my phone vibrates, startling me in the stillness. When I check it to make sure it's not Layla, a snort escapes me.

REID: How long are you planning on sitting there, beautiful? I'm starting to get jealous of a parking spot.

I grin, my nerves instantly erased and type out a reply.

ABBY: Sorry. Just...you know.

REID: I get it. I really do. Consider tonight the same as the cabin. Nothing has to happen. I'm just excited to spend time with you.

REID: Preferably not over text messages while I can see you sitting out in your car, probably freezing. It's warm in here. And I have wine.

ABBY: Sold. I'm on my way.

I'm out of my car and in the building, running up the flight of stairs with a giant grin on my face within minutes. And when I see Reid standing in his doorway, looking absolutely irresistible with his bare feet, T-shirt, and jeans, I barrel into him, crushing my lips to his as we fall through his doorway and into his apartment.

His tongue probes my lips and I eagerly open to him. It's sloppy, and messy, and raw, and passionate. It's a kiss that feels like we haven't kissed in years, instead of just a couple of hours ago. It's a kiss that promises so much more.

I don't register that he's talking until Reid's hands are on my shoulders, gently pushing me away.

"I'm all for what's happening, but I meant it, Abby, we don't have to take this any further than you're comfortable with."

Oh, for heaven's sake. This man and his morals are going to be the death of me. I grab his hands in mine, and slide them around to cup my ass, bringing me close against his body where I can feel just how badly he wants this. I can't hide my moan when that impressive bulge presses up against me. And if he were to slide his hands beneath my pants, he'd know in an instant just how turned on I am.

"Reid. I want this. I want you. Now. Please."

It's that final word that snaps the cord holding on to his self-control.

"Fuck, yes," he growls, then I'm airborne and he's walking down a short hallway, into a room that I assume is his

bedroom. But honestly, my attention isn't on his decorating style, it's on trying to get his shirt off while I'm in his arms. It takes a minute, but I succeed and then my hands and my lips are roaming across his heated skin, feeling every line and contour of muscle bunching under my touch. His body could have been carved by a master artist, it's so perfect. He's strength, and unbridled power. All wrapped up in a man who is showing me as much sweetness and tenderness as he is passion and desire.

“Babe.” His groan might just be the sexiest thing I've heard, and I brush my fingers over his rock-hard nipples to see if he'll do it again. He does, and the fire in his eyes as he lays me down on his bed and comes over me is an inferno.

“You're wearing too many clothes, Abigail.”

Good Lord, the command in those words does something to me. “So why don't you help me take care of that?” Who is this saucy woman and where did she come from? I've never seen this side of myself, but I like it, and judging by the wicked smile on Reid's handsome face, so does he.

“With *pleasure.*”

Clothes come off in a flurry, and then it's skin on skin. We meld together, hands roaming, learning the feel of each other intimately. But when Reid makes to move his way down my body, I grab his shoulders with a moan.

“Don't make me wait any longer.”

“Christ, Abby.” He flips us over so that I’m on top of him, his cock sliding between my legs with ease from the moisture that has pooled there. How can this feel so good? He isn’t even inside of me and I feel ready to explode. We grind together for a few seconds and my orgasm is building into something I may not survive — at least not with my sanity, or my heart, intact.

“Hang on, babe. We need a condom,” Reid manages to get out in between kisses and I freeze, panting heavily. I’ve never forgotten protection except the one time that led to the best thing in my life. Not that I recommend single parenthood for anyone, but Layla is a blessing. No doubt about it. But now is not the time to be thinking of my daughter. Not as Reid is leaning off the side of my bed and snagging a foil packet from his pants pocket in an impressive feat of strength and flexibility. I take it from his hands and tear it open, rolling it carefully down his length, taking the time to stroke him once, twice, until he’s twitching under my hands and his fingers are digging so hard into my hips I’m fairly certain I’ll have bruises there in the morning.

Once he’s covered, I bring my hands to rest on his chest and just stare down at the man that is changing so much inside of me, making me want so many things I didn’t think were possible.

Happiness.

Family.

Love.

“Abby.”

He says my name with such reverence, I know I’m not alone in my feelings. And that understanding stays with me as I lift my hips and sink down on him until he’s filled me up in the most perfect of ways. For the measure of two heartbeats, we stay there connected, eyes locked on each other. Our souls are speaking through our bodies. And I swear mine is telling me, *this is right*.

Then I start to move. Reid’s hands are everywhere, stroking, touching, driving me higher and higher. His hips are lifting to meet mine, and again I’m overcome with the sensation that we’re in this together. Fully. Completely. And it’s so overwhelming, this desire and lust, morphing into another four-letter word, that I start to lose myself.

“I need...Reid, I...”

“I know, sweetheart. I know.”

He lifts himself up until he’s sitting, and my legs wrap around his waist. We rock together and I let him take over, guiding our movements. It feels so good to let go, to have someone else in charge. I can feel my climax hurtling toward me, and I want it even as I want this to never end.

“Fuck. Abby. Babe. You feel so damn good.”

I feel him swell inside of me, and the idea of making this man lose control suddenly becomes my top priority. When his head drops down to my shoulder, I bring my hands to his shoulders and speed up, undulating around him and over him.

His movements become erratic, and he starts to just mumble my name. I can hear a strange, high-pitched moan, and it takes me a minute to realize that it's me.

But then my orgasm hits, and so does his, and suddenly noises and sights and smells are gone and all I can do is just feel.



If there were an award for best morning after, today would win. After a shower at Reid's, where we made good use of the bench in his massive shower stall, I hurried home to the farm for a change of clothes. Uncle Steve's knowing grin should have bothered me, but I'm in way too good of a mood to care. It's one of those beautiful, clear days that makes the rest of winter — which is typically filled with cold, dreary, wet days — worth it. The air is crisp, the sun is shining, and I know the smile on my face is wider than it's been in a long time.

Multiple orgasms will do that to you.

I've got the radio playing Christmas songs as I drive to the home of Layla's friend, Carly, where she spent the night. Somehow, I tame my giddy happiness enough to seem normal in front of Carly's parents, who seem like really nice people. Then my daughter and I are driving home, and I'm trying to focus on what she's telling me instead of letting my mind drift back to last night, back to Reid.

“...and the muffins were so good, and Carly's mom said they come from a place in town, and we need to go there.”

“Mmm, muffins. Sounds great, baby,” I say absently. *I bet Reid likes muffins....*

“Mommy,” Layla says, and the curious tone in her voice grabs my attention. I glance in the rearview mirror to see her fidgeting with her fingers.

“Why were you kissing Mr. Corser last night?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Reid

I'm not ashamed to admit I've had a few one-night stands. Spectacular sex for a couple of hours, then part ways and never speak to each other again.

That is definitely *not* what I had in mind when I invited Abby over.

But here we are, three days after what was undoubtedly the best sex of my entire life, and the woman of my dreams has ghosted me. Aside from a one-word response — *yes* — when I messaged her the morning after to make sure she and Layla got home okay, she's been completely silent. All of my texts have gone unanswered.

Its unnerving, and what's even more so is that I don't know what to do about it. I can't exactly go out there during the day to talk to her, not with three hundred students relying on me to guide them through this final week of school. And after school

hours, Layla will be there, and for all I know she still has no idea I'm falling for her mom. Of course, right now, Layla is in class just down the hall from my office. I've seen her in the halls, and she's smiled and waved at me like usual. Which leaves me still confused by what's happened, or rather, not happened.

I finally get my chance one afternoon when my weekly meeting is canceled due to the impending holidays, and I can make it outside at the end of the day for the pickup line. I make my way around, greeting families and children as I go, keeping my eyes peeled for Abby's car. When several minutes pass after the final bell, and the parking lot starts to clear out, there's still no sign of her. Layla, however, is sitting on the steps, flipping through a book with her gloved hands. I go and sit next to her.

"Hey, Layla, is your mom picking you up today?"

She looks up at me, and I don't miss the slight worry on her face. "Yeah. I don't know where she is."

"Why don't you come inside and wait in my office. We can give her a call and see what's holding her up." I hold my hand out, and Layla takes it, letting me help her up. We walk inside and I get her settled in my office. I go to reach for my cell, but catch myself with a glance to Layla who's looking around innocently. I pick up the school phone instead, and dial the number I know by heart. It doesn't even dawn on me that I was worried about Abby until I hear her frazzled voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello, this is Abby.”

“Hi Abby, it’s Rei- Mr. Corser.” I wince, hoping Layla didn’t notice I almost used my first name. She’s engrossed in her book, but looks up at my voice. “I’ve got Layla in my office. She’s fine, but we’re just checking to make sure you’re okay, and on your way for pickup.”

I hear Abby’s deep sigh, and I hate how uncomfortable it sounds. “Yes. I’m sorry, Reid. Uncle Steve had a doctor’s appointment and we ran into traffic getting back to the farm from Westport. I’m on my way, I should be there in five minutes.”

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “It’s fine, Abby. I’ll wait with her inside. Drive safely.” There’s so much more I want to say, but I can’t with Layla right here, so we hang up and I turn to the little girl who’s watching me closely.

“Okay, your mom got held up with Uncle Steve, but she’s on her way.”

Layla nods. “kay.”

I lean against the edge of my desk. For all my years working with children, I’m suddenly unsure of what to say to this particular child. “Do you want a snack or some water?”

She shakes her head, then cocks it to one side and looks at me closely. “You kissed my mom.”

The fact that I don’t fall off my desk is no small feat, that’s how shocked I am. But fast on the heels of surprise comes a flash of understanding. Damn, I wish Abby had said

something, anything, so I could know how to respond. But I'm flying blind, so I proceed cautiously.

"I did. You saw us?" She nods. "Did that upset you?" She shakes her head. C'mon kid, give me something to work with... "Has your mom talked to you about what you saw?" She nods, and I take my first deep breath in a while.

"I really like your mom," I say tentatively. That turns out to be the right thing to say, because finally Layla smiles.

"Good. She likes you, too."

I grin back at her, filled with relief. "So does that mean you wouldn't mind if I kissed her again?"

"Nope," Layla says, popping the p. "Are you gonna have sleepovers at the farm? Melissa's dad started kissing someone and then they had sleepovers and now Melissa says she's her stepmom. I dunno what that means, but I guess you would be my stepdad if you did sleepovers at our house."

"Right, well, we're not moving that fast, Layla. But I do like spending time with your mom." Oh shit. I need to change the subject away from sleepovers and stepparents. This is way beyond my comfort zone. "What are you looking forward to the most about winter break?"

"Makin' gingerbread houses. But Mom hasn't got the stuff yet. She keeps sayin' she will, but she's busy helping Unca Steve." Layla frowns, and it tugs at something in my heart. I don't like seeing this little girl upset. Not even over something

as trivial as gingerbread. My mind starts going a mile a minute with a plan to win over both Layla and her mom.

I hear the front door to the school open, and smile warmly at Layla. “Sounds like your mom’s here.” She jumps to her feet and grabs her stuff before running out of my office. By the time I catch up to her, she’s got her arms around Abby, who’s crouched down to her level, murmuring something in her ear. Layla nods, and I hear her whisper, “It’s okay, Mom. Mr. Corser took care of me.” Only then does Abby look at me. She stands up and places her hand on Layla’s shoulder.

“Can you go and wait in the car, baby? It’s nice and warm, I promise.”

“Is there a snack for me?”

Abby gazes fondly down at her daughter and I’m smiling, too. The innocence of children is amazing. You’d never guess that twenty minutes ago, Layla was worried about her mother not picking her up on time. Now all she wants is a snack.

“Yeah, there is. But it’s a surprise.”

Layla lets out an excited whoop that has me chuckling before running out the door. Abby stops her just before she gets there. “Layla, what do you say to Mr. Corser?”

Layla spins around and runs back to me before flinging her arms around my legs. It catches me by surprise, but only for a second before I’m breaking every rule in the principal handbook, and hugging her right back. “Thanks, Mr. Corser. I hope I see you soon.”

“Me too, Layla, me too,” I say to her, but my eyes are trained on her mother who’s watching us with something indescribable brimming in her eyes.

When the door closes behind Layla I don’t waste any time walking over to Abby and cupping her face in my hands. “Are you okay, baby? Are *we* okay?”

She nods, a faint blush covering her cheeks. “I’m sorry I disappeared. It’s just...Oh God. This is so embarrassing.”

I let out a low laugh. I know exactly what’s got my beautiful woman tied up in knots. “Layla told me she saw us kissing at the nativity. I’m sorry if that made things awkward for you, but I’m not sorry she knows.” I hesitate before continuing, but I know it’s now or never. “She told me she’s okay with it, with us.”

Finally, Abby’s eyes meet mine and she nods. “She is. She, uh, she asked if you’d be coming for a sleepover.” Her lower lip disappears between her teeth, and I lean down to gently kiss it free.

“I know. Gotta admit, I kind of like the idea of a sleepover with my two favourite girls.”

Abby’s breath comes out in a whoosh. “I do, too, trust me. But Reid, dating me isn’t like dating a regular girl. I’m a package deal.”

I can’t stand the uncertainty in her voice, so I do what I do best, and kiss her again. “I know, baby. And it’s the full

package that I like. A whole hell of a lot. If we need to go slow, we go slow. Whatever you say.”

Abby’s shoulders drop and finally her beautiful smile comes back. “Whatever I say?”

I nod.

“What if I say...you should spend Christmas Eve with us?”

My heart pulls a grinch and grows three sizes right then and there, expanding with what must be love for this woman and her daughter.

Love. Me. I’m in love. Never thought that would happen, but it has, and I couldn’t be happier.

“I would *love* that.”



Three days later, it’s Christmas Eve, and I’m at the Martin Farm, ready for what I hope will be a great surprise for my girls. It’s still crazy to think of them that way, but it feels so damn right in my soul. They’re mine. And I’m crazy about both of them.

Somehow I get a hand free and knock on the door. I hear footsteps running, and Abby’s gentle voice reminding Layla to wait for her before opening the door. I grin in anticipation, knowing both of them will see my surprise.

“Reid?” Abby says, but Layla’s squeal drowns it out.

“Are those candies? And gingerbread? Mom! Mr. Corser brought gingerbread houses!” She starts to take things from my hands, but there’s something I need to say to her first. When Abby and I were talking on the phone last night, I asked if I could let Layla call me by my first name. Abby’s agreement felt like a giant step forward for me, and made me really excited for this exact moment.

I glance at Abby to double-check she’s okay with this, and when she nods, I drop down to my knees.

“Hey, Layla girl, when I’m here to see you and your mom, how ‘bout you call me Reid.”

She stops and looks at me, and grins. “Does that mean you’re here for a sleepover?”

I chuckle and give her a wink. “Let’s start with gingerbread houses, okay?”

At that, Layla disappears into the house with bags of supplies, and Abby and I are alone on the porch. I lean forward and press a soft kiss to her cheek. “Hey, baby. Hope this is okay, Layla mentioned it was her favourite thing to do, but that you hadn’t the time to get the supplies.”

Abby just nods, her eyes shining. “I was actually going to head out and see if I could magically get my hands on a kit or something, I felt so badly. You saved the day.”

I puff out my chest at that and give her a goofy smile. “Just call me your knight in gingerbread armour.”

Abby giggles and rolls her eyes, but her hand comes up to my chest. “Uh huh, sure. How about I just call you my boyfriend?”

Fuck, that does something to me. I drop all of the bags I’m still holding and pull her into my arms. Our mouths meet and meld together until there’s no space left between us. All of my feelings, all of my wants and desires, they coalesce into this one, perfect moment. With this one, perfect woman.

CHAPTER NINE

Abby

Let me let you in on a secret. Springtime on a farm is disgusting. Mud everywhere, including all over the animals. Nothing growing (at least nothing that looks pretty), and here on the West Coast, it does nothing but rain.

But even all of that can't bring me down or make me question my decision to stay in Dogwood Cove permanently.

Why, might you ask?

Reid.

That man came into my life from nowhere, swept me — and my daughter — off our feet, and even has my Uncle Steve convinced he's in it forever. Even though Uncle Steve doesn't technically need me here on the farm with his leg being fully healed and all, it's been great. Now that I don't have to do as much of the hands-on dirty work, I've been able to put my marketing knowledge to work and spruce up his online

presence. We've got big plans, including an open house Easter egg hunt, summer tours, and a pumpkin patch.

"Hey baby, fancy seeing you here." Reid's laughter reaches me, and I look up from where I'm hooking up one of Uncle Steve's Jersey cows to the milking machine. I roll my eyes, but tilt my head up for a kiss just the same.

"You know, Christmas was months ago. You need to let the maids a-milking joke go."

"Never. Not when I keep finding you with your hands squeezing and tugging like that."

I swat at him. "Oh my God. Stop being so gross. What if Layla heard you?"

Reid grabs my hand in his and tugs me up to standing before wrapping me up in his warm embrace. His voice is a low rumble that sets me on fire, just like it always does. "Trust me, baby. Layla is nowhere near the barn right now. Steve has her out on the tractor checking the far fields, which means it's just you, and me, and the cows."

As if on cue, a low *moo* comes from a stall in the back and we both chuckle. Then the implication of what Reid said hits me, and my eyes widen.

"Wait. We're alone? We have time by ourselves?"

He nods slowly.

"What the heck are we waiting for!" I grab his hand and pull him at a run toward the farmhouse. Even though Layla and I have moved into a townhouse close to Reid's apartment, we

still have a room set up at the farm in case we ever need to stay over. Or, in this case, for when Reid and I can magically steal a few minutes without a chatty and curious seven-year-old barging in.

But when we reach the farmhouse and I kick off my boots, it isn't the bedroom I head to but the bathroom. The plumbing might be old, but the shower stall is plenty big enough. And after a morning of farm chores, I need to get clean while I get dirty.

“Fuck, baby, I love you,” Reid mutters as he watches me strip off my clothes. I give him a wink then turn my back to him and lean forward to turn on the shower. I hear him undressing and a minute later his hands curve around my bare waist and his heat covers me. I can already feel his rigid cock pressing against me as his lips trace a line down my spine. His fingers travel around to my stomach and dance up and down, teasing me, making me shiver.

Reid knows how to make me weak in the best way possible, and as soon as the water is heated, he pushes me in the shower and under the spray, then takes over.

He's on his knees, spreading my legs and swiping his tongue up my pulsating slit before I know what's happening, and my cry echoes around the bathroom

“God, Reid.”

“You're my version of heaven, Abby.”

My legs start to shake. Nothing brings me to the edge faster than this man's mouth on me.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.” I can't stop chanting. My hands are grasping at the slick wall behind me, trying to find stability against the tidal wave I know is coming. But it's no use, and when Reid's fingers find my inner walls and press against them, it's over and I'm collapsing with the intensity of my orgasm. As I've learned he always will be, Reid is there to hold me up, whispering my name and kissing my body as he makes his way to standing. He lifts me into his arms as if I am weightless and carries me, dripping water, into the bedroom, snagging a towel along the way. He rubs my body with the towel as my hands slide through his wet hair. It's longer now, shaggy in a way that makes him look adorably young sometimes, and heartbreakingly sexy other times. I take the towel from him and return the favour, running my hands over his body, the peaks and valleys of his muscles, every inch that I've memorized. I could spend all day here, but if there's one thing we've learned, it's that our time alone is at a premium.

“Reid,” I murmur when his hands start to tease me between my legs. “They'll be back soon.” My breath catches when he slides a finger inside.

“I can't help it if I like playing with your clit.”

Good God, his dirty words, whispered in my ear, make my head fall back and a low moan escape me. My hands return to his hair, my grip tightening when he pinches my clit with one hand and sucks my breast into his mouth.

“Oh, fuck! Reid!”

His low chuckle washes over my skin. “I love making you swear, Abby. Lose control with me.”

“Please. Now.”

His mouth releases from my nipple with a pop, and he pulls his fingers out, bringing them to his mouth with a devilish grin. When he sucks them off, and lets out a sound of pure satisfaction, I push him down onto the bed, grab a condom, and quickly roll it on his length, then climb on to straddle his hips.

“Yes, baby.”

I’m so wet, so ready, I slide onto his cock with ease. The fullness of having him inside of me brings an instant wave of pleasure over my body. Reid’s hands go to my ass, and he guides me up and down slowly, then faster, until he’s pumping into me and I’m rocking over him wildly.

“Faster. Oh God, faster,” I cry, and Reid pulls out, flips me over and slams back into me from behind. My shoulders drop to the bed, and the sound of our bodies coming together fills the room, with Reid’s grunts and my moans creating the perfect harmony.

“Abby. Fuck. Baby. Yes.” Reid’s words get choppy, punctuated with every thrust, and I know he’s close. And when I feel him thrust deeply into me, and the heat pulsing into me, my body flies over the edge into my own climax as well.

When he's finished, Reid tenderly turns me over and gathers me in his arms.

With my head on his chest, I can feel Reid's heart pounding in time with my own. I've never felt so connected with a man as I do with him in these moments following our lovemaking. But that peaceful connection is interrupted like a scratch on a record when we hear the back door slam downstairs. The voices are faint, which says they're still in the mudroom and not in the main part of the house, but either way — we're out of time.

“Shit.” I scramble out of his arms and run back to the bathroom with him hot on my heels. Dirty clothes get pulled back on in a hurry, and when he goes to steal a kiss as I pull my sweater on over my head, I swat at him.

“Stop it, Reid, we have to get downstairs or they'll catch us.” Okay, so yes, we're adults and can do what we want, but I'm still holding on to an attempt at keeping Layla from the intimate side of my relationship with Reid.

“Baby, Layla might not get it, but Steve is going to take one look at our wet hair and your beautifully flushed face and know exactly what we've been up to.”

My head lands on his still bare chest for just a second. “I know. But still. Let me at least *pretend* to be a responsible mother and not a hussy who just had to have sex with her boyfriend at nine in the morning.”

Reid's hands tilt my head upward until I meet his serious, yet loving gaze. “Abby Martin, you are the most amazing mother

I've met, and trust me, I've met quite a few." I quirk my lips at his choice of words, but let him continue. "You're also an incredible woman, a sexy, sensual, hot as fuck woman. And you're mine. Layla might be young, but she knows I love you, and her. And she's seven. She doesn't have any clue that we saved water by showering together."

My heart melts at this amazing man with his ridiculously perfect words.

"What you're really saying is, calm down, Abby?"

His gentle smile is everything. "What I'm saying is, we got this. Together."

And he proves his point by taking my hand and leading me downstairs. Steve gives us a knowing grin, but as Reid predicted, Layla doesn't even notice our disheveled appearance. She's too busy tugging on Reid's arm, babbling to him about the deer they saw when they were on their tractor ride. Watching the two of them settle at the kitchen table, Reid paying full attention to Layla, and Layla still holding his hand, is all the confirmation I need.

Mistletoe worked some magic this Christmas, turning secrets into truths, and lust into true love.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Love and Leashes

A Dogwood Cove Novella

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PROLOGUE

Jensen

I'm so bored.

Yeah, I know, every junior in high school thinks that in English Lit class. The only good part about it is that Tatyana Wilson sits to the side and in front of me, the perfect angle for me to look at her when she doesn't know it. She's so pretty. Prettiest girl in school. Too bad every other dude in here thinks that as well. I don't have a chance, even if I am on the football team.

The bell finally rings and I toss my books into my bag. Biology is next, a class I hate even more than English Lit. The truth is, I like literature. I could even see myself teaching it someday. I'd sure as shit be more interesting than Mrs. Maltmore. Old Malty is the most boring teacher in the entire goddamn world. I swear, she could make watching paint dry seem interesting.

When I walk into the biology lab, the seat next to mine, which has been empty all semester, isn't empty anymore. And the person there makes my heart stop. Like, legit, I think I have a heart attack looking at her.

Long blonde hair falls down her back. She's sitting with her head tilted slightly to the side so I can see her face, and she's hot. Like, natural, girl next door hot. Damn.

Taking my seat gingerly to try and hide my body's annoying reaction to her, I give her a quick nod of my head in greeting.

"Hi, I'm Kelly. I'm new here. But that's obvious, isn't it? Shoot, I'm already being awkward. Sorry. Umm, can I start again? Hi, I'm Kelly."

My head bounces up at her rambling, my mouth falling slightly open at her voice. It's...it's freaking musical. And that's not how I've ever described anyone, ever, in my entire seventeen years of life. Weird.

"H-hey," I stammer, gulping quickly. Shit, get it together, man. "I'm Jensen."

Kelly smiles, and it blinds me. "Nice to meet you. I hate biology; sorry to tell you, but you're stuck with a dud of a lab partner."

Her open honesty makes me relax. "S'okay, I hate it, too. But Mr. Welch is a cool teacher."

"That's good. So, what's fun to do around here?"



My friendship with Kelly was cemented in that biology class through whispered jokes, written notes, and easy smiles. My initial attraction to her never faded, but as soon as I learned she had a boyfriend back home where she moved from, I forced those thoughts aside. Besides, Kelly never gave any indication she thought of me as anything more than a friend. So, I was content, figuring we could be those cool people who can handle being friends and not letting it get weird. You know, like Joey and Dawson from that stupid show some of the girls in my class watch.

But everything almost changed one day in the spring. I found Kelly sitting in the bleachers during our study period, and she was crying.

“Kell? What’s wrong?” I jog up the few rows to where she sits as she wipes her sleeve across her eyes.

“Sorry. I know we were meant to meet in the library. I just, umm, I just needed some air.”

“That’s okay.” I fidget in my seat. I don’t know what the hell to do right now. Kelly’s never cried in front of me. Slowly, I put my hand over hers and squeeze. She gives me a watery smile, then lets her head fall to the side to land on my shoulder. I move my arm around her shoulders. “What’s going on?”

“Kyle broke up with me.”

My heart thumps loudly in my chest at those words. Kyle, the boyfriend from her old school. I met the guy once, he seemed okay, but he wasn’t exactly a fan of us being friends.

“He said he didn’t want to do long distance anymore. I tried to convince him it wasn’t so bad, but he refused to listen. I think he’s cheating on me.” Kelly sniffs loudly. “But you know what, good riddance. He was a bad kisser, anyway.”

A laugh escapes me. “Really? You dated him for like, a year, and he was a bad kisser?”

She lifts her head and I immediately miss the feel of her tucked against me. I’ve been careful not to get too close to her and always keep things on the side of friendship. But this changes things.

“Yeah, the worst. He was a total guppy, you know?” She opens her mouth widely and makes a stupid face, and we both start laughing. That’s better. Kelly should always be happy. It’s who she is.

She wipes at her face again, then turns on the bench to face me. “Thanks, J. You always make me feel better somehow.”

I just shrug. “My job as best friend is done. Can we study French now?” I need the distraction of conjugating verbs to stop myself from doing something I shouldn’t. Like kiss my best friend.

Then again, maybe this is my shot. She’s single. I’m single.

This is it.

I look up to see Kelly rummaging in her backpack.

“Kell,” I say, but her name comes out hoarse across my lips. She looks at me with that soft, perfect smile that’s just mine. I don’t think about it. I lean in, wrap my hand around the back

of her neck, and press my lips to hers. I feel her gasp against my mouth, but then she melts into me, and everything around us ceases to exist.

But apparently, heaven can't last forever because after a minute of pure bliss, Kelly pulls back. I know what she's going to say before she even says it.

"Jensen, I... We... You're my best friend. I kind of need just that for now. Okay?" She looks at me worriedly, and I know it's on me to reassure her that the kiss didn't mean anything. That our friendship is fine, even if a part of me is dying at the sense of rejection I'm feeling.

"Of course. We're fine. I just figured you needed a good kiss after a year of duds, that's all." I nudge her with my shoulder and force a wide grin on my face. "Don't read too much into it, we're friends, I was doing you a favour."

The relief on her face is another arrow to my heart. "A favour, huh? Yeah, sure."

"C'mon. Study period's almost over and I still don't know the different tenses for conjugating *cachier*." The irony that the verb I'm stuck on is the French word meaning *to hide*, just like I'm hiding my feelings for Kelly, isn't lost on me. But I'm an expert at ignoring those by now. If she needs a friend, then that's what she'll get.

Because Kelly is the kind of person who deserves anything and everything in life. And that's what I want to give her.

Even if I wish she wanted everything with me.

CHAPTER ONE

Kelly

“Toffee peanut butter chip and triple chocolate.”

My boss licks her lips. Literally, wiping away drool as I tell her the cookie flavours I plan on baking today.

“I was also thinking of experimenting next week with a play on German chocolate cake. Chocolate cookie with some sort of caramel coconut topping.” I smirk as Mila Monroe’s jaw drops open.

“Are you shitting me, Kelly? Is that... Can you... Seriously?”

Okay, so maybe I’m playing dirty. I happen to know German chocolate cake is Mila’s favourite, just the same way I know her boyfriend, Jackson — who happens to be every woman’s dream as the sexy town vet here in Dogwood Cove — is planning on using one of my cookies to propose to Mila next week.

“I can, and I will. Just need to sort out the topping. Anyway, back to today. How many dozen does the PTA need for their meeting tonight?”

Mila and I get to work figuring out the details for our work day. She’s such a freaking amazing boss; I couldn’t ask for anyone better. The fact that we’re friends? A total bonus. But I also know she needs me, not just as a manager for The Nutty Muffin bakery, but also as the only person she’ll allow to bake the cookies we serve here. The last time Mila tried to make a cookie, our teeth almost cracked on the first bite.

“Alright, spill. What’s new in the big city?” Mila folds her arms across her chest and leans against the freshly cleaned counter after we finally get the first batch of everything in the oven.

“Westport is hardly the big city,” I reply as I wash my hands.

“It’s bigger than Dogwood Cove, and you’re avoiding the question. Had any hot dates lately?”

I snort out a laugh at that. “Please. You know my life revolves around the bakery.”

Mila groans. “Noooo. You need a life, Kell!”

“Why? I learned from the master of all workaholics.” I give her a pointed glare. “Not all of us are lucky enough to fall in love with our dog’s veterinarian.”

“You don’t have a dog. Maybe that’s the problem, you need a dog!”

“I don’t need a dog.” The pout on her face is comical and has me rolling my eyes in return. Ever since Mila adopted Milo and decided to champion the crusade for Dogwood Cove to have its own animal shelter, she’s become obsessed with all of her friends needing pets. Dogs in particular. Because although she likes her boyfriend’s cat just fine, Mila is #teamdogg all the way.

“Come on, boss. Back to work.”

“Fine. I’m just going to say one thing. A fabulous woman like yourself shouldn’t be spending every night alone at home. If you don’t want to date, fine, I get that. But maybe come back here sometimes for yoga? Or book club? Now that Paige has had her horizons broadened by Wyatt, her discussion questions are even more entertaining.” Mila waggles her eyebrows suggestively, which makes sense given her comment about her friend Paige. Paige is the super smart owner of the bookstore next door. And up until a few months ago, she was also pretty straightlaced. That changed when she fell in love with Wyatt, her hunky, tattooed boyfriend.

“I’ll think about it.”

Apparently that’s enough for Mila because she finally lets me get back to work. The rest of the morning flies by in a nonstop blur of baking, handling staffing issues, and ordering ingredients for next week. By the time I’m finished with my work day in the early afternoon, I’m exhausted. I never expected to be offered the position of manager at The Nutty Muffin, but when Mila opened Camille’s, the café she named

after her mom, she asked if I would be willing to step up. It meant slowing down my custom cookie business to almost nothing, but better benefits and a more steady income was worth the sacrifice.

The trade off, however, is a longer day before I can get a nap. Waking up at four o'clock in the morning to be at the bakery by five wasn't so bad when I was off before noon, and I could go home and nap before dealing with any custom orders. Now I'm here until at least two in the afternoon, sometimes later, depending on what's going on.

The days are long, but I love my job. And it's not like I have anything or anyone waiting for me at home.

My phone vibrates with an incoming text just as I'm making a coffee to take home. Mila teases me about my plain old coffee with cream, but I like the simplicity of it.

JENSEN: I know I arrive tomorrow and I'm totally gonna regret this if you actually say you don't want us... But are you SURE you're okay with me and Oliver crashing at your house for a while?

The message from Jensen Porter, my best friend since high school, shouldn't make my breath catch like it does. That's a dangerous path I can't go down, especially not with him soon to be living in my house for a month.

KELLY: If only you could see how far back I'm rolling my eyes right now...

KELLY: I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it.

JENSEN: Okay. Sorry. I really appreciate this Kell. I'm buying a giant bag of kettle corn for you on my way to the ferry tomorrow.

The man knows what I like, that's for sure. My mouth waters just thinking of the kettle corn you can only get on the mainland.

KELLY: Good. You won't be allowed in without it. Ollie can stay, but not you.

JENSEN: Nice to know I rate below my dog.

KELLY: I mean, duh.

“What's got you smiling so wide?”

I jump. “Jesus, Mila, you need freaking bells on or something.”

“Why, got something to hide, Ms. Erickson?” Mila arches one eyebrow at me. It's a little creepy how good she is at that.

“No,” I answer quickly, too quickly.

“Oh my God! Yes, you do. Who were you texting, Kelly?”

“Nobody,” I say defensively, crushing my phone to my chest. “Just my best friend who's coming to stay with me for a while.”

“Uh huh, do I get all weird and defensive when I text Summer? No, I do not. Try again.” Her eyes narrow, then widen. “Wait, is this high school guy? The one you kissed in high school and thought it was love at first sight, only for him to fall for the head cheerleader? I thought he was married!”

I wince. “I will never drink tequila around you again. It’s way too much of a truth serum.” Relaxing my death grip on my phone, I take in a deep breath. “Yes, it’s Jensen. No, I did *not* think it was love at first sight, I just said that I never felt that way after kissing someone. And no, he isn’t married anymore. That’s why he’s coming to stay, he’s moving to Westport to start teaching at the middle school.”

Mila squeals. Like, legit, squeals and claps her hands. It’s so ridiculous, and I need to set her straight.

“Would you calm down, crazy lady? Nothing is going to happen!”

But there’s no stopping her.

“I don’t believe that for a second. He’s heartbroken, and he needs his best friend to save him. It’s a freaking Hallmark movie come to life. I can see it now, in the middle of the night, you hear a scary noise, you run and jump into his arms — *Oh Jensen, save me!*

“You are out of your mind.” Rolling my eyes, I pick up my rapidly cooling coffee, my phone, and my keys, making my way to the back door of the bakery. “I’ll see you tomorrow, you nut job.”

“Serious question!” Mila yells after me and I stop and turn to her. “Does he have a dog?”



It's just now dawning on me that I need to keep Jensen away from Mila, and all of my Dogwood Cove friends, for as long as possible. Which actually should be pretty easy, since I'm assuming he'll be busy apartment hunting and getting ready for the school year that starts in just over a month. I'll make sure anything we do together is far away from the bakery, and far away from Mila's observant eyes. She'll see the truth the second she sees me around him.

The truth is, everyone *except* Jensen knows I've been in love with him forever. How he has stayed oblivious to my awkward feelings, I do not know. And the alternative? That he knows I wish we were more than friends, but doesn't feel the same way, so he ignores it? I can't consider that. Nope, I'll stay in my little bubble of denial where I have myself convinced he thinks I'm fine being just friends.

We met as teenagers when my parents moved me to his school in the small suburb of Vancouver where my mom's job was at the hospital. Paired up for biology, we hit it off instantly. At first, it really was just friendship. I was dating a guy from my old school, but that ended rapidly when we realized how difficult long distance was for two teenagers. Unfortunately, by the time I was single, our relationship was solidly in the friend zone. Then, in senior year, Jensen started dating Tatyana. She was not my biggest fan, and for a while we didn't get to hang out much because Jensen was obsessed with his new girlfriend, and she did *not* like him spending time with me.

But eventually she loosened up; I guess she saw there was no hope for anything romantic between us, given my status as resident tomboy athlete, and the fact that we were opposites in so many ways. Tatyana was the stereotypical cheerleader, I was the captain of the softball team and played basketball in the winter. She was petite, with dark hair and big brown eyes, and always had immaculate hair and makeup working for her. I was athletic and strong, with blonde hair that was always up in a ponytail, and makeup was a foreign concept to me. I've never had a problem with body image, but it was obvious we were different, just as it was obvious where Jensen's tastes lie.

When they broke up in university, my mom, who had always rooted for Jensen and I to date, tried to convince me it was my chance. But I had been seeing a really great guy from culinary school and didn't want to mess things up with him, especially given that Jensen had never *ever* even hinted at being interested in me.

No one in our town was surprised when Jensen and Tatyana got back together and married each other fresh out of university. Hell, I even went to their wedding, and no, I did *not* secretly wish it was me standing up there with him. Nope. Not even a little.

Okay, maybe just once or twice.

Fast forward a few years to when Jensen and Tatyana's marriage ended pretty spectacularly this past winter, when she announced she had fallen in love with her personal trainer and wanted a divorce.

I don't blame Jensen for wanting to get away from everything and everyone that reminds him of his marriage and the life he had. So when he came to Vancouver Island for a visit in the spring and told me he wanted to move to Westport, what else could I do but offer myself up as temporary roommate and relocation assistant?

We've never lived together, but it shouldn't be a problem. We get along great, and his dog, Oliver, is easily my favourite animal.

I just can't let Mila meet him.

Ever.

CHAPTER TWO

Jensen

“Not the front seat, Ollie, come on, man!” I reach in and grab his collar, tugging on it to encourage him to get out. After giving me what can only be described as a withering glare, my lab reluctantly hops out of the front seat of my truck and walks oh so slowly around to the open back door. “Take your time, bud, not like we have a ferry to catch or anything.” I close the door on him and make my way back to the driver’s side. “Man’s best friend? More like man’s biggest pain in the ass,” I mutter under my breath, but I don’t mean it, and Oliver knows it, the damn dog. Because as soon as I’m seated, he puts his nose down on the center console and pushes it against my elbow. “Yeah, yeah, good boy.” I pet his head affectionately. The truth is, without Oliver, life would be boring and quiet. For four years he’s been my sidekick — I even had him certified as a therapy dog so he could come to work with me at the middle school. It’s amazing how easily preteens will set

aside their issues, open up, and try new things when they've got a cuddly dog at their side.

The drive to the ferry terminal is traffic free, thank fuck, and we make it for our reservation. My ex-wife hated my deep-seated need to be early for everything, calling me a control freak and uptight more than once. That's not the case, I just have a healthy respect for schedules and appreciate it when others do, too. Our frustration over stupid things like that should have been a minor inconvenience, at most. But when it was layered on top of so many other issues, well, let's just say finding out she was in love with Ivan, her personal trainer, it was more of a relief than it should have been. I was just happy she didn't fight me on custody of Oliver in the divorce.

Yes, I offered a custody agreement to her, but she signed away her rights to him with nothing more than a roll of her eyes.

What can I say, I'm a dog dad through and through.

Once we're on the ferry, I let Oliver come up and sit in the front with me. Lifting the center console, he lays down on the bench seat with a huff and rests his head on my lap. I open up my phone and flip through the depressing news headlines quickly. God, when will this world get its shit together...just as I go to start a new round of Candy Crush, my phone rings with a FaceTime call from Kelly. Instantly my lips turn up in a smile.

"If you're calling to tell me you've changed your mind, it's too damn late. We're on the ferry," I say, half teasingly. The

other half of me can't stop worrying that I've asked too much of my friend. After all, what woman willingly puts up with her newly divorced friend and his dog for an undisclosed amount of time? Saint Kelly, that's who. When I determined I'd need a home base while I apartment hunt, she didn't hesitate to offer her spare bedroom. We've never lived together. Hell, we've never even spent the night in the same house before. So this could be interesting.

What if she's one of those annoying people that never shuts off the light when she leaves a room? Or leaves her dirty dishes in the sink for days? What if she can't stand the smell of my body wash, or if I forget to put the seat down on the toilet?

This could ruin our friendship forever. Or, I could be majorly overreacting. Yeah, it's probably the latter.

“Shut up, J, I have a very important question.”

I straighten in my seat, Ollie lifting his head in question. “What's up?”

“Does Oliver like beef or chicken treats better?” She holds up two bags with her other hand, and I clue in to the fact that she's at a pet store. As if the shelves behind her didn't give it away...

“Seriously, Kell?” I arch an eyebrow at her. “He's a dog, he likes food.”

“Jensen, come on! I want him to settle in and be comfortable at my house. You know what, forget it, I'll buy both. Now, on

to toys. Does he like to play tug of war or fetch better?”

“Uh,” I say, my gaze dropping down to my dog, who’s currently snoring on my lap, my mind blank. Something about the fact that Kelly is so concerned with my *dog’s* well-being hits me in a weird way. Tatyana liked Oliver well enough, but it was clear from the outset that he was my dog, not hers. Not even ours. “He likes both.”

“Okay, I’ll get both. Does he need a new bed?”

“No, he does not. Kelly, listen to me carefully.” I put on as serious a face as I can. “Buy the treats, fuck, buy a toy, if you insist. But then, walk out of the pet store. Ollie doesn’t need anything. He’s fine, I swear.”

Kelly pouts and I hide my smirk.

“Fine. But if Oliver isn’t happy at Auntie Kelly’s house, then it’s your fault.”

“Auntie Kelly?” My grin sneaks past my lips, and soon Kelly’s shaking her head and laughing as well.

“Yeah, yeah, okay, I’m a weirdo. I just want him to like staying at my house.”

“He’s a dog, Kelly, he’ll be fine as long as he’s fed,” I reassure her, pointing the phone down at Ollie, who’s still passed out on the seat beside me. “Now leave the pet store, go home, and enjoy your last few hours without dog fur everywhere.”

Her smile widens, and it lights up her whole face. *She’s pretty.* I’ve always known this, but I guess I’m seeing her

differently now. And that's dangerous.

We hang up and I go back to Candy Crush, but my head isn't in it. I'm on a trip down memory lane, remembering moments from mine and Kelly's past that I'd pushed away for years. After all, it isn't exactly appropriate to remember the one kiss you shared with your best friend during study period while you're still married to a woman who never liked her in the first place.



“Here we are, bud, now you be nice to Kelly, okay? Charm her the way you do everyone else.”

Ollie doesn't answer from the back seat as I pull in the driveway of Kelly's small house. It's cute, with white shutters around the windows, and a small porch that has a rocking chair on it. I park beside her bright red car and shut the engine off as the front door opens, and she steps out with a big smile.

I climb down from the truck, leaving Oliver inside, and close the distance between us before picking her up in a big hug.

“Put me down, I wanna see Ollie!” She laughs, swatting at my back.

“Nope, hug me first, then the dog,” I grumble. Fuck, she smells good. Like peaches. I try to be subtle as I turn my nose to inhale again. This is bad. I put her down and take a step back to regain control. Shit. I can't go down this road with Kelly. I need her, and our friendship, too much. But there's no

denying the shift in energy between us. We're adults, and we're both single at the same time.

But if Kelly feels anything she doesn't show it, walking quickly around me to open the back door of my truck.

"Hi, boy," she coos at my dog. "Oh, who's a handsome dog? You are! Yes, you are!"

Ollie eats up all of her affection, licking her hands and nuzzling into her touch. He's such a needy dog..

"Alright, alright. Let's go inside," I joke, reaching around her to clip his leash on. He's not one to run away, but he's also in an unfamiliar place, so better safe than sorry. "Can I let him off his leash in the backyard?"

"Yup, this way." Kelly leads us around the side of the house and opens a gate. I unclip Ollie's leash, and he takes off, sniffing all around. We watch him for a second and I'm all too aware of our proximity. Good grief, I should be able to control myself better than this. I'm chalking up my reaction to the fact that I haven't had sex in way too long. That's all this is. Hormones, pheromones, whatever you want to call it. My dick is thinking for my brain right now, and I just need to shut it down.

Should be easy enough. I've gone close to fifteen years without having a problem being nothing more than friends with Kelly. There's absolutely no reason that has to change now.

But when I look over at her and see the delighted smile on her face as she watches my dog play in her backyard, I realize something. High school Jensen missed his shot with Kelly, but grown-up Jensen wants another chance.

Now the question is — what the hell do I do about it?

CHAPTER THREE

Kelly

“I was looking up rental properties in the area — do you know Mila and Ethan Monroe? I guess they’re the couple to talk to about renting apartments in Dogwood Cove. That’s where you work, right?”

I choke on the laugh that bursts out of me. Jensen stops walking, rubbing my back with a concerned expression. Eventually, I catch my breath and try to figure out how to respond. There are just so many things wrong with what he just said.

“Yes, I know Mila and Ethan. They’re brother and sister, though, not a couple.”

Jensen barks out a laugh. “Shit. Glad you told me that before I called them and put my foot in my mouth.”

“But do you really want to live in Dogwood Cove and commute to Westport every day?” I hurry on, although, in

actual fact, the plan makes sense. Rentals in Westport are few and far between, and the cost of rent is going up. I've considered moving to Dogwood Cove myself a few times over the past six months.

"I figure you do it in reverse every day, so it can't be that bad. Although, it would be nice to not commute," Jensen muses as we continue walking. We left my house earlier to take Oliver out to stretch his legs after the ferry ride over. I was already in love with Jensen's dog; he's pretty much the cutest thing I've ever met, and his personality is hilarious. But seeing him and Jensen today, without Tatyana putting a damper on everything, he's just a big bumbling ball of joyful fur. The facial expressions he makes are like nothing I've ever seen on an animal, and sometimes I swear it's like he understands perfectly what Jensen is saying. When I mentioned the word walk, he smiled. Seriously, the darn dog smiled! And it's a good thing I ignored Jensen and bought all the toys at the store earlier because after a game of tug-of-war, I'm pretty sure I cemented my role as Ollie's favourite person.

"What are your plans for the rest of the summer?" I ask as Ollie lifts his leg on yet another bush.

"Aside from finding a place to live so I don't have to crash with you forever?"

His response shouldn't bother me, but it kind of does. "I'm happy to have you stay as long as you need, Jensen."

He wraps his free arm around my shoulders. "I know, Kell, but I don't want to overstay my welcome. That's all."

The affectionate gesture feels just a little bit too comfortable. I huff and shrug off his arm, stealing the leash from his other hand, and take off jogging down the street. Ollie lopes along with an excited woof.

“You can’t steal my dog, Kelly,” Jensen yells after us. I ignore him and just keep running. It’s a straight path, so there’s no hope of Jensen getting lost, but I need a little distance from the bizarre feelings mixing around in my head right now. It’s not like being physically attracted to Jensen is new for me, he’s a good-looking guy, always has been. But watching him settle into my home and seeing Ollie curl up on his bed in the living room caused something to click in place inside of me.



“Pizza, sushi, or Chinese tonight?” I pull out the three different menus and drop them on the counter in front of Jensen later that evening.

“Pizza, but only if you act like a rational human being and don’t put mushrooms on it.” He visibly shudders and I roll my eyes.

“There’s nothing wrong with mushrooms.”

“They grow underground, covered in shit, and some of them look like dicks. Everything is wrong with mushrooms,” he deadpans.

“Just because you can’t appreciate the joy of mushrooms doesn’t make them wrong,” I reply as I take two beers out of

the fridge and hand him one. “But fine, tonight, because it’s your first night here, no mushrooms.”

“Thank you.”

We clink our beers together and drink. A part of me marvels at just how easy it is between us, despite not spending as much time together in recent years, thanks to his marriage. This feels similar to high school and college when we would study together with pizza — and back then, pop instead of beer. There was never any awkwardness between us, no sexual tension to navigate. This is so familiar, yet also different. There’s a crackle of energy in the air that has never been there before.

I quickly drink down my beer and avoid thinking about it.

A couple of hours later, my stomach is full of pizza, and my fridge is empty of beer. Jensen and I are sprawled out on my couch, our heads at opposite ends and our feet sort of tangled in the middle. He can’t stop laughing about my descriptions of Mila’s cookie baking disasters, which weren’t all that funny, but the alcohol running through our systems makes it hilarious.

“So when are you going to put yourself out there and try to meet someone? I’m sure the ladies of Westport are ready for you to dazzle them.” *Oh God.* Why did I just say that? I can feel my face flushing with embarrassment the second the words leave my mouth.

Jensen scoffs, oblivious to my sudden discomfort. “I’m not. I don’t need to date. I just need to find an apartment, settle in at

work, and get my life back on track after hurricane Tatyana.”

“Nah, come on, you need to get out there and meet some new people.”

Stop! Abort! Why the hell am I pushing this? Sober Kelly wouldn't have pushed the whole dating thing, that's for sure, but drunk Kelly has less of a filter than the three-month-old Brita water pitcher in the back of my fridge. Apparently, I have an incessant need to poke at all the awkward things. Drunk Kelly is also a total masochist. I don't *want* Jensen to find a girlfriend, do I?

“Whatever. I have you and I have Oliver. If my best friend and my dog can't help me meet new people, then I'm destined to be alone,” Jensen says dramatically. He peers into the neck of his beer bottle. “My drink's empty. We need more.”

“Umm, there's no more beer, we drank it all.”

Jensen hops up from the couch. “Got any juice?”

“Not a clue,” is my cheerful reply. He just laughs and makes his way to the kitchen where I hear him rummaging around for a few minutes.

When he returns, his arms are full of two glasses with ice in them, a bottle of rum, and a bottle of tropical fruit juice I guess I had somewhere. My eyebrows lift. “Planning a party or something?”

“Yep, a party for two.”

“You know rum and juice is not a good combo for me...” I caution.

“The headache will be worth it, I promise.” Jensen turns what I call his puppy-dog eyes on me. Those eyes convinced me to go along with all kinds of stupid things when we were younger, from trying to sneak into a hockey game, to getting me to bake cookies for him way too often. “Nuh uh, no way, buddy. Not even that look is gonna get me to drink rum and juice.”

“Come on, Kell, please? I’ll let you...” His voice trails off, then his entire face twists into a grimace. “Fine, I’ll let you put up a profile for me on a singles site. Happy?”

Well, shit. No getting out of it now, I guess. I sit up and nod confidently. Or, at least, as confidently as I can. “Yes. Very. We’ll make you sound good, I promise.”

“I’m so gonna regret this,” he groans as I grab my laptop off the coffee table and open it up to one of the more popular dating sites.

“Here we go. This one, Left for Love, has a mobile app, so you can install it on your phone and look for women from anywhere.”

“Great,” comes his sarcastic reply.

I quickly set up his account, but keep the screen turned away when I upload a photo, despite his protests. I choose a recent one he sent me, one that I secretly drooled over — just once, I swear — and then it’s time to write his short description.

“Hmm. This is our time to be creative. Let’s see. Oh, I know! *Dog Dad seeks human companion for long walks and*

cuddles on the couch. Must be comfortable with fur on clothing. Cat lovers need not apply.”

“Are you serious right now?” Jensen shouts as I break out in laughter. Oliver comes sauntering in from somewhere and hops up on the couch between us, resting his head on my lap.

“Yep, totally serious. See? Look at how sad he is. Oliver needs a mommy.”

“He fucking does not,” Jensen groans. “He’s got his crazy Auntie Kelly. That’s good enough.”

“Too bad, I just posted it.” I close my laptop with a grin. “Now we can drink.”



My obnoxiously full bladder wakes me up sometime in the middle of the night, and at first, I’m confused by the obvious fact that I’m not in my bedroom. But when I come to consciousness, it’s not the desperate need to pee that has me freezing in panic. It’s the heavy arm draped over my body, and the wall of warmth pressed up behind me. It’s the caress of Jensen’s slow, steady breathing on my neck.

I carefully extricate myself from his arms. I don’t even check to make sure he’s still asleep, I just bolt for the safety of my bedroom.

After taking care of the reason I woke up in the first place, I lay in my bed, trying desperately to fall back asleep. But it’s

futile. Because now, I know just how good it feels to be wrapped up in Jensen's arms.

As dawn slowly crests, and my room fills with early morning light, courtesy of the blinds I didn't bother to close last night, I wrack my brain trying to figure out how to handle this. Will he remember that we fell asleep together? Did he notice me leave? Do we *talk about it*, or do we pretend it never happened?

Because I'm not sure I can do that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jensen

There's an incessant noise, and I can't determine the source. I also can't ignore it because my head is pounding with the beat of a thousand drums, all marching totally off tempo, and that goddamn noise is making it worse.

Fuck. This is what I get for drinking way too much rum last night.

A cold nose nudges my hand and my eyes slowly blink open to see Ollie's head inches away from my own. Before I can even sit up, the noise starts again. It's my phone going wild with notifications of some sort. Somehow I find my glasses on the coffee table in front of me, and after giving Ollie a quick scratch, I force my hungover body into sitting and look around for my phone. Locating it isn't as easy as it should be, seeing as it somehow ended up underneath the couch. I dig it out, then stop to press my fingers to my temples. Damn — I need water, Tylenol, and coffee — in that order.

Speaking of the couch, why did I wake up pressed against the back of it, on my side, like I was spooning something? Why wasn't I in bed like a normal person would be...like Kelly obviously was.

There's something tickling at the edge of my brain, something I feel like I should remember. But I can't. Fucking alcohol.

I turn the sound off on my phone without looking at it. There's no way I want to try and focus on the tiny screen without caffeine in my system. Whatever it is, it can wait. Stumbling into the kitchen, I see Kelly with her back to me, over by the coffee pot.

"Please tell me that's full," I croak. She turns slowly with two mugs in her hands and passes one to me. "Thank you. You're the best."

"Mm-hmm," Kelly replies.

I sink down into a chair and sip at my coffee slowly. It's perfect; somehow Kelly always remembers how I drink it. Probably because it's the opposite of hers. She likes it with nothing more than a splash of cream, whereas I want all the sugar, but no cream.

"Damn, my neck is not happy with me sleeping on the couch," I say now that my brain is slowly switching on from the caffeine. "I don't even remember falling asleep."

"Yeah."

Kelly's non-answer has me looking up at her. Her eyes are shifting all around the room, anywhere but on me.

"Kell? Everything okay?"

"Yup, fine. Why?"

"Okay, now I know something's up. Your voice is doing that weird squeaky thing. You only do that when you've done something you probably shouldn't have, like that time you thought playing field hockey in your mom's living room was a good idea and broke that vase."

"Yeah, yeah, I get the point, thanks for the trip down memory lane," Kelly grumbles as she sits down in the chair across the table from me and finally drags her gaze up to meet mine. Her tongue darts out to lick her lips and for some reason, my eyes zero in on the motion.

"Do you remember anything from last night?" she asks cautiously.

"Not much, aside from too much fucking rum."

Kelly winces. "Has your...phone been doing anything?"

My eyes narrow. "Yes." Like a wrecking ball smashing into the side of a house, it all hits me. The dating app. Kelly writing a profile and not letting me read it. Then...

"Did you fall asleep on the couch with me?"

Kelly stands up abruptly and goes to the sink to rinse her mug. "Umm, yeah, I did. I got up later and moved to my room, but you were so deeply asleep I couldn't wake you. Sorry."

Well, that's one mystery solved. Although, now a part of me wonders what it would have been like to wake up at the same time as her, but I make myself dismiss that idea quickly. Besides, there are more important things to figure out. Standing up, I swallow down the last of my coffee before walking back to the couch and picking up my phone. Trepidation fills me as I stare at the notifications from Left for Love, the goddamn app she signed me up for last night. "Kelly. There's thirty-seven notifications. What the fuck?"

I go to the settings to try and delete the profile, but it needs a password. Turning the phone to face her, I say, "You need to take it down. Now."

"Oh, come on, Jensen, just go on a couple of dates. Meet some people. Where's the harm in that?"

I glare at her for several seconds, watching her squirm. But before I can put her out of her misery, Oliver does it for me, jumping up on the couch and stretching across her lap. Her hands instantly start to stroke along his back and he lets out a sigh of pleasure. *Lucky dog*. I'd have to be crazy, a monk, or blind, not to be attracted to Kelly. But the way she's pushing this dating app is making it pretty clear that any attraction I might have is one-sided.

"Fine. I'll go on one date. Then you're taking it down."

"Five."

"What? Fuck, no!" I look at her in horror. "Three. Final offer. Three dates, with three women that I choose from the

app, and when you see what a bad idea it was, you agree to take the profile down.”

“Fine.”

Jesus. What the hell have I gotten myself into...

CHAPTER FIVE

Kelly

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Yesterday, after we got dressed and took Oliver for a run, we drove around Westport looking at apartments. Jensen put his name on a couple of waiting lists, but nothing was that great. After we got back to my house, he sat down and started going through the profiles of the women — now up to forty-three — who had messaged him on that freaking dating site.

I'm not gonna lie, that was hard. Some of those women were downright crazy, but some of them were beautiful, with profiles that made them sound interesting and alluring even to me, a perfectly straight woman. Jensen settled on two that he reluctantly agreed to reach out to, and I thought that would be the end of it.

I was wrong. All freaking afternoon, he was messaging these women. Every now and then he'd laugh and show me

something they'd sent him, and every time the knot in my stomach grew a little bit bigger. What kind of idiot am I, pushing my best friend, who I'm finally admitting I might like as more than just a friend, into the arms of strangers?

This is why, on Monday morning, when I get to the bakery bright and early to open up and start baking, I'm in a foul mood. And my cookies are suffering because of it.

"Girl, I swear if you roll out that dough any thinner, we're going to be making paper cookies," Mila comments wryly as she pries the rolling pin out of my hands. "What's got you all pissy?"

I slump down on a stool and dust off my hands on my apron. "Nothing."

"Uh huh, and I'm a Disney princess. Tell me another lie."

My eyes roll upward before I can stop myself. Mila doesn't deserve my shitty attitude, but she's getting it. "Just because you're all happy and engaged doesn't mean everyone else has to be sunshine and roses all the time."

The measuring cup she was using hits the stainless steel counter with a clatter. I keep my gaze elsewhere. Mila's a great person until you tick her off. Which I might have just done. But then to my surprise, a still-warm cheddar cheese scone is slid in front of me. My favourite.

"Yes, I am happily engaged. Thanks, in part, to you, which we'll get to later. Right now, let's deal with the hangry, and then you're gonna spill it, sister. Is it the new roommate? Does

he leave the seat up? Walk around naked? Talk with food in his mouth? Poison you with his farts? Drink milk straight from the jug?”

Crumbs fall from my mouth because I'm laughing at her ridiculous suggestions, which is obviously her point. Because when I finally look at her, Mila's eyes are twinkling and a satisfied smirk is on her face. But her tone is soft and concerned when she reaches one hand over to the top of my leg. “Seriously, Kelly, I'm your friend, and I care about you. Which is why I'm really hoping you'll tell me what it is that obviously has you upset today.”

“I-convinced-Jensen-to-try-internet-dating-and-now-he's-gonna-go-out-with-other-women-and-I-think-I-want-him-to-go-out-with-me,” I blurt out super quickly, the words all running together.

“Wait. What?” Mila frowns. “All I got was something about Jensen and goats?”

“God, no!” I say, exasperated, but I repeat myself slower this time. “We got drunk the other night, and I stupidly convinced Jensen to try internet dating. I thought I had good intentions, but the thought of him dating other women makes me feel... not good. Because I think...” I pause and bite my lip. “I think I want to date him.” I say the last part with my head in my hands.

“Well, no shit, Sherlock,” Mila comments drily, causing me to lift my head in confusion.

“Wait. What?”

With a huff, Mila sits down on the stool beside me. “Girl, you’re not the most subtle individual. Every time you talk about Jensen, especially lately with him coming to stay, you get a little catch in your voice, and I swear, hearts dance in your eyes. Did you seriously only just realize you want that man?”

“Ummmm...” I stammer, wide-eyed, in a complete state of shock that Mila read through me so easily. “I guess, I mean, yes?” My voice squeaks at the end, making my insanely intuitive friend laugh. Apparently, Jensen isn’t the only one who knows that’s my tell.

“Oh, Kelly. You’ve got it bad for him. So why don’t you put yourself out of your misery, and *tell* him?”

I stand up and busy myself with putting away cookie ingredients before I answer. “Because we’ve known each other for so long, and he’s never thought of me that way.”

“How do you know?” Mila asks pointedly, folding her arms across her waist to look at me.

“Because...” I trail off. The truth is, I don’t know with complete certainty that he isn’t into me. There was that one kiss we shared, but then he turned around and married Tatyana. So, sure, there’s a slim chance that the only reason nothing ever happened between us was a simple case of timing. But then again, I don’t want to give myself any false hope. And thinking of Jensen’s ex-wife only solidifies my resolve that there never was, and never will be, anything between him and me. “Because he married the head

cheerleader while I was the one getting sweaty and bruised and dirty out on the field. He's into the pretty girls, not the tomboys who don't know how to apply eyeliner without stabbing themselves with it. And if you think I sound crazy, I'm not. I just, I don't know how to explain it, I just know he doesn't see me as anything more than a friend."

Mila stares at me steadily for a minute before shaking her head gently from side to side. "There are so many things wrong with what you just said, I don't even know where to start. No, wait — yes, I do. If you honestly think you're not a beautiful, amazing, interesting, charismatic woman that *any* man would be lucky to be with, you're nuts. Eyeliner is the work of the devil, so that point is completely ridiculous. And he may have married the cheerleader, but where is she now, hmm?"

She raises a good point. But still, I squash down the small ray of hope budding inside of me.

Then my friend, my boss, the ultimate meddler, claps her hands. The look of excitement and anticipation in her eyes makes me nervous, to say nothing of what she says next.

"I've got it. You need to bring him to the café. I've got a good sense about these things; I'll figure out if he's into you!"

"No way. Not happening." I put my hands up in defense. "Sorry, but I don't need or want you getting involved in anything. Just...forget I ever told you about this."

Mila's smile turns into a pout. "Oh, come on, don't be a spoilsport, Kell! I'll be good, I swear. I just want to meet the

guy who's got you all twisted up. You're so calm and chill most of the time."

I wince because she's not wrong. I'm definitely not acting myself right now, and Jensen is definitely the reason. "Can we drop it for now, please? I'm kind of freaking out here, and I need to figure out how to handle all of this without making it more complicated."

"But how would him meeting your friends make things complicated? If anything, I'd think he's expecting to meet us."

"He is. But you've proven how transparent I apparently am about my feelings, and I don't want him figuring it out until I've had a chance to, I don't know, get control of myself."

Thankfully, Mila must sense that I'm one step away from a panic attack because after a minute or two, she just nods. "Okay, fine. But could you just listen to me on one thing?"

I tilt my head in acquiescence.

"Don't sell yourself short. And if the chance comes to let Jensen know how you feel, promise me you'll take it."

I don't answer right away. And when I do, it probably isn't what Mila wants me to say, but it's the best I can do.

"I'll try."

CHAPTER SIX

Jensen

I'm in hell. Forget fire and brimstone, Satan himself prefers packed restaurants with poor acoustics, overpriced food, and a woman obsessed with yarn.

Yup, yarn.

“Then I decided to try a merino wool. Oh, my goodness gracious, you should see the colours I bought! I just couldn't help myself.” Gail titters. Yep, titters. That's the only word for the bizarre, artificial sounding laugh she just uttered. “But wouldn't you know it? My Chrishell pulled that sweater right off and shook it in between her teeth like it was a chew toy.” There's that obnoxious sound again, only this time she pats her lip delicately with her napkin before fluttering her eyelashes at me. “So, Jensen, tell me all about your Oliver. He is such a handsome boy, just like his owner.” Gail's voice dips low at the end. I guess she's trying to be suggestive, but it just makes me feel uncomfortable.

Goddamn Kelly and her dating bargain. I have no idea how to handle this, how to extricate myself politely from the situation — err, *date* — I find myself on.

“Yeah, ah, Ollie’s great,” I say lamely, my eyes darting everywhere except at Gail. Every time our eyes have met over dinner, she’s winked at me. I almost asked her if she had something in her eye before I caught on to the fact that she’s flirting. Or at least trying to, I think.

For the last hour, I have heard more about different types of yarn and wool than I ever thought possible. I’ve heard Gail go on and on about different needle gauges and yarn tension, patterns for clothes — for her dog, of course — and all of the different types of stitches. Rib stitch, garter stitch, cable stitch, seed stitch, moss stitch, seriously. Who knew there were so many? And whatever you do, don’t ask the difference between crochet and knitting. I made that mistake and had to sit through ten minutes of this woman going on about how knitting was superior in so many ways.

I’m not entirely sure if Gail honestly believes I am interested in the subject or if she just doesn’t have anything else to talk about. The fact is, I’ve barely managed to sneak a word in. Now, maybe that’s the way dating goes these days, a one-sided info dump, and if somehow the other person remains interested at the end of it, then you know it’s a match. How would I know? The last first date I went on was with my ex-wife in high school. We went to the movies and then to a local café for hot chocolate. Pretty sure we did nothing but hold

hands and stare at each other, both of us too nervous to make the first move.

There certainly wasn't much conversation, and when the date ended, Tatyana didn't fling herself at me like a fucking spider monkey and try to molest my face.

Gail, on the other hand, did just that. Apparently, she thought our date was wonderful, and she seemed genuinely shocked when I carefully stepped away and told her thanks, but no thanks.

When I get back home, I'm grumpy. And for good reason, if you ask me. Not only was the date a total disaster, I didn't even get to look at the dessert menu in my desperate attempt to end things. Thank fuck, I'm currently living with a pastry chef. Kelly's guaranteed to have something chocolate in the house somewhere.

I slam the door of Kelly's house shut, causing Oliver to lift his head from her lap with a woof. Kelly watches me, wide-eyed, as I stomp into the kitchen, open the fridge, and spy the item I am in desperate need of right now. I tromp back into the living room and drop down onto the couch beside her before opening the container of cookies, jamming one in my mouth without even bothering to see what flavour it is. A second cookie follows, with Kelly just blinking at me innocently, before I finally speak. "I just spent an hour listening to a woman drone on and on about her hobby of knitting small hats for her Chihuahua. Whose name was Chrishell, might I add. *You know, like the woman on Selling Sunset.*" I pitch my voice

as high and annoying as it can go for that last part. "I didn't even stay for dessert, and you know I think dessert is the most important part of a meal." I jab my finger at her face, where I can see she's not very successfully holding back a laugh. "This is all your fault."

"Why is it my fault?" my supposed best friend says in mock outrage.

"I wasn't ready to date again. And then you had to go and put some insane profile on a dating site and force me to go out with complete strangers. Crazy strangers at that! And I haven't dated in over a fucking decade. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"You just need practice. And since I'm such a great friend —"

I interrupt with a wave of my third cookie. "And since this is all your fault —"

"Whatever." Her eyes roll back into her head. "Since I'm such a great friend, I'll help you. We'll go on a fake date and practice your wooing skills."

"I don't have any wooing skills."

She shoves me, not hard, but enough for me to narrow my eyes at her. "Pfft, I don't believe that for a second. Gimme a smoulder."

On purpose, I give her a look that is definitely not a smoulder.

"Huh. Okay. We'll work on that."

She's serious. For fuck's sake, she actually wants to work on my dating skills? Out of nowhere, I'm seized with a sudden desire to kiss her. But I don't know if I want to do it out of frustration, desire, or both.

Both. Definitely both.

"Fucking hell, Kelly, this is ridiculous," I groan, trying to forget the mental image of kissing her. It's not exactly a good time for that, seeing as she's trying to help me be a better date for *other women*.

"No, it isn't. You, me, tomorrow night, Insignia Steak House on the pier. You can wine and dine me."

"But no sixty-nine, I'm guessing." The teasing words escape my mouth before my brain can even catch up to the fact that I'm flirting with her. With Kelly. My best friend, the woman I've wanted since high school but never been able to have.

I fully expect her to smack me, or roll her eyes, or get up and walk away, but she doesn't. She blushes.

And the sight of her cheeks going pink for me? Well, that just makes me feel all kinds of crazy things I probably shouldn't be feeling for a woman who clearly thinks of me as nothing more than a friend.

"Yeah, no. None of that." Her voice wavers.

She's so close, I could touch her easily. A hand resting on her bare leg, an innocent foot massage, a hug goodnight. All within perfectly acceptable boundaries of friendship, and all

things I've done in the past without a second thought, even with my unrequited attraction to her.

So, why now does it feel so scandalous, yet so fucking alluring, to think about doing those things to her?

“Right. Okay, so then I guess, tomorrow.” The words come out hoarse and halting, and I clear my throat. “Tomorrow we'll go out.”

“On a practice date.”

“Yeah. A practice...date.”

Fucking hell, I'm so screwed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kelly

Let me let you in on a secret. Attempting to sleep is impossible after your best friend, whom you've recently discovered you're very attracted to, makes a joking comment about sixty-nine. I lost count of how many times I flipped over, flipped my pillow over, or untangled my sheets from all the damn flipping over.

It's a good thing Jensen's room is at the end of the hall, and there's a bathroom between us, because there was no way I was getting any rest without taking care of things. God bless quiet sex toys. But the real danger came the moment I, well, came, and my mouth started to say his name. Thankfully, I grabbed the pillow beside me to smother my face in time. A quiet vibe he might not hear, but me calling out his name in the throes of release...yeah, I don't feel like risking that.

Luckily, he was still asleep when I left for work today. I didn't even hear Oliver snuffle at his bedroom door to be let

out, so like a total coward, I crept out silently and escaped to the sanctity of the bakery. Yes, I realize he could easily find me here, but I don't think he will.

God, I hope he doesn't. If there was ever a terrible day for him to meet Mila, it's the day after whatever last night was. I could have sworn Jensen was going to do something, say something, after his ridiculous sixty-nine comment, but he didn't. Not really. Still, there was something in the air between us that I had never noticed before. But just in case I was being a sentimental, emotional weirdo, I pretended to be oblivious to it and to the energy crackling between us, and made my excuses to head to bed shortly after. I heard him get up, let Ollie out, and then go to bed himself. When his footsteps hesitated outside my bedroom door, I won't lie. I held my breath until he carried on down the hall.

At the bakery, I'm a machine, cranking out batch after batch of cookies. Pouring all of my restless, insecure energy into baking.

"Uh, Kelly?" Sebastian, our head barista and my frequent early morning co-worker, sticks his head in the kitchen door. "Are we running a sale on cookies this morning?"

I dart my gaze up at him, huffing out some air to get the piece of hair that's fallen over my eyes out of the way. "No, why?"

He fidgets in the doorway, glancing between the racks of cooling cookies in front of me and the front counter.

"Spit it out, Bast," I say sharply.

“It’s just that you’ve filled all the trays out front and taken over three scone trays. Customers are wondering if there will be anything *other* than cookies today.”

My head falls forward. “Shit. I forgot to put the muffins in the oven. I’m so sorry, Sebastian. Yeah, let’s run a two-for-one on cookies, and I’ll put this dough in the fridge and get straight to work on muffins.” I quickly start to scrape the dough into a container, mentally berating myself for being so distracted. Somehow, I didn’t clue in to the fact that with Mila taking a rare morning off, I was responsible for more than just the cookies. Some manager I’m turning out to be if all it takes is one awkward sort of flirt and I’m reduced to a fumbling disaster.



Mila’s arrival at the bakery was just late enough that I managed to catch up on other baking so our customers had their usual variety. But I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.

“Care to explain why we’re suddenly running a two-for-one sale on cookies? Pretty sure I don’t remember setting that up when we mapped out promotions for the quarter.” Mila arches her brow at me, but judging by the smile she’s trying to hide, she isn’t *too* upset.

“Sorry. I got a little carried away with cookie batches, and I figured a flash sale was a good way to clear out the extras. I hope that’s alright?”

I'm dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Of course it is, babe, I trust you. That's why you're in charge. I'm just giving you a hard time."

I give her a wan smile in return.

"I do have one question."

"Which is?" I ask cautiously.

"Is there a good reason for your distraction? And by good, I mean..." Mila wiggles her eyebrows at me suggestively.

My hands come up to cover my flaming cheeks.

"I knew it! Oh my God, what happened? Did you make your move?" Mila's vibrating in place. I almost hate to disappoint her.

"Nothing happened. He went on a date, it apparently sucked, he complained about it, and then I offered to help him."

"Help him how?" Her eyes narrow at me.

It's my turn to start fidgeting under the intensity of her scrutiny. "By...offering to...go on a practice date with him tonight."

"Yeah, girl!" Mila holds out her fist for me to bump, like some sort of teenage skater kid. I ignore it. But one thing about Mila, she's like a dog with a bone. She doesn't give up, so it comes as no surprise when she picks up my hand and forces the bump she's looking for. "Okay so what's the plan? Where are you guys going?"

"Insignia."

“Ooooh, the fancy new steak place in Westport? Nice choice! What are you going to wear?”

“I don’t know, Mila, clothes? It’s not like it’s a real date, so why does it matter!” I throw my hands up in exasperation and turn away. But Mila just walks over and wraps her arms around my midsection, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be pushy.”

“It’s okay,” I reply quietly. “I’m nervous, Mila.”

She turns me around slowly. “Then we need to make sure you’re looking and feeling every bit as irresistible as you are.”

“What exactly does that mean?” I ask, and a look of mischief comes over her face.

“It means we’re going shopping. You’re gonna look so good, it’ll be a slap in his face when he realizes just how hot you are. You might have planned this as a practice date —” Mila rubs her hands together “— but by the end of tonight, there won’t be any doubt that you’re the woman Jensen should be with.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jensen

“What d’you think, bud? Blue or grey?” I hold up two shirts. Oliver keeps on snoring. “You’re so helpful.” I drop the blue shirt on the bed. “Or maybe I’m just the idiot who’s asking his dog for fashion advice.”

“Hey, J? Can you, uh, help me with something?” Kelly’s voice is muffled by the door, but Oliver still lifts his head and looks toward it.

“Oh. Sure. *Her* you listen to,” I mutter, leaving my shirt half-buttoned as I go to open the door. “Of course, what’s —”

Holy. Shit.

I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen Kelly dressed in anything other than leggings, jeans, or shorts. I’ve *definitely* never seen her in a dress that is hitting her curves in all the right places. It does some weird twisty-knot-wrap thing in the front, accentuating her body perfectly. But the part that

is really getting to me is where the folds of fabric part over her legs, letting just enough of her thigh peek through.

Now all I can think of is pinning her against the wall and sliding my hand underneath that dark green silky fabric to see what's beneath it.

“Jensen?” Her hesitant voice jolts me out of the fog of lust swirling in my head.

“Right. Sorry. Umm.” I lick my suddenly dry lips. “What did you need me to do?” Fucking hell, why is my voice cracking like a highschooler going through puberty?

“The zipper, J, I already said so. Are you feeling okay?”

Great, now Kelly's looking at me like I'm crazy, which maybe I am for having these thoughts about her. I shake my head.

“Yeah, of course.”

She turns around, and I try to control the tremor in my hands as I slide the zipper up the line of her back. Jesus Christ. Her skin is right there, looking soft, tanned, and inviting. When my fingers brush against her neck, she visibly shivers. And my dick takes notice.

But then something bumps into the two of us, and Kelly lets out a little shriek, breaking the spell. “Jesus, Ollie, your nose is cold!”

I take a step back into my room and turn slightly to try and hide the situation in my pants. “Okay. So I'll be ready in a few. Could you let Ollie outside?” I close my bedroom door before

she can answer and lean my forehead against it with a mental groan. This visceral reaction to Kelly is nothing new, but it's unexpected at the moment, and I'm definitely not sure how to handle it. Especially when I have no clue where she stands on things.

Things being, us.

The mature course of action would be to have a reasonable, rational, adult conversation about it. But that scares the shit out of me. I've recently had my marriage fall apart, and I'm not super keen on having my best friendship also fall apart because I try to push us into something that she doesn't want. And I'm not exactly looking for another dose of rejection. Divorce was bad enough, thank you kindly.

Just like that, my mood sours. Thoughts of my ex and the cold, loveless relationship we had at the end always does this to me. And that's definitely not the energy I want to have tonight. Kelly deserves better.

"This is just dinner between friends," I mutter to myself as I do one final check in the mirror. Grey shirt was a good choice. Good to go, I grab my keys off the dresser and head to the kitchen to find Kelly. She's just feeding Oliver when I get there, and I shamelessly watch her as she stands, only downgrading my look from an outright ogle to just a friendly glance when she turns to face me.

"Ready to go?" she asks brightly. Any awkwardness I thought might be there after the zipper situation is gone.

“Yup, all set.” I stuff my hands in my pockets, unable to stop staring. “You look beautiful, Kell.”

A blush steals across her cheeks as her pink-tinted lips curl up. “Thanks. You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

After a minute of just standing there, smiling at each other like fools, we lock up and walk to my car, where I go to her side and open the door.

“You’ve never done that before,” Kelly comments, an impressed look on her face.

“I’ve never taken you on a pretend date before.”

Her throaty chuckle as she slides into the car hits me hard. I quickly make my way to the driver’s side, and soon we’re driving the short distance to Insignia, the steakhouse she suggested.

“I found a couple of apartments over on the south side of town I wanted to check out. Interested in coming with me?” I ask after a few minutes of easy silence.

“Well, duh, who else is going to make sure you don’t end up in some disgusting pit of an apartment?”

“I do have standards, Kell,” I reply drily.

“I know you do.” She shrugs and my eyes catch the delicate slope of her shoulders. Goddamn, that dress should be illegal. “But a second opinion is never a bad thing.”

“No, it’s not. But come on, your opinion is gonna be less of a suggestion, and more of a command.”

She turns an impish smile my way. “Someone’s gotta keep you and Oliver in line.”

“Yeah, yeah, my dog already likes you more than he does me,” I grumble under my breath, but her peal of laughter is exactly what I was hoping for. God, I missed her all these years.



Dinner was, as predicted, delicious. And fun. I forgot about Kelly’s habit of making up background stories for strangers around her, but over dinner, she had me laughing nonstop as she adopted various voices and created imaginary histories for the other diners. We shared a dessert of chocolate crème brulee that had Kelly making noises that made me wonder if I could get her to make those sounds in the bedroom, too. Because somewhere over our second glass of wine, I realized that’s how I wanted this night to end. With Kelly in my bed. Ideally, naked and underneath me.

But only if she wants that, too. And I’m still not certain she does.

Which is why I keep things light and friendly the entire drive home, only stealing the odd touch when I not so accidentally brush my hand against her leg, or let my fingers linger on her shoulder when I stretch my arm across the back of her seat as I reverse out of the parking spot. I’m pretty damn sure I didn’t imagine the way she leaned into my touch, or the twitch of her lips, but I’m moving slow. Glacial, in fact.

When we get back to her house, I quickly jog around to Kelly's car door and hold it open for her.

"Such a gentleman," she murmurs, giving me a soft smile as I close the door behind her. My hand finds the small of her back as we walk up to the front door. Once inside, our coats hung up and shoes kicked off, I deal with Oliver while she puts the kettle on for her usual evening routine of a cup of herbal tea.

"Chamomile tea?" She holds up two packets. "Or peppermint?"

"Chamomile, please." I walk over to her and place my hands on the counter, framing her in. "You know, there's one more part of a date we haven't practiced yet." My breath catches in my throat. This is it.

Kelly slowly turns in my arms. "Oh yeah? What's that?" she asks, but the coy look in her eyes belies the innocence of her words.

"The kiss goodnight." Those three words come out gravelly with desire, and I know she hears it. Thank fuck, I see an answering desire written all over her face.

"You're right, we should make sure you know how to do that right."

"Trust me, I know how."

Our lips crash together, fitting like they were meant for this. Kelly melts into my arms, her hands sliding into the back pocket of my jeans and cupping my ass. *Damn.* My restraint is

slipping as I push one leg between both of hers, hearing her moan as my thigh comes into contact with the apex of her thighs. She starts to grind against me, and I growl her name against her lips.

I don't want to stop. I want her to lose herself in this kiss, forget any reason or hesitation she might have about us, but I know Kelly. And I know she's going to need to retreat and think about things for a while, so I force myself to step back.

And when I see the confusion warring with lust in her eyes, I know the right thing to do is to say goodnight and walk away.

But later, lying in bed with Oliver snoring at my feet, I let myself imagine the night ending a little differently.

And fucking hell, do I ever want to make *that* happen. Soon.

CHAPTER NINE

Kelly

That kiss was a mistake. Because for the last half hour I've been lying in bed, unable to sleep, desperately wondering if Jensen is as good at...other things...as he is at kissing.

I'm willing to bet the answer is yes.

"This is stupid," I grumble under my breath as I punch my pillow for the tenth time. It's not like there's any doubt in my mind that Jensen wanted to take things further tonight. I felt the evidence of that myself.

But he's still my *best friend* and I know that if we do this, if we cross this line, things between us will never be the same. Maybe, just maybe, they'll be better.

Which is what has me throwing off the covers, cupping my hands over my mouth to do a quick breath check, and then making my way down the hall.

Oliver lifts his head with a huff from the foot of the bed. I snap my fingers, and he slowly uncurls himself, hops off the bed, and ambles over to me. I gently nudge him out of the room and close the door as a gravelly, sleep-filled voice comes from the bed.

“Kelly? What are you doing?”

I take one last deep breath of courage before pivoting on my feet and lifting my tank top up and over my head, revealing all of me except the little boy short style panties I sleep in.

“Come here.” Any trace of sleep is gone from his voice and my body immediately responds to the command. But the room is dark, and I don’t see the shoe on the floor until I stumble and flail toward the bed. Strong arms catch me, and the next second I’m on my back, on pillows that smell like Jensen, and his bare torso is hovering over me, his corded biceps framing my head.

“Jensen, I...” I start to say something, but I have no idea what because his lips cover mine, and I’m a goner.

“If you’re here to tell me you don’t want this, then speak up. Otherwise, be quiet and let me show you all the dirty ways I’ve wanted to have you over the last ten years.”

My entire body vibrates with the sensual power in his voice. But I do as I’m told and don’t say another word. Instead, my hands wrap around his waist, and I pull until he lowers himself, letting his entire body come into contact with mine. The weight of him, the heat between us, sends a delicious

spark through my body. I draw my short nails up and down his back as our tongues tangle together, exploring each other.

I lose track of everything except the feel of his lips on my skin as he trails a path down my neck, lightly nipping at my collar bone, making me gasp. As soon as the sound leaves my mouth, Jensen lifts himself up, and the pure alpha-male, satisfied smirk he flashes me brings a throaty chuckle. But that laugh turns into a moan when he leans down and latches on to one of my breasts, biting down gently before swirling his tongue around, teasing my nipple into a stiff nub.

Even without any words between us, Jensen knows me, knows my body. Call it instinct, or familiarity, or a soul-deep connection that defies explanation. Whatever it is, he uses it, bringing me to the edge of oblivion. With his attention only on my breasts.

What in the good God kind of sorcery is this...

“Jensen, please,” I moan. I need more. And yet, I don’t ever want him to stop what he’s doing.

“I’ve got you, Kell.”

Light, tickling strokes run down the sides of my torso and over the crease of my pelvis. Only then, when his thumbs are intoxicatingly close to where I want him, does his grip tighten. His fingers dig into my hips and his head lowers.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve fantasized about doing this,” he murmurs, his brown eyes locked on mine.

A thousand questions run through my head. But before I have time to voice any of them, he's pulling down my underwear and his tongue is on me, drawing a path of fire up the length of my slit.

“Oh God,” I cry, my hands tugging his hair, pulling him in tighter.

“Not God. Just Jensen.”

I had no freaking clue my best friend had a dirty streak a mile wide, but I am loving it. And when he takes the bundle of nerves into his mouth and sucks, I scream his name over and over, chanting it like a prayer.

His mouth stays on me through every wave of my release. When I finally come floating back to reality, Jensen is stretched out beside me, his hand drawing lazy circles over my stomach. I blink up at him, taking in his smile, the crinkle at the corner of his eyes, and the small dimple on his left cheek with new eyes. Eyes that view more than friendship, eyes that view the possibility of love.

“You are spectacularly beautiful when you come,” he says in a low voice dripping with desire.

I push him gently onto his back before swinging my legs over to straddle him. “Thank you. Now I want to see what *you* look like when you come.” My hands go to his boxers, and he lifts his hips to help me push them off his legs.

His gaze darkens. I lift myself up, wrap my hand around his rigid cock, and line it up with my entrance. Our eyes are

locked on each other as I slide myself down every inch of him until our bodies are connected as deeply as possible.

“Fucking hell, Kelly,” he rasps. “You feel better than I ever imagined.”

“Mmm...” is my only response as my hips start to rock against him. But suddenly I’m stilled by a firm grip on my hips.

“Wait. Protection. Shit, I’m sorry, I forgot!” Jensen sounds panicked, but when I look down at him there’s one thing I’m certain of. I don’t want anything between us.

“It’s okay. I have an IUD.” And I trust him implicitly. His eyes widen in understanding, then soften with something that looks a lot like...love.

His hold on my hip changes, and Jensen starts moving me back and forth, sliding me along his length in a way that brings his cock in perfect contact with my G-spot.

“Holy fucking shit!” I scream out, drawing a bark of laughter from Jensen.

“You like that, huh?”

All I can muster as a response is a low keening moan. But he gets the message, and keeps doing exactly what I need him to do.

I’ve never, and I do mean never, managed to reach an orgasm from penetration alone. I’ve always needed clit stimulation at the same time. But I guess miracles really do

happen because the telltale heat is thrumming through my body, and my muscles are starting to tense up.

“Jesus Christ, Kelly,” Jensen grinds out, and I smirk down at him. Obviously I’m not the only one who realizes I’m getting close. I squeeze my inner pelvic wall muscles even tighter around him and his back arches underneath me. “Fuck!”

“I thought we already were?” I tease, grinding down on him, mercilessly chasing my orgasm. When it comes, I’m completely unprepared for the intensity of emotions that come on the heels of my physical release. Only the sound of Jensen grunting out my name seconds later keeps me tethered and not spiraling out of control with how overwhelming this all is.

I just had sex with my best friend.

Really, really, *really* amazing sex.

Jensen maneuvers us so that we’re on our sides, then curls around me with a satisfied sigh. Somehow cuddling with him feels even more intimate than what we just did. Yet still, I slowly feel my heart rate return to normal, and a deep feeling of comfort and rightness fills me. Enough to give me a reassuring sense that I haven’t lost my best friend, I’ve just gained something even better.

“Jeez, I think you almost killed me. Death by orgasm.” I keep my tone light and teasing, in line with the happiness I’m feeling.

I feel his upturned lips press against my shoulder. “Eh, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

I flip over and lift up on an elbow to look down at him. “Jensen Porter. Did you just quote the queen Kelly Clarkson herself to me?”

He just rolls his eyes. “Well, you do make me listen to her a hell of a lot.”

I bat my eyelashes at him. “Well, my life would suck without you.” My hand reaches down and wraps around his dick. “And you.”

Jensen lets out a growl and flips the covers back, baring us both. He reaches over me and grabs his water bottle from the bedside table.

“Hydrate. We’re going again.”

CHAPTER TEN

Jensen

A low whine combined with scratching on the bedroom door forces me out of the incredible dream I was having. Kelly and I finally had sex, and she fell asleep in my arms.

Wait.

My eyes blink open, and my body slowly wakes up enough to realize the *naked* warm body pressed up against me, the leg thrown over mine, the light puff of air in and out against the side of my neck, that's no dream.

Kelly is in bed with me.

I had sex — no, I made love to her last night.

And now I'm waking up to her in my arms. I'm not dreaming.

Ollie's whine intensifies, reminding me I have a dog that is probably desperate for breakfast and a visit outside. Carefully,

I untangle myself from Kelly, hoping that she's still as deep of a sleeper as she used to be.

She is, and I give one last longing glance back at the warm bed and the naked woman who's still tangled up in the blankets. Oliver's nose bumps my leg. "Okay, buddy. I'm coming," I whisper, giving my dog a pat on the head. Snatching up a pair of sweatpants and pulling them on commando, I make my way to the kitchen, let Ollie out, and fill his food bowl. Then I get to work on the one thing guaranteed to wake Kelly up faster than anything else.

Dog fed, coffee in hand, I go back down the hall to the bedroom. Sure enough, Kelly is still asleep. I set her mug down on the bedside table beside her, then lean down to feather kisses over her hair. She mumbles something in her sleep and burrows deeper into the blankets.

"Come on, beautiful, I have coffee," I say in a low voice, chuckling when the blanket slowly inches down to reveal her sleepy face.

"Coffee?" she mumbles, and I nod, lifting the mug into her line of sight.

She makes her way to sitting, and the sheet covering her slides down. But before it can reveal her perfect breasts, Kelly snatches it up and looks around, her eyes suddenly wide in shock.

"Umm, Jensen? Why am I in your bed, naked?" she asks.

In response, I lean in and kiss her lips. The way she eagerly meets me and kisses me back makes it clear she remembers everything. I guess I'm not the only one who was just a little surprised that last night wasn't a dream.

“You're in my bed because you were meant to be in my bed. I'm pretty sure you always were.”

She melts underneath me, her arms circling my neck to pull me back down for another kiss. “You say the sweetest things.”

“And I bring coffee.”

“My hero.”



An hour later, I pull into a parking spot just down the street from the town square. A gazebo is currently being painted by what looks like a group of high school kids. We let Oliver out and I take Kelly's hand, threading our fingers together.

“Am I still sleeping? Because this place looks like I just stepped onto the set of a Hallmark movie.”

Her laughter is everything, and for a few perfect minutes we just wander around the adorable town of Dogwood Cove. I can see why she loves it here. Eventually, we stop in front of The Nutty Muffin bakery.

“I finally get to meet Mila.”

“Yup, you do. And I'm just going to say right now, I'm sorry if she's a little...” Kelly bites her lip.

“A little what?” I ask, curious as to what it could possibly be.

“A little excited.”

“About meeting me?”

Kelly nods. “Yeah, and that we’re, you know, obviously not *just* friends anymore.”

I pull her into my body and wrap my free arm around her waist before lowering my head and kissing her lightly. “Not just friends, huh? What are we, then?”

“Oh my God, yes!” A loud female voice pierces between us and Kelly pulls back with an apologetic look on her face.

A brunette woman grabs her and cups her head, turning it from side to side. “Yep, you had sex last night.”

“Mila, come on.” Kelly sounds embarrassed, so I pull her back into my side and kiss her head.

“What? She’s right,” I say, then stick my hand out toward the woman who clearly is Mila. “Nice to meet you, I’m Jensen. Kelly’s boyfriend.”

“Thank God you two finally got your shit figured out. I thought I was going to have to find a new cookie baker. Or —” Mila stops dramatically “— try to bake them myself.”

“God, no. Never.” Kelly shudders.

“Was she really that hung up over me?” I can’t resist asking, and when Kelly elbows me in the stomach, I know I deserve it.

“Worse,” Mila confides, coming to my other side. “Come inside for a muffin and some coffee, and I’ll tell you all about how she was pining over you.”

“I did not pine!”

Mila leans in front of me and pats Kelly on the arm. “Oh sweetie, you pined. Or have you forgotten the day you made so many damn cookies we couldn’t even give them away.”

A little while later, after introducing me to a couple of Kelly’s friends and Mila’s fiancée, Jackson, we’re sitting down at a table near the front window. Mila insisted I try her apple nut muffin, but Kelly has one of the cookies her assistant Barb made — for quality control, she claims.

“So. Do you think you could take down that damn dating site profile now?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest and smirking at Kelly, who has her cookie halfway up to her mouth. She slowly finishes taking a bite before giving me a devious smile.

“That depends, *dog dad*, are you willing to discuss me being more than just Oliver’s fun Aunt Kelly?”

I lift up out of my chair, lean over, and kiss her hard. “If I have it my way, pretty soon you’re gonna be a *dog mom*.”

The surprise on Kelly’s face quickly morphs into joy. “That sounds good to me.” She takes another bite of her cookie before one upping me, yet again. “But that means no apartment hunting.”

“Why?” I ask, even though I think I know the answer.

“Because I will not share custody of our fur baby. It’s all or nothing. You and Oliver move into my house, or he stays and you go.”

“Ouch. You’d pick our dog over me?”

Kelly looks me in the eye, a dead serious expression on her face but a twinkle in her eye that gives it away. “Absolutely.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Fine, final offer. You and Oliver both move into my house, or I move into wherever you decide to live.”

“Deal.” I take out my phone. “I’m cancelling the apartment tours now.”

The smile Kelly gives me is blinding. Impulsively, I grab her hand. “I love you, Kelly.”

She tilts her head to the side. “I know. I love you, too.”

No, she doesn’t know.

“I mean I’m *in love* with you. That kind of love. The kind that makes me want to be with you, like this, forever.”

Her mouth falls open, and I reach over to gently push her chin up to close it. Her eyes blink rapidly, and her tongue darts out to moisten her lips.

“I’m in love with you, too, Jensen. I think...I think I always have been.”

I take her hand in mine and raise it up so I can press my lips to the back of it. “It might have taken us a while to get here,

but I'm so damn happy. You're the best part of my past, and all of my future."

This time, Kelly initiates the kiss. But you best believe I won't let it end for a long time. A lifetime, if I have my way.

EPILOGUE

Kelly

I hold my breath as I slowly lower the tower of cupcakes to the table as gingerly as possible. Somehow, luck is on my side, and I manage to put it down without a single one tipping over.

“Nicely done, babe.”

I turn at Jensen’s voice and crouch down to love up on Ollie.

“Excuse me. Why, exactly, is the dog getting attention before me?”

I look up with a sunny smile. “Simple. I love him more.”

Jensen clutches his chest. “Ouch.”

I stand up and press a kiss to his cheek. “Sorry, but yes. Dog trumps boyfriend.”

“Hmph.”

“Wow, Kelly, this is incredible.”

I turn around to find Dogwood Cove's mayor, Ethan Monroe, and his fiancée, Summer, standing in front of me. "Thanks, guys."

"Please tell me you'll do something similar for our barbecue reception next month?" Summer takes my hand and gives me a pleading look.

"Of course I will. Is everything ready for your wedding? Where is it again?"

"The Cayman Islands," Summer says, clapping her hands. "I'm so dang excited. I wish you could come with us." Her smile starts to turn down, so I jump in.

"Nah, someone's got to run the bakery and the café! Besides, I think it's amazing that you're keeping it so small and intimate."

Ethan gives me a grateful smile. He's one hell of a handsome man, with his lumbersnack vibes and take-charge personality. He's also a great mayor, and completely dedicated to Summer. If I weren't so madly in love with Jensen, I'd be jealous of her. Hell, I *was* jealous. Of her and Ethan, Mila and Jackson, Finn and Ashley, all of the amazing couples in this town. But not anymore because now, just under a year after Jensen moved to Westport, I am one of those couples. And tonight, we're all at Oceanside Resort, the place Summer inherited from her dad, for a bonfire birthday party for Mila.

"You're the best, Kelly." Summer hugs my shoulders. She's such a sweetheart, it's easy to see how she and Mila were best

friends for so long. You know those people who just have a good heart? Summer is one of those people.

Jensen pulls me into his side as Summer and Ethan are called over to a group that includes Ethan's friend, Finn, and his fiancée, Ashley.

"Babe. She's right, you are the best," he mumbles against my hair before pressing his lips in a kiss. "As much as I enjoy your friends, how much longer do you need to be here?"

I look up at him confused. "Why?"

"Because you left the extra frosting at home, didn't you?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I was thinking it could make for an interesting art project."

It takes a minute for my brain to catch up to what kind of art project he's talking about. But when he slips a finger under the hem of my shirt and drags it back and forth, I get it. Heat instantly floods my body. "Oh. *Oh.*"

Jensen quirks a grin and nods slowly.

"I'll just go and say goodbye to Mila and Jackson. Why don't you load Oliver in the car and I'll meet you there?"

"Five minutes, babe. I really, *really* want that frosting."



"Fuck, you're delicious," Jensen rumbles, licking a drop of frosting off my right nipple.

“That’s the frosting,” I gasp as he tugs the peak in between his teeth.

He continues, using his finger to spread frosting in lines all over my chest, following with his tongue. He takes his time in all of my favourite spots, the places he knows will send me higher than ever. And when we finally abandon the frosting and he slides into me, I don’t care about the sticky sweet mess that covers me and the bedsheets.

All I care about is the man in front of me, the man who knows me better than anyone — the man who is my best friend, my lover, and my soul mate. My past and my future.

Vows and Promises

Julia Jarrett

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CHAPTER ONE

SUMMER

Summer

I can't seem to tear my eyes away from the turquoise water outside the tiny window of the airplane — it's currently carrying the love of my life and I to the Cayman Islands for a week beyond my wildest dreams.

"I can't believe we're almost there," I murmur, squeezing Ethan's hand. His low chuckle makes me turn to him, and the look of adoration on his face makes me melt, just as it does every time. The love this man shows me knows no bounds.

"Just a few more days until we're standing on a beach, and you'll finally be mine." His voice is a low rumble, full of sexy promise. I shiver slightly, remembering what he said to me before we left Dogwood Cove yesterday, outlining exactly what he wanted to do with me tonight before our friends arrive on Grand Cayman tomorrow. Then we all head over to the smaller island of Cayman Brac to help us celebrate.

“I’ve been yours since the day you revealed your fear of raccoons,” I tease, needing to lighten the tension before I decide it’s time to become a member of the mile high club right here on this teeny tiny plane.

Ethan’s head falls back against the headrest. “Seriously, shorty? Can’t my wedding present from you be a promise to never mention that again?”

I giggle. “Nope, it’s just too much fun to watch you blush.”

His eyes narrow and fill with what I can only describe as pure lust. “I’ll be making *you* blush soon enough. Just remember that.” He leans over, pressing a firm kiss to my lips before settling back in his seat. “How much longer till we land?”

“About twenty minutes. Why?”

“Because I’m mentally calculating how long until I get to see you in that white bikini you packed.”

My face heats, but not with embarrassment.

With anticipation.

The last couple of weeks have been so busy for both of us. Our days have been packed trying to get everything ready at our jobs and at home in preparation for traveling out of the country for a week.

Oceanside Resort has been a wonderful success since the day I reopened the doors, with reservations already full for the next year. Adding Wyatt’s outdoor adventure tourism company to our property made things even more busy, but in the best

possible way. Even with the staff I now have, including an amazing office manager, I'm still kept on my toes with all the things it takes to run a beachfront getaway. Our winters are mild enough that I can stay open year-round, which is great financially, but makes it hard to get a break.

Ethan is still the town mayor, which he might try to grumble about, but I think he secretly enjoys. Those responsibilities are only increasing as the town has entered into a partnership with the nearby city of Westport to work on developing the local mountain into a ski resort. In addition to all of that, he and Mila are still managing several rental properties.

By the time we fall into bed each night, we're both so exhausted lately that we can't bring ourselves to do much more than tangle up and cuddle to sleep.

Needless to say, I miss him.

So, having some time to reconnect before everyone else arrives is just what we need. He might want to see me in a bikini, but I've got bigger plans. We get to spend a day together, just the two of us, in paradise, and I plan on enjoying every second of it. I want to dance in the waves of Seven Mile Beach, drive up to Starfish Point, and visit the sea turtle sanctuary. I want to eat the local delicacy of conch fritters and drink Caribbean rum.

And I want to take my soon-to-be husband to bed and show him just how much I've missed him lately.

Then, starting tomorrow, we get seven days with all of our closest friends, in a place that rivals heaven. I get to marry my

soulmate and have a vacation that a few years ago, I wouldn't have even let myself fantasize about.

When Wyatt, Paige's fiancé — a verified billionaire and the only one of us to have ever traveled to someplace like this before — first suggested a small resort on the middle-sized Cayman Island as a possible venue, I was hooked. Cayman Brac is quiet, not as popular with the tourists as Grand Cayman, but just as beautiful from what I saw in photos. It's more rugged, but full of quiet charm.

It's the perfect place to tell the man I love that I promise to love him always and forever.

CHAPTER TWO

Ethan

“Holy crap, lumberjack, what is this?” Summer exclaims as she walks past me into the expansive suite I booked for us at the beachfront hotel. She was expecting an average hotel room since we’re only here for one night, but I upgraded us to an ocean view suite in secret. How could I not? I would give this woman the fucking world if I could, so a fancy hotel room for our wedding is nothing.

“I think they call it the honeymoon suite,” I reply, leaning against the wall beside the door, watching her explore. She bounces on the bed, flashing me a mischievous grin. But as I push off and start to go to her, she stands up and dances over to the large glass doors that open onto our private deck. It looks straight out onto a stretch of golden sand and the sparkling water of the Caribbean Sea beyond.

“Ethan, this is insane.” I come up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist, resting my chin on her head.

“Do you like it?”

Summer pivots in my arms and laces her hands behind my neck. “I love it.”

Bending down slightly, I kiss her forehead. “Then that’s all that matters.” My lips move down to cover hers. I could kiss Summer for hours on end, and I have. Time ceases to matter when we’re together.

Her fingers rake through my hair and I growl into her mouth, pulling her closer. Then I bend slightly and lift her up into my arms, pivot, and walk over to the bed before lowering her down onto it.

“I know I said I want to see you in that bikini, but I want to see you in something else first.”

She props herself up on her elbows and smirks up at me. “And what would that be?”

“Nothing at all.”

I grab the hem of her shorts and yank them down as she shrieks with laughter, making me grin in return. Our clothes are off seconds later, and Summer’s pushing me to roll over, then straddling my waist, letting her nails scratch lightly down my chest as my aching cock is trapped between us.

“If you’re keeping me from exploring that beach, you had better make it worth my while, lumberjack.”

Her sexy wink is all the motivation I need. Grabbing her hips, I haul her up my body until her hands fall to the wall above the headboard. “Have I ever let you down in bed,

shorty?” I say, my thumbs teasing the inner creases of her hips, now perfectly positioned in front of my face. She shakes her head, her hips already starting to move impatiently. I lift my head slightly and press a wet, open-mouthed kiss to the top of her mound. “Then don’t worry.”

My tongue circles around her clit before sliding down her slit.

“Ethan,” she moans, one hand finding its way onto the back of my head. I rumble in response and pull her sweetness in closer to my face. We’ve done this enough times I know exactly what it’ll take to send her flying, and I don’t waste any time.

There are bikinis to be worn, after all.

When her body stops quaking and convulsing above my head, I wrap my arms around Summer and maneuver us so she’s underneath me. Her eyes are closed and she’s still breathing heavily, but the satisfied smile on her face is all I care about.

“Still with me?” I ask, peppering her breasts with kisses. She giggles when my scruff hits a ticklish spot.

“Yup.”

“Good. My turn. It’s been forty-eight hours since I had you and I’m in withdrawal.”

Summer makes an adorable snorting noise, but I slide my cock into her heat, morphing that sound into a moan of pleasure.

“That’s better,” I rasp, slowly pumping my hips in shallow thrusts. “Fuck, babe, I love you.”

“More,” she moans, and my body responds instantly. Lifting her legs up and propping them on my shoulders, I change the angle of my movements in a way that I know will drive Summer wild. Sure enough, she starts to keel out my name, her nails digging into my back.

“Right there, babe. God you feel so good, shorty. Fuck.” Her inner walls start to squeeze my dick in a rhythmic, pulsing motion. She’s close.

I settle back slightly, slowing my movements, and bring one hand between the two of us to circle her clit with my thumb.

“Oh my God, Ethan,” she shrieks. “Yes, please, oh God, please!”

Her back lifts off the bed, arching toward me, her hands clutching at me as she detonates around me, sending my own release shooting off into her. My thrusts turn jerky as my arms start to shake, until I manage to lower myself down to the side of Summer, and pull her into my chest.

We lay there for a minute, that afterglow creating a peaceful quiet between us. Sex with Summer is always incredible. But these intimate moments after are almost my favourite. When our connection is the strongest physically and emotionally, and our minds are clear of anything but each other.

“Do you feel better now?” Summer asks, her fingers drawing idle circles on my bare chest. I tilt my head slightly so I can

see her.

“What do you mean?”

She lifts up on her elbow and her expression is way too fucking serious for a woman who just had multiple orgasms. “Ethan, I know you. And I know you’ve been a stress case the last couple of weeks trying to get everything organized back home while trying to make sure everything here goes off without a hitch. But I’m telling you, it doesn’t have to be perfect. As long as I’m married to you at the end of this week, that’s all I need.”

My lips quirk into a wry grin. “Guess I can’t hide anything from you, can I shorty?”

“Nope,” she says, kissing my nose lightly. “I love you too much not to notice when you’re not your usual laid-back, lumberjack self.”

I gather her in my arms, tucking her back against my body. “I love you, Summer. More than anything in this world.”

“I love you, too.”

Later that night, after a day spent at the beach where Summer tormented me in that fucking bikini, we headed into George Town to explore. After, we ate our fill of conch fritters and lobster tails at a waterfront restaurant. Now Summer’s curled up on her side, fast asleep in bed next to me. I finally have the opportunity to open my phone and check the status of a critical text message I tried to send this afternoon.

Undelivered.

Shit.

CHAPTER THREE

Mila

“But did you make sure the volunteer schedule for dog walks was up to date?”

I fire a glare at Jackson. Seriously? He’s doubting *my* organization skills?

“Jackson, I love you. So much. But if you ask me one more question about the shelter, I might strangle you.”

He has the decency to look sheepish. “Sorry, I know you’ve got everything in hand and the place is probably running better than a five-star luxury hotel.”

I pat his forearm, the teasing motion turning into something more as the corded muscles bunch underneath me. Lord, this man’s arms are pure temptation. “I know you’re nervous about leaving so soon after opening the shelter and securing your partnership, but Phil said he would help out with both. And there’s a reason we hired Helen to manage the shelter. So that

we can take a break every now and then. Even workaholics like us need a vacation.” I lean in closer to whisper in his ear. “Besides, remember that thing we tried last night? We’ve got seven whole days and nights in a beachfront suite to ourselves. Which means we can do that again, without the furry interruption.”

Jackson snorts and I know he’s remembering the cold dog nose that nudged his hip right as he was about to lick me into one helluva orgasm last night.

Needless to say, the interruption ruined the mood — and my release — and Milo was banished from the bedroom.

“Oh, I remember. And I plan on trying that again, just as soon as possible.” Jackson winks, but then that darn crease between his eyebrows appears again. “But do you remember if I told Rosie where the spare key is for the house, in case she has to go over to let Milo out?”

“Yes. It’s all fine. Rosie has the key and the house sitter’s information. Kelly also promised she and Jensen would take Milo with them when they go to the beach with Oliver. And before you ask, Kelly knows everything she needs to know about the bakery and the café.”

Thank God the clinic’s receptionist, Rosie, and my head baker and manager, Kelly, are as fantastic as they are. Because coordinating everything for three businesses, one animal shelter, and our dog and cat was quite the ordeal. But we did it, and now, I just need my man to relax.

“What’s it going to take for you to just breathe and realize we’re on vacation? Everything will be *fine* back home,” I point out, moving my hand to the top of his thigh. Jackson isn’t usually wound so tight, but he does like routine, and our lives lately have been anything but. Still, this trip is the break we both need.

If he can just relax.

“Okay, okay, sorry. You win, I’ll stop.” He drops his head back against the seat and I see some of the tension leave his shoulders.

Leaning in, I whisper in his ear, “That’s right. And what else?”

Jackson twists slightly to look at me, a smirk crossing his lips. “And you’re the most organized, on top of it, with it, forward-thinking, future-planning woman I know and love, and I need to shut up and stop questioning you.”

“Thank you,” I say primly, sitting back in my seat. But I should know better because a relaxed Jackson is a sneaky Jackson.

“I do have one last question.” His hand comes to my thigh and starts drawing lazy circles, slowly moving higher and higher. “Do you remember your promise to me?”

“Uh, what promise?” I ask, my voice catching when his thumb brushes just under the hem of my shorts. “And what the heck are you doing to me?”

“Just getting you ready for tonight,” he replies casually, but the wicked grin he gives me is anything but casual. “The promise about not trying to sneak any stray animals into your bag to bring home. Remember?”

“Oh. Ohhh. Jackson!” I whisper-shriek when he boldly presses right over my clit. Sure, the fabric of my shorts separates him from actually touching me, but still. I’m squirming in my seat and I don’t really know if I’m trying to get closer or get away.

Fine, let’s be real. I want to get closer.

Just maybe not on a tiny airplane filled with our friends.

But this man who claims to love me apparently wants to torment me. Because just as I’m straining to get his hand where I need it, he lifts it away. “Good grief, you’re evil.”

Jackson leans over and kisses my cheek firmly. “Consider it payback for withholding my muffins from me last week.”

“One day,” I huff, giving him an evil glare. “*One* day I didn’t bake bran muffins and this is how you react? By withholding *orgasms?*”

The impossible man I can’t help but love just shrugs. “Yup. Love you.”

My eyes couldn’t possibly roll back further into my head, even as I smile back at him. “Love you, too.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Reid

“I can get some ginger ale for you,” I whisper in Abby’s ear, the pale colour on her face making me feel nauseous for her.

She shakes her head almost violently. “Nope. The bubbles will make it worse. I’ll be fine. Just need to breathe.”

“I hate seeing you like this,” I mutter, rubbing the palm of her hand. It’s the only thing I can do right now to make her feel better and I fucking hate it. I dunno how guys go through this with their wives more than once; I’m a wreck.

Abby takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly before opening her beautiful eyes and looking at me. “I’m fine, Reid. Honestly. The nausea is passing. Just need some more time for the medicine the doctors gave me to work.”

I press a soft kiss to her forehead. “You’re amazing, Abby Martin Corser.”

She drops her head to rest on my shoulder, her arm wrapping around my upper body. “Thanks.”

We stay like that for a few minutes. While I’m glad she’s feeling better, I can’t imagine several more months of this. But Abby’s been here before and she’s quick to shut me down when I start to get crazy. Like when I dared to suggest that maybe we shouldn’t come on this trip.

As she pointed out, our availability to take vacation is dictated by the school year. That’s thanks to both my job and Layla — her daughter and my stepdaughter as of a few months ago, when we went in secret to the courthouse and got married. Abby didn’t want to make a big fuss and said all she needed was Layla, her Uncle Steve, and me. Our friends and my parents gave us a hard time, but they got over it pretty quick. We did a BBQ at the farm over the summer and that was that.

Of course, neither of us expected to be in our current situation. Not that we were actively trying to prevent it, but we also weren’t expecting it to happen quite so quickly. Which means in a matter of months, our lives are going to get a lot crazier. Kid-free, beach vacations will be off the table for a while, meaning we want to enjoy every second of this trip.

At least, every second that Abby isn’t sick.

“See, already feeling better.” Abby’s smile has returned when she looks up at me. “I’m going to scoot back a couple of rows and talk to Summer and Paige, okay?” She kisses me lightly before standing up and making her way down the aisle

of the small plane we chartered to take us all from Grand Cayman over to Cayman Brac. As much as the charter made sense, given how big our group is, there's no denying the small plane probably made things worse for Abby's nausea.

Not even a minute after she leaves, Ethan drops down into the seat next to me. It's obvious something's wrong.

"You never got my text," he whispers urgently.

"What text?" I frown.

"The one I tried to send you yesterday before you left."

"Okay, still not getting it, man. Start from the beginning."

Ethan's eyes dart around nervously, but everyone else is talking amongst themselves. No one is paying us any attention.

"I left her ring at home."

"What?" I exclaim and he thumps me on the arm.

"Shh! I don't want Summer to hear."

I rub the spot where he hit me, even though it really didn't hurt. I just need something to do while I process this. "You left her wedding band at home? Dude, you're a fucking moron."

"I know," he hisses. "Now help me fix it, instead of talking shit. You're my best man for a fucking reason."

"Okay, okay, calm down." I think quickly. "We can't exactly get it couriered here in time, so we'll have to buy a stand-in ring."

"Already thought of that. But I'll need to distract her so she doesn't find out."

I debate telling him she'll figure it out pretty damn fast on their wedding day, but decide not to. He's stressed out enough as it is. "Not a problem. We'll have to get the ladies involved, but I'm sure we can figure it out. Let's meet up tonight at the resort and figure it all out."

Ethan's shoulders slump in relief. "Right. Yeah. We can figure it out. Thanks, man."

I slap him on the shoulder— fine, maybe a little hard as payback for his earlier hit to my arm. "No prob. That's what I'm here for."

CHAPTER FIVE

Finn

“Holy shit,” I mutter under my breath as I take in the scene before me. A sandy beach leads to turquoise waters with seashells I’ve never seen before dotting the ground. Six small buildings are lined up along the beach; I’m guessing that’s where we’re all sleeping. But where we stand now, waiting for Ethan and Summer to finish checking us all in with the resort’s owners, is probably the most incredible view.

I’d like to think I’ve seen some beautiful places. After all, I grew up spending my summers in France, in my family’s vineyard. But this is next-level. Palm trees swaying, immaculately kept grounds, and a pool framed in crystal white and blue tile. It even has a fucking fountain pouring into it, over some sort of man-made rock waterfall thing. The main buildings are the same blue and white colour as the pool tile, but are covered in flowering vines, reminiscent of how my

grandfather had his special grapes growing up the side of his house in France.

“Uh, Finn, I’m not sure I’m going to want to go home,” my fiancée Ashley murmurs as she slides her hand in mine.

“Sweet girl, I’m with you. Let’s just stay here forever. Fuck the winery.”

She giggles at that. “As if you’d ever abandon your precious grapes.”

“True. Wonder if I could grow them here.”

“I doubt Pierre would want to relocate.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Fine. I’ll settle for coming back next year.” The truth is, neither one of us would want to leave Dogwood Cove and the careers, and life, we’re building there. The winery is a success, and Ashley’s design firm, the one she and our friend Tom are running, is keeping her busy. Her dad made a full recovery from his heart attack, but she worries about him, so every other weekend we’re on the ferry to the mainland for a visit. Granted, we also get to visit the wineries over there. I even let her convince me to go skiing in Whistler one weekend this past winter.

Plans for our own wedding are underway, but we’re in no rush. She knows I’m hers, no matter what.

I lift her hand, so I can kiss the back of it, as Ethan waves for everyone’s attention. Something’s going on with him; I can see the tension in his jaw.

“Okay everyone, luggage has been dropped off in your cabins. We didn’t bother planning anything for today, figured we could all just use an afternoon to relax.” His eyes dart to Summer. What the fuck? He’s nervous about something.

As everyone drifts away to their cabins, I tug Ashley with me over to Ethan. Summer’s occupied, talking with the resort owner, so I take advantage.

“What the hell is going on, Ethan? You look like you’re about to shit your pants.”

“Eww,” Abby says, poking me, before she, too, turns to Ethan. “But he’s not wrong. Something’s up.”

I watch my friend check to make sure Summer isn’t in listening range. “I forgot her ring at home. We need to distract her so I can go shopping. Help.”

The anxiety is evident in his choppy words and tense voice. I’ve only ever heard him this worked up once before when he called me for help after almost fucking things up with Summer.

“What are you guys talking about?”

Ethan’s sister Mila pops up beside him, surprising us all.

“Shit, Mills. Why you gotta sneak up on me like that?” Ethan says gruffly.

“Because you look like you’re having some top secret meeting and I want in.”

“Ethan forgot Summer’s ring at home,” Ashley says as Ethan drops his chin to his chest.

“Fuck, big brother, you are an idiot sometimes.”

“Thanks, Mills. Now can you just help?” he says, his voice sounding pained.

Mila claps her hands together. “I got this. Ash, let’s get Serena and Paige to take Summer for a beach walk. I need to get into the kitchen to figure out the cake, and Abby wants to lay down for a bit. But between all of us, we can keep her distracted while my dumbass brother goes ring shopping.”

It’s truly amazing what a force of nature Mila Monroe is when she needs to organize something. And judging by the grateful look on Ethan’s face, I’m not the only one thinking that.

The others disperse, and Ashley turns to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Well, there goes our quiet afternoon together.”

I pull her in close and drop a kiss to her lips. “That’s okay. I need to make sure the wine shipment arrived okay. I’ll grab a bottle of Viognier and we can do a private tasting tonight.”

Her eyes darken. “By tasting, you mean...”

I bite gently on her lower lip. “I mean we’ll see what tastes sweeter. You or the wine. I’m betting it’ll be you.”

CHAPTER SIX

Paige

The terrain of the beach we are currently walking on is fascinating. While there are certainly some sandy parts, the vast majority of the beach is covered in shells. Small ones and larger ones. I've never seen queen or king conch shells in person, and they are magnificent. The fact that they are just lying around on the beach is astounding.

"Definitely different from Canadian beaches, isn't it," Summer marvels, stopping to pick up a sun-bleached sea urchin shell. "I can't believe we're here."

She seems happy and unaware that this walk is a distraction tactic meant to keep her occupied while Ethan goes to find a stand-in wedding ring.

"You did choose a remarkable location for your nuptials. I am looking forward to exploring the native flora on the bluff in the middle of the island later this week."

Summer wraps her arm around my shoulder and drops her head down. “Thanks, Paige. I’m happy you’re here, too.”

“Ladies!” Serena shouts from up ahead. “You need to see this, quick!”

We pick up the pace to join her on a rocky outcrop.

“Look!” She points out to the water, just in time for the head of a large green sea turtle to crest the surface, followed quickly by another. “Turtles. Oh my God, I want to swim with the turtles.”

“We should go back to the resort and grab some snorkel gear,” Summer says excitedly.

“No!” both Serena and I answer, perhaps too quickly, given the look Summer gives us.

“We’ll have plenty of opportunities for snorkeling,” I supply. “Let’s simply enjoy the sight and continue our walk.”

Summer’s brow creases and I know she’s questioning why we wouldn’t go back now. The resort we have rented is close by and we could be back here in mere moments.

“Are you sure? What if they swim away?” she asks, starting to turn back.

Serena grabs her arm and tugs her off the rocks, moving farther down the beach. “There’s plenty of turtles in the sea. C’mon, lets see if we can find a giant conch.”

Thankfully, Summer follows without anymore complaint, and an hour later when we do eventually end up back at the

resort, everyone else is there, as well. A staff member from the resort is walking around with a tray of drinks, and I notice that Ethan seems far more relaxed. It is easy to surmise that his excursion must have been successful.

“Hey, baby.” A pair of familiar muscular arms slides around my waist and I feel myself melt back into Wyatt’s arms. It never ceases to amaze me the way my body responds to his. It’s unlike anything I have ever experienced. I still marvel at the fact that I believed orgasms to be inconsequential, until Wyatt proved me wrong.

“Hello,” I reply, turning in his embrace to face him, my hands lifting to run through his hair. “I trust everything is sorted now?”

“Everything’s fine. Crisis averted.” He drops his lips to my neck and presses a kiss to my pulse point. “Mmm. I love how your heartbeat speeds up when I do that. You’re so responsive to me.”

“You do seem to have a direct line to my physical reactions,” I reply breathlessly as he lifts his head and gives me a wolfish grin. “But didn’t you want to announce the plan for tomorrow? Perhaps we should do that before we go to our cabin.”

Wyatt huffs quietly. “Yeah. Right.” He raises his voice to catch the attention of our friends. “Hey everyone, I want to let you know the plans for tomorrow.”

“Right, your surprise,” Ethan says as everyone comes our way. “I told you that you didn’t need to do anything crazy.”

I hide my smile. One thing I have come to learn about the man I love is that he is generous to a fault. I tried to dissuade him from this plan, but he was insistent. Not only is his adventure tourism company doing very well in its first year, he also has a sizeable trust fund and healthy bank account thanks to his family's bookstore chain, so Wyatt has the money to spend. And if spending it on our friends means he eases up on trying to convince me that *we* need a new house, or a new car, or a trip, or any other extravagant thing, I'm all for it.

“Is it crazy if it's something I've always wanted to do, as well? Or is it entirely self-serving and you're just along for the ride?”

“Shit, he's got you there,” Jackson calls out and the rest of the men chuckle along with him.

Wyatt lifts his hands to settle them all. “Don't stay up too late, gentlemen, because we need to be up early tomorrow to head out for a deep-sea fishing trip. And ladies, while we're out on the water, I've organized for a spa day here at the resort. Massages, facials, nails, whatever you want.”

Summer's eyes are filling with tears as she walks over and hugs Wyatt, then me. “Thank you, that is so thoughtful and so generous.”

“Seriously man, I want to say it's too much, but I'm too fucking excited. Thank you.” Ethan claps Wyatt on the shoulder before turning to me. “Gotta say, Paige, I'm glad you kept this one around.”

My eyes drop down, then back up. This type of effusive attention still feels uncomfortable for me at times. But before I can figure out how on earth to respond to Ethan's comment, Serena interjects, saving me.

“Okay, so Wyatt wins for best wedding present, since it's one we can all enjoy. Now can we *please* take these delicious drinks and hit the pool?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Serena

“I swear, Paige, if I didn’t love Leo so freaking much and firmly believe in chicks before dicks I would be tempted to steal Wyatt away from you. The perks of having a billionaire around are so, so, so good.” I moan as the masseuse hits a particularly tight spot.

“It’s a good thing I trust you implicitly, or I could take offense to that comment,” Paige replies mildly.

I lift my head and give her a cheeky grin. “You know I’m only teasing. We love Wyatt for more than just his money.”

“But I’m pretty darn thankful for that money right now,” Summer says from her lounge chair where she currently has a clay mask covering her face. “I’m in heaven. This was so incredibly generous of him.”

Paige shrugs, her attention focused on the woman currently painting her fingernails a pale pink colour. “Wyatt enjoys

being able to use his wealth to make others happy.”

“And that right there is what makes him an amazing guy,” Ashley chimes in. “Because never in a million years would I have imagined I’d be getting a massage on a beach in the Caribbean.”

“Cheers to that.” Mila lifts her champagne flute. “I vote we come back here once a year. Make it a tradition.”

“God, that sounds amazing,” Abby says. “If only that could be possible.”

“Well, why not?” Mila sits up. “We deserve it, don’t we? We all work hard, why not play hard? In the Caribbean. I bet Layla and Violet would love it here; they could come next time.”

I love that Mila is thinking about Abby’s daughter and my stepdaughter, but she’s missing the most important point. I sit up from my massage table and give my masseuse a grateful smile before turning to Mila. “Girl, we don’t want the kids here. We have seven days in a cabin by ourselves, with no risk of kids wandering into the bedroom in the middle of the night and seeing something they shouldn’t. I might be new to the parenting game, but even I know the value of an adult-only vacay. Am I right, Abby?”

Abby nods emphatically. “God, yes. I’ve never done a trip without Layla and I can definitely say this is amazing. I love that girl, but a week with just Reid? Yes, please.”

“Exactly,” I say. “You have no idea how annoying it is trying to keep quiet when your man is going downtown. I can be loud here. Loud sex is the best. And no one will care.”

“Well, I might care, seeing as my cabin is next to yours,” Ashley replies teasingly.

“Loud sex is great, uninterrupted sex is great, but that’s not exactly why I said I didn’t think a return trip next year would work,” Abby says, fidgeting with her hands in her lap. “Reid and I are going to be a little busy next year.”

We’re all silent for a moment as what she just said sinks in.

“Oh my God, you’re pregnant!” Summer shrieks, jumping up and running over to Abby. “That’s why you just asked for sparkling water and not a mimosa.”

Abby nods, smiling, and we all make our way over to hug her. “Yeah, I’ve been feeling really sick with this one, just like I did with Layla. Reid almost tried to convince me we shouldn’t come, but I told him he was insane. Anyway, I don’t want to take the attention away from Summer and Ethan, but I figured you guys should know, in case I seem off at all.”

“Oh Abbs, we love you and this little parasite,” I say, placing my hand on her stomach. “Whatever you need. We’re here.”

And I know I can say that because these ladies, they’re my ride or die. The six of us, we’re closer than blood.

“What she said,” Mila chimes in. “You ladies are my sisters from other misters, and I adore you all.”

Loud, boisterous voices interrupt our moment, and we all turn to see the guys come traipsing back in, looking ridiculously happy.

Leo makes his way straight to me, his eyes burning into mine. Even still, I'm unprepared for him to lift me up and over his shoulder, landing a light smack on my butt.

"Leo!" I cry out. I can't see what's going on with anyone else because I'm currently staring at his tight backside.

"Excuse us, everyone, but I think Serena and I are gonna take a nap," he announces.

"Right, a *nap*," one of the other guys calls out.

"Not a bad idea. C'mon Mila, nap time." That would be Jackson, based on Mila's shriek.

Grinning, I decide maybe a little time in bed isn't such a bad idea. "Loud sex, ladies, loud sex!"

Leo starts to jog away from the patio and I manage to catch a glimpse of everyone else also making their way to their cabins. Guess we're all in the same kinda mood.

"Loud sex, Tippy?" Leo chuckles once we're inside our cabin. He lowers me slowly to the floor, but I make good on my nickname and lift up onto my toes to kiss his lips.

"Yup. Loud, crazy, wild, uninterrupted sex. You game?"

I take a step backward, then another, heading in the general direction of the bed.

“Fuck yeah, babe. Too bad I didn’t bring the cuffs.” Leo starts to prowl toward me.

I whirl around and open a drawer, quickly finding what I’m looking for just as he comes up behind me, pressing his already hard length into me.

“Will these do?” I lift the filmy fabric of the two beach wraps I packed, as I twist in his embrace. Leo’s eyes darken and his tongue darts out to lick the corner of his mouth.

“On the bed, Tippy. Arms up.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ethan

Our friends have all disappeared into their cabins and I have every intention of following their lead. Unfortunately, once we get to our own private oasis, I realize I might not be getting as lucky as the rest of them. At least, not yet. Because the look that is currently on Summer's face isn't exactly the one I wanted to see the evening before our wedding. It's a look that says we're about to have a conversation, whether I want to or not.

“Alright lumberjack, I tried to give you time to come clean, but it seems I'm gonna have to make you talk. Because I'm not starting this marriage with secrets between us. When are you going to tell me what had you acting all strange when we first arrived? I assume it's the same thing that had everyone so flustered our first day here. Or did you think your disappearing act while Serena and Paige kept me occupied went

unnoticed?” She crosses her arms over her chest, as her fingers drum out a beat on her forearm.

Shit. You’d think I would know better than to try and keep anything from my girl. I sit down on the bed and heave a large sigh. Deep down, I know the ring isn’t gonna be a problem. It’s the fact I kept it from her that has the potential to upset Summer. Which means I’ve got some groveling to do. “I’m sorry, babe. I fucked up. This is going to sound terrible, but you deserve honesty. I had kind of hoped I could pull it off without you being aware.”

She comes over and sits beside me, taking one of my hands in hers. Thank God I’m marrying an incredibly forgiving woman. “Pull what off? If something went wrong, you should have come to me right away. We’re meant to be a partnership, Ethan. In good and bad times. That’s literally what we’ll be promising each other tomorrow. I don’t like it when you hide things from me, even if you think you’re doing it to protect me. Didn’t we learn that already with Cole?”

That reference to Cole Devereaux, and my epic fuckup in not telling Summer that the hotel magnate wanted to buy her property, makes me wince.

“I’m sorry, shorty. You’re right, I’m an ass for not talking to you. But in my defense, I really wasn’t trying to lie to you, I just hoped I could fix everything before you found out, and we could have a perfect day tomorrow.”

“Ethan.” She tips my chin up so I’m forced to stare into her eyes. “What did I say on the plane? I don’t need perfect, I just

need you. What happened?”

“I forgot your ring at home.” I pick up her left hand and twist her engagement ring around on her finger. “But it’s okay, the guys and I found a local jewelry maker and I’ve got it all figured out.”

I don’t know what I was expecting, but the quiet giggle Summer lets out is definitely not it.

“Seriously? And you didn’t think you’d need to tell me?” she says, raising her eyebrows. “Tomorrow, when we go to exchange rings, you didn’t think I’d notice something was different?”

My shoulders start to shake with laughter as I finally clue in to what she means. “Holy fuck, I’m an idiot.”

I fall back on the bed, pulling her with me, both of us still laughing at my dumbass move.

“It’s a good thing you’re pretty, Ethan Monroe, because sometimes that brain of yours...” Summer teases.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, holding her close. “I get blinders on with you sometimes. All I can think about is making you happy, keeping you safe, and giving you everything you could possibly want. Is that so bad?”

She pushes back slightly and looks down at me. “Yes, Ethan. It is when it means you keep things from me and don’t let me in so I can help. We’re in this together, remember?”

“I remember. And I love you. Thank you for putting up with me.”

“I love you, too, lumberjack.” Her lips find mine and I hold her to me — this woman who is my past, present, and future, all in one.

CHAPTER NINE

Summer

I have never been the girl who dreamed about her wedding day down to the smallest detail. Truthfully, for a while, I didn't think I'd ever bother getting married. But on the rare occasion I did think about pledging my life to a partner, the only thing that ever mattered was that he and I were surrounded by love.

Which makes today exactly what I wanted.

Ethan is standing underneath the archway that is covered with a white gauzy fabric and beautiful tropical flowers. His charcoal shorts and white collared shirt fit him perfectly. We wanted today to be simple, casual, but still special. Which is why we're all barefoot, feeling the white sand that is in front of our resort under our toes.

As I take my first steps down the short path lined with conch shells that leads me to the man of my dreams, I have to

mentally pinch myself to make sure this is real. Because it feels better than any dream.

My dress flutters around my calves and the wind blows my hair back. But it's the tears building behind my eyes that I worry will ruin my view of my future husband, so I dash them away and speed up.

"Hey, shorty," he murmurs when I finally reach him. I pass my small bouquet over to Mila, who's sitting in the chairs we set up right in front of the arch. No bridal party, just us and our closest friends.

Family.

"Hi lumberjack," I whisper back. "You look good."

Ethan's lips tip up into a smile. "You look better than good. You look like my forever."

My eyes flutter closed for a second. This man has always known the words to say to speak straight to my heart.

The elderly local man who is our officiant, who told us to call him Mister Samuel, begins to speak. Even though the Cayman Islands are a very religious community, he agreed to do a simple ceremony for us. But as he talks of everlasting love, and knowing in your heart and soul that the person standing beside you was always meant to be there, I can't help but think a higher power must have played a role in everything.

Thanks, Dad.

When it's time for our vows, I feel the first bit of nerves I've had all day. Thank God Ethan is going first. Although, knowing him, he's about to reduce me to a blubbering mess. He turns to me and takes both of my hands in his, lifting them to his lips.

“Summer, the day you came home to Dogwood Cove was the day my life truly began.”

I hear a sniffle behind me and I know without having to look that it's Mila. My very first best friend and now, my sister.

“Where I thought I was living, I was only going through the motions. Where I thought my life was full, it was half empty. You brought your sunshine and pierced through the dark, even in the places I couldn't see it. With you, I found a future I never thought possible. One where I have a partner, a lover, and a friend to be with me always. To call me out on my shit when I screw up.” He gives me a wink and I can't help but chuckle, even as I squeeze his hands. “And to make me want to work every day to be the very best man I can be for you. And for our family, both the one we choose, and the one we someday create. I love you, Summer. I'm pretty sure I always have, even when we were snotty nosed kids playing tag. And I'm very sure I always will.”

He drops my hand and reaches into his pocket, only to pull out a band of multicoloured rock. I recognize it instantly as Caymanite, a stone only found here on Cayman Brac. This must have been what he went shopping for the other day. The very fact that he didn't think I would notice it wasn't the

simple gold band we had chosen at home has me fighting back laughter. But Ethan sees right through me.

“Okay, shorty, let it out. We might as well tell everyone what an idiot I am.” He turns to face our friends and holds up the ring. “So, last night, I confessed to Summer about forgetting her ring. And admitted to her I had hoped she wouldn’t find out. Needless to say, she pointed out that I’m an idiot, since this does not look anything like the rings we bought back home.” Turning back to me, Ethan picks up my hand and slides the ring on. “But the ring is just the symbol. Just like my words are just the promise. It’s what we’ll do every day after this one that really matters. And I vow that every day, I will love you more than anything else. I vow that our marriage, our family, will always come first. I vow that I will be true to you, in all ways. And I vow that you will never go another day feeling lost or alone. Because you will always and forever have me.”

Tears are streaming down my face as Ethan dips his head to kiss me. “You’re early,” I blubber against his lips, even as my hands clutch him closer to me. He presses his lips to me again.

“Doesn’t matter,” he whispers back. “I’m going to kiss you every chance I get.”

Someone clears their throat, and we pull apart, only for the gracious officiant to give us a warm smile. He gestures to me and I realize that somehow, I have to follow that. I take a deep breath and try to remember what I planned to say.

But all it takes is one look at Ethan's beautiful blue eyes and I forget everything. Everything except what's important, that is.

“You saved me, Ethan, when I didn't even know I needed to be saved. You found me at my lowest and raised me up to my highest. You gave me more than love; you gave me a purpose, a family, and a home. There is no possible way to put into words the depth of the love I feel for you, but I hope you never doubt it. You are my soulmate, you own my heart, and I want nothing more than to spend a lifetime loving you and protecting you from raccoons.” I smirk as Ethan shakes his head and our friends chuckle. His fear of those animals is legendary. “I promise that my love will know no bounds and have no end. And I will be yours, always and forever.”

I take the gold band, the one that I remembered to pack, and slide it onto his finger before lifting his hand to meet my lips, sealing it with a kiss.

Without warning, Ethan swoops me into his arms, lifting me up, and kissing me deeply, passionately, and with his whole, entire heart. In the background, the officiant is announcing us as husband and wife and our friends are cheering, but all I can see or hear is Ethan whispering how much he loves me.

My husband.

Several hours later, after we've taken a thousand photos, drunk far too much wine, eaten plenty of food, and danced and celebrated with our friends, Ethan and I make our way back to our cabin. It's been hard, keeping our hands off each other all

day. I want to make love to my husband and I know he's just as desperate.

But when we're finally alone, behind closed doors with nothing but the sound of the ocean keeping us company, time slows to a standstill.

"We're married," I whisper into the dimly lit room as Ethan puts the bottle of French champagne Finn gave us into the small fridge.

"We are." He comes up behind me and pulls my back to his front before dropping a kiss to my bare shoulder. "You're my wife."

His hands come to my neck, then slide down my arms, taking the straps of my dress off as he goes. "You're mine to worship for the rest of our lives."

I shiver as my dress pools around my waist, baring my upper body to the air and to Ethan. He cups my breasts, his thumbs circling my nipples, as his mouth continues to pepper my neck and shoulders with light kisses.

"Ethan, please."

I turn to face him and push my dress over my waist, stepping out of it so I'm wearing nothing but the white lacey panties I had on underneath. My fingers make quick work of unbuttoning his shirt until it, too, is on the floor. His shorts are next and then his underwear. And then Ethan's hands move to my ass and he lifts me into the air. Our lips meet and my legs

wrap around his waist, bringing our hips together, so his rigid length is nestled between us.

A few steps and we hit the bed, and Ethan lowers us slowly, never breaking the kiss.

“I want to claim my wife.”

His voice is a low rumble and his deliciously dirty words send a wave of heat through me. Without anymore warning, Ethan’s hands go to the side seam of my panties and he rips them off me before lifting my hands, pinning them over my head, and thrusting home inside of me.

“Yes!” I cry out, my body arching up to meet him.

“I. Love. You,” he growls, every word punctuated by a pulse of his hips.

“I love you, Ethan. You’re mine. I’m yours.”

Ethan frees my hands and rolls us over, so I’m on top. “Let me see you come for me, Summer.”

I rock back and forth, lifting slightly every time. His cock is filling me, stroking my walls, and the orgasm that’s building is overwhelming. I’m close. So very close. And then Ethan sits up, pulling me in close. His hands frame my face and our motions slow for just a split second.

“My wife.”

I explode. I detonate into a supernova. He pulses up into me once, twice, and then Ethan comes with a roar of my name.

“Wow,” he murmurs into my hair after we come down from the high. We’re still joined and our sweaty bodies are tangled together in every other possible way. But when I try to move to go cleanup, Ethan holds me in place.

Lifting my head so I can look into his eyes, I see a single tear spilling over. I stretch up and kiss it away.

“I love you,” I say simply.

“I love you, too,” comes his equally simple reply.

But there’s nothing simple about our love. It’s deep and complex, unbreakable and undeniable. It’s everything and more.

And it’s ours.



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ABOUT JULIA JARRETT

Julia Jarrett is a busy mother of two boys, a happy wife to her real-life book boyfriend and the owner of two rescue dogs, one from Guatemala and another one from Taiwan. She lives on the West Coast of Canada and when she isn't writing contemporary romance novels full of relatable heroines and swoon-worthy heroes, she's probably drinking tea (or wine) and reading.

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