



A CHANGE *at forever*

SECOND CHANCE HARBOR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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A CHANCE
at Forever

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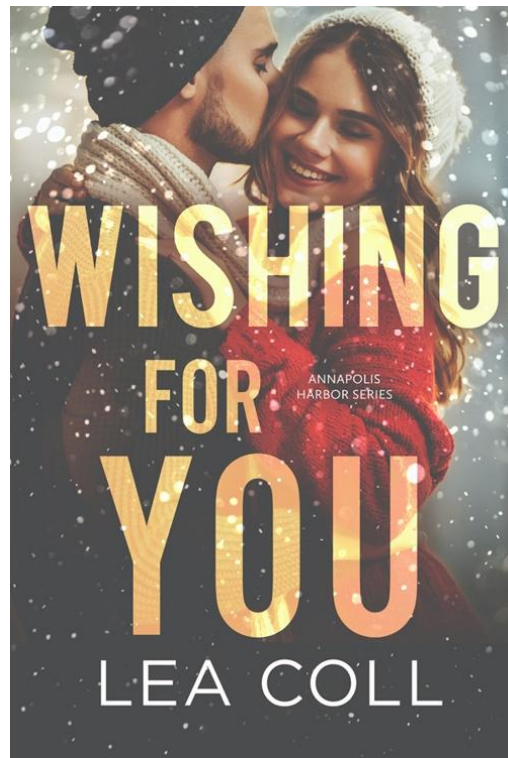
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About the Book

The one that got away is now the one

I refuse to let go.

Enlisting was one of my life goals, so was marrying my high school sweetheart, Sophie, and escaping our small town. Nothing has ever hurt me more than when she turned down my proposal.

I was stupid back then, heartbroken and foolish. A one-night stand was supposed to help me get over Sophie, instead I got the girl pregnant and ruined any chance of Sophie ever looking my way again.

For the last few years I've focused on being the best father and soldier I could be.

Now I've done my duty for my country and it's time to take over raising my daughter, her mother insists it's my turn. What better place to do it, than in my own hometown?

Sophie has moved on and is now a successful bakery owner, but she's still the woman I could never forget. My daughter is her biggest fan, secretly so am I.

With a series of burglaries in town, Sophie is worried her bakery is next. I might not have made the right decisions all those years ago, but this time I'm going to prove to Sophie that I'm the right man for her.

A future without her simply isn't an option.

Chapter One

*M*y hands shook as I lifted the key to fit it into the lock of my bakery. Being alone in the early morning hours usually soothed me. No one was out walking their dog or jogging. I had a few hours of silence before customers came in, and my solitude was overtaken by the morning rush.

But this morning, the quiet was deafening, overpowering the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

Through the store window, the chairs were visible on top of the tables like normal. Nothing looked out of place, but I couldn't stop the trembling of my fingers.

I startled at the thump of soles against the pavement. Was it an early morning jogger or someone up to no good?

Worried, I shoved the key into the lock, willing it to fit. When it turned, I pushed open the door, the alarm chirping. I glanced over my shoulder as a shiver ran up my spine.

A man ran toward me at a good clip, a black hoodie covering his head and face.

My heart jumped into my throat as I slipped inside, my hands already pushing it closed when a rough, gravelly voice asked, "Are you open?"

The man was close. Too close. He'd stopped in front of my door, his head down.

"No," I said, my voice shaking. I needed to close the door, but the alarm was dangerously close to going off. I inputted

the code on the pad next to the door, but kept one finger hovering over the panic button.

My desire to be nice to a potential customer warred with my fear that this could be the guy who'd broken into my friends' shops.

No one had ever seen him, but then, I went to work earlier than everyone else.

I moved so that more of the glass door was between us. If I attempted to close it, would he shove his foot in the doorway, or would he use his arm to block the door from closing?

"That's too bad." He hunched over as if he were recovering from a hard run.

"Do you need water?" I asked before I could stop myself.

He wasn't carrying anything and was probably thirsty.

Why had I offered? He could be the robber or even worse. My mind raced with all the possibilities. I could just see the headlines: *Local Baker Found Dead in the Early Morning Hours.*

I shivered, tightening my grip on the door.

"That would be great." He lifted his head slowly, the cut of his jaw visible before his strong nose and eyes.

Warm brown eyes. He was so familiar. *I knew him.*

Shock flew through my system as my hand fell away from the alarm system.

"Sophie?" His expression was a mix of surprise and something else—regret?

"Mark." My heart clenched. I knew exactly who he was—my high school sweetheart—the one who'd left. The summer after graduation, he turned eighteen and enlisted in the Army.

"It's good to see you." The surprise was gone, and in its place was warmth. So much warmth. It was like a cozy blanket I could wrap myself in. I wanted to fall back into those fuzzy feelings he gave me back then and forget everything that came after.

“You too.” It was still early, and my brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders. I was most likely weak from the adrenaline rush.

A few seconds ago, I thought I was about to be robbed, but even knowing who this man was, I couldn’t relax, not entirely. This was the man who’d walked away from me so easily.

Initially, I’d hoped he’d come back to me and admit he’d made a mistake. That the timing just wasn’t right for us in high school, but then he’d gotten some girl pregnant. And I shoved that fantasy down deep.

At eighteen, I had younger siblings to help raise. I couldn’t even think about building a future for myself.

“How ’bout that water?” Sweat dripped from his brow.

I was tempted to wipe it with my fingers, to run my hands through the hair that was buzzed short. Would it be soft? His hair had been longer when we’d dated, and I’d loved running my fingers through it.

“Sorry. Let me get that for you.” I stepped back, letting him enter before shutting and locking the door.

I wasn’t afraid of my ex—at least not physically, but emotionally, I’d be smart to keep my distance.

He wouldn’t rob me of anything other than my good sense and my heart. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

I grabbed a water bottle from the refrigerated case behind the counter, desperate to put space and physical barriers between us.

He sat at the counter to the left where I’d recently added stools for customers to eat.

I handed the bottle to him, and when our fingers brushed, I hoped he didn’t notice my fingers trembling. It had nothing to do with the robber still on the loose and everything to do with him.

He rested the bottle against his forehead and closed his eyes. “Thank you for this.”

I laughed despite my fear and the awkwardness of facing my high school heartbreak at four in the morning. “You’re not going to drink it?”

His gaze lowered to mine, and he slowly smiled. “I’m getting to that part.”

I blinked. He reminded me so much of the boy I’d dated. He was easygoing and fun, as long as his dad wasn’t on his case that day, and even if he was, Mark was good at brushing it off. I felt special because I was the only one who saw the real him.

He unscrewed the cap and took a long pull. I was mesmerized by the up-and-down motion of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

There were so many other things I could have been doing. Gathering ingredients. Starting the dough. Turning on the ovens. Instead, I was frozen in place.

Once he’d drained the entire bottle, he set it down.

“Would you like another?” I asked.

“I should get going and let you do your thing.” He nodded toward the kitchen in the back.

“I do have to get to work.” Yet I was reluctant for him to leave.

I imagined him sitting on the counter in the kitchen as he told me about the last ten years. It was a ridiculous idea because we weren’t even friends anymore. The familiar pangs of loss pricked my heart.

He’d tried to reach out after his mother told me about the pregnancy, but I hadn’t responded. It had been too painful, especially when I’d thought we still had a future. His actions obliterated that idea.

He stood and lifted the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his forehead. My gaze was drawn to the very defined abdominal muscles. He hadn’t looked like that at eighteen.

Mark exuded masculinity and strength. His shoulders were broader, his arms larger, and his abs were more defined. I couldn't stop myself from following the happy trail to the waistband of his athletic shorts and the bulge the mesh material did nothing to hide.

I swallowed hard. Needing water, I turned away from him. Fumbling with the refrigerator door, I unscrewed the cap and took a drink. The cool liquid soothed my dry throat.

Why was I reacting to him like this? We'd dated in high school, but we'd moved on. Or at least, I thought I had.

"I'll get out of your way." His voice was deep.

I turned around and pasted a smile on my face. "You're fine."

"I'm sure you have things to do." He stood and moved around the counter. My heart thudded with each step he took, wondering what he was doing as he got closer. He leaned down, and I sucked in a breath, thinking he was going to kiss me when he tossed the empty plastic bottle in the recycling bin.

I startled at the thud of the plastic bottle hitting the empty can, my entire body heating at his proximity.

Mark turned slightly, taking in the dining area. "You've got a great place here, Soph."

Goose bumps danced over my skin at the familiar nickname. He'd stopped in one other time during a town festival, but we hadn't had a chance to talk. Not like this. "Thank you."

He stepped closer and lifted a hand as if to brush aside the strand of hair on my forehead. But then he dropped it. His expression filled with remorse. "You've done well for yourself."

After he'd seen the hurt I'm sure was evident on my face when he told me how he'd enlisted, he'd proposed. It felt rushed. Like he hadn't planned on asking me to marry him. It felt empty. Not at all how I imagined that moment.

I'd said no. I had to stay to help my family. I couldn't help raise my sisters if I was traveling and moving around at the will of the military. "So did you."

He'd wanted to escape and to make a man of himself. Someone who would make his father proud. I had my doubts that anything would help in that department, but he'd been determined. I'd wanted him to get peace, and if enlisting helped him get that, then I wouldn't stand in his way.

He frowned. "I didn't get everything I wanted."

Was he talking about me? Hope flooded my chest despite the rational part of my brain that was telling me he wasn't mine and never would be. "I guess that's part of being an adult."

My response was generic because we weren't friends or confidants anymore.

He nodded tightly.

"Are you back in town for a visit?" I asked, continuing with safe small talk as we slowly made our way to the front door.

Outside, the sky had lightened slightly.

He turned to face me. "I moved back."

My heart fluttered in my chest. "You moved to Annapolis?"

He nodded. "It's the perfect place to raise a child."

I barely restrained the wince at the mention of his child. "Oh, right. Of course, it is."

For a few seconds, I'd forgotten his betrayal. At eighteen, I'd stupidly hoped he'd come back for me. That he'd tell me raising my younger siblings wasn't my responsibility. That I had an amazing future ahead of me, if only I grabbed on and took it. But then it all came crashing down.

He wasn't free to be with me. He had other responsibilities, and so did I.

I wanted to ask if the mother of his child was here, too. If they were together, even if they weren't married. But I wasn't privy to the details of his life anymore.

"I never thought you'd move back." The pain of him leaving was sharp in my chest. It dulled over the years but came roaring back to life with his appearance.

He was quiet, as if considering his words. Finally, he said, "Things change once you have kids."

"Right." I wouldn't know, as I'd never had any. I'd just raised my sisters as if they were mine. It was a good reminder of how different we were. He'd been in the military for the past ten years, traveling the world and having amazing experiences, while I'd stayed right here, getting my degree from home, raising my sisters, and then finally opening the bakery.

I was a business owner. He was a father. We had nothing in common. As kids, we were escaping the reality of our homelife. For him, it was the expectations of his father; for me, it was the pressure to step in and take on my mother's role after she died.

"Thanks for the water." His gaze was swimming with an emotion I couldn't decipher. "It was great to see you."

I nodded, unable to say those words because this moment was bittersweet. It was like encountering the one thing you'd always wanted but could never have.

Then he was gone, and I regretted all the things I didn't say. *I miss you. I want to see you again. I want to know who you've become. I want to show you who I am.*

I locked the door behind him and reset the alarm. Then I checked the clock on the wall to note I was twenty minutes behind my early morning routine. I did things in the same order every morning because I knew I'd get it done before opening. There was a comfort to that rhythm. Mark's presence had thrown me offbeat.

I usually felt pride when I took in the white wainscoting, the frothy pink paint, and the dark wood tables and chairs. The

marble counter was my recent splurge. I wanted customers to feel decadent when they came inside.

Now it seemed meaningless.

How could one encounter erase all my progress to get over him these past ten years? Instead, I was right back where I was at eighteen. When Mark told me he had no choice but to enlist, that everything in his life had led up to that moment. I was crushed. I couldn't think about anything other than him leaving me.

He'd asked me to marry him, but there was no ring, no dropping down on one knee. The proposal felt like a last-minute decision. As if he'd just realized he couldn't leave me behind. I needed more than that. I wanted to come first, not be an afterthought.

I told him no because I couldn't leave. I didn't have a choice, and I thought he understood that. He knew my situation better than anyone. My teachers always commented on what an amazing job my father was doing, but in reality, it was me holding the family together.

I'd hoped Mark would ask me to wait for him. He hadn't. He'd moved on before the pain of his leaving dissipated. The familiar hurt burst in my chest, reaching every nook and cranny, making it difficult to breathe.

I needed my routine. I needed to bake.

I moved blindly through the store to the kitchen, my respite, my oasis. Here, nothing could touch me. Not Mark. Not lost opportunities or regrets.

I took great satisfaction in the stainless-steel counters and appliances. Everything was clean and sparkling.

I wasn't my sisters' pseudo-mother or everyone's best friend and confidante. I was Sophie. The baker.

The girl who'd thought she made the biggest mistake when she let the love of her life walk out the door. I rubbed the familiar ache in my chest. That one act negated everything we'd ever shared. Made me doubt every sweet word, every kiss, whispered promise, and declaration of love.

I thought he'd regret his decision to leave. He'd come back to me, but when he left, I was apparently out of sight and out of mind.

I squared my shoulders as I pulled out the ingredients I'd need for the morning. I'd grown up in the last ten years. I wasn't the naïve girl he'd dated. I was a successful businesswoman. I didn't need him walking back in here and eroding everything I'd built, along with my confidence.

Besides, he was here for his daughter, not me. He wanted to give her a better life. He wasn't here to right some wrong or declare his undying love for me. I was too practical to believe those fantasies anymore. People left, or they died. And those who were left behind had to pick up the pieces and move forward.

I sucked in a breath. Mark was here to stay. I'd have to see him around town and pretend he didn't mean anything to me. I wasn't sure I'd survive.

Chapter Two

The cool air in the bakery had chilled the sweat running down my back, but it did nothing to lessen the conflicting thoughts I was having about my ex.

When I first realized who she was, my heart had stuttered under my rib cage, and it had nothing to do with the way I'd pushed myself on my early morning run.

She'd seemed flustered, her eyes wide and her breathing staggered. Inside, she seemed to relax, and that's when I noticed she was wearing a pink T-shirt with the words "Sophie's Sweets" stretched over her breasts. Those words and the way they emphasized all her curves had my imagination running wild.

For a second, it was like no time had passed. She was still my girl, and I was the guy she could depend on, the one she loved. I wanted to move closer, grip her hips, and pull her against me. I wanted the sensation of her soft curves against my hard body. I wanted to feel the familiar weight of her hair in my fingers.

Would she smell like sugar and dough? Would she be as sweet as she'd been as a teenager? Or was she spicier now?

Instead, I'd taken a step toward the counter to block the evidence of my arousal while she'd grabbed the water. When she'd turned, I'd realized she was even more gorgeous than she'd been in high school. Her lanky frame had filled out into enticing curves. Her thick, red, wavy hair with the dusting of

freckles across her nose and cheeks was the same. She was achingly familiar.

When I'd moved closer to throw out the water bottle, her breath had hitched. She was as affected by my presence as I was by hers.

My heart clenched at seeing her for the first time in a long time. We hadn't been alone in the same room since she'd turned down my proposal. I'd tried to reach out several times when I was gone, and a few times when I visited home, but she'd been cool toward me. Her wary eyes and the hurt that simmered just below the surface made it seem like I was at fault when she'd been the one to say no to the logical next step—marriage.

Back then, I'd had no choice but to enlist. It had seemed so clear that I needed to leave, to escape my father and this small town. It would have been selfish to beg Sophie to come with me.

She was the practical one. I was the dreamer. The one who thought there was more to life than this small town and my dad's business. She hadn't felt the same. Maybe what we had was just young love, and it couldn't withstand the test of time.

I picked up the pace to a jog on the last stretch home. The endorphins were already kicking in. I felt good. Each step that took me away from the bakery had me thinking about my future. Things had changed. Now that I was discharged from the military, no one controlled my life but me. Anything was possible.

Could I have everything I'd ever wanted, my daughter and Sophie?

It was still quiet when I opened the door, so I made coffee, then started to make pancakes with chocolate chips. Kendall always liked them when she was little, and I hoped she still did.

I wanted to make a good life for my daughter, Kendall, in Annapolis, but I had no idea what to do for work now that I was back.

When I was discharged, Kendall's mother, Melanie, said she wanted to travel and it was my turn to raise her. Like our daughter was a doll we passed back and forth. I eagerly agreed because I hated that I'd missed so much of her life and was determined to make up for it.

I ate and passed the time reading the news on my phone. I was getting antsy when Kendall finally came down at eight in her pajamas with her hair sticking up.

Affection for her warmed my chest. "Good morning. Are you hungry?"

She plopped down on the end of the couch, her nose wrinkling when she saw my coffee mug. "No."

"I made chocolate chip pancakes."

Her lip curled. "What am I? Five?"

I bit back my initial response to remind her to be respectful. I knew moving here would be an adjustment. Kendall hadn't wanted to leave her friends or her school.

For me, it made sense to move back home. I had family and friends here. It was familiar, and I needed that after being gone for so long.

I took a deep breath. "What would you like to eat?"

She rolled her eyes, and I held my tongue again.

"Why did we have to move here?" She'd made it known she hated small towns.

But I suspected her main issue was that I'd deleted all the apps on her phone. Melanie didn't monitor her usage. I didn't mind if she kept in touch with her friends, but I didn't like the things I was hearing and seeing on those apps. She was constantly primping and prepping and then filming herself. All I could think about was who was watching my little girl on the other end.

"This is my home." This decision tore me up inside because she would be more comfortable in the home she'd grown up in, but Melanie had sold it.

“It’s not mine.” Her jaw set in a stubborn line, reminding me a little of myself at her age.

I settled my elbows on my knees, drawing on the patience I’d used in the military. “I hope you’ll like it. That you’ll at least give it a chance.”

She snorted and looked away from me.

I liked to think I wasn’t the same when I was a kid, but I was probably worse. I butted heads with my dad every time we were in the same room together.

But I couldn’t let her disrespect continue. “I know you didn’t want to move here.”

“I want to live with Mom.”

I wasn’t expecting that admission, and I guess I should have. She’d always lived full time with her mother, but I thought she would still want to see me. In the past, she enjoyed our time together, but it was limited, and I always planned fun things for us to do.

It wasn’t real life. Now we’d be living together full time, and I was tasked with making sure she went to school and did her homework. It was a different dynamic. A role she wasn’t used to me playing.

“I’m sorry I missed out on so much of your childhood, but I want to get to know you better. I want to be your father.” I needed to be patient with her and let her get used to the idea.

She didn’t respond, but I took it as a good sign that she didn’t roll her eyes this time.

“I loved my job, but I hate that it took me away from you. I wanted to be there when you said your first words, took your first step, and when you learned how to ride a bike. I want to be there for you now.” I didn’t ask her if she’d let me because I didn’t think I’d like her answer. It would take time for her to get used to me being in her life more.

She swallowed and then nodded.

I let out the breath I’d been holding. It was something. A small step forward. It was more than I expected after the

painful drive from Indiana to Maryland.

I needed to focus on Kendall and what she needed. I shouldn't be caught up in a high school relationship that ended ten years ago.

I got up to move the chocolate chip pancakes to a container and pour myself some orange juice.

Kendall followed me and sat on the stool. "Can I have blueberry pancakes?"

"Sure." I probably should have refused because I already made her a perfectly good breakfast, but I needed to pick my battles. I'd gotten a small concession from her this morning. I wouldn't push it.

I mixed the batter, pleased that Kendall helped put the blueberries in before cooking them. Kendall brushed her brown hair behind her ears. She had my brown hair and eyes and was on the cusp of developing into a teenager. I wasn't ready for any of it, but I'd figure it out. She needed me no matter how much she pushed me away.

She was still in that last stage of being a girl but not yet a teenager, and I wanted to hold on to that for as long as I could. It was the primary reason I'd taken away the apps on her phone. It might have been the right thing to do, but I knew I'd make missteps along the way.

I didn't want her to put herself in danger, but I also didn't want her to grow up too soon, worrying about how she looked on video, wearing makeup, and—God forbid—stressing about her weight.

"What are you going to do this summer?" When I was her age, I was really into sports, but Melanie said she wasn't. I'd looked into activities, but other than camps and some recreational sports, there wasn't much that wasn't already full.

Kendall's shoulders raised. "I usually hang out with my friends."

"We need to find some girls your age," I said, with one eye on the batter and the other on her irritated expression.

Kendall huffed. “How are we going to do that? You don’t know anyone here anymore.”

I knew Sophie. Maybe I could ask her. She had younger sisters, but they’d probably be too old for Kendall. “We’ll figure it out together. In the meantime, you can hang out with me.”

She huffed a second time, but I got the impression she was pleased. Melanie had worked full time, and I often wondered if Kendall was left to roam the neighborhood with her friends all summer. That was a recipe for trouble. I didn’t want that for her.

I didn’t have a job yet, but I had some time to figure things out. I toyed with the idea of going to school, too. I’d wait until Kendall was settled in first. Then I’d figure out my life. Right now, I needed to reestablish a relationship with my daughter. I needed to ensure that she felt safe and secure. I wanted her to be happy.

The idea of starting over rested heavily on my shoulders. I loved the military enough to be a lifer, but Kendall changed everything. I wasn’t okay with missing her grow up. I wanted to be more than a part-time dad.

I had a box of letters she’d sent over the years. They started out as hand-drawn pictures and had evolved over the years to letters where she told me about everything. As she got older, they got shorter and less frequent. She was growing up and away from me.

I only had this time with her. I was going to make it count.



As I drove toward my childhood home, my stomach tightened. I left town at eighteen because my dad issued an ultimatum, and I wanted to be free of his control. The only option that made sense was enlisting in the military. The recruiting officer said I’d earn a good paycheck, they’d shape me into a man, and, in the end, I’d have a marketable skill. I could even go to college.

I wanted to be independent, but I also loved the idea of belonging to something bigger than myself. I immediately felt like part of a large family, one that accepted me no matter what my homelife was like. I was following someone else's commands, but I'd never felt so free and proud of who I'd become.

If I'd stayed at home and worked in my father's lumber business, I would have felt stuck. My dad had this way of making me feel less than, like nothing I could do would ever please him. Even with Sophie here, I would have always wondered what else was out there.

Now that I'd seen the world, I knew the only thing that mattered was my daughter, and making her feel safe, secure, and happy. I wouldn't be like my father. I wanted her to want to be around me. Not escape as I had at eighteen.

I pulled down the long drive of the property that doubled as my father's home and lumber company.

"This is huge," Kendall said.

My parents usually flew out to see Melanie and Kendall, so she'd never been here. I felt a pang that she'd missed knowing her grandparents better.

We passed several large buildings where supplies and equipment were held. The lane was long and dusty and frequented by large trucks. Finally, the family home came into view.

"I can't believe you lived here."

"It wasn't quite this large when I lived here, but yeah, it was a lot." I couldn't escape my father's expectations that I'd take over the business one day.

I wanted to have options, and if I'd stayed here, I wouldn't.

I parked my truck in front. "Are you ready for this?"

Kendall looked from the house to me. "Are you?"

I chuckled without any humor, amazed that Kendall sensed it was difficult for me to be here. "My father and I didn't

always see eye to eye.”

That was an understatement. He wanted me to work at the lumberyard, not play sports or be involved in activities. He hated that I was seeing Sophie. He disliked anything that kept me away from my responsibilities.

Kendall touched my hand and then opened her door to slide out. I sensed it was her way of telling me she was here with me. We were a unit. I let that idea settle in my chest.

She waited at the hood of the truck for me to join her. With a nod, I continued toward the porch, taking a deep breath before I knocked.

Kendall raised a brow at the move. She was probably wondering why I didn't feel comfortable walking inside.

Mom opened the door. Her eyes widened as she took me in, and then she enveloped me in her arms. “I can't believe you're here.”

Mom never wanted me to leave, but she wanted me to be happy. She's the one who sent care packages and letters updating me about the town and Sophie.

As much as it hurt to hear about Sophie and to know she didn't want to hear from me personally, I ate up every tidbit I got.

“And you,” Mom said as she pulled away from me to hug her granddaughter. Tears sparkled in her eyes. “I'm so happy you're here.”

The teenage attitude I'd seen this morning had dissipated. In its place was a girl who seemed pleased to be getting attention from her grandmother.

Mom pulled back, her eyes bright. “Come in. Come in.”

We walked through the foyer, following the smell of baked chicken into the large kitchen. It had been completely renovated since I'd lived here. The wall between the kitchen and the living room had been knocked down so I could see out the large windows to the trees on the back of the property. “This looks great.”

“Your father finally let me have free rein a few years ago.”

Comfortable furniture faced a large stone fireplace. Not seeing my father, I asked, “You need any help with dinner?”

“Oh, it’s finished. I just need to set the table if you want to take the plates and silverware into the dining room.”

Kendall followed me, grabbing the napkins and the pitcher of iced tea. We quietly set the table. I was lost in the memories after not being in this home for a meal in ten years. Anytime I visited, I stayed in a hotel and met my parents at a restaurant. I needed to maintain distance.

“I didn’t believe it,” my father said as he entered the room.

My stomach tightened further as I looked up at the man who never failed to set me on edge. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

I sounded just like Kendall had earlier. My tone filled with irritation. Christ, he made me so prickly.

He stood in the room, his feet set shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed over his chest. His jaw was tight, his eyes narrow. Then his gaze settled on Kendall, and he softened. He lowered his arms to his side. “Kendall.”

“Grandpa.” She moved into his arms that he held out for her.

I’d never been present for her visitations with her grandparents, so I didn’t know how close their relationship was. But she seemed genuinely happy to see my father, in a way she hadn’t exhibited with my mother. Were they close?

Dad closed his eyes as he squeezed her tighter. When he pulled back slightly, he looked down at her. “Is it true that you moved here?”

Kendall nodded. There were no eye rolls or complaints. She seemed to have a soft spot for my dad. I couldn’t reconcile that with my relationship with him.

Dad ruffled her hair. “I’m happy you’re here.”

Was he happy *I* was here? Why did I care? I thought I’d gotten over seeking his approval a long time ago.

“I’m surprised you moved here,” Dad said to me over Kendall’s head.

“It’s a great town to raise a child. Plus, I have family here.” When I made the decision to move back, I wasn’t sure how Dad would receive me. I knew Mom would be pleased, but would he expect me to work for the business?

Dad scrutinized me before he finally nodded. “I’m glad.”

Had I finally done something he agreed with?

My parents had been upset when I got Melanie pregnant. They thought it was reckless and that a baby would ruin my life. At the time, I’d been trying to forget Sophie. It was after boot camp, and I was set to deploy. I wasn’t sure how I’d manage it unless I erased Sophie from my memory bank. She’d been clear that she wasn’t interested in creating a future with me, or at least, that’s how I took it.

We were drunk. I couldn’t even remember if we’d used protection. I was pissed at myself until I saw Kendall for the first time. I’d never forget what it was like to hold her, to feel her warmth and the grip of her fingers.

I didn’t regret Kendall because she was the best thing in my life, but it wasn’t easy expecting a child with a one-night stand while deployed. Instead of making my father proud that I was doing things on my own, I’d disappointed him yet again.

Mom came into the room with a casserole dish in her hands. Dad took it from her and set it carefully in the center of the table.

“I, for one, am ecstatic you’re here. We have so many things to catch up on.” Mom’s gaze flitted from me to where Dad stood.

There was palpable tension in the room between my father and me.

Kendall looked at me uncertainly.

“Sit. I bet you’re hungry,” Mom said as she left the room again.

“I’ll see if she needs help,” Dad said.

I poured iced tea for everyone and then sat across from Kendall in my old spot. The one where I'd spent countless evenings waiting for my father to come home from work. More often than not, Mom and I ate alone. She made excuses for him, and I wondered if I'd grow up to be the same way. A man who let his family down again and again.

I wanted to be different. I valued hard work, just not at the expense of my family. My father didn't get that distinction. I was convinced he could have done better, encouraging me instead of putting me down.

I dished the chicken casserole onto Kendall's plate, then mine.

Mom and Dad came back into the room with a salad bowl.

"Go ahead and dig in," Mom prompted Kendall, who lifted her fork and took a tentative bite.

I wasn't sure what life was like with Melanie. Whether she cooked or ate out for most meals. Was Kendall alone a lot? Had she wished I was there for her like I'd pined for my father? The thought settled uncomfortably in my gut.

I took a large bite of the casserole, chewing and swallowing. It settled heavily in my stomach.

"What are your plans now that you're here?" Dad asked.

His tone was deceptively casual. Every argument we'd had those last few years hinged on this very question. What were my plans? Would I forge my own path or fall back on his expectations?

"We need to get settled, register Kendall for school, and find some friends for her."

I felt Dad's unwavering gaze on the side of my face.

"That sounds like a good plan," Mom said.

"What are you going to do for work?" Dad asked.

I tensed. I should have known he wouldn't let it go. "I have time to figure it out."

The silence fell on the table like snow in the winter.

“I might go to school, but I have options and the time to figure it out.”

Dad made a disbelieving noise in his throat.

He didn't believe in figuring things out. He believed in decisive action. According to him, the decision was easy: work for him.

I'd always resisted. I think it was the weight of expectation. It felt like I'd had no other choice, and I'd rebelled hard against that.

“They just got here. Let them settle in,” Mom chided.

We ate while Mom talked about the farmer's market, who'd stayed in town and who'd left. It was mindless chatter to keep the air filled with words. I sensed Dad at the other end of the table getting tenser by the second.

I finished eating and pushed the plate back. “I saw Sophie today.”

I wasn't sure why I'd brought it up. Other than wanting to share it with somebody who understood.

Mom smiled. “She opened that bakery a few years ago.”

“It looks like she's doing well.” I couldn't see much of the bakery beyond Sophie standing in front of me. Even then, I didn't know if she was happy or content with her life. Had she gotten everything she'd ever wanted?

“She's a sweet girl. She stops by to see me sometimes and drops off baked goods.”

It was a small town, and Mom told me how she was doing over the years. So that didn't surprise me.

“Who is Sophie?” Kendall asked.

Shit. I shouldn't have even brought her up. I wasn't prepared to explain my relationship with Sophie to Kendall. Maybe not ever. “She's an old friend.”

“They were high school sweethearts,” Mom said with a smile.

I stiffened. Why was she giving more information than I wanted to reveal?

Kendall's eyes widened. "Why did you break up?"

"I enlisted." There was more to it than that. But what could I say to a nine-year-old? I asked Sophie to be my wife, and she said no. The familiar rejection flitted around the edges of my consciousness.

"You didn't try to make it work?" Kendall asked.

"She didn't want to." My jaw ached with the force I used to keep my mouth shut.

"Are you sure—" Mom started.

I held my hand up. "That chapter in my life is over."

I didn't have time for dating or revisiting an old love. Sophie hadn't wanted me back then, and I wouldn't get my hopes up that anything had changed.

Chapter Three

The monthly Shops on Main meetings were held in the spare room at Max's Bar & Grill. We used the time to talk about town events or issues and discuss marketing and business strategies with each other.

I'd started the group for the shops located on Main Street, but it had grown to include the new Harbor Garage & Service Repair Center and a few restaurants, including Max's Bar & Grill.

Today, I asked Officer Colton Castle to stop by at the end of the meeting to talk about the recent burglaries. There were break-ins last year at Max's Bar & Grill, Remi's Juice Shop, and the Spice & Tea Shoppe, but then they'd stopped. I'd hoped whoever was responsible had moved on to another town, but then they'd broken into Brooke's Market Tavern this past spring.

Shortly after my mother died, our house was broken into. It happened when we were at school, but seeing my room turned upside down, drawers and my things on the floor, was unsettling. I had trouble falling asleep and nightmares for a long time after that.

I held up my hand to halt the conversation so we could start the meeting and then introduced Colton to the group.

Colton stood at the head of the table, and I took a seat. "This is just as frustrating for the department as it is for you. We want to find this guy and restore trust in the community."

There had been talk around town that the police had dropped the ball. How could this keep happening without any leads? Surely, something had been missed.

“Brooke’s store had recently undergone a renovation, and the security system wasn’t working,” Colton added.

“What about fingerprints?” Easton, the owner of ReSails, asked.

“Most burglars know enough to wear gloves, and it’s harder than they show on TV to find a good print on a crime scene,” Colton said.

“So, you have nothing to go on?” Easton crossed his arms over his chest.

“As you know, we had a juvenile admit to the damage at Hailey’s and Remi’s shops, but he wasn’t responsible for the break-ins at Max’s and Brooke’s. Those two incidents were different. The kid wanted to cause trouble, but whoever’s responsible for the others is looking for cash.”

I rubbed the goose bumps on my arms.

He was talking about Corey, Ryan’s son, who’d recently come to live with him at the time. He’d gotten into some trouble but had completed his community service and seemed to be doing well in school now.

Colton braced his hands on the back of the chair in front of him. “If you haven’t updated your security systems or added cameras, I highly suggest you do so.”

I’d already updated the security system at the bakery and added cameras at the front door and even at the counter so I could see what was going on out front when I was in my office.

“Is there anything else we can do?” Max leaned a shoulder against the doorway. He usually popped in and out of the meetings so he could check on the restaurant and bar on the first floor.

“Keep doing what you’re doing. Be vigilant. Call if you spot anything unusual.”

I shivered. It was possible that the bakery could be this guy's next target. I couldn't seem to shake the pit of fear in my stomach.

Conversation picked up around the table.

"We appreciate you stopping in to talk to us, Colton." I stood to approach him and Max.

"I wish I had something more to share with you," Colton said to us.

"We do too," Max said.

"Max, can you come down here?" Mallory, Max's manager, asked from the bottom of the stairs.

"You got it," Max said to Mallory, and then to us, "You coming down for a drink after the meeting?"

"I suspect Remi will want to." Colton nodded toward where she sat, animatedly talking to the others.

They were seeing each other, and they were an intriguing mix—the stiff police officer and the carefree juice shop owner. I think they worked because they were so different.

I usually stayed for a drink since I started the group, and I felt obligated to stay for the social scene afterward. I just couldn't stay too long since I had to get up early for work.

I stood next to Colton as everyone filed down the steps and made their way over to the bar. It was busy tonight.

Colton looked down at me. "What are you doing about security at the bakery?"

I appreciated that Colton looked out for the shop owners. He'd said it was his job, but I think he'd have done it whether his supervisor asked him to or not.

"You know I updated my security system." I called him weekly to get an update, and he dropped in periodically for pastries for the department. It was a little guarded secret that police officers and firefighters got free food and coffee at the bakery.

“I don’t like you working there alone in the middle of the night.”

“I go in at four a.m. That’s hardly the middle of the night.” I attempted to keep my tone light.

Colton lowered his voice. “If anyone’s following your routine, they’ll know you’re alone. I’d feel better if you had someone there with you.”

I just couldn’t afford to have someone come in the morning. I needed the help at the counter later in the afternoon when I sometimes took off early. “What would they do? Watch me bake?”

My tone belied my own worry. I didn’t want him to know how scared I was.

“I don’t like it.”

“I know you don’t.”

“Colton,” the strong voice came from behind Colton, causing him to turn away from me.

“Mark.” They hugged, slapping each other’s backs.

I was expecting to see more of Mark, just not so soon. I wasn’t ready to see him. I didn’t want anyone judging our reunion, looking for signs we’d get back together, and pity when we didn’t.

They stood side by side, facing the bar, and I inched away from them, hoping Mark wouldn’t notice me.

“What were you talking about when I got here? What don’t you like?” Mark asked Colton, repeating our words back to us.

My breath caught at his question.

“We’ve had some burglaries at the stores in town, and I don’t like that Sophie goes in alone to start her baking.”

Mark’s gaze traveled from Colton’s to mine. “Is that right?”

“I have to start baking early to be ready for the early morning crowd. They want their coffee and muffins,” I said

defensively.

Colton gave me a pointed look. “I was just telling her she should hire someone to be there with her.”

“I just can’t justify the cost. If I could find a baker, maybe.” But I doubted I could afford to hire a skilled baker, either.

“You don’t think your safety is important?” Mark’s tone was serious.

He’d always been the protective type. Something my father had loved about him.

“Of course, I do.” The ridiculous part was—I was scared for my safety. I didn’t relax until the door was safely locked behind me with the security alarm engaged. Even then, I worried someone would break the glass windows, and the cops wouldn’t get there in time.

I stifled the full-body shiver at the thought.

Mark raised a brow, and I wondered if he’d seen it.

Colton never questioned me. He didn’t see the deep-rooted fear. For some reason, I felt the need to be strong in front of others, to pretend like I had everything handled.

“What can I get you?” Max asked Colton.

Mark sidled up next to me. “Are you okay with everything going on?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” Why had I asked that question? I’d opened myself up for him to give me his opinion, which I didn’t need. Not anymore. I quickly changed the subject to ask, “What are you doing out?”

Mark nodded toward where Colton leaned on the bar, talking to Max. “Colton said he’d be here tonight and asked if I wanted to grab a drink.”

“What about your daughter?” I knew her name was Kendall. I was still friends with his parents. I just couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Kendall’s with my parents. My mom loves having her around.”

“And your dad?” I knew how hard he’d tried to please his dad when we were younger.

Mark averted his gaze and finally said, “I think he’s pleased we moved back.”

I sensed there was something there, but it wasn’t my concern. Not anymore. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Did you want a drink?” Mark asked me as Colton handed him a beer.

I shook my head and smiled, hoping Colton wouldn’t question my leaving early. “I should head out. I have an early morning.”

“You usually stick around for at least one,” Brooke said from my side.

“I couldn’t sleep last night.” Ever since the burglary at her place, I hadn’t been able to sleep through the night. I’d wake up in a cold sweat with the old nightmare of someone breaking into my house.

Brooke’s concerned gaze flicked from me to Colton and then widened when she saw Mark. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “I’ll walk out with you.”

She’d recently started dating Ben, the owner of the new coffee shop, Bean Rush. I assumed he was at home with his daughter since it was late.

“Thank you,” I said when we were outside on the sidewalk.

She moved her arm to link with my elbow, and we walked away from the bar. “You talked to Mark?”

My friends knew that we’d had a relationship before, but not all the details. Just that he’d left after graduation and about his attempts at communicating via email occasionally. “Colton was just talking about the break-ins. He wants me to hire someone to go in to open.”

She stopped on the sidewalk to face me and crossed her arms over her chest. “I think that’s a good idea.”

As much as I didn’t want to talk about this, I really didn’t want to talk about Mark, or how I’d felt since he’d showed up again. “I can’t justify the cost. I don’t have any work for them to do.”

“Will you think about it? There might be something they could do to help.”

I nodded. “I will.”

She let out a breath. “Thank you.”

We continued walking away from the restaurants toward my home.

“How are you doing with Mark being back?” Brooke asked.

“I’m okay.”

It was unsettling seeing him at my bakery this morning. It brought back all the emotions and feelings. I was still attracted to him. But there was no way anything could happen. Not when I’d already turned him down, and he had a child to think about. “It was a long time ago.”

She squeezed my arm. “You never know.”

She was happy with Ben, who was someone she’d known since childhood. They hadn’t dated in high school. She didn’t understand that you couldn’t go back and change things. Relationships ended for a reason. There was no reason to revisit this one, even if my heart rate picked up when I saw him.

“We broke up for a reason.” Because my life was here, and his wasn’t.

“Are you going to share that reason?” she asked when we stopped in front of the steps to my apartment building.

“We wanted different things.” I wasn’t ready to share the truth. That it wasn’t even a choice. Ever since my mom died

when I was twelve, I knew my life would be different. With four younger siblings, I had to stay and help my father.

Following Mark around the world would have been selfish.

Brooke smiled, but it was a little sad.

I didn't want her to feel bad for me. I'd chosen this life, and I was content with the decisions I'd made. Mostly. It was only late at night when I couldn't sleep that I let my mind wander to what might have been if I'd said yes.

Those images were usually enough for me to finally drift off to sleep. Reality was different from our dreams. Things didn't always work out the way we wanted them to or thought they should.

"Keep an open mind."

"Just because you fell in love with your childhood crush doesn't mean we're all destined to," I reminded her lightly.

Brooke laughed. "Ben wasn't my childhood crush. We hated each other back then."

I smiled. "Did you really, though?"

"Ugh. All that matters is that we're happy now." The teasing had faded quickly to something far more serious. "You deserve happiness too."

"I am happy. My business is successful. I have friends. My family." Being there for my sisters, leading the Shops on Main group, and my business kept me busy. I didn't have time for anything else. Especially not thoughts on what might have been if I'd made different decisions. Would I have kids by now? Would Kendall be an amazing big sister? My heart ached.

Brooke hugged me. "I better get home."

She lived with Ben and his daughter, Cammie, now. They were building a life together. She deserved to be happy after her ex-husband asked for a divorce once he received his green card.

I waved to her as she headed back toward her vehicle. Then I unlocked the door and entered my house.

I needed to avoid Mark. I didn't want him to know I'd never stopped pining for him when he'd very clearly moved on. For all I knew, he was dating someone else. The thought was a crushing weight on my chest. I dressed for bed, my limbs feeling heavy. The thought extinguished the remaining hope that he'd come back for me.

Chapter Four

The next morning, I woke early and pulled on a T-shirt, shorts, and shoes. I grabbed my phone and keys and left a note for Kendall, telling her I'd bring home breakfast.

She usually slept late, so it was unlikely she'd wake before I got back. But I felt better leaving her a note.

I stepped outside, breathing in the already humid air. You could feel that it would be infinitely hotter by lunch. I went through a series of warm-ups that I performed so often I could do it mindlessly while my brain shifted to the scene last night in the bar.

I'd heard Sophie say she had trouble sleeping, and I wanted to know why. Did it have something to do with the burglaries?

Remembering her reaction when I ran into her at the bakery the other morning, she'd been surprised and possibly a little scared. Maybe it had more to do with fear than surprise at seeing me.

I'd avoided running down her street the last few mornings, but maybe I should time it so that I ran into her this morning.

I took off at an easy jog, slowly picking up the pace as I warmed up. I'd timed my route so I'd have run five miles by the time I got to Main Street, where Sophie's bakery was located. I hoped she kept the same routine so I'd see her go in,

but at the same time, I knew a predictable routine made her vulnerable to a criminal.

My neck prickled with tension, and I ran faster, hoping I hadn't missed her. I rounded the corner to Main Street and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw her in front of her store. I slowed so I could stop to say hello.

I wanted to make sure she was okay.

Sophie looked up as I approached. This time, I paid closer attention, and there was a flash of fear before she covered it with a polite smile. "You need water?"

I could have run home and gotten a drink, but I had so many questions. Was she afraid, was she safe, and even deeper questions, like what had her life been like over the last ten years? Was our breakup easy for her?

I stopped in front of her, rubbing the ache in my chest. "I could use some."

She unlocked the door and pushed it open for me. I waited close by while she locked up and reset the alarm.

This morning, her long red hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore another pink bakery T-shirt with black leggings.

She moved toward the refrigerator behind the counter, and I sat in the same spot I did the last time I was here.

Colton hadn't asked me to keep an eye on her, and she wasn't my responsibility, but I couldn't seem to stay away.

When she set the bottle in front of me, I slid a credit card across the counter. "I didn't pay the last time I was here."

She smiled, but it was tight. "Your money's no good here."

"What if I make it a habit to drop by every morning?" I lowered my face, tilting my head to the side, trying to break through the veneer she'd put on when she saw me. She was perfectly polite, but I wanted the real Sophie.

Her eyes flared. "Are you going to?" She shook her head. "Never mind. Don't answer that."

“You should run it.” I nodded toward the card that sat between us.

“You’re welcome to stay and drink that, but I need to get started on the baking.” She flung a thumb over her shoulder at the kitchen.

Then she turned and moved toward the kitchen, and I was mesmerized by the gentle sway of her hips. Her ass, encased in those tight pants, left nothing to the imagination. I loved this curvier version.

Unscrewing the cap, I listened to the soft tick of the clock on the wall and drank down the entire bottle before moving around the counter to throw it into the recycling bin. I should tell her I was leaving, but when I moved to the doorway to the kitchen, I stopped to watch her.

Music played from her phone as she moved around the room, gathering ingredients and setting them on the stainless-steel counter in the middle of the room. One side of the room had expensive-looking appliances, including the double-door stainless-steel refrigerator and multiple ovens. The other side had sagging shelves stacked high with cooking utensils, bowls, implements, and ingredients.

It was a stark contrast to the relative newness of the front counter and eating area. She’d clearly spared no expense on the appliances, but the shelves were another story “You need a new storage area?”

She startled and placed her palm on her chest. “You scared me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to.” I moved closer to her, leaning a hip against the counter.

She licked her lips, looking slightly uncomfortable with me in her space. “The shelves. Yeah. I couldn’t justify the expense. I want the front area to look inviting to guests, and I need the best equipment to bake, but those could wait.”

Growing up on the lumberyard, I was handy with wood. I helped Dad build shelves before he hired out for that kind of thing. It was on the tip of my tongue to offer to help her, but I

wasn't sure she'd like that. Would she be too proud to accept help from me? Would she think I pitied her? But I needed something to keep me busy, and I needed to stay close with this burglar still out there.

I couldn't tell her that's why I was offering or even why I was here. I knew she didn't like Colton suggesting she needed to change her business model to be safer, and she wouldn't appreciate my interference either. I had to come at it from a different angle.

"I could make new shelves for you. Would you like them to be open, or would you prefer closed cabinets?"

Her eyes brightened before she carefully schooled her features. "I like to see what I have, so open, but you don't need to help me. You just moved home. You have your hands full."

My gaze drifted from her mouth to the apron she deftly tied in the back. The movement caused her chest to push out, and my brain was swiping through images of my hands on her fuller breasts. Testing the weight, my thumbs tweaking her nipples. Did she still have a dusting of freckles on the tops of her breasts?

Sophie tipped her head to the side. "Are you okay?"

I cleared my throat and waved a hand toward the front. "I'm just gonna—grab another water."

At the front counter, I gave myself a few seconds to gather my thoughts, to rid the images of Sophie's bare breasts from my head. I shouldn't be thinking about her this way. We had our chance, and it was over.

This time, I brought the bottle with me to give me something to do with my hands.

While I was gone, Sophie had pulled out several large bowls and flat pans. Bags and containers of ingredients covered the rest of the space.

"You do this every morning?" I asked her, trying to think of a way to fill the silence.

“I’m the only baker, so I work mornings and then leave early in the afternoon if I need some time off.”

I was used to getting up early for physical training, but it was something I continued to do after my discharge for my health. Never being able to take a morning off must be tough. “What do you do if you get sick?”

Her cheeks flushed. “I don’t.”

She worked when she was sick. I knew her tells. “That must be hard.”

“The business is doing well, and I’d love to hire another baker, but I don’t think I could justify the cost. I’d only need someone a couple of days a week, and would they bake the same way? Would it taste the same?”

I set the water bottle on the counter, bracing my hands on the cool surface. I was enjoying getting a clearer picture of Sophie as an adult. “It’s tough giving up control.”

She measured and poured ingredients into the large bowl as if she had the recipe memorized and could do this in her sleep. “I don’t think of it that way.”

“Hmmm.” We started dating a few years after her mother died, and it was obvious she was a huge help to her father. She ensured her sisters were awake each morning, ate breakfast, packed lunches, and got on the bus. After school, she helped them with homework and made dinner.

Her father meant well, but he had to work long hours to support his family. He wasn’t home for the bus pickup and drop-off, or even dinnertime. He helped out more on the weekends, which was when we spent time together. Thinking back, Sophie had a hard time letting go.

After a few minutes, she nodded toward a stool against the wall. “You can sit if you’re going to stay awhile.”

There was no edge to her tone, only softness. I pulled the stool over to the counter and sat.

“Do you need to get back to your daughter?” Sophie placed the first few trays of pastries in the oven.

“She’s still sleeping. Can I bring some of the fresh pastries home?” I wanted to stay in the warmth of the kitchen with the softly playing music and the smell of flour and sugar.

Sophie smiled. “Of course.”

She was proud of her business. When I met her, she was so worried about surviving each day and raising well-adjusted siblings that she didn’t talk much about the future.

“Have you always dreamed of opening a bakery?”

“Honestly?” At my nod, she continued, “I don’t think I had any expectations for the future, other than making sure my sisters graduated and knew what they were doing in life.”

My heart stuttered. An understanding of her filtered through. I’d asked her to leave Annapolis and come with me when I deployed. *I’d asked her to leave her family.* It wasn’t a question she could say yes to. Was it possible her rejection had nothing to do with me?

Hope sprung in my chest, but I tapped it down. I couldn’t be sure that was the case. It might just be wishful thinking.

She started on her next batch of dough, deftly measuring and pouring while keeping an eye on the oven. “Did you enjoy your time in the military?”

I couldn’t get enough of watching her—the freckles scattered over her nose and cheeks, the confident way she moved around the kitchen as she followed a recipe in her head.

She paused and then shook her head. “Sorry, that was an inconsiderate thing to ask. I don’t even know much about your deployment or what you faced.”

I moved around the counter and placed a hand on hers. Her warmth radiated through my skin. “I loved my job.”

Her gaze drifted from where our hands were touching to my face. An awareness passed between us, and I moved away, needing to sever our connection.

“Why did you leave?” she asked as I moved back to my spot on the stool.

“Kendall. I left to take care of her. She was getting older, and I didn’t want to miss everything.”

Sophie considered me thoughtfully. “Do you mind if I ask where her mother is?”

I sighed. “Melanie said it was my turn to raise our daughter. She needed—no, she *deserved* a break.”

Sophie sucked in a breath. “She said that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, she just left Kendall with you?” I could practically see Sophie’s mind moving and turning, trying to make sense of what I was telling her.

“She did, but I’m grateful I get this time with her. Don’t get me wrong, Kendall needs her mother. I’m sure she’s hurt that Melanie left, and maybe it’s selfish, but I’m enjoying this time with her. We missed a lot while I was deployed.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “It must have been difficult to be separated from her.”

“Each time I left her, it felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I justified it by reminding myself I was taking care of her financially. Melanie was there to handle the day-to-day stuff, but I hated missing each stage of her development. I only have this time and then it’s gone, you know?”

Sophie’s gaze met mine. “I know exactly what you mean.”

A timer rang, interrupting the connection.

“I’ll take them out to cool, and then you can pick whatever you think Kendall would like,” Sophie said over her shoulder.

The water. The baked goods. It was an excuse to spend more time with her. I was worried about her safety, but it was so much more than that. Seeing Sophie again brought everything back, and I wasn’t willing to let her go. Not until I got to know her. Not until I got to the bottom of what happened when I proposed.

She placed the trays on a cooling rack and moved the next batch into the oven. “Do you remember this song?”

I tilted my head to hear the notes. “It played at our prom.”

That time in our life was bittersweet. I had this feeling that a big decision was looming. One that would take me away from Sophie. The tension between me and my dad was building steadily. He wanted me to stay and work the business, and I didn’t.

So, I held her closer, kissed her harder, and wished the moment would last forever.

Wanting to replicate that feeling, I stood and held my hand out to her. “Do you want to dance?”

There was a moment our gazes caught and held when I thought she’d say she had work to do, and I wouldn’t have blamed her. She bit her lip, and it was like time was suspended. She reached behind her back to tug on the apron strings. She lifted it over her head and laid it on the stool. Then she placed her hand in mine.

I tugged her closer so I could grip her hip and hold her hand in mine. It felt good to be near her again. There were a few inches of space between our bodies, but she was close enough I caught her sugary sweet scent. Her hair was pulled back, exposing her neck. I wanted to lower my head to kiss the soft skin.

Sophie smiled softly. “This is a first.”

I leaned back slightly to see her face. “You don’t dance with all of your customers in the kitchen?”

She laughed softly. “Never, actually. And I wouldn’t exactly call you a customer. No one else has ever watched me bake at four in the morning.”

“No one?” My hand drifted from her hip to her back, just above the curve of her ass. She wasn’t wearing a dress as she had at prom, but I still felt every curve.

“Other than my employees, I’ve never invited anyone back here.” There was raw honesty in her tone and her gaze.

“I feel special, then.” I softened my voice in deference to the moment.

A smile curved over her lips. Her cheeks were flushed, most likely from the heat of the oven, but I liked to think it was because we stood so close. It wouldn't take much for me to draw her in closer, but we weren't dating. This was a momentary dance to commemorate our history. It wasn't the start of something.

Except I never wanted the song to end. I wanted to pull her close so that her curves were pressed against me. I wanted to feel her everywhere.

In high school, we explored each other's bodies, but we didn't have sex. I wanted to wait for her to be ready, thinking it would happen the summer after we graduated. Then everything changed.

I untangled my fingers from hers to brush some flour off her chin. Her breath hitched. Our movements stalled.

I should kiss her. But we weren't eighteen and in a ballroom.

I stepped back, guilt seeping down my spine. "I'm sorry. I should probably leave you to it."

Confusion flitted over her face before she carefully smoothed it out.

I wanted to help her, not make things more difficult.

Sophie grabbed a bakery box from the shelves. "Take whatever you think Kendall will like."

I took the box, moving toward the cooling trays to mindlessly place pastries inside. When the box was full, I hesitated, not sure how to acknowledge what had just happened between us.

"I want to pay you for the pastries."

She leveled me with a look.

"It's too much."

"Fine." She washed her hands and then led the way to the front counter. I waited patiently while she opened the register and rang me up.

She kept her gaze carefully averted, but I saw the slight tremor in her hands when she took my credit card.

“Thank you for the waters and the pastries.” I lifted the box, knowing I was thanking her for the dance.

“You’re welcome.” Her voice was soft.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your baking time or make things hard for you.”

She smiled, then moved to disable the alarm. “You didn’t.”

She unlocked the door and pushed it open for me.

“Bye, Soph,” I said, wanting to touch her, to reassure her that everything would be okay, but it wasn’t my place anymore. Instead, I walked out.

“Please bring Kendall by. I’d love to meet her,” Sophie called after me.

I’d always thought she was angry that I’d gotten Melanie pregnant, that she resented my daughter. It wasn’t anything she’d ever said or done, other than she didn’t reach out to me after it happened.

She was always polite, but something simmered just under the surface. It felt a lot like disappointment or frustration. So I was pleased she’d invited Kendall.

“She’d like that too,” I said softly before I walked away.

What just happened? I’d stopped by to make sure she was safe, then I stayed to watch her bake, then danced with her in the kitchen.

Was it merely closure or the start of something even sweeter?

Chapter Five

I let out the breath I'd been holding when I closed the door behind him. Unlike the other day, he walked, since he was holding a bakery box. I watched him until he was out of sight. He'd stopped in for water and then stayed to watch me bake.

It was intimate, at least to me. Nothing was more special to me—baking in my kitchen—other than my family. I'd never invited anyone into this space early in the morning because it was a form of meditation for me.

I knew the recipes by heart, and I used the time to sort through feelings and thoughts, think of new recipes, and evaluate my business and my life. I always thought having someone with me would feel intrusive, but it hadn't.

I was very aware of the space that Mark took up in my kitchen. He was somehow larger than his physical presence. He'd always been that way to me. He'd been a savior of sorts when we met. He pulled me away from my family, giving me a needed break from my sometimes chaotic homelife.

I'd never gotten a chance to grieve the loss of my mother because I'd had to step in to help raise my sisters. My father hadn't expected that, but it was our reality. He needed to work, and the girls needed help.

It was worth falling behind my baking schedule for the day. I enjoyed talking to him, even if we kept the conversation light. But when that song had come on—the one we'd danced

to in high school—I couldn't believe it. It was kismet. It brought back the emotions of that night. I'd been looking forward to a future with Mark. I didn't think anything would get in our way.

It still hurt to think he'd been planning to leave all along, and I was blissfully unaware. Why was he stopping by after all this time? What did it mean?

I'd carefully rebuffed any attempts he'd made over the years to contact me by email or the one or two times he'd approached me at the bakery and at Brooke's party.

Mark hurt me before. I wouldn't allow it to happen again. I needed to be there for my family, ensure the bakery was successful, and somehow avoid the neighborhood burglar. I didn't have time for heart-to-heart conversations with an ex-boyfriend at dawn. Nothing good could come from our trip down memory lane.

It would have been so easy for him to kiss me when he brushed my cheek with the pad of his thumb. The ridiculous thing was I would have let him, despite the pain and heartache he caused me in the past. I was obviously doomed to repeat my mistakes.

Thankfully, Mark had done the smart thing and stepped back. He wasn't here to rekindle our relationship. He'd ruined any chances of that years ago.

Our time was over. There wouldn't be any going back and trying to re-create the past. We'd tried and failed spectacularly.

His living here might be temporary. What would happen when Kendall's mother wanted her back? Would they move back to Indiana?

I pushed away the thoughts because I needed to make up for the time I'd lost when he was here. Dancing with him was bittersweet.

I changed the music to something more upbeat, nothing that would remind me of slow dancing with Mark, then focused on baking. The thought of customers arriving at opening time, expecting a full menu, kept me focused.

By the time my front counter employee, Courtney, showed up, it seemed like a dream that Mark had been here at all. I hadn't slept well, and my subconscious had conjured him, playing that song that reminded me of him. That had to be it. None of it had been real.

I kept baking while Courtney dealt with the customers, making more than I usually did, and when I finally sat down in my office around lunchtime, I checked the cameras. I'd expected it to be slow, but I was surprised to see Mark. Was that a young girl next to him? Was it his daughter?

Wondering why he was here, I was moving my feet before I could stop myself. I paused in the entryway to the shop, still not believing that Mark stood at the counter with a sullen-looking girl to his right. She had his dark hair and the same stubborn tilt of her chin, but that's where the similarities ended. She must have gotten her blue eyes from her mother. The dark and light eyes were an intriguing mix. The fact that Mark had created a life with someone else never failed to prick my heart.

I'd always been jealous of this mysterious woman who'd captured his heart so soon after we broke up. I'd wanted to have sex, but Mark had resisted, saying we should wait. Then he'd given his virginity to her. She must have been someone special. She must have had something I didn't.

"Sophie," Mark said.

Courtney turned; her eyes widened when she saw me. "I thought you were taking a break."

My cheeks heated. What could I say? I'd come out because I'd seen Mark and his daughter. I wanted to see him again. I wanted to meet his daughter. My heart thudded painfully in my chest.

Mark lifted a carry-out bag. "I brought you lunch to thank you for the pastries."

"You paid for those," I said, not moving toward him. I was very aware that Courtney and Kendall were watching us carefully.

Mark winked. “I wanted to do something for you since you opened early for me.”

Courtney was shooting me all kinds of questioning looks, but I refused to look at her.

“I make a mean sandwich,” Mark said, nudging Kendall with his shoulder. “Don’t I?”

Kendall shrugged, but I wasn’t fooled by her bored expression. She felt the growing tension between us.

Wanting to diffuse it, I moved closer to take the proffered bag. “Did you want something while you’re here, Kendall? I just made cupcakes for the afternoon.”

No kid could resist the lure of cupcakes. I’d seen it time and time again and always made sure to have extra chocolate with vanilla frosting on hand. It was a favorite.

“Can I?” Kendall asked her dad.

“Of course.”

Pleased I’d found a way to appeal to Kendall, I grabbed the one with the most icing and put it on a plate. Grabbing a water, I carried it around the counter, placing it on a table.

“I appreciate you stopping by with lunch.” I remained standing while they sat. I’d purposely picked a two-person table, wanting to limit my interactions with them. I wasn’t sure I was ready to know more about Kendall.

“Why don’t you eat with us?” Mark said, gesturing to his daughter, who was already unwrapping the cupcake.

“If that’s okay with Kendall. I don’t want to intrude.” I wanted her to know that her feelings mattered.

“It’s fine,” Kendall said, her face pinched.

I wasn’t sure if it was actually fine, but I figured that was as good as I’d get from a nine-year-old. I pulled up another chair.

When I was seated between them, Mark said, “Kendall, this is my friend, Sophie. Sophie, this is my daughter, Kendall.”

“It’s really nice to meet you.” Despite how I resented her existence over the years, it melted away now that she was sitting before me. She was an innocent girl who had no idea what our history was, or what had happened between her parents.

When Kendall didn’t respond, Mark prodded her. “Kendall.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” she mumbled. Then she took a large bite of the cupcake.

I opened the brown bag, touched that Mark had stopped by with lunch. I unwrapped a club sandwich on rye.

“You made this?” I asked after taking a bite and chewing. The chicken was still warm. The bacon and tomatoes tasted fresh. There was just a little bit of mayo. It was the perfect combination.

“I have this time on my hands, and I’m enjoying having a kitchen to myself.”

He’d gone from living with his parents to enlisting in the military. He’d probably lived in barracks most of his adult life. I was happy he was exploring his independence for the first time.

Kendall rolled her eyes. “If he keeps cooking, I’m going to be fat.”

Mark’s jaw clenched, and I knew why.

“Eat healthy. Everything else in moderation.” I hated when my sisters spoke like that. I wanted to say don’t worry about being overweight or what boys think. Just focus on yourself, but Kendall wasn’t one of my sisters.

Kendall finished the cupcake. She stood, returning the plate to Courtney, who immediately engaged her in conversation. She was using her hands to speak to her. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I was grateful that Courtney was talking to her.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” Mark said, his gaze on Kendall.

I sat back in my chair, wondering what Mark could possibly want. “What is that?”

He rested his elbows on the table, leaning closer to me. “Kendall doesn’t know anyone here. She’s miserable without her friends.”

My skin tingled at his proximity. I needed to finish this conversation and get back behind the counter, away from his heady presence. “How can I help?”

“You have sisters. I know they’re older, but maybe they can point us in the right direction.”

I laughed. “I’m sure they could. They know everyone in this town. They’re older than Kendall, but Ellie’s a sixth-grade teacher.”

“I’d really appreciate it.”

I was really going to regret this. “Why don’t you come to family dinner on Sunday night? Kendall can meet everyone, and Ellie can steer you toward some good kids.”

His gaze was steady on mine.

I wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Was it too much? Was I overstepping? He’s the one who asked for help.

“I’d love that. I miss your dad.”

A lump formed in my throat. He was close to my father. I think it was because there was this sizable rift between Mark and his dad. I hated that for him, but my home became a soft spot for him to spend time.

Mark shook his head ruefully. “And I can’t believe your sisters are all grown up.”

“Did you think nothing changed in the last ten years?” I meant the statement to be light, but it had an unexpected bite to it.

He winced. “No.”

“Dad, can we go?” Kendall stood next to the table, her hands on her hips.

Mark stood, and I did, too.

“It was really nice to meet you, Kendall. Please feel free to stop by anytime.” I paused, waiting for her response.

Mark gave her a pointed look, and she finally said, “Thank you.”

“What time on Sunday?” Mark asked me when Kendall moved toward the door, leaving us alone.

“Six.” Was it too late to rescind the invitation? Spending time with Mark in my childhood home would be more nostalgic than that dance in my kitchen.

“Can I bring anything?” Mark asked, his tone uncertain.

“Just yourselves.” My heart rate picked up as I wondered what my family would say.

Mark shifted on his feet. “Is it okay if I stop by one afternoon this week to measure for the shelves?”

When I didn’t answer right away, he hurriedly added, “I assume you’d want me to come in when it’s not as busy.”

“You don’t need to build me shelves.” I wasn’t sure I could handle him in my space. I could see him now with a thin layer of sawdust covering his worn jeans and a black T-shirt stretched tight over his biceps, a hammer in his hands. It was hot.

“You need them, and I have a lot of time on my hands.”

Something about his use of the word *hands* had me hot and bothered. “I could get someone to do it. Ethan from The Red Toolbox does projects like that.”

“If you were going to build them, you already would have done it with the other renovations,” Mark pointed out.

The other renovations had eaten up my limited budget.

Mark stepped closer, his eyes steady on mine. “Let me do this for you.”

I finally nodded. I couldn’t refuse because it was a nice thing to do. “Let me know what I owe you for supplies.”

He didn't respond, so I wasn't sure what to make of that.

“And right before close would be best. Does four work for you?”

“It's perfect,” Mark said before he followed Kendall outside.

He was sweet and caring. Nothing had really changed since high school, except for my ability to sense that he'd leave when he decided this town was too small for him.



Later that day, Gia from Happily Ever Afters stopped by to go over the upcoming business plan she wanted to involve me in. She wanted to offer full-service packages to her guests that included the cake, photography, invitations, linens, tables, and silverware. It was a way to counteract the growing number of venues offering the package with their on-site wedding planner. It was a smart idea, and great for my business, too.

Recently, more bakers were selling cookies, cupcakes, and even wedding cakes out of their homes. Those businesses didn't have the overhead I did with a physical space and employees. The arrangement guaranteed I'd get Gia's clients. She'd handle most of the marketing.

Gia sat at a table with a water and a muffin to the side of her laptop. She turned the screen so I could see her spreadsheet.

She was always on the go, and I would be surprised if she took the time to drink or eat during this meeting.

Reading through the list, I recognized a few names. “Savannah and Ethan set a date?”

Gia smiled. “We're handling the shower and the wedding.”

“Do they need cakes for the shower?”

“They do. I'd like you to come to the initial consultation with couples and then the cake tasting. My assistant can help with scheduling it.”

“You think it’s necessary for me to be at the initial meetings?” I wasn’t sure how I’d swing that and be at the bakery when I needed to be.

“The brides expect the vendors to be present. Besides, you’re better able to discuss cakes than me.”

I licked my lips. “That makes sense.”

Gia’s gaze scanned the lobby. “You’re worried about the bakery?”

“How many meetings do you think it would be?” I asked, racking my brain for options. I had a couple of front counter people, but I’d need to hire more, maybe even a manager and a baker.

“Right now, five per week, but I’d like to increase that. I think once word gets out that we’re a one-stop shop, it will increase.”

“Okay. Wow.” She was saying this was going to increase my business load significantly. It was a good thing, but the logistics had me worried.

“This is going to be huge for us.” Gia’s energy was infectious.

“Won’t there be some weddings at venues where the extras are included?”

“That’s true. Some couples will still go directly to the venues and use their wedding planners and in-house bakers.”

My nose scrunched at “in-house bakers.” “Those are never as good.”

“We’re offering quality options for our couples and removing the stress from picking vendors. It’s a win-win for them and for us.”

“I agree.”

“Can you make this happen? I’d really like you to be my sole baker.”

We’d worked together on several weddings in the past, and I loved getting her referrals, but this was so much more. “I’ll

make it happen.”

“Perfect. My assistant, Chloe, will be in touch regarding the contract and scheduling.” Gia started packing up her laptop and notes.

“I’ll get to work on hiring a few more people around here.” I’d resisted, but it was time.

I moved to get her a to-go box for the muffin.

Gia took the offered box and hugged me. “Thanks, Sophie. I’m so excited to work together on this project.”

When Gia left, I turned to Courtney, whose eyes were wide. “What’s going on?”

“Looks like we’re going to be a lot busier.” Wedding cakes meant long hours on the weekends. I’d probably need a van to deliver them, too. If Gia was offering full service, then her customers would expect the cake to be delivered directly to the venue.

I needed to look at the numbers to see if a vehicle and more employees were in the budget. I’d resisted hiring when it was just me, but the potential of this arrangement was huge. If it worked out, I’d need to hire a baker to help with the morning baking and maybe even the cakes. It was a good position to be in; I was just scared to take that leap.

I’d always wanted to own a bakery, but expanding was a huge risk. Things were moving along nicely now, but what would happen if I hired extra employees and wedding clients didn’t increase? What if this venture failed?

The muscles in my neck tightened. The other business owners at the Shops on Main meetings were always talking about taking calculated risks. Was this a smart one, or was I getting in over my head?

Chapter Six

On my run the next morning, my mind drifted to Sophie's invitation to eat dinner with her family. I hadn't expected it, and it was under the guise of welcoming Kendall and helping her, but it felt like more.

I loved her father, Travis, because he'd always supported me. I felt guilty that I hadn't kept in touch when I left, but I assumed he hadn't approved of me leaving.

He was aware of my dad's pressure to work in the family business, and he always encouraged me to follow my heart. I just didn't think he meant for me to leave his daughter and the town in pursuit of my dreams. It was nerve-wracking wondering how he'd react to me sitting at his dinner table.

It hadn't escaped my attention that my current reality was starting to intertwine more and more with Sophie's. I'd offered to build her shelves at her bakery. I'd introduced her to Kendall. We were eating dinner with her family.

Why was I getting more entangled with her? I was supposed to be building a new future for Kendall and me, but it seemed like I couldn't escape my past, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

After leaving the bakery, I'd taken Kendall to the library and to the grocery store. I loved doing these mundane things with her, even if she spent more time sighing and rolling her eyes at me than talking.

I'd tucked a small tape measure into my shorts so I could use it as an excuse when I stopped by Sophie's bakery this morning. It would allow me to get a jump start on the project. The only downside was I'd need to talk to my dad about acquiring the lumber I needed.

I wasn't looking forward to that conversation, or questions about my future, but I'd come home, and I couldn't avoid him.

Sophie smiled at me when she saw me approaching.

I drew up short. "It's almost like you were expecting me."

Her smile widened. "I can't imagine why."

I held up the tape measure I'd brought. "I came prepared."

"I thought you were going to do that later?" she asked as she unlocked the door and silenced the alarm.

"I wanted to get the measurements so I could bring the wood over later this afternoon."

She grabbed a water out of the refrigerator and handed it to me. "I didn't think it would be so quick."

Our fingers brushed when I accepted the bottle, sending goose bumps up my forearm. "When I decide to take something on, I like to do it quickly."

Leaving tasks unfinished drove me crazy.

She waved for me to follow her into the kitchen.

I drank the water, assessing the shelves. "You want the same setup?"

She sighed. "Simple shelves would be fine."

I sensed there was something she was holding back. "If money wasn't an object, what would you want?"

She went to her office, pulling a magazine out of one of the drawers. It was already folded back to a page that was worn, with a turned-down corner. She must have looked at this numerous times, coming back to it again and again. My heart pinched at the idea of creating something she'd wanted for a long time.

“This is what you want?” I asked her, moving closer to the desk.

“It’s my dream storage area.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard anyone say that before,” I teased as I stood next to her, reveling in her familiar sweet scent before focusing on the glossy page. They were classic shelves, but there were also pull-out sections for various ingredients, spices, and icings, as well as a special compartment for mixers and larger equipment. I straightened, rubbing the scruff on my chin. “This is fancy.”

Her eyes dimmed as she shoved the magazine back into the desk. “I know it’s a pipe dream. It’s not necessary. Open shelves are fine.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. It’s the perfect setup. You’d be able to find exactly what you need, and it’s sturdy. It’ll last a long time.”

Her eyes implored me to understand. “I don’t want to be frustrated when I’m looking for ingredients. I want everything to have a place.”

“I want you to have exactly what you want.” I’d never said anything that was more truthful.

Her eyes met mine like she recognized that my statement encompassed more than shelves.

“You shouldn’t have to settle.” At this point, I wasn’t sure exactly what I was referring to. I could have been talking about the storage options, our relationship, or her future, which most certainly didn’t include me. I just wanted her to be happy.

She took a step back from me and looked away with a huff. “The question is, can I afford it?”

She was avoiding me, and I didn’t blame her. We’d gotten too close and flirted around more serious issues. Neither of us was prepared to tackle our history or our breakup. We were here to discuss shelves.

“Don’t worry about that. You know my dad has the wood.”

She rested a hand on my forearm. “I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“He’ll give it to me for wholesale.” Even if he didn’t, I’d cover the excess.

“Can you do an estimate for what this would cost, and I’ll let you know if it’s in the budget?”

“Of course.” She didn’t need to know my estimate would be skewed. I didn’t want her to hire anyone else. I had this ridiculous desire to make her dreams come true.

Before I moved back, I thought I was okay with her moving on—marrying and having kids with someone else. But now that she was standing in front of me, our shared memories and her presence flooding my mind, I wasn’t so certain about anything anymore.

“I really appreciate this.” She moved toward the kitchen.

I hesitated, taking in her office space. It had a similarly neglected look to the storage area. A beat-up desk, metal filing cabinets, cheap shelves that sagged from the weight of the books, and a small black couch with cracked leather. The only thing new in the room was her laptop.

She stood in the doorway. “Are you coming?”

“You know, this office reminds me of those storage shelves.”

She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “Not happening. A new office is not in the budget.”

I moved closer to her, her eyes widening with each step. “Is it because you always put other things and people before yourself? Don’t you deserve the best?”

Her mouth opened, then closed. Her fingers tightened on the doorframe. “I don’t know.”

“What if you had a beautiful space for your office? A new desk, bookshelves, filing cabinets that weren’t from the seventies.”

She laughed at that.

“Can you imagine yourself sitting at the desk?”

Her eyes clouded for a minute as if she were imagining just that. “That would be nice, but—”

“But nothing.” I moved around her, intending to start the measurements for the shelves, figure out the cost, and whether I could help her with the office.

She hurried after me and stopped me with a hand to my elbow. “You can’t help with the office.”

I raised a brow.

“I shouldn’t even be accepting your help with the shelves.”

“And why is that? Because we have history? Because we hurt each other?”

She waved a hand at me. “All of that. I’m not your responsibility anymore. Are you doing this to relieve the guilt for how things went down?”

I turned to fully face her, her hand naturally dropping away. “What are you talking about?”

She hesitated, licking her lips before she finally answered, “You feel guilty because you left.”

“What are you talking about—”

Her phone rang, and she held up her hand to stop me. “It’s Colton. I have to take this.”

Why would Colton be calling this early in the morning? It was a welcome interruption because I wasn’t sure what Sophie was getting at. She was the one who’d rejected my proposal. *I hadn’t left her.*

She answered her phone. “Hello.”

She listened intently, her eyes widening, then she rested her hand on her forehead.

I wanted to move closer and comfort her, but something held me back. My mind was still spinning from her assertion from a minute ago.

“I understand. No, that’s not necessary. Mark’s here.” Her hand that held the phone was trembling.

“What is it?”

Sophie’s gaze met mine. They were filled with worry and something else—fear?

This time, I moved in front of her, taking her shoulders in my hands.

“I’ll let you know if I see anything unusual. Thanks, Colton.” Then she lowered the phone to the desk.

“What’s going on?”

“Police were patrolling Main Street this morning when they saw someone in black, wearing a mask in the alley behind some of the shops.”

“Where exactly on Main?” Sophie’s store was smack-dab in the middle.

“Across the street, by Lavender and The Red Toolbox. Savannah’s and Ethan’s stores,” Sophie sounded slightly breathless, as if she were in shock.

My jaw tightened. “That’s too close, Soph. I don’t like it.”

That’s when I noticed her whole body was shaking.

“Are you okay?” I moved closer to her, trying to assess her emotions. As strung tight as I was by Colton’s call and the idea that a burglar was seen across the street, I needed to reassure her.

“I’m fine.” But her voice wavered.

“You’re not. Why don’t you sit down?” I cupped her elbow and led her to the sofa.

I pushed gently on her shoulder until she sat. “Let me get you something to drink.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated, but her cheeks were pale, and she wrung her hands in her lap.

This time, I didn’t argue with her, I just hurried to grab a water and what looked like a few leftover muffins. She needed

something to eat and drink. She needed to calm down.

I clenched my jaw on the too-long walk back to her, hating seeing her so upset.

When I returned, she was rubbing her arms as if she were cold when the room was warm from the heat of the ovens.

I sat down next to her, unscrewed the cap of the bottle, and handed it to her. “Drink.”

When she took a tentative sip, I unwrapped the muffin and handed it to her. “You need the sugar.”

Sophie shook her head, her eyes uncertain. “I feel a little sick.”

“You’re shaky. The sugar will help.” When she hesitated, I continued. “Please eat. For me.”

She took a small bite.

“Good girl.” Relief poured through me, relaxing my taut muscles inch by inch. I don’t think I’d ever been so scared as I was when she got off that call with Colton.

Her cheeks were pink now, her hands steadier.

“You need to take care of yourself.” I wondered if the state of her office and pantry was indicative of how she treated herself in general. Did her family and friends always come first? Did she even remember to eat or stay hydrated?

She took a few more bites and drank some water before she said, “I don’t even know why I’m so upset. I have an alarm system.”

Before I could think about my response, I said, “That alarm isn’t going to stop anyone. Anyone could get through the glass windows or the back door before police arrive.”

She shivered.

I’d spoken too freely. I’d only meant to caution her. “I’m not trying to scare you.”

“You think the worst because of your job.”

“I’m familiar with assessing security risks, and we’re not talking about a hypothetical situation. This guy has broken into multiple stores, and he was seen doing the same thing this morning.” This guy was way too close for comfort.

Sophie set the rest of the muffin on a rickety side table.

“You shouldn’t be here by yourself.”

“I was already planning on hiring more staff. I partnered with Gia, a local wedding planner, to do cakes for her brides. She wants me to attend the initial meetings and hold cake tastings. If she’s right, it will significantly increase my time away from the kitchen. I need help.”

I relaxed slightly. I liked knowing that she wouldn’t always be here by herself. “You need to get someone in here soon.”

“I’ll prepare an ad today.”

“In the meantime, I can walk you from your car each morning and stay until you hire someone.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I wasn’t asking.” I wanted to reassure her father that she was safe when I was sitting at his dinner table on Sunday. Hell, I couldn’t relax unless I knew she was safe.

A small part of me looked forward to spending more time with her alone. Early in the morning, there were no customers or employees. It was just her and me.

She looked up at me, her teeth creeping out to bite her lip. “I walk from home.”

For a second, I was confused. I wasn’t sure why she was telling me. “You need me to walk you from home?”

She nodded as she looked away. “Yeah.”

“You live in town.” It was a tiny glimpse into her private life, the one outside the bakery, and I savored it like the crumbs of her blueberry muffins I’d taken home for Kendall.

“I didn’t want to be far from my family’s home.”

“When did you move out?” I held my breath, waiting for her answer.

“When I was twenty-four.”

That surprised me a little. Sophie had always been so self-sufficient and independent. Why had she lived with her father for so long?

“I wanted to be there to help the girls get ready for school, to make sure they ate dinner when they got home.”

Her youngest sister, Nora, would have been about four when her mother died, and sixteen when Sophie moved out.

“What finally prompted you to leave?”

“I wanted to open a bakery, and Dad said I’d never do it if I felt responsible for my sisters.”

“He was right.” This glimpse into the Sophie I’d left behind was bittersweet because I wished I’d been here to help her. I never regretted leaving my father with the business, but I hated that Sophie was left to raise her sisters. Her father did his best, but he couldn’t work and take care of the girls.

“What did your father do when you moved out?”

“My two youngest sisters were sixteen and eighteen. They were self-sufficient at that point. Ellie and Aria were older and had already moved out. It was just hard.”

“To let go?”

She nodded. “It was almost like they were mine. Not just my sisters.”

“That’s understandable. You helped raise them.” And put her dreams on hold. I hadn’t done that. I’d selfishly left to pursue mine with barely a thought as to what Sophie would do. When she’d said no, I felt rejected. That sting clouded everything else.

It made me doubt our relationship that she could reject my proposal so easily. But it wasn’t an easy decision. Her sisters came first, just like Kendall was my priority. Sophie couldn’t

just walk away from them. Hell, her father had to force the issue when she was twenty-four.

I had the uncomfortable feeling that I'd been thinking about this all wrong for a while now. I wasn't quite ready to focus on that, so I doubled down on evaluating Sophie's safety and this burglar, who was still out there.

Chapter Seven

Why had I invited Mark to family dinner? When I told my dad Mark was coming along with his daughter, he'd raised a brow. I couldn't blame him for his disbelief.

My excuse that Mark wanted to reconnect with the community and that Kendall needed to make friends sounded weak, even to me.

Thankfully, he didn't question it further. He'd been upset when Mark enlisted, but he'd understood. Mark needed to forge his own path. He couldn't do that with his dad pressuring him to take over the business that Mark wasn't even sure he wanted.

My baby sister, Nora, was home on break from college. My second youngest, Tori, had stayed in Texas to work an internship during her summer break. Thankfully, they both had the time and space to explore what they wanted to do. Their hands weren't forced, and they had no responsibilities. That's how I wanted it to be for them.

Ellie had gotten pregnant at sixteen with Drew. She was the real reason I'd stayed at home until I was twenty-four. We had Drew to care for. Our middle sister, Grace, was living in New York. I think she wanted to escape our town and explore the world. I was just glad she had that opportunity. I wanted my sisters to do anything they wanted to do, even if it meant leaving home.

When I arrived, my sisters, Nora and Ellie, were already there. Drew, at ten, was the center of attention, as usual. When he was born, my sisters spoiled him. He was the only boy. He'd loved it when he was little, but now he seemed a little uncomfortable with the attention.

"You meet any girls?" Nora asked.

"I'm ten," Drew said, looking disgusted.

I exchanged an amused look with Ellie. I'm sure she was relieved he wasn't into girls yet. She was worried about him following in her footsteps and getting someone pregnant. She loved him and had some help from his father, but she wanted him to have it easier than she did. She'd been able to attend college because we'd helped her.

I kissed my dad's cheek as he shook his head at us. "Never a dull moment around here."

There was a sparkle in my dad's eyes. He loved us, no matter what we did. Whether it was getting pregnant at sixteen like Ellie or leaving home like Grace.

The doorbell rang.

"That Mark?" Dad asked.

"I didn't invite anyone else."

I moved toward the door, but Ellie beat me there. She was the second oldest, so I was closest to her. She remembered how devastated I'd been when Mark left. She probably wanted to protect me.

"It's good to see you, Mark." Ellie opened the door wider so he could come inside.

His eyes widened when he saw how many people were in the kitchen, watching him expectedly.

"Did you forget what it was like around here?" I asked, amused.

He shook his head. "It's about the same."

It was probably tamer. When he left, all of us girls were in our preteen or teen years. We fought over stolen clothes and

makeup. There was a lot of screaming and yelling, but also a lot of love. There's nothing we wouldn't do for each other.

At first, those in the community pitied us—the five poor girls left without a mother—but we were self-sufficient. We took care of ourselves. I'd worked hard to get to that point.

Dad approached, and I held my breath, unsure how he'd react. "Mark, thank you for your service."

"Thank you, sir," Mark said.

Dad respected him. I'd always known he had, but seeing him treat Mark with so much reverence touched me.

"And who do we have here?" Dad asked.

"This is my daughter, Kendall."

"My son, Drew." Ellie reached for him.

I hadn't expected Drew and Kendall to be friends. They were in that in-between stage where they weren't quite sure about the opposite sex, but Kendall must have been happy to see someone her own age because when he asked if she wanted to play video games, she readily agreed.

"She doesn't even like video games," Mark said when they'd disappeared into the basement.

Ellie laughed. "She wants to escape us, and I don't blame her. We can be overwhelming."

"It's just been her and her mother for a long time," Mark said.

"It must be tough being away from her," Dad said, even though he never had to experience that.

"It was. She's the reason I was discharged."

Something passed between my dad and Mark. I think it was respect.

"I wondered about that. You want to talk outside? I'm grilling tonight."

"Sure thing." Mark followed him outside on the deck.

Ellie folded her arms over her chest. “Are you sure he’s here for his daughter?”

“He brought Kendall into the bakery and said he was worried about her finding friends here. She’s lonely, not knowing anyone. She misses her friends from home.”

I didn’t mention that he’d stopped by the bakery early in the morning, and he’d vowed to walk me from home to work.

“Uh-huh,” Ellie said, her expression skeptical.

I gestured with my hand. “Trust me. That ship has sailed.”

“You’re resorting to corny clichés now. Nice,” Nora said as she dumped lettuce into a large bowl.

“No one asked for your opinion,” I said, resorting to childish retorts. Something about Nora being the youngest made her sassier.

Ellie leaned in to ask, “What do you think they’re talking about out there?”

I glanced outside where Mark stood next to my dad. “Should I be worried?”

I shifted on my feet.

“I bet Dad’s grilling him,” Nora said in a singsong voice.

I was a little worried about Dad’s reaction, but he’d been so respectful when Mark came in, I didn’t think he’d say anything to him. “We broke up years ago. What could he possibly be grilling him about?”

Nora snorted as she tossed the salad with wooden forks. “Why he’s here.”

Ellie pointed a finger at Nora. “I guarantee you it has nothing to do with his adorable daughter.”

It was suspicious that he stopped by the bakery after his run. The first time was an accident, but every time thereafter? It couldn’t have been an accident.

As quickly as the hope soared in my chest, I shook my head. “We aren’t right for each other.”

“I’ll give it to you—it was bad timing for you back then, but he’s living here now. He wants to make Annapolis his home again.”

“You act like it’s inevitable.”

“Tell me who’ve you dated seriously since Mark.” Ellie grabbed the bamboo salad bowls from the cabinet.

I tapped my chin with my finger. “I dated Pete Brown.”

Ellie gave me a look as she headed toward the large kitchen table, the only one we ever used for meals. The dining room table was covered with my dad’s important papers, whatever those were.

Nora rolled her eyes. “Even his name is a snore-fest.”

“He was nice,” I countered.

Ellie narrowed her eyes at me. “That was exactly the problem. He was nice. Too nice if you ask me.”

I was the one who’d strung Pete along, hoping to feel a smidgeon of what I had for Mark. I thought Mark was merely my first love, that it wasn’t meant to endure, but I’d never met anyone who made me feel like he did.

Now every time I saw him, my heart jumped, my skin tingled, and every hair rose in anticipation of him getting closer. He was in my childhood home, talking to my dad. What did it mean?

My sisters’ opinions about his motivations were getting under my skin. I wanted to go back to when there was a very defined border between us. The one where we’d walked away from each other and had no intention of going back.

Their suspicions cracked the wall, letting air seep in.

Mark opened the door, carrying the potatoes wrapped in tin foil.

“You survived,” Nora said breezily when she passed him with the salad.

Mark’s forehead wrinkled as he looked over at me, his brow raised in silent question.

I shrugged because I didn't want him to know what we were talking about. I didn't even want to know what my dad said to him. I wanted to ignore everything and focus on my family and the bakery.

Just because Mark was back didn't mean anything had to change. But if I thought about it logically, I'd have to acknowledge everything had.

"Dinner's ready," Dad yelled down the stairs.

Drew and Kendall came upstairs and sat next to each other at the end of the table, as far away from the adults as they could get.

The food was passed around the table. There was teasing and laughter. It was fun and easy. I loved spending time with my family.

Seeing Mark at our table after all these years was familiar. He'd always needed an escape from his family, and we were all too happy to have him here. My sisters loved having another male around. He helped my dad with things around the house, too. My father loved how attentive and protective he was toward me.

I hadn't realized that it was a rare quality until I dated other guys.

"So, what are your plans now that you're home?" Dad asked Mark when the conversation slowed.

Mark straightened his shoulders. "I want to get Kendall settled in at school, and then I'll figure things out."

Dad nodded. "You have time."

"I do." Mark looked relieved that Dad had let it go.

I wondered if his dad was on his case to work at the lumberyard.

"Is it overwhelming being home after so long?" Ellie asked.

I cut my steak, carefully watching Mark's reaction.

His gaze darted to me, then back to Ellie. “I wouldn’t say overwhelming.”

Did I bring back memories for him? And if so, were they good or bad? Since he’d been home, I’d been bombarded with our past. I hoped I wasn’t alone in this trip down memory lane.

“It’s good to have you home,” Dad said when silence fell over the table.

Mark nodded at my dad and then turned his steady gaze on me. “It’s good to be back.”

My cheeks heated. Every one of my sisters’ heads turned in my direction. I knew they would have a lot of questions when Mark left.

What had Mark and my dad talked about outside? Had Dad encouraged him to pursue me? Had he told him to stay away? I was overreacting. I probably didn’t come up in conversation at all.

When we finished eating, Kendall and Drew disappeared into the basement again. And we all worked together to clear the table, forming an assembly line in the kitchen to rinse and place dishes in the dishwasher while Mark took out the garbage.

“You want to go for a walk?” Mark asked me once things were cleaned up.

I dared a glance at my father, who nodded at me.

“If you don’t mind keeping an eye on Kendall?” Mark asked the room in general.

“I think between all of us, we can keep track of one nine-year-old girl,” Ellie said.

“Sure,” I said to him, leading the way to the front door and out onto the sidewalk.

He fell into step next to me, and I had a moment of déjà vu. Mark coming over for dinner, cleaning up, taking out the garbage, and then asking my father if he could take me for a walk. Back then, we weren’t allowed to be in my room or in the basement. I was the oldest, so Dad was strictest with me.

He loosened things up after Mark left. I think he felt guilty for limiting the time I was able to spend with him.

Dad never said anything, but I think he liked Mark for me. He wouldn't have wanted me to get married and leave home at eighteen, but I always got the impression he was sad for me.

“This feels like old times, doesn't it?” I asked him.

“Except usually, I'd be holding your hand.”

“Things were so easy back then.” The biggest thing we worried about was whether we should go all the way or not. Looking back, I wished he'd been my first, but at the same time, it would have been even harder when he left.

I would have been even more emotionally invested, if that were possible.

“It didn't feel easy at the time.”

I'm sure it wasn't for Mark. He had his dad's expectations on his shoulders.

I itched to touch him. My fingers ghosted down his arm, curling around his forearm. “I'm glad you and Kendall moved here. I think this town will be good for her and for you.”

Mark smiled down at me. “Me too.”

We walked through town in silence. “Want to get ice cream?”

Our walks often ended with getting dessert. Mark worked for his father, so he always had money to spend.

Warmth spread through my chest as my fingers tightened around his arm. “There's a new ice cream shop. They serve homemade sodas, and I feel like a root beer float.”

Mark gestured with a hand. “Lead the way.”

We walked along the water, side-stepping families and couples walking with dogs.

“There are new restaurants,” Mark said.

“The ones along the water change more frequently. The ones across from the marketplace have been there a while.

Except for Max's Bar & Grille.”

Mark opened the door to Georgia's Ice Cream & Soda Shop for me, the air conditioning welcoming us in. The floors were a black-and-white pattern, with dark shelves behind the counter, and ice cream refrigerators.

We stood in line, Mark considering the many options for sodas. When we made it to the front of the line, I ordered a root beer float, and Mark ordered a lime soda with vanilla ice cream. “Good choice.”

“Have you tried all the options?”

“I have tried a lot, but I keep coming back to the root beer.”

“It's a classic,” Mark said as we took our order number and found a two-person table along the wall.

“It's fizzy and sweet, but if you eat too much, you feel sick.” I still couldn't resist it.

“The perfect combination?” Mark asked me.

He'd always listened when I talked, and now was no different. His eyes were on me, and I could tell he was paying attention to what I was saying.

“I think so.”

The waitress set our drinks in front of us and took the order number. I sipped the float, the sweet, fizzy drink settling in my stomach.

“Can I try yours?” Mark rested his elbows on the table. Muscles rippled along his forearms. It was clear he'd worked out while in the military.

I slid the glass across the table, watching as my straw disappeared between his lips. He sucked, and all I could think about was his lips on mine. Would he taste like root beer or lime?

“I don't know which one I like better.” Mark pushed his drink toward me, and I used his straw to taste it.

My nose wrinkled at the lime flavor. “I think I prefer the root beer.”

While we tasted each other’s drinks, we leaned closer. Our lips were only a few inches apart. When we were kids, we’d sneak kisses whenever we could, and this was one of those moments that we would have indulged.

My face flushed, and Mark raised a brow as if he knew exactly where my mind had gone. I was so innocent back then. I wasn’t worried about what I would do after graduation or whether Mark would leave. I’d naïvely thought we’d stay in town. He’d work for his dad, and I’d stay home, get a job at a local bakery, but still be home to help with my sisters.

It was sweet and domestic, and now that I knew the end of our story, one hundred percent foolish. I had no idea he’d been harboring this secret plan to get out of town.

I would be smart to learn from the past. There was a good chance Mark would take Kendall back to the only home and school she’d ever known. Whatever itch made him leave the first time would come back around. He wasn’t someone who’d stay in town.

I’d never leave my family, and he’d never be content in our hometown.

I wasn’t sure why Mark wanted to relive our teenage dates or if he was thinking of our history when he’d made the casual suggestion of going for a walk. The whole evening felt so familiar that it made me long for something I shouldn’t want. No matter how good it felt to be around him, it didn’t mean I’d ever trust him with my heart again.

Chapter Eight

When I'd walked Sophie home from the ice cream shop the other night, memories bombarded me. As teens, we'd sneak touches and kisses on the way home. By the time we'd arrived at her porch, I limited any affection to one chaste kiss on the cheek. I was hyperaware that her father was most likely watching us, and I didn't want to be disrespectful.

I'm sure he was aware that we weren't entirely innocent, but I wouldn't flaunt it in front of him. It was the same reason I'd held off on having sex with Sophie. I respected her too much. Over the years, I'd regretted not taking my chance when I had it. I might not get one again.

When I leaned into her space at the ice cream shop, I saw the way her cheeks flushed and her lips parted. It was the perfect moment to lean over and kiss her, but we weren't teens who were infatuated with each other anymore. There was pain and rejection mixed in there.

We were friends. That would have to be enough.

Besides, I saw the moment when hurt shifted through her expression, and then her eyes shuttered. Whatever reason she had for saying no to my proposal at eighteen hadn't changed. I wasn't good enough for her then, and I wasn't now.

I didn't regret having Kendall. She was the most important person in my life, and I was forever grateful she was mine. But I wasn't naïve enough to think that Sophie didn't feel somewhat betrayed by the fact I'd held off having sex with

her, but then lost my virginity to the next woman who showed interest.

In my mind, Sophie rejected me, so I was free to do what I wanted, even if my heart wasn't in it. I wanted to prove that I'd moved on, but it only made everything worse. I'd effectively ended any chance of reconciliation with Sophie when Melanie got pregnant.

Empty one-night stands didn't do it for me. It made me realize that what Sophie and I had was precious, and I might not find that with someone else.

I'd focused on Kendall and tried to put Sophie out of my mind. There were little updates from my mother over the years, but it only made me long for what I couldn't have.

But now that I was back, I was continually drawn into her presence, placing myself in her sphere. It was either a strong desire to torture myself or my body knew what it wanted, even when my mind didn't.

Unfortunately, I couldn't control how Sophie felt about me. Just like I couldn't control her answer to my proposal. It had driven me crazy over the years. I'd never known why she'd said no, but I hadn't stuck around to ask, either.

I ran my fingers through my hair. I wasn't what she wanted. My mind had instantly run with me not being right for her. And that had hurt. I'd secretly thought she was too good for me in high school. So, when she'd said no to a future with me, it hadn't come as a surprise. It reinforced everything my father said.

"You ready to meet Drew at the arcade?" I called up the steps to Kendall.

"I'm coming," Kendall said as she came down.

She wore a navy crop top over tiny white shorts and flip-flops.

"Those shorts are"—I took in the back of them as she walked away from me and sucked in a breath—"barely covering your ass."

I looked up at the ceiling for guidance.

Her head slowly turned in my direction, and she hissed, “It’s okay for you to swear?”

I was used to cursing from working with men for most of my adult life, and it was hard to break the habit, especially when my temper was triggered. Meeting her gaze, I held up my hands in front of me. “I’m sorry, but I need you to go back upstairs and change.”

She placed her hands on her hips and stomped a foot. “Why?”

“I don’t want to see your belly button hanging out, and those shorts are”—I gestured with my hand—“indecently short.”

Shit. Now I was using words like indecent. I was worse than my father, but then again, he never had a daughter. Anyone would have asked her to change. “You’re nine.”

“So, what does that matter?”

“I’m not letting you go out in public like that.” It was way too much skin, even though she was innocent of what it meant.

Her brows raised. “That’s the style.”

I started shaking my head and couldn’t stop. “Nope. No. Just no.”

“I can’t believe you,” she said when she realized I wasn’t budging from my position.

“If you want to hang out with your friends, you need to change.”

If it were possible, steam would have been coming out of her ears. “You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

I heard what she wasn’t saying. I’d never been around, so I’d lost the right. “I’m still your father, and you’ll follow my rules as long as you live under my roof.”

I winced at the exact words my father used to say. My heart pounded in my chest.

Kendall let out a scream of frustration and stomped slowly past me up the steps.

“Kendall.” I pleaded with my tone that she listen to me.

She stopped, her hand on the rail, and looked down at me. Her expression was a mixture of pure fury and frustration.

“I just need all your important parts to be covered. If you can’t wear it in school, you’re not wearing it here.” There was so much more I wanted to say. Sometimes she acted so much older than her nine years. I wondered if it was the apps her mother allowed her to have access to her or her friends. I was determined to reverse the results of those influences if it wasn’t too late. It was probably naïve, but I wanted her to stay little for as long as possible. I was fighting against time and the natural order of things, but I had no choice if I wanted to maintain my sanity.

Her expression softened slightly, then she continued up the steps.

Progress. Pride flew through me that I’d set a rule and stuck with it. I knew I’d constantly be tested. Especially since I didn’t know the rules Melanie had set forth. I was bound to have a different approach to this, but hopefully, Kendall would respect my decisions. I only wanted what was best for her.

While I waited for her to change, I sat on the bench by the steps and ran through my conversation with Sophie’s dad, Travis. He’d mentioned how he’d raised five daughters and was happy to help with advice if I needed it. I thanked him and said I’d take whatever advice he was willing to offer. He’d said I needed to trust my instincts, and when I gave an instruction, I needed to stick with it.

That one had stumped me for a few seconds before he added, “They need to know that when you say something, you mean it. Even if you were wrong.”

“So, never admit you’re wrong?” I asked, still confused.

Then he’d chuckled. “Definitely not. In a house full of women, you learn quickly to admit your mistakes and

apologize profusely. But what I meant was when you set a curfew, you never give an inch. You get what I'm saying?"

"I do. Thank you for offering to help. I'm kind of alone in this. Obviously, my parents didn't have any girls."

"What about Kendall's mother?"

"Melanie said it's my turn to raise our daughter. She needed a break. I don't blame her. I was gone for most of her upbringing." I hated that for Kendall, though. She needed both of us in her life.

"That's shitty if you ask me. I didn't have a choice but to raise these girls on my own."

Travis's wife died when she was far too young, and the girls were in their formative years. From what I remembered, she'd died of breast cancer, but Sophie had never discussed it with me. I'd learned that information from my mother.

"Sophie really stepped up, and I feel selfish for letting her."

"You were doing the best you could."

"It's also why I pushed her out of here at twenty-four. It was time for her to find her own way. Follow her dreams."

"If I'm half the dad as you, I'll be happy."

Travis briefly touched my shoulder before he stood to check the grill. "You've got this. The number one thing Kendall needs right now is love."

I don't know what I'd expected him to say, but that wasn't it. I immediately relaxed, my muscles loosened, and the ever-present tension between my shoulder blades dissipated. If all Kendall needed was love, then I could do that.

"Everything flows from that feeling. If you tune into it often, you'll be okay. Trust me, she will test you through the teen years."

I was grateful for Travis's advice.

"You need anything—you're welcome anytime. With or without Sophie."

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.” His advice and his words had me choked up. Travis had been the father I’d always wanted as a kid.

Even now, the tension between me and my father was thick. Maybe it was because Travis was someone else’s dad, but there was no awkward tension or stress. I could take in his advice without worrying about censure or judgment.

Footsteps thundered down the wooden steps. I stood, turning just as Kendall reached the foyer. She held out her arms for me. She wore a summery-looking green dress with tiny flowers. But then she did a little twirl, and I realized how very short the dress was.

I sucked in a breath as she came to a stop, the end of the dress fluttering, then falling down. It covered her butt but fell high on her thighs. I should be thankful. This was a win.

“What? It covers the important parts, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” Barely.

I sighed as I followed her out of the house. She bounded down the steps and toward my SUV. At least she was excited about something to do here in town. I was so grateful for Sophie and her family. I didn’t know what I’d do without them.

At the arcade, Kendall disappeared into the dim, cavernous room as soon as we entered. There was bowling on the left, a restaurant on the right, and the arcade game noise was coming from the back. A sign advertised a rooftop deck for drinking and ax throwing. Was that a thing?

“If you have things to do, you can go. I’ll keep an eye on Kendall. Drew invited a bunch of his friends, a mix of boys and girls, so he could introduce her to them,” Ellie said.

“I don’t mind sticking around.” The only thing I had on the agenda was building Sophie’s shelves, and it was Saturday, so it was too busy to be in her kitchen.

Something had been bothering me since I had dinner at the Hendrixes’ house on Sunday. Drew was almost the same age as Kendall. That meant Ellie was pregnant at sixteen, around

the end of Sophie's senior year. Had Sophie known that when I proposed? Had it factored into her decision, and if it did, why hadn't she said anything?

Ellie nodded. "How are you?"

"I'm hanging in there." I'd always respected Ellie. She was the one who'd helped Sophie as much as she could. It was the younger two girls who didn't have as many responsibilities.

"I can't imagine getting Kendall full time at her age. It must be an adjustment."

"I'm just so happy to get this time with her. I'm sure it puts me at a disadvantage. I had to make her change her outfit this morning. It's tough setting rules and expectations." I resisted doing the latter because it was my father's go-to parenting style.

Ellie gave me a pointed look. "But you have to."

"I made some mistakes when I first returned, but I think I've got it now."

"Is her mother gone permanently?" she asked, and then winced. "Sorry, I couldn't think of a better word."

If Ellie didn't know about Melanie, that meant her father had kept our conversation between us. I respected the hell out of him for that. "I'm not sure. Melanie said she was taking the time to travel, and she hasn't said where she is. I think I need this time with Kendall to figure out our relationship. If Melanie was here, it would be different."

Ellie opened her mouth, and I rushed to add, "I get that Kendall needs her mother, especially at her age, but I don't think she'll be gone forever. Maybe just the summer."

"Is that what she said?" Ellie asked, and there was nothing but genuine concern in her voice.

"Not exactly." I found that the news was more easily accepted if I said her mother was only gone for a short time, but I honestly had no idea how long she intended to be gone. When I said I was moving Kendall home, she hadn't argued, which was a bad sign.

Ellie bumped her shoulder with mine, and said, “Well, you’ve got the Hendrixes on your side.”

“I don’t think I deserve your loyalty, but I’m grateful for it.”

“You were around when we were kids. Helping around the house. Protecting us from bullies. And then you were just gone.”

My stomach dropped. I hadn’t realized I’d meant so much to Sophie’s sisters.

She held her hand up. “You had to do what you had to do, but we missed you. You were important to us.”

“Your family was everything to me, too.”

It felt good to say that, to acknowledge it out loud. My mom meant well, but she never crossed my dad. He had the final say when I really needed her to stick up for me. To tell him it was okay to let me play sports or have interests outside the family business. He hadn’t liked me dating Sophie, but it was one thing he didn’t try to control.

Looking back, he probably hoped she’d keep me here, but even she hadn’t been enough. The thought of living here and working for my dad at eighteen crushed my soul. When my dad issued his ultimatum after graduation, there wasn’t even a choice. I immediately contacted the Army recruiter and never looked back.

I mistakenly thought Sophie would understand. That she loved me enough to come with me, but I’d been wrong. I wouldn’t make that same mistake again.

Chapter Nine

SOPHIE

It was the end of the day. The shop itself was closed, and Mark was working on the shelving unit. He'd sketched a design of the space, delivered the wood in his truck, and now, he was measuring and cutting the pieces outside. He kept the door to the back closed so the dust wouldn't get in the kitchen.

He'd said he'd build it outside and then move it inside one piece at a time, so as not to disturb the customers but also to keep construction materials out of the kitchen.

He'd even hung a tarp between the hallway and the kitchen in case sawdust drifted inside when he walked back and forth to ask me questions.

I only allowed him to work when the baking was done for the day. I wouldn't take any chance that the construction would make its way into the dough. I thoroughly cleaned each night after he left. It was more work for me, but I enjoyed having him nearby, and I was beyond excited to have workable storage space.

Each time I checked on him, he was one hundred percent focused on his task, a pencil perched behind his ear, a tool belt of some sort slung low on his hips, and the tantalizing smell of sawdust drifting around him. Each time I heard the door open, my heart rate picked up, and my skin tingled with the anticipation of seeing him.

He didn't seem as affected as I did, but then I wasn't the one wearing a tool belt. At the bakery, my hair was either up in a bun or in a ponytail. I never wore makeup because the heat of the kitchen would just melt it off, and I wore my uniform shirt, leggings, and sneakers. There was nothing attractive about being covered in flour, but Mark working with wood was undeniably sexy.

He had me imagining all sorts of scenarios, like him taking a break to press me against a wall and rolling his hips so I could feel the delicious friction. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I should be planning my menu for the week, not imagining Mark fucking me against a wall.

I dropped my forehead onto the table. When was the last time I'd had sex?

"Is my dad here?" a voice asked uncertainly.

I looked up to find Kendall standing in the doorway, her arms loaded down with books. "Courtney let me in. She said he was back here."

"He's cutting wood behind the shop."

Kendall glanced down the hallway but didn't make a move to leave.

"You find any good books at the library?" I asked her.

Kendall dropped the stack on the edge of my desk. "There are so many good ones I couldn't choose."

"I didn't know you loved reading so much."

Kendall dipped her head. "I love it. Mom worked a lot, so I was home alone most of the time."

"Oh." I wasn't sure how to respond to that. I wasn't sure even Mark knew that tidbit about her life. It seemed like he'd been mostly in the dark when it came to his daughter.

"Do you think—" Then Kendall shook her head. "Dad said not to bother you."

I waved a hand at her. "Ask whatever you were going to ask. I wasn't doing a good job on focusing on work, anyway."

Kendall bit her lip before she finally asked, “Do you think you could teach me how to bake? Mom hated it. Said she’d just eat it, and she didn’t want to get fat, so I never learned.”

“You want to learn how to bake?” My sisters enjoyed it when I baked because they liked eating it, but they never helped or expressed an interest in learning for themselves.

Kendall nodded, her eyes filled with hope.

“I’d love to teach you.”

She bit her lip. “But Dad said not to bother you.”

I stood with a smile on my face. “He’s helping me by building shelves, and now I’m helping him by teaching you how to bake. It’s a win-win.”

His estimate for the shelves was suspiciously low. I moved past her into the kitchen, all too happy to bake instead of dealing with the menu and ordering supplies for next week.

“Are you sure I’m not interrupting?” Kendall asked.

I stood in front of the open shelves, wondering where we should start. “I’m positive. Cookies or cupcakes?”

“Can I say both?” Kendall asked hopefully, drifting to my side.

“A girl after my own heart.” I held a palm over my chest, then pulled sugar and flour off the shelves, moving them to the stainless-steel countertop.

“I had no idea you were interested in baking. Your dad never said.” I would have engaged her earlier if I’d known. There was nothing I loved more than talking shop.

“He doesn’t know. Mom always shut me down when I asked, and I don’t know anyone else who bakes.”

I bumped shoulders with her. “Well, now you do.”

We shared a smile, and pure joy spread through me. I couldn’t wait to teach her everything I knew. I secretly hoped this wasn’t a one-time thing, that she’d fall in love with it.

We talked about recipes and how I came up with new ideas and tested them out. I explained why I used each ingredient and how much. She wrote down the recipe in a notebook I gave her from my office.

Unfortunately, the pages were already covered with flour, sugar, and oils. I wasn't a clean baker, so the counters were covered, too, but the important thing was that we'd had fun doing it. I loved sharing my knowledge with someone who seemed to soak it up.

When I put the first tray of peanut butter cookies in the oven, I turned to find Mark watching us.

"Sorry, she asked if I could show her how to bake." Would he be upset? Was this something he wanted to share with her? That was something I hadn't even thought of.

"You like to bake?" Mark asked Kendall as he moved closer.

"I've always wanted to learn, and Sophie makes it fun. Do you know she has the recipes memorized?" Kendall's tone was excited.

Mark looked from Kendall to me, a mix of something simmering just beneath the surface. "No, I didn't."

I winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to overstep."

"Why would you think you had?" Mark asked.

"I don't know. Maybe you wanted to teach her yourself?"

Mark shook his head, his lips twitching. "Not at all. I can't bake."

Kendall squealed and threw her arms around his neck. Mark looked surprised for a second before his arms came around her waist.

When she pulled back, he said affectionately, "You're a mess."

I smiled. "Baking is messy. Especially when I'm doing it. But the important thing is to have fun."

"Did you have fun?" Mark asked Kendall.

“So much.” Her eyes were sparkling with excitement. I hadn’t seen her look like that since I met her. She wasn’t even that happy hanging out with Drew.

“You should thank Sophie for teaching you. I’m sure she had other things she should have been working on.”

I waved a hand at him. “It was just paperwork. I’m happy to get out of the office or never really go in there.”

Mark gave me a pointed look. “If you’d let me give it a makeover, you’d enjoy it more.”

My nose wrinkled in distaste when I thought of the ordering sheet waiting for me. “I highly doubt that. I’d much prefer to be in the kitchen.”

“I’m going to wash my hands,” Kendall said, leaving us alone.

Mark moved closer as I turned to check the progress of the cookies. I didn’t need to look in on them, but I needed something to distract myself from his presence.

“Are you okay with her being here?” Mark asked me.

I turned to face him. “Her interest made me so happy. You have no idea.”

The employees I hired were strictly for the front counter. No one expressed a desire to learn how to bake or the business side of things.

“I don’t want her to interfere with your business.”

“She’s not. I enjoyed spending time with her this afternoon.”

“Do I get the first taste?” Mark asked when I opened the oven to pull out the first batch.

My cheeks heated, and it had nothing to do with the ovens. Why had my mind jumped to him tasting me? I remembered him being particularly attentive and skilled in that area.

I put the tray on the cooling rack. “These were just to teach Kendall. You can take them home.”

“Is it crazy that I had no idea Kendall was interested in baking?”

“Maybe it was something Kendall was never able to explore until now.” I didn’t want to break her confidence by telling her father what she’d said to me about her mother.

“Thank you for indulging her.”

“You know, if she wants to, I’m happy to continue giving her lessons. If she’s interested, of course.”

“I’m interested. Can I, Dad?”

I’d been so wrapped up in Mark, I hadn’t even realized she’d returned.

“We’ll talk about it later. We don’t want to take advantage of Sophie. She has a business to run.” Mark’s expression was serious.

Even his stern dad-expression was sexy.

“Do you know I get up at four a.m. to bake for the day?” I asked Kendall.

Kendall shook her head.

I began cleaning up the ingredients and putting them back on the shelves. “It’s the only way to get everything baked fresh before the shop opens at six.”

“Wow. That’s early,” Kendall said.

“I bake the rest of the morning to replenish the case. If we sell out of a customer’s favorite, they’ll be disappointed, and they might not come back. I don’t want them to ever realize they can live without a chocolate croissant or whatever it is they love.”

“That makes sense.” Kendall chewed on her lip. “Can I watch one day? I think it’s called shadowing—like ‘take a kid to work’ day.”

“That’s for parents to take their own kids to work, and I already said we’ll discuss this later,” Mark said.

“Fine,” Kendall said with a huff.

“Why don’t you help Miss Sophie put everything away.”

Kendall dropped the stubborn look on her face and immediately stepped in to take the washcloth I was holding.

I gestured for Mark to follow me to my office. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. I was just so excited to have someone interested in baking. I didn’t stop to think about the consequences. That is up to you. I’m sorry.”

Mark’s expression softened. “I want to make sure we’re not taking advantage of your generosity.”

“Oh. Like I said, I don’t mind. She’s sweet and helpful and really interested in learning everything. It was fun.”

Mark’s gaze darted over my face as if searching for evidence to back up my statements. Satisfied, he said, “You’re pretty amazing.”

I’d been told that a lot—when I offered to commute to college to help Ellie with baby Drew and when I held off on pursuing my dreams to take care of my sisters. Each time, my father was appreciative, and I hadn’t minded. This felt slightly different because Kendall was interested in what I did for a living and was so eager to learn.

“I have all this knowledge and love for baking I can’t share with anyone else. Why not Kendall if she’s interested?” My heart rate slowed as I waited for Mark’s reaction.

He’d seemed hesitant to say yes in front of Kendall.

“I understand you want time to think about it, but that’s where I stand.” I moved around him to go back to the kitchen when Mark touched my elbow. It was a light touch, one I easily could have shaken off, but I stopped and looked up at him.

We stood close. The heat of his body emanated onto mine. The hand encircling my elbow felt good.

“Is it okay if she’s here twice a week for lessons?” Mark asked.

I sucked in a breath, surprised he’d agreed so easily.

“Or once a week. I don’t want to impose,” Mark rushed to add.

I smiled. “Twice a week is perfect. If she can come in the afternoon like this, I’ll have more time to work with her.”

He released my wrist and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I don’t want to get in the way of your office work.”

My breath hitched at the seemingly intimate move. “I’ll literally do anything to get out of paperwork.”

He smiled affectionately. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Miss Sophie. Where should I put the dirty washcloths?”

I stepped away from Mark, and his hand dropped away. “I’ll show you where the laundry room is, and then I’ll show you how we sanitize the countertops. Cleanliness is really important.”

Kendall nodded and listened carefully as we walked toward the laundry room next to my office. I thought she might only be interested in learning to bake, not cleaning up, but she was equally invested in both.

When we were finished, we headed out back to see what Mark was doing.

Mark lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat off his brow, revealing his very chiseled muscles. “I’m just finishing up.”

I think I stopped breathing as my gaze traveled downward, following the happy trail, sidetracking to the defined V-shaped muscle.

My chest was tight. I couldn’t seem to draw in a breath. Was I having a panic attack?

Mark dropped the edge of his shirt, covering that delectable tan skin and a light dusting of hair that I wanted to touch with my fingertips. “I’ll just clean this up and get out of your hair.”

I swallowed hard. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to agree to him building these shelves or to having Kendall help me. It brought Mark around more, and I couldn’t resist the man he’d

turned into. He was sweet, affectionate, and an amazing father with a body to die for. I was so screwed.

“Are you okay, Miss. Sophie?” Kendall asked, her tone laced with concern.

Mark’s gaze flicked from where he was placing tools in a box to me. After carefully perusing every inch of my body, his gaze met mine, and he winked. “It’s really hot out here.”

“It is. I think I’m going to—” I gestured toward the interior of the bakery, unable to finish my sentence over my ever-tightening throat.

Inside, I grabbed a clean towel from the laundry room and wiped the sweat off my brow. Then I grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and rested it against my forehead. I needed to cool down, and it had nothing to do with the weather.

When I was feeling slightly better, I stacked the peanut butter cookies in a bakery box for them to take home. The cupcakes were still cooling, and I could show Kendall how to make the icing and decorate them tomorrow.

I finally sat down at my desk and attempted to focus on the numbers on the computer screen, but my brain was completely scrambled. I couldn’t remember what I’d baked last week, much less what I’d need next week.

Mark paused in the doorway. “We’re going to head out.”

He’d leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb. Everything was covered, but the memory of his stomach was front and center in my mind. Would he take a shower when he got home? I nearly groaned out loud from the image of him soaping his stomach and moving lower.

I stood and moved closer. Walking him out was the polite thing to do. It had nothing to do with getting closer to him or needing to hear his voice rumble inside my chest.

He moved slightly so that I had to slip between his large body and the doorway. My breasts brushed against his chest, and my entire body flushed.

I ducked my head, not wanting him to see my overheated cheeks as I led the way outside. Kendall was already inside the truck, her head bowed over what was most likely her phone.

Mark easily lifted his toolbox into the truck bed. “Thank you for today. Anything that gets Kendall away from her phone is a win in my book.”

I tried and failed not to notice how his muscles flexed with that movement.

“She really loved it, Mark.” I hoped he knew what I was saying. She might not want to be a baker, but it was something that she enjoyed. She could use it for stress relief, to make herself feel grounded when everything else in her world was spinning out of control.

His expression softened as he stepped into my space, leaned down to kiss my cheek softly, and murmured, “You really are an amazing woman.”

He was gone before his words registered in my brain. It didn’t feel like every other time someone said I was great or dependable or was always there when they needed me. It felt special. I stood on the sidewalk, watching as he waved a hand and drove away.

I rested my palm over my racing heart. What had just happened? That kiss on the cheek felt like something more than a friendly gesture of appreciation. It felt like a promise of something more.

Chapter Ten

MARK

My heart pounded underneath my ribs as I pulled away from the curb.

“You have a good time with Miss Sophie?” I asked Kendall.

She lifted her head from the cell phone and gave me the sweetest smile. “The best.”

My heart leaped in my chest. I wanted to keep that look on her face.

“Can I do it again?” Kendall asked me hopefully.

“Miss Sophie mentioned you coming in two afternoons a week.” I glanced over at Kendall as her eyes widened.

“Seriously?”

I sobered. “There are conditions. You have to listen, be respectful, and help clean up.”

“That’s not a problem, Dad.” Her tone was exasperated, and when she lowered her head, I swear she rolled her eyes.

“I just want to be clear about what my expectations are. If Miss Sophie says she’s too busy, you need to respect that, too.”

“I can do that.” Her head was bowed, and I couldn’t see her expression.

Silence fell in the cab for a few minutes while I contemplated the unexpected afternoon. Finally, I asked, “You

really enjoy baking?”

She lifted her head, her eyes not focused on me but on the windshield. “I do.”

She was quiet for a bit and then finally added, “Mom didn’t have time to show me, or maybe she couldn’t bake. I don’t know.”

“I didn’t know your mom well enough to know, either.” I hated admitting that, but it was reality.

“I just can’t believe a real baker is teaching me. It’s so exciting.”

I don’t think Kendall had used words like exciting since we’d moved back. It was like she was bound and determined to prove how boring everything was. This town. Our new house. The school she’d be going to. The other kids.

I wondered how much of that was real and how much she was trying to convince me this was a mistake. Maybe this thing with Sophie was the secret to getting her to fall in love with this town, or at the very least, admit it wasn’t the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

The summer finally stopped feeling like an endless number of days with nothing to do. I was working on the shelves for Sophie, and Kendall had baking lessons to look forward to. I’d only been back in town for a short while, and Sophie had easily slid back into my life, reminding me why she was the only girl I’d ever had a connection with.

She was sweet and caring, responsible and organized, and now that she was grown-up, she was utterly irresistible. But if I wanted her to keep giving Kendall lessons, I needed to steer clear of any other thoughts about Sophie.

Any touching or kissing had the potential to ruin what I was building with Kendall. I didn’t want to destroy Kendall’s trust in me or Sophie.

The most important thing was that Kendall felt comfortable living in this town so we could stay. If she wasn’t happy, I’d do anything to make it better for her. I hadn’t

realized I'd been so unsettled until I saw Kendall in the kitchen with Sophie.

She was in her element. She was happy. It settled some of the worry and anxiety and made it easier for me to breathe. I was ridiculously grateful for Sophie. It made my feelings for her even more confusing. I was more attracted to her than I'd been in high school. It would be so easy to fall back into her, but the stakes were too high.

My daughter was the most important person in my life, and I wasn't sure I could let anyone else in. Work had been my priority for so long, but I owed it to Kendall to give her this time. I ignored the niggle in my brain that prompted me to question if I'd have to wait until she graduated from high school to pursue a woman.

Tonight, we had dinner plans with my parents, and I needed to be prepared to defend my choices.

At home, Kendall and I went our separate ways. I gave her some time on electronics while I took a much-needed shower. I'd enjoyed Sophie's admiration when I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I took satisfaction in the fact she was checking me out.

I never thought much about my body other than being prepared to handle anything in my job. I was aware women appreciated a muscled physique, but it meant more that I affected Sophie.

I closed my eyes as the water sluiced over my body, cooling my overheated skin. As teens, I'd seen Sophie naked. We'd spent a lot of time exploring each other's bodies in the bed of my truck, parked in some remote part of my family's property. But it felt wrong to think of her back then. I wanted to know what she looked like now.

I'd felt her breasts pressed against my chest when she'd squeezed past me, leaving her office, and those leggings left nothing to my imagination. I gripped my cock, gritting my teeth at the sensation.

I hadn't indulged in any self-care since I'd come home. Something about being the sole parent for Kendall had me on edge. But she was otherwise occupied, and I needed this release if I was going to be around Sophie and not make a move on her.

Something about not being able to have Sophie, the fact that any relationship with her was forbidden, made me more desperate. I stroked my cock to the naked version of Sophie in my mind—fair skin scattered with freckles, full breasts, and dusty pink nipples. Her waist dipped in, and her hips flared out. Her skin was soft, and she smelled sweet, like sugar.

I'd take my time with her, licking and touching every inch, reacquainting myself with her body. Noting the changes, the places she'd filled out, the things that made her a woman and no longer a girl, I groaned as I stroked harder.

Her legs would wrap around my waist, pulling me closer, insisting I press my weight on top of her as I nudged my cock at her pussy. We wouldn't be fumbling teenagers, but adults who knew exactly what they wanted. The thought of being with her in that way set off my orgasm. It came barreling through me hard and fast.

Coming down from the high, I felt a little disappointed that Sophie would never be mine. Our timing was never right. How could something that felt so good be something we couldn't hold on to?



At the dinner table, Dad was rattling off the developments in the business for the past ten years. I was listening with half an ear, and Kendall looked like she'd completely checked out. I wondered if he was building up to something important.

“Have you thought any more about what you'd like to do?” Dad prompted me.

“Not much beyond settling in and finding some friends for Kendall. I'm building shelves for Sophie at her bakery, and Kendall's taking some baking lessons.”

“Oh?” Mom asked, and I realized too late my mistake.

I shouldn't have mentioned Sophie at all. I didn't want to imply there was something there.

“Are you seeing her again?” Dad asked, his tone deceptively even.

Kendall's concerned gaze shot to mine, reminding me why I couldn't pursue my attraction to Sophie.

“I'm just reacquainting myself with an old friend,” I said carefully.

Kendall's shoulders relaxed slightly.

“An old friend you used to date,” Mom repeated with a knowing smile.

Kendall looked from Mom to me.

“Mom.” I gestured toward Kendall. Sometimes my parents forget they had a grandchild, one who was listening to everything going on around her, searching for any reason to worry about her future. I wanted her to feel secure. And if she thought I was adding a woman to the mix, it would make her feel unsettled.

“I'm just saying.” Mom's lips twisted.

I gave her a pointed look. “Sophie turned me down.”

“What are you talking about?” Kendall asked.

I sighed as I sifted through how much I should tell her. “Sophie and I were high school sweethearts. When I enlisted, I asked her to marry me, and she said no. There's no hope for a future with Sophie. I'm not what she wants.” I emphasized the last few words so my parents understood where I was coming from.

Mom waved a hand. “That was ten years ago. You were babies back then. And I haven't heard that she's dating anyone recently.”

“She was seeing that guy at the bank for a long time,” Dad added, and I wanted to ask which guy at the bank.

What did he look like? Did she prefer men in suits who worked a nine-to-five in an office? Had she changed so much from high school? Maybe I didn't know her at all anymore.

"They weren't a good match. She never looked happy with him," Mom said.

"You guys aren't listening." I waited until all eyes were on me. "I'm obviously not who she wants. We've both moved on. We're friends."

Her friendship was important to me. I didn't like the idea of hurting her when I got Melanie pregnant.

I hoped they understood this topic was closed. "Sophie's helping Kendall out, teaching her how to bake."

"I didn't know you enjoyed baking," Mom said to Kendall.

Kendall nodded eagerly. "I've been interested in it but haven't had an opportunity to try it until now."

"Your mom didn't bake?" Mom asked, her tone slightly disapproving.

"She said she was too tired when she got home from work."

It was an honest statement, but I hated that I wasn't there to help Melanie and pick up the slack. Sending money was something, but it wasn't enough. I didn't need much to live on because I always took advantage of living and eating on base. I sent as much as I could home, saving the rest for Kendall's college tuition. Melanie didn't seem like the type of person to plan that far ahead, and I wanted Kendall to have every advantage that I hadn't. I never wanted her to have to choose like I did. I wanted her to have choices. Opportunities.

I wanted her to be free to go wherever and do whatever she wanted, and I'd be there to help her every step of the way.

"I could have taught you," Mom said, her voice tinged with hurt.

"I didn't know you enjoyed baking." She wasn't the kind of mom who baked cookies when I came home from school. Birthday cakes and pies were always store-bought.

“I can do it.”

“Thanks, Grandma, but I really like learning from Miss Sophie. Plus, she owns a bakery.”

“Who better to teach her than a baker?” I added.

“I suppose.” Mom’s lips pursed.

“Maybe there’s something else both of you enjoy that you can do together,” I suggested, even though I hadn’t thought of one yet.

“I do need some help around here. Maybe you could come once a week and clean,” Mom said, her tone nonchalant.

I placed my fork on the table as white-hot disbelief shot through me. “You’re kidding me, right?”

Mom’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I thought there was a hobby or an interest that one of you shared with Kendall. I didn’t suggest it so she could clean your house.”

It would be one thing if they were elderly and truly needed the help, but I wasn’t offering my daughter up to clean their house for free or otherwise.

Kendall remained quiet throughout the exchange.

The only time I thought moving here was a mistake was when I visited my parents. They were still hopelessly out of touch.

“May I be excused?” Kendall asked softly.

“Yes.” I waited until she left the room.

“She barely ate,” Mom chided me.

I stood, throwing my napkin on the table. “Kendall needs to adjust to life with me and this town. She needs friends and family and love. What she doesn’t need is to be pushed to clean your house or to work with the family business.” Frankly, I wasn’t so sure she needed her grandparents, not if they saw her as hired help.

“You’re overreacting,” Mom said, completely unaffected by my outburst.

“So, I didn’t just listen to you suggest that Kendall clean your house as a way to bond with you?”

Mom’s face pinched as if she smelled something rotten.

“Don’t talk to your mother like that,” Dad said.

It was a familiar order. “I’ll talk to her with the same respect she just gave my daughter.”

Dad coughed. “I think your mother is right. You’re overreacting.”

“I know what I heard.” I clenched my teeth, trying to hold back the years of resentment I felt for my father. It wasn’t the time nor the place.

Rolling back my shoulders, I said, “I’m taking Kendall home.”

No one tried to stop me. I found Kendall sitting on a couch in the formal living room. The one no one ever used. If my mom had seen her there, she would have chided her. I held out my hand to her. “Let’s go.”

Relief flooded Kendall’s face as she placed her hand in mine. My entire body softened at the touch. I hadn’t held her hand since she was six. I needed the connection now.

I’d protect her. I’d make sure she knew she had choices. I’d never pressure her to do something she didn’t want to do.

In the truck, Kendall asked, “Why did you get so angry?”

A muscle ticked in my jaw. “I don’t want you cleaning their house. Not that there’s anything wrong with that profession, but you’re nine. You should be doing other things.”

Kendall was quiet for a few seconds and then said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I wanted to tell her I’d always stick up for her. I’d always have her best interests at heart. But I couldn’t seem to form the words. Hopefully, she understood from what just happened.

Guiding and protecting her was my job now. I tried not to think about what would happen when Melanie decided my turn was up.

Chapter Eleven

Every morning, I could count on Mark to appear when I was opening up the shop. It made me feel protected and safe. I'd even started sleeping better.

I wasn't naïve enough to think the burglar had moved on, but I felt more secure about the situation.

We'd settled into a nice routine. Mark timed his run to end when it was time for me to bake. After I let him in, he'd grab a water bottle, drop cash next to the register over my protests, and sit on his stool in the kitchen to watch me. He never offered to gather ingredients, baking utensils, or help. It was almost as if he understood there was a cadence to my routine, one that settled and soothed me.

What he didn't know was that his very presence interrupted my calming routine and set every nerve ending on fire. I could feel him watching as I moved around the room.

I enjoyed his company in the morning and didn't know how I'd ever go back to baking by myself when it was something I used to crave.

"Are you sure you don't mind giving Kendall lessons?" Mark asked one morning when I'd gotten a good start to my routine.

I shot him a look over the large mixing bowl. "Of course not."

He'd never understand that I got more out of the arrangement than Kendall probably did. Sharing my love and

passion for baking with another person was deeply satisfying. And there was something about her being Mark's child that made it even more meaningful. Even if she wasn't mine, she was an extension of him, and I'd cared about him for so long. It was only natural I care for her, too. He'd helped me with my sisters, and I was helping him with his daughter. It had a nice order to it.

He was quiet for a few more minutes, but I was hyperaware of the way his fingers picked at the label of his mostly empty water bottle. "My mom was jealous that Kendall was coming here."

"What are you talking about?" I paused to look over at him.

He sat on the stool, one foot braced on the floor, the other perched on the bottom rung. His legs spread wide, and his forearms hung loosely between his thighs where he cradled the water bottle. He was sexy without even trying.

"I think she was jealous that Kendall has something in common with you," Mark said thoughtfully.

"If your mom wants to teach her, I don't mind." I'd miss our afternoons together, but I didn't want to step on any toes. I was sure his parents were happy to finally have her living so close.

No matter what their issues were with Mark, surely that didn't extend to their granddaughter.

Mark's lips curled up. "Trust me, she was never a baker. I can't remember her making as much as a batch of chocolate chip cookies. She always bought store-brand baked goods."

I pointed my spatula at Mark. "Store-bought is not the same."

Grocery stores employed bakers, but their recipes weren't as inventive or as tasty as mine. Plus, I used quality ingredients whenever I could afford them to improve the taste.

"Easy, tiger," Mark said, reminding me of how he'd talk to me when we were dating. He'd always made me feel special, cherished even.

He was the only one who prompted me to take a break, to remember I was a teenager first.

“I’m just saying.” I turned my attention back to the recipe, uncomfortable reminiscing on our past. I couldn’t forget that he’d walked away like our history meant nothing.

“Then she suggested Kendall stop by once a week and clean her house.”

I slowly lowered the spatula, my stomach twisting uncomfortably. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“It was in response to my suggestion there might be some other activity they could do together to bond.”

“By cleaning her house?” My eyebrows raised to my hairline.

Mark shook his head. “I don’t know what she was thinking. Sometimes I think my parents lack an empathy gene.”

This was something we’d analyzed often when I was lying against his chest in the back of his truck, staring at the stars. It was during those whispered conversations that I thought I knew him down to his soul. “How did Kendall feel about that?”

Something passed over Mark’s face. “She asked to be excused from the table.”

“I don’t blame her.”

Mark continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “Then afterward, she thanked me for stepping in.”

I searched my brain for the right thing to say and finally settled on, “I’m sorry your parents aren’t the grandparents you’d wished for, for Kendall.”

Mark cleared his throat. “That’s exactly it. I couldn’t put words to how I was feeling about the situation, but you nailed it. When we moved here, I hoped they would have a relationship. Melanie’s parents live in California and have no interest in spending time with Kendall.”

“I’m sorry.” I moved around the countertop, needing to be closer to him. I could feel his pain from across the room.

He moved his hands as I stepped between his legs, my arms naturally looping around his neck. I closed my eyes as I breathed in his scent. His arms came around me, pulling me closer. I bent my head so that my nose was pressed against his neck. He was still slightly sweaty, but I’d missed this. His touch. Our connection. The way we could soothe old hurts with something as simple as a hug.

He was probably remembering his own childhood when his dad pressured him to work instead of playing sports or hanging out with friends and comparing it to their relationship with his daughter.

No words were spoken. We just held each other. I became very aware that my breasts were pressed against his chest. He dropped his head slightly, and his breath ghosted over my bare shoulder. I shivered at the contact.

His shoulders tightened. “Soph.”

My name on his lips was rough, yet held a warning. I was playing with fire because I wanted so much more than a hug or a dance in my kitchen. *I wanted him.*

Did he feel the same, or was he tense and holding me off because he didn’t want my touch? Maybe he was seeing someone else. I loosened my hold and stepped back. My cheeks flaming, I returned to my position behind the counter. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

He cleared his throat. “It’s okay.”

“It wasn’t right.” I waved a hand at him. “You could be dating someone. I’m sure she wouldn’t appreciate me hanging all over you.”

My cheeks flamed brighter. It sounded like I was fishing for information when I shouldn’t care.

He stood and moved in front of the counter, his fingers braced on the cool metal. “First of all, I’m not dating anyone, and second, you weren’t hanging all over me.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, my gaze hovering over the white knuckles of his hands.

He shook his head. “You hugged me, and I liked it. It felt good. Like old times.”

“Everything with you feels good. It’s like revisiting a time in your life when everything was easier somehow. When your future was bright with possibilities, and anything was possible.” Except that was never the case for us. My future was with my family. His was supposed to be the family business. He’d bucked his responsibilities, but I’d stayed.

Everything that happened during those ten years we were apart was too much to overcome. We were different people. Even if being here with him like this, sharing our struggles and me comforting him, felt right.

Mark straightened; his arms crossed over his chest. “That’s not exactly true, though, is it?”

“Which part?” My brow furrowed as I took in his rigid posture.

A muscle ticced in his jaw. “The one where our futures were ripe with possibilities.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Maybe not for me, but you enlisted and traveled the world. I’m sure you met a lot of people and saw amazing things.” I pursed my lips, thinking of Kendall’s mother. What did she have that he chose her over me?

“It wasn’t a choice.”

I shivered that he knew what I was thinking. “What wasn’t?”

“Enlisting.”

Alarm at his statement had me pausing. “Your parents made you enlist?”

He laughed, but it was humorless. “They issued an ultimatum. I’d graduated, so it was time to commit to the family business, or I couldn’t live there anymore.”

A chill ran down my spine. I could hear his father saying that.

I sucked in a breath. “You never told me.”

My heart pounded inside my chest. Had I misinterpreted his proposal? Had he been dealing with this on his own? Why hadn't he shared it with me? The pain of that went deeper than watching him walk away.

He shrugged. “Would it have mattered?”

“I think so. I'm starting to think I misunderstood where you were coming from.”

He shook his head as if he didn't want to hear what I had to say. He had this vision of what happened back then, and he didn't have room for anything else.

“You chose to leave.” My voice was flat as I scrambled to remember his expression when he'd asked me to marry him. I remember it feeling spontaneous, like he hadn't thought about it ahead of time. There hadn't been a ring, not that I needed one. I just needed him to include my family in whatever he was thinking.

Mark dropped his arms, one hand gripping his neck. “It pushed me over the edge I'd been teetering on my whole life. They thought they could control me and my choices, but they were wrong.”

“So, you enlisted because you were angry with your parents, and when I said I couldn't leave with you, that was it,” I thought out loud.

“You didn't say that.”

“Didn't say what?” I asked absentmindedly while I put the trays of pastries in the oven. I needed to get a grip. This conversation felt huge, and I still needed to work. The shop was opening soon.

“You never said you couldn't leave. I asked you to marry me, and you said no.” His voice was tight.

“Wasn't it obvious?” I frowned. My mind had gone over that moment *ad nauseam*, and it was always the same. There

was no other option. I couldn't move away, and he wouldn't stay.

“What was obvious was that I wasn't good enough for you. I was convenient to date in high school but not to plan a future with.”

“No, that wasn't it.” Realization shot through me, hard and fast. He'd thought I'd rejected him. That I didn't love him.

He spun and left the kitchen. I followed more slowly, my mind still trying to catch up with him.

I punched in the security code to the alarm because he stood by the door, clearly wanting to leave. It wouldn't have been fair to hold him here against his will.

“Lock up,” Mark said as he unlocked the door and slipped through.

I wanted to go after him, but I needed some time to process what he'd said. He thought I'd rejected him when I didn't have a choice. I wasn't able to move away from my family. I thought he'd understood that. That I didn't need to spell it out for him.

We'd already talked about me living at home and commuting to college.

I made my way through the kitchen and into my office, sitting on the couch. I dropped my head into my hands. Why hadn't I seen it before? We were so young and naïve. We didn't understand each other, no matter how many nights we spoke about our dreams and our fears. When it mattered, we'd failed each other. Instead of explaining my reasoning, I assumed he knew I couldn't leave my family. I'd thought he'd considered all those factors holding me back before he'd proposed. He hadn't. He must have been so upset over his parents' ultimatum, he assumed I'd come with him. That I'd follow him anywhere.

The sad part was I wanted to. I'd never felt happiness like I had in that initial moment when he dropped down to one knee. For a second, I forgot about my mother dying, my four sisters and my father needing me. I forgot that Ellie just told us the

night before that she was pregnant and planned to keep the baby.

I was intricately tied to my family. I'd never walk away when they needed me. Any hope I had of going away to college had been dashed by Ellie's confession. But I hadn't explained that to Mark because as soon as I turned him down, his face had hardened.

I hadn't recognized the man in front of me. But now, I knew he was already hurt by his father's ultimatum, and he wasn't thinking clearly. He was in fight-or-flight mode. When I said no, that chapter in his life was closed. Annapolis was already in his rearview, and then so was I.

Had he slept with Melanie because he was hurt? He'd said that he wasn't good enough for me, but that couldn't be further from the truth. He'd always been there for me, strong and steady. He was amazing with my family. I didn't care if he went to college or worked for his dad, as long as I was included in his plans.

I felt hot and sweaty despite the air conditioning. I went to the bathroom and washed my face with cool water, then fixed my hair into a ponytail.

I wanted to go to him and explain everything. To tell him he was a good man. That I loved him. I wasn't rejecting him or telling him he wasn't good enough for me.

But I wasn't sure what it would accomplish. We'd been over for a long time.

There'd been no one like him since. I'd always wondered if he was *the* one.

I spent the rest of the day in a fog, going through the motions. I'd make the decision to talk to him, then talk myself out of it, telling myself it didn't matter. What happened ten years ago was ancient history. Then I remembered the stricken look on his face when he walked out. I wasn't sure what to do.

Chapter Twelve

I asked you to marry me, and you said no.

Was the story I'd repeated in my head over the past ten years true? I'd clung to it, reacted to it, planned my life around it. Sophie and I were done, so I could—no, *I had to* move on. Sophie didn't want me. There was nothing left for me in Annapolis. Enlisting was my only option.

I wasn't leaving anyone behind. My dad had been clear on where he stood. I wasn't welcome unless I worked for him. Fuck that.

Sophie said she didn't want to marry me or plan a life with me. Hadn't she?

But today, she'd said that *she couldn't leave with me*. I racked my brain trying to remember if she'd said it back then and I missed it. Had I been so upset about my dad's ultimatum that I'd missed her saying something so vital?

I ran all the way home. Not a jog or a cool-down like usual, but a full-on sprint. The streets were starting to fill with people walking their dogs, but I didn't wave or pause to chat like I usually would.

I needed a minute to myself to process this sudden revision of history. By the time I got home, I was dripping with sweat. I filled a glass of water and took it out back so I could ease through some stretches.

I'd pay for my impromptu sprint tomorrow. Sore muscles would be a good reminder of our conversation.

Stretching my hamstrings, I surmised she'd never told me she couldn't leave. Her dad would have been okay. He wouldn't have held her back. Ellie was only two years younger than her—older than Sophie had been when her mother died—and she was responsible. She could have stepped up.

When Sophie said she didn't want me, I shut down. Everything became painfully clear that day—no one wanted me, not my parents, and certainly not Sophie. My dad had essentially been telling me that since I was born, so it wasn't a surprise my girlfriend felt the same.

Had I been so preoccupied, so overwhelmed by the ultimatum and my decision, that I hadn't taken the time to understand what Sophie was saying?

The slider opened, and Kendall came out with a steaming mug.

Did it even matter what happened back then? I had Kendall now. She was all I needed. I shouldn't be going back in history to figure it out. I should move forward.

“Are you drinking coffee now?” I stretched my other leg, leaning over my knee to feel the burn.

She rested the mug on a side table, sat on the couch, and curled her legs underneath her. “It's for you.”

We'd come so far since we first moved here. She'd gone from petulant to accommodating. “Thank you.”

“Where do you run in the morning?” Kendall asked, and I wondered if she knew my secret.

“I take the trails around town and then finish on Main Street.”

“Hmmm.”

“Why are you up so early?” I stood to stretch my arms over my head, tilting to the left and right. It felt good to get the kinks out.

Her forehead wrinkled. “I couldn't sleep.”

I was instantly alert. Concern for her replaced the remnants of regret for the way things ended with Sophie. “Why not?”

“Worried about school, I guess.” She couldn’t quite meet my eyes.

“Is that it?” I asked as I sat next to her. She rarely talked to me. I figured she’d had that kind of relationship with Melanie, but it would take time for her to trust me.

“Is Mom coming back?”

I dreaded this question because I didn’t have an answer for her. “Of course, she will.”

Was it okay to lie to your kids when you didn’t know for sure?

“Why did we move away then?” Kendall’s gaze rested on mine.

I shifted, resting my elbows on my knees as I sorted through my thoughts, sifting through what was appropriate to share with a nine-year-old. “I talked it over with Mom. She agreed it would be the best for us.”

“What happens when she comes back?” Kendall’s voice wavered.

“We’ll figure it out together.” The thing was, I liked being home. Annapolis felt like a trap when I lived with my parents under my dad’s rules and expectations. But now that I was an adult and supporting myself, his attempts to express his opinion and exert his control fell flat.

I didn’t feel pressured to work in the family business. My future was wide open. The only problem was figuring out what I wanted to do.

She brushed her hair out of her face. “What if she wants to go back to Indiana?”

“We’ll discuss it as a family. Your opinion matters, too.”

Her lip curled. “It didn’t matter when we moved here.”

“It was all you’d ever known, but it wasn’t my home. There was nothing for me there—except for you. I thought it

would be best to make a go of it here. If you go to school in the fall and you really hate it, then we'll talk about it. I don't want you to feel like you don't have options." I didn't want to be my dad.

She nodded. "Is there another reason you moved here?"

I thought it would be good for Kendall to spend time with her grandparents, to live in a small town versus a city. "No, why?"

She chewed her lip. "You used to date Sophie."

"That's right. But we broke up ten years ago. It's rare to marry your high school girlfriend." At one time, I thought we were the exception to the rule.

"But you loved her."

"I didn't even know what love was back then." But that explanation fell short. I'd never felt what I had for Sophie with anyone else, but then, I also never got that close to anyone again. What was the point when I could move at any time? It was convenient to keep things light.

"Did you love my mom?" Her forehead wrinkled.

I sighed long and hard. "We never dated."

Melanie had told her some version of this before. We never tried to make a go of it because I was already deployed to Germany.

"I'll explain more when you're a bit older."

Thankfully, she didn't ask any follow-up questions. "Miss Ellie invited you over to hang out with Drew today."

Kendall's eyes lit up, and I was relieved she seemed to have forgotten our conversation.

"You want to go?"

She smiled. "Yeah."

"I'll drop you off this afternoon." I reached for the coffee mug and took a sip.

“You’re not staying?” Kendall asked, her voice full of disbelief.

“You’re nine, and Ellie said she’d keep an eye on you.”

She looked pleased. It was good for her to have some independence. And I trusted Sophie’s family to watch out for her.

Thankfully, today wasn’t one of the days that Kendall had a lesson with Sophie. I wasn’t sure I was ready to see her right now. I certainly wasn’t ready for a continuation of our conversation this morning.

Guilt crept in. What if I walked away not understanding what had happened? Wouldn’t I always regret it? But I wasn’t quite ready to hear the truth.

I should have gone to work on Sophie’s shelves. I needed to do something active to keep my mind off things. Instead, I organized our house, unpacked more boxes, cleaned out the garage, and washed the truck.

When it was time to drop Kendall with Ellie at Travis’s house, I was exhausted physically and emotionally.

When Kendall knocked, Ellie answered. “Drew’s in the basement.”

“Thank you,” Kendall murmured, walking past her and disappearing downstairs.

“Are you okay with me dropping her off?” I asked Ellie.

“They’ll just play video games, but I’ll make sure they eat.”

My gaze darted around the empty kitchen. “Is it family dinner night?”

“Not officially, but we all sit down to dinner when we can.” Ellie searched my face and then lowered her voice. “Are you asking if Sophie will be here?”

“No.” I took a step back.

“She said she was dropping off the leftover pastries from the bakery on her way home.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, rocking back on my heels. “That’s nice that you get those, and they don’t go to waste.”

Ellie watched me, her gaze steady, like she could see right through me.

Why was I still talking? I hitched a thumb over my shoulder. “I should get going. Call me when Kendall’s ready to go home.”

“Will do, and Mark?”

I turned back to where she stood in the doorway, her lips tipped up in amusement. “I’ll take care of her.”

I assumed she meant Kendall and not Sophie. She had no idea that my mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Sophie and our conversation earlier this morning. “I appreciate it.”

When I backed out of the driveway, a car was waiting to turn into the driveway. Was it Sophie? I saw a flash of red and large black sunglasses.

I looked in the rearview mirror but didn’t see the woman get out. Even if it was Sophie, I wasn’t ready to see her or talk to her about what she’d revealed this morning. Because if what she said was true, then I’d screwed up big time.

I wasn’t patient. I hadn’t taken the time to understand what Sophie was saying. I was rash and immature. But then, we were teenagers.

I spent the rest of the evening cleaning every spare surface and emptying every last moving box. I made plans for what I wanted to do with each room, the furniture I still needed to buy, and the bookshelves and cabinets I could build. I enjoyed working with my hands.

If this was going to be our home, then I wanted to make it mine. I’d originally planned on renovating the kitchen in a few years. It was the practical decision. Melanie might come back and insist we move back to Indiana.

At dinnertime, Ellie texted to let me know that they were eating dinner and would be watching a movie afterward.

I was in an empty house. My daughter had plans for the evening. What was I doing sitting at home? I could use it to reconnect with my friends from high school. So far, I'd only seen Sophie and her family and hung out with Colton once.

From what Sophie had said during our early morning conversations, Max's Bar & Grill was the hangout spot. I sent a text to Colton to see if he was free and willing to meet me there. When he responded that he was already there, I quickly showered, grabbed my keys, and headed out.

It already felt weird to have this freedom to do whatever I wanted. I didn't exactly have freedom in the military, but having a child was a different kind of responsibility, and I couldn't just leave her at home for longer than a few hours.

I found a spot and walked the few blocks to the bar. It was busy tonight, with families eating outside at the various restaurants, enjoying ice cream cones, and shopping. I pulled open the heavy wooden door and headed straight for the bar, where I knew I'd find Colton.

He sat next to a blonde, most likely his fiancée, Remi.

"Hey," I said as I sat next to him.

"Glad you could get out. Haven't seen you much since that one night."

"I like to stay in with Kendall."

"Don't blame you. You remember Remi?"

"I do." I nodded a greeting at her.

She reached her hand around Colton and squeezed my hand. "It's so good to see you."

What I remembered about her from our first meeting was that she was bubbly and full of energy. She was the opposite of Colton, who was serious and tended to lean toward the grumpy side.

"Where's Kendall tonight?" Remi asked me.

"She's with Ellie's son, Drew. They're having a family night at her dad's."

Colton tipped his beer back. “He’s a good kid.”

“I sure hope so.” Every once in a while, I tensed, wondering what I was thinking letting her hang out with a boy.

“You’re already worried about her hanging out with boys?” Colton asked, his lips tipped up in amusement.

“Not exactly.”

“Oh, you’re in so much trouble,” Remi joked before someone called her name. She turned away from us to talk to a woman with shoulder-length brown hair.

Max placed a beer in front of me. “Hey, man. You’ve been home, what, a month? And we’ve seen you once.”

“I’ve been...busy.” What could I say? I’d been hanging out with Sophie in my spare time. The only good thing was most people weren’t awake early in the morning and had no idea I was spending it at the bakery.

Max slapped the counter. “I’m just glad you’re here. Let me know if you need anything else. Beer’s on the house.”

He moved down the bar to help another customer before I could thank him.

Colton waited until Max was gone and raised a brow. “Busy at the bakery?”

I paused my beer halfway to my mouth. “How do you know that?”

“We have an issue with a burglar, so we patrol the shops, especially on Main, overnight.”

I cleared my throat. “I didn’t realize you worked that early.”

“We’ve been trying to catch the burglar before he escalates and someone gets hurt. He was seen across the street from Sophie’s Sweets just a few weeks ago.”

My jaw tightened. “I remember.”

“Are you visiting Sophie’s shop to protect her, or is it more than that?”

“The first time was an accident. I just ran into her when she was opening one morning, and I was thirsty. Then I saw you and heard about the burglaries. You were concerned about her being alone. She was going to hire someone but hadn’t yet. So, I just scheduled my run at the same time each morning and used the excuse that I needed water.”

“And stay for an hour to chat?” His tone insinuated something else was going on besides conversation.

“Would you believe me if I said yes?”

Colton scrutinized my face. “I believe you. You know what you’re doing there?”

I laughed and shook my head. “No idea. It started out as a way to protect her. I enjoyed talking to her. But now, things are coming up. We have a history. One I don’t think we can get past.”

“She turned you down.” Colton was one of the few guys who’d kept in touch when I was deployed, emailing me for updates.

I shook my head. “She said something recently that makes me think I had things wrong back then.”

“She didn’t say no?” Colton asked, concern etched on his face.

“She did, but I think there was more to it, and I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“It have something to do with Ellie getting pregnant that summer?”

All the air sucked out of my lungs. “Is that the timing?”

Drew and Kendall were almost the same age.

“The rumor was she got pregnant at the end of that school year, and Sophie killed any plans to go away to college to stay home and help her sister.”

My heart thumped in my ears. “I didn’t know. My parents never told me about her sister being pregnant.”

“Would it have changed anything?”

Would it have? Sophie wouldn't have left. I couldn't stay. "I can't say for sure, but if there was some other reason that she said no besides me not being the right guy for her, then yeah, maybe we could have worked something out."

"Then you wouldn't have Kendall."

I sighed. "You're right, and she's the best thing in my life."

Colton was quiet for a few minutes, and then he said, "The question is, what are you going to do about it now?"

"I'm not proud of how I reacted."

"You felt rejected and walked away."

"It was like I couldn't hear what she had to say because I knew"—a tingle ran down my spine—"it would change everything. My perception of what happened. Our future. What happens next."

Colton just waited, not interjecting or asking any more questions. He gave me the time to process.

"Seeing her again brought everything back—how much we loved each other, even if we were naïve. She's great with Kendall, and we easily fell back into each other's lives." I'd relived that moment she hugged me many times over the last couple of weeks. The way she'd immediately wrapped her arms around me, providing me comfort when I was hurting. She'd always been free with affection and love.

I was lucky to have her in my life back then, and it hurt that I'd walked away not knowing what she was going through. "I just wish she'd confided in me."

"You held back, too, didn't you?"

"I did, but she knows everything now." Each day I spent with her, I was falling deeper. I was remembering everything I'd always loved about her that had only amplified as an adult. She took care of everyone around her, almost to the detriment of herself. I could rectify that by helping her with the shelves and maybe even her office.

"You got some time to help me with a project? I need to move some furniture. Maybe build a desk."

“You building furniture?”

“I’m attempting to do it. I never had time before.”

Colton lifted his beer to his mouth. “You ever thought about making that your business?”

“You haven’t even seen my stuff, and really, I’ve only done simple things like shelves and an end table in shop class.”

“Well, if you want to talk to someone else who does it, Ethan at The Red Toolbox builds furniture on the side. It’s taken off. He might like some help.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. It would be nice to have options.”

“Or you could work for your dad.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Maybe you could work together. You’d be in the same business, after all.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I wasn’t sure if it was worth the hassle, but he sold wood, and I was contemplating making furniture. A partnership made sense.

Conversation turned to Remi’s Juice Shop and her yoga classes, and the goings-on around town. It was light and easy. It felt good to let loose.

It was still early, but I probably needed to get Kendall soon. I said my good-byes, and when I was on my way to the truck, I got a message from Ellie, asking if it was okay to start a second movie. I agreed, pleased Kendall made a friend, and I had more time for myself.

Chapter Thirteen

I was quiet during dinner with my family. It was hard to concentrate, and everyone seemed like they were talking on the other side of a tunnel.

After dinner, I volunteered to clean up so that I could have some time to myself.

Dad came in with a stack of dishes and sat them next to the sink. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing. Why?”

Dad gave me a knowing look. “You’re quiet, and it looks like something is on your mind.”

What could I say? That my ex—my high school sweetheart—was hanging around my shop? That he’d said something that made me doubt the last ten years?

“Does this have something to do with Mark?”

It had everything to do with him. I just wasn’t sure I wanted to talk to my dad about it. “Have you ever done something you regretted?”

“Well, sure. Not telling your mother I loved her every day.”

“Oh Dad. I didn’t mean to bring up anything painful.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I just wanted to answer honestly. I think you feel that way when it’s too late to change them.”

He handed me the dishes. I rinsed and placed them in the dishwasher. When we were kids, we didn't have this luxury, and we'd fight over whose turn it was to wash the dishes.

He was quiet while we finished up. Then I filled the sink with warm water to wash the larger pots that didn't fit in the washer.

Dad turned so that he was leaning against the counter, his gaze on the side of my face. "Is this something you can't change?"

"I don't know."

"You have regrets about telling Mark no all those years ago."

"I just realized I wasn't entirely truthful with him. I didn't tell him about Ellie."

"Ah. We'd just found out."

"I wanted to respect her wishes. She told us not to tell anyone."

"I'm sure she didn't mean Mark. He was part of our family back then."

"I thought she did," I said as I scrubbed the pot. "I think he thought I was rejecting him when I thought I was telling him I couldn't leave. He took it to mean that I didn't want him."

Dad was quiet for a while, the only sound the water sloshing in the sink. "You were kids. Teenagers. Feelings were bigger. And you were quick to take offense."

"To assume something that wasn't true. Because I have this awful feeling we didn't communicate clearly that night, and—"

Dad grabbed the shiny pot and set it aside. He took me by my shoulders and turned me so I faced him. "Do you still like him?"

Tears pricked my eyes as I thought about how I felt when he was nearby. How I enjoyed his company and loved the way he cared for me. "I never stopped."

“Then you owe it to yourself to talk now. Lay everything out on the table.”

“What if he leaves again?” That was the ultimate fear. That Mark would never stay in Annapolis. That he always had something bigger out in the world to pursue. I’d never leave. Not with an established business and most of my family firmly rooted here.

“You won’t know if you don’t talk. You’re older now. Wiser.”

I wanted to clear up any misconceptions about how much I loved him, how I wanted to be with him, how I longed for him to say we could be together long distance. It would have sucked, but it was better than the alternative, not being in each other’s lives at all. I missed the support he provided when he helped me with my family. I missed his love.

“I don’t think it was the right time for you then,” Dad said.

“But it is now?” I asked skeptically. What if the timing was all wrong again? What if we weren’t meant to be together? Maybe we were destined to be ships passing in the night, never in the same town long enough to form a relationship.

“You won’t know if you don’t talk to him.”

What if Mark was my chance at forever and I didn’t pursue it?

A sense of urgency struck me in the chest, knocking me back a step.

Dad lifted his hands from my shoulders. “You know what you need to do.”

I wanted to know what Dad had said to him the other night when he was here. But I sensed it was private and not something I should be privy to, but I’d always regret it if I didn’t talk to him.

My heart pounded. “I need to go.”

Dad’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Don’t worry about the dishes. I’ve got it.”

But I was already moving, grabbing my purse from a nearby chair, and walking out the door without saying good-bye to anyone else. Dad would handle it.

Remembering Mark's stricken expression when I'd said I couldn't leave spurred me on. During one of our conversations, Kendall told me where they lived, so I drove to his house just outside of town with mature trees and a tire swing in the front yard. I wasn't even sure he'd be home. With Kendall at my dad's, he might have gone out.

There was no truck in the driveway, but he could have put it in the garage. I knocked, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. What if he didn't want to see me? What if what happened ten years ago didn't matter to him?

That thought hurt because I'd done nothing but think of how things could have gone differently.

The door opened slowly, and Mark's eyes widened in surprise. "Sophie? What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk." Now that I was here, my determination was fading. What if it was a mistake to come here?

With the emotions crossing his face, I had this overwhelming urge to jump in his arms and kiss him. To remind him how good we were together. I wanted to erase any rejection he might have felt when I'd said no. I wanted to reassure him that I never stopped loving him.

He held out a hand, and I took it. My hand felt clammy in his as he shut the door behind us.

He turned to face me, his expression uncertain.

I took a deep breath, and my words came out in a rush. "I think that you misunderstood where I was coming from when I said no."

"When I proposed?" he asked cautiously.

I took a deep breath. "The night before you proposed, Ellie told me and my dad she was pregnant."

The shock of my announcement seemed to reverberate through him. "I didn't realize."

“She made us swear that we wouldn’t tell anyone. She was worried she’d be made out to be a slut at school.”

“So, when you said no—”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t want you or didn’t love you, but my family came first. I couldn’t leave my sisters, especially when Ellie was pregnant. She needed me. My dad needed me. A part of me was worried if I told you everything, you’d talk me out of staying.”

“You deserved to live your life.”

“I couldn’t leave Ellie. I decided to stay home and commute to college. With the baby coming, I knew I could only take a fraction of the courses I originally wanted to. It would take me longer to graduate.”

“You’re a good sister. The best. You care about your family in a way that I never experienced myself.”

I think that’s what drew me to him. Mark soaked up my love like a sponge. I was drawn to people who needed me. “And on some level, I didn’t want to hold you back. You wanted to leave, and I didn’t want to be the reason you stayed. I hoped you’d suggest we could stay together. Long distance.”

“When you said no, I took that to mean you didn’t want me. You didn’t love me enough to plan a future with me.” His expression was vulnerable.

“I did want a future, but you shut down. You shut me out.”

His mouth twisted. “My dad had just issued an ultimatum. Come work for him or live somewhere else. I’d already talked to an Army recruiter about my options. I knew I could provide for myself and that they would make me into a man. It was an attractive idea, and then my dad—”

“Gave you the catalyst you needed to go through with it.” The air between us was charged. The hair on my arms stood on end.

Mark moved closer, and my skin tingled with anticipation. “I didn’t want to leave you, but when you said no, it played on every one of my insecurities. My father said I wouldn’t

amount to anything, and I believed him. I thought I wasn't worthy of you."

"That couldn't be further from the truth. You're a good man." My heart broke for him. For the situation his father had put him in. For the unnecessary pain I'd caused by not explaining myself.

He brushed a hair back from my face and lingered. "I think you're the reason I am."

I tipped my head back, searching his face for any clue that he wanted me. I saw tenderness, warmth, and a simmering heat underneath.

His fingers tangled in my hair as he lowered his head. "I've never stopped wanting you."

I looped my arms around his neck, pulling myself flush against him. "I want you."

It was like something snapped inside him. His lips lowered to mine, and it wasn't soft like our kisses were when we were teens; it was all-consuming, frantic. He tugged at my clothes, and I pulled at his.

His lips and teeth clashed with mine. It was like the last ten years had been broken wide open. There was nothing holding us back. It was just him and me and repressed desires.

I moaned from somewhere deep inside me as he shoved my leggings down my thighs and off, never taking his lips from mine. His hands ghosted over my shoulders, my ribs, and my hips. He was touching me, but it wasn't enough.

I pulled my T-shirt over my head, leaving me in a bra and panties. My chest heaved from exertion as his gaze moved slowly over every inch of my body.

I looked different now, more filled out. Would he like what he saw? Or would he mourn the girl he used to know?

"You're gorgeous. Just like I imagined." His tone was reverent.

Emboldened by his words, I reached behind my back and unclipped my bra. I let it fall down my shoulders to the floor.

Mark tracked my movements.

My nipples pebbled as he stepped closer. “You’re so beautiful. I knew when I finally had you, I’d want to take my time with you. I wanted to make it special.”

“It will be because it’s us.”

His hands rested lightly on my shoulders as if he were suddenly afraid to make a move. His words reminded me of the things he said to me when we were kids. We weren’t virgins anymore, but this was our first time. No matter if it was slow or fast, it was special because it was us.

I tipped my head to the side. “I’m not glass, you know. I’m not going to break.”

His eyes flashed. “You want me like this?”

“I want you however I can have you.” My brain filtered through images of him taking me against the wall and me riding him on the floor. I was very aware I was mostly naked while he was still dressed.

He whipped his shirt off with one hand, and my skin tingled with anticipation. His broad shoulders, defined pecs, and chiseled abs... Everything about him was hard and unyielding. He’d worked out in high school, but he wasn’t built like this. Clearly, his body was his temple, and I intended to worship it.

I stepped closer, resting my palms on his chest, the light dusting of hair tickling my skin as I moved over his pecs, his abs, and lower. He sucked in a breath at the contact.

My fingers rested over his belt buckle. I looked up at him from under my lashes. “May I?”

He groaned, and I fumbled with his belt while he kissed me like a man possessed. Like a man who’d been craving me since the day we met.

I couldn’t wait any longer. I ripped my lips from his to free his belt and push his pants down over his hips.

I half-expected him to capture my wrists with his hands and tell me there wasn’t a rush because he seemed just as

eager as I was.

He stepped out of his pants, leaving him in black briefs that clung to his hard cock. I cupped him, watching the expression on his face that was a mixture of pleasure and pain.

“You’re killing me.” With a surge of energy, he lifted me so that my legs wrapped around his waist.

I reveled in his pure strength as he carried me upstairs. My fingers tangled in his hair as we kissed each other. I’d never felt like this with anyone else.

This passion between us was a revelation. I wasn’t shy or uncertain. I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted him, and I was finally going to have him.

I ground my pussy over his cock, bemoaning the thin cotton and strip of lace that prevented me from feeling every bare inch of him. My nipples rubbed against the hair on his chest. Then I was flying and bouncing on the bed. My legs fell open as he stood at the edge, pushing his briefs down and off. His cock jutted out, proud and hard.

I whimpered as I moved without thinking so that I knelt in front of him. I gripped his cock, marveling at how hard and beautiful it was. Pre-cum beaded on the tip, and I couldn’t resist licking it.

His hands were rough on my shoulders as he pushed me back on the bed and crawled over me. His muscles rippling over his shoulders and forearms made me wet. My legs fell open to accommodate him.

He braced himself above me on his hands while he kissed me for what felt like hours. My hips mindlessly pressed upward, searching for some contact. I wanted his weight pressing me into the mattress, his cock filling me up. But he had other ideas.

His lips trailed over my jaw and down my chest until he sucked one nipple into his mouth.

There was a direct line from my nipple to my clit. He watched my face as he moved from one nipple to the other. He

murmured things like *you're so beautiful, your skin is so soft, you're so responsive*, and finally, *you're perfect for me*.

A phrase flashed in my mind, but I bit my lip to stop it from escaping—*you're the one for me*. This reunion was too precarious, our history too fraught with problems, and our future was tripped with obstacles. There was nothing else but this moment. Our bodies coming together was long overdue, yet it felt so natural, like the water flowing down a stream, inevitably crashing against the rocks.

He moved lower, to my stomach, then to my lace panties. He gave me a heated look as his fingers hooked in the sides, pulling them slowly over my hips and down my legs. He flung them over his shoulder and gripped my legs, spreading me wide for him.

I felt his breath on my lips, but nothing else. I should have felt self-conscious, but this was Mark. *My Mark*.

It felt different from when we fooled around as kids, but there was still this familiarity between us. His tongue circled my clit, and I bucked off the bed.

He used a forearm to press my hips flat. He had me right where he wanted me, panting for more, tense, waiting for a firmer touch. Fingers separated my folds before one slipped inside. I whimpered at the sensation of his finger pumping inside me as his tongue pressed flat against my clit. I was racing toward an orgasm faster than I wanted, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be my last.

He stretched me with a second finger, then a third, and every muscle in my body pulled taut until he circled my clit with his mouth and sucked. He lifted his arm so my hips arched up to meet him as I crested. The feeling was like nothing I'd ever felt before.

It kept washing over me, one wave after another, until he was moving up the bed, nudging his cock at my entrance.

I threw an arm over my forehead. "Condom?"

"I'll grab one." His words were halting, his voice rough with need. I loved that I'd broken through his careful control.

He slid his cock through my folds, slowly building me up until I was desperate for him to slip inside. “Please, Mark.”

My words prompted him to sit back on his heels. He leaned over me to the nightstand, where he fished out a condom.

He smoothed it over his cock and moved back into position. He held his cock at my entrance, his gaze steady. I saw everything in his expression I’d ever wanted—tenderness, care, and maybe even love.

I pushed that thought away. This was the man I let walk out of my life, and this was my second chance. Whether it was just for now, or something more, I’d cherish every moment and live in the present.

I bit my lip as he slowly slid inside. I was exactly where I was supposed to be. Full and complete.

Chapter Fourteen

I wanted to be with Sophie like this when we were younger, but for the first time, I was glad we'd waited. We were older. More experienced. We knew exactly what we wanted.

Her walls pulsed around my cock, urging me to move harder, faster. My muscles strained with the effort to hold back, to savor the moment.

I kissed her, getting lost in the sensations of her mouth, her pussy, and her legs tightening around me.

She tapped my hip, and I rolled so that I was on my back, and she straddled me, lowering herself down on my cock. Her hair trailed down her back, her nipples hardened peaks and her fair skin flushed with desire. She bit her lip as she slowly rode me. I gripped her hips, guiding her.

I'd never seen anything more beautiful in my life. Her breasts bounced as she picked up the pace. I palmed one perfect globe, marveling at the contrast of my tan skin against her fair skin. My thumb brushed over her pebbled nipples, and she shuddered, her head tipped back in pure pleasure.

She leaned down to kiss me, my hands falling away as her nipples grazed my chest. I urged her to move so that I could take a nipple in my mouth, my teeth grazing the turgid peak as she whimpered.

Her expression was full of desire and—was that hope?

I flicked her nipple with my tongue as she writhed and moaned. Her movements became jerky. I gripped her hips, surging into her from below.

When she cried out, I flipped us again so I could drive back into her. I rode her through the orgasm, lifting her higher and higher. Her hands trailed over my chest, her expression a mix of awe and satisfaction.

Pride filled me. I put that look on her face. I took her to that place. She looked so beautiful spread out beneath me, her pussy stretched around my cock. With one last thrust, I collapsed, tucking my face into her shoulder. Pure pleasure burst through my body.

I never wanted to move from this spot. I angled to the side so I wasn't crushing her, slipping off the condom, tying it, and throwing it on the floor. I'd have to take care of it later, but I didn't want to let her go.

She was warm and pliant in my arms, her expression soft, her limbs languid.

I wished we could stay in bed but I needed to pick up Kendall. A sense that our timing was never quite right drifted into my consciousness. I tried to push it away, but it hovered like a fog in the morning. I couldn't shake it or see through it. It was a persistent presence, blocking me from having what I wanted.

Sophie. Love. Family. Happiness.

Everything I ever wanted. My hands drifted over her soft skin, then threaded in her thick hair. I used to love holding her like this. I cherished having her close.

When you're young, you take more time to hold the other person, to savor them, to cherish them. There's no rush because you have all the time in the world.

That wasn't the case anymore. I had responsibilities, and so did she.

I didn't want reality to penetrate so quickly, but it was inevitable. I looked at the clock on my nightstand. "I should check in with Ellie. See how Kendall's doing."

“Of course,” Sophie said, her voice soft.

She didn't seem upset, but I was moving her along after sex, and it didn't feel good. I always imagined my first time with Sophie to be when we had the whole night to spend in each other's arms. My stomach sank when she eased out of my arms and looked on the floor for her clothes.

She found her panties, slipping on the black lace. She turned, and I almost groaned at the sight of the thin string disappearing between her cheeks. *A thong*. She hadn't worn those in high school.

Her breasts were perky, her belly flat, and her legs were long and shapely. Her hair was down and covered her face. She was perfection.

I folded an arm behind my head as she disappeared into the bathroom.

I heard the toilet flush and the water run, but I still didn't move.

She opened the door, her gaze darting around the room, but I didn't think she was taking anything in. “My clothes are downstairs.”

“I know.” I bit my lip, debating whether we had time for one more round because the sight of her standing there, her back straight and her breasts on display, had my dick stirring to life again.

She raised a brow. “Don't you need to pick up Kendall?”

I sighed and stood up. “I do.”

I pulled on my briefs and held out a hand to her. She hesitated for a second before she curled into my side. Her skin was warm against mine. I felt every dip and curve, her nipples pressed against my side. My cock grew stiff again under the soft cotton.

I kissed the top of her head. “I wish you could stay.”

In another life, I would have asked her to. It felt right to have her in my home, and I wasn't nearly sated.

She smiled softly. “Me too.”

Reluctantly I pulled away, my fingers interlacing with hers as I led the way downstairs. A feeling of déjà vu stole over me. We held hands everywhere we went in high school, walking the halls and around town.

Downstairs, I let go of her hand and gathered her clothes to hand them to her.

When she was dressed, she paused as if uncertain about what she should do.

“I’d like to see you again.” She was the one who’d made the first move, but our coming together had been one hundred percent mutual. *I wanted more.*

Every visit to the bakery, every shelf I cut and sanded, had built to this moment. Our teenage relationship was merely the foundation.

“Yeah, okay,” she said.

I stepped into her, cradling her head in my hands, and kissed her, slow and sweet. I meant it to be a promise of more to come, not a good-bye. This girl had once been everything to me, and that hadn’t changed. My feelings for her had lessened over the years with distance, only to spark to life again when we reconnected.

Pulling back, I said, “Thank you for coming over.”

Her eyes were soft, her lips slightly parted as if she wanted more.

With one last kiss, I pulled open the door. I regretted not putting on pants because I couldn’t walk her out.

“You’d better stay here,” she said with a smirk in the direction of my dick, which stood at attention from the kiss.

“Night, Sophie,” I said, as she slipped through the door and disappeared. I ran a hand through my hair, snapping to action. I needed to get dressed, not look like I had thoroughly fucked Sophie when I showed up at her dad’s.

Her sister, Ellie, had this way of seeing right through you. And I didn't want her to guess at what happened.

I wasn't ready to share it with anyone. I wanted Sophie to myself. No interference from either of our families. I wanted to explore this new relationship that, hopefully, wouldn't have an end date.

Anticipation hummed under my skin as I got dressed, grabbed my keys, and headed out the door.



If Ellie thought something was up when I came to pick up Kendall, she didn't let on. She'd said the kids had a good time, eating popcorn, playing ping-pong, and watching movies. She'd assured me she kept an eye on them.

They were only nine and ten, and I hadn't noticed any signs that Kendall was even interested in boys yet, thankfully.

I had more energy on my run this morning, flying through my normal route, and arrived earlier than usual at Sophie's bakery. I got my breathing under control, went through some stretches, and rested against the wall while I waited.

When she came around the corner, headed in my direction, the sight of her sucked the air from my lungs. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, the tip hanging over the curve of her breast.

"Morning," she said softly when she reached me.

"Morning, beautiful." I pulled her into my arms, kissing her like I'd imagined all night.

She pulled back slightly, her lips swollen, her eyes bright. "We should go inside."

There was still a burglar at large. "Right."

I waited while she unlocked the door and silenced the alarm. We went through our morning routine, but it felt different. I'd been inside her last night. The one thing I'd

thought about most of my adult life: What would it feel like when it finally happened? Would she regret it?

I grabbed a water, dropped cash by her register, and then joined her in the kitchen.

“So, about last night...” she began, her hands fluttering by her side.

Did she have regrets? My heart plummeted. I was flying so high I hadn’t even suspected she felt differently.

“I’m not sure it was a good idea.” Her words were stilted, her gaze on me.

“It felt right to me,” I said evenly as I moved closer to her.

She grimaced. “Our history isn’t the best.”

I didn’t stop until I stood in front of her. With a hand on her shoulder, I slowly turned her until she faced me. There were dark circles under her eyes.

“We have to do better with communication but, Sophie, we’re not kids anymore. We’re not held hostage by our families. We’re in control of our destinies. And some part of me has always known you’re the one.”

She gasped softly at my declaration. “You can’t say things like that. You bring me right back to where we used to be.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” I asked, my tone soft, but my heart was beating loudly in my ears, drowning out everything else.

“It didn’t work out the first time.” Her expression was earnest.

I tugged on the end of her braid. “Because we were too young. Now we’re adults, and we know what we want.”

“And what is that?” she asked, looking up at me from under her lashes.

Holding on to her braid, I stepped into her space. “You. I want you.”

Her eyes dilated.

I hadn't meant to interfere with her morning baking, but she'd slid into uncertainty at some point last night, and I needed to bring her back with me.

My mouth hovered over hers. "What do you want?"

"I want you, Mark."

I lowered my mouth to hers, claiming, devouring, and imprinting myself on her soul. I wanted her to feel me as she baked, my hands on her hips, in her hair, and my mouth on her lips. She'd always been mine.

"How do you feel about sex on this counter?"

She pulled back abruptly. "Not in the kitchen. It's a health violation."

When I smiled at her challenge, she continued. "I have twenty minutes."

Lifting her in my arms, I said, "I can work with that."

On the short walk to her office, I considered the possibilities, her on all fours on the couch or bent over her desk. Both had my cock standing at attention within seconds. I set her down in front of her desk, still undecided. I toed off my shoes and peeled off my socks, tossing them aside.

She grabbed at my shirt, impatiently lifting it over my head, then pushing down my shorts.

"I'm sweaty," I warned, remembering I'd just finished a hard run. The sweat had cooled, but I could use a shower.

"Even better," she murmured as she slipped to the floor on her knees.

This wasn't on my list of possible scenarios this morning. She'd given me numerous blow jobs, but never on her knees in her office. The sight was doing crazy things to my cock and my head. She was seriously hot.

She gripped my cock as she looked up at me from under her lashes.

"I might need more than twenty." My voice was guttural.

“Hmm,” she hummed as she swallowed my cock.

“Fuuuuck,” I said, drawing out the word. This—being here with her—was heaven. I never thought I’d get the chance to be with her again, and I wasn’t going to screw anything up.

She alternated between sucking my cock and pulling off to swirl her tongue around the tip. She kept a tight grip on the root.

“I need—” I lost the ability to form sentences and hauled her to her feet, pulling off her shirt and shoving down her leggings. She helped me, and then I spun her around and pushed her hands onto the desk.

“I hope you don’t mind that we’re defiling your office.”

She looked over her shoulder at me with a smile. “Defile away.”

I pushed her legs farther apart, dipping my fingers into her pussy. “You’re soaked. You love sucking my cock?”

“I love it,” she said, her voice breaking.

I kept a steady pace, simulating fucking her with my fingers.

She was right there, ready to go over.

I lined my cock up with her entrance, feeling like I was ready to blow.

I blew out a breath. “Fuck. I don’t have a condom.”

When going for a run, I didn’t carry much on me besides some cash for the water.

“I’m clean, and I trust you.”

“I am, too. Are you sure?” I draped myself over her back, kissing her shoulders. This felt good to be skin to skin. Nothing between us.

She nodded jerkily, and that was all the permission I needed to move. She was so wet, I easily slid in to the hilt.

“You feel amazing.” It wasn’t cliché. I’d never felt anything like her warm walls pressing around me, pulsating

and gripping me tight.

“It’s like you were made for me.”

“I love your pillow talk,” Sophie said over her shoulder.

I almost said *I love you*.

It was something we used to say with ease, but now I couldn’t. It was too soon, and I had no idea where her head was at.

I tightened my grip on her hips as I watched the spot where my cock entered her pussy. Then I reached around to tweak her nipples, finally dipping lower to circle her clit. She bucked against me when I pressed firmly against her hard nub.

I thrust harder, the clamping of her pussy on my dick setting off my own release. My heart was racing as I came down.

“That was incredible.” I pulled out, helping her to stand.

“Sex without a condom is messy,” Sophie said, her voice amused.

I grabbed a paper towel from the roll on her desk, cleaning her and then me before throwing it out in the garbage.

Neither of us was in a hurry to get into the kitchen. Instead, I grabbed her hand, pulling her against me.

She smiled up at me. “I’d much rather start my morning this way.”

“I’d rather it be in a bed, but this will have to do for now.” Why had I said that? Would she hear the future plans in my words? I tensed, waiting for her response.

She shook her head, a small smile playing on her lips. “I’ll need to get up earlier to get my baking done.”

“I’m sorry for holding you up.”

“I don’t think you are.”

I kissed her once and then reluctantly let her go to find her clothes and help her get dressed. We washed our hands and

then moved to our usual places in the kitchen. I stayed on my stool while she was on the other side of the counter.

Her cheeks were flushed. The kitchen was warm with the ovens running, but I liked to think I made an impression this morning. I hadn't planned on having sex in the bakery, but I was happy I did.

She flashed me a smile every once in a while, and I enjoyed just being in her company.

“Did you ever advertise for more employees?”

Sophie groaned. “I did. I just need to start interviewing. It's my least favorite part of owning a business.”

“Hiring employees is a necessity if you want to preserve your sanity.” And stay safe. Although I wasn't looking forward to the day when she had someone else here with her in the mornings.

“I know. I'll make calls today and get people in. Gia called to let me know we have a few potential clients. I need to meet with them in her office. I won't be able to be here as much.”

“All good things.”

“It's great for business. At least, I hope it will be. When I was first starting out, I only dreamed about collaborations like this. Now, I have standing orders with several hotels and restaurants in the area. This is just one more avenue of income.” Her voice picked up as she listed the exciting things that had been happening.

“A steady one.”

Sophie looked up at me. “I think it will be, too. Gia's proposing a one-stop shop for weddings. If the brides hire her as the planner, then she'll have a list of vendors she recommends.”

“Is she taking a percentage of your sales?”

“She is, but I'll raise my prices to cover it.”

“Smart.” I was proud of her.

“If I want to stay in business, I need to price accordingly.”

“I’m proud of you. This place is amazing.”

“Thank you,” she said, and then her smile faded. “I know that when you stopped in to see me at the bakery and then at the grand opening of Brooke’s Market Tavern, I was standoffish.”

“You were afraid of getting hurt.”

“I was, but I’m so glad you moved home. Being with you again is everything.” Her eyes were shiny.

“I feel the same way, Soph.” At one time, she was my best friend, my confidant, and my girlfriend. I thought she’d be my wife. And for the first time in a long time, I thought that might still come true.

Chapter Fifteen

Over the next few days, I spent more time conducting interviews than overseeing the bakery. I didn't like it, but it was a necessary evil if I wanted to spend more time with Gia's brides and grooms. It was an amazing opportunity I couldn't pass up.

I hired someone who had no formal training but could bake. Olivia brought her concoctions for me to sample. They were good, but the question was, could she bake my recipes? There was only one way to find out.

I hired her on a trial basis. Her hours were the early mornings. I put off hiring someone so that I could have Mark in the mornings for a little while longer. But now, I didn't have a choice.

If I wanted to branch out to weddings and have a steady influx of paying customers, I needed to be more available for meeting with brides and grooms. I needed to do more tastings. I couldn't lock myself in the kitchen and ignore people.

I had a few weeks to teach Olivia my recipes and ensure that she'd be able to re-create them. Then I planned to let her handle one morning a week by herself. I needed some time off. I couldn't bake seven days a week every week. It wasn't sustainable.

I hoped Olivia could deliver the same quality recipes my customers had come to expect.

Today was the first meeting with one of Gia's wedding couples. For the first time in years, I went to work in a dress and heels instead of a T-shirt and leggings. Outside the kitchen, I felt a little out of my element.

My genius was working with flour and sugar. What if I couldn't work one-on-one with clients? I'd done a few weddings over the years, and I enjoyed making cakes, but this was different. I'd be putting myself out there.

I walked from the bakery to Gia's office on Main, which boasted large windows with purple lettering, Happily Ever Afters. When she'd opened, she'd handled all the events, birthdays, engagements, and grand openings for the local businesses, but she'd since sharpened her brand to wedding planning.

She believed the best business model was a focused one. I smoothed my sweaty hands on my dress and pulled open the wooden door.

Gia sat at the large front desk. There was the same purple and black lettering on the wall behind the receptionist's desk with the company name, Happily Ever Afters.

"Sophie, I'm so glad you could make it." Gia crossed the room and pulled me in for a hug.

I returned it, a little surprised at her gesture, but then she'd always been friendly.

"I'm so glad we're partners now."

"Me too." I got swept up in her energy.

"Our first clients should be here any minute. I invited Abby and Lily, too, so you can go over the available packages."

I lifted the book I'd tucked under my arm for the short walk over. "I brought everything with me."

The door opened, and Lily and Abby walked inside together. They greeted Gia, and we followed her into her office.

“I’m so glad you signed on. I’m hoping to ease brides’ and grooms’ concerns about their big day. This is for couples who want the big wedding without the hassle. We handle everything for them so they don’t have to.”

The thought of planning a large event would be stressful to me, so that made sense.

“Are there any other wedding planners offering the same service in town?” Lily asked, the local florist and owner of the shop, Petals.

“Surprisingly, there aren’t. Some of the venues have a wedding planner on-site, but they don’t offer the comprehensive package that we do.” Gia grimaced. “There’s one, the Chesapeake Resort, in Southern Maryland.”

“Isn’t it too far away to be competition for us?” Lily asked.

“It’s not that far if you want a wedding by the water,” I said.

“We’re offering a one-stop shop, but we’re not a resort,” Gia said, pushing a glossy brochure across the desk, depicting a large resort by the water.

“It’s essentially a weekend getaway for the wedding party and guests,” Abby, the photographer, said.

I knew that area well because we had family who owned a small cottage there. “We’re able to offer the Annapolis experience. Guests can visit the restaurants, tour the historic buildings, and take boat rides.”

“That’s true,” Gia said. “Hopefully, we’re offering two different experiences so we aren’t competition *per se*.”

The bell over the front door rang, and Gia said, “Our first clients are here. I’ll do a brief overview, and then you can wow them with your options.”

We waited while Gia greeted the couple.

We’d come up with packages we could offer each bride that simplified the process. Gia said it eased some brides’ stress if they could pick an overall theme with corresponding décor. The sunset package included white linens and bright

hues for the flowers and cake. Couples could also create a custom package with prices running the full gambit of possibilities. Abby offered mostly packages with just a few add-on options.

“You already know our first couple, Ethan and Savannah.”

They owned neighboring stores, The Red Toolbox and Lavender, and were active members of the Shops on Main group. They’d known each other as kids and reconnected when Ethan moved back to town and bought the building Savannah’s store was in.

When they came in, we greeted them enthusiastically.

“Congratulations on setting a date. We’re so happy you’re our first official couple,” Gia said as they sat in chairs across from us.

Gia explained the process and what her fee included and then introduced our specialties. Normally, we’d have to sell them on the wedding planner package, but she wanted us to practice with a client that had already signed on.

Ethan and Savannah wanted to support Gia and her new business plan because she’d helped us with various grand opening parties, and we’d all become good friends.

Gia provided an overview of her job and then allowed us to go over our packages and options. Ethan and Savannah were excited to get started, and it was an easy meeting. I knew they wouldn’t all be like this. Some couples might choose not to go with us, but it was a good first start.

Savannah and Ethan left without choosing a package. They wanted to talk to their mothers and Savannah’s son, Miles, first. Gia had already prepared a folder with the packages outlined, the links to our websites, and our phone numbers.

We walked them out, exchanging hugs.

“We did it,” Gia said when they left, but her words didn’t quite meet her eyes. She still looked stressed.

While I was hoping this would be successful, it really fell on Gia’s shoulders. She was the one tasked with bringing in

the clients and convincing them we were their best option. Sure, each of us needed to sell the couple on what we had to offer, but Gia was the one who held everything together. We still had our businesses to fall back on. The pressure was really on her.

“Some couples won’t want help, or they’ll be so involved in each aspect, they won’t want packages. They’ll want to choose. Those will be more difficult, and we’ll need to pick and choose how many of those we can handle. They’ll be more time-consuming. The packages help streamline everything and will be our bread and butter.”

“I think a lot of brides will appreciate the packages,” Abby said.

“I hope so. I have a lot riding on this,” Gia said before her gaze darted around the room at each one of us. Maybe she regretted saying that, revealing any weakness.

Her family owned the most popular pizza shop in town, and I knew she was already bucking tradition by opening this business. She wanted to be successful outside of her family.

I understood that drive all too well. I wanted something for myself after helping to raise my sisters all those years. I’d finally found it, and it was my time to shine. To reach for something I never would have even imagined for myself. Complete autonomy. Not relying on customers at the bakery but having multiple streams of income. My dad said I was diversifying, and it was smart. I hoped so.

Warmth spread over me when I remembered that Mark had said something similar the other night. He’d said my business decisions were smart. I’d taken business classes in college with the idea of opening my own bakery one day.

Dad had given me the money to open it. When I tried to refuse it, he said I’d sacrificed enough for the family, and he wanted to support me in doing what I’d dreamed about for so long. It was a sweet gift I couldn’t turn down. I couldn’t imagine how long it would take me to raise the capital I’d need on my own to open a business. Renting and renovating the space and buying the equipment all had a steep price.

“Don’t give up. I think you’re on the right track with the wedding planner packages. It feels similar to an all-inclusive resort where the guests could get married. Everything was taken care of for them, and they could just enjoy their wedding,” I said to her.

Gia’s shoulders relaxed. “That’s what I was going for.”

“It’s not the best option for every bride, but you can offer a more personalized experience to brides who want or need it. I think it will work out, too,” Lily said.

We said our good-byes and parted ways.

On the short walk to the bakery, I had to admit it was nice to get out of the kitchen and talk to other people. It wouldn’t always be this easy. The bride and groom wouldn’t always be our friends.

I could see how my days were regimented. I woke up early, baked, and then managed the bakery. I had little time for anything else.

By the time I was done with work, I was exhausted and had to go to bed early so I could do the whole thing all over again the next day.

For the first time, I felt like I had a lot of things to look forward to, including reconnecting with Mark. It might not have been the best move, but it sure felt good.



I had another baking session with Kendall this afternoon. Mark dropped her off and then said he had to run errands.

Today, I was teaching her more about cake decorating. It was tricky, and not everyone had a knack for it.

We started with cupcakes. I showed Kendall the tool I used, and she bent over a tray of chocolate cupcakes, her tongue peeking out as she concentrated on making the perfect loop.

She finished one and pulled back to look at it. “Eh.”

I laughed. “It takes a lot of practice.”

“I want them to look like the ones in your case out there,” Kendall said, gesturing to the front counter.

“And you will, but this is something that’s just going to take repetition.” I didn’t mention that not everyone got it. She seemed determined to tackle it, and I didn’t want to discourage her.

Kendall moved her icing bag over the second cupcake.

“Eventually, you’ll get to the point where you can do it without even thinking.”

“I’m looking forward to that,” she murmured.

“Hey, I’m already impressed. I don’t know many nine-year-olds who would spend their summers learning how to bake.”

Kendall chewed her lip thoughtfully. “This is like a dream for me.”

I sensed that something else was bothering her. “Is something wrong?”

“What if Mom comes back? I mean, I want her to come back, but where will we live? Will I have to move back to Indiana?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry I don’t have the answers for you.” And I hated that she was so worried about it. A nine-year-old shouldn’t be concerned about where her mom was or where she’d be living. She should be worried about making friends and getting good grades.

Kendall shook her head and returned her attention to the icing. She was quiet for a few minutes.

I wondered if I should tell Mark that she’d brought up her mother and was worried about the future. I wasn’t sure if I’d be betraying her trust by doing that.

When she finished the second, she said, “It looks better.”

“It does. You’re getting the hang of it.”

She nodded, moving to the third.

Satisfied she was okay on her own, I started to ice my tray of cupcakes. These were chocolate on chocolate. One of my favorite combinations.

I wondered if Mark had a favorite cupcake. The thought of baking for someone, not just my customers, was deeply appealing. I didn't think I could date anyone who eschewed sweets. Mark was into working out, so he might not like it. But he'd never said anything.

I got lost in the music playing on my phone and the comforting routine of icing one cupcake after another. Then I moved on to the second tray of birthday cake cupcakes. I switched to vanilla icing and got out the confetti I sprinkled over the top. These were a favorite for parties, and I always had orders for them on the weekends.

By the time I'd finished both trays, my back ached.

In the time I finished two trays, Kendall was just finishing up the one.

"Do you have someone you could bring cupcakes to?" I asked her.

She looked up at me. "Maybe Drew?"

Mark leaned against the doorjamb.

"Oh, I didn't realize it was so late." The clock on the wall indicated it was after four. The bakery would be closing soon.

"I had a lot of errands to run," he said to me. Then to Kendall, "I don't think we should give all the cupcakes to Drew."

"Oh?" Kendall asked as she looked up.

"We should take them home. Give some to Grandma and Grandpa."

Kendall lifted her head, her eyes full of excitement. "Do you think they'll like them?"

Mark hesitated and then met my gaze over the counter. "Of course, they will."

But I knew from his expression he wasn't sure they would. Praise wasn't something they were known for. But I knew Drew and my dad would love them.

"You should bring them to family dinner on Sunday," I said, eager to get the subject off her grandparents. They were a source of stress for Mark. I hated how he could never please them. A child should be encouraged and praised.

Mark raised a brow. "Are you inviting us for dinner?"

"Kendall's friends with Drew now, and—" I wasn't sure what else to say. He'd been over once as a friend, but now we were more. The only thing was, Kendall had no idea our relationship status had changed. For the first time, I wondered if Mark had any plans to tell her.

"I love your family," Mark said gruffly.

"You're always welcome. No invitation needed." That's how it was when we were dating.

"You're so lucky you have so many sisters," Kendall said.

"I didn't realize you wanted siblings," Mark said.

Kendall rolled her eyes and then licked the icing off her finger. "Of course, I do. It's boring being an only child."

She was lonely. I wasn't sure what the situation was with her mom, but if she worked, then Kendall might have been alone or left with others in the summers and after school. I'd never been alone when my mom was alive, and I always had my sisters.

"Our house was always full and loud. Probably too loud." I had fond memories of my sisters chasing each other around the dinner table and my dad telling us to stop, yet his voice was full of so much affection. There was no question we were loved.

"It was a little overwhelming when we first started dating," Mark said quietly.

I sensed that he was being honest so that Kendall could see that he struggled with things, too.

“I never noticed. You just seemed to fit right in.” Looking back, he might have used our family as an escape from his, but I couldn’t blame him. Anytime I saw his parents, they were cold or were reminding him of his responsibilities.

Kendall was watching us carefully. Did she sense there was something more between us than friendship or just the remnants of an old relationship?

I wasn’t sure we should tell her. We hadn’t even defined our relationship. Was this just a way to pass the time until Kendall’s mother came back? Or was it the start of something? Hope bloomed big in my chest, threatening to burst.

Kendall moved to clean up the decorating tools and icing bags we’d used.

“I stopped in to speak to Ethan.”

“Did you talk to him about his furniture-making business?”

It bothered me that Mark didn’t have a clear plan for the future. Maybe this was just a summer visit, although he’d talked about enrolling Kendall in school. It wasn’t like she’d started yet. It would be easy to go back.

“Yeah, he’s got something good going there.”

“Do you think you’d like to do something similar?” What I’d seen of the new shelves was exciting, but I wasn’t sure if he wanted to do it as a job.

“I don’t know what I want to do yet.”

Kendall pointed at him. “You always tell me I have plenty of time to figure it out.”

Mark laughed. “Yeah, but you’re only nine. You do have plenty of time. I need to figure things out by the time school starts.”

Kendall’s nose scrunched. “I hate school.”

“Why?” I asked. I remembered enjoying school at her age. I loved my sisters, but being in school made me feel like an individual.

“It’s so boring,” Kendall said, and Mark shifted on his feet.

I wondered if it bothered Mark when Kendall wasn’t happy. Taking care of my sisters wasn’t the same bond as a mother had with a daughter.

“If you want to be a baker or run your own business, an education is good to have. It’s a building block, if you will.”

Kendall sighed. “I know.”

“Plus, you can meet more people and make friends.”

Kendall didn’t respond to her father’s comment. I wondered if that’s what she was most worried about—being the new girl and not fitting in.

“Thanks for helping me clean up,” I said when everything was washed and put away, and the counters sparkled again.

“Why don’t you take the cupcakes to the truck,” Mark said to Kendall.

I wondered if he thought I was overstepping with my comments about school and her future. “Is everything okay?” I asked when Kendall was gone.

He moved toward me, his hands going to my hips, where he turned me to face him. “It’s more than okay.”

Before I could breathe a response, his lips were on mine. It was slow and sensual, his tongue exploring the recesses of my mouth before he pulled back with several short kisses. The move satisfied something deep inside of me. The unsettled part that always wondered if I’d ever truly be happy.

“Thank you for being there for Kendall. It has to be tough for her with her mother gone.”

This was my opportunity to tell Mark about Kendall’s concerns about Melanie returning, but it felt like a betrayal to do so. “Of course.”

I had more questions, like if we should tell Kendall about us. But I was too worried about what his answer would be to ask. His daughter would and should come first. I just wasn’t sure where that would leave me.

Chapter Sixteen

Today was the first morning that I wouldn't be seeing Sophie after my morning run. She now had an employee working with her in the mornings. That chunk of time had become something necessary to start my day, and it had nothing to do with that one time we had sex in her office.

It was like getting to know each other all over again. Our relationship had evolved since we started our little tradition of meeting when she opened, but I still craved it and would miss it. It was tough to find time to spend alone when Kendall was still home on summer break.

At nine, she didn't have any girlfriends to have sleepovers with, and I didn't want to impose on Ellie.

I wasn't ready to tell Kendall about us. My relationship with my daughter felt tenuous. I was still building trust, and if I told her I was dating the woman she had befriended, I didn't think she'd react well.

Kendall was still struggling with the move and worried about fitting in. I didn't want to do anything to upset her.

There was no need to rush into anything. We'd been down this road before, and it hadn't worked out. There was no guarantee this time. No matter how good it felt in the moment.

There was always that prickle in the back of my mind that warned things might not work out in the long run. Sophie's life was here, and mine was wherever Kendall lived.

Melanie could show up and blow all my careful plans out of the water. When I registered Kendall for school, the paperwork asked if there was a custody agreement. There wasn't, and I wondered if I should get something in writing. I wasn't sure what my rights were if Melanie returned and demanded Kendall return to Indiana with her.

I called Colton, and he suggested an attorney's office, Arrington, Gannon, & Winters. I trusted his judgment, so I called and made an appointment. I couldn't make any decisions about Sophie until I had things more settled with Kendall.

The receptionist at the law office greeted me and directed me to a conference room. The office itself was clean and up-to-date. The walls of the conference room were covered with pictures of the Baltimore football team at various charity functions.

There was a news article about a charity, Kids Speak, that was created by one of the partners, Hadley Winters, and supported by the entire firm. Before I could read more about it, a woman with dark hair and fair skin entered the room.

"Mr. Walters? Avery Arrington. Nice to meet you."

I shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you, as well."

She gestured at a chair. "Have a seat so we can go over your custody situation."

Once Avery was settled in her seat with a legal pad in front of her, I said, "I was in the military for ten years. During that time, Kendall resided with her mother, Melanie. When I was discharged, Melanie said it was my turn to raise her. She gave me permission to move Kendall here, which is my hometown."

"Where was Kendall living previously?"

"In Indiana. I have her birth certificate indicating that I'm her father."

"If you don't mind, I'll make a copy of it, since it establishes paternity." Avery held her hand out for the certificate.

“No problem.” I handed the birth certificate over to her.

Avery left the room, and I tried to relax.

I hadn’t worried too much about it when I was enlisted because I provided child support, and Melanie always allowed visitation when I was on leave. There had never been a need to clarify things any further than that. Now I was regretting that short-sightedness.

Avery smiled at me when she returned. “Since there’s no formal custody agreement between you, both of you have equal rights to take Kendall whenever you want.”

That was comforting and concerning at the same time.

“It would be better to have something in writing, outlining who has physical custody and who has legal custody, in other words, who can make the legal decisions, where to enroll her in school, what doctor to take her to, and so on.”

“I’m not in contact with her, but I can reach out.” I’d texted Melanie when I settled in Annapolis, but she hadn’t asked for any updates since. I was a little worried that asking for something formal would upset her. Would it prompt her to return?

“I’m sure you’re worried about upsetting the balance, and that’s understandable. But in the long run, it’s better to have something in place. Otherwise, Melanie can return at any time and take Kendall. You’d have no recourse other than to pursue something in the courts at that time, and the process is lengthy. It’s best to start now.”

“If filing for custody prompts Melanie to get involved, would a judge grant it to her since Kendall lived primarily with her for the first nine years of her life?” This was my greatest fear. The reason I hadn’t insisted on something more concrete when I moved Kendall here.

“It’s a possibility, but it’s more likely that you can work something out with Melanie where you could share custody.”

I wasn’t sharing anything right now. I was one hundred percent involved in Kendall’s life, and I liked it too much to risk losing it.

“I know things seem ideal, but there’s nothing stopping Melanie from taking Kendall back. She could move her out of state, and you would have no recourse. You’d have to follow her.”

When I was first discharged, I wouldn’t have minded moving wherever Kendall was, but now? I had other things to consider. Like Sophie. My parents. My hometown. I liked living here. What would I do if Melanie moved her back to Indiana? I had no connections there. No friends.

My chest felt tight.

Avery clasped her hands together on the table. “You came to me for legal advice.”

“I did.”

She tipped her head to the side. “So, you must have been worried.”

“I was.” But I couldn’t ignore the implications of what officially filing for custody would do to Melanie. It could bring her back, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to give up my time with Kendall. I wanted Kendall to have her mother, too, but wasn’t I owed some time to reconnect with her, to build the relationship I’d missed out on for so long?

I ran a hand through my hair. I hated this.

Avery tapped her pen on the pad of paper. “You have time to think about it.”

“Until she comes back.”

“And you don’t have any idea when that might be?”

“She said she wanted to travel. She didn’t give me any details.”

“Is she talking to Kendall? Maybe she has more information,” Avery pressed.

I didn’t like to get involved in their relationship. They’d been a unit for years. I was positive they talked on the phone, at least by text, but I hated the idea of pumping Kendall for information.

“The fact is that you have the same rights to pull Kendall out of school and to move her out of state. There’s nothing stopping either of you from doing that.”

“Even if it’s disruptive?” Kendall started school soon. I wanted her to have stability.

“Even then.”

Then a worse thought came to me, one that had me resting a palm over my racing heart. “Could she keep her from me?”

“She could disappear with Kendall. I’m not saying that would happen, but it’s a possibility. It’s why I’m suggesting you file for custody.”

I couldn’t breathe, much less respond. I couldn’t imagine Melanie taking her from me. Not being able to see her every day. It was the worst imaginable pain I’d ever felt in my chest.

“You could file an emergency motion for custody, but only if you could find them.”

There was a roaring in my ears, drowning everything out.

“I’m not trying to scare you.”

But she was, and it felt like I didn’t have a choice. When it came to Kendall, I had to do what was best for her, for us. She didn’t deserve her parents uprooting her at every turn. It was bad enough I’d moved her here from everything she knew. I wouldn’t allow Melanie to do it again.

I took a steadying breath. “I think we need to file for custody.”

“You don’t want to take some time to think about it?”

“I don’t want Melanie taking her.” That’s all I could think about. Me alone in that house and Kendall gone. The thought was crushing.

“I can get started on the paperwork, but these things take time. We’ll need to serve Melanie with the papers. The court will schedule mediation, a settlement conference, and then a trial.”

It sounded official. Dread filled my stomach because I never wanted it to come to this.

“Hey,” Avery said, her voice soothing. “There’s always the possibility that she’ll agree to put your current situation in writing. Not every custody situation is antagonistic.”

“But most are.”

“It seems to bring out the worst in people. For some, it’s avoiding paying child support, for others, the children become a pawn.”

I hated that it had come to this, but Kendall was fitting in here, and I was, too. It wasn’t just abandoning my hometown that was worrisome; I wasn’t ready to leave Sophie. This time, I wanted us to have the space to explore what was happening between us. But it almost seemed like life was determined to get in the way of our relationship.

Was it possible to have Sophie and the life I wanted with Kendall? Or were our paths destined to take us other places, far away from each other?

“I’ll draft everything. You can hold off on filing.”

I nodded tightly, my throat constricting. I couldn’t tell her what to do. Not yet.

“Thanks for meeting with me. Please call if you have any questions, and I’ll be in touch once the paperwork is ready to be filed.”

I stood with her and followed her to the receptionist’s area. I shook her hand and said something about it being nice to meet her, or at least, I think I did. My mind was still in that conference room, running through the worst-case scenarios.

I’d returned home for a fresh start, but it felt fleeting. As if it were only a matter of time before something happened to yank this temporary arrangement and happiness away from me. Filing that paperwork would only make it happen sooner.

Maybe it would be better to settle it before school started. Otherwise, I risked Melanie yanking her out of her new school.

I cursed myself for not insisting on something, even a temporary custody agreement, before Melanie left. I probably could have said something to get it. I might need it for school or doctor visits. I was just happy I was getting anything, or maybe I was too scared to ask for what I wanted.

I could call her and tell her what I was thinking. That it would be a good idea to put something in writing. To protect both of us. If she didn't respond favorably, I had Avery and the court system at my disposal. Satisfied I had a workable plan, I headed home.

I was grateful for any time I had with Kendall. After years of only seeing her sporadically, this was a dream come true. I didn't want to do anything to change what we had now, but it would be better in the long run to protect both of us.

At home, Kendall was leaning over the countertop with some contraption with a bag and a tip.

"Is that icing?" I asked when a white substance poured out onto the cupcake.

Kendall pursed her lips in concentration. "I'm practicing."

"Did Sophie tell you to?"

Kendall nodded, her focus on the design she was etching onto the cookie sheet in front of her.

"Have you talked to your mom lately?" I asked her.

Kendall looked up at me before turning her attention back to her work. "Yeah, why?"

"She mention anything about—" Where she was, what she was doing? I ran a hand through my hair. Christ. What was I doing? Pumping my daughter for information about my ex's whereabouts. I promised myself I'd never do that. I wouldn't put Kendall in the middle.

"I told her about registering for school and taking baking lessons."

"She say what she was up to?" There. That was innocent enough, but I still felt a little guilty for inquiring at all.

“I asked when she was coming back, and she said she didn’t know.” Kendall readjusted her grip on the tool, the only indication that her mother’s answer bothered her.

I wanted to reassure her, but it was difficult. Selfishly, I wanted this time with her. Melanie wasn’t used to sharing Kendall with anyone, and I was waiting for her to waltz back into Kendall’s life and take her back. There was nothing stopping her.

Avery’s words were haunting me.

Kendall set the tool aside, straightened, and focused on me. “Why? Did you talk to her?”

I shook my head. “I send her updates like you do, but she doesn’t tell me what’s going on with her.”

We never had that kind of relationship. She’d texted when she discovered she was pregnant, and she kept me up to date about doctor’s visits. Later, she’d tell me about Kendall meeting various milestones, but the smaller details like what Kendall feared or what she wanted out of life were noticeably missing.

Maybe Melanie thought I hadn’t wanted to know about it, but I had. I wanted to know everything. I just wasn’t aware of what I was missing.

Now that I lived with Kendall, I knew she was scared about starting a new school and making new friends. That she missed her old school but was making new friends here with Drew and Sophie. I wasn’t sure what kind of support system Melanie had for her in Indiana, but here, she had me, my parents, and Sophie’s family. Her world was slowly expanding, and I hoped Kendall would be happy here.

“What if Mom comes back? Will she take me home?”

Pain sliced through my chest that Kendall still thought of Indiana as home. It was premature to think Kendall had started to think of my hometown as anything more than a temporary stop, but I’d still hoped for it.

“She hasn’t told me her plans,” I admitted.

Kendall nodded.

I knew enough about childhood development to know that the uncertainty wasn't good for Kendall. "Do you like it here?"

Kendall considered the icing designs in front of her. "More than I expected to."

Relief flooded my chest, easing the muscles I hadn't even realized were tight. "I'm glad."

Until I lived with Kendall, I never realized how much my well-being depended on my daughter being happy. Before, I was satisfied with her being safe and secure, but now, her emotions were inexplicably tied to mine. If she wasn't happy here, I'd do anything to change it.

The realization sat like a brick in my stomach. As much as I enjoyed spending time with Sophie, Kendall's needs would always come first.

I wasn't sure there was a way to have everything I wanted. Especially if Melanie wanted Kendall to move back to Indiana.

"I don't like not knowing." Those simple words were spoken so quietly I could barely hear them, and it burst everything wide open.

"You want me to find out?"

Kendall's face was pinched, but she nodded tightly. "Yeah, I think I do."

"I can do that." If Kendall needed me to reach out to Melanie to solidify her plans, I'd do it, even if it meant that Melanie returned early and took her away from me. I needed to tell Avery I wanted to move forward with custody. The sooner the better.

I'd do anything to make Kendall feel safe and secure. To be happy. The thought of moving out of this home and moving to Indiana didn't feel right, though. Could I walk away from Sophie a second time?

At eighteen, I'd only been concerned with my own well-being and happiness. I'd taken Sophie's words at face value and thought that she'd rejected me. Now, I was more in tune with other people's feelings. I wouldn't hurt Sophie a second time. Or at least, I hoped I wouldn't.

Chapter Seventeen

In the mornings, I trained Olivia to bake my creations. I thought I'd miss the quiet and solitude of my mornings alone in the kitchen, but instead, I missed Mark and his steady, comforting presence as he sat on the stool and watched me.

I missed our conversations that sometimes were light and funny and other times deep. They were glimpses into who he was now. No longer the boy I'd known in high school, he was a man with responsibilities. I knew him better than I had at eighteen. It made what we were doing even riskier because he had the power to hurt me if he left again.

He'd do anything for Kendall. There was no doubt in my mind that if she were truly unhappy here, he'd move back to Indiana. The fact that he'd do anything for his daughter only solidified my feelings for him. I was falling in love with him all over again. Except this time, it felt a lot like falling down a hill. I knew I'd get bumps and bruises along the way and crash at the bottom.

The heaviness that settled in my chest foreshadowed that this wouldn't end well for me. But then, it never did with Mark. I couldn't help but think any relationship with him was doomed to fail.

Outside forces worked against us to keep us apart. But there was a small piece of me that hoped he'd fight for me this time. It was probably naïve, but I couldn't stay away from him despite the likely consequences.

My life was wrapped up in the bakery, my family, and now Gia's wedding planning service. Wherever Mark decided to settle down wouldn't change those facts. I just hoped this time, he'd include me in his plans.

In the afternoons, I met with prospective couples at Gia's office, answering their endless questions and concerns. It was more draining than baking and serving customers. I had to convince these couples that they not only wanted but needed a wedding planner and would be happy with my designs. It was stressful.

So far, we'd only signed two more couples in addition to Savannah and Ethan. I know Gia hoped for more. I wanted our partnership to be a success, too. It had the potential to expand my brand and give me much-needed exposure.

I had to think about my future. Eventually, I wanted a family of my own. I couldn't be tied to the kitchen like I had been the last few years. Being the face of the brand would make it easier to step away if I needed to.

Despite the stress of those meetings at Gia's office, I felt a rush when I walked out. A sense that I was on the right path, at least professionally. Personally, I didn't know if Mark would ever be the guy for me in the end. No matter how many times I'd dreamed he'd come back to me, I never really thought he'd stick.

At the bakery, I was surprised to see Mark talking to Courtney, with Kendall standing next to him.

"Were we supposed to meet this afternoon?" I asked, looking from Kendall to Mark, wondering if I'd missed something.

Mark shook his head, a smile playing on his lips. "I thought we could take you somewhere."

I hesitated because Kendall didn't know we were seeing each other.

"Can you wrap up some muffins for us to take with us? Coffees and waters?" Mark asked Courtney.

Then he moved toward me, blocking me from Kendall. He lowered his voice. “Can you get away? I’m sorry, I should have asked before I just showed up.”

“I was already scheduled to meet with bridal clients this afternoon, and I’m done. I wasn’t planning to work.”

He raised a brow, his tone eager. “So, you can come with us?”

When I hesitated, he rushed to say, “I thought we could spend some time together and see how things go.”

“What about Kendall?” I barely voiced the words, worried she’d overhear.

“Let’s see how it goes. We’re friends first, right?”

Something about the word *friends* had me swallowing over a lump in my throat. “Of course.”

I wanted a declaration of something more, but I couldn’t expect that with Kendall here.

Then Mark smiled, and it reminded me so much of when we were younger and carefree. He was excited to spend the afternoon together, and I couldn’t help but get caught up in his excitement.

He grabbed the bakery box and drink carrier while we headed to his truck. Once we were situated and he’d pulled into traffic, I asked, “So, where are we going?”

“I thought we could go to the sunflower garden.” Mark glanced over at me, his tone uncertain. As if he wasn’t sure I’d like his plans.

I settled into the leather seats. “That place is beautiful.”

Mark winced and threw a thumb over his shoulder. “I thought it would be fun, but not sure how Kendall feels about it.”

I looked back at Kendall, whose earphones were in, the faint sound of music emanating from them.

“It’s a great place to take pictures,” I said to Mark, pleased we’d have some time alone to talk.

“You’ve been before?” Mark’s voice rumbled pleasantly through my chest.

“I have.” It was a romantic location, and I loved the bouquets I gathered there. The owners frequently posted about couples getting engaged, but I wasn’t going to tell Mark that.

I appreciated that he wanted to spend the afternoon together. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to spend time with both of them.

Mark nodded toward the backseat. “It’s tough to find things Kendall will like other than arcades. And she didn’t even like video games until she met Drew.”

“She’s almost a tween now, right? It’s only going to get harder.”

Mark sighed. “I regret missing so much of her childhood, and I want to make up for it before she wants nothing to do with me. I have this tiny sliver of time and then I worry she’ll be lost to me.”

“That happens with all teenagers,” I said, remembering my sisters going through the same phases. She’d test his patience many times before she matured.

“I know.” Mark fell silent, and I was content to let it ride. It was comfortable spending time with them. I could easily imagine us doing this more often.

Kendall took off her earbuds a few times to ask how much farther. Unfortunately, the garden was about an hour north of Annapolis. When Mark turned at the sign for the gardens and followed the stone path to the parking lot, I was excited to show him around.

We got out, and I was pleased to see that Kendall removed her earbuds and put them away. If we were going to have a future, Kendall was part of that, and we needed to see if we could operate as a unit.

We’d gotten along in the kitchen of the bakery, but this was different. If she knew we were dating, she might see me as a threat to her relationship with Mark. I wouldn’t blame her if she did. I couldn’t imagine how I would have felt if Dad

started dating after my mom died. He hadn't, or if he did, we didn't know about it.

I appreciated that when we were younger, even if I worried he was lonely.

First, we passed a wooden wagon with a sunflower garden sign on the side.

“Can you take a picture?” Kendall asked, climbing onto the wagon and settling her hands over the side. She smiled, and I could almost see the little girl she was and the woman she'd become. Strong and beautiful.

Mark dutifully took several pictures and showed them to me to approve. When he was done, Kendall joined us on the ground.

At the classic truck, Kendall asked us to take a picture in front of the door. It was surrounded almost completely by tall sunflowers. We had to dodge a few bees, but eventually, it was safe for us to stand together and snap the picture. When Kendall showed us the images, I wondered if she suspected there was something between us. We stood close in the picture, Mark's hand ghosting over my lower back. It was innocent, but we looked happy.

At the lean-to that doubled as the storefront, we grabbed a couple of baskets and shears to snip the sunflowers we'd want. We took our time walking through the rows of wildflowers and then the fields of sunflowers. Mixed in between the flowers were antique toy cars, a bathtub, a mirror, a bicycle, and a desk. The props provided opportunities to take pictures. I was surprised when Kendall exclaimed over each one, asking for one of us to take a picture.

“You want me to send these to your mother?” Mark asked.

Something flashed over Kendall's face. “Yeah, sure.”

She said it in a way that made me think she wasn't sure if her mother would care if they were forwarded or not. I hoped that wasn't the case.

Surely, her mother was planning on coming back. I didn't think too hard about what would happen when she did.

“There are chickens, too,” Kendall said when she spotted them behind a fence.

“You can feed them. Just ask the lady at the front counter for food,” I suggested.

Kendall spun like she was going to take off in that direction. “Can I, Dad?”

“Sure. We’ll just be here, picking out sunflowers.”

Kendall kissed Mark’s cheek and raced off toward the chicken pen.

“I think that’s the first time she’s kissed me since I was discharged.”

“Her affection is harder to win now?” I asked as we walked down a new row of sunflowers, taller than the others. We couldn’t see Kendall.

“When she was younger, it was easy. She was always so excited to see me. Her love was freely given.” His tone was wistful.

“She still loves you. She just shows it differently.” I rested my hand in the crook of his elbow.

He smiled down at me. “I’m still going to treasure any kisses I get.”

I felt the affection and love for his daughter like the warmth of the sun on my face. The path narrowed. My chest rubbed against his arm, making my breath hitch.

Mark stopped. “We should get a picture.”

His arm wrapped around me as he held the phone out with his free hand. He took a few selfies of us smiling, and then he kissed me on the cheek.

“Take a look. Let me know if any are good.” He handed me his phone and resumed walking.

I scrolled the images he’d taken of Kendall. “These pics of Kendall are so good. You could frame them for a wall in your house.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mark said, but I wondered if he’d do it.

I sent the images to my phone, thinking I’d have them printed and framed and present them as a gift.

In the first few images of us, Mark was looking at the camera, then there was the one where he kissed my cheek. It was a sweet picture, but it was the last one that had my heart tripping over itself.

My cheeks were flushed as I smiled at the camera. He was gazing at me with so much love on his face. Did he know he’d fallen in love with me again? Or was it that he’d never stopped?

“Mark?” My voice broke on his name as I sent the image to my phone and added it to my wallpaper.

“Yeah?” he asked over his shoulder, stopping when he realized I wasn’t moving.

“Did you tell Kendall about us?” My heart was pounding in my chest.

Mark frowned. “I wouldn’t do that without talking to you first.”

“Do you think we should? It feels like things are getting serious between us, and I don’t want to keep it from her.”

“We can talk to her on the way home if you want.”

I wrung my hands. “Do you think she’ll be okay with it?”

Mark considered my question. “I can’t say for sure.”

“I just worry that she finally has you to herself, and she won’t like me stepping in.”

“We won’t know until we talk to her.” Mark sounded reasonable, but my stomach was tied in knots.

He fell silent while I clipped a few sunflower stems and added them to my basket.

I’d almost filled the second one when Mark added, “I don’t know what the right answer is. I’m worried about Melanie,

where she is, and when she's coming back. What effect will it have on Kendall?"

I clipped another stem; this one was thicker than the others. "What if this is just one more thing that Kendall doesn't need right now? Maybe we should leave it alone."

I couldn't look at him, even though I felt his gaze on the side of my face.

"Are you saying you want to take a step back?" Mark asked carefully.

I shook my head. "Definitely not."

"I don't want to keep hiding what's happening between us. She's going to figure it out."

I looked at him in time to catch his earnest expression. "I agree."

It was the responsible, mature thing to do. I was just tired of doing the right thing. Commuting from home to college to take care of my sisters, turning down Mark's proposal to help Ellie with baby Drew, and now this. Would I ever come first? Or would I always be second to the outside forces in our lives?

The only thing I could do was hold on to the love I saw on Mark's face in that picture. I had it on the home screen of my phone so I could look at it whenever I had doubts. I had a feeling it would be often.

Mark took the shears from my hands to snip a particularly tall sunflower. "This one is perfect. You should put a bouquet in the bakery and keep one for home."

"I want them everywhere. Sunflowers make for the best bouquets."

Mark interlaced his fingers with mine. "Are you enjoying this?"

"I love the sunflower garden, and I'm so happy we could share it with Kendall." If I framed the pictures of her for their home, it would be a memory they'd have forever.

I just hoped I wouldn't become a memory, too. I wanted to be their past, present, and future. I wanted everything, and for the first time, nothing was standing in my way. My sisters were independent. My shop was successful. There was nothing holding me back.

Mark's situation with Melanie was a different matter. I didn't have any control over whether she came or what happened next, and I hated it.

Chapter Eighteen

MARK

On the way home, I was pleased Kendall didn't put in her earbuds. She talked animatedly about the gardens and the chickens, and she wanted to tell Drew about it.

Coming here was a good idea. It proved we could hang out together as a unit. The only thing that dimmed my happiness was that Kendall didn't know Sophie and I were together. That could change everything.

"You know Sophie and I dated in high school?" I asked her, knowing we'd talked about it in front of my parents.

"I know, Dad." Her tone held a slight bend of irritation.

I glanced over at Sophie, who nodded. "When I moved back, we became friends again."

"Okaaaay," Kendall drew out.

My heart pounded under my rib cage. Her reaction would determine our future. "How would you feel if we were dating again?"

Was that the wrong thing to say? We were already dating? Was I being misleading?

"Are you?" Kendall asked, her gaze darting from me to Sophie.

She was more perceptive than I'd given her credit for.

Sophie turned slightly in her seat to face Kendall. "We've reconnected."

“What does that mean?” Kendall’s lips pursed.

I took over for Sophie. “We started talking as friends, and it led to something more. I want to make sure you’re okay with it.”

“Would it matter if I wasn’t?” Kendall sat back in her seat, crossed her arms over her chest, and looked out the window.

“Of course, it would. That’s why we’re having this conversation.” I alternated checking the road with looking at her in the rearview mirror.

Kendall was quiet for a few seconds and then she asked, “What does it mean for me?”

“Nothing has to change. Sophie will still give you baking lessons. But we might do more outings like this, where all three of us hang out together. Would that be okay?” Was I making a mistake by leaving this up to her? She was a child. We were the adults. Shouldn’t I tell her how it was going to be?

That reminded me too much of my parents.

The tension on Kendall’s face had eased. “Yeah, okay.”

Relief flooded my body, my muscles easing with each exhale.

Sophie smiled at her. “We will always consider your feelings. If you have any problem with us dating, you can tell us. We wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable. Your feelings matter.”

Sophie was saying all the right things, but her words grated on me like nails on a chalkboard.

I wanted Sophie to be a priority in my life, too. I wanted her to feel just as important as Kendall. But how was that possible?

Sophie smiled at me, but mine felt stilted.

Were we going about this the right way? Was Kendall truly okay with us dating? Something felt off.

I didn't want to repeat history. This time, I wanted to make decisions with Sophie.

The question that hung over me was what would happen if Kendall's mother returned? Would any of this matter?

"School starts next week." Kendall's voice was flat.

"Are you excited?" Sophie asked, but I could already tell she wasn't. "You'll get to see Drew."

Kendall's expression was grim. "We're not even in the same class."

My stomach dipped. "I didn't realize you knew that already."

"Drew's mom told me. You need to sign in to get my teacher assignments and schedule."

Ellie was a teacher, so she could probably check class lists, but I should have done it.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." I was already failing as a parent. But then again, this was new to me. I'd need to pay closer attention to the paperwork from school and be more involved.

"I'm sure it's in the registration paperwork."

I'd registered her earlier in the summer, but the fact that school was starting soon had slipped my mind.

Kendall tapped her fingers on the door. "We need to get school supplies."

"We can do that." I felt like I'd committed another error. Wasn't I already supposed to know about these things? I racked my brain, trying to remember if Melanie had ever talked about teacher assignments and school supplies, but I couldn't.

Sophie reached over and touched my leg. "Do you need clothes for school?"

Kendall nodded tightly. "Everything's getting too small."

“You want us to go together, or do you shop online?” I had no idea what Kendall and Melanie did for clothes.

“Mom helped me pick things out online.”

“We can do that,” Sophie said.

Maybe Sophie would know more about girls’ clothes than me. Where to shop and what to get. But was it a good idea to step aside and let Sophie handle the things I should be?

Parenting after being absent for so long was difficult terrain. But if I could handle basic training, then I should be able to handle clothing a nine-year-old girl.

“I’ve got this. I’ve never been around for any of this stuff, and I want to be.”

Kendall looked pleased, but Sophie’s expression was unsettled. Had I screwed up? Pushed her away somehow?

Navigating this situation created uncomfortable pressure in my chest. I didn’t want to hurt either one of them.

“You want to eat at Giovanni’s?” I asked them.

“It’s only the best pizza in town,” Sophie added.

I shook my head with a wry smile. “I can’t believe we haven’t tried it since I’ve been back.”

“You haven’t eaten at Giovanni’s yet, Kendall?” Sophie asked her.

Kendall shook her head.

“You’re in for a treat,” Sophie said.

I hoped we hadn’t made a mistake in telling Kendall about our relationship. I had no experience with children. Maybe I should have waited to date. Focus on Kendall first. That had been my initial plan, but then I’d run into Sophie, and it was like we’d fallen right back into our relationship. First as friends and then as lovers. It was like quicksand with Soph; she sucked me in, and I didn’t want to fight it.

“My friend Gia’s family owns it. She’s the wedding planner at Happily Ever Afters. Her dad and brothers run the

pizza shop.”

“She didn’t want in on the family business?” I asked her, grateful Sophie was changing the subject from school and our relationship.

“She’s never said why, but I guess not. She has good business sense, and I’m happy to be working with her now.”

“How’s that going?” I remembered Sophie talking about getting clients referred by Gia.

“Good. We signed a few more couples this week.” Then Sophie turned around to address Kendall. “Gia is a wedding planner. She wants to be a one-stop shop, if you will. Brides will come to her for the whole package—a wedding planner, baker, photographer, and even linens, chairs, and tables if they need it.”

“And you’re the baker,” I said unnecessarily.

Sophie smiled at me. “That’s right. I had to hire some employees to handle the shop because I’ll be busier meeting with clients and fulfilling wedding cake orders, but it will be worth it in the long run.”

“So, you won’t bake anymore?” Kendall didn’t seem happy about that.

“I hired another baker to handle it when I can’t be there.”

“It won’t be the same,” Kendall said quietly.

“That’s what I was afraid of, but if Olivia sticks to my recipes, it will be fine. I can’t be tied to the kitchen all the time. I need breaks, too. I’d like to travel. I’ve never left Maryland.”

I whistled. “I hadn’t realized that.”

“When my mom was alive, we’d take trips to Ocean City, but afterward, not so much. Dad was just trying to keep his head above water.”

“You helped raise your sisters, right?” Kendall asked, leaning forward to hear her answer.

“That’s right.” Sophie turned slightly to face her.

“Is that what your dad expected?” Kendall asked carefully.

Kendall was just curious, so I didn’t chide her for prying. Besides, I wanted to know, too. When we were teens, I hadn’t thought too much about her circumstances, other than to remind her she needed to take care of herself, too.

“After my mom’s funeral, Dad came into my room, and he said something I’ll never forget.”

Kendall leaned in even closer because Sophie was talking softly.

“He said we’re in this together. He couldn’t replace her or hope to ever be her, but he was going to be the best father he could be.”

Tenderness flooded my chest. “That’s amazing, but not surprising. Your father—Travis—gives great advice.”

A smile curved over Sophie’s lips. “He does.”

“You didn’t mind taking care of them?” Kendall asked.

Sophie shifted in her seat to address her. “I love my sisters, and I love my dad. I felt bad that I had my mother for so much longer than them. I didn’t want them to feel neglected.”

I reached over and interlaced my fingers with hers. Sophie was amazing, caring, and sweet. Selfless and hardworking.

“It must have been nice having so many sisters.” She’d said the same before, and I worried I’d failed her in some way.

“A blessing and a curse. Sometimes I wanted to go to a Friday night football game with my friends, but they needed me. Nora was only four when my mother died.”

My heart contracted in my chest. Sophie had been through so much. She’d lost her mother at a young age and then me.

I didn’t want to hurt her even as I sensed it was inevitable. I couldn’t control Melanie’s actions. That’s why I needed something for custody, because this constant worrying about what would happen was driving me crazy. Kendall needed stability. I needed peace of mind.

“Would you want a sister now?” I don’t know why I asked. She would be at least ten years older than any potential siblings.

Melanie had never talked about settling down with someone else or having more kids. I always sensed that Kendall was it for her.

Kendall’s eyes instantly brightened. “I’d love that.”

That was surprising. I figured she’d want a sibling close in age to her so she could play with them. Had we failed her in some way that neither Melanie nor I had more kids? I hadn’t wanted to settle down while I was still in the military. I hadn’t met anyone, and in the back of my mind, Sophie was always there. The standard I held everyone else up to.

“You’d be the best big sister,” Sophie said to her while I sorted through my feelings.

Sophie would be the best mother. The thought hit me without any forethought. She was so good with Kendall and fit into our family seamlessly.

Kendall smiled softly.

I hoped Kendall would give her a chance. I squeezed Sophie’s hand, and she smiled at me.

We’d make a good team. I wanted to be the best father I could be. To make up for the years I was absent. I thought it would be a disservice to date someone so soon, but now, I could see that we could work. That Sophie was good for Kendall and for me.

I parked on the street, and we walked to Giovanni’s, feeling more like a family with each passing minute. Inside, we were assaulted by the smell of mozzarella and marinara with the underlying scent of freshly baked garlic bread.

“I love Giovanni’s,” Sophie murmured as we walked in.

“You’re going to love it,” I said to Kendall.

“I can’t believe your father never brought you here. This place is a staple. You haven’t come home until you’ve eaten here.”

Gia's father ran Giovanni's, but it was her brothers who managed it on a daily basis.

Gia's eldest brother, Leo, greeted us. "Welcome to Giovanni's. Party of three?"

That sounded good. "Yes, we are."

We followed Leo to a table by the window.

I hoped to be a permanent party of three, with the option of having more kids in the future, but I had to bide my time. Make sure Kendall was okay with things and deal with the custody issues with Melanie. I had some work to do. I just hoped Sophie would be patient with us and give us time to figure things out.

Leo pulled out Sophie's chair for her to sit across from Kendall and me. I bristled, wanting to be the one who had the honor.

"Your server will be with you shortly. Enjoy your meal." Leo winked at Sophie before walking away.

"You know Leo?" My throat was tight.

"We went to school together," Sophie said.

"I suppose we did." I didn't remember him being particularly flirty, though. But Sophie and I had hooked up pretty quickly. As soon as I saw her, I liked her. I was fascinated by her beautiful red hair, her freckles, and her innocence. The more I found out about her, the more I liked. I never had eyes for another woman.

My chest tightened. I'd never find anyone else who I was as attracted to as Sophie. I couldn't screw this up.

Sophie gave me a look before turning her attention to the menu.

I focused on the options. I was acting like a jealous idiot. I was with Sophie and Kendall. There was no reason to be jealous.

Sophie mentioned the subs she thought were good, and Kendall said she'd have pizza.

We ordered a large pizza and a couple of subs to share.

“Oh, look. Drew’s here. Can I play games with him?”

I glanced over my shoulder, seeing Drew by the arcade in the back.

“Sure.”

Kendall was gone before the word left my mouth.

Sophie rested her chin in her hands. “I thought today went well.”

“It certainly could have gone worse.” I knew Kendall said she was okay with it, but I wasn’t sure she was. Didn’t all women say they were fine when they didn’t mean it?

Sophie smiled softly. “It’s a good start. It gives me hope for us.”

I reached across the table to take her hand in mine. “You were worried.”

She bit her lip. “Our relationship has always been complicated. There’s all this”—she flipped her hand in the air—“stuff that we have to deal with. My family. Yours.”

“I get it.” I wanted to say I hoped this time was different, but it wasn’t. I had a child to think about.

“I’m hopeful that we can make this work.” Sophie’s gaze was on Kendall, where she was laughing with Drew.

Wasn’t this supposed to be easy? Why was our relationship so complicated, so difficult? Fraught with so many issues? Was it a sign I shouldn’t ignore? “I talked to an attorney today about custody.”

Sophie’s hands slipped from mine. “Oh? I didn’t realize that was an issue.”

“Technically, we each have custody. It only becomes a problem if one of us stops cooperating with the other. If Melanie shows up and takes Kendall back to Indiana, I wouldn’t be able to stop her.”

Sophie swallowed and looked away from me. “You’d move with her.”

“I don’t think I’d have a choice, but I want to avoid that scenario. That’s why I talked to an attorney. She thinks I should file for custody.”

“Won’t that stir things up with Melanie?”

“That’s what I’m worried about. But it’s that or wait for her to show up whenever it suits her. I don’t want her taking her out of school.”

“It sounds like you made the right decision, then.” Her tone was flat.

“I’m protecting Kendall.” I felt the need to defend my decision. Sure, I was stirring things up, but it had to be done.

“It sounds like something you have to do,” Sophie said agreeably, but I wanted to know what she was thinking.

“There’s no great option, but I want to do the thing that protects her.”

Sophie folded the cloth napkin on the table. “You want to stay here?”

“Kendall seems to be settling in. You’re here. I like being at home. I don’t know anyone in Indiana.”

Sophie glanced up from the napkin. “Kendall does, though.”

I looked over at Kendall, who bumped Drew with her shoulder, knocking him away from the game. “She hasn’t said anything about her friends in a while. I think they stopped texting and calling.”

Sophie tilted her head. “And she’s okay with that?”

I refocused on Sophie. “She seems to be.”

“That’s good. I want what’s best for Kendall, even if it’s not what’s best for us, or even me.”

I rested my hand over hers. “You’ve always been selfless. It’s okay to ask for what you want.”

“I want you.” She nodded toward Kendall. “I want Kendall. I want you to be happy. Fulfilled. Even if it’s not with me.”

I opened my mouth, wanting to remind her those things were more about me than her, but she interrupted to ask, “Speaking of, have you thought any more about what you’d like to do for work?”

“You know I spoke with Ethan.”

Sophie nodded as the server brought a pitcher of water and glasses. “Your food will be here soon.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said to the server before they moved to the next table.

I removed my hand from hers to clasp them in front of me on the table. “I also met with Cade and Nolan at Morrison Brothers Construction. Both were eager for us to work together.”

“Is there a way you could do both?”

“Possibly. I need to work out the details. Cade mentioned having me lead my own team. He seemed to respect my military experience.”

“You’ll make a great manager.”

A server brought the pizza, and Kendall came over with Drew. “Can Drew eat with us?”

“Is your mom here?” Sophie asked Drew.

“She’s shopping, so I asked if I could play a few games.”

“I’ll text her and let her know you’re eating with us,” Sophie said, taking out her phone.

I moved out of the booth so the kids could sit and moved to sit next to Sophie. My thigh rested against hers, and I didn’t bother pulling away. I liked sitting close to her.

Watching Kendall and Drew eating their pizza, talking and laughing with Sophie next to me, I couldn’t help but hope that there would be more moments like this in my future.

I missed Sophie. I missed her family. They had become my adopted family in high school, and I wanted to be close to them again. I didn't need my parents to agree with my decisions. I just needed people around me who supported the path I chose. And I thought I found it with Sophie and her family.

Chapter Nineteen

Ellie met us at Giovanni's and offered to take Kendall home so they could hang out a bit longer. I took her up on the offer because I wanted some alone time with Sophie.

We'd made progress by telling Kendall about us, but I couldn't help but think our time together was limited.

I felt almost desperate to solidify our relationship, to reassure both her and me that nothing would come between us.

The drive home was quiet. I felt the impending pressure of the custody situation and an uncertain future. Each question settled like a brick on my chest, making it difficult to take a deep breath.

I didn't want to think about what would come next. I just wanted this time with Sophie. I parked the truck in my driveway and walked Sophie inside.

We didn't talk about the day with Kendall, our conversation, or anything else. Once I closed the front door, I reached for her.

Our lips met as our hands warred for purchase on each other's clothes. We moved through the house, dropping things as we went. When we were naked, I lifted her in my arms, wanting to keep our connection.

The heat of her pussy surrounded my cock, and I wanted nothing more than to ease inside. But I needed to lay her down on a bed. I didn't want quick and hard; I wanted to slow this down.

We didn't have forever. Our relationship was a ticking timer. The alarm would sound eventually, and everything would blow up in our faces.

I pushed aside the sense of impending doom when I reached my room, laying her out on the bed in front of me. Her hair surrounded her, her skin glowing in the light of the moon seeping through the windows. She was gorgeous and all mine.

I rested a knee on the bed as I hovered over her, holding myself apart from her as I kissed her. She reached for me, pulling me on top of her. She wanted to feel my weight, and I couldn't blame her. The warmth of her body was a reminder that this was real.

Her skin was so soft, her hair so silky. I reveled in each inhalation, each hitch of breath, the sensation of her fingers running over the planes of my body. My muscles tightened more with each effort to hold myself back.

"Mark. I need you." There was a sense of urgency in her tone.

I growled as I laved her nipples, scraping my teeth lightly over her skin. She arched, pressing herself deeper into my mouth as I settled between her legs, sliding my dick between her slick folds.

Whimpers escaped her lips as I drove her higher. Her fingers tightened in the hair of my neck.

Had I ever felt anything more intense? More perfect? It was like Sophie had been made for me. Unable to restrain myself, I slipped my crown inside.

Sophie gasped at the intrusion.

"You want me to make you feel good?" I murmured to her as I kissed the underside of her jaw, licking a trail to her nipple.

She nodded jerkily. "Mmm."

I slid slowly inside, bracing my hands on the bed. The feeling was intense. She brushed a lock of hair off my forehead, gazing at me with affection.

Tenderness swept through me, urging me to thrust harder, to slide deep. Sophie was it for me. I wasn't sure if we could make it work, but I sure as hell wanted to try.

Interlacing our fingers together on either side of her head, I lowered myself so that there was no space between our bodies. Her nipples pressed against my chest as I circled my hips, grinding my pelvis against hers so that she felt the friction on her clit.

“So good,” she said, her voice breathless.

“I want to make it better.” I wanted to make it so good she'd never think of anyone else but me.

“I don't know how that's possible,” she teased, a small smile playing on her lips.

“You shouldn't be able to talk.” I increased my pace, taking measured thrusts. I wanted to get so deep inside her, she felt me tomorrow and the next day. I wanted her never to know what it was like to be without me.

Each time I filled her, she whimpered. I was working her into a frenzy I never wanted her to come down from.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I repeated the words inside my head with each thrust. I couldn't say it out loud. Not with so much still up in the air, but I felt it in every breath, every touch.

I wanted more. I wanted to do this every night. I wanted to go to sleep beside her and wake up next to her. I wanted to see her ruffled hair as she rested her head on my chest in the morning, her leg covering mine. I wanted everything with her. I wanted us to raise Kendall together. I wanted to watch her grow up and mature.

I wanted more. I wanted babies of our own. Ones who would share her red hair and my brown eyes.

I wanted Sophie to be happy and fulfilled. I wanted to stay by her side, growing more each day. I never wanted to leave her.

As my spine tingled with an impending release, there was a sense that the dream was just out of reach. Unattainable. Because that's how things always were with Sophie. She was bigger than life. A relationship with her seemed impossible.

I tightened my grip on her fingers as I thrust harder. Deeper. Her pussy clamped around my cock as she went over, sucking the orgasm out of me. I lowered my head to her shoulder as stars burst in my vision, and I emptied myself inside her, imagining that this was my life and Sophie was my wife.

The image was so intense, so beautiful, I was overcome with emotion. My chest tight, my throat dry, I rolled to my side, caressing her skin, the curve of her waist, and the slope of her hip. I'd never get enough of her.

I kissed her shoulder. "You're so beautiful."

She smiled sleepily. "You make me feel that way."

"Because you are." I turned her head so I could kiss her lips. It was slow and exploring, a validation that she was mine, if only for now.

Tomorrow, everything might change. I couldn't forget that or stop anticipating it. We learned from our past, and our history suggested a future together wasn't inevitable.

"I love you, Mark. I don't think I ever stopped." Sophie's voice broke through my thoughts, sending goose bumps over my skin.

I pulled away slightly so I could see her face. Every muscle in my body pulled taut. I wasn't sure how to respond because I'd told her the same with my body, even as I held back my words.

She shifted to her side, her hands tucked under her cheek. She was gorgeous, her skin flushed pink from her orgasm, her nipples still puckered from arousal.

I wanted to take her again.

"It's different now. Deeper. More intense somehow."

I wanted to agree, but the words got stuck in my throat. What if Melanie showed up and demanded Kendall move back to Indiana? What if Kendall was unhappy with me dating Sophie? I wasn't drawn into a false hope that today was the beginning of her accepting Sophie as mine. I knew it would be a process; there'd be ups and downs. Nothing would be easy, but then nothing worth having ever was.

Her gaze searched my face.

I knew what she was looking for, but I wasn't sure I could, or should, give it to her. I didn't want to give her false hope or promise something I couldn't give. I didn't want to hurt her.

"Do you feel the same?" Sophie's voice was hesitant.

Instead of responding, I rolled on top of her and kissed her. With renewed energy, I worshipped her mouth and her body, and by the time I slid inside, we were both slick with sweat and on the edge of an epic orgasm. This time, we went over simultaneously. It was like our souls met in that moment. I knew she'd understand what I couldn't say.

Our love transcended everything. I fell asleep afterward. In my dreams, Sophie danced like fog over the water. Each time I reached for her, she'd disappear.

I startled at the buzz of my phone. I reached clumsily for my phone, which I must have tossed on the bed. It was Ellie, telling me I could pick up Kendall. She was tired and wanted to come home.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. I'd been so consumed with Sophie I'd forgotten about my daughter. How could I be so reckless?

"Is everything okay?" Sophie asked, rubbing my lower back.

"I need to get Kendall." My voice was rough with sleep. How was I going to explain this to Kendall? Sorry, I fell asleep with Sophie. She was young, but she wasn't naïve.

Sophie glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "I must have fallen asleep."

“We both did.” I got out of bed and moved to the dresser to grab briefs and jeans. Our clothes were scattered, and I’d need to pick them up before I left. I didn’t need Kendall to see our clothes strewn about the house.

“Are you upset?”

“I shouldn’t have fallen asleep.” My jaw was tight.

I heard the rustle of sheets, signaling that Sophie was getting up. I zipped and buttoned my jeans.

Her hand landed on my shoulder blade.

Reluctantly, I turned to face her.

She was naked. Her nipples pebbled in the cool air. I wanted to grab her ass and pull her against me, feel her nipples against my chest. I wanted to take her back to bed, but I had responsibilities.

Sophie’s face was etched with concern. “You’re not late.”

“I fell asleep,” I repeated through gritted teeth.

“I get that, but you woke up in time. Kendall won’t know.”

“I don’t want her to know—”

“That we’re sleeping together?”

I nodded tightly.

“I agree. It’s too soon for sleepovers, but I enjoyed today. I’d love to join you again.”

The tension in my shoulders eased slightly.

Her palm slid over my chest and rested on my heart. She leaned in to kiss my other pec, and I closed my eyes to take in the sensations of her soft lips on my skin and her hair brushing my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I cupped her cheek. “I wish you could stay.”

She smiled softly. “I do too.”

“Whatever happens, know that I want you, Soph. I’ll do anything to keep you both.” I didn’t know where that promise came from, but it felt like it was pulled from the depths of my soul.

She curled her fingers around my neck, stretching to kiss the underside of my jaw. “I want to keep you both, too.”

She pressed her body against mine, and I marveled at her warmth, letting it seep through my skin, infiltrating my heart.

She didn’t say she loved me again, and I was grateful for that. Because I didn’t want to hurt her, even if it seemed unavoidable.

“I’d better get moving.”

“I’ll get dressed.” Sophie moved toward the door.

I should have grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. I should have told her that I loved her, too. That I’d never stopped. My love for her only grew stronger. But I didn’t. The thought of walking away from her again was like a knife to the chest.

I didn’t want to do it, but I might not have a choice. She’d said she wanted long distance when we were younger, but that wasn’t fair to her now. She deserved someone who could commit to her, have children, and build a future with her.

Not someone whose future was tied to his ex. Until I was granted custody, my life wasn’t my own.

I rubbed the piercing pain in my chest, wishing things could be different. That Sophie’s mother hadn’t died, that she’d been able to marry me. But then she’d never have owned a bakery, and Kendall might never have been born.

I couldn’t go back and change the past any more than I could alter the future.

I grabbed a T-shirt and pulled it over my head. Downstairs, Sophie was dressed, her hair smoothed down, and her purse was over her shoulder.

“I put your clothes in the laundry room off the kitchen.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” I grabbed my keys from where I’d dropped them on the floor when we were preoccupied with each other.

“I can drop you off at home.”

She pulled out her phone. “I can call for a car.”

I grabbed her phone and held it just out of reach. “Soph. I’ll take you home. What kind of a boyfriend would I be if I didn’t?”

We hadn’t discussed labels, but it felt right on my tongue. It was like how natural everything felt when I was with her.

Sophie smiled up at me. “Not a very good one.”

I kissed her. “That’s right.”

I could offer her this. It wasn’t much, but it was all I had at the moment. Brief snippets of time alone. A hope that things would change in the future.

I opened the door for her, locked up, and followed her out to my truck. I wished she could stay, but this would have to be enough.

When I dropped her off at home, I walked her to her porch and kissed her softly. It reminded me so much of high school that my chest ached.

I wanted to stay in Annapolis. I wanted a future with Kendall *and* Sophie. I just wasn’t sure where Melanie fit in, or whether she even wanted to.

Chapter Twenty

School had started. The air was cooler in the evenings, the sun setting earlier and earlier. I'd transitioned to my fall recipes, featuring pumpkin spices and apples.

Mark finished my storage shelves, but things were otherwise the same. Gia was setting up more wedding couples to meet with us, and customers at the bakery were steady, but I felt slightly off. Like I was waiting for something bad to happen.

I missed my lessons with Kendall in the afternoons, but she made a point to stop by for an hour after school each day. I enjoyed my time with her, and it allowed Mark to work longer hours. He'd decided to work on a trial basis with Cade at Morrison Brothers Construction to see if he liked it.

With both of us working during the day and him understandably wanting to spend time with Kendall in the evening, I didn't see much of Mark. I missed our mornings together. I missed our conversations. I missed his touch. I missed everything.

I kept coming back to the way he'd held me the last time we were together. How he said he was my boyfriend. When I felt especially lonely, I'd pull up that picture of us on my phone.

That evening felt amazing. Like we were connecting on a soul-deep level. When he'd woken up, he'd been distant, worried about something. I knew he was worried about the

custody situation and Melanie coming back, but it felt bigger. Like he needed to pull away to preserve his feelings, but then he'd called himself my boyfriend. It was confusing.

We texted and talked on the phone after Kendall was asleep. But he had to be up early to get her ready for school and to head to work. Our time was limited in more ways than one.

It felt like the beginning of the end. If we lived together, we'd see each other more, but Kendall wasn't ready for that. There hadn't even been time to spend time together as a trio. Mark wanted to spend as much alone time with her as he could.

I tried to be understanding, but I was starting to worry. I tried to remind myself that things were different now than when we were eighteen. We communicated like adults, or at least, I hoped we did. If there was an issue, or this wasn't working for him, he'd say. He wouldn't walk away without talking to me this time.

Mark mentioned that his attorney had drawn up custody papers and filed them with the court. He was waiting for Melanie to be served. The only problem was he wasn't sure where she was. She'd said she needed a break, and the implication was that she was traveling. She never said where or when she'd be back.

It wasn't fair to Kendall or Mark. What if Kendall was hurt or needed her?

I looked forward to Kendall stopping by each day after school. She was required to call Mark when she got here. It allowed him to work later in the evenings and Kendall to spend more time at the bakery. When she got off the phone, I asked her, "Are you ready to learn more fall recipes?"

Kendall nodded eagerly. "I love pumpkin."

"Well, you're in luck, because that's all we make for months until we switch to gingerbread." The demand for pumpkin spice was higher than anything else I made all year.

I handed her the apron I kept just for her. She tied it behind her back and grabbed the recipe list. She was familiar with my shorthand and the bowls and tools I used for various recipes. She was a great baking partner. If she were older, I'd suggest she work for me. But she was too young, so I kept calling them lessons.

If she was still here when she was eligible to work, I'd talk to Mark about hiring her. I knew she'd be responsible. If she didn't get involved in sports or boys, I had a feeling she'd love it here.

The thought of her moving away with her mother worried me. I'd become attached to her. We had a relationship entirely separate from Mark. We had a shared love of baking. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed having someone to share my passions with until she expressed interest.

"I saw some legal papers on the counter the other day."

My heart dropped. She must be talking about the custody papers. "That's probably something you should discuss with your father."

Kendall's lips pressed into a line. "He won't tell me the truth. Not that he'd lie to me, but he'd sugarcoat it."

"He's your father. It's his responsibility and duty to protect you."

"But you know about it." Her tone was accusatory, and it had me on edge.

I wouldn't lie to her. "I do."

"But you won't talk to me about it?"

It felt like she was testing me. "I don't think it's my place. This is something you should discuss with your father. I don't know what he wants you to know."

Her face pinched. "Everyone treats me like a baby."

I knew what it was like to have people whisper behind your back. "I'm sorry. I know it's tough."

I lost my mother when I was not much older than she was now. I lost that veil of protection out of necessity. I was privy to my father's grief, his struggles, and our financial realities. I'd give anything to be able to go back to not knowing any of those things. I wanted to keep Kendall innocent for as long as possible.

Her lips set in a stubborn line. "You don't care about me."

That caused me to pause. "That's not true, Kendall. I *do* care about you."

"If you cared about me, you'd tell me what the papers meant."

I sighed. She was manipulating me, or maybe she was hurt that we were keeping her in the dark. It wasn't my place, but I had to give her something. "Your father wants to protect you. If your mother comes back—"

Kendall's eyes widened. "He's stopping my mother from seeing me."

I shook my head. "What? No. That's not what I meant."

She'd untied her apron and threw it on the floor.

I reached for her, but she backed away from me. "Don't touch me."

I held up my hands in a stop motion. "Let's just calm down."

"Dad's taking me from her. That's why she's not here," she cried.

I slowly shook my head, my heart pounding under my rib cage. "That's not what's happening. Melanie wanted to take some time to herself."

"How do you know?" She spit out each word, and I worried customers could hear her out front.

"I don't. That's just what your father told me." I tried to keep my voice low and calm.

"You just want him for yourself," she hissed.

“My relationship with your father isn’t your business.”

Her eyes snapped with fire, and then she spun out of the room. “Then you won’t miss me.”

I hurried to follow her, but she was already gone. I called Mark, my heart pounding as I waited for him to answer. “Kendall just left,” I said as soon as he answered.

“That’s early,” Mark said, his voice still unconcerned.

“She was upset.” Shaking, I wasn’t sure what to do. Pulling open the door, I couldn’t see her in either direction. She must have ducked down an alley.

“About what?” Mark asked, his tone more focused.

“She said she saw legal papers on the counter.”

I could practically see him running his fingers through his hair without having to see him. “Fuck.”

“She asked me about them.”

“What did you say?” His voice was deceptively calm.

“Nothing at first, but she kept pressing me for information. She thinks that everyone is lying to her, that I don’t care.”

Mark scoffed. “That’s her way of getting what she wants.”

It didn’t feel great, though. “I just told her that you were protecting her.”

“You had no right to discuss any of this with her.”

“I wasn’t sure what to say. We didn’t discuss what to do if it came up.”

“You should have referred her to me.” His voice filled with anger.

“I did at first, but she wouldn’t take that for an answer. *She said I didn’t care about her.*” I emphasized the last part because that’s what hurt the most.

“She was manipulating you, and you fell for it.”

“She said we wouldn’t miss her if she was gone.” That couldn’t mean—

“Are you saying Kendall ran away?” Mark’s voice was strangled.

“I don’t think so. I hope not.” Fuck. What had I done? “I’m so sorry, Mark.”

“I have to call Colton and tell him what’s going on,” Mark said in a rush.

“You want me to come to your house in case she comes home?” I asked, desperate to help in some way.

“I think you’ve done enough.”

My stomach dropped at his words, pain ricocheting throughout my body, intensifying with each passing second; he didn’t say more. I held the phone to double-check he had in fact hung up on me.

I turned to face the bakery. Thankfully, it was just Courtney. “Are you okay?”

“What have I done?” I asked her.

She rushed around the counter to take me by my elbow to my office. I sank to the couch and dropped my head into my hands. “No, no, no,” I chanted over and over again.

I felt sweaty—hot, then chilled.

“I think you should come,” Courtney murmured into her phone.

I just shook my head, unable to process anything other than Kendall running out of my store and Mark’s words. *I’d done enough.*

I always tried to help, whether it was raising my sisters, helping my dad or Mark, but was I harming Kendall?

I should have stayed completely out of it. I never should have entertained the conversation. I should have shut her down, referred her to Mark, and kept our conversation solely on baking. But then, she’d previously confided in me about the teacher she thought yelled too much and the kid on the bus who tripped her on purpose. I liked that she felt comfortable enough to do that.

I felt like I was helping her, but maybe I was wrong. I hurt more than I ever helped.

“Ellie’s coming,” Courtney said, breaking through my spiral.

“She doesn’t have to do that.” I stood but swayed on my feet.

“You should sit.” Courtney gently pushed me back to the couch. “I’ll grab you some water.”

“I don’t need any,” I said as she fled the room in her hurry to help, but my throat was dry, and my head ached.

My eyes stung, but the tears didn’t fall. I felt drained. Defeated. Like nothing I’d done was right or redeemable. I should stay away from Mark and Kendall. He didn’t want me to help.

“Are you okay?” Ellie rushed in with Courtney at her back.

A water bottle was shoved into my hands. “Drink.”

I couldn’t seem to coordinate my brain and my fingers as I fumbled with the cap.

Courtney twisted it off for me.

“Thanks,” I murmured, taking a small sip.

“What happened?” Ellie asked Courtney when I didn’t respond.

Courtney’s concerned voice floated over me. “Kendall ran out. Sophie called Mark. I don’t know what he said to her—”

“She saw the custody papers. I’m worried she ran away,” I said flatly.

“What custody papers?” Ellie tipped her head to the side.

I hadn’t confided in her because it was Mark’s business. “Kendall saw something she shouldn’t, and she was asking me questions. I told her she needed to talk to Mark about it, but she accused me of not caring about her.”

The tears slipped over my lashes and down my cheeks.

Ellie crossed her arms over her chest. “She used emotional warfare.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. I should have referred her to Mark.”

“It sounds like that’s what you did,” Ellie said practically.

“Then she ran out, saying something about not seeing her again. I called Mark, and he was upset. He’s going to call Colton.” *He said I’d done enough.*

Those words were burning a hole in my chest.

“Does he need someone at the house in case she comes there?” Ellie asked, her voice measured and reasonable.

I stood, prepared to go home and hide. “No, he said I’d done enough.”

My voice sounded bitter. I felt rather than saw Ellie and Courtney exchange a look.

“Let’s get you home, and then I’ll see if he wants Dad to help,” Ellie said.

“You don’t have to do that. I don’t think he wants us to get involved.”

“Then he’s an idiot,” Ellie muttered as she guided me outside. I shielded my eyes from the bright sun, wanting nothing more than to hide under my blankets when I got home. I wanted to drown out his words and disappear.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You tried to navigate a difficult conversation. You balanced being there for Kendall and preserving Mark’s position.” Ellie’s voice was soothing despite the turmoil in my chest.

I clutched my elbows, wanting to forget the last hour ever happened. “I want to be alone.”

“Is that the right thing to do?” Ellie asked me pointedly.

I was acutely aware that I was the big sister and the one who usually led these kinds of conversations. It was an unusual role reversal for us.

I bit my lip. “I asked if I could help, but Mark said no.”

“He said you’d done enough,” she murmured.

I nodded my head. His words were painfully clear.

“But he was probably speaking in anger,” she continued as we walked down the sidewalk. I wasn’t sure if we were heading toward her car.

“You know Kendall pretty well at this point, don’t you?”

I nodded, the motion making me feel light-headed. “We spend most afternoons after school together.”

“Has she been struggling with anything else?” Ellie paused on the sidewalk to face me.

I thought for a second before answering. “Meeting friends. She didn’t like one of her teachers.”

Ellie tipped her head to the side. “She talked to you about that?”

“Yeah, she did.” It had made me feel good, but then it put me in an untenable position today.

“Do *you* know where she might have gone?” Ellie’s gaze was steady on me.

“She loves spending time in the bakery, going to the library, and listening to music. Other than that, I don’t know.”

“Are you sure about that?”

There was something dancing on the edge of my consciousness. “Do you think she’s with Drew?”

Ellie sucked in a breath.

My mind was clearer now that I wasn’t fixated on Mark’s final words to me. “Drew’s her only friend. She’s said that to me repeatedly.”

“And they’re not in the same class,” Ellie rushed to add.

“She was really upset about that because she only sees him at recess, but he plays with the boys. Have they spent a lot of time together since school started?”

“Not as much,” Ellie admitted.

“Would she go to him?” I asked, feeling hopeful for the first time since Kendall walked out.

Ellie’s face was pinched. “She might.”

“Where does Drew hang out?” I asked, eager to go wherever they might be.

“When he’s not at school or playing soccer, he’s playing video games.”

“In the basement.” I was moving before she’d finished her sentence.

“Do you really think that’s where she is?” Ellie asked as she followed me.

“It’s a possibility. If he’s not there, I’ll go back to the bakery in case she comes back.”

“That’s a good idea. My car’s this way.” Ellie took my elbow and guided me down a side street.

I’d wanted to bury myself in the hurt that Mark’s words caused me. But I was doing my best to navigate a difficult situation.

Hopefully, when Kendall was home—safe and sound—we’d revisit our conversation from earlier. Maybe he’d see that he’d jumped to conclusions.

I didn’t need Mark, even if these past few months had been the best. Mark needed to work with me if we were going to be a family unit, not pull back and throw blame and accusations around when something didn’t go right.

We should have discussed what would happen if Kendall discovered that Mark was filing for custody and how I should handle it. But we hadn’t. We’d naïvely thought she wouldn’t.

Ellie drove as fast as she could to her house. “Call Dad and make sure they’re not there.”

“Good idea.” We might be wrong. I didn’t want to think about how I’d feel if we didn’t find her.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Dad's number.

"Hello?" Dad asked when the call went through.

"Kendall's missing. She left the bakery upset this afternoon. We're not sure where she went. We're checking Ellie's basement next but wanted to make sure Kendall and Drew aren't with you."

"They haven't been here today. You think they're together?"

I exchanged a look with Ellie. "He's her only friend. Who else would she go to?"

Dad let out a breath. "You need my help."

"You can help by staying home in case they go there." Dad didn't know Kendall well, but she'd been to the house a few times when he was there, and Drew might go to him.

"Will do."

We'd pulled up to Ellie's house, and she was already moving to get out.

"Sophie?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," I asked as I unbuckled and pushed the door open.

"You'll find her." Dad's confident tone only slightly eased my anxiety.

"I hope you're right." Then I hung up.

I quickly followed Ellie through her front door. I felt like I was moving through a fog. My heart raced, and my hands shook.

Ellie called Drew's name, but nobody answered.

"What if they're not here?" I asked desperately.

Ellie's expression was grim. "If they're here, they'd be in the basement."

We raced down the steps, my chest filled with hope, but the large TV screen was black. Maybe Kendall was too upset to play video games. But the couch was empty.

“Kendall. Drew,” Ellie called as she moved around the room, opening the door to the laundry room and storage areas. “They’re not down here.”

“Let’s check upstairs.” I still held out hope, but it dwindled with each empty room we went into.

In the kitchen again, I asked, “Where could they be?”

“Does Kendall have a phone?”

“She does. I’m sure Mark’s called her.”

“Why don’t you try? Maybe she’ll answer for you.”

I gave her a skeptical look but pulled out my phone and brought up her contact information. We’d texted when she left school and was on her way to the bakery and a few other times she’d experimented with baking at home and had sent me images of her creations.

I hit the call button; each ring that went unanswered made my stomach dip more. “She’s not answering.”

I waited until it went to voicemail and left a message that everyone was worried about Kendall and asked that she please call to let us know she was okay. I wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do, but surely, doing something was better than nothing.

“What now?” I asked when I hung up.

“Drew wouldn’t have left without telling me. You should go to the bakery in case she shows up there.”

I chewed my lip as I explored the possibilities. It was a good idea. I just wished I had more insight into where she might be. “I should let Mark know that we think the kids are together, since Drew’s not where he’s supposed to be.”

I called Mark, but he didn’t pick up. I left a message, relaying everything, but I wasn’t sure what to do if he didn’t listen to the message or was avoiding my calls.

“You could go to Mark’s,” Ellie said at the same time I said, “We should call the police.”

“I’ll drive. You call,” Ellie said, already on her way back to the car.

After I’d called the dispatcher and relayed our information, Ellie said, “I’m surprised this never happened when we were young,”

“Mom dying young. Dad raising five girls. It was almost inevitable,” I said, despite the turmoil in my stomach.

“You kept us together. When I got pregnant, it felt like my entire world was upended, but you kept me grounded. You said you’d be there for me. I knew whatever I decided I’d be loved and cared for. My baby would be, too. We were so lucky to have you as our big sister.”

“You’re going to make me cry.” I blinked away the sting of tears, knowing I needed to keep my wits about me until the kids were found.

“We’re going to get through this. I have a feeling they’re hiding out somewhere, but wherever they are, they’re safe.”

“I hope you’re right.” We pulled up to the curb of Mark’s house, where police officers milled about.

I unbuckled and opened the door before Ellie had come to a full stop. Colton was taking long strides to reach us. Mark was close behind.

“You think Drew and Kendall are together?” Colton barked, and I tried to block out the heavy weight of Mark’s gaze on my face.

“Kendall said Drew was her only friend here.”

“Drew should be home, but he’s not. He’s never disappeared like this before,” Ellie said, her voice breaking.

I’d been so focused on Kendall being missing, I hadn’t stopped to consider that Drew was, too, and that this was just as scary for Ellie. I wrapped an arm around her.

“You don’t think she went home to Indiana?” Colton asked Mark.

“I don’t know how she’d get the money to leave, and her mother isn’t there. So, it’s more likely she sought out someone she was close to here,” Mark said.

“We’re still checking the bus tickets and airlines to see if she’s listed anywhere,” Colton said.

“If she’d provide her own name,” Mark said.

“A minor traveling without a guardian and any identifying paperwork would be a red flag,” Colton said.

Mark’s face was drawn, his hair mussed as if he’d run his fingers through it a million times since he’d gotten my call. I wanted to say I was sorry, but it wasn’t the time. “I called her mother. She’s on her way.”

My stomach dropped. It was the right thing to do, but I couldn’t help but wonder what it meant for me. For us. I took a deep breath. The important thing was finding Kendall and Drew safe.

“You should be at your house in case they go there,” Colton said to Ellie. “I’ll send a deputy to follow you.”

Ellie didn’t argue, just hugged me and murmured, “They’ll be okay.”

The question was, would I?

I watched Ellie get into her car and pull away.

“I’ll head to the bakery in case they show up there.”

Colton gave me a pointed look. “Mark said that was one of her favorite places.”

Warmth spread through me that Mark acknowledged that.

“Is there anywhere else you think they could be?” Colton asked.

“We checked with my dad and Ellie’s house; I can’t think of anywhere else. She wouldn’t go to your parents’, would she?” I asked Mark.

“They’re not exactly close. But it’s a big property. If they wanted to hide out, they could.”

“It’s worth checking out. I’ll get someone on it.”

Colton moved away to assemble a team to head to Mark’s parents’, leaving me alone with Mark.

“I know you said to stay out of it, but I might be able to help.” We’d already figured out that Drew was most likely with Kendall.

Mark nodded tightly. “I was upset.”

It was understandable, but it still hurt. I wanted to say we should talk about it when Kendall and Drew were home, but I couldn’t bring myself to open my mouth. I couldn’t offer false platitudes either. Mark wouldn’t want me to.

“Are you going to stay here?” I asked.

“It sucks not being able to search for her.” Mark’s face twisted, and I wanted to reach for him. To soothe him. But it wasn’t the time or place. Especially since he’d pushed me away.

“The best place for you to be is here. When she comes, she’ll see your face.” I remembered the pain of knowing I’d never see my mother’s face at home again.

“Maybe that’s what Kendall had been struggling with—a fear she’d never see her mother again.” I was thinking out loud.

Mark winced. “It’s a possibility. I should have talked to her about it.”

“She’s only a kid. I don’t think you were wrong in keeping her in the dark.”

“Parenting is full of difficult decisions. I feel like I’m making my way in the dark most of the time.”

“But it’s also learning to listen to your intuition.”

Mark pulled out his phone. “I’ll text Kendall and tell her Melanie is coming to see her. That she’s worried about her.”

“Maybe her mother being here will be enough to draw her out.”

Colton came over to us and must have heard part of our conversation because he said, “That could work.”

Mark pulled out his phone to deliver the message.

“I’d better head to the bakery.”

“I’ll get a deputy to drive you,” Colton offered.

It wasn’t the right time to talk about what any of this meant for Mark and me. There’d be time after Kendall and Drew were found safe. I tried not to think about what it would mean if we didn’t. Or if Mark decided the best thing for Kendall was to move back to her home in Indiana.

My head ached. How had things gone so off the rails in just a few short hours? Kendall was gone. Drew was, too. My relationship with Mark was in jeopardy.

Mark might feel pressured to keep their family intact. What if he decided that it would be irresponsible to continue something with me?

I’d always known something like this would happen. I’d been waiting for the other shoe to drop. There was always something—my mother dying, Mark enlisting, and now this. We were destined to hurt each other.

We weren’t what each other needed. I should go back to finding the nice, safe guy. The one who lived and worked in Annapolis all his life. His family was from here. And he’d have no intention of ever leaving. Maybe he’d never traveled like me, too. Except the idea deflated me. I’d tried that, and it didn’t make me happy.

What did it say about me that I liked the guy who was impossible instead of inevitable? I wanted the complicated relationship, not the easy one. I was seriously messed up.

Chapter Twenty-One

MARK

I looked up from my phone in time to catch Sophie getting into a patrol car.

“She’s going to the bakery in case the kids show up there. We’ll find her.” Colton’s hand was a reassuring pressure on my shoulder.

My throat was tight, my eyes burning. The alternative was too much to even think about. What if Kendall got hurt? What if someone took her? I wouldn’t rest until she was safely at home.

I hated that she’d pulled Drew into this, too. Ellie and her father must be out of their minds with worry.

“You have any other ideas on where to check for them?” Colton was in full cop mode now. He wasn’t my friend.

“I don’t think she left,” I found myself saying, relying on the intuition Sophie had talked about.

“I hope you’re right,” Colton said before turning to one of his deputies.

How had I fucked everything up? Kendall running away with Drew. Involving two families in my mess. Now, Melanie was on her way here.

Dread filled my stomach for all the things that could go wrong.

One of Colton’s deputies guided me inside. I’d never felt so useless in my life. I sat on the couch with my elbows

resting on my thighs and hung my head. Then I paced in front of the living room windows that faced the street.

I wanted to be the first to know if they found them. What if they found Drew but not Kendall? What if Drew couldn't convince Kendall to stay?

I never considered myself a religious person, but I prayed hard that the kids were unharmed. That we'd find them.

It was getting dark, which brought up a whole host of other worries. Where were they? Did they have shelter? Or were they hiding in the woods? It was fall, and it got cooler at night. It didn't look like it was anywhere close to freezing, but I still wanted Kendall safely tucked into her bed tonight under my roof.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to let her out of my sight for a long time. A car stopped in front of the house. I ran outside.

Could it be Kendall?

The back door opened, and Melanie stepped out. Her eyes were puffy, her cheeks tear-stained.

She rushed up to me. "I got the first flight out of Florida I could."

"Why were you in Florida?" My skin drew tight over my jaw.

Her face screwed up in disgust. "I'm not sure how that's important right now."

"It is when our daughter runs away from home."

Melanie sighed. "I followed a guy out there. I thought it was my chance to have my happy ending. You don't know how hard it was as a single mother to meet guys."

"So what, you go after a guy who doesn't like the fact that you're a mother?" I wasn't positive that was what had happened, but looking back, she'd erased any trace of her relationship with Kendall. She'd sold the house. She didn't tell us where she went, so we couldn't follow her.

Melanie winced. "It wasn't like that."

It was exactly like that.

Melanie slowly shook her head. “We shouldn’t be arguing. Not when Kendall is missing. Where is she?”

A muscle ticked in my jaw. It wasn’t the right time to attack Melanie for leaving. “We don’t know. We’re trying to find her.”

Melanie pounded her fists on my chest. “How could you lose her? How could you let her walk away?”

The words reverberated through my head in time with her fists on my chest.

“I didn’t—I don’t—” I couldn’t form words; the guilt pressed heavily on my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

An officer pulled her gently away. “You need to calm down.”

Melanie was hysterical, and it wasn’t helping. She was making everything worse. I felt everything at once—guilt, regret, pain. So much pain.

I thought quitting the military would be the best thing I could have done. Like it would instantly repair my relationship with Kendall, but it hadn’t. I’d screwed everything up.

I watched Melanie rail at me with a deputy holding her back, and it felt like it was happening to someone else.

Then my focus sharpened. The fog lifted. “You left.”

My voice was raspy with disuse.

Melanie sneered. “You were gone for ten years.”

“I was working, providing for you. I didn’t want to be deployed. It was my job. But you just left.” I didn’t want to pass the blame because we were both just as responsible. “She was upset. She didn’t know when you’d come back.”

When I was deployed, I called. I sent letters. Emailed. I was always there, even if I wasn’t physically.

“I texted Kendall,” Melanie said.

“What did you talk about?” Colton asked her.

The deputy had stepped back now that it appeared Melanie had calmed down. “How she hated it here. She didn’t like school. She didn’t have friends.”

I winced. It was what I was most worried about. That if Kendall was struggling, she wouldn’t necessarily tell me.

Melanie pointed at me. “You shouldn’t have moved her here. She had a home.”

The familiar guilt washed over me. “That you sold so you could travel around the country, or do whatever it is you were doing.”

The truth was, we would have had to buy a home either way. Maybe this wouldn’t have happened had I settled in Indiana. But we’d never know.

“This is your fault.” Melanie wagged her finger at me, and I knew if we were standing closer, she would have jabbed it against my chest.

I deserved this guilt I was feeling. It was my fault.

“This isn’t helping anything,” one of the officers said.

“Has Kendall reached out to you since she went missing?” Colton asked.

I wanted to be searching for Kendall. Not standing here with Melanie.

Melanie shook her head.

“You should go inside. Try to eat something.” The officers guided me and Melanie into my house.

It didn’t feel right. I’d never lived with Melanie. We were never in the same space at the same time, but she didn’t have a place to stay. And it made sense that we were close by so that the officers could ask questions as they came up and so we could hear any updates.

I didn’t like it.

She kept asking where Kendall could be and what happened between Kendall and Sophie that made her leave.

Her voice grated on my nerves, even as I tried to answer her questions.

“You’re fucking her, aren’t you?” Melanie finally asked me, her voice close. Too close.

I finally lifted my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Sophie. Your ex. The one that got away,” Melanie ground out.

My jaw tightened. “That’s none of your business.”

“It is if it’s the reason my daughter ran away from home.” Her voice rose with each word.

I let out a breath. “She saw the custody papers.”

Disbelief widened Melanie’s eyes. “What custody papers?”

“I was planning to file for custody. Kendall needed stability, not someone who could show up and take her out of her school and home.”

“We’ve never had anything in writing.” Her voice was incredulous.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I needed it. I didn’t like the uncertainty.”

Melanie’s eyes widened. “You wanted to take her from me.”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t like that. I wanted something official. The school asked for paperwork. The attorney said it would be a good idea.”

“You talked to an attorney about this?” Melanie’s voice was steady, but anger simmered underneath the surface.

“I wanted stability for me and for Kendall. I didn’t want her worrying about what would happen if you showed up.”

“I’m her mother. I have a right to see my daughter.”

“Where’ve you been, then? Did you think about how Kendall would feel about you leaving?”

Melanie shook her head. “I deserved this.”

“What did you deserve? A vacation? Time off? I don’t get it. You’re always her mother. You can’t just disappear when it suits you.”

“Like you did.” Her tone was bitter.

“I didn’t disappear. You always knew where I was. I kept in contact when I was able to. I never left you or Kendall in the dark. I always supported you however I could. You just left.” There was no financial support, not that I needed or wanted it. But Melanie hadn’t even asked. She’d just left. There was no telling when or if she’d be back.

Colton rushed into the house without knocking, looking from me to Melanie.

I stood, my heart leaping. “Did you find her?”

“They were found in the woods behind the school, trying to build a shelter for the night,” Colton said.

The tension in my chest eased slightly.

Colton moved toward the front door. “They’re en route to the hospital to get checked out.”

“They’re okay?” I asked him as we approached one of the patrol vehicles.

“I’m not sure. I’ll take you to them.”

Colton held the car door for Melanie while she slid inside.

I paused in front of Colton. “Thank you for finding them.”

I couldn’t seem to locate the right words to show my appreciation. I wasn’t sure I ever would. My chest was full of repressed emotion. I was afraid if I let it go, it would consume me.

Colton nodded. “It’s my job.”

“It might be, but you’re my friend, too,” I said, getting into the back of the car. In the front seat, Melanie kept up a steady stream of chatter.

I wasn’t sure how she managed it. I was still tight with tension, unable to speak. I was afraid I’d lose it. Even though

Colton said she was safe, I wouldn't breathe a sigh of relief until I saw she was okay for myself.

At the hospital, I jumped out first, heading straight to the receptionist's desk. I was barking out my information when Colton grabbed my elbow and pulled me down a nearby hallway.

"You know where she is?" I asked him.

"Uh-huh."

My mouth was dry, and my heart was beating hard. I needed to see Kendall. I needed to make sure she was in one piece. That nothing had happened to her.

Colton led us into an exam room with two beds. Kendall sat on one. Drew on the other. Ellie stood on the side of Drew's bed, an unfamiliar man next to her. Was it his dad?

Kendall's eyes filled with tears as I crossed the room to her.

"Daddy!"

She hadn't called me that since she was little. I wrapped my arms around her. Being near her soothed my soul. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay." But Kendall's voice was shaky. "Mom?" Kendall asked, her gaze behind me.

I hated to let her go, but I stepped back so they could reconnect.

Kendall's eyes filled with tears. "You're back? Because I ran away?"

"I was worried about you." Melanie's eyes darted away.

The soft expression on Kendall's face hardened. "You left. I didn't know if you were ever coming back."

Melanie crossed her arms over her chest. "Did you run away because of Sophie?"

"Sophie?" Kendall's eyes were wide, her expression uncertain.

Melanie huffed impatiently. “You didn’t want your father dating her.”

I didn’t like Melanie’s approach, but I wanted to hear what Kendall would say.

“I like Sophie,” Kendall said softly.

“The custody papers, then,” Melanie persisted.

Kendall shook her head. “It wasn’t that.”

I rubbed Kendall’s shoulder, and she leaned into me, seeking comfort. She rested her head against my chest, and the tension I’d been feeling all day melted away.

Sophie rushed in, her gaze flitting around the room before it rested on Drew. “You’re okay.”

Melanie moved to the other side of Kendall as Sophie hugged Drew.

Sophie pulled back to run her hands over Drew as if searching for injuries.

“I’m fine,” Drew said.

“You scared us.” Sophie hugged him again, and I saw the love that she had for her nephew.

“What happened?” Sophie pulled back to see Drew’s face.

Drew nodded toward Kendall. “I wanted to make sure Kendall was okay.”

I wished Drew had called us first, but I was grateful that Kendall wasn’t alone. He’d tried to help her in the only way a ten-year-old could—by being there for her.

Sophie pulled away as the doctor came in to talk to Drew. He drew the curtain around the bed. Sophie moved to stand in front of us, her gaze on Kendall. “Are *you* okay?”

Kendall looked up at Sophie. “I’m fine. I’m sorry I worried everyone.”

“I love you, sweet girl.” Sophie’s voice broke as she threw her arms around Kendall and hugged her tight.

I kept my arm around Kendall, so Sophie ended up pressed against me, too.

I didn't move. Instead, I relished Sophie's warm embrace. Was it crazy to wish for more hugs with the three of us?

When Sophie pulled back, there were tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry if I said something—"

Sophie felt guilty. I was probably an asshole when she first called to tell me.

"Sophie—" I started, wanting to tell her it wasn't her fault. That I'd overreacted.

"Aren't you the reason she ran away?" Melanie's shrill voice, full of disbelief, rang around the otherwise quiet room.

Sophie flinched and stepped back from the venom in Melanie's voice. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I feel awful."

"Sophie, it's not—" I interjected.

But she'd already spun on her heel and was gone. A second doctor arrived, pulling the curtain closed behind her.

I didn't have time to deal with Sophie or the fallout. I needed to be there for Kendall.

The doctor examined Kendall, not finding anything concerning. She just had some scratches from running through the brush. She was tired and hungry, but otherwise okay.

When the nurse handed us the discharge papers, Melanie placed a hand on my arm. "Can I come home with you?"

"It's up to Kendall."

Kendall rubbed her arms. "Not tonight, Mom. I need some time."

"But I'm your mother—"

Melanie had hurt Kendall, and she'd need to repair that relationship. But tonight was not the time. "I'm going to get her home, feed her, and get her into bed. She needs to rest."

"I have every right to take her."

Sucking in a steadying breath, I said carefully, “Technically, you could, but do you really think it’s a good idea?”

I tipped my head in Kendall’s direction, where her eyes were filling up with tears. “She’s asked for space, and I think you should give it to her.”

Melanie opened her mouth, and I held my hand up. “Now isn’t the time to discuss custody or visitation.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Melanie finally said to Kendall.

Kendall nodded, and we moved past her. I wouldn’t keep her from her mother. I knew seeing her after so many months away was a shock.

When we were in the truck, Kendall asked, “Did you call Mom?”

I tapped a finger on the steering wheel. “You were missing. I thought she might have talked to you about something that could help us.

She rested her head against the headrest. “I didn’t even know where she was living. How messed up is that?”

“Melanie didn’t tell me anything more than she did you. Did you want to talk about the custody papers?”

She let out a breath. “I understand that you wanted something official so she couldn’t just show up and take me.”

I held up a hand. “But I won’t keep her from you. She’s your mother.”

She chewed her lower lip. “I know.”

I took a deep breath, knowing I had to ask. “If you want to move back to Indiana, we can do that.”

“You’d move to Indiana *with me*, or you’d let me move back with Mom?”

I felt Kendall’s gaze on me. “Let’s be clear about one thing: If you move, I go with you.”

“What about Sophie?” Kendall’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror.

“What about her?” My fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

“You’d leave her? She owns the bakery. She can’t move.”

My stomach tightened. “That’s true.”

“So, you’d what? Break up over me?” Kendall’s voice rose in pitch.

I sighed. “Kendall, you’re my daughter. You’ll always come first.”

Kendall looked out the window. “I get that, but you need to consider her, too.”

“What do you want?” I asked her.

She pursed her lips. “I want to stay. I like it here.”

Relief flooded my system. I’d been prepared to move, to do whatever Kendall needed me to do, but it didn’t mean that’s what I wanted.

“I’m sorry I worried you and Sophie,” she said quietly.

It was telling that she didn’t mention worrying Melanie. “The important thing is that you’re here now. Safe and healthy.”

Kendall shook her head. “I shouldn’t have run away.”

This was one of those big parenting moments I didn’t want to screw up. “You shouldn’t have. You could have talked to me about it.”

Kendall looked at me. “Just don’t be mad at Sophie. It wasn’t her fault.”

“I know that.”

“Make sure she knows it, too.”

I glanced over at her. She sounded so much older than her age. “I will.”

But first, I needed to make sure Kendall was okay. I couldn't leave her tonight.

When we pulled into the driveway, the police vehicles were gone, but my parents' car was in the driveway.

"Why are Grandma and Grandpa here?" Kendall asked as she got out.

"They're probably worried about you. The police wanted them to stay at home in case you showed up there."

We stepped out of the truck, and Mom rushed out of the car to hug Kendall. "We were so worried."

Dad followed at a slower pace. He was never one for emotional reunions.

Kendall pulled back from my mother's embrace. "I'm so sorry I worried everyone. It was stupid."

Mom patted Kendall's shoulder. "Your feelings are valid. But there are better ways to handle these things. You shouldn't run away from your problems."

Kendall gave me a pointed look.

Was she saying that's what I was doing with Sophie? Instead, I asked my parents, "Can you stay for dinner?"

Mom smiled and wrapped an arm around Kendall. "We'd love to," she said to me. Then to Kendall, "Let's get you some food. I brought a casserole."

The two of them walked inside, leaving me and Dad on the sidewalk.

"You finally going to make this thing with Sophie official?"

I bristled at his insinuation that I hadn't already done that. "I asked her to marry me when I enlisted."

Dad's expression was grim. "She was smart to turn you down then. You were both young and immature. Neither of you knew what you really wanted."

"And now?"

Dad gave me a pointed look. “Are you staying in Annapolis, or are you heading back to Indiana?”

When Kendall was missing, I’d wondered if I’d made a mistake in moving here, uprooting the only life Kendall had ever known. But it was Melanie who’d done that by selling their home. There was nothing for me in Indiana, and Kendall was settling in here. She’d gone to Drew when she was upset. She hadn’t gotten on a bus and headed to Indiana. That was telling. “I’m staying.”

“Good.” He touched my shoulder before following Mom and Kendall into the house.

I had to make things right with Sophie. Maybe once Kendall returned to school.

I was anxious to talk to her, but I needed to be with Kendall tonight. Her disappearance had been my worst nightmare. I wasn’t ready to let her out of my sight.

I sent a text to Sophie, telling her that I was staying in tonight with Kendall but hoped she was okay. She didn’t respond, but it was late. She was probably sleeping so she could get up early to work.

I had time to fix this. Or at least, I hoped I did.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Last night, I didn't get much sleep. I'd tried and failed to rationalize Mark's lack of communication. His daughter was missing. He was upset. He'd want and need to spend the evening with Kendall. He wouldn't want to let her out of sight.

I'd tried and failed not to take it personally that I only got a *I hope you're okay* text around eight. I hadn't responded because I should have been asleep already.

I shouldn't have been staring at the ceiling, hoping Mark would ask to come over. Kendall needed him. She'd always come first.

I understood that, even as my stupid heart cracked at the replay of his words when Kendall ran away. *You've done enough.*

Instead of getting much-needed sleep, I'd stayed awake, thinking of all the ways I'd screwed up. Even if Kendall or Mark said it wasn't my fault, it sure felt like it was.

She'd disappeared immediately after talking to me. I didn't have kids. Even though I'd practically raised my sisters, it didn't make me a parent.

Melanie was Kendall's mother. I shouldn't have gotten so close to Kendall. I shouldn't have assumed our relationship was something special. At the end of the day, I wasn't her mother.

On some level, I knew Melanie would come back. She'd want Kendall in her life. Who could blame her? Kendall was a

great kid.

Then I fell down the slippery slope. Now that Melanie was back in town, did that mean they were one big, happy family? Mark had said they'd never gotten involved other than co-parenting. But maybe you had a special relationship with the mother of your child. One that transcended what I'd built with Mark over the years.

It sounded crazy in the light of day, but in the dark, it seemed likely, probable even. I'd fallen asleep for a couple of hours and woke with my eyes swollen from tears. My skin was dry from crying. I quickly showered and donned my bakery uniform.

I walked to the bakery with a heavy heart. My life felt so empty when I thought of Kendall not stopping by after school. Or never being able to spend time together, all three of us.

I was wrong for stepping in. I should have given them space to explore their relationship. Convinced space was necessary between Mark, Kendall, and me, I raised my key to unlock the door when I realized—too late—the door was ajar. The glass near the lock was missing.

Someone had broken in. I stepped back, my heart pounding, my hand shaking. Was someone inside?

I knew without looking down the street, Mark wouldn't be showing up like he had for all those weeks. There was no one awake at three in the morning to protect me. I was on my own.

A crash sounded from the kitchen area. Whoever it was, was still here.

I reached for my cell phone when a man appeared behind the counter. My hand hovered with my cell phone in front of me. His eyes locked with mine. I was frozen.

What would he do now that he saw me? Should I run? Should I dial 9-1-1? My jaw dropped open, and I tried to scream, but no sound came out. It was like a nightmare where you knew all the things you were supposed to do, but you couldn't move, scream, or even wake up.

The only thing I heard was the rapid pounding of my heart in my ears. The man stepped around the counter, menace in his gaze, and I finally snapped out of whatever spell I was under.

I gripped my cell phone tightly and ran.

I wasn't sure where I was going, just that I needed to get away. I needed to hide. In the back of my mind, I knew I still needed to call the police somehow.

The alarm hadn't been going off when I'd gone inside. Had he silenced it somehow? I ducked down an alley and peeked out onto the sidewalk to see if he'd followed me.

He hadn't. My hands shaking, I finally punched in the numbers to call the police. Fumbling, I hit dial and raised the phone to my ear.

My lips were dry, my throat tight. "9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

"There's a man in my bakery—Sophie's Sweets. He broke in," I whispered.

"Where are you?" The woman's voice was steady.

"I ran. I'm in an alley. I don't think he followed me. He's still inside, or he ran out the back." Which meant he could easily circle around and find me.

Wouldn't he want to get rid of any witnesses? I'd seen his face.

"Get somewhere safe. I have police en route."

The streets were quiet. It was still dark. No one was walking their dog or out jogging this early. I was on my own until the police showed up.

A chill ran up my spine. Everything was locked up for the night. Most people lived above the shops or on a different street.

Not knowing where to go, I checked one more time to make sure the man wasn't on Main Street and took off for home. I didn't want to stay in that alley. He could have come up behind me. God knows what he would have done.

My breaths came in short pants, and I developed a stitch in my side. I kept going because it felt like my life depended on it. I looked over my shoulder every few feet to make sure no one was following me.

When I hit my porch, I stabbed the key into the lock. I got it open, then slammed it shut behind me, locking it. I didn't stop until I ran to my bedroom, where I paced.

I'm safe. I didn't lead a crazy man to my apartment. I chanted those words over and over again, still not quite believing them.

Looking down at my phone, the call was still active. "Hello?"

"Are you somewhere safe?"

I sucked in a breath. "I'm at home."

"The police just arrived at the bakery. They'll want to talk to you."

"That's fine." I gave her my name and address. Then I got off the phone. I felt relatively safe, although I probably wouldn't fully relax until the police caught the man, but he was probably long gone by now.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my heart in my throat, waiting for word. I could have called Ellie or my dad or even Mark, but it was still early. I didn't want to worry them when I didn't have much information to pass on.

When a knock came thirty minutes later, I almost jumped out of my skin. I should have been expecting the police, but I'd been sitting rigidly on the bed, frozen and unable to move.

I checked the window to see two uniformed officers. When I opened the door, I breathed a sigh of relief. "Colton."

"Are you okay?" Colton's arms hung loosely by his side, but the other guy, presumably his partner, had his hands on his duty belt, and his gaze was alert.

"I am now. Did you find him?" My gaze darted from Colton to his partner, searching desperately for answers.

“Can we come in?” Colton gestured inside my house.

“Of course.” I stepped back, letting both officers inside.

“This is my partner, Dexter Cross.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, not offering him my hand.

He seemed to be taking everything in.

“One of my officers chased the guy down an alley.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

“He’s in custody, under suspicion for the burglaries in the area.”

I sagged in relief. “I can’t believe it.”

Colton grabbed my elbow, propelling me toward the couch, and then placed pressure on my shoulder to sit. Then, to Dexter, he barked, “Get her some water.”

Dexter left the room.

“He doesn’t have to do that—”

Colton just gave me a look, and I stopped talking.

He drew a wooden chair from my dining room table over to sit across from me. He rested his elbows on his thighs. He felt more like a cop right now than my friend. “What happened?”

I liked that he didn’t sugarcoat things and got right to the point. “I came in an hour early this morning because I couldn’t sleep.”

Thankfully, Colton didn’t ask me why I’d broken from my routine. Instead, he nodded for me to continue.

“I tried to unlock the door, but the glass was broken. The alarm wasn’t on.” I regretted my hesitation. I hadn’t put things together quickly enough. It was like time had slowed down.

“We have a call into the security system company to see what happened there,” he said as Dexter returned with water.

Cradling the cool glass, I said, “I heard a crash from the back and realized someone was there, so I got out my phone to

call for help.”

Dexter stood a few feet from us, his feet shoulder-width apart, like he was standing guard.

Colton’s jaw tightened.

I probably should have run first. “Before I could, the man came to the front. He saw me, and I didn’t know what to do. I froze, then I ran. Once I was in an alley, I called 9-1-1. I was worried the guy would leave through the back and easily circle around to where I was, so I came here.”

“You did the right thing,” Colton said, but I wasn’t so sure I had.

I miscalculated my conversation with Kendall yesterday. Then broke from my routine.

“The important thing is we caught him in the act. You can identify him as the man who broke into your store.”

“I can.” His face would be imprinted on my brain forever. I tightened my grip on the glass, bringing it to my lips to drink.

“Hopefully, we’ll be able to link him to the other burglaries.” Dexter’s voice was rough.

“I’m just glad it’s over.” I drew in a steady breath. I tried not to think about what could have happened if he’d gotten to me.

Remi had a run-in with the same guy, and he’d shoved her. She’d been bruised and sore. I’d gotten off lucky.

“The important thing is that he’s in custody,” Colton said reassuringly.

I wiped my palm on my leggings.

Colton stood. “You want me to call anyone for you?”

“That’s not necessary.” I placed my glass on the coffee table and followed them to the door. “Thank you for stopping by. I really appreciate it.”

Dexter left, and Colton turned to talk to me. “I thought we talked about you hiring someone to work with you in the

mornings.”

“I did. She doesn’t come in until four. I came in earlier this morning, remember?”

“It defeats the purpose if you don’t come in at the same time, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure it would have changed anything. Maybe I would have felt safer having someone by my side, but she couldn’t handle an attacker any easier than I could.

“You won’t be able to open today.”

I glanced at the time on my phone. It was seven. My customers would be wondering why the store was closed, but then the door was broken.

“You need to fix that door and get your security system up and running.”

“Right.” There were so many things to do. I couldn’t bake until everything was fixed.

Colton nodded. “Doesn’t Mark work for Morrison Brothers now?”

“He does.” I tensed, wondering why he was asking. Did everyone know that Mark and I were a thing again? If so, it was going to sting when they found out we weren’t anymore.

“Maybe he can help out with the repairs.”

“That would be nice.” I just wanted Colton to leave so I could have a few minutes to myself. I felt stupid for how I’d reacted to the break-in. I should have gotten out of there immediately.

Colton’s hand pressed lightly on my shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up. It was an emergency situation. It’s normal to freeze. You did well.”

Relief flowed through me at his words. “Thanks, Colton.”

“Call someone. You shouldn’t be alone right now.” He turned to go.

“I’ll call Ellie,” I said to appease him.

“Good.” Then he was gone, and I pushed the door closed.

I was alone. I’d give myself a few minutes, then I needed to get to the bakery and sort things out. I splashed water on my face, wondering if my hands were ever going to stop trembling. Then I called Ellie. Word was going to get out soon. I didn’t want my family to find out from someone else.

“Are you okay? I just heard,” Ellie said as soon as she picked up.

“I’m fine.”

“Dad’s worried about you.”

“I’m okay.” Or at least, I would be. I hadn’t quite come down from the adrenaline high from yesterday with Kendall being missing, and now this? It was more than one person could handle.

“We’re coming to the store to help you clean up.” Ellie’s tone didn’t allow for any argument.

“That would be good.” I tightened my grip on my phone.

“We’ll meet you there.”

“Thanks, Ellie.”

“You’ve been there for me my entire life. It’s my turn to help you.” She hung up, and my heart clenched. I was there for my family, Mark, and Kendall, but it was time for me to let others return the favor.

I wouldn’t let myself think about Mark. He needed to focus on his family. I was a distraction.

Ever since I saw the front door to the bakery ajar, all I could think about was seeing Mark. Wishing he was meeting me this morning. Wanting to be safe and cared for. Would I ever have that feeling again? Or was I doomed to be alone?

I took a deep breath. It was going to be a long day. People were outside now, headed to work, walking their dogs, or jogging. Just a few short hours ago, the streets had been empty.

I headed toward the bakery, my throat tightening with each step. I was worried about what I'd find inside. I just hoped that the ovens were okay. I could replace the smaller utensils and tools.

Ellie and my dad stood talking to a couple of officers who remained. I hoped they were done with their investigation. I wanted to erase any trace that this guy had been there.

I wouldn't let him ruin my business or scare me anymore. I squared my shoulders as I approached my family.

As soon as my dad turned and saw me, he hurried in my direction. His arms came around me, and I was immediately reminded of home. "You're okay."

I nodded against his shoulder. "I'm okay."

His hold tightened. "I was so worried."

"I'm good." Then my eyes were stinging, and the tears slipped over. This was my dad. I didn't have to be strong with him. Not right now.

"We'll get through this together." It was the same thing he'd said when he'd talked to me after my mother's funeral.

"We will." I stepped back only for Ellie to hug me, too.

"Don't ever scare me like that again. First Drew and now you." She clutched her hand to her chest.

"I didn't mean to worry you."

"It's not your fault. None of this is your fault," Ellie said, gesturing at the store windows behind us.

The front looked okay. But I was assuming he wanted what he hoped was left in my register or kept in the safe.

"The officers said he wasn't able to get in your safe."

"I didn't leave anything in the register." Not after there'd already been several break-ins at neighboring stores and at Max's Bar & Grill.

"That's my girl, but he must have been pissed about that because the cops said he destroyed whatever he could in the

back,” Dad said.

“Oh no.” I rushed past them.

No one stopped me, so the officers must have been done with their investigation. I drew to a stop, overcome with dismay. The kitchen was ransacked. Tools and bowls were strewn over the floor. I picked up a metal bowl, my heart in my throat because it was dented.

Thankfully, the ovens were big and sturdy. I didn’t see any damage to them. Maybe he hadn’t realized those were the most valuable things in here. The small things could be fixed.

Dad placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You were lucky. All things considered.”

“I know.” So why did I feel defeated?

It wasn’t just that the bakery had been vandalized. The kitchen was the place I’d felt safest. I had a security system, video cameras, and hired extra employees. It hadn’t been enough. My inner sanctuary had still been violated.

My heart thudded painfully in my chest.

“I know it seems like a lot, but we’ll help you clean up and order new things,” Ellie offered, her voice a balm to my battered soul.

“I appreciate that.” Tired and overwhelmed, I went to the supply closet and grabbed the box of garbage bags. I’d feel better when I could see the floor. When the damaged items were removed. Then I could see what needed to be done.

I returned to the kitchen, grabbing one bag for myself. I picked up one item after another, examining it for damage, debating whether I could salvage it or not. Most things weren’t salvageable.

“Do we know why he did it yet?” I asked Dad.

“Colton mentioned he associated with known drug offenders. They’re investigating his motive. Did he pick a place to rob when he needed easy money, but it got harder as the stores beefed up security?”

“That makes sense.” But why was I a target?

“He also mentioned something about there being a guy with you in the mornings, but he’d noticed that he’d stopped coming around recently.”

“I came in earlier than usual today. That’s what happened. If I came at my normal time, I probably would have missed him.” Then he’d still be loose. It was a good thing I’d changed up my routine.

“Who was the guy meeting you at four in the morning to open?” Dad asked, his tone steady.

“It was Mark.”

I wasn’t sure we had a relationship at this point. I wouldn’t blame him if he walked away. But I couldn’t even process that situation, not with the bakery a disaster. I wasn’t even sure when I’d be able to reopen.

I would lose money and wedding clients. It felt overwhelming and hopeless.

“You guys are serious, then?” Dad asked.

“What are you talking about?” The kitchen was starting to swim in my vision, or I was tearing up. I felt a little disconnected from what was happening. Or maybe I just wanted to hide. Pull a blanket over my head and pretend this never happened.

“You and Mark. You’re together. Serious.”

“Honestly?” I paused my musings to really look at my dad. His face was etched with concern. “I think I screwed up. I said something that made Kendall run away. I don’t think he’ll forgive me.” I wasn’t sure I could forgive myself.

I felt dead inside, like everything had shriveled up. I hadn’t even felt this way when my mother passed away.

“You didn’t screw up.” The familiar, deep voice coming from the doorway drew my attention.

“Mark? What are you doing here?” I tipped my head to the side.

Mark moved across the room, erasing the distance between us, his voice sure. “You didn’t screw up anything.”

He stood in front of me, looking more beautiful than any man had a right to. He looked well-rested and recently showered. His aftershave washed over me like a comforting embrace. He cupped my cheek, and I forgot my dad and Ellie were nearby and probably watching.

It was just me and Mark.

“I’m so sorry I made you think that Kendall running away was your fault.” He punctuated each word, his expression earnest.

“I was the one who talked to her.”

“You were trying to protect her. Protect me.” His thumb was feather light on my jaw. The motion slowly unraveled the tight knot that formed when Kendall ran away.

“Oh?” Why couldn’t I come up with anything more intelligent to say?

Then his expression softened. “I love you. I think I always have.”

“I love you too,” I whispered.

Had he come here to tell me that?

“I’m messing this up.”

“It seems like you’re getting it right.”

“I had this whole speech prepared. Kendall and my parents gave me a talking-to. Told me I need to make things right with you.”

“And why is that?” My voice was steadier now, my vision sharper.

“Because I let you believe that what happened was your fault when all you’ve ever done is try to take care of us. To be there for us. I was an idiot. I feared losing Kendall, and now, I’m scared to lose you.”

I looked into his eyes, seeing the love for me there. I was overcome with emotion—the guilt from yesterday, the fear from this morning, the uncertainty about the future.

“Are you okay? Colton told me what happened.”

I licked my lips. “Um, yeah.”

What happened this morning seemed like a long time ago.

“You scared me.”

“I’m okay.” I’d said that a lot today, but it wasn’t exactly true. I was rattled.

He drew me to him. “Is this okay?”

I nodded against his chest, allowing his masculine scent to wash over me. “It’s more than okay.”

His presence, his embrace, was exactly what I needed. I let him hold me tighter, hoping he’d never let go.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight.”

Relief had my muscles relaxing. “You can’t bake with me every morning.”

He grumbled. “I can still stop by after my run.”

I smiled up at him. “You don’t need to do that.”

“And I’m going to help you with construction. I already talked to Cade, and he can spare a team to get started right away. He said the town can’t lose its bakery.”

“Are you serious?” I couldn’t believe the town was rallying around me.

“The other shop owners are all asking how they can help, too.”

“My family has my back.”

“And now you have me, Kendall, my family, the shop owners, and the entire town. They want you to recover from this.”

I slowly shook my head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Let me take care of you.”

My heart clenched at his sweet plea.

Mark gestured at the men who'd entered the room. "This is my crew. They're all yours for the next few days."

"Thank you."

He stepped close, cradling my face in his hands. "I just want to love you. That was always the easiest part of being with you. It was everything else that got in the way. But not anymore. Nothing comes between us."

"I like that." I freaking loved that.

"We're a team."

"We're a family."

"Yes." Then his lips were on mine, soft and comforting, while noise carried on around us. Suddenly, it didn't seem so daunting. I'd come out on the other side, better than before, because I had so many people who had my back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Colton called this morning to say Sophie's Sweets had been burglarized and Sophie had a run-in with the perpetrator, I was beside myself with worry. I needed to see her. To hold her. To see for myself that she was okay.

I hadn't gotten a chance to tell her I wasn't upset with her. That nothing was her fault. If something had happened to her, I don't know what I would have done.

I vowed never to go to bed with a misunderstanding between us again. I wanted never to go to bed alone, but that was probably too soon. We needed to ease Kendall into it, no matter how much I wanted to just move Sophie in.

All those thoughts were too soon because I hadn't fixed things with her yet. I was going to rectify that just as soon as I reassured myself she wasn't hurt.

When I walked into the bakery, I got a look from Ellie, but she didn't stop me. I figured that was a good sign. Deep down, Ellie and Travis were rooting for me despite my screw-up.

I kept moving, not taking in the space, the destruction, or the other people present. There was nobody but her. She looked exhausted and stressed. I wanted to help. I wanted to be the one to protect her. I never wanted to leave her side again.

"Are you going to help out, or are you just here to kiss the beautiful baker?" Cade asked good-naturedly.

Cade offered me a crew, but he and his brother, Nolan, showed up, too. They must have put their jobs on hold so they could help, and I was grateful. The construction business was a tight-knit group of men who were there for each other. I loved it.

Ignoring Cade's teasing comment, I brushed a strand of Sophie's hair back from her face. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving, actually."

"Let's get you something to eat." I didn't think the worry or fear would ease for a while. But I'd take care of her.

"Let's get breakfast."

She tipped her head to the side. "An official date?"

"An official date. Our first since high school."

She smiled. "Let's do it."

"You're not going to stick around and help, are you?" Cade asked.

While we'd talked, half of the damaged items were already cleared. "Sophie needs to eat, and I'm hoping when we get back, this place will look more put together."

Understanding passed over Cade's face. "We're on it. Don't worry about anything."

Sophie wrung her fingers in front of her. "I can't thank you enough for dropping everything to help."

"We're all part of the same community. Family, if you will," Cade said to her.

Sophie smiled, but I could see she was near her breaking point.

"We'll be back." I interlaced my fingers with her and drew her away.

I wanted to take her away from everything. She needed to relax, and being around the destruction was only going to increase her distress.

“Thank you for getting me out of there,” Sophie said once we were out on the sidewalk.

I paused, turning so I faced her. “You need to eat.”

“It’s more than that. I should be in there, but...” Her voice trailed off as she gestured over her shoulder.

I tugged her closer to me. “It’s better you’re not. You put everything into that bakery, and to see it that way—”

Her nose scrunched. “It sucks.”

I chuckled. “It does.”

Looking up, I noticed Ellie standing next to Travis by the front door.

Ellie raised a brow. “Are you going to take care of my sister?”

“We’re going to get breakfast,” Sophie answered, not realizing Ellie’s double meaning.

“I am,” I said seriously, trying to convey that I meant now and in the future in those two words.

Ellie nodded, seemingly appeased. “Good.”

“Do you want to come with us?” Sophie asked Ellie and her father.

Travis shook his head. “We’re going to help inside. You two have fun.”

They disappeared inside, and Sophie shrugged. “Usually, the family wants in on any outings.”

“I think they were trying to give us space.” Which I appreciated. I wanted Sophie to myself.

We headed down the sidewalk in the direction of the harbor. The white triangular sails of the boats bobbed in the water.

“That’s a rare thing with four sisters.”

I pulled her to my side. “Enjoy it. Because we have Kendall at home.”

She looked up at me. “I didn’t realize how much I needed you this morning until you weren’t there. When I saw the broken glass, the man, all I could think about was how much I wished you were jogging by this morning.”

My stomach roiled at the thought of her in danger.

“Would you have called me first thing if I hadn’t said what I did yesterday?” I knew the answer. When we were younger, Sophie came to me with everything. I’d created this distance between us, and I needed to fix it.

She sighed. “Probably.”

“Thank you for being honest with me.”

The streets were relatively quiet at this time of day. “I’m going to make mistakes. I’ve never been in this role of dad before. I haven’t been in a serious relationship since we were kids. The stakes are higher, the risks greater. But there’s no one else I’d rather explore this with than you.”

She squeezed my hand. “I’d say you’re doing a pretty good job.”

“I can’t believe this is the first time we’ve hung out, just the two of us, in public since I’ve been back.” It was one more thing I needed to rectify. Kendall knew about us. My parents. Her parents. There was no reason not to take her out.

“You’ve been busy since school and work started.”

“I’m going to do better.”

“I don’t want to step on any toes, but I enjoy doing things with you and Kendall. Unless you don’t want me there.” She was being vulnerable with me, but I didn’t want her to feel that she didn’t belong with us because she did.

I paused, turning to face her. “You are my family.”

Her eyes softened. “I love hearing that.”

“They’re not just pretty words. It’s the truth. We’ve been each other’s family since we were kids, and I’m beyond happy that we found our way back to each other.”

We continued walking to Dock Street, where most of the restaurants were located.

“When I decided to move home with Kendall, I couldn’t quite place my finger on why it was so important to me. I didn’t have high expectations that my parents would be better grandparents or anything. But now, I think it was you. On some level, I knew you brought out the best in me, and I needed to be near you.”

“Mark—”

I placed a finger over her lips. “I need you. Kendall needs you.”

“I need you too.”

We belonged together. We had since we were teens. I wasn’t going to walk away from her ever again.

“Table for two?” the hostess standing outside The Iron Rooster asked.

“Please.” I held Sophie’s hand as we made our way through the tables to sit.

We ate breakfast. We talked about everything and nothing. We talked about our past and our future. Contentment filled my chest. As long as we were together, I could handle anything that came our way. We’d be there for each other. We’d be unstoppable together.



That night, I convinced Sophie that she should come over for dinner. I involved Kendall in figuring out what to make. We decided on a cheesy chicken pasta dish with garlic bread, mainly because we’d be able to make it without too much trouble. I bought a bouquet of flowers for the table and a bottle of red wine.

While I prepared dinner, Kendall baked a chocolate cake with vanilla frosting. I think she wanted to show Sophie what she could do.

At seven, Sophie rang the doorbell.

Maybe because I'd dreamt of being with Sophie my whole life, I was in a rush to move to the next step, the one where we were already living together. Where we could have chosen dinner together as a family and enjoyed making it together.

Kendall opened the door.

Sophie stepped inside. "It smells delicious."

"We made chicken, pasta, and a cake."

"I'm excited to taste everything." Sophie glanced around the room, her gaze pausing on the kitchen table that was already set with dishes and silverware, cloth napkins, lit candles, and flowers.

My dining room was empty. I'd need to get a table for it. Maybe even make my own. I'd talked to Ethan about his process, and I was eager to try to make something more complicated than Sophie's shelves.

"Thanks for inviting me to dinner," Sophie said to us.

I poured the wine for us and grape juice for Kendall. "I hope it's the first of many nights together."

Sophie smiled. "Me too."

We sat at the table to eat, talking about school, the progress at the bakery, and my work. It was a nice night. One I wanted to have again and again. After we'd cleaned up, Kendall showed Sophie the cake.

"It looks great, Kendall. I'm so proud of you."

Kendall preened with the praise. "I wasn't sure I got the icing right."

Sophie swiped her finger over the icing, licking it. "It tastes great."

"I kept playing with the milk until I got it the way I wanted it."

"What kind of mixer do you have?" Sophie asked her.

"It's just a hand mixer. So my arm was getting tired."

“You should have a stand mixer,” Sophie said thoughtfully to Kendall and then rushed to add, “If that’s okay with you.”

“Whatever she needs.”

Kendall’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Your birthday is coming up.” I was happy to support this hobby. She was learning a skill.

“You can pick out the color,” Sophie said.

“You pick the color of a mixer?” I asked.

“This one you do,” Sophie said, exchanging a smile with Kendall.

This mixer sounded expensive, but if it was what Kendall was interested in, she should have a good one. She struggled with the hand mixer, saying it had gotten too heavy to hold.

I loved that Sophie and Kendall shared an interest in baking. It made a connection between them that much easier, but I had a feeling they would have found something else to bond over, regardless.

Kendall cut the cake, and we ate, standing at the island countertop. I could easily imagine more evenings like this. Kendall testing out various recipes and us enjoying them.

A little while later, Kendall was flipping through the TV menu, looking for a movie to watch. Sophie placed the cake carefully in a box, and I found a spot for it in the fridge.

“Is Melanie staying in town?” Sophie asked hesitantly.

It was probably her way of asking if Melanie was sticking around. “She’s staying at Juliana’s Bed & Breakfast for now.”

“You think she’ll move here?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know. She stopped by to see Kendall earlier. Kendall seems really upset with her.”

“When she was leaving, she said she was willing to discuss a custody agreement.” Avery had said it was best if we could come to an agreement without involving the court.

“I’m going to push for Kendall to stay here. If Melanie wants to see her, she’ll need to move here.” I struggled with that decision, but Kendall said she wanted to stay in Annapolis, so I’d do anything to make that happen.

I glanced at the family room to make sure Kendall wasn’t paying attention and lowered my voice. “Kendall needs her mother. I hope for her sake she wants to be involved.”

“That would be best,” Sophie said.

“My plan is for us to live in Annapolis as a family.”

Sophie’s eyes widened, and I realized what I said. I held up my hands. “I meant, me, Kendall, and you. I wasn’t including Melanie in that. We’ve never been a family.”

Sophie nodded. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

I drew her close to me. “You and Kendall make me happy.

Tipping her chin up with my finger, I kissed her softly, cognizant that Kendall was nearby.

“Are you going to watch this movie, or can I pick?” Kendall’s voice broke through my consciousness.

I lifted my head, smiling at Sophie. I knew it would be the first of many interruptions. “We’re coming.”

Taking Sophie’s hand and interlacing my fingers with hers, I pulled her toward the living room.

Kendall’s face was pinched. “There’s nothing to watch.”

“What about *Field of Dreams*, *A League of Their Own*, or *The Rookie*?”

“Sports movies?”

“They’re inspiring, even if you don’t play sports.”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s a cooking movie you’re going to love,” Sophie said, holding her hand out to Kendall.

“A cooking movie?” I asked as Kendall passed Sophie the remote over my lap.

Kendall smiled triumphantly. “You’re outnumbered now.”

“I think I’ve always been.” Whenever I was with Kendall, I was consumed with making sure I was the best dad. I deferred to her needs. Now I had Sophie to think about, too. But it didn’t feel like a hardship. Love made everything easier. You ate food you didn’t think you would. You watched movies you didn’t particularly care for. As long as my girls were happy, then I was, too.

“There it is. *Julie and Julia*.” Sophie hit play on the trailer and settled into the couch cushions.

“No one cares if I want to watch this movie?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

Sophie looked at Kendall, who giggled. “Not really.”

I shook my head and stretched my arms over the back of the couch. Kendall was on one side, Sophie on the other. “You two are lucky I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” Kendall said, snuggling into my side.

When was the last time Kendall said she loved me? It was usually written on a hand-drawn picture or note or said over the phone. In person was so much more rewarding. I’d cherish this time I’d get with her, watching her grow into a teen and then an adult. I was grateful for everything I had.

My chest was warm, my heart overflowing with contentment. I loved both of them so much.

After traveling all over, I’d finally found the place my heart belonged—here in Annapolis, with Kendall and Sophie.

Chapter Twenty-Four

With the help of Cade's construction crew that showed up the morning of the break-in, the bakery was put back together quickly. It took a few more days for the new tools and supplies to be delivered.

As much as I wanted to be involved in the smaller details of fixing the bakery, I needed to focus on Ethan and Savannah's wedding. It was the first wedding I was involved in with Gia, Abby, and Lily, and everyone wanted it to be perfect. Not only because the bride and groom were our friends, but because we were motivated to ensure Gia's wedding planning business was a success. It benefitted all our businesses, including the town and other stores and restaurants in the area.

Weddings would draw more customers and tourists to Annapolis. The pressure was immense, but all I needed to deliver was one perfect wedding cake.

To ease my nerves, I baked and decorated a smaller-tiered replica so I could ease my mind.

"It's perfect," Mark said, licking icing off his finger.

"Are you sure?" My stomach twisted with nerves.

Mark came around the counter and put his arm around my shoulders. "You're putting too much pressure on yourself. You know how to bake a cake."

"Yeah, but—" I wasn't sure where this anxiety was coming from. The stakes seemed bigger than usual. It was like my

entire future hinged on the success of this one wedding.

“And it’s gorgeous.”

I’d painstakingly decorated it to match what Savannah envisioned. I’d even gone a little overboard with the cascading flowers. There was nothing wrong with delivering more than the bride asked for. But my shoulders and back ached with the hours I’d spent hunched over the sample cake.

He guided me out of the kitchen and toward my office. “You need to relax.”

I raised a brow. “And you know just how to do that?”

He smirked. “I do, actually.”

Thinking he had plans for the sofa in my office, I shivered, my skin tingling with anticipation. I turned to face him, expecting him to draw me close for a kiss. Instead, he merely raised a brow.

“What?” I asked as I looked around the office.

My beat-up desk, couch, and old shelves were cleared out, and in its place was a beautiful desk, one wall of shelves, and black leather chairs—a swivel one for my desk and two others for guests. “What did you do?”

Mark smiled big. “I made you new furniture. I bought the chairs.”

“You made this?” I moved closer, admiring the natural wood stain on the desk and the bronzed hardware, and ran my fingers over the intricate detail on the front.

“You deserve everything. Not just a beautiful store, but an amazing kitchen and a relaxing place to work.”

“This is incredible. I can’t believe you did this for me.” I ran my palm across the smooth top of the wood.

“I wasn’t sure I could do it, but Ethan helped with the design and answered all my questions. Colton helped me move your old stuff out and set up the new things.”

“You’re incredibly talented.” I could make something out of flour and sugar, but this was something else entirely.

Mark was content with his work at Morrison Brothers Construction, but I could easily see him creating custom furniture on the side.

“Did you see the pictures on the wall?” Mark asked, his tone filled with excitement.

There were framed pictures of me and my sisters, my dad, and even a few of Mark and me when we were younger. My eyes pricked with tears. “I love these.”

“I wanted you to have a relaxing space that was all yours.” His voice was concerned, as if he were worried I wouldn’t like what he’d done.

I looked around the upgraded room, feeling more professional already. Less like an imposter and more like a confident businesswoman. I turned to him, placing my hands in his chest. “I love it. Thank you.”

“I’ve wanted to do this for you since the first time you brought me in here to show me the dog-eared picture of the storage shelves you wanted.”

I smiled at the memory. “I can’t believe it made that much of an impression on you.”

Mark rested his forehead on mine. “It was pretty bad, especially when you compared it to the front counter area and the kitchen.”

“I thought it wouldn’t make a difference if my shelves or my office were nice, but it does.” The custom shelves made it easier to organize my supplies, and it took less time to gather everything I needed in the morning. Plus, I felt amazing when I looked at it.

“It’s time you came first, Sophie.”

“Hmm.” My heart soared, because that’s what I’d always wanted. I just didn’t realize that it had to start with me. I needed to start putting myself first, or no one else would.

Mark pulled back slightly, his hand cupping my face before he slowly sank to one knee.

I sucked in a breath, my heart tripping over itself.

He took my hand in both of his. “Sophie, I’ve loved you since we were kids. You challenge me to be a better person. You taught me what love and family are. I’m complete when I’m with you.”

He drew in a steadying breath, his eyes filled with emotion. “I will always put you first. I want to be the one who gives you everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“I only want you.” As I stared into his familiar brown eyes, everything was clear. I loved Mark. I wanted to build a family with him. I wanted everything with him.

“I’m not going anywhere, and I’m going to prove it to you for the rest of our lives. Annapolis is our home.”

“I love you.”

“I’m not done yet.” He smiled, his nerves seemingly dissipating. Holding on to my hand with his, he reached into his back pocket with his free hand to pull out a velvet box.

My heart thudded heavily in my chest. I wanted to slow this moment down and replay it again and again.

Mark looked up at me with so much love and affection in his voice, my heart clenched. “Sophie, will you marry me?”

My eyes filled with tears as I sank to my knees, cupping his face in my hands. “Yes.”

He kissed me, and I was surrounded by him—his presence, his warmth, and his love.

I’d imagined this moment many times when I was younger, and nothing compared to it. Because we were older, more mature, and we knew exactly what we wanted. We were no longer boats floating in the water without an oar. We were captains of our own ships. I knew I needed to grab on to Mark with both hands and never let go.

Mark drew back, gliding the ring onto my finger. “I love seeing my ring on your finger.”

Tears slid down my cheeks.

He wiped them away. “Are you happy?”

“So happy. I can’t even express how much.” My heart was overflowing with it.

He smiled. “You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life.”

“There’s no other place I’d rather be.”

“Ellie took Kendall for the night.”

“I have you all to myself?”

Mark stood, tugging me with him. “So, if you’re done with practicing on that cake.”

I smiled wide. “I’m done.”

“Then let’s go home.”

I liked that he referred to his house as home. I never stayed overnight. Yet we spent most of our free time together. But I was ready for the next step. I wanted to live with Mark and Kendall. I wanted to be a family.

Melanie rented an apartment in town so that she could visit and repair her relationship with Kendall. Mark and Melanie worked on a custody agreement that allowed her to see Kendall on Wednesdays and every other weekend. I think Melanie realized the damage she’d done when she left Kendall and was motivated to make some changes.

We quickly cleaned up the kitchen and locked up.

At home, Mark led me to his room. At the foot of the bed, he turned to face me, my hands in his. “This is the first time I’ve brought you here as my fiancée.”

I felt lighter, yet my entire body vibrated at a higher frequency. “It feels different.”

His thumb caressed a path over my cheek. “I want many more nights with you in this house and my room. I love having you here.”

“Me too.”

He kissed me; it started out slow and easy, then steadily grew deeper. His hands framed my face, making me feel

cherished. We slowly removed each other's clothes, reveling in having more time to explore.

When I was naked, he dropped to his knees, spreading my legs. I tangled my fingers in his hair as he looked up at me. "I want to worship you for the rest of our lives."

I smiled softly. "Yes, please."

He moved closer to the apex of my thighs. Breathing me in, he parted my folds.

My breath hitched, and my nipples pebbled in anticipation. I arched into his mouth, needing him closer.

"You need my tongue? My fingers?"

I nodded. "Mark. I need you."

"I got you," he said before his tongue circled my clit.

I rocked over his mouth, needing more friction, more of his tongue and lips. I'd never get enough.

His finger entered me, pumping in and out as his mouth devoured me. I wouldn't last long. I swayed on my feet as the need spiraled higher.

Mark moved one of my legs over his shoulder, opening me even more to him. He held me steady so I wouldn't fall. I should have felt exposed, but instead, I felt loved. Cherished.

He added a second finger as he sucked my clit into his mouth, and I exploded. My head fell back, and goose bumps erupted over my skin as my pussy clamped around his fingers. Before I could come down, Mark lifted me onto the bed. With an arm banded around my back, he rested me carefully onto the comforter like I was something that might break if he wasn't gentle.

He kissed my face, my chest, my nipples, and lower, murmuring how much he loved me and how excited he was to be my husband. His words flowed over me like a breeze on a warm summer's day.

I tangled my fingers in his hair and tugged lightly so he'd look up at me. "I love you."

He moved me up the bed, taking my mouth with his. Easing back, he looked into my eyes as his cock nudged my entrance. "I love you."

Then he slid inside me, filling me up with his love. His eyes shone with emotion, love, and tenderness.

He slowly rocked inside me. He wasn't in a rush. It was as if he wanted to savor this moment forever. I moaned when my second orgasm caught me by surprise.

Only then did Mark pick up the pace, lowering himself over me, his mouth on my neck, kissing and occasionally nipping me with his teeth, soothing me with a flick of his tongue. He thrust deep, shuddering as he collapsed on top of me. He quickly rolled to the side, cradling me in his arms.

It was always so good with him, and I knew this was only the beginning. We had an amazing future ahead of us, with our businesses, Kendall, and hopefully, more children.

He was my chance at forever, and I was so happy I took it.

Epilogue

The morning of our first official Happily Ever Afters wedding, I was a nervous wreck. Not only would there be potential clients among the guests, but the other vendors in town would be watching us to see if we could deliver.

Since it was Savannah and Ethan's wedding, all our friends were invited. Mark and Kendall were my plus ones, but I wouldn't be spending much time relaxing with them. It was my responsibility to bake and decorate the cake and ensure its safe delivery. I didn't have a van yet, but Lily let me borrow hers.

In the driver's seat, Mark ran a hand through his hair. "If this hunk of junk makes it to the reception hall, I'll be surprised."

My stomach twisted tighter. "Don't say that."

It was a nostalgic blue VW van Lily had inherited from her grandmother. She took care of it, but there was no getting around the fact it needed work. I knew she would never consider trading it in for something more reliable. It was her baby.

Sighing, I said, "I'm going to need to invest in a refrigerated van."

Mark glanced over at me sympathetically. "You need something reliable."

I knew my business couldn't grow without these upgrades. "It was nice of Lily to loan it to me, though."

Mark grunted a response.

When we finally pulled around the circle to the historic inn in downtown Annapolis, my neck was tight with tension. I wouldn't relax until the cake was safely resting on its assigned table. Or maybe not until it was cut, and the plates were passed around with nothing but crumbs left, and wedding guests sat back in their chairs with satisfied bellies.

Pulling around to the rear of the venue, Mark parked the van in the unloading zone and reached over to cover my hand with his. "You've got this."

It wasn't like I hadn't baked a cake for a wedding before, but this one represented the future of my bakery's partnership with Gia's wedding planning service, Happily Ever Afters, Lily's flower shop, Petals, and Abby's photography business. Gia recently signed a contract with Harrison, whose business was linens, tables, chairs, and silverware.

Gia truly wanted to be a one-stop shop. The more I observed her, the more I believed in her and her plan. This had the potential to be huge, and I didn't want to screw anything up.

I flexed my fingers, swallowed, and then nodded to Mark. "I do."

He smiled and then leaned over to kiss me. "Your cake is perfect."

It was technically the only thing I had to worry about, but since our success depended on each piece operating smoothly, we were invested in the entire night being a success.

As usual, Mark was able to ground me with a few words and a kiss. "Thanks for helping today."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be." When we needed to build a gazebo, archway, or backdrop for the vow portion of a ceremony, he'd offered up his crew at Morrison Brothers Construction.

“Happily Ever Afters is going to be the go-to wedding planner in Annapolis.”

I sighed, releasing some of the tension I’d been holding on to. “I hope you’re right.”

Outside the window, Harrison’s employees were unloading tables and chairs from the truck. Throwing a wedding was a big production. Some venues had supplies, but they weren’t usually the ones the bride preferred. Gia prided herself on giving the bride and groom exactly what they wanted.

“Let’s do this,” Mark said with more confidence than I was feeling.

The cake was so important for a wedding. It was the symbol of the reception. The one thing every guest oohed and ahed over as they waited for the bride and groom to arrive.

“We need to get things settled so we can get to the church and be guests.” Normally, we wouldn’t be both guest and vendor. The added stress and responsibility was getting to me.

We met at the back of the van. I didn’t breathe out a sigh of relief until Mark opened the doors and the cake was in the exact position we’d left it.

“You need help to move it?” Harrison stood behind us.

I nodded. “I’d appreciate that.”

Harrison called over a couple of his workers, and we had the cake positioned safely on the table in no time. I circled the table, making sure nothing was jostled in the move.

Mark threw an arm around me on my last rotation. “Relax. It’s perfect.”

I tapped a finger on my chin. “Hopefully, it tastes good.”

He kissed my temple. “There’s more to a wedding than a cake, you know.”

I smiled, turning in his arms to face him. “Are you sure about that?”

“There are the flowers.” Mark nodded to the table centerpieces and the archway of flowers where the guests

entered the room. “The tables, chairs, linens, and don’t forget the pictures. The memories are what’s important.”

I wondered if he was thinking about our wedding. “You’re right. The cake is just one small part.”

Gia came over. “Your cake is beautiful.”

Butterflies swirled in my stomach. “I hope Savannah and Ethan think so.”

“No doubt they will. It’s gorgeous.”

I let Gia’s praise wash over me. Her business was weddings, and if she said the cake was good, I believed her. “Do you need help with anything?”

Gia shook her head. “You get to the church so you can represent us. Lily and Abby are already there.”

There were flowers at the church that Lily had set up last night. And Abby would be documenting the wedding party getting ready behind the scenes.

“I can do that.”

Gia was the sole wedding planner, but I knew she wanted to add more. If the business expanded as she hoped, she wouldn’t be able to handle everything herself.

Gia glanced from me to Mark. “I’ll be there soon to get things moving.”

I hugged Gia. “It’s going to be great.”

“We’ll be delivering happily ever afters for years to come,” Gia said with a confident smile.

If she was nervous or stressed, it didn’t show. I admired her confidence.

At the church, guests were ushered to their seats. I left Mark to find a spot for us and made my way to the suites on the second floor reserved for the bridal party.

In the groom’s room, the door was open. Lily wore a pale pink dress and stood with her assistant, who held a tray of white rose boutonnieres.

Abby was already behind her camera, documenting everything. Her movements were quiet and unobtrusive.

Ethan's wedding party included Max as his best man, Alex, Savannah's brother, Easton, the owner of ReSails, and a couple of family members I hadn't met yet. His soon-to-be stepson, Miles, looked adorable in a tailored tux.

Ethan took one of the boutonnieres from Lily's hands and crouched down in front of Miles. "You ready for this?"

Miles nodded solemnly. "You're going to be my daddy."

My eyes teared up at his declaration. His father had died in a car accident before he was born. Ethan was the only father he'd ever known.

Ethan took a few seconds before he took a deep breath and responded. "That's right."

He pinned the flower on his lapel. "It's a big responsibility."

"I know."

My heart clenched. Miles was adorable, and it made me wonder if Mark and I should move up our timeline to have a baby. Kendall was already pressuring us for a little brother or sister. I wanted her to be in our baby's life for as long as possible.

Ethan ruffled Miles's hair and stood to say to me, "I have a surprise for Savannah."

I shifted in my heels. "I thought you didn't want to see your bride before she walks down the aisle?"

"This is something I need to do beforehand." Ethan smiled, and something told me this wasn't something he'd necessarily planned on doing, but the sweet moment with Miles had motivated him to change his mind.

Instead of asking him to wait for Gia, who I was confident would know the right thing to do, I said, "We can make it happen."

That was Gia's motto. She'd said it many times over the past few months of our partnership. I knew it's what she'd want me to say, and she'd want me to handle it now and not wait.

"Let's go talk to Savannah. I need to give them their bouquets," Lily said.

We filed out of the room, Abby following us. She probably wanted to capture whatever was about to happen.

Ethan reached out to touch my shoulder. "Tell Savannah Miles and I have a gift for her."

"You want to be alone?"

"Yes."

"Is it okay if Abby documents it?" I asked, noticing one of the groomsmen was tracking Abby's movements.

"Absolutely." Ethan radiated pure joy.

It made me think of my wedding day with Mark. Would he plan a special gift or a surprise? I knew it wouldn't matter. If he felt anything like Ethan did, I'd be a lucky woman.

I could see why Gia had chosen wedding planning as her profession. She was orchestrating the perfect day, but it was so much more than that. She was creating beautiful memories that Savannah, Ethan, and Miles would remember for years to come.

"Let's do this," I said to Ethan, who smiled.

"We'll let you know when you can join us," Lily said as we exited the room.

The bridal suite's door was closed, so I knocked. The maid of honor, Ava, answered the door in a red wine-colored dress.

"We have flowers," Lily said with a smile.

"Say no more." Ava opened the door wider.

We slipped inside. Lily's assistant held several bouquets in her hands that she set up on a makeshift stand that would hold the flowers until the bridal party was ready for them. While

Lily and her assistant were busy setting them up, I sought out Savannah.

I sensed Abby clicking pictures as she made her way around the room.

Savannah stood in front of the mirror. Ethan momentarily forgotten, I said, “You look beautiful.”

Savannah smoothed a hand down her skirt. “I can’t believe this day is here.”

“It is, and you’re gorgeous.”

“How is Miles?” Savannah asked.

“He’s ready to go. Speaking of, Ethan wants to give you a gift.”

Her eyes widened. “He doesn’t want to wait to see me?”

“He said the surprise couldn’t wait until later.”

Savannah rested a palm over her chest. “I think seeing him alone would help my nerves. I’m ready.”

“We’ll clear out the room. Abby will stay out of the way to get the moment, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.”

“Ethan has a surprise for his bride. Do you all mind waiting in the hall?” I asked the bridesmaids and Ava.

“I can’t wait to see what it is,” Savannah’s mother said on her way out.

“I’ll get Ethan and Miles,” I said to Savannah.

Her gaze returned to the mirror.

I retrieved Ethan and Miles and stayed in the hall so as not to intrude. Miles hung back as Ethan entered the room, his movements hesitant.

Savannah turned, and her eyes widened when she saw him.

He moved to her as if drawn by some invisible force. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Savannah looked at him with so much love on her face.

My heart contracted and released. I tipped my head back to discourage the tears from falling. I knew Gia would be nearby to assist if necessary, so I stayed.

“Miles and I have something we’d like to give you.”

Ethan gestured for Savannah to take a seat on the chaise lounge and for Miles to join him. Ethan went down on one knee and held his hand out to Miles, who handed him a folded piece of paper.

I expected a jewelry box, not paperwork.

Ethan slowly unfolded it. “I know we talked about waiting until after the wedding, but I couldn’t. I want Miles to be my son. This wedding is as much about him as it is about us.”

Savannah’s eyes teared up as her hands came together in front of her face.

With shaking hands, he handed the paperwork to her.

“These are the adoption papers?” Savannah asked, looking from him to Miles.

Ethan smiled wide, the nerves gone. “We need to attend a hearing to make it official.”

“I want Ethan to be my daddy,” Miles said.

I blinked back the tears, knowing my makeup wouldn’t survive the threatening onslaught.

“I want that too,” Savannah said as she hugged Miles.

Gia liked to be part of every second of a wedding to ensure nothing went wrong, but I didn’t feel right eavesdropping any longer. I moved farther down the hall to get myself together.

“Everything all right?” Gia asked, her normally calm demeanor slipping slightly when she saw me.

“Ethan was just giving Savannah a present. I wanted to give them privacy.”

Gia looked at her watch. “We have fifteen minutes.”

“The bridal party is ready. Abby has been quietly taking pictures of everything.” She was so stealthy I didn’t think

anyone even noticed her in the room.

Except for that one groomsman. I made a note to tease Abby about it later. Her husband left when their child was born. He was on the periphery but not involved enough to be a factor in her life. She deserved something for herself, even if it was only a one-night stand.

Ethan ducked his head into the hallway. His smile grew when he found Gia. “Can we get started?”

Gia stood, her expression professional, and ushered him into the groom’s room. “Just about.”

I watched as Gia efficiently lined everyone up, the men led by Miles heading down the steps first, then the bridesmaids, and finally, the bride.

“Why don’t you go downstairs and watch with Mark? I have this.”

“If you’re sure?”

Gia merely smiled before nudging me in the direction the men had just gone. I slipped inside the sanctuary and sat next to Mark. He immediately placed an arm around me.

“Everything good?” he asked, and I nodded.

When the pianist played the familiar wedding march, we stood.

I watched as my friends got married, Savannah’s—no, *their* son, Miles, stealing the show when he handed Ethan the ring and solemnly asked him to take care of his mother.

As soon as the wedding party filed out, Mark walked me out, and we headed to the reception. There wasn’t much for me to do, but I wanted to help Gia if she needed it.

In the hall, I stood with Lily, watching as the guests arrived to get their table assignments and see the cake.

“It’s beautiful,” Lily reassured me.

“So you’re saying I can relax now?”

“Let’s enjoy the reception. We’re guests, after all. Gia will let us know if she needs us.”

Lily sat at the table with Abby and a few other single guests. I took my spot next to Mark at the table with our Shops on Main friends: Zoe and Max, Remi and Colton, Hailey and Ryan, Brooke and Ben, and the as-long-as-I’ve-known-him single guy, Easton.

“Who’s going to be next?” Zoe asked, her gaze slowly traveling around the table.

We knew what she was referring to: Which one of us would be the next to get married? Being the most recent couple to get engaged, I figured she wasn’t looking for an answer from me and Mark.

“Right now, I’m happy being engaged. I’ll know when it’s the right time,” Remi said as Colton put an arm around her, drawing her close.

“How will you know?” I couldn’t help but ask her, even if I wasn’t in the same position as her and Colton.

“It’s a feeling I get. Right now, I’m blissfully happy with the way things are.” Remi gazed at Colton with affection as he leaned over to kiss her temple.

Most of our friends were already engaged, in that happy place, where their lives were full of possibility and looming decisions, whether to buy a new home together, set a date to get married, and if and when to have kids. Would Mark be in a rush to set a wedding date?

Mark squeezed my hand. “I’m just happy to be engaged.”

A sense of rightness washed over me. I was exactly where I was supposed to be—with the man of my dreams—and my friends.

“We’ve talked about it,” Zoe said quietly, bringing everyone’s attention to her and Max.

Max leaned back in his chair slightly, an arm slung over the back of Zoe’s. “We’d like something more casual.”

“But I don’t want to get married at the bar,” Zoe said, nudging Max’s shoulder with hers. Max owned Max’s Bar & Grill. The private room upstairs was used for engagement parties, but he’d never hosted a wedding.

“You’ll figure out the perfect spot,” Hailey said.

“Just give it some time, and the perfect solution will come to you,” Remi added with a smile.

The owner of the juice shop, Remi, also led yoga and meditation classes. When I attended, I remembered her talking about the importance of listening to your intuition.

Mine was telling me that this business venture with Gia’s wedding planning business was my future. And this relationship with Mark was my happily ever after.

Mark used a finger to turn my chin toward him and kissed me.

The guests cheered around us. Savannah and Ethan must have arrived.

Everyone’s attention was on the DJ announcing the happy couple, but Mark’s gaze was on me. “I’m happy.”

“Me too.”

He lowered his voice and said, “We have the rest of our lives to make the big decisions. I just want to enjoy this happy middle.”

“I couldn’t have said it better.” Mark kissed me, this time a little deeper, making me wish we were alone.

Silverware tinkled on glasses, so we reluctantly turned our attention to the front of the room where Ethan obliged his guests by kissing Savannah.

The room erupted in cheers again, but the attention turned to the servers who were passing out the salads.

The energy in the room picked up now that the bride and groom had arrived. Their love was evident to everyone.

After dinner was served, Savannah danced with Miles and then Ethan. When the wedding party paired off, Mark asked,

“Would you dance with me?”

“Of course.” I took his hand.

After a glass of champagne, I could finally relax. The cake hadn't been cut, but I already felt like the wedding was a success.

Mark stood tall as he held my hand in his and placed the other on my lower back. “I told you the cake was gorgeous.”

“It is.” It was the centerpiece of the room, but it was really Savannah and Ethan's love for each other that eclipsed all the smaller details of the wedding.

“I know I said we don't have to decide anything yet, but have you thought about our wedding?” Mark ducked his head and murmured into my ear.

“All day, actually.” Each time I saw Ethan look at Savannah or Miles, I wondered if Mark would look at me like that on our day.

He eased back slightly to see my face. “What were you thinking about?”

I took a few seconds to gather my thoughts. “This was perfect for Ethan and Savannah, but I want something a little simpler. I want our families to celebrate together, but I don't have a vision for the location. I'm not sure the smaller details matter.”

“We don't have to have everything figured out yet.”

“We can do that together.” My heart bloomed with contentment. I'd never felt a more honed sense of rightness. I was exactly where I was supposed to be. Things had come full circle, and I was finally back in Mark's arms, planning the future we were destined to have all along.

“This is just the beginning of our forever,” Mark said with a smile.

“I love that.”

“Thank you for taking a chance on me. No matter what happened in the past, everything we went through led to this

moment.”

My heart soared at his words. Every hurt and every heartache led to this indescribable joy.

He drew me closer to him as we swayed. The rest of the room faded away until it was just us.

I hope you loved Sophie and Mark’s story! If you want to read more about their happily ever after, download their [bonus epilogue](#).

Abby and Nick’s story is next in [Feel My Love!](#) As a wedding photographer, I get to witness the magic, the romance, and the fairy tale without getting close enough for it to ever sting me again. Until Nick. I broke my number one rule and slept with the best man.

Read *Feel My Love* on [Lea’s shop](#).

Feel My Love

I moved quietly around the room, snapping pictures, adjusting settings, and observing the bridal party getting ready for Savannah and Ethan's wedding. My goal was to blend into the background, and I lived to capture candid moments. This time, the only difference was a groomsman tracking my movements.

I felt the heat of his gaze on the side of my face, my skin tingling with awareness. I refused to look at him, but an awareness prickled my skin. He was taller than the rest of the party, with broad shoulders and a booming voice that rumbled through my body whenever he spoke.

When another groomsman drew him into conversation, his gaze lifted, and I finally drew in a deep breath. Inwardly, I chided myself. I was here to document Savannah and Ethan's wedding, not flirt with a groomsman.

Ethan was speaking to Sophie, who'd baked the cake and was my partner in Gia's wedding planning business. I focused on what he was saying. He had a gift for Savannah and wanted to see her with her son, Miles, before the ceremony.

I'd worked quite a few weddings, and it wasn't out of the ordinary for a groom to change course and want to see his bride before the wedding, but I wasn't sure how Savannah would feel. Some brides got upset, claiming it would doom their wedding; others rolled with the change.

Not only was this the first wedding we'd done in partnership with Gia's Happily Ever Afters wedding planning

services, but Savannah and Ethan were our friends.

Sophie promised she'd talk to Savannah when they went to the bridal suite to deliver the bouquets. I needed to be present to document the florist, Lily, and her assistant handing out the flowers.

The hair on the back of my neck tingled. He was looking at me again. I needed to escape.

I wasn't sure if he was a friend or if he was related to Savannah or Ethan. I didn't know if he lived close by or if he'd traveled here just for the wedding. And it shouldn't matter.

I mindlessly scrolled through the images on my camera to avoid meeting his gaze as I followed Sophie and Lily out of the room. At the very last second, I lifted my gaze to meet the weight of his stare. Blue eyes, sandy brown hair, larger-than-life presence. He winked, and my heart stuttered to a stop before picking up speed.

I ducked my head as I stepped out of the room and away from the interest I'd seen in his eyes.

My words to my sister, Brooke, a few months ago danced in my head. I'd told her the truth—I was ready for something new. I was open to dating again, or maybe even a one-night stand. That was all I was willing to indulge in as the single mother of an eight-year-old boy.

Even though I'd carefully planned the pregnancy with my ex-husband, even undergoing fertility treatment, Bryson left shortly after I brought our son, Hunter, home from the hospital. Bryson said he wasn't ready to be a father and wasn't sure he ever would be. I was aware of his complicated relationship with his father, but I hadn't realized it would affect ours so profoundly.

Being a single mother was hard, and I'd probably always bear scars from my ex leaving me, but I was antsy for something different. I was finally ready to take care of my needs. I'd probably never want to get into a serious relationship again, but what harm was there in a little fun?

I had no idea if this groomsman was up for that, but his perusal suggested he was. Entering the bridal suite, I vowed to flirt with him at some point tonight, to let whatever would happen—happen.

I deserved one night where I could let go, and Hunter was conveniently spending the night with my parents. Was I going to let this opportunity pass by, or would I grab on to it with both hands?

My hands shook a little as I steadied the camera on the flowers. I refocused on my job, snapping pictures of the bridal party, Savannah's mother, and finally, the meeting between Ethan, Savannah, and her son, Miles.

Sophie and Lily ushered everyone out of the room before Ethan and Miles entered. With Savannah's permission, I stayed, being quiet and as unobtrusive as possible.

Gia was still at the reception hall, ensuring everything was ready to go there, but Sophie stood just outside the room, ready to step in if she was needed.

I held my hands steady, snapping Savannah's tear-filled eyes and their family hug. Once I was satisfied I'd memorialized the moment, I slipped out.

The bride and groom said they wanted everything documented, but there were times when it was unnecessary. I used my judgment to slip in and out to give them privacy. Memories weren't all wrapped up in photographs; sometimes they were wrapped up in a feeling or one of our senses.

I pushed out any thoughts of my wedding, how I'd hoped for a large family and a partner for life. It wasn't in the cards for me, but I couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement of the bride and groom.

I had responsibilities, my son, and my business. The only extracurriculars I'd be involved in were of the short, one-night stand variety. Remembering the man's wink from earlier, my body heated with anticipation.

We had a few minutes until the bridal party needed to line up. I moved farther down the empty hall to scroll through my

images and see if I'd caught the moment when Ethan said he wanted to be Miles's father.

Tears pricked my eyes at the love in Savannah's eyes. Miles's biological father died before he was born. Hunter's dad was still in his life, but more on the periphery than anything else. I felt a pang that there wouldn't be a man who could come in and be the father figure for Hunter and adopt him. Hunter had a father, just not the one he deserved.

I startled when the bathroom door across from me opened.

A man stepped out. My gaze traveled up slowly from his polished shoes to his nicely muscled thighs that were threatening to burst through his pants, then to his trim waist, broad shoulders, and familiar blue eyes. It was him. The guy who'd been watching me.

He glanced down the hall and then smiled at me. "You're alone."

My cheeks heated at his obvious pleasure. "Looks like it."

He stepped closer, and I let the hand that held the camera fall to my side. "I've been waiting to get you alone all day."

"You have?" My voice came out like a squeak.

This wasn't the meeting I'd imagined while I mindlessly scrolled through my camera. I'd envisioned him kissing me passionately. There'd be no words, only the frantic ripping off of clothes.

His lips twitched. "I've been watching you."

"I know." If I were more practiced in flirting, I would have asked if he liked what he saw, but I wasn't. I was rusty with the witty back and forth and the sexy innuendos. I was in over my head and questioning what I was doing in a hallway alone with a man this potent.

"You're gorgeous." His tone was filled with awe as his gaze slowly slid down my body, heating every inch of my skin at his perusal.

On Savannah's wedding day, it was beyond satisfying to know that I'd attracted someone's attention. I was dressed to

blend in and not stand out, but he'd noticed, anyway.

I licked my suddenly dry lips. "Thank you."

"Will I see you later?" His gaze returned to mine, the heat I'd seen banked there flaring to life, warming me from the inside out.

I shrugged, the casual motion belying my pounding heart. "I'm working."

He tipped his head to the side, as if my reaction amused him. "Do you get some time off? Maybe at the reception?"

I nodded, unable to speak without my voice breaking. I usually took my break after the cake was cut. That was the unofficial time for everyone to let loose.

He touched his hand to my cheek, and all I could do was blink up at him when he said, "I'll look for you."

He winked again and walked away with a swagger I couldn't tear my eyes from.

I should have said no. I should have told him I was a single mother, and he didn't want to get involved with me. But I wasn't looking for anything serious.

"Wait." My voice was breathless. I rested a hand over my stomach to settle the butterflies.

He paused and arched a single brow over his shoulder.

"I don't know your name." Maybe it was better without one. It was easier to fuck a nameless guy and then never see him again. I'd pretend he was a fantasy.

Finally, he said, "Nick."

He didn't move, and I assumed he was waiting for me to reciprocate, so I said, "Abby."

He smiled wide, seemingly satisfied at my reaction to him. "I'll look for you later, Abby."

This time when he walked away, I didn't feel regret, only anticipation. And I loved the sound of my name on his lips. It

was sinful, a promise of something delicious to come, and I was here for it.

He moved out of sight, and I sagged against the wall. When he focused on me, it was intense, like I was the only woman in the world. That feeling was addictive.

I'd indulge in Nick tonight, forget that I was a single mom with responsibilities, and enjoy an evening of freedom.



During the ceremony, I focused on getting the right angle, capturing the look in Ethan's eyes when Savannah walked down the aisle. That one took my breath away because he'd already seen her in that dress. What would it be like for a man to look at me like that?

Nick had looked more like a guy who wanted to devour me.

I snapped a shot of Miles holding Ethan's hand, so trusting and sweet, and the way Savannah's dad dabbed at the tears in his eyes when he thought no one was looking. This was why I wanted to be a photographer. I wanted to memorialize the moments people forgot about later. They could look back on these images, and it would bring back every emotion they felt that day.

Occasionally, I noticed Nick watching me, but I tuned it out. I only had one chance to get the perfect wedding shots—the photos that would hang over the mantel and on the wall for years to come.

After the ceremony, I was consumed with bridal party pictures. Gia was a tremendous help, positioning everyone so I could stay behind the lens.

It was a reminder that I needed to hire an assistant. Lily and Sophie had both hired one as soon as we signed on to partner with Gia. I was more cautious about expanding my business. Relying on my income alone to support Hunter and

me, I was conscious of not taking risks. Besides, I could do the job myself, even if it took longer.

The butterflies in my stomach never went away as I transitioned from the ceremony to the reception. There was this heightened anticipation that I'd see Nick later. Would he buy me a drink? Would he want to talk? Or would he want to take me to a room and have his way with me?

I kind of liked the latter option. I was always tired, and I just wanted to lose myself in the promise I saw in this man's eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I worked the reception, taking pictures of the couple's arrival, the dances, the toasts, and finally, the cake. By that point, my feet ached. I sat in one of the chairs at an empty table in the back of the room, hoping to be ignored for a few minutes.

"You look like you could use a drink." Nick stood next to me, looking handsome in his tux as he placed a glass of champagne in front of me.

"That and a foot massage." I tipped the glass back, the bubbly liquid flowing down my throat.

Pulling out a chair, he sat next to me and asked, "May I?"

He gestured toward my leg, then to his lap. I nodded, unable to form words. Despite the drink, my throat was dry.

There was a sly smile on Nick's mouth as he pulled my leg into his lap. His calloused hands on my bare skin sent tingles up my calf, my thigh, then to my center.

"That feels good already." Was I that hard up for a man's touch?

He looked up at me with a grin. "I haven't even gotten to the good part."

"You sure haven't." All I could think about was him moving those strong, capable hands under my skirt and up my thighs. My core clenched in response to my dirty thoughts.

With a wink, he slipped my heel off and set it carefully on the floor.

We were hidden by the tablecloth, but I still looked around the room to see if Gia or anyone else was looking for me. For now, everyone was crowded around the dance floor, having a good time.

His thumb pressed into the ball of my foot, and a moan escaped my lips.

His easy grin faded. His eyes heated as he looked over at me. “I’d like to hear more of that.”

I gestured at where his fingers were working their magic on my feet. “You always give random women foot massages at weddings?”

He chuckled, and it rumbled up my legs to my core. “Never, actually.”

“I’m special?” I asked softly, wincing at my characterization. Ever since Bryson walked out, I’d felt anything but.

His gaze met mine. “You are one of a kind. Beautiful. Strong. Hardworking.”

Something sizzled under my skin at his words. “How do you know that?”

He returned his attention to my foot. “I’ve been watching you.”

His attention made me feel wanted, desired. I glanced at the time on my phone. As much as I was enjoying his massage, it was still early. I wasn’t sure if I’d get a chance like this again, so I pulled my leg from his lap and leaned in close. “Do you want to get out of here?”

His eyes flared as he took me in. Finally, he nodded.

I stood, grabbing my clutch and my camera. Gia already told me I was done for the night, so I didn’t need to check in with her again.

I held out my hand to him. When he took it, I felt confident and led him through the maze of tables to the exit, relaxing when I didn’t see anyone I knew.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure he was still into this, but his gaze was lower, on my ass. I could have chided him, but instead, I stood straighter and put a little sway in my hips.

Outside, he dropped my hand, both of his coming to rest on my hips. His mouth hovered over my neck. “Where are we going, sweet girl?”

I knew Savannah and Ethan were staying here, so I nodded toward the taller Maryland Historic Inn at the end of the street. “You want to get a room?”

My heart pounded in my chest. I’d never been so bold. I hadn’t picked up a guy since college, and it was a lot easier back then to take a guy to my dorm room.

“Lead the way.” His voice was short, as if he wanted to get me alone as soon as possible.

On the short walk to the inn, he’d pulled me into his side. We were in a hurry, but I wasn’t immune to the hard chest beneath my palm, the strong arm around my shoulders, or the way he occasionally looked down at me with this look on his face like he couldn’t believe *he* was with *me*.

By the time we reached the front counter of the historic inn, my body was flush with need. Nick secured a room, and I tried not to think about the fact we were renting a room solely to have sex.

Ducking into the elevator, I felt almost giddy to be doing something I wouldn’t normally do. We stood on separate sides of the car. The implication was that if we touched or kissed, we wouldn’t make it to our rooms. Instead, the air between us was thick with tension. Would he kiss me as soon as we got to the room? Would we go slow, or would we rip each other’s clothes off in a frenzy? I shivered at the latter image that popped into my head. I wanted to be uninhibited. I didn’t want to think about my responsibilities or the consequences of my actions.

With a ding, the car arrived at our floor and opened. Nick grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hall. With his free

hand, he flashed the room key in front of the door and opened it. With the door shut behind us, he wasted no time pressing me against the cool surface.

He dipped his head, his lips hovering over mine. “Are you sure about this?”

I lifted my mouth to his; every muscle in my body pulled taut with anticipation.

Every part of him that was touching me was rock-hard. I licked my lips and nodded.

His gaze tracked the movement before he ever so slowly took my lips with his. I thought that passionate meant hurried, but he proved me wrong. Nick kissed me slow and sweet, as if he were sipping the champagne from my lips. He lifted his head slightly to say, “You’re so beautiful.”

Those words had my pussy clenching. “Nick.”

His jaw tightened at the plea in my voice. “I’ll give you what you need.”

In my mind, I chanted, *yes, yes, yes*. A fire built in my core, burning hotter with each press of his fingers into my hips. When was the last time anyone took care of my needs? I’d been a single mom so long I’d forgotten what it was like to feel desired or pursued.

His hands ghosted down my hips before pulling up the skirt of my dress. He kissed me as his hand drifted underneath the silky material, caressing the back of my thighs, squeezing my ass before finally touching me where I needed him the most.

“Are you wet, Abby? Have you been thinking of this all day?” He separated my folds, circling my clit.

“You. I was thinking about you.” Doing this and so much more. I should have felt naughty saying those things, but for some reason, I felt safe with him. Like I could say or do anything, and he wouldn’t judge me. I was free to give in to my desires. With that thought, I let go of any expectations and gave myself over to him.

He rewarded me by dipping a finger inside, pumping slowly. I widened my legs, needing more. I tipped my head to the side so he could trail his mouth over the skin of my neck and shoulder. Slowly, he slid the tiny spaghetti strap of my dress down my arm.

“Your skin is so soft.” He did the same on the other side, pushing the dress down my arms and over my hips until I was left in a strapless bra and lace panties.

He pulled back, taking me in, while I stepped out of the dress and kicked it to the side. Feeling brazen, I reached around to unhook my bra, letting it fall to the floor.

He took in the sight of my body for several seconds. I should have felt self-conscious. I’d only had sex in the dark since I’d had Hunter, and my body wasn’t perfect. But with him, I felt like a goddess.

Never taking his eyes from mine, he slid to his knees. He looked up at me like I was the most beautiful woman in the world. I was so entranced by his seduction, I forgot about the thin stripes on my stomach, the softness that had been there since before pregnancy. I forgot about everything outside this room but his touch, his appreciation, and the burning desire.

He hooked his fingers in my panties and slid them slowly over my legs and off. I stood before him, naked in heels. The door was cool against my shoulder blades while he knelt, fully clothed, in front of me.

My pussy throbbed with desire; my skin hummed with anticipation. “Nick. I need you.”

He widened my legs with his shoulders, breathing in my scent. “I’m going to savor you.”

I tangled my fingers in his hair, rocking my hips toward his mouth, knowing he could make me feel so good. I’d never experienced an all-consuming need for someone else. This man was going to satisfy every one of my needs and leave me wanting more. He was every fantasy brought to life, and I wanted to be present for every second.

“Please, Nick.”

Instead of responding verbally, he separated my folds and pressed his mouth there. There were no other words for it; he devoured me with his mouth and his tongue. It seemed like he enjoyed this. He kept up the pace until I was weak in the knees.

I pressed hard against the wall, undulating my hips, wanting the release yet not wanting this to end. When I wavered on my heels, he drew one of my legs over his shoulder.

His stiff shirt abraded my skin, creating a delicious contrast between his mouth and clothes. “I’ve got you.”

I felt his words deep in my soul. I wanted him to hold me, to grab on, and to keep me forever. I never wanted him to stop touching me. I felt light-headed as the desire swirled in my stomach, burning brighter and hotter with every swipe of his tongue and pump of his fingers.

He hummed as he worked me over with his fingers and his talented tongue. I stopped thinking and rested my head against the wall, letting go. Shamelessly, I rode his mouth, giving in to the sensations—the sharp bite of his teeth, the soft swipe of his tongue.

I wanted—no, I *needed* him inside me, filling me up. He tightened his grip on my ass, pressing me against the flat of his tongue. The pressure was just right for me to detonate, knowing he’d catch me. I spasmed around his fingers, my muscles trembling as I went over.

He kept his mouth on me, slowly pumping me through the orgasm until I was limp against the door, incapable of moving. He stood, shrugging off the button-down, then he pulled the soft undershirt over his head.

I scanned down his broad shoulders, chiseled chest, and defined abs, to the happy trail. I licked my suddenly dry lips. He was better than any fantasy I’d ever had.

With renewed energy, I pushed off the wall, pressing my palms flat against his pecs as I pushed him back to the bed and then down. He fell on the end of the bed, widening his legs as

I stepped between him. His eyes flashed with barely repressed desire.

I had some unresolved anxiety about giving head. But anything was possible tonight. If this was a fantasy, reality wouldn't settle in because we'd never see each other again. He made me feel like I could do anything.

I sank to my knees, unbuckling his belt and pulling his pants down far enough to maneuver his cock out of his briefs. It was hard and warm, the skin surprisingly soft under my touch.

Nick smoothed my hair back from my face. "You don't have to—"

The gesture and his words were surprisingly tender for what this was—a one-night stand with no expectations.

I held his gaze as I licked the beaded precum from his slit. I pulled back to swirl my tongue over the head, then sucked him deep again. I kept a careful eye on his face for any sign of displeasure, but his fingers tightened in my hair as he seemingly held back his desire to thrust into my mouth.

But I wanted him to let go. I wanted him to lose control. I felt powerful at his feet.

"Your mouth feels like heaven."

My skin hummed with pleasure. Who said things like that? It made me think that this man had the potential to be more, so much more. But I wasn't interested, and neither was he.

He gripped my shoulders and lifted me onto the bed. I fell back as he shoved his pants and briefs off. He prowled over me. He was big and hard, and I wanted to feel every ridge of muscle against me. I wanted him to press me into the mattress. I wanted to forget my name.

It was a tall order, but I knew he could deliver. His eyes promised satisfaction as he lowered his mouth to mine.

I wanted him inside me. I needed him to fill me up. To make me forget. To give me memories for years to come.

My fingers curled around his neck, pulling him against me as I widened my legs. I was desperate to have him, yet reluctant to rush this. If this was the only time I had with him, I wanted it to last.

He slid his hard cock between my folds, and I gasped at the sensation. The need built inside quicker than before.

“Nick,” I pleaded, knowing he couldn’t resist.

With a groan, he pulled away to grab a condom from his wallet. I should have been concerned about how long it had been in there, if he always kept condoms in his wallet, or if one-night stands were something he did often. But none of that mattered. Because this was a fantasy.

I let my knees fall apart as he lined up at my entrance. His gaze flicked to mine as his cock nudged my opening. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’ve never felt more right about anything.”

He sank inside slowly, inch by inch, as I bit my lip at the sensation of him filling me up. He lowered himself over me, surrounding me with his shoulders and his biceps, kissing me. I barely registered the feel of his hands skimming over my body, tweaking one nipple, then the other. Each touch was a direct line to my clit.

Moans escaped as I lifted my hips to meet his thrusts. *I want more.* The sensation that I was going to explode out of my skin at any moment had me gripping his arms for support.

In my ear, he murmured how he couldn’t believe I was his for the night.

I was his. But only for the night. I wouldn’t consider anything else.

Instead, I said, “You feel so good.”

I wanted him to make me forget everything. My responsibilities. My job. My family. Tonight, it was just him and me and pure, unadulterated pleasure.

If I thought sex with a stranger would be awkward, I was wrong. Maybe it was the chemistry between us, but every

place he touched me tingled with a fire that wouldn't be put out.

“I need you to come for me.”

The words washed over me, and finally, I let go. A second later, I was flying in his arms to my second orgasm of the night. It was unprecedented. The pleasure went on and on. Stars burst behind my eyelids. My muscles ached with the release of pent-up tension.

He thrust twice more before settling in deep and groaning out his release. He held me tight to him, not moving. It was as if he didn't want to let go of me, either.

With a kiss to my lips, he pulled out and went to the bathroom to take care of the condom. The overhead fan spun slowly, sending goose bumps over my cooling skin.

I felt bereft with him gone. I probably should have felt regret, but instead, I felt sated. Like I'd indulged in the most decadent piece of chocolate. I couldn't feel anything but satisfied with my decision.

When Nick returned, we slipped under the sheets, and he drew me to him. With an arm banded around my waist, he kissed my temple and said one word, “Stay.”

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Lea Coll is a USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet and sexy happily ever afters. She worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

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