

BABY, I'M YOURS

A WILD WOLFF VILLAGE NOVELLA

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE ROCK STAR ROMANCE SERIES

ERIKA KELLY

BABY, I'M YOURS

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BABY, I'M YOURS

Erika Kelly

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Titles by Erika Kelly

The Calamity Falls series

KEEP ON LOVING YOU

WE BELONG TOGETHER

THE VERY THOUGHT OF YOU

JUST THE WAY YOU ARE

IT WAS ALWAYS YOU

CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE

COME AWAY WITH ME

WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

YOU'RE STILL THE ONE

THE DEEPER I FALL

LOVE ME LIKE YOU DO

TRULY, MADLY, DEEPLY

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KISS ME SLOWLY

ANYWHERE WITH YOU

BABY, I'M YOURS

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Prologue

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FOUR YEARS AGO

“THIS IS IT.” CRAZY AS IT SEEMED, REID SINCLAIR HAD JUST found his future home. The lodgepole pine cabin looked rustic, but it had every modern convenience. And being in Wild Wolff Village meant he’d have access to all the amenities while still retaining total anonymity and privacy.

“I knew you’d love it.” The realtor’s perfume filled the good-sized space, making his nostrils burn. “It was built by the owner’s son, but now that he’s married with kids, he’s built a larger house for his family.”

“Seems like he could’ve just added on. It’s a lot of land.” Folding his arms across his chest, he scanned the views that overlooked nothing but forest. He fucking loved it here. On the road three-hundred days a year, living life on a tour bus and out of a suitcase, he craved roots. He wanted to wake up in the same bed every day. He wanted to take his coffee out on that deck every morning. He wanted routine.

He still had to perform, of course. His career was going strong, but he knew having this secret hideaway would give him an escape from the endless blur of days.

One thing for sure, if he bought this place, he wouldn’t tell anyone. A secret smile warmed him down to the soles of his feet. Nope. Not a soul. If he mentioned it, his siblings, his mom, and every roadie and hanger-on would ask for an invitation and turn his mountain oasis into a party pad.

“I’m sorry.” The realtor came up behind him. “This is so unprofessional, but can I get your autograph?”

When he turned, he found her holding out a pen and a small notepad. “Yeah, sure.” Before he signed, he made eye contact. “But please don’t forget about the non-disclosure agreement.”

“Of course not. I totally respect your privacy. And you should know, Calamity’s home to tons of celebrities. They come here for the extreme adventures, but also because they’re left alone. We don’t have paparazzi or screaming fans.” She took the pad back from him. “You’re safe here.”

“Cool. If I pay cash, can I take ownership immediately?”

“Well, the bank has to confirm the available funds, but I think we can move quickly. You’d have to take it as is and with no contingencies.”

He could afford renovations, so he didn’t care about either of those conditions. “The sooner we close, the better. I’m back on the road in six days.”

She gave him a firm nod. “I’ll make it happen. It might take as long as three weeks, but since I know the owner, I’m sure he’d let you rent it until then. Consider it yours.”

“Thank you.” A deep sense of satisfaction rolled through him. *This is happening. Fuck, yeah.* “Mind if I hang around a few more minutes?”

“Not at all. Let me head back to the office and get started on the paperwork. Meet you there in half an hour?”

“Sounds good.”

It was only when the door clicked shut that he felt the tension in his body ease. That reaction alone told him how much he needed a place of his own. He’d been performing from the time he was sixteen—and not because he loved it. Because his family had needed him to.

At first, his talented twin brother had only wanted to supplement their single mom’s income. It hadn’t even entered

his mind he'd be discovered while performing on the streets of Vegas.

But while Bex had the talent, he'd been unable to front a band or play stadiums. The thought of being interviewed made him sick to his stomach. They'd been about to lose a record deal, a contract for money that would keep a roof over their heads and food in their bellies, when Reid had stepped in and said he'd do it. He'd sing his brother's songs.

The whole world thought he was Van Claybourne, a rock star, but all he did was sing and thrash around on stage and roll out the same practiced lines in interviews. And he did it with a smile because it gave his family financial security. It had sent his younger siblings to college—the first ever in Sinclair history.

One day, he'd pursue his own dreams and passions. Not that he knew what they were. But once he was away from the noise and chaos of tour buses and stadiums, he'd have the space to discover them.

As Reid wandered the empty house, he picked up a strange scent underneath the realtor's perfume.

Is that fried chicken?

No one had lived here for months, so that didn't make sense. He'd have to get the locks changed first thing. He checked out the kitchen, opening the oven and refrigerator, but the place was spotless. He followed his nose into the main bedroom, and the view immediately snatched the breath right out of his lungs. Two walls of windows let the forest in. It was like a treehouse, only luxurious. *Damn, that's something.* One day, he'd get to wake up to it every morning for the rest of his life.

As he walked closer, he noticed something on the floor. A white napkin next to a black eBook reader. The hairs at the back of his neck stood up.

Someone's here.

Following the fast food scent, he headed toward the walk-in closet, opened the door, and—

A woman sat in the corner against the wall, peering up at him with a sheepish grin.

Startled, he could only set his hands on his hips and stare at her.

“Hey.” She had a greasy paper bag in one hand and a blue bakery box in the other.

He burst out laughing. *Hey? That’s what she has to say?* It might seem weird that instead of fearing for his life, he noticed how pretty she was, but there it was. That shoulder-length, choppy dark hair gave her a rocker look, and those bright-blue eyes revealed intelligence and confidence.

“So—” she got up “—this isn’t what it seems. Well, it is. But it’s not.” She drew in a breath and thrust out her right hand. “Hi. I’m Maisie Delgado. I mean no harm.” She must’ve forgotten about the greasy bag because she faltered and cleared her throat. “Sorry.” She was about to reach out with the left, but it held a box.

“It seems like you’re hiding in a closet.”

“Right. I am. But you’re probably thinking I’m a stalker. A crazed superfan, but I’m not. I mean, sure, I like your music. Who doesn’t? But I had no idea you were house hunting let alone looking at this one in particular. It doesn’t even have a for sale sign.”

Okay so she knew who he was. Not a big surprise. “I’m with you so far, but I still don’t know what you’re doing here.”

“I just wanted some time to myself. I meant to...” She tipped her head back. “Oh my God. I knew this was a bad idea.” Looking him right in the eyes with a resigned expression, she said, “I’m sorry. I thought this place was empty. I just wanted to be left alone for five minutes.”

I can relate to that more than you’ll ever know. “How did you get in? There might not be a sign, but there’s a lockbox on the front door.”

“Right.” She hesitated. “Well, since you’re going to own it, you should know.” She gestured for him to back away so she could get out of the closet, and then she led him across the

kitchen and to the mudroom. Inside, she tapped a door. “See this?”

He nodded.

“If you go down these stairs, you’ll find a tunnel.”

“A what now?”

“Yep. There’s a shed out there in the woods—maybe a quarter of a mile from the house—and it’s got a passageway that leads right here.”

“How do you know that? Did you used to live here?” She had to be around his age—mid-to-late twenties. The former owner wasn’t even thirty. Was this his wife getting a break from the kids?

“Like I said, I just wanted some time alone, and I figured I’d have a picnic in the woods. I was looking for the perfect spot when I found a shed. It looked abandoned, and it was unlocked.” She hunched a shoulder. “Frankly, if I can avoid sharing my food with a bear, I’ll take that option.”

Okay, she was cute. Really fucking cute. In his world, he got a lot of overeager fans with makeup and big hair and flashy clothes. He got all kinds of pick-up lines and promises. He didn’t get much cuteness.

“But before I could even have one stinking bite of my chocolate cake—”

So cute.

“I noticed a broken floorboard. It was super sketchy—like, deliberate, you know? So I pried it open and discovered a metal door and some stairs that led to a tunnel. I followed it —”

“Wait. You were scared about bears, but you went underground and followed a dark passageway? What if it led to a serial killer’s den?”

“Yeah, I know.” She let out an exasperated huff of breath. “I get it. I was too stupid to live, but it led me here, and this house is in the middle of nowhere, so I figured I could scarf down my lunch and get out without being noticed.” Motioning

for him to follow, she led him back into the bedroom and dragged a tote bag out of the closet. She pulled out a small container of wet wipes and waved it at him. “I wasn’t going to leave a single trace.” She dropped it back into the tote and straightened, facing him as though he were a judge about to pronounce her sentence. “Are you going to call the cops?”

He glanced down to the bakery box. “Are you willing to share that chocolate cake?”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed, and she laughed. “I was a little piggy and bought four different desserts. So that’s fine. I don’t mind cutting you a sliver of each one.”

“Just a sliver?”

“Of *four* desserts. That’s a pretty good deal. And it’s not like you’ve got a lot of options right now.”

“Valid point. Where are we eating?”

“Here, duh.” She gestured to the windows. “Did you see that view?”

“I bought it.”

“You’re a lucky man. Okay, grab the goodies.”

Smiling, he picked up the bakery box and peeked inside. He found a slice of cake with a bite taken out of it, a mini fruit tart, a cannoli, and an éclair. “One of these things is not like the other. Why the fruit tart?”

“Well, I mean, fried chicken, biscuits, chocolate, whipped cream... It just seemed like I should have *something* good for me.” Her mischievous grin set his pulse pounding.

I think I’m in love.

She sat down on the floor facing the windows, legs crossed, and started unloading her paper bag. Pulling out containers of chicken, coleslaw, mashed potatoes, and biscuits, she set everything on the gleaming hardwood. “I’m starving. As you can see, I brought enough to host my own dinner party, so help yourself.”

He hadn't eaten since this morning's protein bar, but he found himself hungry for something other than food. And that was a first for him. He was surrounded by women. Beautiful, sexy, funny, smart, great women. But none of them—not a single one in his twenty-eight years—had ever awakened this feeling in him.

Watching her bite into a juicy leg, her pretty pink lips turning shiny, heightened his senses. He became sharply aware of his pounding pulse, the quickening of a desire rooted somewhere other than his dick. This tug came from deeper, and he knew there was no turning back. Even if he never saw this woman after lunch, he would have to sate this particular hunger.

This need for something real. *Someone* real.

“Mm.” She licked her lips. “Delicious. I never get to eat this kind of thing.”

“Yeah? Why's that?”

She stiffened, and all the feistiness drained out of her. “No, I mean, I *can*. I just never do.”

Well, fuck. He'd ruined the mood. “You wouldn't believe the crap we used to eat.”

“What do you mean?”

Shit. He'd said *we*. Being a twin, it was automatic for him to refer to his brother. But the public didn't know about it. It was a secret they worked hard to keep so that Bex could avoid being in the public eye. “Just that growing up, my mom didn't have time to cook, so dinner was always fast food. She'd pick up McDonald's or Taco Bell on her way home from work. But then...” A thought struck him.

What if she's one of the artists? Or someone's assistant? Oh hell. Cold fluid slid into his bloodstream. He didn't usually let his guard down, and in fact, always kept to a script so he didn't mess up. It was quite a feat to keep such a big secret in the music industry, but this woman made it so easy to be real. “Are you from Calamity?” He tried to keep his tone light.

“No. Never been here before. I like it, though. I could see myself living here.”

“So, what brings you to town? You here for the festival?”

She stopped chewing. “Yes, I am. But...do you think we could just eat lunch and not ask each other personal questions? All I want is an hour away from the madness. I don’t mind sharing my lunch with you, but I want to stay in this little bubble we’ve got going on here.” She let out a sigh. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah.” He smiled because he wanted the same thing. “We can do that.” He held out the box. “So, which one are we slicing into first?”

“But we haven’t had lunch yet.”

He pretended to dig around the bag. “Is there a set of rules somewhere?”

She broke out in a slow grin. “No, sir. No rules at all.” All that happiness came roaring back. She dropped the chicken leg and reached for the dessert. “Gimme that box.” When she grabbed the éclair and bit off a huge chunk, her eyes rolled back in her head. “Oh my God. So good. I can die now.”

When their gazes connected, his body went electric. He didn’t know the first thing about this woman, but he honestly didn’t care. He had six days left in Calamity, and he wanted to spend every one of them with her.

The past five days had been the best of Reid’s life. As he sat calmly in his new rocking chair, he figured anyone walking by would see a man enjoying a beautiful summer day in the Tetons. They’d be wrong. Every muscle was tight in anticipation of seeing her.

Every day, she’d come to him whenever she had a break in her busy schedule. Stolen moments that had added up to the kind of happiness he hadn’t known existed.

When he heard the crunch of leaves, he jolted to his feet and leapt off the porch, running to meet her on the lawn.

Giddy to have her back, he claimed the mouth he hadn't kissed in four hours. Her hair smelled like wildflowers, and her mouth tasted minty from the gum she liked to chew. She said it calmed her down. He knew she had a stressful job, but she hadn't shared any details about her work other than the fact that she had a demanding boss.

He slid his hands down her back, grabbed her ass cheeks, and gave them a lusty squeeze. He loved her big tits and ass, loved her rock 'n' roll hair, and her laughter was his favorite melody. This woman turned him the fuck on. When he lifted her, she let out a laugh and wound her arms around his neck. She held on as he climbed the porch stairs and pressed her against the door. When her fingers slid through his hair, he got a whiff of something odd. "You smell like Cheetos."

"I ate a bag on my way over here."

So that's why she tasted like mint. She'd tried to cover the smell. "That was lunch?"

"Seriously, Reid?" She squirmed all over him and licked his earlobe. "The only thing I'm hungry for is your cock."

He burst out laughing, twisting away when she went to unbutton his jeans. "Oh, you'll get my cock. There's no doubt about that. But first, I'm feeding you."

"Are you out of your mind?" She reached between them and rubbed him, but he just turned the knob and carried her into the kitchen.

He set her on the counter and couldn't resist stealing another delicious kiss. She cupped his head and licked into his mouth, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"Fuck, you make me crazy." She got him all fired up until he couldn't see, couldn't think, couldn't be anything other than lost in her.

With one hand, she grabbed his T-shirt and yanked, forcing him to separate from her long enough to pull it off. She eyed his bare chest with hungry eyes.

"Fuck it." As he unbuttoned her blouse, he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, running his tongue along it. He

reached behind to unclasp her bra, and then in one smooth move, she was topless. “You have the best fucking tits I’ve ever seen.” Big, full, and bouncy.

“You keep saying that, but what’re you gonna do about them?”

She made him hot, she made him laugh, she made him think, and she made him yearn. He couldn’t get enough of her. “I’m gonna fuck them, that’s what I’m gonna do.”

Her expression turned sultry, desperate, and she pushed him back, jumping off the counter to kick off her leopard-print flats and shimmy out of her black leggings. He carried her over to the kitchen table and spread her out like a feast.

“This is all mine.” He slid his hands up her thighs, over her belly and ribcage, and to her breasts. Cupping them, he licked each nipple before sucking one into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it.

“Yes.” The word came out a hiss, and her eyes went half-lidded.

He loved the way she responded, the way her thighs opened for him. He wanted to touch her everywhere at once, but he took his time, pushing her tits together, pinching her nipples, and licking them. Slowly, he slid a finger between her legs. She was hot, slick, and so ready for him, but still, he took his time, really working her up. Her hips shifted restlessly, and she planted her feet on the table.

Pressing a trail of open-mouthed kisses down her belly, he found his way to the place he knew she wanted him most. He licked a pathway to her clit and then flicked it.

“Van. God.”

He hated that she called him that. Obviously, everyone did. Even his family—just so they never messed up in public. But this woman... He wanted her to know *him*, not the character he played.

While he teased her clit, he reached for her plump tits. Her back arched, and she moaned. “Oh, Van. Oh God.” Her tone, drenched in lust, made him lose his mind. He had to fist his

cock and give it a squeeze to stave off his own release. She was just so hot. The sexiest woman he'd ever known.

She grabbed his hair, the sign that she was close and wanted all his attention on her pleasure center. So, he slid his hands under her ass and lifted her to stroke her into an orgasm that had her gasping and crying out.

Her thighs clamped around his ears and her hands went to the back of his head, holding him in place while her body writhed on his kitchen table.

With a dreamy expression, she sighed. "Mm. That was so good."

"Yeah, don't get too comfortable. I'm about to fuck you into next week."

She gave him a lazy smile and cupped her breasts, pressing them together. "Thought you were gonna fuck these."

Lust unlike anything he'd ever felt roared through him.

Her eyes went half-lidded. "Get the sunscreen out of my purse."

He went wild, lost his ability to think. Digging into her bag, he grabbed the lotion no one at this altitude lived without and slathered it all over his cock. He would forever associate coconut with his hideaway girl. "Push those tits together."

The rosy hue of desire spread across her body, cresting in her cheeks. She did as he asked, her dark-pink nipples poking through her fingers. He dragged her closer and set her feet on the chair. As he lined himself up, he watched her sultry eyes and the shallow pants that made her breasts jiggle. The sight of his cock sliding into the tight valley, the mushroom head thrusting out and tapping her chin, made him lose his shit. "Tighter."

She did it. She pushed them together, made them mound higher, and he thrust hard and fast. His body burned, went electric. When her tongue licked his head with each pass, he knew he wasn't going to last.

The coconut scent, the bouncy tits, and Maisie Delgado lost in erotic sensation, all combined to work him into a frenzy of uncontrollable need. He pulled out and jerked himself off until he came all over those glorious tits. He'd never climaxed so hard in his life, shouting with the euphoric release.

Sated, he braced his hands on either side of her and rested his head on her belly. "Jesus, Maisie. Fuck." Her stomach growled. Laughing, he glanced up at her, and she scraped her hands through his hair. "I can't feel my legs."

"That's a problem," she said. "Because I need to be fed."

"For you, I'll rally." He sat up, grabbed a paper napkin off the counter, and gently wiped his release off her chest. Pressing one last kiss to her nipple, he tossed the napkin into a take-away bag. "You go shower while I heat up last night's chicken. Sound good?"

"Everything with you is good." It was rare that she showed vulnerability, but when she did, he got this massive rush of affection for her. He wanted to savor every second, wanted it—*them*—to last forever. Nothing was better than this closeness, this...intimacy. He'd never had it before with anyone. He couldn't tell her that—that's not what they were—so he drew her tightly against his chest and kissed her.

The gentle tangle of their tongues, her breathy little sighs, every single kiss... It all lit him up. The rush of energy was so powerful, he was sure it could be seen from outer space. There was just something about this woman. Something about her scent that connected with his primal core and made him beat his fists against his chest and shout *Mine*.

The best part? She didn't care that he was a rock star. To her, it was the least interesting thing about him. Their tongues tangled, and she smoothed her hands up his chest, sifting through his hair.

"You make me happy."

She sighed. "Swear to God, I didn't even know a kiss could feel like this." She rested her forehead against his. "You make me happy, too. I wish..."

“You wish what? Tell me?” Because if she asked him to quit Van Claybourne, he’d do it. *That’s how happy she makes me.*

She seemed to shake off whatever she wanted to say. “I wish we had a real bed.” She kissed his mouth. “I’m going to the bathroom. Be right back.”

He still didn’t own the place, of course, but he’d brought in an air mattress, and they’d tested its durability every chance they’d gotten. Sometimes, they’d lie there and talk about how to decorate the house. A topic he’d never imagined giving two shits about. But with Maisie, a new life in a cabin in Calamity, Wyoming had become very real to him.

It scared him a little that he wanted her enough to quit this gig that had brought such good fortune to his family and the good people who worked with them. Mostly because so many people depended on them. With a calendar chock full of obligations and commitments, retiring would throw everything into chaos. They’d gotten into this gig to support their mom and siblings, and now that they’d grown into the biggest rock band in the world, he didn’t know how to walk away.

He pulled the container of chicken alfredo out of the fridge, set it in the microwave, and grabbed a fork and napkin. Then he poured a big glass of water.

When Maisie came out of the bathroom, he pulled her into his arms for more kisses. *Fuck, man.* She was so responsive. They got hot so fast. He slid his hands beneath the waistband of her leggings to squeeze her plump, bare ass. Just as he began to slide them down, his phone vibrated on the counter.

“Shit. Sorry. I have to check it.” He and Exie Sylva were doing a duet at the festival tonight, but his brother hadn’t finished writing it.

“Of course.” Maisie stepped back and adjusted her leggings. “Is that my lunch?” She pointed to the microwave that beeped to let them know the food was ready.

“Yeah.” He checked the text message.

Exie: Where's the song? I'm not winging it, so let's get cracking!

He quickly tapped out a message to his brother.

Reid: Exie's asking for the ballad. You got it yet?

He lowered his phone. "Sorry. Work shit."

She nodded, eating her chicken.

When the message didn't show delivered, he called Bex. It went right to voicemail, which meant he'd turned his phone off. He could picture his brother bent over a guitar, forehead tight in concentration while he strummed and sang. A pang of envy hit him. He wanted to get that engrossed in something. "Hey, listen, I've got to run to the lodge."

"Everything okay?"

"Sure." He and Bex had to orchestrate their lives so they were never seen in public at the same time. When Reid was out doing interviews or on stage, Bex was on the bus. Right now, his brother thought he was sleeping in the suite. He hated lying to his twin, but he wouldn't let anything ruin this little idyll he'd created. "I'll be gone twenty minutes max. Can you wait here?"

"No problem. I don't have to be back till four."

"Perfect." He'd left his shoes on the deck, so he started to go get them, but she grabbed his arm and tugged him right up to her.

With a dreamy smile, she said, "Guess what? After the concert, we have the whole night together. My boss has plans, so I'm not needed until tomorrow morning."

"Yeah?" That punch of happiness faded when he remembered it was their last night together.

"Yeah."

He didn't want his time with her to end. He couldn't bear getting back on that tour bus and singing his brother's songs. He didn't want to go back to a life of pretending.

The look in her eyes—happiness, mischief, and longing—drew him in. He only meant to skim his mouth over hers, but he fell right back into the warmth and excitement of this beautiful, sexy woman.

Until his phone buzzed again. “I’ve got to go.”

As he made his way across the living room to get his boots, he smiled. He’d only agreed to this festival because of Exie. Wildly creative, she was a renaissance woman. Not only had she changed the music industry with her revolutionary style, but she had her own fashion line and painted the kind of art that hung in galleries around the world.

Their conversations were flirty, filled with banter, and devoid of substance. Talk about playing a role. The woman was always on, always trying to prove how cutting edge and out there she was. He didn’t want to date her. He just wanted some of her creative energy to rub off on him.

Boots retrieved, he went back to the kitchen. Once there, he immediately noticed something had changed. Maisie wouldn’t look at him. She seemed pissed. Hurt, maybe? “Everything all right?” *What could have happened?*

She handed him the phone. “Sure. You better go, though.”

“Wait, talk to me.” Had she looked at his phone? Figured out about his twin? *Shit, fuck.* He’d gotten careless. He had a password on his screen, but maybe she’d seen a few lines from an incoming text message. What if it had come from Bex?

He quickly checked his phone.

Exie: Get over here, big boy! Don’t make me come looking for you.

Shit. The last thing he needed was for Exie to go knocking on the bus and catch Bex unprepared. “I’ve got to go.” At the door, he turned back to her. “You’ll wait, right?”

“Sure.” But her tone held a hardness he hadn’t heard before, and she had an unreadable look in her eyes.

He’d fix everything when he got back. But right now, he had to make sure Exie didn’t discover their secret.

Thirty minutes later, Reid's boots pounded on the trail. Heart racing, he willed Maisie to be home. He'd had a lot of time to think over her sudden mood change. Where he'd seen the text and thought of an anxious, demanding duet partner, Maisie might've read it as a booty call.

Even though he'd shown her how much he adored her with his hands, mouth, tongue, and cock, his reputation still preceded him. He was known as a partier, the kind of debauched rocker who took what the fans offered. He needed to tell her the truth about that. He'd needed to tell her what she meant to him.

He leapt up the stairs to the porch and jerked the door open. "Mase?" His boots thudded in the empty room. "Maisie?" Dread coated his skin like sweat, and his stomach churned. He hurried into the bedroom, hoping to find her crashed out on the air mattress.

But the house was empty, heavy with stillness.

She's gone.

SIX WEEKS LATER

Maisie Delgado pumped a fist. *Yes.* She'd made it backstage.

Because I'm a badass bitch, and by God, I'm going to get in front of the man who did this to me.

Of course, she wasn't blaming Van. They'd done this together. She was just still upset that the whole time he'd been with her, he'd been gaga over her boss.

Evil Exie.

She shuddered. None of this would've happened, of course, if she'd come clean. Told him she was the woman's assistant. She'd just... God, she'd wanted that blissful moment out of her real life.

And look what it got me.

As she strode down the hallway acting like she totally belonged, her phone vibrated. Knowing it was her best friend, she pulled it out.

Olive: Did you get in? If he fucks you over, I'm going to rip off his pretty face.

Pushing through the crowd, Maisie smiled. Her friend was fierce and her greatest advocate.

Maisie: I did. Heading to the green room now.

Maisie: And he's not a jerk, I swear. It was just his manager.

She wished her conversation with his manager had gone differently. That way she wouldn't have had to hunt Van down. But she understood the man was just doing his job, and it hadn't deterred her in the least. She knew the only answer was to confront Van in person, so she'd flown to Chicago because one of the roadies she used to work with lived here and had promised to get her backstage. Unfortunately, the guy's girlfriend had broken up with him, and he'd completely dropped the ball. She hadn't heard from him in three days.

But I'm resourceful, and there's no obstacle that can hold me back.

Olive: Let me know how it goes. Love you brighter than the sun.

Maisie: Love you more than the entire Milky Way.

Green room in sight, Maisie relaxed for the first time in two weeks. Well, since the two blues lines had shown up on that stick. She knew Van. He was a good guy. He wouldn't blow her off. She knew if she told him to his face, he'd do the right thing. She was under no illusion that he'd marry her, and they'd become some stupid, happy family. She just needed him to meet his basic responsibilities.

She also knew exactly what she'd see the minute she got into that room, because it was no secret that Van Claybourne was a total party beast. Even though his show had ended

fifteen minutes ago, he'd have a woman on each knee and a bottle of vodka in his hand.

She didn't care. *This isn't about love and happy families.* It was about providing for her baby. Their baby. But just as she neared the door, a wave of nausea rolled through her.

Oh no. Not now. Please, not now.

Breathe. Deep breaths. She closed her eyes, filled her lungs, and willed the sickness to subside. It didn't. It got worse. Saliva spilled into her mouth.

Bathroom. I need a bathroom.

As people brushed past her, perspiration broke out, and her skin went cold. *Oh God.* What was she supposed to do? *The green room has a bathroom. Go, go, go.* Racing ahead, she made it two steps before ginger ale and crackers vaulted out of her mouth and splattered onto the floor.

"Hey, hey." A beefy bodyguard gripped her upper arm.

Oh, thank God. Help. "I'm so sorry. Can you please—"

"We don't put up with that shit here." His grip tightened, and he frog-marched her in the opposite direction of where she needed to go.

"No, stop. I'm not... Do you think I'm drunk? I'm totally sober." Her legs went weak, and her stomach roiled again. "It's coming."

"What's coming?" He looked at her, and his eyes went wide. "Nuh-uh. Don't do that on me. Not anywhere near me." He smacked the release bar on a door and shoved her out into the cold night.

"Wait. You don't understand." But she was talking to herself. He was gone. "Dammit."

She couldn't see through a sheen of tears, so she had no idea where she was. She only knew she wasn't going home until she talked to him. *And he's only in Chicago one night.* Blinking furiously, she forced herself to pull it together.

Think.

First, she had to pop a mint. Reaching into her purse, she found the little red tin she carried everywhere for when she indulged in the food Exie forbade her employees to eat. She tipped out a handful and dumped them in her mouth. The bright, sharp flavor filled her senses, waking her up.

Rock stars as big as Van and Exie didn't spend a lot of time in the green room. They shook hands with the local support players, did their interviews, and then went to a hotel or strip club to party all night. She didn't know Chicago, so she had no idea where he and his entourage would go. *So... what are my options?* She could wait for him to get into a limo —

Oh, wait. The bus. Of course.

Wiping the moisture from under her eyes, she looked around to get her bearings. *There.* A whole convoy of buses. She knew the most luxurious would be Van's. She struck off, knowing he'd have to come back to the bus at some point.

Good plan. We got this.

Thankfully, the nausea had settled. *It's all right. It'll be fine.* She pressed a hand to her belly, warming the tiny, hard bump that barely showed. Remembering the life growing inside her calmed her down.

This baby had changed everything. It had given her the excuse—*oh come on, the guts*—to quit her horrible, impossible job. It had also given her the incentive to enroll in a master's program in education. She vowed on all that was holy to give this child the life she deserved. The kind of childhood she'd always longed for.

Standing outside the enormous bus with black-tinted windows, she drew in a slow, shaky breath. She smoothed her hands down her jeans, drying her palms.

He's a good guy. He won't be a jerk.

Maisie knew enough about the music industry to not bother with fantasies about a real relationship with a rock star. With the constant onslaught of temptation, he would never be faithful or reliable. But she didn't need that. She needed child

support because the contracts she'd signed when she started working for Exie stated she didn't get her bonuses if she ever quit her job.

Okay. Let's do this. She knocked on the door. At the very least, the driver would answer. They wouldn't leave the bus unattended, not with Van's personal guitars and possessions on board.

A whoosh of air opened the doors, and an older gentleman gave her a sad smile. "Nobody's here, ma'am. If you want to meet the band, you can wait with the others by the door over there."

She glanced back to the stadium where a group had formed. "Oh no. I'm not a fan. I..." She glanced down at her outfit and regretted her choice. "I only dressed like one so I could get backstage." *Stop talking. Immediately. Shut your mouth.* "Let me start over. I met Van two months ago—"

"I got this, Hank," a deep voice said, and then Van appeared, switching places with the driver.

Relief had her sucking in a harsh and sudden breath. "Van." She wanted to fall against him, go back to that perfect time in his cabin. She wanted to let it all out, her fears, the courage it had taken to finally leave her horrible job. And she might've done it if he hadn't looked so blasé. All the words she'd been rehearsing crashed into a wall and collapsed into a heap. "Hi."

"Hey. Do you have something you'd like me to sign?"

She reared back. Why was he pretending not to remember her? It had only been two months since the festival. "Van...it's me. Maisie. From Calamity?"

"Sure, sure. Listen, it's great to see you again, but we've got to hit the road. It's a long drive to the next venue, so thanks for stopping by."

Okay, this man was not the same one she'd spent five days with. The man who'd worshipped her body, made her laugh, and looked deeply into her eyes as if he wanted to see her whole being—body and soul.

Do you even hear yourself right now?

How could she be so stupid? How could she have thought she was special? “Stopping by?” She set her hands on her hips. “Okay, look, you don’t have to pretend you don’t remember me. I certainly never thought for one minute you’d want an actual relationship. God, Van. I’m not here to fangirl you.”

“Okay, then...?” Behind that pleasant tone, she could see growing impatience and not even a hint of recognition. He wanted her gone.

“You actually don’t remember me, do you?”

“Remind me where we met again?” He was trying. She’d give him that.

But she wasn’t here for friendship. She was here for accountability. “In the cabin. I was having a picnic. You found me in the closet. We shared chocolate cake.”

It might’ve been imperceptible to someone else, but because she was watching him so intently, she saw the glimmer of fear in his eyes. The driver’s black boots came down on the step behind him. A warning.

They think I’m looney tunes. “Right. Of course. You’ve been with so many women in so many crazy situations you forgot about the *five days* we spent in your house.”

“I’m sorry I don’t remember you, but I don’t actually own a cabin. So, it’s possible—”

“Are you kidding me right now? ‘It’s possible’ I slept with someone else who told me he was Van Claybourne?” None of the conversations she’d rehearsed had ever gone this way. She’d expected his charm and certainly, a request for a paternity test. “Cut the crap. Fine, maybe you never bought the house. Maybe you look at houses in all the cities you visit. Whatever. I don’t really care. I tried to tell your manager, but he blew me off, so I came here tonight to tell you in person.” She drew in a breath. “I’m pregnant.”

His confused expression quickly gave way to anger. He glanced over her shoulder, and she heard footsteps moving quickly on the asphalt. She swung around to find the same

security guard who'd escorted her out of the building. Her time had run out, and she'd achieved nothing.

“Look, I know it was just sex to you. I'm not here looking for a relationship. But I am pregnant, and you *are* the father. You have to step up and take some responsibility. I can't do this alone.”

The guard came up behind her. “Ma'am—”

Van held up a hand, never taking his eyes off her. “I don't own a cabin.” His soothing tone made her want to crawl out of her skin. “I've never been in the market for one. I'm sorry for your situation, but I'm not the father. Good luck with everything.” And with that, he backed up the steps, and the doors whooshed shut.

She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe he'd play her like that.

“Trust me,” the security guard said. “He hears it all the time. Everyone wants a piece of him.”

She turned around and faced him. “Not me. I want nothing to do with him. *Nothing.*”

She would never forgive him for this.

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Chapter One

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FOUR YEARS LATER

THE VAN CLAYBOURNE SONG PLAYING IN THE PACKED ART gallery was overkill, but until they revealed their big secret—that the rock star Van Claybourne was actually a set of twins—Reid would just have to deal with it.

His brother had made the announcement at a bar a few weeks ago, but since the guests had been close friends and family, the word hadn't spread yet. It would happen soon, though, since Bex was finalizing plans for his first solo tour. He sang ballads, so the venues would be smaller, more intimate, but it was a big move for his brother to put himself out there like that.

“Honestly, I think you've made an indelible impression on wildlife photography.” The critic standing next to him had his arms folded across his chest as he took in the shot of two bull moose locking antlers.

“It's the minimalism that's so striking,” someone else in their circle said.

Surrounded by art patrons and critics, Reid imagined a pair of tongs coming down from the ceiling and plucking him out of this room. Or an escape hatch opening, so he could plummet to a hidden bunker. He didn't want to stand here listening to them gush about a shot he got only because he had enough free time to be out in the woods waiting to capture a special moment.

I'm a fraud.

Sure, he'd taken some good pictures. No question about it. Like the next one over, the antelope crossing the river. The slant of early morning sunlight softened the colors, highlighted the antlers, and made the water sparkle, but it had everything to do with sunrise and nothing with camera manipulation.

As they continued to gush about his work, he eased away. The white walls and bright lights gave him a headache. He wove through the crowd with chin lowered and shoulders pulled in, as if that would somehow make him invisible. Pushing out the back door, he sucked in fresh, clean mountain air and pulled out his phone.

His brother answered on the first ring. "Hey, man. How's it going?"

"Fuck my life."

"That good, huh? You should've let us come. We could've been there with you. But really, fuck the critics. Your work is good, man."

The line went muffled—a sign that his future sister-in-law had taken the phone out of her boyfriend's hand. Something she did all the time. He cracked his first smile of the evening, because Della was a spitfire. His brother was lucky as hell.

"Half the people are there to see a rock star," she said. "And the other half are there to judge one. Their opinions don't matter. Your work is good, Reid. I'm telling you. It's really good."

After Reid had finally told everyone about his cabin, Bex had wound up buying a place nearby. The three of them would make Calamity their permanent home. Any other time, Bex and Della would be at an event like this, but they were currently visiting her dad in Arizona and the Sinclair family in LA before they went on tour.

"So it's a shit-show?" His twin was back on the line.

"No. It's not that." Reid tipped his head back against the brick wall. "What the fuck am I doing?"

"You're showing your work at an art gallery, man. You worked hard for this. And I'm serious when I tell you it's

good. You're talented."

"Yeah, I got some good shots, but they're asking me about F-stops and apertures, light meters and... Someone actually talked about the 'perceptual intrigue' of my work. Like I'm making some kind of statement here instead of going to the spots where the rangers tell me they've seen animals. I've got a lot of time on my hands, so I get to be there when shit happens."

"That doesn't detract from the quality of the shot. I'm not hearing anything negative, so what's really going on? Are they making fun of it?"

His brother would go there. When he'd started out busking for rent money, it had gone well until some kid from school saw him, and from that moment on, Bex had been trolled for being poor enough to need the coins tossed into their dad's old Fedora. It hadn't stopped him, but it had absolutely impacted him.

"Not at all. They love it. Think it's brilliant."

"Then what's the problem?"

He pushed off the cold wall. "The problem is that I'm not a photographer."

"Pretty sure you've spent the entire first three months of your retirement taking and editing pictures. That makes you one."

"Yeah, that's the thing. I like to take pictures, but I'm not interested in shutter speed or exposure values."

"Ah, okay. I get it. This isn't your thing, but you've got time to figure out what you really want to do."

What if I don't find it? He and his brother were so alike, he'd just assumed he had some wild creative energy, too, and that he just needed the time and space to find it. Well, he'd had plenty of time and lots of space and...

I've got nothing. Believing he had a future as a photographer had gotten him through the hardest times on the

road. Without that, what did he have? How did he fill all the hours in a day?

“Just because you have a house in Calamity doesn’t mean you have to stay there all the time. Why don’t you come on tour with me and Della?”

“Love you, man, but getting back on a bus is the worst thing I can imagine doing.”

“It won’t be like before. It’s chill. Smaller venues.” His brother’s tone softened. “And this time, we’ll be real.”

Right before Bex launched his American tour, a press release would go out telling the whole story. The world would know the truth about the twins.

“Nah. This is your time, man. I want this for you.” *I just want something for me, too.* Truth was, he loved his cabin in the woods. Loved Calamity. The only thing missing was a purpose. And he didn’t think he could stand one more day without one.

He knew what he had to do. As much as he dreaded making the call, he’d run out of options. “All right, I’ve got to go.”

“Don’t do it.”

“Do what?”

“You’re going to call Martin, aren’t you?”

He cracked his first grin of the night. Twinergy, as Della liked to say. “Yeah.”

“He’s a manager. It’s his job to get you back in the studio and out on the road.”

“I know, but I just want to see what ideas he has.”

“Reid, man. You don’t have to do anything right now.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“It’s only been three months. You’ve got to give it more time. I’d hate for you to commit to something now when the right thing might be just around the corner.”

“Look, I only want ideas. I’m not doing anything that doesn’t rock my world.”

“The first thing he’s going to ask is if you want to get the band back together.”

“And he knows we don’t want that.” Leading a double life—hiding it from fans, reviewers, promoters—had taken its toll. When they’d met Della three months ago, she’d forced them to get real about what they wanted out of life, and they’d both decided to shut it all down. Neither wanted to go back to that life.

“Look, this is a huge transition for both of us,” Bex said. “And if you just hang tight and let it happen, you’re going to stumble onto something good. I guarantee, you’ll know the minute you bump into it.”

“I hear you.”

“Bullshit. You hear the emptiness of your life after rocking stadiums for ten years.”

“You’re not wrong. But all I’m going to do is call and see if he has ideas for me.”

His brother exhaled into the receiver. “Promise me one thing. Before you commit to anything, run it by me. Okay?”

He could hear the concern in his brother’s voice, so he lightened his tone. “You know I will. Talk soon.” He thumbed off. He was happy for his brother. Not only did he have talent and passion, but he had Della. He’d gone from their crazy life on the road to something better.

Reid had gone from the chaos and noise to...the utter silence of living in a cabin in the woods.

A house where he’d met and spent five days with a woman who’d rocked his world.

A woman who’d ghosted him.

Sometimes he lay in bed and relived their time together. It had been the best five days of his life, and he still didn’t know what had gone wrong. He only had two pieces of information about her: she lived in LA, and she had a demanding boss.

He'd had time to wonder why her demeanor had changed after he'd come back with his boots, and why she'd left while he was at the lodge. He'd pieced together a few things.

One: even if she'd seen the text from Exie, he'd told her he would only be gone twenty minutes. She couldn't have assumed he was running off for a twenty-minute booty call. That didn't make sense.

Two: Maisie hadn't named her boss—which was weird—but she had described her as unreasonable and irrational. What if *Exie* was her boss? If Maisie was at her beck-and call, Exie wouldn't appreciate her stealing away to spend time with Van Claybourne. Mixing business and pleasure never worked, and he didn't think someone as exacting as Exie would stand for it.

Three: everyone knew Exie followed a strict paleo diet. She didn't let anyone—including roadies—eat outside her plan in her presence. While he'd been with Maisie, she'd talked about sneaking chips and desserts and fried chicken and how she never got to eat this kind of thing at work.

Four: all of that was interesting, but it didn't answer why she'd run. Unless Exie had found out about their relationship. That was the only thing he could conclude.

Fuck. Stop thinking about a woman who's long gone. Focus on now. Your future. He tapped out his manager's number.

“Reid. Hey. How's it going?”

He should probably follow his brother's advice and get off the call, give himself more time to find a path, but when he thought of waking up tomorrow with nothing to do, no one to talk to, his stomach squeezed. “It's all good. You?”

In that moment, standing outside the art gallery where people were fawning over his amateur photographs, talking to the manager he'd hoped never to work with again, his skin felt like it didn't fit. He wanted to strip it off and run.

But I've got nowhere to go.

“I've got this new band I'm pretty excited about. Good kids. They'll go far. So, what can I do for you?”

“I need...” Martin might be a manager, but he’d still been in their lives for a decade. Reid could be honest with him. “Fuck, man. I need something.”

Martin chuckled. “Believe me, I know all about it. You think I haven’t been expecting this call? Three months is what it takes. Three months of oil changes and laundry and clogged drains.”

“I don’t mind any of that. I like doing things for myself. I just don’t...”

“You’re bored. I get it. You’ve spent the last ten years with a packed schedule where you couldn’t get a moment to yourself. And now you’re bingeing cable TV shows and have whole days when the phone doesn’t ring.”

Martin had nailed it. Relief cracked him wide open, and he dropped to a crouch and lowered his head. “Yeah.” Someone understood. “Exactly.”

“You want to get the band back together?”

“What?” He stood up. “No. I never want to go back to that life, but I need to do something.”

“Something with photography?”

“No.”

“The show didn’t go well?”

“Show’s going great. They think I’m a fuckin’ genius.” He paced away from the wall. “I like taking pictures, but I’m not a photographer.”

“Okay. So what kind of gig are you looking for? Because a buddy of mine’s putting together a reality TV show. He’s looking for a big name to interview rock stars. It’s going to be huge. You’ll record them in their homes, their studios, on tour... It’s a comprehensive look into their lives.”

“Sounds like a lot of travel.”

“Oh yeah. All over the world.”

“That’s a hard no. I’m not living out of a suitcase again.” *This is good.* He was narrowing the field just by having this

conversation. “I want to stay here, and I don’t want to be in front of the camera. I want to be behind the scenes.”

“What about a recording studio? Something you and Bex could do together?”

“Yeah, we’ve talked about that.” After all these years, he should be comfortable with the idea that he had no musical talent beyond his voice. It shouldn’t sting. “Seems an obvious choice, but I’m not interested in running the business end of a studio.”

“What do you want?” Martin sounded kind, patient, and Reid appreciated that.

“I don’t know. My brother told me to give it more time, but I just wanted to call and see if you had ideas.”

“Actually, I might. Guess who I just got off the phone with?” Martin had a smile in his voice. “Exie Sylva’s manager.”

A bubble burst in his belly, spreading heat through him. “Yeah?” What if Maisie *had* worked for Exie four years ago? *What if she still works for her?* This might be a path back to the one woman he couldn’t stop thinking about. He’d tried asking, but Exie had brushed him off.

“I’m sure you heard about the breakup.”

“Hard not to.” The rock star’s fiancé—well, former fiancé now—had been caught on a hot mic saying she was such a dud in bed, it was like fucking a corpse. Reid cringed just thinking about it.

“Well, if you know Exie at all, she’s got a plan. And you’re number one on her list.”

“Oh. Okay, well, I’m not interested in collaborating with her.” But he should probably let Martin finish. Of course, if Maisie still worked for her... *Fuck, yeah.* “Sorry. Go on. What’s she got in mind?”

“She wants to date you for six weeks.”

He barked out a laugh. “Hell no.” He was looking for something meaningful. “I’m not interested in being anyone’s

rebound.”

“No. Let me rephrase that. She wants you to be her *fake* boyfriend.”

“Why me?”

“Her ex just told the world she’s a dud in bed. She wants the Sexiest Man Alive to prove otherwise.”

“Why doesn’t she just get drunk and eat ice cream like everyone else who’s ever been dumped?” Not that he’d know. He’d never been in a relationship. Except for those five days.

Damn. He’d actually considered giving up his career for her. *Dumbass.*

Martin chuckled. “Ah, come on. You know Exie. Why would she do that when she can date the guy who’s won the title four times? Packs a hell of a lot more punch. Besides, it’s not her style to take shit lying down. She comes out swinging every time. Look, I didn’t think you’d be interested, so I wasn’t going to bother telling you, but you called. You’re looking for something to do, and who knows where it might lead.”

That right there got his interest. No, he didn’t want to pretend to date her, but Exie had her fingers in a lot of different pots. Her fashion line and fine art were as successful as her music. Maybe hanging around her would get him fired up about something. Maybe he’d find he had a flair for something. He could be stubborn and stay in his own lane, or he could step into hers and be exposed to new opportunities.

And maybe...it would lead to Maisie.

“What does she want exactly?”

“Nothing more than some leaked photos. Shots of you sneaking out of her house at six in the morning, a blurry photo of you banging her against the wall... That kind of thing. A few suggestive posts and emojis on social media.”

“Forget it. I’m not that hard up. I’m definitely not going to pretend to fuck her for the tabloids. What else have you got?”

“Well, hang on. The two of you can agree on the kinds of shots you’re willing to release.”

“Martin, this isn’t what I’m looking for.” Except...Maisie. This was the only tie he had. “What do I get out of this?”

“Connections. No one’s better connected than Exie. Why not spend a few weeks in her world, meet some people... Maybe just being around her will light a fire under your ass?”

Exactly what he’d been thinking. “Yeah.” And even if Maisie didn’t still work for her, Exie might know where she’d gone. “Tell you what. I’ll fly out there and meet her. See if we can work something out.”

Why the hell not? He had nothing else going on.

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Chapter Two

REID BARELY SLEPT THE NEXT FEW NIGHTS. HIS MIND KEPT shuffling through his memories with Maisie, stirring him up, making him ache for her. And now, finally, he was standing on Exie's doorstep, seconds away from possibly seeing Maisie again.

The artist owned an entire building on the boardwalk facing Venice Beach. With neon light fixtures and sculptures attached to the façade, the place looked funky and dynamic. If he couldn't discover his own creativity in Exie's world, then he just didn't have any.

Let's do this. He pressed the buzzer. While he waited, he took in the rollerbladers, cyclists, and skateboarders whizzing by. Across the boardwalk, tanned, fit people played sand volleyball. The air was scented with grilled onion from the restaurant next door, and endless miles of ocean sparkled in the bright sunlight.

Hope struck a match in the darkness that had fallen over him the last several months. *This might be good.*

"Be right down," a voice called through the intercom.

It landed on his skin like sparks. Was that Maisie? He couldn't tell. It had been too long. He remembered looking down into her sultry eyes while she sucked his cock, recalled the path his fingertips had taken across her cheeks, down the column of her neck, over the plump swell of her breast, all the way down to the high arches of her feet. He remembered

laughing so hard he couldn't breathe, but he didn't recognize her voice.

Reid looked down at his Converse high tops. He didn't know what it was about her, but he'd never felt that way around anyone else. Not before or after. Was it because she'd run off on him? Was it the lack of closure that kept him thinking about her?

He'd have his answer when he looked into her eyes again. The chemistry would either be there, or it wouldn't. And if it wasn't?

Well, he'd spend the next six weeks with Exie and catch some inspiration, find his path in life, and finally put his fantasy girl away, so he could move on.

A man strolled by strumming a guitar and singing, and a pack of teenagers chased each other onto a grassy patch just off the boardwalk. An ocean breeze sifted through his hair, and he *remembered* her. The way it felt to be under the covers with her, their bodies pressed tightly together, the sense of rightness, of home.

Nah. He'd never forget his hideaway girl. He'd always hold a place in his heart for her, and nothing could suppress the wild excitement he felt when he heard noises behind the door.

Fuck. Let it be her.

It swung open, and a harried, frazzled woman with sleek black hair greeted him with a smile. "Hey, Van. Sorry to keep you waiting." She let him into a vestibule and locked the door behind him. In one hand, she held a sheath of papers. With the other, she reached out to greet him. "Hi. I'm Destiny, Exie's assistant."

"Great to meet you."

She must've noticed his disappointment, because her smile flattened. "Don't worry. Exie's here. I just have to get some details out of the way before I let you into the factory." Her laughter rang false. She seemed not only harried but possibly at the end of her rope.

“My manager didn’t mention any details. He said I was just hanging out with her for a couple of weeks.”

“You are, but you’re about to enter the super-secret world of Exie Sylva, so I’m sure you can understand that everything you see inside these walls is proprietary. She doesn’t allow anyone in until they’ve signed a nondisclosure agreement.”

“Seems fair enough. Why don’t you go on and send a copy to my lawyer?” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I can chill on the beach...” He thought about his jeans and boots compared to everyone else’s board shorts and flip-flops. “Or I can hang out in the hotel for a bit.”

“Oh no, that’s not necessary. Exie’s dying to meet you.” The smile stretched across her face like a rubber band ready to snap. “It’s all super basic. See, look.” Holding out the papers, she let him skim the contents as she quickly turned each page.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’m still going to have my lawyer give it a look.”

“Honestly, there’s nothing in here you haven’t seen before. You can’t reveal any trade secrets or discuss anything you see or hear inside this building. Pretty standard stuff.”

“Not that I’d violate it, but what’s the penalty?”

She flipped through the pages and showed him the page in question. “A million dollars cash payment and cessation of business activities of Van Claybourne LLC for two years.”

“What does the business have to do with anything? This contract is between me and her.”

“You have to understand, she’s letting you into her world. She’s exposing you to her entire empire, so it’s got to be an ironclad contract with real consequences.”

What did it matter anyway? The band didn’t exist anymore.

“How many assistants does she have?” The question just popped out. It was the only thing he cared about, and he had to know.

“One. Me.”

“What about Maisie? Does she still work here?”

The way her expression shuttered, it was like peering through a window and having the drapes jerk closed. “I’m afraid I can’t talk about anything in Exie’s world until the papers are signed.”

She’s here. Maisie’s in Exie’s world. Fuck, yes.

Still...he hesitated. “Not sure I want to sign anything without my lawyer taking a look.”

“Okay, well.” She reached behind him to unlock the door. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Wait, you’re actually kicking me out?” He laughed. The whole situation was absurd.

“I’m afraid so. Exie’s looking to start right now. She doesn’t have time to go through a long process, and as I said, everyone who walks through these doors signs the same contracts.”

When he didn’t immediately leave, she said, “It’s nothing more than stating that everything you see and hear within these walls is proprietary information, not to be shared in perpetuity.” She pulled out the last document and set it on top. “And this one lays out the details of the arrangement. Basically, for six weeks, you can’t be seen with another woman, and Exie owns all the photographs taken and will leak them to the press at her discretion.”

Damn, he wanted to get inside. Get to Maisie. “I’ve got my own terms. No nudity, no sex tapes, nothing of a sexual nature.”

“Well, I mean, that’s the whole reason she’s doing this. For the sexual aspect.”

“She can post shots that suggest we’re dating, but that’s it.”

“Got it. You don’t have to worry about that.” She pointed to a section. “See? Martin gave us a heads-up, so it’s already in the terms.”

He wasn't dating anyone—unless Maisie was inside this building, in which case *it's on*. And she'd know about the contract, so she'd know he wasn't sleeping with her boss.

This sheath of papers...this was his ticket to see his hideaway girl. And the sooner he got to her, the happier he'd be. "Give me that pen."

So much for six weeks. Not even three days later, Reid pushed out of his attorney's office and into the cool evening air. At this time of night in Calamity, tourists jammed the town green and a live band played in the gazebo. He headed for his car.

"How's it going?" his brother asked.

"It's fine." He shifted the phone to his other ear. "But I'm back in Calamity."

"Oh shit. What happened?"

Thanks to the NDA, he couldn't tell Bex what he'd discovered about the "artist" Exie Sylva. "Nothing really. She's got a lot going on, so I decided that instead of staying there the whole time, I'd go back and forth." His attorney had just gone through the contract and explained the significance of restricting Van Claybourne LLC. "I need you to do something, though. You need to set up a new LLC. Separate from Van Claybourne's." Because if he fucked up in any way over the next six weeks, his brother's tour would be cancelled.

"I can do that. Want to tell me why and what it has to do with Exie?"

Yes. But he couldn't. After he'd found out the truth about her, he'd known he couldn't stay. He'd let Exie take as many pictures as she could in two days, but then he'd told her he'd had enough, that the lack of chemistry between them would be obvious. He did agree to fly back three more times to fulfill his obligations, but that was the extent of it.

The moment they'd agreed on terms, he'd left the building and bolted for his hotel. He couldn't get away from her and LA fast enough.

“I had to sign an NDA. If I break it, Van Claybourne LLC can’t do anything for two years. Apparently, you haven’t created one for your new entity, so this tour is covered under the old one.”

“Listen, I don’t know what’s going on, but you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to because of my tour. I can cancel it right now.”

Yeah, he figured his brother would hit the eject button at the first possible opportunity. He couldn’t let that happen. Bex needed to come out of the shadows and show the world his talent. “It’s all good. Hey, I called because I need you to do me a favor.”

“Anything. You know that.”

He did. *Which is why this was going to suck.* “I need you to go along with everything you see in the press over the next few weeks, okay? And not ask me questions.”

“What the fuck?”

“Just roll with it for six weeks, and then I’ll tell you everything.”

“I don’t like the sound of this, but okay. Whatever you need.”

Yeah, he loved his brother. “But I do have some good news.”

“You gonna produce Exie’s next album?”

“Ha. Nope. But Exie got me a gig as a judge on *Make Me a Superstar*.” Reid waited for a response, but his brother had gone silent. “What?” he eventually asked.

“Nothing. I’m just surprised. I thought you didn’t want to be in the spotlight anymore, that you’re looking for something meaningful.”

“I am, but the bottom line is I don’t have anything going on right now. This is just a way to connect me to creative people. Maybe something will come of it.”

“I’ll just say it one more time and then I’ll drop it. I think you should hold off signing contracts. You’re going through a huge transition, and you need to give it more than three months.”

“The show isn’t time-consuming. They film all the episodes over a few weeks in April. It’s just something to do.”

“It’s going to put you back in the spotlight. Back to the noise that kept you from figuring out what you want to do with your life.”

“That’s a fair point.” *Fuck*. He was pretty messed up at the moment and not making the best decisions. But finding out Maisie wasn’t at Exie’s—and might never have worked for the woman—had messed with his head. He knew he needed to stop thinking about her, but it wasn’t easy to erase the best memories of his life.

He couldn’t believe he’d thought he could siphon inspiration off a fraud like Exie Sylva. He stopped in the middle of the street to take in a sky glittering with stars and blew out a breath. “I’m just so fucking lost.” His brother went quiet long enough for Reid to think they’d gotten disconnected. “Bex?”

“I’m cancelling the tour. Della and I are coming home. We’ll—”

“No. You’re not doing that.” After spending a weekend with Exie, he appreciated his brother’s talents even more. The woman had none. She hired people to design her clothes, paint her art, and even write her music. Unbelievable. He’d never seen anything like it.

He continued across the road, heading for the bright lights of Main Street.

“Instead of flying out to LA and joining reality TV shows, why not take some classes, get your degree? You’re in Calamity, for fuck’s sake. Get out there and rappel, snowboard... Have some outdoor adventures. You’ve got the money and the time. Have fun. Don’t lock yourself up because you’re restless.”

“Too late.” The rattle of wheels on concrete drew his attention, and he dodged a group of kids skateboarding. “I signed a contract.”

“At least it’s only for a few weeks.”

“Right. And not until next April.” As he passed Bliss Ice Cream parlor, a head of golden-brown, choppy hair caught his attention. The familiarity of it had him turning to see—

Maisie.

A bolt of lightning struck his chest dead center.

What the ever-loving hell?

Is that seriously her?

The music, the crowds, the laughter and conversation—all of it went muted as he took in the beautiful woman licking a chocolate ice cream cone. His heart thundered, and blood roared in his ears.

“Reid?” his brother called from far away. “Hey, man. You there?”

Realizing he’d lowered his arm, he swiftly brought it up and pressed the phone to his ear. “Yeah. Listen, I gotta go. Just ran into an old friend.” He didn’t wait for an answer before thumbing the disconnect button.

He stood so close to the plate glass window that his breath fogged a small circle, obscuring the woman he’d fantasized about for four years. He was almost afraid to go in there. What if she didn’t remember him? Or worst...what if she wanted nothing to do with him? She’d ghosted him for a reason.

A powerful energy rolled in, charging him up. Maybe she’d reject him, but maybe she’d want to see him.

It was time to find out.

He pushed into the noisy shop, breathed in the scent of freshly made waffle cone, and made his way through crowded tables. With each step closer, his pulse quickened, making him as jacked up as if he were heading on stage for a concert.

When he reached her table, he had one second to take her in and confirm it was her. *Fuck, she's beautiful.* Even more so than before. Her features were fuller, her cheeks rosier, and she radiated the kind of uncomplicated joy he hadn't seen back then.

She must've sensed a presence, because she looked up with a mix of curiosity and don't-fuck-with-me energy.

"Maisie?"

Her eyes widened, and she popped out of her plastic chair so quickly it tipped back. In making a grab for it, she toppled her ice cream out of the cone, and it landed on the table. "Dammit."

"Here." He reached for the stack of napkins. "Let me—"

"No. Leave it." She stepped right into his space, blocking him from the table.

"Hey," he said. Nervous energy buzzed around her, a forcefield keeping him from leaning in for the hug he wanted to give. "I was just walking by and saw you in here. I can't believe it. I've thought about you for four years, and now here you are."

"Here I am." She looked pissed. She acted like he was her high school bully who was pretending nothing had ever happened between them.

His smile faltered at the edges. What had he done wrong? He thought about that last text from Exie. *Get over here, big boy! Don't make me come looking for you.*

He should clear that up, but not now. Not here.

And then...

Oh shit. Fuck.

Dammit all to hell.

He'd just signed an NDA. He could not believe he'd waited four years to find her and then run into her the day after he'd given up hope of ever seeing her again. Well, there was

nothing he could do about it now. He had one shot to make an impression. *Don't blow it.*

Damn, she's a beauty. He'd do anything to have her as soft and happy around him as she'd been before he'd approached her table. "So how are you? What are you doing back in Calamity?"

The pulse in her neck beat wildly, and a sheen of perspiration broke out across her forehead. "I live here now."

"You moved to Calamity?" *To be near me?* "Damn, I've been back three months. I wish I'd known you were here..." He shoved a hand into his jeans so she wouldn't notice the tremble. "I've thought about you a lot over the years."

"Well, there you go." Her tone had a dismissive edge. "We're both in Calamity. Listen, I've got to get going."

"I always wanted to explain why I ran out the way I did." He'd have to talk to his brother about moving up the timeline to announce his tour and the fact that they were twins. Because if she'd misunderstood the text message, he had to come clean. If that was the reason for her attitude, he wouldn't let her go until she understood the truth.

"I don't need an explanation. It was a lifetime ago."

"No, it wasn't. It's been four years. And I was disappointed to come back and find you gone." *Yep, we're having the conversation.* He had to fix her misconceptions. "I think you saw the text from someone I was working with, and I don't know if you thought it was a booty call or something like that, but that wasn't the case. Exie needed something that only my brother could give her." This wasn't the time to go into details. He had to stick to the most important parts. "Maisie, those five days with you were the best of my life, and I never got over it. Why did you take off like that?"

"It was over anyway. We both had to get back to work. In any event, it's all water under the bridge."

Her total lack of interest gutted him. How ironic that the rock star with posters hanging in bedrooms around the world was so lonely that he'd romanticized a weeklong fuckfest?

“Yeah, okay. Sure. I’ll let you go.” His body fought the words. He wanted to stay, remind her how great they’d been together. Convince her every minute had been real.

Instead, ears burning, cheeks flaming, he turned and walked away.

By the time he got outside, though, and the mountain air started to cool his skin, his mind cleared. He started to piece together the signs. That tip of her chin, as if challenging him. The icy tone, the snide comment about it all being water under the bridge.

He’d gotten it wrong. Her shakiness meant she hadn’t been indifferent at all.

Worse, he’d definitely seen her flinch when he’d mentioned Exie.

Shit, why had he done that? He should’ve waited until they were in a better place before launching into that discussion.

He’d handled it terribly.

One thing was clear. They needed to talk. Just not today. Not in a crowded ice cream parlor. He’d go back in and get her number.

Unless... Was she on a date? Funny, he’d been so worked up, he hadn’t even looked to see who else was at that table. Now that he thought about the way she’d acted, she clearly hadn’t wanted him to see her companion.

He glanced back through the window. A family was just getting up, and they blocked his view.

Forget it. Go home. He’d consider tonight a win because he’d found out she lived here now. It was a small town, so he was bound to see her again. Besides, he had to get through the next six weeks if he wanted to build something meaningful with her.

Decision made, he started to turn away, but the crowd cleared, giving him a view of Maisie’s table. Her date was...

A child.

His axis tipped with such force he thought he could hear the rush of wind in his ears, feel the pavement rise up to meet his face. *Maisie's a mom.*

She's fucking *married*?

Was that why she'd never wanted to talk about her life? Because she'd had to get home to her husband, her children? Shock lit his brain like stadium lights, obliterating his thoughts.

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she leaned in with an adoring smile and wiped the little boy's face with a napkin. The tenderness, the joy.

He couldn't watch anymore. It was too painful to realize how completely she'd moved on. One day, he'd be happy for her. Today was not that day. Right then, she glanced up and saw him. Her shocked and fearful expression had the little boy twisting around to see what had upset his mom.

The boy didn't see him, but Reid got a clear view of his face.

A second lightning bolt struck, rendering him a live wire. Stunned, it took a moment to process what he was seeing. That was the face he'd looked at every day of his life when he was a kid.

It was Bex.

It's me.

His brain scrambled to put together facts. He'd been with Maisie four years ago. This kid had to be, what? Three?

His axis righted, his mind cleared, and he got it.

Holy fuck.

That's my son.

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Chapter Three

OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD.

What do I do?

Maisie's blood turned to ice. Her instincts screamed to grab her son and bolt. But before she could do a single thing, Van stormed into the shop, a look of fury mixed with awe in his eyes.

Ignoring her, he set his hands on the table and looked right at Jagger. "Hey, little man. How's it going?" The static energy billowing off him was so powerful, it drew the attention of people at nearby tables. "Is that..." He swallowed and gave a chin nod to the cone. "What flavor is that?"

Instead of answering, Jag looked to his mom. He wasn't used to strangers getting in his face and asking questions. That snapped her right out of her panic and back into mama bear default mode. She gave her son an encouraging smile. "Sweetie, this is Van, an old friend of mine. Van, this is Jagger. But we call him Jag. Or Sweet Pea. Sometimes, Cutie Pie." *You can stop talking now.* Even her son was looking at her like she'd lost it.

I have. I most definitely have.

"Jagger?" Van asked the boy. "As in Mick Jagger?"

"I don't know." Rivers of ice cream flowed onto her son's fingers.

She reached into her tote bag and pulled out a small pack of wipes. “Hang on a sec.” Taking the cone, she licked all around to clean it up, wiped his messy hand, and then handed it back.

Van dropped to a crouch. “How old are you?”

Her boy lifted three fingers. “Free.”

“Three, huh? I bet I can guess your birthday? Want to see if I can?”

Jagger nodded warily, his gaze shifting between his mom and the stranger.

Oh God. Sure, she’d imagined running into him. Of course, she had. She’d known he had a house in Wild Wolff Village—the ski resort in Calamity—but she’d figured it was just something rich people did. They saw a cool town and bought a place. He probably had a whole portfolio of properties he’d bought on a whim. She’d never once run into him, and no one she knew had ever talked about him.

Well, until his photography exhibit. But she lived and worked here—it wasn’t like she’d move to get away from him.

Yes, she’d thought about seeing him again. But nothing could prepare her for this moment.

“You were born in... Let’s see, it’s July now...so if we go back three months—” he pointed a finger at the boy, “—April. Did I get it right?”

Of course, her son had no idea when he was born, so he just focused on his cone.

Van stood to his full, intimidating height. At six-four, he towered over her. Forget his status as the world’s most recognized rock star, he drew eyes no matter where he went because of his powerful physique and handsome features. “We need to talk.” She’d never heard him so cold.

Anger chased the anxiety away. “Really? *Now* you want to talk? Now that you’re retired, you’ve got time for this conversation?”

“How are you angry with *me*?”

Playing the victim. Classic. Fortunately, she'd been trained by the best gaslighter in the world, so he wasn't getting one over on her.

He hadn't been there for her when she'd needed him most, when she was pregnant and unemployed, when she'd had a newborn and finals. She wanted to tell him he'd had his chance, and he'd blown her off. She would love to take Jagger and storm out. But she had to put all that aside and do the right thing. Jagger needed to know his father.

"His grandparents are taking him to the farmers market tomorrow, so we can meet for coffee." She gestured vaguely to Calamity Joe's just down the street.

"Mommy." Her boy sounded distraught.

Forgetting the rock star, she swept into action and removed the soggy cone from his hand. She dumped the mess into the garbage, pulled another wipe out of the packet, and cleaned him up. "All better." She grabbed her purse. "Let's go home, okay?"

"What's your rush?" Van had a hard look in his eyes. "We have so much to catch up on."

"And we're not going to do that in the middle of Bliss." He had the nerve to come at her? After everything she'd done to find him, after facing him outside that bus... The humiliation he'd put her through?

Yeah, you can go fuck yourself.

Hitching her tote onto her shoulder, she picked up her son and smoothed the hair off his forehead. "You ready for your bath?" When she glanced up, she found Van watching her.

There was tenderness there, until their gazes locked, and then he just looked hurt and confused. "I'd rather not talk publicly. Can you come to my house tomorrow morning? Around ten?"

Hah. "No." Not only wouldn't she step foot in the cabin that held some of her very best—and worst—memories, but she needed to meet him on her terms. "The reason his grandparents take him Saturday morning is so I can catch up

on all my chores for the week. I'll be in town anyway, so let's just meet at Calamity Joe's."

"You won't want to be in a public place when we start talking."

Rage whooshed through her like a flash fire. "Are you out of your mind? If you're going to reinvent the past, you can just forget it. You're unbelievable." Her son touched her cheek with a sticky hand.

"Okay, Mommy?"

Oh, her sweet boy. She loved him with every fiber of her being. "Yeah, sweetie. I'm fine. Let's go home. We'll have a bath and read some books before bed." Only a love as pure and unadulterated as a mother's for her child could tamp down the rage of injustice. *This is what matters.* Her precious little boy.

She would have it out with Van, and then they'd decide on a path forward. But she wouldn't expose her son to this kind of animosity. "I live on the lake. In one of the Sundance cottages. I can meet you there at ten."

"Which one?"

She hesitated, hating the idea of him invading her peaceful enclave. He shouldn't get to see baby pictures and stuffed animals, Jagger's favorite toys, or any of the things he'd chosen to miss out on because his career came first.

He stepped closer, looming over her. Jag's fingers clenched in her T-shirt. "Address?"

"Two Lark Cove." She wanted to turn back the clock three hours to the doctor's office where Jagger had gotten so worked up his skin had broken out in an angry red rash. Back when she'd promised him ice cream after dinner.

She wished she'd stayed home.

Because it seemed, now that Van was retired, he wanted to know his son.

Terror like she'd never known ripped through her. Would he make a play for custody? Would she have to share her son?

She couldn't let this man into her home, the only place she felt safe. "There's a bench under a pine tree across the street. I'll meet you there at ten."

The lake lapped gently against the shore as Maisie sat under the shade of lodgepole pines. This was her spot. Where she came after putting her busy toddler to bed. Where she brought a book and read until the sun sank behind the mountain peaks.

But now? She was a tangled ball of nerves. He'd ruined this place for her, and he hadn't even shown up yet. Not that he was late. No, it was only nine-fifty. Too anxious to do her chores, she'd stayed home, cleaned the kitchen, made their beds...eaten a whole bag of chocolate-drizzled popcorn.

Sorry not sorry for eating my feelings.

Her phone vibrated in her hand. Irritation flared. Was he cancelling? If he thought his time was more valuable than hers, he was going to learn very quickly that his fame, his wealth, and his power meant nothing to her.

She wasn't his fangirl, and she didn't have to put up with anything from him.

Her whole body relaxed when she saw her friend's name.

Olive: You ready for this?

Maisie: No.

The moment her phone rang, Maisie tapped Connect. "Hey."

"Okay, you've got ten minutes before Fuckface shows up. Talk."

Maisie smiled. She and Olive believed wholeheartedly in expelling bad feelings out of the body—clearing them out so they didn't fester and harden. So, they vented to each other. No judgements, no solutions, and no advice.

She drew in a breath of pine-scented air and slowly released it. When she was ready, she let it out. "I'm scared he's going to want custody. I'm terrified I'll miss out on whole

summers with my boy. I can't bear the idea of waking up alone on Christmas morning and not getting to see the excitement in Jagger's eyes as he makes a run for the tree. I'm scared Fuckface will ruin him with his decadent rock-star ways. I'm terrified he'll get joint custody and then leave him with nannies and expose him to drugs and orgies and—"

"Is that what you really think?" Van's deep voice—gravelly from years of overuse—shattered the stillness of the peaceful summer morning.

Without even saying goodbye, Maisie disconnected. Her friend had to have heard him. She got to her feet and found Van standing behind the bench. "Yes." Her reaction to his ripped body, overgrown hair, and movie-star charisma would never change. He would forever be this larger-than-life rock star.

In his worn jeans and dark gray T-shirt, he eyed her in disbelief. "Jesus, Maisie. Were you in that cabin with me? I was more real with you than I've ever been with anyone. You saw me." He tapped his chest. "You *knew* me. How could you think I would take your son from you and then leave him with nannies?"

"We had five days together. I've known your reputation for ten *years*. How long after you went back on tour before you were in the press for partying and screwing everything that wiggles in your direction?"

"Probably not very long. Because I thought we had something special, but you ghosted me, and...I'm sorry if I didn't deal with it very well."

Her feelings for this man had hardened, but right now, seeing him this vulnerable, this willing to expose his heart? She felt terrible for what he'd overheard.

"Wait." He reared back in disbelief. "Is that why you didn't tell me about my son? Because you thought I was a scumbag?"

And just like that, it all came back. All the hurt, anguish, and fury came charging in. "Didn't *tell* you? Are you actually

going to pretend that we didn't have a conversation outside the bus? I told you I was pregnant. I get that your manager was trying to protect you from the hordes of women who claim you've gotten them pregnant, but you looked me right in the eyes and—”

“Wait, stop. What're you talking about? What bus? When did you talk to my manager?”

She might not know him well, but in that moment, there was no question that this was all news to him. He looked genuinely shocked and upset. She forced herself to calm down and give him a chance to respond. “I found out I was pregnant at six weeks. I didn't know how to find you—”

“That's because you didn't leave your contact information. If you hadn't run out on me, we wouldn't be in this situation.” His jaw snapped shut. “I'm sorry.” He waved a hand for her to continue. “Please. Go on.”

“I tried your manager first. His assistant asked if I knew how many paternity suits he got each month, and I said I didn't care because my situation was different. He asked how I knew you, and I said we'd met at the music festival in Calamity. I was very specific about your house, describing as much detail as I could, but he said he could only take it seriously if I produced a paternity test. I sent him a sample after the baby was born and never heard from him again.”
What an asshole.

“No one knew about that cabin.” He said it quietly, like he was barely holding it together. “It was the first thing I'd ever bought that was just mine. You have to understand my family... Being on a tour bus... I knew the minute I told them about it, they'd all want to book time there. It would've become a party cabin. I just wanted one place where I could be alone.”

Oh dear. He was getting to her. He really was. This man—the sensitive soul looking for peace and quiet, true connection... This was the man she'd spent five days with.

Before Exie crooked her finger, and he went running.

“Okay, that’s fine. You didn’t tell your manager, but Van, I told you to your face, so please don’t pretend that didn’t happen. Tell me you were too shocked to deal with it, or...or that you were in the middle of a tour. Or you were seeing someone else by then. Tell me anything but an embarrassing lie.”

“It’s not a lie. Maisie, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If those five days meant so much to you, how are you going to stand here and tell me you didn’t remember me six weeks later? Were you so high on drugs you didn’t recognize me?”

“I don’t do drugs. Never have.”

“Okay, fine. So, what’s your excuse?”

“Where did this happen? Give me as many details as you remember.”

“As I *remember*? I found out I was pregnant six weeks after being with you. Do you know how scary that was for me? I didn’t know what to do.” She pressed a palm to her forehead. She was confused that he could seem so sincere and yet... *No, no, no.*

This is gaslighting.

Plain and simple. “Let me tell you something, Van. I remember everything. I had a job that was too stressful and unstable to keep while raising a child. A job that was almost impossible for me to quit. But I did it. I quit and enrolled in school here. I wanted to get a teaching degree so I could be with my baby as much as possible.” She looked him right in the eye. “I needed your help. I needed child support, so I kept trying to find you. I messaged you on social media, wrote letters.”

“I don’t run my own accounts. Our publicist does that.”

“I figured. But I hoped somebody would let you know. So when I ran out of options, I showed up backstage at your concert in Chicago. I almost made it to the green room, but I threw up in the hallway. A security guard thought I was drunk

and escorted me out. My last resort was to go to your bus.” The memory of that night still had the power to devastate her. “Where I *talked to you.*” Watching him carefully, she saw no hint of recognition, no flinch of memory. Not a single tell that he was hiding something.

Is this man a sociopath? Or has he slept with so many women, he has no memory of me in particular?

“Was this right after the show?”

She was not going to play this game with him. “Yes. I told you I was pregnant, and you acted like you didn’t remember me. At first, you looked sorry for me, but then—”

“It wasn’t me.”

She burst out in a bitter laugh. “Okay, this is a waste of time. You should know that I used to work for the queen of the manipulators. A gaslighter extraordinaire. So trust me, Van. Your game is nothing compared to hers.” She sighed. “Listen, I’m a single mom, and I have no time for bullshit. If you want to know your son, then let’s skip to the scheduling portion of the conversation. You can tell me when you’re in town, and we’ll arrange supervised visits. But just so we’re super clear, I will never enter any mind games with you. That part of my life is over.”

He scrubbed his face with both hands, blowing out a *fuck*. “Maisie, I know you’re not going to believe me, but it wasn’t me.” With a shake of his head, he took a step back. “We’ve kept this secret for so long it feels weird to say it out loud. But I guess since my brother revealed everything at his show at Wild Billy’s, it’s okay.”

“Tell me what? What are you talking about? What secret?”

“I’m not Van.” His gaze dropped to his boots before swinging back up. “My name is Reid Sinclair. You talked to my twin brother.”

Chapter Four

HEAVY DOSES OF BOTH FEAR AND CONCERN COURSED THROUGH her. “Is there someone I can call? Because you’re clearly out of your mind right now.”

“Yeah, I know it sounds nuts, but I’m serious.”

“Okay, look, I get it. You thought I wanted some big payout. You and your manager thought I got knocked up with a rock star’s baby so I could live large. But it just isn’t true. Yes, I needed help back then, but I only wanted enough to cover diapers and a crib. Stuff like that. And I don’t need anything anymore. I’m fine now.” She just wanted to get away from him and go home. “Look, I have a headache, and I’ve got some errands to run before I pick up my son. Can we finish this conversation later?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “I’m Reid Sinclair.” With a few swipes, he found what he was looking for. “And this is my brother Bex.”

In the photo, identical twins stood side by side, laughing. They’d obviously been messing with each other. She could see one elbow bent, digging into the other’s ribcage, while the other man ruffled his brother’s hair.

Floored, she didn’t know what to believe.

“The reason it’s a big secret is because I don’t do anything but sing. My brother’s the musician.” He shrugged. “He doesn’t want to perform, so I do it for him.”

In that moment, her perspective shifted as surely as if an earthquake had cracked open the ground beneath her feet. “I’m going to need some coffee.”

“Yeah. Sure.” He sounded defeated. “We can go into town.”

She’d been wrong about him. “No. I mean here.” She gestured to the navy-blue house with the hot-pink door. Exie might’ve paid for it, but Maisie had made it all her own. “Come on.” They crossed the sandy two-lane road and headed up her walkway. Flowers danced in a light breeze, and the air was scented with honeysuckle. She opened the door and led the way into the kitchen. “Do you want coffee or tea?” But when she turned around, he wasn’t behind her. She found him at the mantle over the fireplace, staring at pictures of Jagger. She came up beside him, sharply aware of the breadth of his shoulders, the silkiness of his hair, and the scent of expensive soap. “He’s a really good boy.”

Van—no, wait. Reid—didn’t look at her. Didn’t speak.

Knowing he had a twin validated everything she’d felt back then. *It wasn’t all a lie.* But before she let her feelings run away from her, there was one thing she needed to know. “I have to ask you something. During the festival, were you... Were you hoping to hook up with Exie?”

“No. Never. Is that why you left? Because of that text?”

She nodded. “You were all she talked about. She was obsessed with you.” And Exie always got what she wanted. She made sure of it.

“Dammit. I wished you’d asked me. My brother wrote a ballad for our duet that last night. She wanted to rehearse, but Bex hadn’t sent it to me yet. He wasn’t answering his phone, so I ran to the lodge to get it from him and send it. I came right back. I wasn’t interested in her.”

This was too important to skim over. “Not at all?”

“Romantically? No. But even if I had been, the minute I met you in the closet with your fried chicken and chocolate cake, I was a goner.”

Dammit. She believed him. What a horrible, horrible mess. Frustration bore down on her, and she had to move. “I’m going to make coffee. Do you want some?” She would give anything to go back in time and do things differently.

“No, thanks.”

What have I done? Instead of making a pot, she dropped a pod into the machine and grabbed a mug. As she worked, sadness crept in, overtaking frustration and eroding the mountain of resentment she’d built over the last four years.

If she were honest with herself, she could see how easily she’d painted Reid with the same brush she’d used for Evil Exie. She had to stop doing that. A sense of rightness emboldened her. For her son’s sake, she needed to stop letting her past experiences infect her. It was time to clear the cache and give Reid a chance. It helped to give him a new name. It forced her to see him as himself, not some stick-figure villain she’d sketched to fit the narrative of raunchy rock stars.

If she’d only known he was a twin... God, all this time Jagger could’ve had a dad.

When she came back out with her coffee, she found him still looking at the framed photographs. Slowly, he’d made his way down the line. When she reached him, he turned to her with glassy eyes.

Her heart broke for him. She didn’t know how she’d handle missing out on three years with her son. Giving him a soft smile, she was about to tell him he had all the time in the world to get to know Jagger.

But before she could get the words out, he said, “You’re alone.”

“I’m— What?” It took a moment to change tracks. He hadn’t been thinking about the time he’d lost with his son. *He’s upset about me?*

“In every picture, you’re alone.”

“Well, no. I mean, I have Jag.”

“Where are your parents? Family, friends?”

“Oh.” *Ha.* If only he knew. But she’d never talk about that. “I have a good friend, Olive. We’re very close.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in Scotland right now.” He didn’t need to hear about the blockbuster franchise her friend worked on.

“Where was she when you were giving birth? When you had a newborn?”

“Olive’s got a life, too. A busy one. We stay in touch all the time, and I have a good group of friends here.”

He let go of the frame to pick up another. “Right now, I want to rip my manager’s face off.”

“Well, to be fair, he did ask questions. Since my story didn’t line up, he put me in the pile with all the other paternity claims.”

Color rushed up from his neck, spreading across his cheeks. “That’s not why he blew it off. But dammit, I wish he’d said something.”

“This never would’ve happened if you’d told them you’d bought a house.”

“True, but I just wanted one thing that was mine.”

Standing so close, she was hit with that familiar scent that stirred something primal in her. She wanted to touch him, to comfort him, but it was all too soon. She couldn’t fall back into those feelings—wouldn’t let herself. Her life had changed. Her priority was her son.

“I’d been playing a role for years, and I wasn’t happy. But during those five days with you, I found something I wasn’t even looking for. And we made a *son*.” He lowered his head. “Fuck.” When he looked at her, he smiled. “How perfect is that? I made something so beautiful when I was my most real.”

It’s him. The man in the cabin. She careened back in time to the intimacy they’d shared. Their intense connection, the laughter, the electrifying touches. Before that text from Exie,

she'd firmly believed that if they'd had more time together, their affair would've turned into a forever kind of love.

She'd always had a crush on him—who didn't think Van Claybourne was the sexiest man alive? But the moment he sat down and shared her picnic in the empty house, she'd forgotten his face was plastered on magazine covers around the world. He'd just been this charming, sensitive, funny man with an enormous sexual appetite.

But immediately after the festival, he'd been back in the headlines for partying.

She turned away from him. "Who are you? I'm so confused. Are you the decadent rock star who bangs groupies and gets drunk in public? Or are you the man I spent those five days with?" *Because if you are, then I'm totally screwed.*

He took a step back, jamming his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You want to know why no one believed any of the paternity suits I got over the years?"

She went still, almost afraid to hear his answer. There was just so much at stake here. Certainly because of Jagger, but also because she'd fallen so hard for him that week.

He watched her for a moment, as though unsure whether to confess.

"Just tell me. Please. I'm trying to understand all of this."

He hunched a shoulder, looking impossibly young and innocent. "Because I never slept with any of them."

"Oh, come on." She didn't want to believe him. Somehow, it was easier to cling to the narrative the press created than adjust to an upside-down world. "I saw the sex tape."

Instead of shame or embarrassment, he seemed ticked off. "My sex life belongs to me, and I have nothing to say to the people who want to cash in on it. But your trust matters, and so I'll tell you the details because I want access to my son. You want the truth? Here it is. I got a lot of blow jobs and partied pretty damn hard over the years, but I've never had sex with a stranger. Not once."

It sounded crazy, but it made sense for the man she'd come to know. "That's a long time for a man to go without sex."

"I said I didn't fuck strangers. I've had brief relationships with women over the years. Once with a roadie in Europe. Another with a producer we worked with. My point is that I don't bang fans, and I'm not the whore the press makes me out to be." He brushed a strand of hair off her cheek and tucked it behind an ear. "Do you believe me?"

"Does it matter if I do?"

"Very much."

"Because of Jagger?"

"Because of you. I've held on to the memories of that week for a long time. Maybe I blew them up them because they helped me get through years of touring and partying and living a life I never wanted or liked, but whatever the reason, you're the standard I've held every other woman against. And believe me when I say, no one compares."

Every cell in her body wept with relief. Her heart filled with so much joy she thought it might burst. To know that their time together had meant as much to him as it had to her... It was overwhelming. Over the years, she'd come to doubt every single minute of it, but it had been real.

"This is all so crazy. I've thought the worst of you for a long time, so I guess I'm going to need a minute to adjust."

"Yeah, it's a lot for me, too. I finally find you...and it turns out I've got a son. Maisie, if I'd known you were pregnant, I would've been there. I would've quit the band, bought a bigger house, and stayed here with you."

The air turned murky as lake water, and she found it hard to take a full breath. Her vision went spotty. "Well, I wouldn't have expected you to quit." The words came out of her mouth because a response was expected. She neither felt them nor believed them.

She'd gone numb, and she didn't know why.

“I thought about spending my life with you. I would’ve been thrilled to find out you were pregnant.” His big hands cupped her elbows. “Swear to God, nothing would’ve made me happier. I would’ve been there every step of the way.”

The dam broke. A lifetime of loneliness, fear, and anxiety hit like a tsunami, obliterating the walls she’d built to help her survive. Tears burned tracks on her cheeks.

His arms came around her, and he held her close. “I’m sorry, Maze. I’m so sorry. I would’ve been here, I swear. I missed out on the most beautiful experience of a lifetime.”

Tires crunched over gravel, and she pulled away. Her maternal instincts rang like a bell, and she stepped around him to peer out the living room’s bay window. *Jagger?*

By the time she’d reached the porch, the Champions were just getting out of the car.

“Everything all right?” She kept her tone light and pleasant, but her pulse hammered.

Carl leaned into the back to unbuckle her son’s car seat, and Leddy met her on the lawn. “He took a spill,” the woman said. “Nothing to worry about. But he wanted to come home.”

The moment her son spotted her, he held out his arms. “Mommy?”

That little boy voice nearly undid her. She hurried over and took him out of Carl’s arms. He was sweaty and smelled of a child who’d been playing in the sunshine. “I got you. It’s okay.”

He clung to her, his little arms around her neck, his legs latched around her waist.

She stroked his back. “Did you get hurt?”

“Hurt, Mommy.”

“You need a Band-Aid?”

Instead of answering, he lifted his chin off her shoulder. “Who dat man?”

Unprepared for them to officially meet like this, she got flustered. “Oh, that’s... That’s my friend.” She didn’t know whether to call him Van or Reid, and she wasn’t about to tell Jagger this was his dad. It was too soon, and he wouldn’t understand.

“I’m Reid. I met you last night. At the ice cream parlor.” He came closer, bending so he was at eye-level. He’d done the same thing last night, and she had to say she really liked that about him. “You had chocolate.”

“Wiv mallows.”

When Reid looked stumped, she said, “That’s right. Rocky Road ice cream with marshmallows. Your favorite.” It was only then that she remembered the Champions. When she stepped back to include them in the conversation, she could see they’d already made the connection. The resemblance between father and son was that obvious. “Reid, this is Leddy and Carl Champion.”

“Very nice to meet you.” Reid reached out to shake their hands. “You’re Jagger’s grandparents.” He seemed confused but maintained his smile.

“We’re going to get going and give you folks some time alone.” Carl nudged his wife. She linked her arm through her his, and together, they headed back to the car.

“Thanks for bringing him home.” Maisie called out. “Nothing to worry about, right?”

“He’s fine.” Leddy waved a hand. “Just scraped knees.”

“I not fine.” Her son jerked upright. “I need Band-Aid. Mommy, can I have dinosaur Band-Aid?”

“You sure can.” She waved until the Champions backed out of the driveway and then headed inside. When she noticed Reid wasn’t following them in, she asked, “Are you... Do you need to be somewhere?”

“I didn’t know if...” He tipped a chin to her son. “Is it all right if I come in?”

“He doesn’t need to know details right now, but sure. Why don’t you help me clean his wound?”

Her son’s eyebrows pulled in, and he gave her that adorably obstinate look he’d perfected. “Mommy do it.”

“Sure, but I’ll need Reid’s help.”

“No. No Weed.”

“Sweetheart,” she began.

“No, it’s fine.” Reid almost looked relieved. “I’ll go. But can I see him later?”

“Of course. We’re going to have lunch—”

And just like that, Jag seemed to forget all about his skinned knee. “I want chicken fingers, Mommy.”

“Of course, you do.” She smoothed the hair off his damp forehead. “Lunch, then nap time. How about we meet you at the lake at two, Reid?”

“That sounds good.” He agreed, but he looked a little lost.

“It’s right down the road.” She pointed in the right direction. “There’s a playground. You can’t miss it.”

She’d never seen Van Claybourne anything but confident and strong. But then, of course, that was the point. *This is Reid. Not Van. He’s completely out of his element.*

“Yagger hungry, Mommy. Want chicken fingers.”

She had to smile at his adorable plea. “I know, doll.”

Reid stood at the door watching. She wanted to tell him his son would warm up to him, that he was a bit of a diva when it came to getting hurt, and that he wasn’t used to strangers looking at him so intensely. But now wasn’t the time.

“I’ll see you then.”

But he didn’t go. And the way he held her gaze... She found herself caught between the intimacy of their past and the reality of their present. There simply wasn’t a way to connect the two.

Reid would always be in her life. He was Jag’s father.

One relationship had to take priority over the other, and her boy would always come first.

She'd lost her chance at anything more when she'd run before even asking if he had feelings for Exie.

She would regret that decision the rest of her life.

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Chapter Five

PHONE TO HIS EAR, REID PACED AROUND THE PLAYGROUND, waiting for his brother to answer.

“Hey, what’s up?” Bex asked. Wind whipped in the background.

He must be driving somewhere. “Where’ve you been?”

“After a week with the family, Della and I needed some time alone. Everything okay?”

“You didn’t notice my ten thousand messages?”

“Just turned on the phone. Want to keep at it, or you want to fill me in?”

It was pretty ironic that while his brother was the creative engine behind Van Claybourne, he was the practical, logical one, whereas Reid, who had no talents whatsoever, was the emotional one.

“I have a son.” It was the first time he’d said the words out loud. And it was thrilling.

Slowly, the noises quieted until there was nothing but silence. He assumed his brother was shutting the window. “Okay. Say that again.”

“I have a son.” Not wanting Maisie to overhear the conversation, he glanced to the parking lot. Thanks to his own eavesdropping that morning, he’d gotten the opportunity to hear her impression of him, and it had sucked to know she had

such a low opinion. Too restless to sit down, he headed for the beach. “I ran into Maisie at Bliss—”

“Who?”

Right. He’d kept that tiny slice of his life a secret. “Remember I told you about a woman I met who knocked me on my ass?”

“I don’t remember her name, but sure. You got her pregnant?”

“I did. She has a son. *I* have one. A boy. He’s three.”

“I need a minute. He’s three, so you met her four years ago?”

“Yeah. During the festival we played in Calamity.”

In the background, he heard Della shout, “Reid’s a dad? Give me the phone.”

“Honey, are you okay?” she asked. “Are you happy? Scared?”

He really fucking appreciated his future sister-in-law. “I’m good. I’m great. And I’m also scared shitless.”

“It’s a big deal.”

“It’s huge. But I had to tell Maisie about the twin thing, because she tracked me down at a show in Chicago. She actually talked to Bex, but of course, she’d thought it was me.”

“Oh no. She must hate you.”

“She did. She talked to Martin and Bex, and both of them told her to take a hike, that she should get in line behind every other woman who’d ever filed a false paternity claim.”

“*Bex.*”

“No, it’s not his fault. He didn’t know. If anyone’s at fault it’s me, because I never talked about it.”

“But that doesn’t make it suck less.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Hang on.” Bex came back on the line. “Are you sure it’s yours?”

Hearing Jagger referred to as “it” grated. “Him. He’s a boy, and absolutely. I’m seeing him in a few minutes, so I’ll send you a picture. He looks just like us.” Out of nowhere, a framed photograph of his dad dropped into his mind. Emotion punched him in the chest so hard it drove a sting of tears to his eyes. “He looks like Dad.” Once upon a time, the Sinclairs had been a great family. They’d had parents who loved each other, a mom who stayed home with them... They’d had a great childhood. Then their dad died. He was young enough that he hadn’t taken out life insurance, and their mom had scrambled to make ends meet for her family of five. “You know that picture on Mom’s nightstand? Of Dad as a little kid? That’s what Jag looks like.”

“Jag? Kid’s name is *Jag*?”

“Jagger. But she calls him Jag.”

“I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around this.”

“No shit.” Reid blew out a breath. “I don’t know the first thing about kids.”

“You practically raised Chance and Hannah. Sure, you do.”

“I was a kid myself. And they weren’t my responsibility.” In the silence that hung between them, Reid was sure he and his brother were both thinking just how wrong that statement was. Because after their dad died, their mom had to take two and sometimes three jobs to pay the rent, so a lot had fallen on their shoulders. They’d filled cereal bowls and made lunches, enforced baths, and checked homework.

“Tell him he’ll be a great dad,” Della called.

Reid smiled. “Tell her I appreciate the vote of confidence, but she doesn’t know shit.” Once again, he glanced toward the parking lot. “We’re meeting at the park in three minutes.”

“At least it’s the woman you had a thing for,” his brother said. “Not some random.”

At the thought of his hideaway girl, warmth flushed through his system. “Yeah.”

“All right, so we’ll book a flight out there. I want to meet her, meet my nephew.”

“You did meet her.”

“What do you mean?”

“In Chicago. After Martin blew her off, she showed up at a gig. Couldn’t get backstage, so she knocked on the bus. You answered.”

“Oh, that was *her*. Shit.” He stretched one syllable into five. “I actually remember. It was the only time anyone had ever approached me about an issue like that. She seemed sincere, but I asked her basic questions. Swear to God, man, if anything she’d said had added up, I would’ve told you.”

“It’s not your fault. You asked her where she knew me, and she said I’d bought a house—the house I didn’t tell you about till a couple of months later. After speaking to you, she gave up on me.”

“I’m sorry, man. I figured it was another money grab.”

“I get it. But it kills me that she went through it alone. All of it.”

“Where’s her family?”

“She said she doesn’t have family, but things aren’t adding up. Jagger’s grandparents take him every Saturday morning. Nothing makes sense. I want all the answers at once, you know? But I have to chill. I just found her last night, and I’ve got to play my cards right. I want...”

His brother gave him the space to get his thoughts together.

“I want this.” Sunlight sparkled on the lake, and a bird swooped low, skimming the surface. “I want this more than anything.”

“I hear you, man. I hear you.”

“I don’t want to fuck it up.”

“That’s it. We’re coming out there. We’ll be—”

“No. Don’t. You’re not canceling your tour. You’re not postponing it, either. You need this, and I need to get to know him for a minute before bombarding him with family. And don’t you dare tell Mom or Chance or Hannah.”

“I won’t. I’ll leave that to you.”

Heading back toward the playground, he sat on the bench where he’d dropped his bags. “I don’t know what to do with him.”

“What does he do with him?” Bex asked Della.

“Let me talk,” she said. A moment later, he had Della in his ear. “So, you’re at the playground?”

“Yeah, I went to a toy store on my way over and asked a clerk what a three-year-old would like, and so now I’ve got a pile of balls and bats and water guns.”

“Well, he’s not just a three-year-old, you know? He’s got his own personality. His own likes and dislikes.”

He could see her point. “Makes sense.”

“Watch him with his mom, get to know him,” Della said. “Whatever you do, don’t try to rush it. You’re not going to build a relationship in one playdate.”

“I hear you.” His knee jackhammered, and he dragged his palms on his jeans. “What if the kid hates me?”

“Nobody hates you, Reid.” Della’s tone softened. “I mean, honestly, that’s one of the reasons you’re so successful. Everyone genuinely likes you. Why do you think this little boy could hate you?”

“I don’t know. Kids are real. They see you. What if he thinks I’m a dick?”

Della paused before saying, “Don’t be a dick.”

“Good answer.” He grinned. “Okay, I gotta go. They’re going to be here any minute.”

“Send us pictures,” Della said.

“I will.” When he disconnected, he saw a father holding a boy no bigger than Jagger up to reach the bars. The kid was too small to hold his own weight, but he tapped each handhold as the dad moved him along.

Okay, I can do that. Just push him on the swings, wait for him at the bottom of the slide.

“Hey.” Maisie held Jag’s hand as they approached. For some reason, he’d expected the boy to be running ahead of her, eager to get to the playground, but he looked like he wanted to be anywhere other than this park by the lake on a perfect summer day.

Well, here we go. He met them halfway. “Hey.” When he smiled, Jagger turned his face into his mom’s leg. “Beautiful day, right?”

Maisie’s smile hit like the first breath of fresh air after being holed up in a bus for too long. “Somebody’s grumpy because he had an extra-long nap this afternoon.”

“I not gumpy.”

“Well, you’re a little grumpy.” She ran her fingers through his hair with so much love that Reid’s heart ached with tenderness.

“That’s okay.” His voice broke a little bit, and he cleared his throat. “We can just sit on the bench and hang out.”

Jagger didn’t seem inclined to go anywhere, so his mom drag-walked him over. When she sat down, she patted her lap in invitation, but he just stayed crouched at her feet.

“Did you get your errands done?” he asked.

“Not today. I can do them tomorrow.”

“You want me to watch him?” He saw the horror in her eyes, and he laughed. “I meant while he’s napping. I’m nowhere near ready to be alone with him.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll warm up to you. Other than Carl, he doesn’t have a lot of men in his life. And you’re all...” She gestured to him as if she had no words to describe him.

“I’m all what?” He had no idea what she meant.

“You’re a lot.”

“A lot what?”

“You have big rock star energy.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“It means even when you’re not on stage, everyone looks at you. You’ve got presence. I don’t know how to describe it.”

“So, I’m a show-off?” He said it teasingly because he really had no idea what she was talking about.

“No, not at all. You know how in high school, there’s always that one girl who just knows how to put outfits together and do her hair? She’s just comfortable in her own skin, where the rest of us are awkward and weird and say stupid things. We think we look good, but when we compare ourselves to her, we see we got it all wrong.”

“We were mostly homeschooled, so no, I’m not familiar with that.”

“I guess it’s confidence. Some people were just born with it. You don’t worry what others think about you. You don’t try to look cool. Your jeans always hug your butt just right, and your hair’s perfectly tousled.”

“My hair?” He chuckled. “I don’t know what any of this has to do with kids.” All he wanted was for his son to take an interest in him. He didn’t want to intimidate him with some kind of *big* energy. When he noticed the boy watching the father and son playing, he leaned down and asked, “You want to go on the swings?”

Jag ignored him.

“Jagger?” She set her hand on top of his head. “Don’t be rude. Answer the question.”

“Want ice cream.” He looked to Reid.

He wanted to say, *You got it, buddy. Whatever it’ll take for you to like me.* But he deferred to Maisie.

“Maybe later. We’re going to play first.”

The boy gave a long-suffering sigh. Then he stood up and placed both hands on his mom’s knee. “Pease, Mommy? Want ice cweam.”

“I heard you.” Maisie kept her tone pleasant. “And we’ll get some later, but right now, we’re going to play.”

Reid picked up the bags. “I brought some things for us to do.”

Jagger turned around to look.

Oh good. He’d piqued the boy’s interest. *Score.* Opening one of the bags, he pulled out a soccer ball, two water guns, and a big plastic bucket and sand shovel. “What looks good?”

Instead of answering, Jag dug into the other bags. He didn’t seem to like anything. *Well, this sucks.* He didn’t like not knowing what to do or say. He wasn’t used to it. He wanted that same easy rapport of the father and son on the swings.

Why was he sitting here waiting for a three-year-old to decide what to do? *I’m the adult. Nothing’s going to happen unless I make the move.* Grabbing the ball, he headed to the grass and started kicking it from one foot to the other. “Hey, Jag. You play soccer?”

The boy shook his head.

Reid kicked the ball up into his hands and spun it on the tip of a finger. “Want to play?”

Jagger tipped his head back against the bench, tracking an airplane cross the bright-blue sky. “Dat plane, Mommy.”

“Yep. That’s a big airplane.”

“Ice cweam?”

“Later, punkin.”

One glance to the swing set to watch the father and son kicked him into gear. *If I want that kind of relationship with him, I have to make it happen.* Besides, once Jag started playing, he’d have fun. What kid didn’t like the park? Reid

headed to the bench, batting the ball from the side of one boot to the other. “You want to play?” The boy showed zero interest. Reid didn’t know if Jag had never seen a soccer ball, or if he just felt uncomfortable around a stranger. “Here. I’ll kick the ball to you, and you kick it back.” But when he lobbed it to his son, it glanced off his sneaker and rolled in a different direction.

“Juice, Mommy.”

“Sure. I think you left it in your car seat. Let me go grab it.” Maisie took off. “Be right back.”

She was only a few yards away, but Reid had never been more nervous. He’d done countless interviews, podcasts, and television shows. He’d rocked stadiums around the world. But nothing had ever mattered more than bonding with this little boy.

My son.

I just want him to like me.

Kicking the ball back to the bench, Reid looked around the playground to find something the boy would like. The father was pushing his son on the swings. “Higher, Daddy. Higher.”

He would give his left nut to see his son laugh like that. *To hear him call me Daddy?* The very idea shook him deep in his bones. Reaching for Jag’s hand, he said, “Let’s swing.”

Jagger hesitated. “No swings.”

“No? Are you sure?” He knelt, facing the dad and his son. “Doesn’t it look fun?”

The boy pumped his legs, and the father kept talking, encouraging him. The dad was oblivious to the world around him, focused entirely on his son’s happiness.

Everyone likes swings. “Come on. Let’s do it.” He picked him up, and *Holy Mother of God. This is my son.* Jag was heavier than he’d expected and smelled of laundry detergent and baby shampoo. A strange sense of protectiveness roared through him.

This defenseless little boy needs me.

It was the moment everything clicked. *This boy will see me the way I saw Dad, as all-powerful, my North Star.* Reid's dad had been the one who could fix anything. He'd taught him how to tie his shoes, be kind...but mostly, how to love.

While Maisie was this boy's primary caregiver and source of support now, Reid would soon assume those roles right alongside her.

It was the most powerful moment of his life. When the boy squirmed, he realized he was hugging him. "Sorry." Blinking back the sheen of tears, he set him on the swing. "Hang on."

Looking over to the other boy, Jagger swished his butt a few times, trying to get the right balance as he gripped the chains.

"Okay, let's go." Reid pulled back and gently released. The wind riffled through the silky, thin strands of Jagger's hair. "See? It's fun." He kept it slow and easy, nothing like the other kid, who was soaring. *We'll get there one day.* For now, Reid just had to ease him into it.

Jagger wasn't smiling, though. He looked uncertain, so Reid slowed it down even more. "I used to love the swings. My brother and I would race each other to see who could get the highest." He left out the part where they jumped off to see who landed the farthest.

And then, it happened. Jag smiled. It was just a hint of one. He was still uncertain, but he was definitely starting to enjoy it.

Reid kept up the slow pace. "Yeah, man. Look at you go."

The grin widened, and the boy leaned into it. *Yes. This is good.* He turned to see if Maisie was watching. She was. And she looked happy.

He turned back just in time to see Jagger's left hand release the chain. Reid lurched forward. "Oh no. You have to hold on with both hands. Both hands, Jagger."

Right before his eyes, his son went sailing forward, landing facedown on the mulch with one arm under him.

Shit. Reid hurried over. “Are you okay?”

For a second, the boy lay there stunned.

And then, a howl shattered the silence. The boy screamed, and Reid cursed himself. What if he’d broken his son’s arm?

Maisie ran over and dropped to her knees. “Okay, baby. Come here, sweetheart. It’s all right.” She lifted him off the ground and into her arms.

“I’m sorry.” Reid had never seen a kid let go of a swing like that. “Do you think it’s broken?” *What have I done?*

She carried Jag over to the bench and sat down. “Let me see your arm.”

The boy shook his head, wide-eyed and red-faced.

She looked up at Reid. “I’m going to take him home, okay?”

“Sure.” Overwrought, he could only stand there. He rubbed the boy’s good arm. “I’m sorry.”

Maisie started toward the car. “Come back to the house, okay?”

Shaky, he could only nod and watch them walk off. It was only after Maisie got Jag buckled into his car seat and backed out of the spot that he remembered what his brother and Della had said.

Follow Maisie’s lead. The way she talks to him, the things she does with him.

Well, he’d blown it.

Total fucking fail.

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Chapter Six

“TIP YOUR HEAD BACK.” WITH A PLASTIC CUP, MAISIE Poured warm water over her son’s scalp, but he was too engrossed with his dinosaur squirt guns to hear. “Tip back, honey.”

Reid shifted from the toilet lid to the floor and pulled the dinosaur out of Jag’s hand. “Here. Let me fill this up while your mom washes your hair.”

She used those thirty seconds to quickly rub the shampoo between her hands, lather up his head, and then rinse out the suds. “Okay, you’re good.” With her son absorbed with his toys, she got up and brought the day’s dirty clothes to the hamper.

Reid followed her to the other side of the bathroom. “I totally f—” He shook his head. “Messed up. I’m sorry. My brother told me to follow your lead, but I wanted Jag to like me so badly that I... I don’t know. I lost my head.”

“It’s partly my fault. I should have told you two things. First, he’s a total diva. He got stung by a bee once at the Champions, and ever since then, it’s like he expects an end-of-world event every time he gets hurt. I don’t know whether it was that scary for him, or if he just liked the attention.”

“No, I saw true fear in his eyes.” He scraped his hand through his hair. “I can’t believe I hurt my *son*. But go on. What’s the second thing?”

Mesmerized by the effortless fall of that glossy mane, Maisie almost forgot what they were talking about. He didn’t

even use hair product, and it just always looked sexy. “Um...” She had to give herself an internal shake. *Right*. “He doesn’t like sports. He’s a homebody. He likes puzzles and blocks and art projects. I know it’s crazy since we live in a town where extreme sports are a way of life, but he doesn’t like bicycles, he hates the snow, and while some boys might be obsessed with balls, he’s just not interested.”

“Now you tell me.” Reid scrubbed his cheeks. “I should’ve asked him what he wanted.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. He’s fine.”

“Sure.” He looked sad and lost.

“I promise he’ll warm up to you. It takes time. Unless...” Was he hurrying things along because he was leaving town? “What’re your plans now that you’re retired?” He must have something lined up.

“Well, I just signed on to do the next season of *Make Me a Superstar*.”

“Oh, okay. So Calamity’s just a place to get away from it all?” It would suck for Jagger to bond with him if he’d only visit every now and then. She didn’t want that for him.

“What? No. I love it here. I wouldn’t live anywhere else. This show is nothing. They film the whole season in a couple of weeks, and that’s not until next April.” He glanced over his shoulder to check on their son. “Do you think I blew it?”

She wanted to hug him and reassure him that everything would work out, but she honestly didn’t know that it would. He seemed to be in transition from rock star to an undefined something else. When he found his next project, would he leave? Van Claybourne was too big for this small town.

Then again, he’s Reid now. Shouldn’t she give him the benefit of the doubt?

“He’s going to tell his grandparents about the monster who tossed him off a swing and nearly broke his arm.”

“He might, but like I said, he has overblown reactions to getting hurt, and they know that. Besides, they’re really good

people. Leddy was my first babysitter. I was in the grocery store nursing with one hand and pulling pasta off the shelf with the other, and she stepped in to help me. I hadn't slept in months and was hanging by a thread. She told me to go home and get into bed. She'd watch my baby."

"Wasn't she a stranger?"

"Oh, everyone knows the Champions. She used to be a teacher at my school but that was before I got there. She and her husband took us in, and now they're like grandparents. I don't know what I'd do without them."

"So, you really don't have any family?"

None he needed to know about. "Of course, I do. Jagger and I are a family. Olive is my chosen sister, and the Champions are grandparents. They have us over for all the big holidays."

He nodded in a way that told her he understood. "You're really good with him."

"Well, I love him. He's my whole world. But I'm also a kindergarten teacher, so I've got lots of experience with little kids."

He shot another longing look at his son. "He's with his grandparents while you're teaching?"

She nodded. "In Calamity, kindergarten's only half day, so I'm able to pick him up from Leddy's house at one-thirty. That's why I chose this grade. I don't know that I'll be doing this forever, but it works well for now."

"Nice." He let out a soft and uncomfortable laugh. "I don't know how you're keeping your cool about all this. I can't believe I finally found you, and then to find out I'm a *dad*. Well, I guess I have to earn that title. But I *am* a father." When his gaze connected with hers, as though looking to see if she understood, she felt a jolt from the top of her head all the way down to the soles of her feet. "Is this as weird for you as it is for me?"

"Are you kidding? Do you know how many levels of weirdness I'm dealing with? First—" she lifted a finger, "—

Van Claybourne's in the bathroom of *my* little cottage.”

He didn't smile. “I'm not Van Claybourne. I'm Reid.”

“I know. But come on, for ten years you were *the* mythic rock god.”

“Is that how you saw me four years ago? Were you fuck —” He lowered his head. “Sorry. Gotta work on my language. Is that all it was for you? Screwing a rock star?”

“The opposite.” He had no idea. “If you hadn't asked to share my picnic, I would have run as fast as my size-seven Chucks could carry me. The very last person I'd choose to be with is someone in the entertainment industry. But that doesn't change the fact that you've been the world's biggest star during the most impressionable years of my life.” She lifted a second finger. “Two, after I thought you'd blown me off for Exie, I never thought I'd see you again. So it's insane to have you standing here right now.” She popped a third finger. “Also, just having a man in this house? I don't date, so it's weird to be around a guy my age, and one that I'm attracted to. It's been a long time since I've felt those flutters, you know?”

Eyes smoldering, he grew intense. “You're attracted to me?”

Even though he'd made no physical move forward, his presence loomed larger, pressed her against the wall. He might as well have touched her for how hot she went. It was too intense, too much like last time.

But it was different now. She had a child, and Jagger came first. “Of course, I am. Who wouldn't be? But it's not like I'm going to act on it. The only thing that matters is the relationship you're going to build with your son. Nothing can interfere with that.” *No matter how much I miss being hugged.*

Sometimes, late at night, she allowed herself to remember the hunger of Reid's kisses, to actually feel the ghost of his fingertips tracing the curves of her body. Sometimes, she was sure she could hear his gasps and moans, his breath in her ear. She longed for that kind of intimacy.

“I get what you’re saying, but I’m not sure I can shut off my feelings like that. I’ll respect yours, of course.” But he didn’t seem to like it.

Why would he? He was a rock star. The whole world catered to him. He only answered to himself. He woke up when he wanted, ate when and what he wanted, and got to say no to anything that didn’t interest him.

He had no clue how all-consuming it was to raise a child. How you had to be on your game every single day. “You have to understand that as a single mother, I’m solely responsible for that little boy, and he deserves my very best. Not only can’t I afford to get emotionally wrung out over a guy, but I can’t let Jagger get attached to someone who isn’t in his life to stay.”

Reid’s expression darkened. “Since we only knew each other for five days, I understand that you’re not sure about me. So let me explain something. I’m not going anywhere. I’d like a paternity test before I lose my heart to that little boy—just to be one hundred percent certain—but I already accept that I’m Jagger’s father. My only objective in life right now is to become his dad. Sure, I’ll be gone for a few weeks in April, but outside of that, I don’t have plans.”

“I believe you. I’m sorry. I really am.” She vowed in that moment to stop making assumptions about him based on his profession—and her relationship with Exie. “I’m a mess right now. For four years, I’ve lived with anger and resentment that just seemed to grow with each passing day. Every time my little boy watched a father interact with his child, every bill I didn’t know how to pay, and every aspect of childrearing that I had to do alone because I thought you didn’t want to disrupt your decadent lifestyle just added fuel to the fire. It’s hard to change gears so quickly. I have to wrap my head around the fact that you’re a twin, that you thought about me over the past four years...”

“Thought about you? Maisie, I was crazy about you. It might’ve only been five days, but I wanted to spend every free minute with you. And I get that you saw Exie’s text, but did you really think I’d run over there for a booty call? After everything we’d shared?”

“You were so eager. I just thought you—like every other person in the world—had a thing for her.” She wanted to tell him about her complicated relationship with the woman, but it would be a breach of the nondisclosure agreement. So before he asked any more questions, she changed the subject. “Are you going to concentrate on your photography until you film *Make Me a Superstar*?”

“No, I’m done with that.” He tapped his fist against the counter a few times. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. The only thing I’m good at is the one thing I never want to do again.”

“What do you mean the only thing?”

“I have a good voice.” He hunched his shoulders. “That’s it. That’s the extent of my skill set.”

“Where did you ever get that idea? Reid, you’re so much more than a voice. There are millions of people who can sing. Just look at all the talent shows on TV. It takes something entirely different to be a superstar, and you... God, you have it. You’re confident and charismatic, charming. You’ve got stage presence. Reid, you’re magnetic.”

“Well, thank you.” His cheeks flushed a dark pink. “Too bad none of that translates to the real world.”

“What do you mean?”

“There aren’t a lot of job qualifications that call for charisma. Unless I want to be a Disney prince or something.”

It was hard to believe such an accomplished man couldn’t see his own value. But then again, she’d just learned he had a twin who wrote the music, that he’d only ever been in the role of performer. “The world might’ve mourned the retirement of Van Claybourne, but I think it might just be the best thing you ever did, because now you get to find out who are. If I were you, I wouldn’t rush into anything. Take the time to figure out what you like.”

“That’s what my brother says.”

“Smart man. Well, while you’re looking for something to do, you should consider funding the music department at my

school. When budgets are tight, the arts are the first to go. And you know as well as I do how important they are for child development.”

“I do. But I want to do more than write a check.”

“You could do more than make a donation. You can figure out what we need. Maybe even run an auction to raise funds for instruments. That’ll certainly give you something to do.”

“I’m not just looking for something to do. I want something meaningful. Something that’s... I want it to be the thing I was put on this earth to do.”

He was such a passionate man. She remembered that about him. And not just sexually. He threw himself into everything. He was a handsome, sensitive, caring, and wonderful man. Just standing this close to him, feeling the heat from his body, gave her goosebumps. She loved his thick, dark hair, the gorgeous hazel eyes that watched her with such intensity. She loved his fearlessness in opening his heart to her. “Gusto.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s how I thought of you back then. You threw yourself into everything. Food, sex, nature... You live life with gusto. I’ll bet that’s what audiences love about you. They want to feel that much gusto in their own lives.”

“Did you?”

“I did.” *I still do.*

He cupped her chin, thumbing her bottom lip. “What’s the thing you were put on this earth to do?” His whispered voice was filled with longing.

Her breasts felt heavy, and her skin tingled. She had the strangest sensation of falling, and she had to grip the counter to stabilize herself. *Answer the question.* She glanced at her son. He was singing quietly, making the dinosaurs leap along the rim of the tub and then dunking them in the water. He played with them in every way except the one they were intended for: squirting. She found the way his mind worked endlessly fascinating. “Him.”

“I can see that, but I mean something that you fill your time with, the way my brother fills his with music. Something you can’t *not* do.”

“I know what you mean, and I would still say my son.” Reid seemed disappointed in her answer. She couldn’t tell him the whole truth, but she could tell him some of it. “My childhood was...different.” She didn’t tell anyone about this, but if he was going to be in her life, he should probably understand her a little better. “When I say I don’t have family, it’s because my mother gave me up, and the grandmother who raised me died when I was sixteen. I didn’t have the chance to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and I missed out on the opportunities that people take for granted when they’re teenagers and in their early twenties. I had to take a job I didn’t like just to keep a roof over my head and food in my belly. So that little boy...” The love she felt for Jag was so powerful that sometimes she felt like it gave her superhuman strength. “He’s my entire world, and I know I was put on this earth to give him the life I didn’t have.”

At first, he didn’t say anything. He watched her with awe. “This is why I fell so hard for you. I couldn’t figure out what it was. I knew we had amazing chemistry. You made me laugh. You’re smart and fun, and I knew on a gut level that you were the one for me. But I didn’t have a way to express it until this moment. You’re fierce, and it’s about the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. And that boy...” He tipped his head to the bathtub. “He’s the luckiest kid alive.”

I knew you were the one for me? What?

Me?

What is happening right now?

She could fall so hard for this man. “God, Reid.” How was she supposed to keep her hands off him? If Jagger hadn’t been a few feet away, she wouldn’t be able to. She’d be pressed up against him, licking into that sexy mouth, grinding so hard on him. She’d topple right back into the magical connection that had made their perfect little boy. “I forgot the good stuff. All that anger and resentment just piled on top of it, but now

you're here reminding me how good it was between us. What a good person you are. I've spent so much of my life fighting, and when I'm with you. I just feel so *safe*."

At that moment, Jag switched tunes. Leddy had been teaching him the ABC song, and he'd been humming it a lot, but this was different. He'd lowered his voice, hitting notes she'd never heard before.

"What's that?" Reid sounded blown away. "Is that Kane Brown?"

Jagger didn't know the words, but even with his three-year-old babble, his voice was unbelievable.

She and Reid looked at each other and burst out laughing. "Still need that paternity test?" she asked.

He just shook his head in disbelief and headed to the tub. Getting on his knees, elbows on the rim, he sang along with his son, clearly articulating the lyrics.

Her heart flipped over. Her son peered up into his dad's eyes, listening intently. She'd given up believing she'd ever see them together. *I have to capture this beautiful moment*. She dashed out of the bathroom and hurried to the kitchen where she was charging her phone.

Dammit, why had she run out on him? If she'd just asked him about Exie...even just left her phone number, Jagger could have had a daddy all along.

I could've had this happiness, this joy...companionship.

I could've been with Reid all along.

She'd vowed to pay Evil Exie back for the house and tuition so she wouldn't owe the woman anything and could cut all ties, but in this moment, she saw the truth. If she really wanted to be free from that evil woman, she had to wash every ounce of her poison out of her system.

She had a choice whether to let the past define her future, the choice of which lens she'd use to view the world.

She'd lost four years with this man. She wouldn't lose another minute.

Yanking out the cord, she pressed the power button and waited for her apps to load. God, the idea of the three of them being a family. Her heart clutched at the image of Christmas morning, of Reid making pancakes, her pouring juice, and their sleepy-headed little boy charging down the stairs to see what Santa had brought him.

Yes. Please. I want that for Jagger so much.

I want it for me, too. The family she'd longed for and never had.

As soon as she got back to the bathroom, she recorded the two of them singing. Her son's voice might be higher, but man, he had perfect pitch. It was clear as a bell. In the humid little room, her son gazing into Reid's eyes as he tried to learn the lyrics, she thought she might just have found her happy ever after.

A series of text messages came in, and she stopped recording to read them.

Olive: That fucking fucker.

Olive: Of all the women in the world, he had to pick her.

What's she talking about? Maisie clicked on the link her friend had attached. It led to a tabloid, and a photograph took up the screen.

She reared back, almost unable to look at it.

Reid and Exie were leaving a restaurant in Malibu. They were laughing, shoulders pressed together.

Adrenaline sent a sting through her body. She read the caption.

New couple alert! So this is what Van Claybourne's been up to in his retirement?

We ship Van and Exie.

Vexie!

He lied to me. The humidity in the bathroom grew too thick. She couldn't breathe. Stumbling out, she sat on the edge of her bed and let the devastation bleed out all over her.

Of all the women in the world...

Every pretty image she'd dared dream of a true and real family went up in flames.

Maisie could never be with a man who'd slept with Exie.

It's over.

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Chapter Seven

REID COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. *THAT VOICE*. DAMN, HIS KID HAD pipes. If that wasn't proof enough that he was a Sinclair...

Look at him. He looks so damn cute sprawled on the bed facedown, exactly the way I sleep.

After bath time, he'd stretched out beside his son on top of the blanket and read stories until the boy had conked out. He knew he should leave, but he couldn't. He just couldn't.

As he stood beside the bed watching his son sleep, a powerful wave of affection crashed over him.

My boy.

Pulling out his phone, he took a picture and sent it to the group chat.

Reid: My son.

Bex: Photographic evidence he's your child.

Della: OMG! He sleeps just like Bex!

Bex: How are things going with Maisie?

Reid: They were going great, but then she did a one-eighty. Not sure what happened.

Della: Uh, have you checked your newsfeed in the last hour?

Fear gripped his spine and squeezed.

Exie.

Shit. Fuck.

Reid: No. Been with my boy. Will do it now.

He'd gotten so carried away with finding Maisie and Jagger that he'd shoved Exie to the back of his mind. *Dammit.* He'd known she wanted to get the images out as soon as possible. He should've given Maisie a heads-up.

He could've managed the situation instead of blindsiding her. *Now I look like a liar.*

Heading out of the room, he stood in the hallway and opened his newsfeed. Even though he knew exactly what he'd see, it still blew a hole right through him.

Because Maisie had seen it. They'd cleared up all their issues...were just getting back to a good place...and then she'd seen him with her former boss. No, she hadn't confirmed it yet, but he was pretty damn sure at this point. He had to talk to her.

And tell her what, asshole? How can you explain anything when you signed an NDA?

Fuck my life.

Two days ago, he'd been lost and alone. He'd agreed to be Exie's fake boyfriend because he'd had nothing at stake.

Now he had everything.

A chance to get back the only woman he'd ever had true feelings for, a son...a family.

No. The word roared inside his head, reverberating throughout his body. He would not let anything hurt his chance at this kind of happiness.

On the move, he checked her bedroom. *Empty.* He hurried to the living room. *Not there either. Shit.* "Maisie? Maze?"

Not in the kitchen, either.

Where the hell had she gone? He pulled out his phone.

Reid: Hey, where are you?

A moment later, he caught the glow of a screen through the glass panel of the front door, so he let himself out.

Even this late in June, the air had a chill. She sat with her arms crossed over her stomach. He wanted to hold her, give her his body heat, but he couldn't do that. "It's not what you think."

When she lowered her phone, he noticed the tremble in her fingers. "It doesn't matter. I told you our focus has to be on your relationship with Jagger. That's it. I can't do *this*." She wagged a finger between them. "I can't be an emotional mess around my son."

"No, wait. Just listen. Please." How did he reassure her without violating the contract? "Look, nothing in the entertainment world is what it seems."

"I know all about the entertainment industry."

"Because you worked for Exie, right?"

"That's right. And can you not try to *manage* me right now? You want to have a real conversation, I'm here. I'm listening. But photographs don't lie."

"This one does."

"Reid, you're *laughing*. Your bodies are pressed together. You *like* her."

"Actually, I..." *I can't stand her*. He couldn't say that out loud. "You worked with her, so you know. This is not what it looks like. I wish I could say more, but I can't."

"Of course." She gazed up through a canopy of pine trees to the glittering stars. "She had you sign an NDA."

"Yes." Relief coursed through him with such intensity it nearly knocked out his knees. "I signed contracts. And believe me, if it were just about money, I'd break them all right now, but there's more at stake."

"With Exie, there always is."

"You get it."

She nodded.

“Then I need you to believe me when I say you have nothing to worry about.” He wanted her to let him back in, to go back to that place where the barriers had been knocked down, where the connection they shared crackled, but he knew from her stance that wasn’t going to happen. She’d shut him out.

“I do.”

“I’m sorry. If I could go back two days, I’d do it. I’d do anything to erase...what I did. But I need you to trust me.” He sounded ridiculous to his own ears.

“I don’t know what game the two of you are playing, and I understand that nothing’s what it seems with her, but the fact that you’re with her—in any capacity—means nothing will happen between us. Ever. And this is not a position you can charm me out of.” The resolve in her tone made him feel utterly helpless. “The only thing that matters is Jagger. That boy deserves the best we’ve got. Let’s not complicate things by trying to rekindle a fling that happened four years ago.” She reached for the door like she was going back inside and expected him to leave.

“No.” Like hell he’d let her go. Every fiber in his being recognized this woman as his. “We’re not letting that—” he caught himself before he said something ugly, “—woman get between us a second time. I never should’ve agreed to go to LA. Retiring hasn’t been easy. I thought I needed time alone to figure out what to do with the rest of my life, but all I’ve gotten out of it is this huge hit of loneliness. When I signed Exie’s NDA, it was so I could get inside the building and see if you worked there. You didn’t, but the damage had already been done, so I’ve had to make the best out of a shitty situation. One *I* put myself in.”

She watched him, and he knew her enough to read the conflict in her eyes.

Good. That meant she was torn. Which meant she hadn’t given up on him. “I’ll have my attorney take a look at the contract, see what we can do—”

“Nothing. You can’t do anything. It’s ironclad.” She held his gaze, and he was positive she was checking to see if he knew the truth about Exie’s businesses.

He gave her a curt nod. He sure as fuck did. “It’s been a hell of a day, so I’ll go. But I need you to know that I wouldn’t be standing here right now if I had anything going with Exie. I have never wanted anyone the way I want you, and today only drove it home. You and me? We’re the real deal, and nothing’s going to keep us from being together.”

He could swear he saw hope ignite in the depths of her eyes. It might be nothing but wishful thinking, but his heart thundered.

“Brace yourself, Maisie Delgado, because I’m coming for you.”

Reid had fucked up. He knew that. But he couldn’t let Maisie push him away. Every day this week, she’d had another excuse why he couldn’t stop by. Mostly, she didn’t want to disrupt Jagger’s schedule.

Okay, fine. He got that. But time was ticking by, so he’d shown up this morning with the ingredients for breakfast. Now, he stood at the counter pouring more batter into the waffle iron. Maisie had warned him Jagger didn’t eat much, but he’d had two of them already, so that made him feel pretty damn good.

At the table, Carl Champion wolfed down his third waffle, while Leddy was still on her first. “So, today’s the day.” The older woman smiled at Maisie.

“Yep.”

The nervousness in her voice caught Reid’s attention. “What day is this?” A look passed between the two women, and he wanted more than anything to be the keeper of Maisie’s secrets. It would take work and time, but he’d get there. He wanted to matter to her.

He wanted to be the one who made her life better.

“There’s a new store in town that sells locally-sourced products,” Maisie began. “The shop’s set up like a boutique, so every artisan gets her own space.”

“Interesting story,” Leddy said. “The owner came here from England and had to live on her dad’s ranch for a month to win an inheritance. She started out with a farmstand, selling little things like Carl’s honey—”

“Nothing little about my honey.” The man poured more syrup on the remaining bit of waffle. “I’ve got all kinds of flavors and new products coming.”

“Well, they’re little in comparison to Callie Belle’s artwork that takes up half a wall,” Leddy said. “Not to mention LeeAnn’s quilts. Anyhow, the point is, she’s opened a shop.”

“Right, and on Sundays, she has a meet and greet where people get to come in and show her their crafts.” Maisie tore strips off her paper napkin. “She’s the nicest woman you’ve ever met, so it’s not like I think she’ll kick me out the door.”

“Oh goodness, no.” Leddy patted her arm. “Honey, your work is special.”

Reid pulled out a chair and sat next to her. “What do you make?”

“Jewelry.” She balled up the shredded pieces. “I’ve been building up the nerve to go in, and I marked today on the calendar.”

“Yeah?” She was normally such a confidant, tough cookie. Seeing her this vulnerable made him want to wrap her in his arms and love her up. “Show me?”

“Oh, you’re going to love her stuff. It’s one of a kind, for sure.” Leddy scraped her chair back. “We’re going to get out of your hair.” She gave her husband a meaningful look.

He gaped at her. “I’m eating.”

“You’re not a bear, and it’s not winter. Now come on. We promised to take Jag out on the lake to sail his boats.”

“Boats.” The boy’s eyes gleamed, and he scampered out of his seat. “I get them.” His bare feet slapped on the tile floor as

he shot out of the room.

“Hey, tiger.” Carl headed after him. “Your mom already packed ’em in the bag by the door.”

“We bought him these remote-controlled boats for his birthday, and he just loves them.” Leddy brought their plates to the sink. “It’s going to be a perfect day for sailing. We’ll head to a little cove and let him play. You two have a nice day.”

While Maisie handed the tote bag off to Leddy and gave her son a big hug, Reid started on the dishes. He watched her linger on the doorstep for a few moments and wave while the car backed out. When she returned to the kitchen, she said, “I’m surprised you didn’t want to go with them and spend time with Jagger.”

“I’m not going to intrude on his time with his grandparents. They’ve been here a lot longer than I have.” He reached for a towel to dry his hands. “I learned my lesson at the park last weekend. It’s going to take time, and I’m here for it. Also, I’d hoped to spend time with you. I want us to build a relationship, too.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Look, I heard you. You don’t want to be involved with me romantically, but we’re still Jagger’s parents, and how we get along will impact him. Frankly, if you like me, he’s more inclined to like me, too.”

“That’s a fair point. But I still think you want to get in my pants.” She had a teasing glint in her eyes until he closed the distance between them in one step, and then those bright-blue eyes went hot. But as much as he wanted to touch her, he kept his hands to himself.

“Yeah, I want in your pants, but what I want even more is to crack you wide open.”

“What does that mean?”

“I want to know everything about you, Maisie. I want to see your heart. Just know I’m here to stay. I’m going to get to know my son, and I’m also going to prove you can trust me.

And I'll wait as long as it takes to get there." He went back to the sink. "Now, can I please see your jewelry?"

Looking a little dazed, she nodded and left the room.

Every time she walked away, he felt the tug of connection tighten in his chest. It was crazy, but he missed her even while they were under the same roof. There was just something about her. He was obviously attracted to her physically—her fresh coconut scent, the sway of her hips, the lush roundness of her tits—but it was also *her*. She was confident, she took no shit, and yet she was kind and loving to her son.

He liked everything about her.

She returned with a three-story wooden jewelry box. Setting it on the table, she opened the top level and lifted out a necklace made of multiple strands of forged metal, all different lengths. The second drawer had bracelets, and the bottom was filled with earrings.

He noticed they all had gems, pearls, or crystals. "These are beautiful." He picked up a black velvet choker studded with pearls. "We didn't know our grandparents, but my mom's parents used to own a diner. They kept a box of items people left behind underneath the counter. My mother took that box with her everywhere we moved."

"Why? Was there anything valuable in it?"

"She said it represented her childhood. Every day after school, the first thing she did when she got off the bus was run behind the counter and sort through the box. I think it mostly had odds and ends like costume jewelry, some change, pocketknives... Stuff like that. And she'd sit in an empty booth and sort through it all."

"I kind of did a similar thing. My grandma was always going out, always socializing, and I'd go through her pockets, her purses, and the console in her car. That's actually how I started making jewelry. From the little beads and baubles I found."

A quiet happiness settled over him, warming his bones. He liked being alone with her in this cozy house, hearing her

stories. He wanted all of them. Every single story she had to tell. He pulled out a chair and sat down, encouraging her to go on.

“My grandmother liked her bling. And I used the crystals and gems in my designs.”

“What was she like?” *And did having her make up for not having your mother?*

“Oh.”

The way she looked away, the dismissiveness of her tone, answered his question. She did not.

“She was an odd bird. Her mom wanted her to be a star, so she spent her childhood going on auditions, but it never really happened. I guess she never knew another way to live, because she spent her entire life pursuing it. She was beautiful, so she tried modeling, but that never took off either.”

“So what did she do? How did she make a living?”

“Most of her income came from being a fit model.”

He cocked his head. “What’s that?”

“She was a standard size four, which meant she was five-eight and her measurements were thirty-four, twenty-seven, thirty-seven.”

“And she kept that exact size her entire life?”

With a slow nod of her head, she smiled. “Yep. Know what was in her refrigerator? Lettuce, carrots, and unsweetened iced tea. Bib lettuce, specifically.”

That explained the fried chicken and Cheetos.

“It wasn’t easy for me because my body, my metabolism, wasn’t like hers, and it was a constant fight. She just couldn’t understand why I’d eat like her but would still be fat.”

He went from neutral to intense dislike for her grandmother. “You’re not fat, and that’s a pretty shitty way to raise a child.”

“No, I know that, but I’m the only woman in my family with an hourglass figure. In any event, she made her living as a fit model, and she also did extra work. But since she never gave up the dream of being discovered, she spent every dime she made going out to gallery openings, premieres, and restaurants where she knew Hollywood types hung out... Oh, and she dressed like a movie star so she’d get noticed.”

“Was she good to you?”

She looked up sharply and then broke into a smile that melted his bones. “Thank you for asking that. That’s really nice. My grandma...” She let out a soft laugh. “Put it this way. She didn’t expect to be a mother the first time around, and she certainly didn’t want it the second time, but she fed me and put a roof over my head.”

That’s not enough. “You deserved so much more.” He couldn’t believe she’d been raised this way. A mother who’d abandoned her, a self-involved grandmother, and she’d still turned out to be well-adjusted. Hearing about her childhood made it ten times worse that he hadn’t been there for her from the moment she’d found out she was pregnant. He could’ve helped through morning sickness and contractions and late-night feedings.

“Yeah, I mean, I was lonely a lot. And hungry.” She said it like it wasn’t that big of a deal, but he couldn’t get that image out of his head, the refrigerator with nothing but lettuce and carrots in it. “Anyhow.” She waved a hand, as if she’d gone off on a tangent. “After she passed, everything had to be sold to pay off her creditors. She didn’t have much, but I kept the things that mattered to me.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

He wanted to ask more—like where she went after that—but she was tapping her fingers on the table, and he didn’t like making her anxious. “What did you take?”

“Her jewelry and clutches, her stilettos... The flashy things she loved so much. There were some pretty dark days after she

died, and I had this sense of like... I'm not sure how to explain it. Her life just seemed so wasted, you know? She never had real friends or true love or the career that she wanted. Other than me, who would remember her? So I turned her bling into jewelry."

It was killing him to sit so close and not touch her. He wanted to haul her onto his lap, stroke her hair, and say he was sorry her mom was a shit person. He was sorry her grandmother didn't pull her head out of her ass and see what a treasure she was. "You know you're beautiful, right?"

"What? Where did that come from?"

"To create this home for Jagger, to give him a safe, perfect childhood... It's remarkable. It's not easy to overcome a tough childhood." He lifted the necklace. "You've made beauty out of yours."

"Oh." She gave a soft smile. "Well, thank you for saying that."

"You're doing it. You're giving your son the life you didn't get."

She nodded. Swallowed. "That's all I've ever wanted." Her voice broke.

He couldn't stand it anymore. He leaned closer and cupped her chin. "If I had known about him, I would've been here. Every step of the way. I would've run to the store at midnight to get whatever you were craving. I would've held your hand during labor and changed his diapers. I would've fed him in the middle of the night so you could catch a few more hours of sleep." He gazed into those bright-blue eyes. "You deserve to be loved. I want you to know that. You're beautiful, Maisie." He traced his fingertips down her chin, the column of her neck, and he pressed his palm over her heart. "Especially in here."

Tears glittered, and she placed her hand over his. He didn't know if she'd ever dated anyone who'd treated her the way she deserved. Who appreciated her. But he knew that once

they got together, he'd make it his job to make he feel loved every single day.

He sat back and reached for a necklace. "Is this how you survived after your grandmother died? Selling jewelry?"

"No. I didn't even think of doing that until much later, after I took a soul-stealing job that paid so well I knew I'd never leave unless I found a way out. Anyway, I'm boring you with the details."

"No, you're not. I don't think I've ever been more impressed with anyone. Go on."

"Well, I'm just saying I knew I had to come up with something that would make money sooner than later. One day in Philadelphia, I was so angry with my boss, I left the tour bus and wandered around. And that's when I discovered pawn shops."

"Pawn shops?"

"Yep. I saw the jewelry, and everything just clicked for me. I realized I had access to real gems—not great quality, because that's not the point of my brand—which meant I could actually produce enough to earn money off it. That's when I started taking it seriously."

"Are they selling well?"

"They do sell. I make a nice side income."

"And you'd like it to become your whole income?"

"I'd like it to pay off my debts. That's my main goal with it."

"Debts?"

"This house, my graduate degree..." She wouldn't look directly at him, so he suspected she was hiding something.

Something that made her ashamed. Energy spun through him, and he reached for her hands. "I have more money than I could spend in five lifetimes, and I could pay everything off for you." He laced their fingers. "Even if you don't want that from me, know that I'm more than Jagger's dad. I'm your

friend. I've got your back." He cupped her beautiful face in his hands. "You're not alone anymore. Like it or not, you've got me, and I'm not going anywhere." He stood up. "Now, let's get out of here and have some fun."

Despite her bitter laugh, her eyes glittered. "I'm not sure I know what the word even means."

"What's your favorite thing to do on a Saturday morning?"

"I usually go to the farmers market. It's a big deal here since we have such a short growing season. The whole county goes."

He was ready to go there with her—until he remembered the NDA. Even though people in Calamity were cool with celebrities, someone could take a picture of them, and it was guaranteed to go viral.

Because he'd been seen with Exie yesterday.

When he hesitated, she said, "I usually meet up with my friends. It's a weekly thing we do. But you're welcome to join us."

"I'd like that." Though he didn't say *but*, the word hung in the air. He knew his hesitation fueled her inability to trust him. But what else could he do?

"We can pick up Jagger on the way there," she said. "The three of us can spend the rest of the day together."

He couldn't think of anything he wanted more.

"Actually, that's a really good idea. If I have you with me, I can run my errands and not worry about Jag, and you'll get time with him while I'm around."

Nothing would make him happier than sliding right into their lives like that, but he could just see the headlines.

Van Claybourne's secret love child!

He only had to get through five more weeks. “As much as I want to, I can’t.”

“Okay.” Her easy acceptance made it seem like he’d met the low bar of her expectations.

And that wasn’t cool. He couldn’t tell her about his fake relationship, but he had to give her something. “If I go out with you guys, the press will get a hold of it. And I want to build a relationship with him first. Does that make sense?” It was a lie of omission, because he’d choose to be with them over any consequence of a photo going viral.

If it didn’t impact his brother.

She tensed. “I agree with you. I don’t want that kind of attention. For either of us.”

“Then let’s just keep things on the down-low for now. Stay private.” He’d sidestepped it today, but he had five more weeks of photographs that were going to come out.

What would his next excuse be? And how long would she tolerate the situation?

If he knew her at all, it wouldn’t be for long.

And then what would he do?

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Chapter Eight

SITUATED ON A LAKE, THE COTTAGE WAS NEVER COMPLETELY quiet. The frame creaked on windy days, branches scratched the windows, and people walking by offered a regular murmur of conversation. It made Maisie feel less alone.

Curled up on the couch with her phone and a glass of iced tea on the coffee table, she drew the blanket over her legs. “Okay, he’s napping.”

“So talk to me.”

“I mean, there’s nothing new. I texted you everything.” With the five-hour time difference, and Olive busy on the set, they had very specific times they could talk on the phone. Naptime hit perfectly.

“You can’t vent through text. It’s not nearly as good. So, he wouldn’t go on errands with you?”

“Yeah, he said he’s afraid people will take pictures of us, and then the paparazzi will swarm in.”

“That sounds fair.”

She guessed it did. “It’s confusing, because he comes on so strong—”

“Just like four years ago.”

“Yes, exactly. It’s that same intensity.”

“Do you find it as hot now as you did then?”

God, yes. “I can tell you that no one’s ever looked at me the way he does.” Even thinking about it made her blood burn. “But isn’t that what makes him a rock star? I mean, look at him in that picture with Exie? He makes everyone feel like the center of his universe.”

“I can’t imagine how it felt to see them together after he told you how much he’d thought about you over the years. That had to hurt. Do you believe his story? That there’s nothing to worry about?”

“Well, that’s the thing. He acts so genuine, so sincere... I want to believe everything he says. And then, when he has the chance to spend a whole day with me, he gives me some line about not wanting pictures of us to go viral. I’m not buying it. If he’s so worried about staying out of the press, why would he have a photography exhibit? I just think there’s something else going on, because he’s always going to be Van Claybourne. Stars manage their exposure.” And with him secretly being a twin, he had that down to a science.

“Then why didn’t you say that to him? Why’d you pretend like you were cool with it?”

“I’m trying very hard not to compare him to Exie, but I’ve learned there’s no point in arguing with liars or manipulators.”

“Sure, but he said it was just until Jagger gets used to him. I mean, that makes sense to me. Can you even imagine paparazzi swarming that sweet little boy? Lightbulbs flashing, and people shouting at him?”

“It’ll never be like that in Calamity. Reid has lived here full time for months now, and the media hasn’t come. No, I know him.” *You can’t be that intimate with someone and not be able to read their expressions and body language.* “When he’s uncomfortable, he jams his hands into his pockets. It’s his tell.”

“So whatever he’s hiding, you think it has to do with Evil Exie?”

“I know it does.” Olive knew she’d worked for the woman and despised her, but she didn’t know the true relationship. No

one did. “It was the same thing four years ago. We’d be having the best time.” *The hottest sex*. “And then he’d talk about Exie, and it would kill the mood completely. And now, here we are doing it all over again.” *Even though he swears he wouldn’t be with me if I had anything to worry about.*

But Maisie knew that when it came to Exie, there was always something to worry about.

“You have to trust your instincts.”

“Well, that’s just it. After so many years with a master manipulator, doubt intercepts the signals from my gut. My instincts might give him the all clear, but then I find myself questioning everything that comes out of his mouth.”

“If you hadn’t seen him with Exie, would you have bought his excuse about pictures going viral?”

“Probably.”

“Exie ruins everything.”

“Well, he *is* involved with her, so...” It just depended on how. And if it was romantic or sexual... *Ew*. She wouldn’t go there. That was a total dealbreaker.

“If it was one date, I could see how he’d be swept away by her beauty, her power, all of that stuff. But if he spends time with her and *then* continues to see her? Forget it. It’ll tell you everything you need to know about his character.”

“That’s exactly right. And the fact is, I’m not going to trust him until I find out the truth about their relationship.”

“I would feel the same way,” Olive said. “Because ultimately, his words don’t matter. He can’t be seen all over the news with a woman one day, tell you he can’t go out in public with you the next day, and then expect you to trust him. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Yeah, but she made him sign an NDA. So who knows what’s really going on? See what I mean? That’s my spin cycle. One second, I’m into him, the next, I’m slamming the door on his ass. Then he comes up with an excuse that makes sense, and I’m back into him.”

“Then wait.” Olive sounded decisive. “You let him get to know Jagger, and you keep your panties on.”

“I honestly don’t know if I can do that. When I’m with him...” She closed her eyes, sinking back into the way he looked at her—like he could devour her whole. *And that’s the thing. I love the way he wants me. I crave it.* “I’m susceptible to him.”

“If you think you can have sex with him and not get emotionally attached, then do it. It’s totally up to you. You make the call. I’m only here to support your choices. I just don’t want you to trust him and get lost in all that good lovin’ only to find out he’s, like, engaged to Exie or something.”

Olive might as well have tossed the glass of tea at her.

“After what you’ve been through,” her friend continued, “it’s okay to hold back until his actions match his words.”

Her whole body warmed with affection. “And that right there is the reason we’re still friends after you stole my Uggs.”

“Oh my God. Stop that right now. I burn in shame every time you mention it.”

“I know. That’s why I pull it out in moments like these.”

“What? Moments when you’re grateful to have me? That’s sick, Maze. Sick.”

“You can’t spend seven years working for Exie Sylva and not be a little twisted.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t steal them. I legitimately thought they were mine. And I offered to mail them back to you.”

“I’m joking. I hardly even wore them.” A light tap on the door had her twisting around to see a dark-gray T-shirt covering a broad, muscular chest. *Reid*. The thrill of it blasted through her. “He’s here.”

“Why are you whispering? Is he pointing a gun at you? Is incense wafting out of his robe?”

“What? No. I just... I’m whispering because I don’t want to wake Jag up.”

“Well, if you don’t want to wake him, then don’t let Van in. We all know what happens when you two are in the same room together.” Her friend started making moaning sounds.

“Shut up. I’m not having sex with him while he might be dating—” Her jaw snapped shut. “I’m not going to say her name in case it summons her evil spirit. Go eat a scone or something.”

“No time for that. I’m getting ready for my date with the bartender from the pub next door. He’s used to the locals, and I plan on blowing his mind in my thigh-high boots and rhinestone miniskirt.”

“You’re scandalous.”

“I know, right?”

Maisie laughed. “Go get him, tiger.” Disconnecting, she tossed the blanket aside and set the phone on the coffee table. With each step toward the door, she grew more anxious. Every time she saw Reid, her pulse kicked up, and her heart got all fluttery. He was the finest looking man she’d ever laid eyes on. Worse, he was confident and powerful, charismatic and larger-than-life. The sight of him on her porch made her jittery.

She opened the door. “Hi. Everything all right?”

“Yeah, I just... I was missing you guys.”

See? When he said things like that, looked at her with such sweet vulnerability, she wanted to jump his bones and kiss him until she was a sweaty, aching mess of need and desire. “He’s napping, but come on in.” She hoped he didn’t hear the slight quaver in her voice.

He followed her into the kitchen. “What do you do while he naps?”

“I’d like to tell you I make jewelry or plan projects for my kindergartners, but the truth is that I eat chocolate, read, or talk to my friend.” She poured him a glass of tea and handed it over.

“Thanks. That sounds pretty good to me. Is there something wrong with it?”

“No. Not really. It’s just the way I was raised.”

“Your grandmother pushed you to get good grades, go to college? That kind of thing?”

“Not at all. It’s just that she was always working toward her goals. Even when she was watching television, she called it ‘research’. Though she’d usually just snarl about why they chose that actress over her since she’d have been so much better. I was raised to believe if you want to reach your goals, you had to work tirelessly.”

He nodded. “With that work ethic, it’s hard to believe she never landed any parts.”

She pulled out a chair and sat at the table. “My grandmother was a piece of work. She didn’t rest. Not for a minute. Even going to the grocery store, she’d dress like she was already famous. She lived her life like she was at a cocktail party in her honor.”

“That had to be exhausting.”

“If so, she didn’t show it. But her attitude stuck with me, that relentless pursuit of success. Until I held Jagger in my arms. Everything changed for me after that. I looked at him, and I was overwhelmed with love for this helpless little soul, and I knew in that moment, I would make him my priority, make him feel loved every minute of his life. I realized I had to put myself in a better place if I was going to be good for him.” She looked to the jewelry box she hadn’t put away. “I love teaching, I do. But I’d love to have my own jewelry store.”

“It’s your passion?”

“I don’t know that I’d call it a passion. Maybe more like a creative outlet that gives me a sense of pride. When people buy something of mine, when they smile and tell me how much they love it, I get this feeling...like I’ve done something good. I’ve given someone a little hit of pleasure.” She loved the way he asked questions and really listened to her. It made her feel so close to him. It reminded her of how she’d felt in

his cabin, when they couldn't get close enough no matter how hard they tried. "You've got that wistful look again."

He chuckled. "Well, yeah. I thought I was going to build a photography career, but all I did was hike and take pictures. I don't know how to explain it. I want to put all my energy into something that consumes me. I want to be proud of something."

"I know you give your brother all the credit for your success, and I get that he's the musical talent, but I honestly think you had an equal part in it with your voice and your stage presence." *And your ability to make everyone fall in love with you.* "In any event, it's not like I grew up with this burning desire to make jewelry." She smoothed a finger over the leather-wrap bracelet with blue quartz. "It was a way to incorporate people into my life who didn't really want to be there." *Whoa.* Where had that come from?

Though she'd never thought it before, saying it out loud lifted an enormous weight off her shoulders.

He leaned back against the counter, folding his arms across his broad chest. "Explain?"

"Let's take this outside." Getting up, she led the way out the back door to a little metal café table and two chairs she'd bought at a garage sale so she and Jagger could have tea parties. Seeing Reid in the small chair only reminded her what it had felt like to have his big body on top of her in bed.

It struck her that she didn't feel anxious when she was with him. It was only when he left that all the bad thoughts flew out of the dark corners of her mind and shouted at her, trying to convince her he was bad.

She felt safe enough to share a story even Olive didn't know. "My mom left me on my grandmother's porch." She waited to see how he'd respond. She'd kept it all inside for so long that she really had no idea how someone would react.

Emotion flickered across his face, a pinch of pain around his eyes, a jerk of muscle in his jaw. "How old were you?"

“Not even two, so it’s not like I grew up thinking I’d done something wrong or that I was a bad child. In fact, I didn’t even know my grandma wasn’t my mom until much later in life.”

“Did she ever come back for you?”

When Maisie was eleven, her best friend at the time, Janna, got a dog. The family installed an invisible fence. She and Janna used to take the collar off the dog and take turns stepping as close to the line as possible to see where it activated. The shock of his question felt like holding that dog collar, the jolt reverberating through her body.

It was all so complex and dirty and secret.

She was so tired of all the secrets. She didn’t think there’d ever come a day when she’d be free of them.

“No, but after my grandma died, child protective services brought me to her. She only had to be responsible for me for two years.” Since it was her story, it lived inside her. Talking about it put it outside of her, like reading it in a book. It still filled her with a sadness though, with a sense of loss— No, a sense of yearning that seemed bottomless.

She was losing her hold on the moment, sinking into the darkness when Reid dropped to his knees on the grass right in front of her. He covered her hands in his big warm ones. “I don’t know your mom, and I’ll never know your grandmother.” He searched her expression, looking for clues he would never find. She was too good at locking everything down. “But I know you. And you’ve done what you set out to do. You’ve given our son a perfect life. You’re giving him everything you didn’t have.”

Warmth spread through her. It started where he clutched her hands and rushed up her arms, reaching her shoulders and neck before pouring through the rest of her body. This man had gotten a glimpse into her life and had seen the good. Not the ugly.

That was the moment she knew it was over. She’d lost the battle to protect her heart from him.

He'd wiped out all the doubts, leaving nothing but the truth. *He's a good man.* Tears brimmed but didn't spill. She was just so happy to have found him again. It didn't mean she could be with him—not until she discovered the truth of his relationship with Exie—but she could trust him.

“Those five days...” His breath hitched his throat. “They were the best, Maze. I was devastated when you left, and there hasn't been a day that's gone by that I haven't thought about you. No matter what you see in the press over the next few weeks, I need you to believe in me. In us. Promise me you'll do that.”

She scraped her hands through his hair. “I promise.”

With a look of pure carnal intent, he surged forward. The moment their lips met, he let out a sigh filled with relief. Need sprang free, sharp and raw, and she understood in that moment how muted her feelings had been. Other than her love for her son, she'd suppressed all her emotions. Stuffed them down so she could get through life.

Reid tore off the scab and made her senses sting.

His tongue touched hers in an explosion of sparks. *Reid. This is Reid.* The man she'd known for five blissful days. The man she'd made a son with. In this moment, she couldn't see any other outcome for a love this powerful, this *deep*, than the creation of a child.

She leaned into him, opened to him body and soul, and all the need she'd tamped down for so many years roared through her. She let herself go, sinking into his kiss. Swept away with longing and passion, she had the strangest sensation of falling.

His arms banded around her, and together they landed on the grass with him holding her securely. He never let go, never broke the connection, just tightened his embrace while giving her deep, hungry kisses. With a hand on her ass, he rolled her onto her back and settled between her legs. He nudged her knees, urging her thighs to spread wider.

When his hard cock hit her center, electricity lit her up. A flash fire of lust swept through her, and she wrapped her legs

around his waist and arched her back. *Friction*. She was desperate to be filled by him. Fused with him.

While she yanked up his shirt, dying to feel his smooth, hot skin, he jammed a hand under the waistband of her leggings and reached between her legs. “You’re so fucking wet for me.”

A phone rang through a neighbor’s window. Ripped out of her lustful state of mind, she became aware of the tips of grass tickling her back, the swish of tree limbs in a slight breeze, and the scent of Reid. “Jag.”

Reid lurched up, settling on his knees. “Fuck.” He stood and reached for her hands. “Sorry about that. I just... I want you so much I can’t stand it.”

Awash in the glow of attraction and the rush of this newfound trust and affection, she decided to let him into her life. All the way. “Hey, Jagger’s art class is having a showing this Wednesday night. I know you don’t want to be seen in public with us, but it’s at the Museum of Broken Hearts, so it’s not like any tourists will be there.”

She’d expected him to smile, to be pleased. Instead, he’d tensed. It shoved Exie right back between them.

“You wouldn’t have to associate with us. I just think it’ll be good for your relationship if you show up for him.” His discomfort had her pushing. “Even if you don’t stay long, just seeing you there, telling him how much you like his work, will be good.”

“I’m sorry.” With a pained expression, he looked away. “I want to. More than anything. But I’ll be out of town.” His gaze swept back to her. “You promised you’d trust me. Don’t forget that.”

It was the most natural thing in the world to doubt him. Her mind immediately went there. But she didn’t want to be that person. Most importantly, she didn’t want to ruin this relationship before it even had a chance to get off the ground.

“Okay. I won’t.”

She hoped like hell he didn’t let her down.

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Chapter Nine

CHILDREN CHASED EACH OTHER AROUND THE MUSEUM, threading their way through the well-dressed guests, their laughter swallowed by the roar of conversation.

Growing up, Maisie hadn't had a lot of friends. Mostly because she didn't have a parent at home. But even if her grandmother happened to be around, she'd monopolize the time with stories about the golden years of Hollywood. Whatever that meant, considering she'd been born in the late fifties and had never starred in a film. It had also been hard for Maisie to join teams or clubs when she didn't have a ride home. There came a point where she just couldn't bear asking for favors anymore.

In Calamity, though, she had great friends. From the start, the Champions had been awesome, stepping right into the role of grandparents and keeping a place for her and Jag at their holiday tables. She'd made friends from the faculty at school and the various Mommy and Me classes she'd taken.

Mountain people were a quirky bunch. They kept to themselves, but when you asked a question or needed a hand, they showed up. Tonight, half the town had come to support the kids. Silly as it was to show the artwork of three-to-five-year-olds, the museum was treating it like a gallery opening. It was wonderful.

Maisie stood with some women she'd met through a toddler music class. One of them—the tall, gorgeous blonde who always smelled divine—was actually a princess and

married to a Bowie brother. While Maisie didn't know the family personally, the men were famous extreme athletes that everyone seemed to admire not just for their good looks but also for the honorable way they lived their lives.

A man joined the group, and the princess stepped back to let him in. "Hey, guys. This is Kai. He's a friend of my husband's brother."

With big dimples, thick black hair, and a muscular body, the man was ridiculously handsome. He shook everyone's hand, but for some reason, his gaze lingered on Maisie. While the others continued talking, he turned slightly away from them. "What's your favorite dessert in the world? Hands down, best thing you ever tasted?"

What an odd question. "I'm not sure. Why?"

"Take me on a trip. Over the course of your life, what are your best dessert memories?"

"Okay... Well, let's see. In middle school, the big thing was to take little paper cups and fill them with soda, freeze them, and bring them to school like they were popsicles. That's definitely not what you mean, though."

"Sure, it is. Keep going."

"Okay. I used to love Hamburger Hamlet's custard. And then there was RJ's in Beverly Hills. They had this huge slab of chocolate cake—"

"But was it good?"

"It was delicious. What else? Oh, you know what I loved? Penguin's frozen yogurt. I used to go to the one in Malibu, but they went out of business. Let's see." She scrolled through the towns and cities where Exie's tours had gone, when she'd sneak off to indulge in a fancy dinner, or an out-the-way food truck, or a local diner. "I've got it. What's the name of that hotel on the big island of Hawaii... Orchid something? They have the best coconut cake I've ever had in my life."

"You're saying that because I'm Hawaiian, right?"

“Not at all. I’m on the trip, remember? And the island’s the next stop.”

He looked at her as though he thought she was utterly delightful, and it made her smile. “Well, funny enough, that’s where I started. Not at the Fairmont Orchid Hotel but making Halekulani coconut cakes.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

“Totally. I want to make you one. Will you come to Harley and Lu’s Emporium for an espresso and a slice of cake?”

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“I am.”

“But why me?” She shook her head. “Oh my God. That was a stupid thing to say. Honestly, it’s been so long, I can’t even think of the last date I went on.”

“I want to take you out because you’re beautiful and strong.” He gestured toward the kids. “I saw you with your son, and you’re an awesome mom. I like your confidence and your kindness.”

“Where in the world did you see all that?”

“Right here. I brought out the desserts, and the kids came at me like I had the last raft on the Titanic. I told them they had to ask their parents first. They all came racing over to you guys, and while most of the parents waved them off because they didn’t want to be interrupted, you stopped talking, got down to look your son right in the eyes, and reminded him what you’d talked about earlier.”

“That if he didn’t eat dinner, he couldn’t have snacks at this event?”

Kai nodded. “And when he started to pitch a fit, you stayed firm. And the best thing of all? You actually explained nutrition to him.”

“You heard that?”

He nodded. “I thought it was cool because he listened. He got it, and then he went back to playing. So, hell yeah, I want

to go out with you. And I want to make you a coconut cake.”

She didn’t date, and if she hadn’t been so caught up in Reid, she would’ve made an exception for this man. But Reid was it for her. Sure, he had secrets, but she couldn’t exactly demand transparency when she didn’t offer the same.

In the week and a half since he’d come back into her life, three pictures had hit the media. In each, he and Exie looked happy. It didn’t seem romantic—*thank God*—but they were definitely having fun together. The last two hadn’t hit Maisie with nearly the same impact because she believed him when he told her he wouldn’t be with both her and Exie at the same time.

Besides, he couldn’t hide his feelings for the woman. Even if he didn’t say the words, he clearly didn’t like her.

So, no, she couldn’t date anyone. Her heart was already taken. “I’m sorry.”

Kai’s features fell. He seemed genuinely disappointed.

“My life’s complicated right now.” *Because I can’t even tell you about the man I’m not dating but involved with. How screwed up is that?*

“Gotcha. Well, if anything changes, stop by Harley and Lu’s. I’d still like to make that cake for you. You just tell me when.”

“I will.” He started to go but an unexpected spring of gratitude welled up in her. “And thank you, Kai. For making me feel like more than a mom.”

She didn’t even get two seconds to revel in the fact that a very hot man had just asked her out before Jagger broke from the pack of kids—completely oblivious to the art gallery vibes—and hurtled toward her leg. Head tipped back, he gazed up at her. “Where dat guy, Mommy?”

“You mean Kai? The man I was just talking to?”

He shook his head. “Dat man what comed over.”

“Oh.” Her heart squeezed. “Reid?”

Her son nodded.

“He’s out of town, sweetie.” She crouched, smoothing the damp hair off his forehead. “But he wishes he could be here.”

A little girl called his name, and he took off again.

Reid’s going to love this. Her impulse was to call him right then to share the news that his son had asked about him, but she couldn’t. He hadn’t given her specifics, but she guessed he was in LA with Exie.

If he so much as touched her... *No. Nope.* She wouldn’t let those thoughts into her head. *I’m trusting him, remember?*

The point was that Jagger had finally warmed toward him, which meant she could tell him he had a daddy. And maybe, if things kept going this well, the three of them would be a family.

God, she could see it. Jagger climbing into bed with them on Sunday mornings. Movie nights snuggled under a blanket with cocoa and a crackling fire. She could picture them sitting around the kitchen table, sharing stories about their day, Reid getting stern when it came time to do homework.

She’d grown up in an apartment in Westwood Village, and her grandmother had never invited people over. Christmas was the one day a year she didn’t wear makeup and get dressed up. She slept late, wore a white terry cloth robe she’d stolen from the Bel Air Hotel, and lounged around on the couch. She always bought Maisie a pile of presents and declared it No Calorie Day. They could eat anything they wanted and not worry about getting on the scale the next morning.

Maisie made Christmas special for Jagger, but there’d always been one thing missing. Family. A dad, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents. Excitement barreled through her when she thought of Reid joining them this year. It was time. She had no doubt Reid would be a great dad and take it seriously.

Overwhelmed with affection, she got out her phone to text him.

Maisie: When you get back, let’s—

Her phone vibrated as a text came in.

Olive: He's a fucking scumbag dickwad.

Another text came in. This one linked to a video. With a shaky finger, Maisie tapped it and waited while it loaded on the *Entertainment Update* website.

The moment she recognized Reid, hope plummeted like a rock out of a window. Taken at night, it was blurry, but it looked like he was on a balcony, gazing out at the bright lights of sprawling Los Angeles. A woman came into the frame and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his back. When he turned around to face her and noticed the camera, the recording ended abruptly.

Olive: This wasn't staged. This was in real time. Someone caught them.

Maisie couldn't respond. Focused on the screen, the world around her spun, and she lost her balance. Finally, she tore her gaze away. *Olive's right.*

He's been lying to me this entire time.

And I bought it. I just gobbled up his lies like candy.

It hurt way more than it should for someone she'd known a total of one month out of her twenty-eight years.

“Hey, you all right?” Kai gripped her forearm. “Come here.” He led her to a tufted bench. “You need me to take you and your son home?”

She'd been lied to before. *This is nothing new.* Only this time... She just liked Reid so much. Somewhere inside of her, she'd been weaving and spinning and stitching together this perfect future with the only man whose touch made her hot and tremble. Lazy Sunday mornings in pajamas, making waffles, and lounging on the couch while their son played with his Legos.

God.

Her body and soul wanted it more than her mind had ever allowed her to admit.

“What can I do for you?” Kai was so kind. And he smelled good, like just a hint of expensive cologne.

“You can make me coconut cake.”

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Chapter Ten

SHE SAID SHE'D TRUST HIM. SHE KNEW THERE'D BE MORE pictures coming out.

So why is she only giving me one-word responses to my texts? Why isn't she answering when I call?

As the car turned onto her street, he leaned forward. "It's the blue cottage with the pink door." His nerves flared with excitement. He couldn't wait to see her and Jagger. He'd been gone too long.

He would explain everything to her. Hell, he was pissed, too. In that video, he'd been ambushed. Last night, frustrated and disgusted, he'd stepped outside to get some air. Exie's arms had come around him. The only thing he could remember was her funky scent and his rage. Like chemicals in clothing, she smelled like a mix of hair products and cabbage.

He'd spun around to figure out what she was doing, and that's when he'd seen someone on the third-floor balcony recording them. He'd flipped the fuck out.

Yeah, it looked bad. He knew that.

But Maisie needed to know he'd ended the ridiculous game. Walked away.

Consequences be damned.

She was right to be upset. He wouldn't have tolerated it, either. *Here I am trying to build trust, and yet I'm still living under the terms of that contract?*

I'm an asshole.

His thumb flicked the screen, scrolling back through their conversation.

Reid: Home tomorrow. Can't wait to see you guys.

No response. At this point, he hadn't known she'd seen the video. He'd thought Exie had deleted it—as he'd demanded she do. It went against *his* stipulations.

Reid: Everything okay? How did Jagger like the showing?

Maisie: He had fun with his friends.

Reid: When I get back, you want to rent a sailboat and have a picnic in Leftie's Cove?

Maisie: Have you ever sailed before?

Reid. No. LOL.

By then, he'd picked up the vibe that she'd only talk about their son, and he'd grown nervous. So he'd pushed.

Reid: Then let's take the gondola up the mountain and have a picnic.

Maisie: We can talk when you get back.

He'd felt sick to his stomach, so he'd opened up social media and found it. That thirty-second scene had punctured his hope, and he'd known there was nothing he could do, the damage had been done. Still, he'd had to try.

Reid: You saw the video. You know it's not what it seems.

Maisie: Like I said, we can talk when you get home.

He'd called her then. Three times in a row.

Reid: Please pick up the phone. Answer me. I need to talk to you.

Maisie: The only thing we're going to talk about going forward is Jagger. That's it. Until he's comfortable with you, I'll be there when you visit him. But that's all that's going to happen with us. There's not going to be family outings. There's going to be you bonding with your son. Got it?

“Here we are.” The driver had already been paid and tipped, so all Reid had to do was get out of the car, but he couldn’t seem to stop staring at her final words to him.

“You need help with the luggage?” the man asked.

He glanced to his leather carry-on. “I’m good, thanks. Just...” He didn’t have a plan yet. Because if he’d seen a video of Maisie with some other guy— No. It wasn’t just another woman. This was the boss who’d treated her so terribly.

It was inexcusable and unconscionable that he’d flown to LA a third time, but he hadn’t wanted to violate the contract and risk shutting down his brother’s tour. He had a deep and almost unbearable craving to find fulfillment in life, and if he hadn’t found it for himself, he at least needed to know his twin brother had. After hiding out on a tour bus for ten years, Bex deserved to step into the light and realize his own potential.

Reid needed it for his brother as much as he needed it himself.

But not at the expense of Maisie. His family. His future.

“Car’s full of gas. Say the word, and we drive.”

Reid’s gaze flicked up to the eyes watching him in the rearview mirror. “Thanks. But I’ve got some serious work to do here.”

That’s it right there. It’s not over.

Any mistakes he’d made, he could correct. He needed time. He needed to prove himself to her.

“Does it involve a woman?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me give you advice from a man married thirty-three years and a dad to three adult daughters.”

Reid hadn’t had a father in a very long time. His manager was a good guy, but his goal was to make money from Van Claybourne. Reid found himself wanting to hear this man’s words of wisdom.

“People like to say women are complicated, but they’re really not. They want your time and attention. They want you to listen. Not while you’ve got one eye on your phone and half of your brain working through problems at work. They want you to listen to what’s on their minds and in their hearts. Unless they ask, they don’t want you to fix anything. If you can give her your whole focus, you’ve just filled her well. And that’s it. Put down your defenses, hear her—*see* her—and everything’ll be okay.”

“I’ve been working so hard to win her—” and manage his contractual obligations to Exie, “—that I never bothered to find out what she wants.”

The driver shrugged as if to say he could do that now.

“Thank you.” He was pretty sure his tone was as drenched in gratitude and relief as he felt. Since he didn’t see Maisie’s car in the driveway or at the curb, he asked, “You mind waiting till I see if she’s home?”

“You got it.”

Reid took a moment to pull himself together. Before a performance, he had a ritual where he’d visualize his set. He’d see himself walking onto the stage, greeting the audience, addressing his bandmates, and then launching into a song. He’d run through the scripted repartee and his shout-outs to the audience. And he always reminded himself of the name of the city and the locals he needed to thank.

Once he had everything fresh in his mind, he’d strut out there and do his job.

Up until this moment, he hadn’t known what he wanted to say to Maisie. He’d come here like a bat out of hell, wanting to promise her nothing had happened with Exie, to beg her to give him a chance, and to let her know he’d torn up the contract. He had no control of what other photographs Exie released, but he wouldn’t be going back to LA. He was done with that woman for good.

Now he knew he had to listen to her fears and concerns. He had to let her blast him for having anything to do with the

woman who'd wronged her so badly. He had to listen, and once he understood where she was coming from, he had to take decisive action.

Leaving his bag by the mailbox, he strode to the front door and knocked. A breeze rustled the pine leaves and wrinkled the lake. A pair of squirrels chased each around the trunk of a tree and then disappeared into the bushes that separated Maisie's property from her neighbor's.

When no one answered, he pulled out his phone, but before he could open the screen, a car pulled into the driveway. Mrs. Champion got out of the passenger side. "They're not home."

"I see that. Do you know where they are?"

"Well, Jag's spending the night with us. He's at a friend's house right now. We just came by because he forgot his swimsuit." She reached past him to unlock the house. "Excuse me. I'm just going to run in and get it."

Of course, she'd seen the video, too. The whole world had. "I'm not with Exie Sylva. I know what it looks like, but I'm ___"

Leddy shook her head. "This is between you and Maisie."

"I love her. I've loved her from the moment I met her." *Hiding in my closet with a bag of fried chicken.* "I got into a situation a few days before I ran into Maisie, and I couldn't get out of it. But I swear on my life, it's not what it seems."

Carl ambled over. "You got a car?"

"Here?" *Of course, he means here, dumbass.* "I just landed twenty minutes ago and got a ride from the airport." He gestured toward the town car.

Carl pulled a key out of his pocket. "We've got a cabin up in the woods."

"Oh, I live here. Thanks. I've got somewhere to stay."

Carl watched him patiently.

Finally, it clicked. Jagger was spending the night with them so Maisie could have time alone at their cabin. *To deal with what I've done to her.* “Right. Sorry.” He hardly knew this man, but he wanted to hug him. So, he did. He drew the elderly man into his arms, holding him tightly enough that the buckles from Carl’s overalls dug into his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Go on and make it right. She’s hurting.”

Pulling away, he nodded and jogged back to the car.

“I’ll text you the address,” Carl called.

Twenty minutes later, Reid doublechecked Carl’s message.

Carl: 9.6 miles from the sharp bend in the road, you’ll see a row of six mailboxes. You can’t miss it because one is extra tall and says Air Mail.

“That’s it. Right there.”

They turned into the driveway, and the wheels crunched over dirt. As the car rattled and shook on the rutted road, he found himself rubbing his hands on his jeans. He knew she was tired of his promises, and that his words meant nothing next to the photographs showing up in social media.

It killed him that he’d hurt her. *I have to fix it. I have to let her know what she means to me.*

But first, I’ll listen to her.

I’ll hear her.

And then I’ll promise to do whatever it takes to earn her trust and be the man she needs me to be.

“Here we are.” The driver braked in front of number six. Set back from the road, the log cabin’s roof was covered in pine needles and had two metal rocking chairs on the front porch. Sunlight glinted off the side mirror of Maisie’s blue car.

She’s here. His heart knocked in his chest, and he opened the door. “Thank you. For the ride and for what you said. I’m gonna keep my mouth shut and listen to her.”

The man gave him a small smile. “I’ll wait a few minutes till you get inside.”

“That’s fair.” If she didn’t want him to stay, he’d have no choice but to leave. He walked toward the house, his gaze on the neatly chopped and stacked logs under the porch. Was she watching his approach?

She had one night to herself, and he didn’t want to ruin it, but he also knew he was the reason she needed the isolation. He climbed the porch steps, breathing in the pungent smell of fresh-cut pine and damp wood. Plain white curtains covered the windows, giving the house a sense of stillness, but the air was charged with energy, and he wasn’t surprised when the door flung open.

“Go.” Eyes blazing, his hideaway girl stood there practically shaking with anger. He didn’t miss the puffiness around her eyes.

“If that’s what you want, I will.”

His response seemed to disarm her. She deflated just a little.

“*After* we have a conversation.”

A flurry of energy swirled around her. “I don’t care what comes out of your mouth.”

“But I care what comes out of yours. I want you to tell me what you’re thinking and feeling.”

She watched him for a moment, her chest rising and falling a little too quickly. “Fine. I think you’re an asshole, and I feel like being alone.” She reached for the door.

He kicked out his boot, making sure she didn’t close it on him. “And then I’m going to tell you the truth.” That got her attention. “About everything that went on with Exie.”

She hesitated only a moment. “What about the NDA?”

“Fuck the NDA.”

She shifted toward him. “You said there was more at stake than money.”

“There is. My brother’s career.”

“You’re willing to ruin your twin brother’s career? For what exactly?”

“For you. For Jagger. For the chance to be a family.”

“Well, that’s never going to happen. I told you. It’s a hard line. Anyone involved with Exie—”

“I never had sex with her. I never kissed or even so much as hugged her.”

Her knees buckled, and she held onto the doorframe to support herself. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Because I’m going to tell you everything.”

She took quick, shallow breaths, the muscle in her jaw working. While she made her decision whether to let him in, his skin bristled with anticipation.

Talk to me.

Give me a chance.

“Fine. You can come in.” Her gaze flicked over his shoulder. “But tell him not to leave. You won’t be here long.”

He pulled out his phone.

Reid: Going inside but I might not stay. You okay to wait a little longer?

Driver: Long as you need.

Pocketing his phone, he entered the dark cabin. A candle burned on a side table, making the place smell like sugar cookies. The furniture was well-worn and basic.

He considered the couch and the straight-backed wood chairs. “Should we sit down?”

“No need. Just talk.”

That’s fair. “The night of my showing at the gallery, everyone kept asking me about F-stops and apertures, and I felt like a fraud. I like taking pictures, but I’m not a photographer.”

She perched on the edge of the couch.

“And that sucked because it was the only thing that got me through ten years on the road doing something I didn’t want to do. Maybe it’s because my twin was always writing or playing music, but I’ve always felt something was missing. Something huge. And I need it, Maisie. I need a project that consumes me. I want to work until I can’t keep my eyes open and wake up the next morning ready to get back to it. I can’t be aimless. I just can’t. Without photography, I had nothing. So I called my manager, and he told me that Exie Sylva wanted me to be her fake boyfriend—”

“Her what?” She pushed off the couch. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” She let out a huff of breath. “Her fiancé tells the world she sucks in bed, so she pays the Sexiest Man Alive to be her fake boyfriend. Of course.”

“Right. But she didn’t pay me. It wasn’t about money.”

“What was it about? Why would you do that?”

“I told you. I only went to LA because I thought you might work for her. I had no other way to find you, and she wouldn’t let me into the building until I signed the contracts. At that point, I had nothing to lose. And I figured if you weren’t there, at the very least, I might get inspired by being around someone so creative.”

“Ha.” She let out a bitter laugh.

“Believe me, as soon as I figured out her scam, I was out of there.”

She eyed him skeptically. “But you’d already signed her contracts?”

“Right. And I had to honor them or Bex would have to call off his tour. But since the only thing she wanted was a bunch of photographs that she could release at her discretion, I didn’t care. I wasn’t dating anyone. I didn’t have anything going on. I told her I wouldn’t agree to any naked or sexually suggestive photographs. When I saw her screaming at her fashion designer and figured out who she really is, I knew I couldn’t

stay. I told her I'd come back a few times over the next few weeks."

"Reid, yesterday's reel was *live*."

"Hang on. Please let me finish. I went back a second and third time just to take a few more pictures. I never stayed more than one night, and I never touched her. Then, last night, she got into a fight with her assistant. It got ugly, so I stepped onto the balcony. I felt her arms and I turned around to tell her to fuck off, and that's when I saw the camera. That was it. I told her I was done. That I didn't give a shit about the terms of the contract. Right there in front of her, I texted my accountant and told him to wire her a million dollars. And then I left. To come home to you."

"God, I hate the way you make me feel."

His driver's words prodded him. "How do I make you feel?"

"It's the same jumble of emotion I felt while working for her. She has a way of looking at you so intensely, it's like she's reading your soul, looting all your secrets. I find myself believing her, and then I leave, get some perspective, and realize I've just been gaslighted."

"I can understand how confusing it is to hear me tell you what you mean to me and then to see pictures of me with Exie. That's why I quit."

"But I'm still going to see more pictures of the two of you?"

"Yes. For three more weeks. But none of them are sexual. There's no sex tape. Nothing like that."

"What does this mean for your brother?"

"Right from the start, I asked him to file for a new limited liability, so he'll be fine as far as that. But, of course, she upped the ante. She threatened to ruin the tour for him. And the *worst* thing that could happen to my brother is to get bad press."

“She knows everyone. She’ll do it, Reid. She’ll get people to write bad reviews. She’ll create a scandal so big that people will be talking about it instead of his music.”

Fuck. What have I done? He’d hurt the people he loved most in the world. “I didn’t know she was like this. She’s so well-respected in this industry. How come no one knows this about her?”

“I’ll tell you exactly how. First, she keeps a very small and tight circle. Do you notice she’s had the same manager and the same agent all these years? That they work exclusively for her?”

“I didn’t pay attention, but yeah, I can see that.”

“Two, she’s a sociopath. She’s brilliant, and she manipulates you so convincingly, you find yourself apologizing to *her*.” She grew concerned and set her hand on his arm. The simple touch made him weak with relief. “I think he should postpone his tour.”

“I hate how I’ve fucked things up for him, but you know her better than I do, so I trust you.”

“When you first got there, you said you asked about me.” Something in her demeanor changed, like her spirit was peeking behind a half-closed door. “What did they say?” Even her voice went quieter, weaker.

“No one knew who I was talking about. I even showed her assistant a picture.”

“You showed her a picture, and she didn’t recognize me.” It wasn’t a question. With a deep exhale, she turned toward the fireplace. “In the entire building, there wasn’t a single bit of evidence that I existed?”

“I didn’t see any.” Reid hated how Exie had used and abused her. How she’d *wounded* her.

“If she pays you, she owns you. And she’ll treat you like a possession. If someone leaves the circle—which is extremely rare because she buys you houses and cars and pays for your parent’s medical care—she wipes you out completely. Like you never existed.”

“I’m sorry she did that to you.”

She turned back to him and hunched a shoulder. “We all make choices. I stayed with her for seven years.”

“Last night, her assistant quit. When I pushed Exie away and told her I was done, she blamed Destiny. I’ve never seen anyone go off on another human being like that. It was tough to watch. I tried to offer Destiny a job—”

“She’ll never work in the entertainment industry again. Exie will make sure of it. Since she’s got other people doing the actual creating, she’s got time on her hands, and she uses it to keep track of people, make connections, and ruin people who cross her.”

“I wish I’d said no the night my manager brought it up.”

“You were looking for me.”

She understood. He went weak with relief. “But I signed the fucking contracts.”

“Because it was your only access to me. I set all this in motion when I ran out that day. If I’d stayed, if I’d asked you what was going on between you and Exie, none of this would’ve happened.”

“Can we both agree to stop assigning blame? All I want is a future with you and Jagger. I fucked up, and now I’m done with her. No matter the consequences to me or my brother, I won’t hurt you ever again.” Grimacing, he gestured around the dark room. “I can’t believe I drove you *here*. Look at this place.”

She laughed. “Oh, this is just a cabin they rent out. They don’t actually stay here. It’s been in Leddy’s family for generations.”

“Does anyone actually sit in that chair?”

“I think they prop up dead bodies in it.”

Flooded with affection for this woman, he cracked a smile. “I love you.”

Her eyes went wide, and she had an almost comical look of shock on her face.

“I do. I love you. And I know I violated your trust every time I posed for another picture with Exie. I can’t go back and undo the decision to sign that contract, but I can promise that going forward, I’ll do whatever it takes to earn your trust, and I’ll wait until you feel comfortable with me. All I want is to be in your life.”

“You love me?”

“Maisie, I ache for you. I want you. I want us. I want our family.” He took a step back. “I’m not going to push you into anything you’re not ready for, but you’ve got a whole night to yourself... Will you come home with me? You’ve only ever seen my place empty. I want to show you what it looks like now. I won’t make a move, and I swear I won’t expect more than what you’re ready to give me. I’m asking for the chance to start with a fresh slate, to let me build your trust in me.”

Looking a little stunned, she nodded. “Yeah, okay. I’ll go with you.”

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Chapter Eleven

“IT WASN’T NAMED AFTER BABE RUTH.” SITTING IN THE passenger seat of her car, Reid couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this happy. He had a second—well, he guessed it was a third chance with this woman who owned him body and soul.

They passed through the grand arch that led to Wild Wolff Village. Maisie shook her head, all that pretty hair shimmying. “Of course, it was.”

“No, it was named after President Grover Cleveland’s daughter, Ruth.”

“Oh, okay. So you’re like the world expert on candy bar trivia. Fine, then Babe Ruth is named after the candy bar, not the other way around.”

“You don’t get to make up your own facts. It doesn’t work like that.”

“You asked me my favorite candy bar, and I told you. Then you had to go and play Professor Sinclair on me.”

Their eyebrows both hitched at the same time. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“School?” Her eyebrows shot up. “Get your PhD?”

They cracked up at the ridiculous conversation, and it just felt so good to be laughing with her instead of constantly trying to prove himself. He wished he’d ended things with

Exie the same night he'd discovered Maisie and Jagger in Bliss. Bex's tour didn't compare to Maisie's heart.

She turned onto the road that cut through town. Tourists strolled the cobblestone streets, eating ice cream cones while sitting on wrought iron benches. Navy blue awnings and hanging planters bursting with colorful flowers decorated the high-end boutiques.

"Okay, favorite beverage," she said. "I'll go first. Lemonade."

He didn't have to give it any thought. "Water."

"Ugh, that's so boring. Try again."

"That's not how this works. You ask me my favorite, and I answer. There's no right or wrong."

"There's always a right or wrong. Try again, and we'll see if you get it right."

He grinned. "Fine. I like chocolate milk."

"You got it! Good job. Okay, favorite color. Mine is—"

"Blue."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Because your clothes are blue, your plates are blue, and your car is blue."

"Well, that's pretty observant for a decadent rock star."

"Your *house* is blue. You have blue bedding." She was unreasonable, and he loved it. "Whatever. My favorite color is ___"

"Red."

"Yes." He was impressed. "How did you know?"

"Because your aura's red."

"My *aura*?"

"Yes, red means power and vitality."

"Vitality, huh?"

“That’s not the same as virility, Reid.”

“But I’m virile, too, right? That’s part of my big-dick energy?”

She laughed. “It’s your aura’s energy. Not your dick’s.”

“Is it, though?” He kept his gaze on her, waiting.

Grinning, she rolled her eyes. “Yes, Reid. You’re virile. And handsome.” Her tone said she was placating him, but she reached over and squeezed his biceps. “And you’ve got really big muscles. Okay?”

He sniffed. “Okay. Favorite thing to do on a Saturday night.”

“I lay out all my beads and baubles, set out a glass of wine, and videoconference with Olive on my laptop, and while she takes a hot bath, I make jewelry.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“It really is. What’s your favorite thing?”

“I haven’t found it yet.” He held back the answer he really wanted to say since it would happen in the future. *Doing puzzles with Jagger while you’re on a video call with your best friend making jewelry.*

When she shot him a look, wondering what he meant, it dawned on him that he would need total transparency with her. It would be the only way to earn her trust. “My fifth favorite memory is finding you in the closet with your fried chicken and pastries. My fourth favorite memory is having a picnic with you and sharing your cake. My third favorite is the afternoon we hid out in the tunnel between the shed and my house because we got caught in a rainstorm.” They’d talked for hours about nothing and everything. And then he’d licked her into an orgasm. The echo of her screams still reverberated in his mind. “My second favorite memory will be when Jagger and I work on a puzzle while you make jewelry and talk to Olive. And my absolute favorite will be the moment you look into my eyes, and I know I’ve earned your trust.”

Maisie gripped the steering wheel, her cheeks turning pink. She turned onto the road that led to his house. “Well. I can’t beat that.” And then she reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m getting there.”

Pleasure swept through him, making him warm and content in a way he’d never experienced. “Thank you.”

There was only one road up the mountain, and on either side were three-story townhouses and condos. All of them had huge balconies with grand views of both the town and the Tetons. It ended at a shopping plaza that hosted a gourmet food and coffee shop, two restaurants, and a pharmacy. She turned left, braking at the guard’s station.

When the man leaned in and saw Reid, he smiled and waved, letting them pass through. Two miles later, they’d reached his secluded cabin in the woods.

Once inside his house, she stood and looked around. “Wow. It looks so different.”

“I leveled up from my air mattress aesthetic.”

“Well, yeah, but I mean, now it looks like a home.” Her gaze roamed every wall hanging, piece of furniture, rug, and tchotchke. “I guess you hired a designer?”

“I didn’t. After the festival, I went back on tour, so I didn’t really think about much beyond the basics. Bed, couch, lamp. But then I started noticing furniture stores when we traveled, and I got into it. You could call this place a labor of love.” He ran his hand over the smooth teak surface of his sideboard.

She headed to his coffee table. The dark cherry wood had an inlaid tile design under glass. “This is amazing.”

“I got it in Morocco.” He grew excited. “Want to see my bed?”

She leveled a look at him that said *Nice try*.

He just laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just really like my furniture. Come on.”

She followed him to the door but didn’t step inside. Her jaw hung open. “What are you now, a king? An emperor?”

“You’re not far off. I got it at an auction. We were heading up to Scotland for a show, and I saw a sign for an estate sale. Turned out to be a castle.”

“You bought a castle?”

“Thought about it.” When her eyes went wide, he chuckled. “What can I say? I’m always looking for something to do. But no. I just bought some of the contents.”

With a look of awe, she entered the room. Her gaze swept from the Isfahan rug to the intricately etched headboard, nightstands, and dresser. The mirror was so old, the glass seemed to be melting. She ran her hand along the furniture. “It’s like I’m touching history.”

Excitement flared. She got it. “That’s exactly why I had to have it.”

“This whole house, everything you’ve done with it, is stunning.”

“I’m glad you like it.” *Because I want you to live here with me. I want us to be a family.* He had to lay his heart at her feet. “I don’t know if you remember, but my dad died when we were young.”

“I do.”

“Yeah, so Bex and I stepped into his shoes, helping with the kids, earning money to help pay some bills. It made my family my first priority. Even over me. My brother comes first because I feel what he feels, which I guess sounds weird unless you’re a twin.”

She nodded carefully, like a child holding a glass of water she didn’t want to spill. “No, I get it.”

“But now that I have you— Well, I mean, I know I don’t have you. But now that we’re back together.” *Shit.* He was doing this all wrong. “I know we’re not together—we might never be together like that. I just mean now that I have you in my life because of Jagger, those priorities have shifted. You come first, even before my brother, who I shared a womb with.”

She sat on the edge of the bed.

“I’ve waited four years to find you, and now that I have, I want us. I want us to be a family. I know I hurt you—”

“No, it’s fine. I understand now.”

“But that’s the thing.” He dropped to his knees, putting his hands on her thighs. “I don’t want fine. I want...” He swallowed, reining in his emotion. Not wanting to overwhelm her. *She’s not here with me yet.*

“What do you want, Reid?”

“I want extraordinary. Because that’s us.” His hands flexed, his fingers pressing into her skin. “I want the crazy magic I’ve only ever felt with you. I get that you need time, but I have a feeling the only way to earn your trust is to be honest with you. And so here I am being as real as I’ve ever been. I was crazy about you four years ago, and I never recovered after you left. Seeing you as a mom, knowing everything you accomplished to live on your own terms and give our son this perfect life—”

“It’s not perfect.” She wrapped her hands around his wrists. “There’s always been something missing. *Someone*. It’s you, Reid. You’re the man who completes this family.”

“I wish I’d—”

“No. No more of that.” She shook her head. “You said it’s the past, and we can’t change it, right? We can only build a future. So let’s do that. Starting today. Right now.”

“You want that with me?”

“God, Reid.” She scraped her hands through his hair. “Of course, I do.”

Surging up, he toppled her onto the bed, but before he kissed her, he took a moment to read the lust in her eyes, register the rise and fall of her chest. “I love you, Maisie Delgado. And I promise I’m never going to let you down again.”

“I believe you. Now, are you going to kiss me or what?”

He was a whisper away from her mouth when her hands came to his shoulders and stopped him.

“I want to be honest, too.”

He could see how hard this was for her, so he rolled to one side and rested a hand on her stomach to stay connected.

“Before I met you, I was miserable. I didn’t see a way out of the life I was living. But from the moment you opened that closet door and caught me with my box of pastries, you set all these changes in motion. You made me feel things I’d never felt.” She pulled him back over her. “Four years ago, I met a man with a heart so big and beautiful, he left a piece of it inside me. You’ve been with me all along.”

That’s it. He couldn’t hold back another second. He kissed her, and holy shit, all the need and lust and want and passion he’d held back exploded inside him. He fell into the minty taste of her, the familiar scent of her coconut body lotion, and something potent, something that connected to an engine deep inside and made him roar.

Needing to feel all of her, he shifted them to the middle of the bed where he could stretch out. Immediately, she wrapped her arms and legs around him and arched her back, pressing her plump breasts to his chest and grinding her hips against his aching cock.

He kissed her deeply, hungrily, desperate to get closer, wild with the need to touch her everywhere. He slipped his hand under her shirt, and when she sighed, when she tipped her head back just at the simple contact of skin-on-skin, goose bumps popped out along his arms.

I got her back. My Maisie’s here in my bed. Indescribable joy spun in his chest.

As he buried his nose in the sweetly scented crook of her neck, she lifted his T-shirt. “Need you.”

He had to tear his mouth away to grab a handful of fabric and pull it off. And even while he stepped off the bed to unbutton his jeans and pull them down, he never once took his gaze off her.

Because this woman... “You make me wild.” He grabbed the waistband of her leggings and peeled them off. “You make me lose my mind.” Gripping her ankle, he kissed the smooth sole of her foot and licked a path along her calf to the back of her knee. “You make me so damn happy I can hardly stand it.” Once she unclasped her bra and tossed it aside, he climbed back over her. “For ten fucking years, I’ve been on a tour bus surrounded by strangers, talking about absolutely nothing, but I swear to God, when I’m with you, I’m home. I’m not pretending or performing. I’m my best self.”

Grabbing her wrists, he pulled them over her head. He kissed her temple, her cheek, and the corner of her lush pink mouth. He pressed a trail down her neck and along her collarbone.

When he licked her nipple, she wrested one hand free, scraped her nails along his scalp, and fisted his hair. “Yes.”

As he sucked, he cupped her other breast, filling his palm, and flicked his thumb across her nipple. Moving lower, he kissed her belly. “You grew our son in here.” He looked into her glazed eyes. “Thank you.”

She groaned. “Don’t be sweet right now.”

“No? What do you want me to be?”

“Be Reid.” She set her hands on his shoulders and pushed. “The man who takes what he wants.”

“It’s been four years.” He continued his exploration. “And what I want is still you.” He pressed open-mouthed kisses down her belly. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed us. And I never want to be without you again.”

She went still.

“Yes, I mean it just like that. I don’t care how many minutes our three weeks and five days add up to, because I knew then, and I know now. You’re the only woman in the world for me.” Hands on her thighs, his tongue found her clit.

She jerked.

“I won’t let you down.”

“Reid.” His name came out shaky and thin. She squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed a fistful of comforter.

He made slow circles around her sensitive nub, pushing a hand under her ass so he could feast on her, and loving the tremble in her thighs. Sliding two fingers inside her hot, slick core, he found the sensitive patch that made her squirm and stroked her into a climax that had her body twisting and writhing while she cried out.

When her thighs clapped shut around his head, he withdrew. As he loomed over her, he looked into the most beautiful blue eyes he’d ever seen. Eyes that penetrated deep into him, a portal connecting him to the missing part of his soul.

“I always thought Bex was the other half of me, but I was wrong. He’s my brother, and I love him, but you...you’re the piece that makes me whole.”

She reared up, knocking him onto his back. Straddling him, she kissed him on the mouth. “You have to stop saying things like that.”

“Can’t. I promised to always tell you the truth.”

“You don’t understand. I’ve never had someone. I mean, I have Jag, but he’s mine to take care of. Do you know what I’m saying? You have a mom and brothers and a sister. You have a manager and roadies and...and fans. You’re the center of so many people’s worlds, but me... I’m just alone. It’s all I’ve ever known. I’d hoped to fall in love someday, but I pictured it as... I don’t know... Holding hands with some faceless guy. Making coffee and asking if he wants me to pour him a cup. I just never imagined...mattering so much to anyone.”

“You matter to me, Maze. You fucking matter.”

Her hands landed on his chest, her mouth covered his, and she kissed him with the kind of passion that only came from letting go, from losing control.

She’s in this with me. Finally, she’s mine.

He reveled in her fervor, her urgency, her abandon. A volatile energy stirred deep inside him, gaining momentum,

threatening to break free. When she shifted her hips restlessly, kissing him and making those little cries in the back of her throat, he couldn't stand it. He needed to be inside her. The kind of elemental fusing that happened beyond bodies, where souls strained to connect.

As she kissed a trail down his chest, she reached between them to grip his cock and circle her thumb over the head. Knowing where she was headed, he groaned. He wanted to feel the slick heat of her mouth around him so badly. When she got there and sucked him in, he slammed his fists onto the mattress and his hips jerked up, forcing him deeper into her mouth. "Sorry. Shit. Sorry."

Her eyes had gone sultry, and her tongue slicked up and down his length as she worked him like she was ravenous, like she couldn't get enough, and it drove him too close to the edge too fast.

He swatted her ass to get her attention. "Ride me. I want to see your tits bounce. Want to feel your hair all over me."

She didn't even hesitate, just pulled him out of her mouth, climbed back on, and reached for him. Gazes locked, she slowly lowered herself on him and let out a needy, shaky sigh. And then he was fully sheathed inside her tight, welcoming channel, and nothing had ever felt better. He had one second of clarity and said, "Condom?"

"I haven't been with anybody since you."

He'd been tested at his last physical. "I'm good. I'm clean. Pill?" He couldn't believe how badly he wanted to fuck another baby into her, but he knew they weren't ready for that.

She stopped squirming on his cock, as she seemed to give the idea some consideration and then broke out into a soft but mischievous grin. She lifted, and he couldn't believe how disappointed he was, but it was the right thing to do. He started to reach for the top drawer of his nightstand, but instead of moving off him, she eased back, taking him all the way to the hilt. And then, she was riding him. This beautiful, smart, confident, independent, generous, kind woman sat up,

put her hands behind her to brace herself on his thighs, and rode him like a rodeo queen.

In that moment, he got everything he wanted. Her big tits bouncing, her silky hair brushing his legs, and her tight pussy squeezing his throbbing cock. It was perfect. He felt whole.

That was his last thought before he became pure sensation. Reaching for her hips, he took over, lifting her and slamming her back down. Harder, deeper, he was out of control. Desire twisted through him, pulling tighter and tighter, until he thought he might explode. He reached between her legs and rubbed her into a climax that had her crying out his name and writhing all over him.

When she came down from it, he flipped her onto her back and fucked her. Driving into her, the drumbeat of possession pounding in his blood, he clamped down on her hips and exploded. One orgasm after another lit him up until he was fully and thrillingly alive.

When he was spent, he collapsed beside her, barely able to catch his breath.

He was so out of it, he only came back into his body when he felt her hand reaching for his.

“That was spectacular.” She smiled.

He couldn’t even speak. He just loved this woman so much.

Nothing would ever come between them again.

He’d make sure of it.

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Chapter Twelve

IN THE PAST, MAISIE SPENT HER SATURDAY MORNINGS RACING from the supermarket to the post office to the hardware store so she could get her chores done and still have an hour or two with her friends at the farmers market.

This morning, she was naked. In bed. With the sexiest rock star in the world.

And it was bliss. A happiness unlike anything she'd ever known.

Given her circumstances, she'd developed a strong spirit, and she walked the earth with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other, ready to defend herself against anyone who sought to harm her or her baby boy. Today, though, she relinquished her weapons and wallowed in love. Letting down her guard was the most liberating experience in her life. "I feel safe with you."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tighter to him. "That means a lot to me."

She played with the soft hair on his chest. "Do you like your house better or mine?"

He lifted his head. "What're you saying?"

"I'm not talking about now, but eventually, when we live together as a family—"

His body went hot. "Are you serious?" Hope swam in those warm hazel eyes. "You want us to be a family?"

“Eventually, yes. If things keep going the way they have between us, I can’t think of anything I’d want more.” She turned to face him. “We still have to deal with Exie though. I know you think you’ve paid her and everything is settled, but it’s never like that with her. Right now, you’re a loose cannon. You quit and walked away, taking her secrets with you. She feels threatened.” She needed him to take this seriously. “She’s a sociopath, and we don’t know what she’ll do.”

“Is it just Exie that worries you?”

He knew her so well. “No.” Taking a moment to gather her thoughts, she sat up. Relationships were such new territory for her. “I’ve never been with anyone before, and I’m afraid... Well, I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. Do you know what I mean? I’m waiting to find out you’re married, or you go into rages. I’m waiting for a dealbreaker.”

“We’ve got all the time in the world for you to see there is no other shoe.” He reached for her hand and kissed her fingertips. “And that there’s nothing that will break us.”

She loved that he understood what she needed. Leaning closer, she kissed him. She might not be able to say the words just yet, but if this feeling—this big, powerful rush of affection that made her giddy, made her heart hammer—wasn’t love, then she didn’t understand the definition.

Her phone chimed, and she recognized the ringtone. “That’s Leddy. I have to get it.” She didn’t know whether her shaky hands came from the fear something was wrong with her son or the realization that she had undeniably strong feelings for Reid. “Hello?” The kind of feelings that had the power to destroy her.

“Hey, sweetheart. We’ve had a bit of a problem.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We were at the playground, and another boy took Jagger’s truck.”

“The one Reid gave him?”

Her son had never really played with cars and trucks before, but Reid had brought a few over the other day, and

now her son was obsessed with them.

“Yes, that one. The boy wouldn’t give it back. He was a bit older, and he ran off with it, taunting Jagger. And then... Well, Jag pushed him. It wasn’t his fault, but the boy fell back against the swing set pole and hit his head.

“Is he hurt?” she asked.

“Jagger’s hurt?” Reid jumped out of bed and grabbed his jeans off the floor.

She shook her head, listening to Leddy.

“No, I saw the whole thing. He just stumbled back and knocked his head. It wasn’t too bad, but the boy cried, the parents yelled—”

“They yelled at Jag?”

“Yes.”

“At a three-year-old boy?” She reached for her bra. “Where are you?”

“We’re in the car on our way over. Almost there. See you in a few minutes.”

“Okay.” She tossed the phone on the bed and pulled a fresh pair of panties out of the dresser.

“Talk to me while you dress.”

She repeated the information Leddy had given her. Then, as she shoved her feet into flip flops, she shook her head. “He’s the sweetest boy. He’d never hurt a spider. I mean, he’s so good.”

Reid gripped her shoulders. “Hey, not only did someone take something of his, but the boy got off on watching Jag get upset. I’ve known kids like this before. Their parents blame the world for *their* fuckups.”

Worried, she hurried into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

“Hey, it’s okay. We’ll talk to him.”

The power of that one word immobilized her.

“What?” Reid watched her in the mirror. “What’s wrong?”

“You said we.”

“Of course, I did. We’re in this together. He’s our son.”

There were some nights when she got under the covers, knowing her son was safe, she’d paid her bills, the refrigerator was full, and she knew all was right in the world. This felt like that but amplified by a thousand. “I’ve never been part of a unit. It was one thing when I was alone and making my way through the world, but the burden of raising a child? Of making every single decision? You have no idea. Am I disciplining him the right way? Am I saying the right thing in those monumental moments? When he gets sick, it’s just me to wonder if it’s something serious, if he needs stitches, if it’s worth taking him to the ER. It’s just so hard to do every single thing alone.”

He pulled her into his arms. “You never have to do it alone again, Maisie. Never.”

She leaned into him, gave him all her weight, and he held her firmly. For the very first time, she knew he was real. This man was everything she thought he was.

He won't hurt me.

They both heard the car in the driveway. She dropped the toothbrush on the counter and hurried out to greet them. Carl got out of the car and came around to unbuckle Jagger.

Maisie rushed to greet her son. “Hey, sweetheart.” She pulled him into her arms, hitching him on her hip. “Come inside and tell me what happened.”

The Champions settled on the couch, she sat on a chair with Jagger in her lap, and Reid headed into the kitchen. “Are you okay?”

Red-faced, her son looked angry, scared, and a little wild-eyed, like a trapped squirrel.

“We were at the park,” Leddy began, giving Jag an encouraging smile. “He was playing with his new truck on the grass, and a boy came over and snatched it right out of his hands. Jagger asked for it back, but the boy ran off, laughing and holding it just out of reach.”

“And then what happened?” she asked him softly, rubbing his knee. “You got so angry you pushed him?”

Jagger gazed up at her warily, lips pressed firmly together. He nodded. “I pushed him, and he got hurt. He cwied.”

“Did you push him because you were so angry?”

“I angwy, Mommy.”

“I bet you were. I would have been angry, too. But no matter how frustrated you are, you can’t touch people. You know that, right? You can use your words, and you can ask an adult for help, but you can’t lay your hands on anyone.”

“Here’s the thing.” Carl leaned forward. “You’ll be starting school soon. You push or hit someone, you’ll get in trouble, and then other kids won’t play with you. Their moms won’t let you come over for playdates. So next time you get real angry like that, walk away. Cool down. Tell your mom or your teacher or whatever adult’s with you that you need some help. You understand what I’m saying?”

Jagger nodded with that incredibly sincere expression that made her know how very much he wanted to do the right thing. He was such an earnest, sweet-natured boy.

She wasn’t sure how to handle the situation. He’d never hit someone before. Sure, he got frustrated, but he would usually cry or pitch a fit.

Reid came out of the kitchen with a sippy cup and a snack-sized packet of crackers. “Hey, buddy.”

Jagger’s cheeks flamed red, and he buried his face in her shoulder. *He’s embarrassed. He wants Reid to think well of him.*

Reid set everything on the coffee table. “Brought you some water and those fish crackers you like so much.”

Her son reached for the cup and glugged.

Keeping his full focus on Jagger, Reid sat on the edge of the table. “Heard you had a rough day.”

Jagger froze, the spout of the cup resting on his lower lip. He seemed to be reading the big man's expression for judgment.

She suspected they all were.

"Sounds like that kid was being a dick."

"Reid." *Ugh*. He had a lot to learn about how to talk to children. "You can't say things like that. He'll mimic you."

"Come here a sec, Jag." He reached out, and to her great surprise, Jagger scampered over. Reid pulled him onto his lap, held his chin in his big hand, and made his son look him in the eyes. "I love you very much. You're a good boy. Today, you made a mistake." He shrugged. "We all do that. I do. Your mom does. Even your grandparents do, and they're pretty perfect. And you know what? It's okay to make a mistake. Know why? Because we learn from it. Today, that kid pissed you off. He took your truck, and he ran off with it, and he wouldn't give it back. Worse, he laughed at you and made you frustrated. That would make anyone angry. But next time it happens, you're gonna need to make a different choice. Because what if that kid had pushed *you*? Do you like when kids hit you?"

Jagger shook his head.

"Me neither. So if we don't want anyone to hit us, we've got no business putting our hands on anyone else. Keep your cool, and don't let the bullies see you sweat. Got it?"

This man loves me.

He loves his son.

She wanted to wrap her arms around her family.

Then why are you sitting here? She heaved out of the chair and joined them, throwing her arms around her guys. She soaked up this beautiful moment of bonding.

She was vaguely aware of the Champions getting up and leaving. From a distance, she registered the rumble of the car's engine firing up, but her whole world was held within her arms.

And it was perfect.

She needed it to last. She needed nothing else to go wrong.

Please, Exie. Leave Reid alone.

If I ever meant anything to you at all, just...leave him alone.

Reid had the best week of his life, so naturally, it had to all come crashing down around him. To avoid the risk of being recognized in town over the busy Fourth of July weekend, they'd spent the holiday at a cabin he rented way up the mountain. He'd been so damn careful not to be seen in public with his family, he was sure he'd make it through the last remaining week of his contract.

He'd been wrong.

Now, he stood in front of the television and stared at the screen. *Dammit.*

"How did they get this?" Maisie paced behind him. "There was no one around."

Someone had obviously caught them sneaking outside for some alone time while Jagger napped. The cabin didn't have Wi-Fi, so they hadn't seen the news until they got home, bathed Jagger, and put him to bed.

"I thought he was dating Exie Sylva?" the anchor asked.

"Oh, come on. You know Van Claybourne. He's a total horndog." The cohost grinned.

"So who is this mystery woman?" the first one asked. "Does she look familiar?"

"Hard to tell when he's eating her face."

As the cohosts continued chatting, the screen split. A photo of Reid and Exie laughing as they headed out of a restaurant took up one half. The other side had a shot of him making out with Maisie in the woods.

He had his hands on her cheeks, kissing her deeply. The passion was palpable.

“Whew. Excuse me but is it hot in here?” the anchor joked.

“Van and Exie look like brother and sister when you compare their photos with the fire he has with this mystery woman.”

“Poor Exie. She’s had a rough go of it this past month. Aging is tough in this industry, no doubt about it. Well, folks, we’ll let you know more as the story unfolds.”

Reid reached for the remote and powered off the TV. The screen went black.

The quiet settled over them. “I’m relieved it’s out. We can stop hiding.” He’d lost a million bucks, and Bex had postponed his tour, but it was over.

“You can’t let your guard down,” Maisie said. “Not for a second.”

He pulled her into his arms. “We’ll lay low until this blows over.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I guarantee she won’t let it go. Her ex already made her look bad, and now you? She’s going to come at you with everything she’s got.”

“I know you have a terrible history with her, but there’s nothing she can do to me. And she can’t hurt you because there’s no way to identify you.”

“Do you see those bracelets? They’re mine.”

Made of rose gold, the cluster of bangles had gemstones embedded in them. They were bright, colorful, and distinctive. “Does she know you make jewelry?”

“Yes.” Maisie gazed up at him, fear in her eyes. “You’ve humiliated her. She’s going to lose her mind. And she’s going to come for you.”

“Hey, hey.” He tipped her chin. “Let her do her worst. You forget that I have money and influence, too. If she wants to hurt my reputation, I can punch right back. Remember, I know

the truth about her businesses. She won't risk exposure. I promise you."

A knock on the door had them separating. "God, I just feel sick." Maisie went off to answer it.

He followed behind and saw her flinch and lose her step. Through the glass pane in the door, he saw a woman.

"She's here." Maisie whispered it.

Exie's here? Dammit. What have I done? Maisie had worked hard to build a life far away from this woman...and he'd led her right to Maisie's doorstep. Okay, he'd handle it. This was his problem. Not hers. "I got this."

He'd get Exie out of here, take her far away from Maisie and their son, but before he could reach for the doorknob, Maisie opened it.

"Mom? What're you doing here?"

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Chapter Thirteen

WAIT A MINUTE. EXIE'S HER MOTHER?

The same mother who dropped her off on her grandmother's doorstep when she was two? Evil Exie?

Of course. All the pieces fell into place, and Reid couldn't believe he hadn't figured it out. Maisie's grandmother died when she was sixteen, leaving nothing but debt, so Maisie had taken a job she didn't want but couldn't refuse.

Exie had offered her big money to be her assistant and to keep her mouth shut since only a handful of people knew the truth about their relationship—Maisie and her grandmother.

The woman pushed past her daughter and breezed into the room. "So this is it? This is the dump I paid for? You always did set the bar too low."

Reid kept his mouth shut, but only so he didn't diminish Maisie's independence and personal power in front of this woman who'd had such an impact on her. But he did move to Maisie's side, so she'd get the message that he was here for her, that she wasn't alone.

"I'm sorry those pictures got out." Maisie sounded strong but firm. "We've been extremely private."

"Let's not pretend you haven't been waiting for your moment to get me. Congratulations. You did." Exie flashed her gap-toothed smile. "What I want to know is how you found him? How did a plain, dull little schoolteacher get access to a rock star?"

“Well, that’s the thing, *Mom*. I’m not a teacher, and he’s not a rock star. I’m Maisie, and he’s Reid. The whole world doesn’t see people for how they can serve them. Some of us have actual feelings.”

Normally, Exie wore provocative clothing. She did, after all, have the bestselling coffee-table book of all-time filled with photographs of her in provocative poses. But today she wore an oversize hoodie, jeans, and thick-soled sneakers. It was the perfect disguise for the flashy, over-the-top rocker.

“Oh, I have lots of feelings.” With a forced smile, her eyes went hard. “My fiancé told the world I’m a dud in bed, and then my daughter took the Sexiest Man Alive right out from under me, making me look like a fool.” She clapped her hands three times, slowly. “Good job. I guess you’re more like me than you realize.”

“I met Reid years ago.”

“Years ago, huh? But you only picked things up with him after *I* got him. I’d think it was pretty pathetic you want your mommy’s sloppy seconds if I wasn’t so pissed at both of you.”

“I understand why you’re upset, but trust me, our relationship has nothing to do with you. Believe it or not, I rarely think about you. Once I walked away, I didn’t look back.”

“You sure about that? Every time you walk into that classroom, doesn’t it grind through you that the only reason you’re teaching is because I paid for your education?” She gestured around the cottage. “I’ll bet there’s not a room in this house where you can get completely comfortable since you know I paid for it.”

Ah, hell. Maisie would never be free and clear as long as she had those ties to her mother. He’d wire Exie the money right then if he believed Maisie would accept it.

“You’re right about that. But I’ll pay you back one day in full, and then I’ll never have to think about you again.”

“I know. Boo hoo. My mommy was mean. You know, a man can make his career his focus and be showered with

awards and praise. A woman tries to make a name for herself, and what? She's a neglectful mother? I didn't abandon you, Maisie. I left you with my mother because I knew I couldn't be what you needed. I did the right thing."

"You sure did. Grandma wasn't much of a guardian, but at least she wasn't evil."

"Oh, shut up. I gave you a job, I gave you an opportunity, and I gave you enough money to have independence. Seriously, if not for me, you would have gone into foster care and been cut loose at eighteen. Okay, enough of the warm and fuzzy walk down memory lane." She pointed a bony finger at Reid. "You broke the contract, and I'm going to fuck you up."

"You can try, but I've already paid you a million bucks, and Van Claybourne LLC is defunct, so there's nothing you can do to me."

The woman seemed completely calm when she said, "You're right. There's nothing I can do to you." Slowly, her gaze shifted over to Maisie, and a chill tripped down Reid's spine.

He rushed forward, aware he was using his height and physicality to intimidate her, but he didn't care. He would not let this woman threaten Maisie or anyone he loved. "I think you forget that both of us know your secrets. All of them. It would be in your best interest to walk out that door and forget we exist."

"Mommy?" Jagger's sweet little voice broke the tension in the room, and everyone turned to see him standing in the doorway. Blanket scrunched under his arm, hair sticking out on one side, he blinked. "Who dat lady?"

Maisie hurried to scoop her son into her arms. Reid stayed put, right near Exie, his stomach squeezing so tightly that bile shot to the back of his mouth.

"I'm your grandma, sweetie." With a tilt of her head, she shifted her gaze between Jagger and Reid. Her eyebrows shot up. And then, an evil grin broke across her features. "And I'm going to make you famous. Just like your daddy."

The bottom dropped out of his world. He knew this woman was sick enough to use her grandson.

Not on my watch. No one fucked with his family. He would ruin her. He would bring her down. With a hand on her back, he ushered her out the door and onto the lawn. “I want you to listen to me carefully. I get that we caused you embarrassment. That was never my intention. I’ve known Maisie for years and had no idea you two were related. Your issue is with me. Not with her, and sure as hell not with your grandson. So go ahead and extract your punishment. What do you need me to do to make this right?”

Her eyes narrowed, but she still didn’t lose her cool. “I’ll tell you exactly what you’re going to do. On Saturday morning at eleven o’clock, I’m going to be at the Griddle Café in Beverly Hills. You’re going to walk in there and beg me to come back to you. You’re going to tell everyone what a terrible mistake you made, and that I’m the love of your life. And if you don’t... Well, all’s fair in love and war.”

That night, Jagger crawled onto his lap and shoved a book in his hands. “Wead.”

It was the same one he asked for all the time. “The cave was warm,” he began, but he paused because Jagger cared less about the story itself than the images.

He pointed. “Bwead.”

“Yep. They’re having bread with their dinner.”

“Candle.”

“One candle.” Reid tapped the page. “Two candles. Three candles.” He touched the fourth one, waiting for Jag to call out the number.

He held up his hand, taking a moment to work out which fingers stayed up and which went down. “Four,” he said when he figured it out.

“You got it.” He snugged his boy tightly against him and started reading.

Maisie came into the living room and sat on his other side, tipping her head onto his shoulder. This moment. Fuck, it was perfect. He couldn't believe how something so simple—reading a book after a full day—could be more meaningful than winning a Grammy or selling out Madison Square Garden.

He breathed in the mingling scents of Maisie's coconut lotion and his son's baby shampoo. He wanted to capture this moment in a bottle and never let it go.

“Wead.”

He laughed. “Sorry. Okay, the cave was warm and smelled like the bread his mom was making. Cory's stomach growled.”

Jagger patted his belly. “My tumak gwowl.” He made an adorable attempt at the sound.

“While his mom helped Sam with his homework and fed the baby and set the table, Cory went to the oven and peeked inside. The bread looked good. His stomach roared.”

“Yagger's tumak woar.”

All three of them made a roaring sound.

“Mommy, I'm hungry,” Reid continued. “But his mom was busy helping Sam with his homework and feeding the baby. So, he said it louder. ‘Mommy, I'm hungry.’”

Jagger pointed to the mama bear. “Dat Mommy?”

“Yep,” Reid said. “That's his mommy.”

“Dat Sam?”

“Yes, that's his brother Sam.”

“Dat baby.”

“That's right. That's Cory's baby sister.”

He pointed to the big bear dozing on the couch. “Dat Daddy.”

“Yep. Daddy's asleep because he worked all night long while Cory was sleeping.” Reid turned the page.

His son gazed up at him. “You my daddy?”

The world stopped spinning. The only sound came from the beating of his heart in his ears. He shot a look to Maisie, who gave him a soft and happy grin.

“Yes.” Reid swallowed. “I’m your daddy.” Startled to hear the words out loud and touched beyond measure, he let out a weird little huff of air. He shifted Jagger around so they were face-to-face. “I love you very much. You’re my son, and I’m your dad, and I’m always going to take care of you.”

Jagger watched him for a moment, and Reid wondered if he grasped the size and scope of this revelation. That he would have a father for the rest of his life. He would never again feel that pang in his heart when he watched other kids and their dads. From this moment on, he would always have the support of someone who loved him more than his own life.

But the boy turned back around and patted the page. “Wead.”

Reid and Maisie broke out laughing.

Jagger set his little hand on Reid’s forearm and shook it. “Wead.”

He kissed the top of his son’s head. He honestly didn’t think life could get more perfect than this. “You got it.”

After they’d put their son to sleep and picked up around the house, Maisie came out of the bathroom rubbing lotion into her hands. She stacked some pillows and climbed into bed. Normally, she snuggled up against him, so he knew something was wrong.

“What’re you thinking?” he asked.

“I don’t want you to go to LA and play her stupid, sick game. I hate that the world is going to see you as some heartsick lover.”

“I don’t like it, either. But do you think she’s evil enough to try and get back at us by hurting our son?”

Maisie closed her eyes and let out a slow breath. “Yes.”

“Then I’ll do it. Because she’s vindictive, and she’s not going to stop until she takes a pound of my flesh.” He shifted onto a hip to face her. “A hit to my ego’s a small price to pay to get her out of our lives for good.”

“All my life, she’s been lurking. I can’t get away from her.” She rolled onto her side. “She’s the weird creak in the house when I’m alone at night. Or the shadow I think I see, but when I turn to look, there’s nothing there. I wish I hadn’t taken her money.” She tucked her face into his arm. “I wish so many things.”

“I’ll pay her back every cent you borrowed. Tomorrow, I’ll transfer the money into her account, and it’ll be done. The last tie cut.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “There will always be a tie. For both of us. As long as we’re the keeper of her secrets, we’ll always be connected to her.”

The next morning, they all overslept. Since Reid was the only one who didn’t have to be somewhere, he skipped a shower to get the coffee going and breakfast started. Jagger came into the kitchen rubbing his eye with the back of his hand, his hair in wild disarray. Instead of pulling out a chair and sitting down, he walked right up to Reid with his arms lifted.

Reid’s heart nearly exploded, and he dropped the spatula to lift his son into his arms. The boy collapsed against him, resting his cheek on Reid’s shoulder. It was the single greatest moment of his life to be a source of comfort to his son

On their own accord, his hips started swaying, and his knees had a slight bounce. Joy bubbled up and spilled all over him. *Look at me with the daddy moves.*

“I love you.” He whispered it, but he knew his son heard by the way his body stirred and shifted. “You’re my boy.”

He gently rocked his son, content to stay right there and do it all day long.

Maisie, dressed and all made up for work, rushed in and came to a hard stop when she saw them. After a moment, she broke into a smile. “He takes a while to wake up. That used to be my job.” She grabbed her phone from the counter and took a picture.

He’d frame this one. Put it on the mantel with the others.

He’d treasure every first he had with his son and his family.

Maisie grabbed the coffee thermos he’d prepared. “Thank you for this.” At the refrigerator, she pulled out the insulated lunch bag and then glanced at the counter. “I thought I left my keys... Wait. Did I leave them in my purse?”

He tipped his head. “They were in your coat pocket. I put them next to your phone.”

She spotted them and broke into a bright grin. She kissed his cheek. “Thank you. You’re amazing.” She ran her fingers through Jag’s hair. “I love you, punkin. Grandma will be here in fifteen minutes. Do you want to eat now or wait till you’re at her house?”

Instead of answering, Jagger wrapped his arms around Reid’s neck and hitched his body a little higher. It was a claiming. A choice.

A hard knot formed in Reid’s throat. He pressed his palm to the center of Jagger’s back.

“Stay with Daddy,” the boy said.

Reid’s muscles spasmed, and he held his son tighter. “That’s okay with me.”

“But Leddy and Carl...”

“Can hang out with us this morning, but I’m here now. I got this.”

“You’re leaving for LA.”

“That’s just one night. After that, I’m not going anywhere unless it’s with you two.”

Maisie seemed subdued. “This feels like such a big deal.”

“It is. But that’s where we are.”

“I guess we are.”

He couldn’t tell if she was happy about it or not. “Are you worried about the Champions? That this will hurt them?” Not that he would change his mind. He was Jagger’s father, and he had time to spend with him.

“Not at all. They’ll be happy for us. I just...”

“Find it a little scary? Because you’re putting all your trust in me?”

She gave him a guilty twist of her lips. “Yes.”

After a lifetime with a grandmother who didn’t want her, a mother who’d abandoned and then used her, this woman had never known unconditional love. So he understood how hard it was for her to put her faith in him. He would give her all the time she needed to get there, but damn did he want it. All of it—all of her love and her trust. He wanted her to finally let down her guard and feel love and safety and peace.

With me. “I want us to live together. As a family. Whether we live in my house or yours...or we buy something new. As long as we’re together, I don’t care. Maisie, I’m all in. You know that, right?”

She held his gaze, and he could see her brain processing. He didn’t want to influence her in any way, so he kept his mouth shut and hoped she’d choose to trust him.

“Yeah, I do.” A gentle smile broke across her beautiful features. “Okay. Let me give Leddy a call on my way to work.” She kissed Jag’s cheek again. “I think you lucked out in the daddy lottery, my love.” She got on her toes and pressed her mouth to Reid’s. “I know I sure did in the boyfriend lottery.”

He didn’t like the sound of that. He’d have to hurry up and put a ring on her finger so she could call him husband.

Chapter Fourteen

MAISIE SETTLED HER THERMOS IN THE CUPHOLDER AND dropped her purse on the passenger seat. Normally, she spent the short ride to school gearing up for her day of teaching. She walked herself through each lesson and what she'd say to the kids.

But today... She looked to the house. Reid and Jagger stood on the porch waving goodbye. Her heart squeezed hard. It was the most beautiful sight in the world.

This is my family.

The moment the thought formed, she wanted to bat it away. To dig a hole and bury it. To turn tail and run. Instead, she kept very still and let it bloom inside her.

That gorgeous man loves me. He loves my son.

Our son.

Truly, she'd never wanted anything more than a real family, and it took so much courage to accept that she might have it.

Oops. She'd done it again. I do have it.

She trusted Reid. Wholeheartedly.

As she backed out of the driveway, her phone pinged, and she braked to dig it out of her purse.

Olive: Whoa. Have you seen this?

Too many years of being ambushed and manipulated sent a kick of adrenaline into her bloodstream. *What's Exie done now?* She tapped the link her friend had attached, and as she waited for it to load, she glanced at the porch. Reid had already clocked her anxiety and stood right outside the driver's side window. He didn't say a word, just waited.

Then the video started. She couldn't take a full breath, couldn't fully focus because she kept waiting to see her beautiful boy exploited for Exie's vicious desire for revenge.

"I was there for that," Reid said. "I saw it. That's why I couldn't stay."

It wasn't Jagger. Someone had recorded Exie screaming at her artist. "That's not what I pay you for. Are you bored? Do you want a new job? Maybe you can paint houses or how about teaching art? Because that's all you'll ever be without me."

The video shut off and then restarted on the first floor, showing the fashion designer at work. A voice asked, "Is that Exie's new line?"

The man glanced over his shoulder. "She wants avant-garde. Whatever the fuck that means. As long as she pays me, I don't care what I make." More and more footage, all of it proving Exie didn't design her clothes, make her art, or write her songs.

She was a total fraud, and now the whole world knew.

"Is this going viral?" Reid asked.

She glanced at the URL. "Yes. It's *Entertainment Update*." She looked at his wicked expression and understanding dawned. She was just so used to bad news, it took a moment to recognize good. Slowly, she got out of the car. Reid lifted an arm, and she stepped into it.

"It's over." He'd uttered two simple words. But they were filled with such gravity...such finality.

"Is this real?" She couldn't believe it.

"It is."

“Who would do this?” In all these years, no one had risked Exie’s wrath. She would ruin them financially. She’d destroy their reputation.

“Her assistant, the one who quit while I was there. I’m sure of it. That woman had no fucks to give.”

“Wow.” The fog cleared, giving her a clear view of the truth. For the first time in her entire life, she was safe. The curtain had been whisked open, and the wizard had lost all her power.

She can’t hurt me anymore.

It’s over.

After saying goodbye to Reid and Jagger, she’d sung at the top of her lungs all the way to work. Windows open, breeze whipping her hair around her face, she felt free.

She’d never dared dream of a future like the one that stretched before her now. Never dared hope for so much beauty. She’d tried hard to make a nice life for herself and Jagger, but in her wildest imagination, she’d never envisioned having such passion. She’d been with Reid for over a month, and every time he touched her, it was electric. Every time they kissed, her knees buckled. Every time they made love, hot sparks landed on her skin.

Sometimes, it felt too good to be true.

But it wasn’t. It was real. And now, she knew what her future looked like. She would marry Reid Sinclair, and they’d have more babies. Lots of them. Loads. She’d stay home with them and make her jewelry.

God. She couldn’t believe it.

I’m truly free. No more secrets, no more games, no more fear of her mother infecting her life.

Pulling into a parking spot, she sang along until the song ended. She liked a few minutes alone in her classroom with her coffee and pretty notebooks, so she always got to work early. But today she was flying high.

In a rush of affection, she got out her phone.

Maisie: I love you.

It rang one second later, and she answered with a big smile. “Hey.”

“All right, who is this?” Olive asked. “I know you stole my best friend’s phone, and I want you to know you’re as good as dead.”

“No, it’s me.”

“Are you feverish? High? Because I’ve said those words to you a million times, but you’ve never said them to me.”

She’d never said them to anyone but Jagger. It seemed easier to say them to a dear friend than... Well, to someone like Reid who she loved on the deepest, most terrifying level. *This is a first step.*

“I hope you know I felt it. Feel it.”

“I did. I do. So why today? Why now?”

“I’m free. I’m finally free.”

“What’re you talking about?” Her voice went flat and hard. Warrior mode. “Wait, I have to go somewhere private.” In the background, Maisie could hear chatter and the clink of silverware on plates. *It must be lunch time on the set.* “Okay, I’m back. Talk to me. What happened?”

“Exie’s assistant quit, and instead of honoring the NDA like I did, she violated it in the most spectacular way. She exposed Exie as a fraud.”

“What does that mean? You’re freaking me out here. How is Exie a fraud?”

It was harder than she realized to say the words out loud, to expose the secret she’d kept her entire life. “She doesn’t write her own music, design clothes, or create art. She’s nothing more than a businesswoman. She hires people to do it all for her. And she pays them so much money, they can’t leave. And if they try, she’s got her legal team on standby to ruin them.”

“This is unreal. My brain has exploded. There are little chunks all over the floor. Are you fucking with me?”

“I’m dead serious.”

“And now that the secrets are out, she’s got no hold over you.”

“Yes. Exactly.” In the quiet of her car, she said, “I’m free.”

“You’re totally, completely free.”

Another day, she’d drop the other bombshell. *Exie’s my mom*. “Okay, I have to go to work, but I wanted to tell you how grateful I am for your friendship all these years.”

“Oh, sure. You go to class. I’ll just be over here freaking out that Exie Sylva’s a total fake. How insane is that? How many decades has she been considered innovative and ahead of her time? Every single article ever written about her has included the words provocative, and...and *controversial*, and now we find out it’s all lies. This is insane.”

Maisie couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t keep it inside one second longer. “And a mother.”

“No, she never had—” Her friend went silent.

Maisie gave her a minute.

“You’re her *daughter*? Of course. It all makes sense now. Oh, my God, you’re her daughter.”

“Yes. And on that note, I have to go to work, but I promise to fill you in on everything.”

“Oh no you don’t. What do you think you are? A stand-up comedian. An actor? You don’t get a mic-drop moment here. Fuck work. Talk to me right this minute.”

“I can’t. I have twenty little baby birds with their beaks open waiting for me to drop my wisdom and love into their mouths. I promise we’ll have a full conversation later. Bye.” Her friend groaned, and Maisie disconnected.

As she headed to the front door, she waved to some of the parents in the drop-off line, crouched for a hug from a girl who’d been in her class last year, and prepared for her usual

morning ritual of greeting Principal Murphy. Standing outside to greet everyone was his thing. They had a good relationship, so she gave him a big smile.

Oddly, he looked uncomfortable. “Morning.” He probably wasn’t used to seeing her show up so late. Not that she was tardy. Just later than usual. “Everything okay?”

He shifted, as though blocking her from entering the building.

It jarred her. Her smile faltered.

“I’d like to speak with you.”

“What’s wrong?” She expected to be led into his office. Instead, he guided her away from the building and back toward the parking lot.

“Maisie, you know how much we value you here, but with all that’s going on right now, I think it might be best if you take a leave of absence. Just until things settle down.”

Settle down? Her brain scrambled to think through the last twenty-four hours. Had they found out she was Exie’s daughter?

Of course not. No one knew that.

But other than the video that had come out exposing Exie, what could he be talking about? “I don’t understand.”

“With all the media frenzy, parents are already calling in. I just think you should take some well-deserved time off. By the time you come back, I’m sure this will all be forgotten.”

“What will be forgotten?” Now she was getting pissed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Besides, class starts in ten minutes. I have to be there.”

“We’ve called in a substitute. He’s in there right now.”

“You had time to find a replacement for me and put me on *leave*, but you can’t tell me what I’ve done wrong?” *Scratch that. I haven’t done anything wrong.* “I need you to tell me what’s going on.”

“A series of pictures came out. From your past. Unfortunately, it’s caused some concern with the parents.”

“What pictures? I’ve literally done nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Of course. Absolutely. There’s no shame in any of it. Look, you’re entitled to your private life, as we all are—but your being on campus will be a distraction from learning, so go on home and let this blow over.”

“I have no secrets. I’ve led the most boring life you can imagine. Other than working for—”

Exie.

Fear stabbed her spine, and blinding pain radiated throughout her body.

What has she done?

What the hell did my mother do?

It had taken three and a half hours to grab Jagger and reach the airport in Idaho Falls. Now, phone at her ear, Maisie pressed her forehead to the cool plate glass window overlooking the tarmac. “I can’t do this anymore. I just can’t.”

“You can, and you will.” Olive sounded resolute.

But it didn’t matter. Exie had ruined her. “How could she do this?”

“You’re thinking about her like a mother, and that’s not what she is. She’s a narcissist. People exist only to serve her.”

In the car ride, she’d filled Olive in on the whole story. “I know.” Glancing down, she saw the top of Jagger’s head as he played with his cars. Her sweet, beautiful boy was oblivious to the scandal, and she would keep him that way.

“Look, she didn’t take you in because your grandma died, and you were on your own. She *hired* you because you’re the only person who knew the truth. She paid to keep you quiet. The house, the degree, all of it bought your silence. There’s not a maternal bone in her body.”

“And I took it. I took it all.”

“Nope. Not letting you do this to yourself. You were two months pregnant, and you needed a career that worked for a single mom. You cannot for one second regret taking the money for your education or the roof over your head. Besides, what difference would it have made? You’d still have come to this exact situation where your mom—and honestly, honey, Exie Sylvan is your *mom*? Talk about a plot twist. Anyhow, we’d still be in this moment where she thinks Reid betrayed her.”

“He didn’t do it. It was his assistant who recorded it.”

“I believe you. What’s weird is that no one else is coming forward to either confirm or deny it. The people on her payroll —”

“Aren’t talking. And they won’t. She’ll wipe out their bank accounts.” She knelt beside her son to smooth his soft, silky hair. “What’re they saying about me?” Her mother had released a series of photographs of Maisie with every big rock star on the planet. She’d made it look like her former assistant was the world’s biggest and most shameless groupie.

Which only mattered when you were a kindergarten teacher.

And when you were raising a son in a small town.

With all the traveling, Maisie hadn’t been back on social media since seeing the pictures. As they threatened to flash through her mind, she stood up and focused on the airplane slowly making its way to her gate.

“I honestly don’t know,” Olive said. “We’re filming. The person to ask is the one you’re not talking to.”

“I did a terrible thing.” She’d asked Reid to drop Jagger off at Leddy’s, and while he was on his way there, she’d packed bags for her and her son. Then, when Reid was on his way home to deal with her situation, she went to pick up Jag. And now, she and her boy were in the airport waiting for their flight to Scotland while Reid blew up her phone.

Was she being a bitch?

Absolutely.

Did she need to leave the country and keep her son out of the press?

You bet your ass I do.

“I get why you’re coming here, and I think it’s a great way to lay low for a while, but you could’ve come with Reid.”

“Are you kidding me? After what Exie did, you want me to be seen with a rock star?”

“Fair point. But you should’ve told him you were leaving. You can’t just run away.”

“If I tell him, he’ll come get me, and then someone’s going to get a picture of us. Of Jagger.”

“*Maisie.* You finally, for the first time ever, have someone in your life who’s loyal, would do anything for you, and you’re ghosting him? *Again?* I love you, girl, but this is a bad, bad move. You need to fix it. Call him right now and explain.”

“I will, but not until I’m in my room at the inn. Jagger looks just like him. If someone gets a picture... Sees that I had a baby with Van Claybourne... It’ll only reinforce the narrative.”

“Fuck the narrative. You’re in the middle of a crisis, and you bailed on him. He’s going out of his mind because all he wants is to help you. He wants to be there for you, and you’ve cut him off at the knees.”

“I know. I know.” If only she could calm down. She couldn’t pull herself out of the panic of knowing every parent at her school had seen those photos. Every clerk in town, the kid who scoops ice cream at Bliss, the mail carrier... “Why would Exie do this? I don’t care about me, but Jag’s going to be bullied. You know he is. Kids are brutal.” Imagining his pain, his isolation as the kids tormented him, seared a path of fear right through her.

A woman seated nearby was staring at her, so she tugged her baseball cap lower. “Jag, sweetie, come here. Look at the cool airplanes.”

But he was playing with his trucks, lost in his imagination, and didn't hear her. No one could possibly recognize her. Besides, outside of her small town, no one cared about her at all.

The doors opened, and people filed out of the jetway. "I'll text him now. Tell him we're okay. That we're just taking a break until this blows over."

"I want you to come here, and you're welcome to stay as long as you want, but you need to do more than text him. Look, I know you're used to making decisions and handling life on your own, but you've got Reid now. Let him in."

"We're boarding. I'll call him when we land."

"You know, you're freaking out because she made you look like a groupie who fucked all the rock stars, but it's no one's damn business who you sleep with. Your body, your choice. Who you fuck is not a reflection of your ability to love or teach or be a good citizen. The only thing it says is that you like sex and you had a blast when you were single."

"You're right about that." As her energy started rolling back in, she stood straighter. "I don't even want to know what Principal Murphy does in his private time." Or any of the teachers for that matter. "But I have to protect Jagger. He's shy and quiet, and I don't want the media finding out about him."

"I get it. Like I said, I want you to come here. I just want you to talk to Reid."

"I will. I just know if I told him, he wouldn't let me go. He'd fight for me. He'd fight for Jagger."

"Yes, sweetheart. You're right. He will fight for you, and it breaks my heart that no one's ever done that before, but you've got me, and now you've got Reid. Let us love you, honey. Okay? Just let us love you."

Chapter Fifteen

REID STOOD ON HIS BALCONY, THE SUNSET TURNING THE woods a blazing orange. He must've reread her texts a dozen times, and he still couldn't settle his mind.

Maisie: I'm sorry I left without telling you. The minute I saw those pictures, I went into fight-or-flight mode, and I grabbed my son and ran.

Our son. He'd thought they'd moved past this, that she'd come to trust him.

I thought we were a family.

Maisie: I hope you understand that I had to protect him. I knew the media would descend on Calamity, and if they find out about him, Jagger will be all over the news. I can't have him be known as the love child of a groupie and a rock star. It's not fair to him.

Maisie: But I should've talked to you. I should've told you what I was doing. You have every right to be angry with me.

"Angry?" Reid stormed back into the house where his brother and Della sat on the couch. "How can she think I'm angry? I'm *worried* about her. She and Jagger... Jesus, they're my life."

"Because her mother is Exie." Della said it quietly.

It was like walking into a sliding door. Rattled, he glanced down his boots. *She's right. This isn't about me. It's about*

Maisie's childhood. She's managed every situation in her life all alone. And it's been one traumatic situation after another. “She told me that every time the house creaks or a branch scratches the window, her first thought is that it's her mom.”

Della nodded.

“She said she's always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's all she's ever known.”

“It dropped.” Della gave it a moment to sink in.

“I hate that she's freaking out right now. I want to make it better.”

“And you will. It'll just take time. If you're consistent in your love and stable in your emotions, she'll adjust to a new way to live in this world.”

“Fuck, Dell.” He raced over to her, threw his arms around her, and held her close. “I can do that.”

“I know you can. I know you will.”

“When you're done fondling my woman, can we get back to work?” Bex looked up from his laptop. “I've got reels from Joe, Keith, Dre, Spike, Ronnie, and Blaze. Is that enough?”

“No. I want proof that every single photograph Exie put out there was photoshopped.”

“I agree.” Della reached for her pad of paper. “We're still waiting to hear back from five more artists, but they'll do it. I talked to their assistants. Slater's wife is pissed because Exie used a picture from their honeymoon. She's on it.”

They'd contacted each rocker and asked them to find the photograph Exie had used and figure out where and when it was taken—bonus points if they had the original shot. It was Slater's wife, Emmie, who'd come up with the idea for them to record a short reel where they show the original photo and comment on it. *Easy to do since everything's on the internet.*

He couldn't wait until they got this recording out there. Maisie was right that Jagger might be teased—even bullied—about it one day, but they had to work as a team, because Reid would never get away from being Van Claybourne.

Dammit, he missed her. He missed his son. With every minute that passed, the ache spread until he hurt all over.

“Reid.” Della’s sharp tone pulled him out of his thoughts. “Do you want to be with her?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Then what are you doing here? We’ve got this part covered. Get your ass on the jet and go get your family.”

Maisie paced the length of her attic bedroom atop the Ailsa B&B. She’d asked Olive to take Jag down to the restaurant for scones and jam, one of his new favorite things to eat.

Now, with phone in hand, she pressed Connect.

Reid answered right away. “Hey.” That voice. That growly, sexy, beautiful voice.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I know.” In the background, she heard noise. A car honking, someone shouting. Calamity didn’t sound like that.

But she had words that needed to be said before she asked where he was, so she didn’t pay attention to anything but getting them out. “You know how I told you I didn’t remember my mom dropping me off at my grandma’s house?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s true, but what I didn’t say is that for most of my life, I waited for her to come get me. I guess my grandmother didn’t want to say that my mom’s a narcissist who couldn’t be bothered with me, so instead she said stuff like my mom was traveling the world. She was dazzling the country with her songs. She never said that my mom was coming back, but that’s what I heard. I had this idea that once her tour was over or the album was done, we’d be a family. If she could just reach a certain level of fame, she’d be able to take me home. Only, of course, that day never came.”

“Your mother’s a sociopathic bitch.” Growly had turned savage.

She loved the way he protected her. “I know that. Believe me, I do, and I stopped taking it personally a long time ago. My point is that it taught me a lesson about getting my hopes up for things that will never happen. And on a deeper level, one that got really embedded, the message I got was that I wasn’t interesting enough to be worthy of the attention of someone special.”

“What about your father?”

“Never met him, and I doubt he knows I exist. Exie was too careful about who knew things. Anyway, it took me a while, but I finally created a world for myself. It’s all mine. It’s peaceful and nice, and I belong. I matter to my kids. Their parents think the world of me. Well, they did until those photos came out.”

“I’m going to stop you right there. The parents are *fighting* for you. They stormed the principal’s office and demanded to have you back. They said they don’t care what kind of fun you had five years ago. They only care that you’ve made an impression on their children.”

She sank onto the chair. “They said that?”

“Yes. The whole town turned up at the school to demand you be reinstated. They called out Murphy for being sexist and are demanding his resignation.”

Warmth flooded her. “I shouldn’t have run. I should have stood my ground.”

“That’s right. You don’t have to explain yourself to anyone.”

“But I need to explain myself to you. Reid, I’m terrified I won’t hold your interest. Like, sure, you met this girl four years ago, and we had some great sex and chocolate cake, but once you live with me for a while, you’re going to see that I’m just a schoolteacher who goes to the farmers market on Saturday and likes to make jewelry in my free time. You’re going to want to stab yourself out of boredom. I’m so afraid

you're going to find your purpose and leave me, because if I'm not worthy of my grandmother or mother's love, how in the world can I be worthy of a man like you? I mean, you're amazing. You're so kind and caring and smart and creative and fun and generous and loving." She drew in a breath. She couldn't hold it in any longer. "And I lo—" The line went dead. "Reid?" She pulled the phone away from her ear. Had they gotten disconnected? She pushed the Connect button again, and this time, she heard it ring out in the hallway. Then there was a rapid succession of knocks.

"*Reid.*" She tossed the phone onto her bed and flung the door open to find her heart, the other half of her soul, standing there. "Oh my God. You're here."

"Finish your sentence. Say it. I want to hear it in person."

She pulled him inside and shut the door. Shaking, she cupped his cheeks. "I love you. I love you so much it hurts. Like my heart can't take being so full. But even when I think it can't hold anymore, it manages to grow fuller every day. I'm sorry I ran. I got scared. But I'm not scared anymore. I called to tell you I'm coming home. That I wrote my resignation letter, because I'm not going to work at a school that would fire me because of pictures from my past. I don't care that you're a rock star. You've never been a rock star to me. You've only ever been the man who makes my heart beat out loud, who makes me step out of the shadows and feel things. Who makes me crave a life I thought wasn't meant for me. I love you, Reid, and I want us forever."

"You've got me. I think I was born to be yours." He stepped away from her. "All my life, I've been looking for a purpose. I told myself it was because of my brother, because he's been making music from the time he could use his hands. But it isn't true. There's just always been something missing in me. And the day I found you in that closet, the hole was filled."

She believed him. She felt it, too.

"Maisie, listen to me. The thing I was put on this earth to do? It's to love you. To take care of you and Jagger. *You're* my

passion. You and Jagger are my purpose. I've been looking outside when all along what was missing was you." He dropped to a knee. "Maisie, I will live in any city or town you want. I'll live on a boat or a bus or in a cabin or a mansion. As long I live with you, I'll have everything I've ever wanted or could ever need. Will you please, for fuck's sake, put me out of my misery and let me put a ring on it? Marry me and make me the happiest man in the world."

"God, yes. There's nothing more I want than to love you forever."

She only registered the footsteps in the hallway when the door crashed open, and Jagger burst in with jam on his cheek. "Mommy?" Then he noticed the man in the room, and his eyes went wide. "Daddy." He hurled himself against his dad, nearly knocking him over.

Reid hugged him like a tornado was bearing down on the inn and this was their last moment together. Getting on her knees, Maisie joined them, wrapping her arms around these two people who were her very reason for living.

She closed her eyes and let it sink in.

She finally had it all. All the goodness, all the love, and all the joy she'd ever yearned for.

She had the most beautiful gift in the world: true love.

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Epilogue

“WHAT IS THAT MUSIC?” OLIVE SHOUTED.

Phone at her ear, Maisie pulled two pair of underpants from her dresser. “It’s the soundtrack of the latest kid’s movie. Jagger loves it.”

“Does that mean you guys have to play it nonstop?”

“They’re painting the nursery. They like to sing while they work.” She put her digital reader and her toiletry bag into the suitcase. *What am I forgetting?*

“I guess it’s good he bought all that land, since you keep adding on to the house with every pregnancy.”

Think. What else do I need? She didn’t need a blow-dryer, but she did want her comfy slippers. “He says he bought it for the family he was going to have.” She trekked back to the closet. Running a hand into the fuzzy shearling interior, she decided to wear them. She kicked off her sneakers and slid her tired feet into the slippers. Wiggling her toes, she sighed. *Good choice.*

“He’d decided to buy the house before he met you.”

“Right, but deep down he believes he’s always known we were his purpose.”

“Who knew that a partying rock star could be so romantic?”

She sighed. “He’s the best.” She loved him so much. How on earth had she gotten so lucky? He was filling the second

half of her life with all that she'd missed from the first. Her phone vibrated. "I gotta go. That's Leddy."

"Wait—one more thing. Real quick. Did you hear what happened to Exie?"

Disgraced, Exie had been stripped of the majority of her awards and honors. She had to move to Europe and assume a new identity in order to live without the constant harassment she received in the States. "No. I don't pay much attention to stories about her."

"Well, apparently, she invested her money in a pyramid scheme, and she's lost everything. Someone found her selling her guitars, her record collection...even *lamps* on auction sites."

"Whoa. That's..." She dug deep to figure out how she felt about that. But didn't come up with much. "Karma at its best."

"Right? Okay, I'll let you go. I love you and wish like hell I could be there."

"We'll call you the minute we can."

As soon as she disconnected, she read Leddy's text.

Leddy: Five minutes out. You okay?

Maisie: Couldn't be better.

Leddy: You're an old hand at this now.

Maisie: Right?

She laughed, tucked her phone into the side of her tote bag, and headed toward the sound of her guys singing along to the music. She was ready to tell them it was time to go, but she stopped in the doorway.

A love bomb exploded in her chest, filling her with warmth, affection, and joy. With a roller in one hand as he painted the wall a bright gray, Reid had their eighteen-month-old baby on his hip. Jagger, for some reason she couldn't figure out, was squatting in a corner of the room painting the hardwood floor.

Reid glanced over his shoulder, but instead of racing over to grab the paintbrush, he said, “You’re doing great, buddy.”

Seven-year-old Jagger looked up from his work. His hands were covered in paint, and he had streaks of it across his cheeks and forehead. He let loose a beaming smile. “Almost done, Dad.”

She came into the room and shut off the music. All three of them looked over at her.

“My water broke.” She shrugged. “It’s time to go.”

Joy spread across her husband’s handsome features, and he literally dropped the paintbrush and rushed to her side. Wrapping his arms around her, he motioned for Jagger to join the circle.

As they held onto each other, he whispered in her ear, “Thank you for giving me so much. I love you. I love us. I’ll take care of our family till my last breath.”

“You’ve given me everything I ever secretly dreamed of. And now that there are no more secrets, I can live my life out loud.”

And then, holding hands, they headed downstairs to welcome the fifth—but not final—member of their family.

Thank you for reading *BABY, I’M YOURS!* If you want to find out how the hottest hockey player in the NHL winds up braiding hair and hosting tea parties, check out [LOVE ME LIKE YOU DO](#), a standalone in the Calamity Falls Small Town Romance series. #smalltown #singledad #steamy #secondchanceromance

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CHAPTER ONE

“YOU’RE NOT GOING OUT LIKE *THAT*, ARE YOU?”

McKayla Lewis looked up from the computer to catch her mom’s disbelieving expression. “Like what?” She glanced down at her jeans, battered Dr. Marten’s, and blouse.

“For goodness’ sake, you’re getting *engaged* tonight.”

A strange mix of excitement and mortification rushed through her. “Mom.” Giving her a warning look, she pressed a finger over her mouth and tipped her chin to the client in her mom’s salon chair.

Because, seriously, what if he didn’t propose? What if she was reading too much into a dinner reservation, and it turned out all he wanted was to shake things up and do something different?

“Oh, come on,” the client said. “You two been running around since middle school. You think anyone’s gonna be surprised you’re tyin’ the knot?”

Here we go. The news would spread everywhere. “I don’t know that he’s proposing, so please, please, please, don’t talk about it.”

“He’s gonna do it.” The older woman gave a firm nod. “Joanie said she saw him comin’ out of Taylor’s Fine Jewelry. He’s askin’.”

He is, isn’t he? Giddy, Micky turned back to ordering the semi-permanent hair color. But adrenaline charged her system,

making her shaky, and she tapped the wrong keys. *Focus*. The sooner she finished, the sooner she could leave.

“Let me at least fix your hair, make you sparkle.” Her mom had big blonde hair like Dolly Parton, wore form-fitting clothes and gold belts that cinched her waist and accentuated her bust, and Micky would rather get a buzzcut than sit in her mom’s chair.

“If I didn’t already sparkle, you think a guy like Carson would stick around?” She meant it as a joke, but as their high school’s wide receiver, her boyfriend had always been the talk of the town. Gorgeous, hot, and kind down to his bones, everyone loved Carson Wheeler.

“You need a little oomf.” The client made a circling motion around her head.

“And by ‘oomf,’ you mean big, teased-out hair. I’m on to both of you.” Finished ordering, Micky logged out and shot a quick text to her boyfriend.

Micky: Done for the day! See you soon.

Flipping through the pile of mail, she sorted the bills according to due dates. She always paid close attention, so they never got charged late fees. “Okay, I’m going.”

“Can you at least change your clothes?” her mom asked. “You probably smell like beer.”

She’d catered a luncheon for the VFW Auxiliary Post, so she probably did. “Of course. All right, bye, ladies.”

“Bye, honey,” her mom said. “I want pictures!”

With the salon housed in their garage, all Micky had to do was climb two steps to be in the kitchen. The blaring television meant her mom had another client waiting. She dumped some cheese puffs into a bowl, brought it out to the living room, and set it on the coffee table. “Hey.”

“Hey, hon.”

“You need anything?” Micky asked.

“No, I’m good.” The realtor reached for the bowl and set it on her lap. Muting the TV, she asked, “Tonight’s the night, huh?”

“Oh, my gosh, stop. My mom has the biggest mouth.” She headed for her bedroom. “You want me to make your next appointment now?”

“No, you go on. I’ll text you tomorrow. Hey, where’s he taking you?”

“The Primrose.” Which was why she thought he might propose. After ten years together, they didn’t really do date nights, and they certainly couldn’t afford expensive restaurants. *Something’s up*. They were twenty-six, and they’d known since their first kiss in middle school that they’d have a future together.

What else could it be but a proposal?

“Put on a nice dress,” the woman called. “And a little perfume wouldn’t hurt.”

“Got it.” She opened her bedroom door to find her best friend laying on her back, scrolling on her phone. “Hey.”

“Finally.” Della sat up, swinging her legs off the bed. “I got in.”

“Are you serious?” Micky unbuttoned her white blouse and tossed it on top of the pile of dirty clothes. “They finally said yes?”

Della’s grin was answer enough.

“I’m so excited for you.” Micky stopped what she was doing and turned to her friend. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe you’re leaving me.” They’d been inseparable since first grade.

“Well, first, it’s only for five months, but technically I’m not leaving you because...you’re coming with me.”

“Della, no. What did you do?”

With her short, platinum blonde hair, vivid blue eyes, and what their friends joked was her sex goddess mouth, Della

Swanson turned heads everywhere she went. “I applied for you, too.”

Squatting, Micky untied her shoes so she could pull off her jeans. “You can’t do that.”

“Too late.” Della showed her the screen of her phone. “You’re in.”

“I’m getting engaged tonight.” Yeah, she’d said it. That’s how sure she was. Excitement spun in her chest, throwing out fiery sparks. Instead of planning other people’s events, she’d be planning her own wedding. *Hot damn.* “I’m not moving to Wyoming.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Micky. You’ve been with one guy, lived in one town your whole life. For five measly months, shake things up. Do something different. See something other than cactus for a change.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but as fun as it sounds, the timing’s wrong.”

Della stood up, hands on her pin-up girl hips. “This is the only time. You have to go before you get married and start popping out babies.”

“Whoa. Can we not fast forward that far? I don’t even want to think about kids.”

“The point is that we need to flip our worlds upside down. And if you don’t want to live without Carson for five months...” She flashed a devilish grin. “I applied for him, too. He’s in. God knows, he needs it more than we do.”

Guilt drove Micky into the closet, where she scanned the familiar offerings. The black dress, the gauzy skirt, the row of flannel shirts. She wasn’t hugely into fashion. Sure, she liked to look nice...she just didn’t obsess over clothes.

Carson does need to get out of here, though. They’d stayed in Bixby, Arizona so Micky could live at home and pay down her student loans. Well, and also because her mom needed her. A single mother, Franny Lewis had given her daughter a life filled with love, laughter, and community. Her “girls,” as her mom called her clients, regardless of whether they were four

or eighty, were loyal to her business, even if Franny wasn't the most cutting-edge stylist in town.

Franny loved her customers, loved styling hair and doing makeovers, but she couldn't handle technology. And since everything from keeping the books, to ordering supplies, and managing the calendar was all done online, Micky happily stepped in.

Which meant Carson was stuck in this small town with a drunk father who didn't give a damn where his punches landed.

Well, that's not entirely true. He's here for his mom, too.

Yanking the black dress off the hanger, her heart swelled with affection for the boy who sacrificed so much to be with her and take care of his family. Throwing the dress on, she slid her feet back into the Dr. Marten's and came back out of the closet.

Della watched her carefully. "You know you can handle your mom's business stuff from anywhere in the world, right?"

She sat on the edge of the bed to tie her laces. "It's more than ordering supplies, and you know that." Her wealthy father had tried to turn Franny into a country club woman, but her mom hadn't wanted anything to do with that lifestyle. She didn't want her daughter raised in a soulless world where manners trumped character and tutoring replaced family time. Her dad only wanted his child support check to go to private school, cotillion, and fancy music lessons, basically turning Micky into a carbon copy of her snobby, uptight, bored grandmother, so Franny had cut ties. "I can't leave her yet."

"Oh, come on. Look at this place. It's magical." Della plopped down beside her, showing the images on her phone. "It's got cobblestone streets, and the whole village is lit up with twinkling lights. Look at this Christmas tree. Have you ever seen one so big and pretty?"

"Not in person."

"They have events all through December, so we'll be there for the tree lighting and caroling and the winter market..." She

grinned. “Every Thursday is night skiing, so I’m gonna get me some action with a hot mountain man in a gondola.”

“It sounds fun, and I’m happy for you.” Micky stood at her dresser, sorting through the earrings in her jewelry box. “But you know the employment situation in Bixby. If I leave, they won’t hold my job for me. Then, what would I come back to? It’s the only event planner in town.”

“Which brings us to the biggest selling point of all. Wild Wolff Lodge isn’t like other ski resorts, where seasonal workers get minimum wage and have to pay for their own housing. This one’s family owned, and they offer free room and board. Micky, we can sock away everything we earn. We’ll come back with enough money to start our own company.”

Micky’s gaze slid to her desk, to the business registration forms she’d picked up from the Chamber of Commerce. That was a good enough reason right there. She’d wanted to go out on her own for a while now.

Mountains, snow, a quaint village...it was tempting. Would Carson come with her, though? He’d dropped out of college to help his mom pay bills when his asshole father had lost his job because he’d shown up drunk one too many times, but now that Mrs. Wheeler was making more money, maybe Carson would feel more comfortable moving away.

“And the place is crawling with billionaires and celebrities.”

“Well, you just lost me. I don’t give a rat’s ass about either.” Her life was filled with riches. Her mom, Carson, Della, the whole close-knit community of Bixby.

People are so funny thinking money’s the solution to their problems. Happiness comes from the people we surround ourselves with.

“Van Claybourne’s got a place there,” Della said. “I’m going to bump into him, and he’s going to fall in love with me.”

“You’re going to clean his house. You’ll pick up his used condoms and wipe pee off his toilet bowl.”

“You can’t bring me down.” Della said it with a big grin.

“And I would never want to. Now, let me get pretty so I can look good in my engagement selfies.” She didn’t have a full-length mirror, but she could see her face and shoulders from the mirror on her dresser. She slid rose gold drop earrings in and turned back to her friend. “Okay, this is it. The next time you see me I’m going to be a real adult.”

“You don’t need a shiny ring to be an adult.”

Della had been adulting since her mom died of breast cancer. In a rush of affection, Micky reached for her friend and hugged her. “I’ll miss you so much, but I want this adventure for you.”

“Me, too. And if getting married is your adventure, then I’m rooting for you all the way. Just do me one favor, okay? After you have engagement sex, and you’re lying there all sated and relaxed, ask him if he wants to go to Wyoming. Tell him he’s already been accepted, and we can be out of here the first of November. You know he needs to get out of this town.”

Della was right. *I can handle my mom’s business remotely and giving Carson a break from his family would be a gift.* “I’ll bring it up, okay? Now, let me get out of here.”

“Isn’t he picking you up?”

“He’s supposed to, but I left my dress-up shoes at his place, and he’s not responding to my texts, so I’m just heading over there now.”

“Love you.”

“Love you more.” Micky grabbed her purse off the kitchen table and her keys from the hook by the door. Shutting off the TV, she wiped the orange crumbs off the couch and dropped them into the bowl, before heading out into the night.

Alone for the first time all day, she closed herself in her Honda and texted Carson.

Micky: Hey, don't come get me—I'm on my way to you right now.

Not waiting for a response, she backed out of the driveway. Twilight was hitting earlier at the end of October, so it was getting dark at nearly six o'clock. Only when she got to the first stop sign did she notice he still hadn't responded. She hoped everything was all right. What if he'd gotten into a car accident or something?

Carson wasn't the most romantic guy—and she was totally okay with that. Because he showed his love for her every day of the week—like sending her random messages, always telling her she was pretty, thanking her for anything she did for him, even if it was just making him a sandwich. He listened to her—really listened.

And most of all, he stayed in a town with his ugly, drunk of a father.

She'd learned long ago to stop telling him to bail on his dad, because every single time the owner of the Copper Mine bar called and asked him to haul the asshole away, Carson showed up.

Maybe we should go to Wyoming.

Seemed like there were more pros than cons on this one.

We could even get married at the resort. A quick ceremony in a winter wonderland? How fun would that be? And then they could have a reception here when they got back in April.

We're getting married. The thrill of it rocked her, and she couldn't keep the grin off her face. He only lived a few blocks away, so as soon as she reached his apartment complex, she parked, lowered her visor for a quick check of her hair, and hurried off to his unit. With every step she took, excitement grew.

At the door, she knocked, and she couldn't help wondering how he'd do it. Would he get down on one knee in the restaurant? Pull off at the vista on Old Highway 96 and do it under the stars?

When he didn't answer, she checked her phone. Still nothing. He hadn't even looked at her texts since three this afternoon.

What's going on with him?

Worried, she found his key on her ring and let herself in. "Carson?" On the dining room table, she found a leather jacket that wasn't his.

She heard voices, murmuring. *What the hell?* He has a woman in his bedroom? No, wait, that was water running. He's in the bathroom with someone. She glanced around, looking for any kind of clue, and found his wallet and keys on the coffee table, like he'd tossed them there in a hurry.

She didn't know what was going on, but she knew with absolute certainty that Carson would never cheat on her. He just wouldn't.

And yet...he hadn't responded to her in three hours, and now he was *in his bathroom* with a woman.

Heading toward the hallway, she noticed a pair of high heels kicked aside.

A wave of anxiety rolled over her, making her skin clammy.

The light from the bathroom spilled onto the beige carpet. If she was so sure he wasn't cheating, why was she moving like a ghost? Why wasn't she calling out to him?

Why did she think she might throw up?

She reached the bathroom to find Carson sitting on the toilet lid, while Sheri, the waitress from the Copper Mine, dabbed his lip with a wet washcloth.

They'd gone to school with her—and she'd always had a thing for Carson. Every time Micky showed up at the bar, she could count on Sheri hovering around him and flirting.

In spite of her fears, though, Micky wasn't getting any kind of sexual feeling from the situation. She pushed into the cramped room. "Carson? What's going on?"

But neither needed to answer. Carson's eye had already begun to swell, and his lip was split.

Giving Micky a chin nod, Sheri tossed the cloth into the sink. "See you." Somber, she left.

"That fucker." Micky cupped his chin to assess the damage, but he jerked away. He was pissed, still shaking. She had so much she wanted to say.

Just because the bartender calls, it doesn't mean you have to go get him.

He's not your responsibility.

But it was a worn-out conversation, and now was not the time. "I'm sorry. He's such an asshole."

Irritated, Carson got up. His big body forced her to step back as he washed his hands in the sink.

She watched his reflection in the mirror. "You want to tell me what happened?"

"What's to tell? Same old shit. I either pick him up or Dan calls the cops." His gaze cut to her. "And don't tell me I should let him go to jail. You know my mom will spend money she doesn't have on bail. She won't eat, she won't sleep...she'll spiral. And then I'll have even more problems on my hands."

In that moment, she'd never been more thankful for Della. "You can't spend the rest of your life wrapped up in your parents' problems. It's not fair to you, and you're only enabling them." She touched his shoulder. "Carson, look at me. What if we left town?"

Watching her in the mirror, he gave her a guarded look.

"Della finally got a job at that resort in Wyoming, and her crazy ass applied for both of us. Let's do it." She stopped talking because there was a tortured look of guilt in his eyes that scared her. "What's going on?"

He blew out a breath and lowered his head. They didn't have secrets from each other, but he was holding something back. Something she could tell was going to hurt.

Each second that went by without him speaking ratcheted up her anxiety. “Please talk to me.” She said it on a whisper. “You’re scaring me. Did you hurt him, your dad?”

“I don’t want to talk about my parents, okay?” He stalked out of the room.

She followed him down the hall and watched him scrape both hands through his long hair.

He gestured to the couch. “Can you just sit down or something?”

“I can, but I’ve got to tell you, I really don’t want to. I feel like a jumping bean right now. Whatever you have to say, just say it.”

Instead of reassuring her, he let his arms fall to his sides. “Okay.” He paced toward the kitchen table, empty now of Sheri’s leather jacket.

“Micky...I love you.”

Oh. Switching gears, she went ahead and sat down. *It’s happening.* God, she wished he’d do it another night. Not when he had a bloody lip and was pissed about his family. But...okay.

“I love you, too.” A smile broke across her features, sending warmth and happiness streaming through her. “So much.”

He’s going to propose, and then we’re going to get out of here. If he doesn’t want to go to Wyoming, I’ll go wherever he wants.

He stayed for me, and I’ll leave for him.

She wanted to say it out loud, let him know he didn’t have to live like this anymore. She didn’t want their engagement marred by pain and anger from his family situation anyway, so she got up. “I don’t care about Wyoming. If you’ve got somewhere else in mind, I’m down for it. All I care about is being with you. You know that, right?”

But his anguish only grew worse. He looked sick with it.

“We’ll go wherever you want, and you never have to deal with your dad again.”

“Micky, stop.” His voice came out a plea. “I did something today.”

“What did you do?” *Oh, my God. This can’t be happening.* She backed away from him. “You and Sheri?”

“What? No. I’d never cheat on you. I love you. You’re the only happiness in my sorry fucking existence.”

Relief swept her legs out from under her, and she perched on the arm of the couch. “Then what’s going on?”

“I can’t do this anymore. I know everyone thinks I’m proposing to you tonight, but I can’t do it. I’m done.” He wagged a finger between them. “*We’re done.*”

His words scorched her heart and bones, turning them to ash. “What...why?”

He sucked in a breath. “I enlisted in the Marines. And I’m not coming back.”

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About the Author



Award-winning author Erika Kelly writes sexy and emotional small town romance. Married to the love of her life and raising four children, she lives in the southwest, drinks a lot of tea, and is always waiting for her cats to get off her keyboard.

<https://www.erikakellybooks.com/>



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