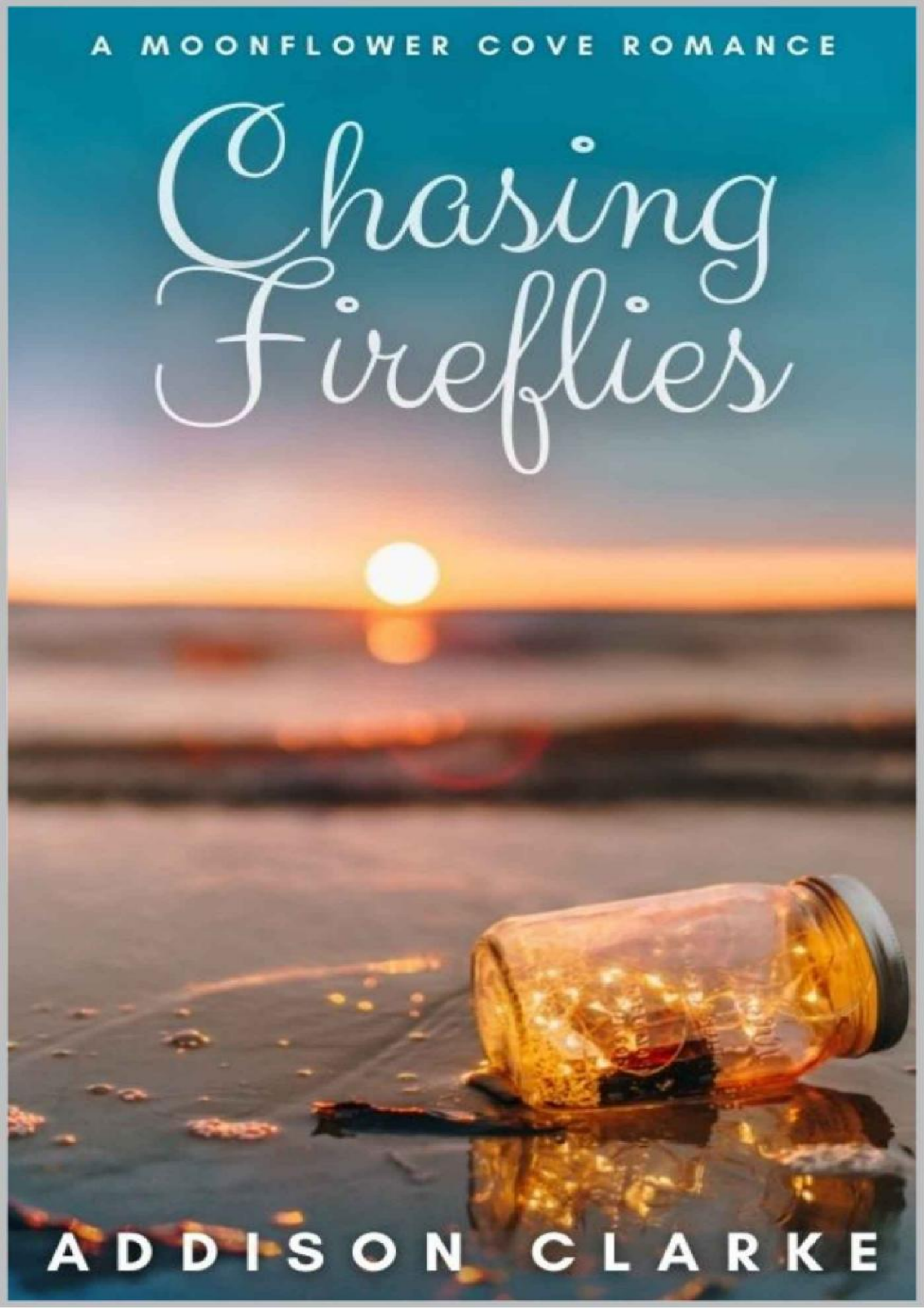


A MOONFLOWER COVE ROMANCE

Chasing Fireflies

A glass jar filled with fireflies lies on a wet beach at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The jar is tilted, and the fireflies inside are glowing. The background is a soft-focus view of the ocean and sky.

ADDISON CLARKE

CHASING FIREFLIES

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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This book wouldn't be possible without you.

And to my readers, thank you for welcoming the people of Moonflower Cove into your life. You're simply the best.

If you keep reading, I'll keep writing.

Chasing Fireflies

A Moonflower Cove Romance

Chapter 1

Mason



Mason Mackenzie methodically clicked the ink pen as she tried to focus on the paperwork in front of her. Thanks to the new financial advisor, Mason's nonprofit service dog training organization had stayed out of the red for the last three months. Their budget boost had been thanks to holiday donations and the publicity they were already getting from the documentary that had recently wrapped up filming at the organization.

Although Mason had been skeptical about the documentary when the idea was first proposed, she had to admit it had turned out better than she'd expected. Jones Garner, the new marketing director for Paws on a Mission, had set the whole thing up. Along with Mason's Hollywood actress sister, Blake Calloway-Holland, and a small film crew, the entire filming process only took a couple of weeks.

There was a small premiere happening soon, but Mason didn't know any details. As long as word got out about the work she and her coworkers strived to do every day, that would be enough. And she didn't dare let the thought of the documentary being featured on a streaming service enter her mind. It was such a pie-in-the-sky dream that Mason didn't want to get her hopes up. For now, YouTube, TikTok, and other social media that Mason knew little about would be their primary platforms.

In all honesty, everything had been insanely overwhelming for Mason. She'd started Paws on a Mission nearly a decade ago with her friend, Mallory Garner, Jones's twin sister. While Mason knew more about the business side of things, Mallory knew more about actually training the dogs to become service dogs. Together they worked hard to transform Paws on a Mission into the marginally successful business it was now. People from all over the United States traveled to Moonflower Cove, Maine, in order to be matched with a service dog. Most people even received their dogs for free, thanks to generous donations and sponsorships. There were also others that paid for a dog to be trained in specific areas to meet their needs. Overall, Paws on a Mission had been a success.

Even if it came at the price of Mason's sanity most days.

The last few years had been more of a whirlwind of ups and downs than Mason ever expected. She'd completed her Master's program and purchased a house, which were both great. She was closer to her moms than ever and was actually getting along with all her younger siblings. And not to mention the fact her long-lost older sister Blake came back into her life unexpectedly.

But all the good things seemed to be counteracted with not so good things as well. For starters, her best friend had nearly died in a shootout at work with the Moonflower Cove Police Department. Then Blake fell in love with Mason's friend Alexis, and, yes, that is good news, but it also felt like she lost her sister again, and this time, she took a close friend away with her. All of that piled onto her already full plate of responsibilities that came along with owning her own company.

And don't even get her started on her love life. Or rather, a general lack thereof.

It wasn't a secret that Mason was a bit of a Casanova with the women in and around the Cove. She'd had a reputation for years and had finally accepted it as her fate. Mason was the one who slept around, and then it never failed that the person she slept with found their forever partner shortly after. And

each time, Mason was left alone to pick up the pieces of her heart that she swore wouldn't get involved.

It was all too much sometimes.

Although she fancied herself someone who was happy alone, Mason, more often than she cared to admit, wished she had someone to share her life with. She craved more than one-night stands and quick hookups. Mason wanted a lasting connection with someone she could build a life with. Hell, build a family with. She just wasn't sure that person existed.

"You look deep in thought." Chase Monroe walked into Mason's office holding two cups of coffee. She sat one down in front of Mason before taking a seat on a nearby chair. Mason noticed the slight wince as she sat down, which happened almost every time she sat down after her injury. "What's on your mind?"

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

Chase snorted a laugh. "As your best friend, I feel I should say *no*. But also, as your best friend, I feel I should say *yes*. So, which answer are you wanting?"

"I dunno," Mason grumbled and tossed the pen onto the desk. She picked up the coffee and savored the smell of the dark roast blend from their favorite coffee shop. Chase knew her order by heart, just like Mason knew hers. "I'm tired."

"Did you sleep well last night?"

"It's not really a physical tired. It's more metaphysical."

"Right," Chase held out the word longer than necessary and narrowed her eyes. "Makes perfect sense. Anything I can do to help?"

"Go back ten years and tell me how much stress I'm under, so I won't start this business."

"Nope. No way." Chase stood, sitting her coffee down on the desk. She pointed a finger at Mason, and she knew what was coming. Her best friend was nothing, if not predictable. "You know what we're gonna do? We're gonna go to Straight to Ale tonight and drink and eat fried foods. And then we're

gonna go home and watch *Joe vs. Carole*, and cuddle your dogs, and have a great night.”

And that was why Mason loved Chase. She didn't push her to talk when she wasn't up for it, and she always knew the cure for her mental health.

“I'm in.”

“Obviously. You'd be stupid *not* to want to hang out with me.”

“Why are we friends again?” Mason teased.

“Cause you said *hello* to me.”

“Right, right.”

Mason remembered the day she met Chase as if it was yesterday. Although they'd gone to the same college, they had run in different circles because Chase was a couple of years ahead of Mason. That all changed, though, when they wound up in the library before midterms looking for a quiet place to study. The only available table was the one Chase was at, and Mason had walked over, said hello, and slowly sat in the wooden chair before Chase could tell her not to.

Little studying was done that day as the two quickly struck up a conversation. It was well after dark when they called it a night and headed back to their dorms. Mason often wondered why she hadn't made a move on Chase, as was her usual style, but maybe the universe knew she needed a best friend more than a hookup.

“So, tonight. Seven o'clock. I'll be the pretty one at the bar.” Chase winked and picked up her coffee.

“Only until I get there.”

“Whatever, loser. I'll see you tonight.”

“You off to the bookstore?” Mason asked, although she already knew the answer. Chase had been making it a habit to go to the bookstore every Tuesday for weeks now, and Mason knew it actually had little to do with the new releases and more to do with the cute bookkeeper. She didn't linger on the

way her stomach churned at the thought of Chase flirting with someone that wasn't her.

Get your shit together, Mason. Seriously.

“Of course. You want to join?”

“So I can finally ask *her* out for you?” She hoped her voice didn't sound as cynical to Chase as it did in her head. “You just gotta make a move.”

“That's what you do. That's not what I do.”

“It's what everyone does that wants to be in a relationship.”

“And what would you know about that?” Although the remark was made with a laugh, Chase's words still cut deep. She tried to shrug them off and laughed as well.

“More than you, apparently.” Mason picked up her coffee cup, thankful to have something to block the emotions she knew were written on her face. She decided a subject change was best. “So, seven o'clock?”

“See you there. Love you.” Chase blew Mason a kiss before she walked out the door and down the hallway. Mason could hear her stopping at the other offices as she left, as if on a farewell tour.

She honestly didn't know what she'd do without Chase. After Chase was injured, the doctors told them on multiple occasions she might not make it. Chase spent weeks in a medically-induced coma as her body tried to heal from the numerous injuries. Even two years later, Mason could still remember the call.

“Chase has been shot!” It had been Chase's mother on the other end of the line. Mason had been asleep in bed and had bolted up.

“What?!”

“I don't have the details. I just know she's been shot, and it's not looking good and I need you here. Chase needs you here.”

Mason didn't hesitate and arrived at Taylor Memorial Hospital moments later. Chase had been in surgery, and Mason couldn't see her for hours, but when she did, she fell to her knees by her best friend's bedside. Tubes and wires of all sizes were running all over Chase's body, which was mostly covered in bandages. Her face was so swollen that Mason could almost convince herself that it wasn't Chase, that it wasn't her best friend hanging onto dear life in the hospital.

But it was. Chase was in the hospital for months after that. She had to have a total knee and hip replacement from where two bullets shattered each of them. Through it all, Mason never left Chase's side.

It's what best friends do, she'd tell Chase.

Of course, she hadn't told Chase about the way she'd run into her asshole ex-fiancé in the hallway after he broke up with her. Shane Davis was a piece of shit, and Mason never liked him. When Chase got engaged to him, she resisted the urge to talk her out of it. Chase seemed happy, so Mason kept her mouth shut.

But everything she'd been worried about was confirmed when Shane walked out on her. Chase had barely been conscious for two hours when Shane arrived, told her he didn't want to deal with *this* and left. The kicker that Mason didn't know until later was that he even took the engagement ring that had been pried off Chase's finger during surgery. Mason's blood boiled each time she thought about it.

The only saving grace was that Shane had since moved to who cared where, and Chase seemed to be doing better than ever. For that, Mason was thankful.

Not for the first time, Mason wondered how life could be if she and Chase were more than just friends. They'd joked about it before, but there had always been a clear line that neither of them would cross. Their friendship meant more than anything to them, so neither wanted to jeopardize it if the relationship didn't work out.

Besides, Chase wouldn't be interested anyway.

Historically, Chase had only dated men. Recently though, she had told Mason that she might try exploring more of her sexuality now that she had a new outlook on life after her injury. Chase was the embodiment of living as if death was around the corner because, for her, it had been. Mason was thrilled that her friend was discovering more parts of herself that had been closed off.

She couldn't help but wonder if she could help Chase with that.

Dammit, Mason. She's your best friend. Get your shit together.

Chapter 2

Chase



March was one of those perfect times in Maine, and the current month was no exception. It was as if the entire town came to life in March. With winter mostly behind them, the Cove's residents once again mingled through the town square and downtown areas. Storefronts were replacing their snowman decor in the windows for bright spring flowers. Maddie Carlson, the owner of Little Miss Happy Plants, must have been at work all winter tending to her greenhouse to make the flowers look so beautiful.

Chase found herself amid people enjoying the first sixty-degree day of the year as she made her way to Between the Covers. The small bookshop was one of Chase's favorite places in town, and not just because the bookkeeper was pretty damn cute. Although she'd known August Forbes for years, she'd recently wondered if August was single and if she'd like to go on a date.

Of course, Chase's insecurities about being in her mid-thirties and just now coming to terms with her sexuality kept her from asking August out on a date.

But alas, that didn't stop her from going to the bookstore every Tuesday for the new releases.

Standing outside the store, Chase pretended to be admiring the new book display in the front window while she checked

her appearance in the reflection. Sweatpants and hoodies had been her main attire since her hip and knee replacements. Orthotic tennis shoes had also become her best friend as they helped ease some of the pain from walking. She tried not to linger too long on the events that led her to the new wardrobe, but it was hard sometimes.

Everything about the traffic stop had been so routine. Chase had pulled over an out-of-state sports car going seventy in a forty zone. The ticketing should have been cut and dried: approach the car, explain why she pulled them over, check license and registration, write the ticket, and then go on about her day. It was something she had done every day since she joined the Moonflower Cove Police Department.

Except nothing about it was routine.

As soon as Chase stepped out of her cruiser, the truck door opened. Chase's hand instinctively went to her holster as she ordered the person to close the door and stay inside the vehicle.

But he didn't.

Everything after that happened in slow motion and lightning-fast simultaneously. As the man exited the truck, he aimed the gun in his hands at Chase and shot five rounds into her body. One shattered her knee, while two others shattered her hip. The last two grazed her but, thankfully, didn't cause any significant damage. Chase had fallen to the ground as the man got back in his truck and sped away. She could barely call for backup as she bled out on the side of the road. If it hadn't been for the passerby who stopped and applied pressure to her wounds, Chase knew she wouldn't have made it.

Granted, at times, she didn't know if she *wanted* to make it. The recovery had been insanely hard; harder than anything Chase had ever faced before. Add on the fact her fiancé had left her in the hospital with barely a goodbye was enough to piss Chase off.

The sad thing was that she couldn't even say she missed Shane. He had been safe. That was all. He was there and seemed to care about her, and Chase could hear her biological

clock ticking. After only dating for a few months, she had said yes to his proposal. It had nothing to do with love and everything to do with the fact she didn't want to end up alone.

But that happened anyway, just a few weeks later.

Except Chase never really felt alone after Shane left. Mason had been by her side at the hospital every day. She rarely missed a physical therapy appointment and was there the day Chase made her first steps by herself after her surgeries. Her best friend had stepped up during Chase's darker hours and never let her feel alone. Mason was one of the good ones; Chase knew that much. She'd lucked out in the best friend department for sure.

Taking a deep breath, Chase pushed her thoughts of the past and her best friend to the back of her brain. If she was ever going to have the nerve to ask August out, she needed her brain cleared. Chase entered the shop as the bell above the door signaled her arrival.

"You're running late today," August's coy voice greeted her from behind the counter. Trying to hide the smile on her face, Chase slowly walked over toward her. She had on a Stevie Nicks T-shirt French-tucked into her ripped jeans with her hair up in a messy bun. August could pull off casual; Chase just looked frumpy in her clothes.

"I stopped by Mason's and dropped off some coffee."

"Ahh, so *she* gets coffee, but I don't?" *Was that jealousy in her voice?* It was slight, but it was definitely there. August raised an eyebrow at her. "I see where I stand."

"Next week," Chase blurted out, "I'll bring you one next week."

"Yeah?" The corner of August's mouth ticked up into a sly smirk. Chase found it hard to breathe under August's gaze and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'd like that."

Any possible flirty comeback dissipated from every corner of Chase's brain. She awkwardly smiled as she turned and mindlessly meandered through the bookstore. Chase tried to pump herself up into asking August out but completely

chickened out and left in a hurry with a book she had no interest in reading.

She spent the next few hours overthinking her entire interaction with August and planning out how she could do it better the next time. If there was a next time. Chase didn't know if she was cut out for flirting and dating anymore. It all seemed so complicated and unnecessary.

Was it too much to ask to have someone who understood you and loved you, and wanted to live happily ever after with you?

That question remained on Chase's mind as she walked into Straight to Ale. Mason's mom, Isla, owned the restaurant, so more often than not, it was their designated hangout spot, thanks to the free food. Of course, Isla made them pay for drinks, but Chase didn't grumble about the otherwise sweet deal.

She found Mason sitting in a booth away from the bar. Usually, they sat at the bar, so Chase wondered what the seating change was for.

"Hey, why are we over here?"

"Because Courtney was at the bar, and I didn't want to sit near her."

"Ew," Chase mumbled and took a seat across from Mason. "I hate her."

"Hate's a strong word."

"You said the same thing when she kept calling you after your hookup."

"Ugh, don't remind me I slept with her." Mason dramatically slapped her forehead with her palm. "It still makes me cringe."

"Me, too."

"How did the bookstore go?" Mason casually asked as she took a menu from the holder on the table. It was an odd move, considering she had the entire menu memorized, but Chase tried not to overthink it.

“Um, not great.” Following Mason’s lead, Chase took a menu and began half-ass perusing it, although she already knew what she wanted. “I chickened out. Again.”

Mason inhaled sharply and she raised her menu up more to cover her face. “Oh.”

“Yeah. She was looking all cute and was flirting back, and my brain went blank. I dunno.”

“Mmm.”

Chase narrowed her eyes at Mason, although she could only see the top of her head. Something was up with her, and it wasn’t something new either. Mason had been squirrely when talking about August for weeks. Actually, ever since Chase admitted to having feelings for August, Mason had acted weird every time her name was brought up.

What the hell is her problem?

It wasn’t as if Mason had slept with August. That would have maybe made sense. It was also clear that Mason wasn’t interested in August. But that didn’t explain her behavior. Chase had contemplated asking her what was wrong the last few weeks but had always talked herself out of it.

Chase hated confrontation almost as much as she hated bleu cheese. Which was a hell of a lot. And confronting Mason? That was a double-edged sword that Chase wasn’t willing to mess with. Although Mason was her best friend, she knew her moods were subject to change without notice. It was better to stay on her good side than piss her off and risk not talking to her for a few days. She knew Mason better than anyone, and sometimes she just had to deal with her moodiness.

Thankfully, Emily Crawford arrived at their table to take their order. She plopped down on the bench seat by Chase and loudly sighed. “I’m so tired.”

“Sophia keep you up late last night?” Mason snickered and set the menu down. Sophia Beauchamp was Emily’s insanely hot, older French girlfriend, and Chase would be lying if she said she hadn’t found her attractive. “If so, I don’t want to hear it.”

“You in a dry spell, Mace?”

“It would explain her mood.” Chase couldn’t stop the sarcastic comment from escaping her mouth. Mason shot her a glare over the menu, letting her know she disapproved of the analysis. That, of course, didn’t stop Chase and Emily from laughing.

“So, what can I get for you two tonight? The usual Tuesday?”

“Are we in such a rut we have a usual Tuesday?” Chase laughed and expected Mason to do the same. Instead, Mason nearly slammed the menu onto the table.

“I’m not in a rut.”

“Geez,” Emily and Chase responded in unison.

“Mace, chill. I was just teasing.” Chase kept her voice low, although she’d rather have screamed, *what’s your fucking problem?* She mouthed an apology to Emily, who nodded in response. They placed their orders—rum and Coke with a chicken sandwich for Mason and a margarita and burger for Chase—and Emily headed back to the kitchen. She waited a beat before asking, “Hey, are you okay? You seemed fine this morning, but now you’re acting all moody and I don’t know what happened.”

“Why do you constantly put yourself through going to the bookstore to *look* at August like she’s some puppy in a pet store? If you like her, ask her out. Jesus, Chase, it’s not that hard.”

“Maybe for you.” Chase hated raising her voice, especially in a public place. She tried to calm down but felt like yelling nonetheless. “But this is all new to me. I’ve never asked someone out, let alone asking another woman out. This isn’t easy for someone like me, and it would really help if you’d at least *try* to understand that.”

Mason’s shoulders dropped and Chase could almost see the fight drain out of her. She rested her elbows on the table as she buried her face in her hands. After a long pause, Mason sighed and looked back up at Chase.

“I’m sorry. Work has me drained and I’m tired, which isn’t an excuse, I know. But I’m clearly not handling things well.” Mason bit her lip and Chase reached out to place a hand on her arm to let her know it was okay. “It just seems like everyone around me has someone and I’m just alone.”

“You have me.”

“I know, and I’m so thankful for that. Honestly.” Mason covered Chase’s hand with her own and squeezed. “But that’s not what I meant. All my friends seem to be settling down with someone or falling in love or flirting with cute bookkeepers, and then there’s me. Just by myself, with my two dogs floating through life on my way to my next one-night stand. I’m just tired and kinda sad about it.”

Chase nodded. She truly understood where Mason was coming from. More often than Chase cared to admit, she worried she’d end up alone because of all the baggage she’d drag into a relationship. Maybe August was the smart one by not making a move on her. Her track record wasn’t promising as it was.

“I get that, Mace. Really. But we can still find someone to spend forever with. We just have to...”

“Don’t you dare say *believe* because this isn’t some damn Disney Princess movie.”

“Well, obviously.” She jokingly waved her off as she removed her hand from her arm. “You’re too gay to be a Disney Princess and I’m bisexual, so I don’t think they’d want me either.”

“Who wouldn’t want you?”

Mason’s question hung in the air between them like a thick fog. There was a look in Mason’s eyes that Chase had never seen before.

And if Emily hadn’t arrived with the worst timing possible, Chase might have asked her about it. But instead, their conversation reverted to their usual silly banter as they talked about their days and their families. In fact, Chase could have

convinced herself she was seeing things if Mason hadn't had the same look when they walked out to their cars.

"Thanks for still loving me even when I'm crazy," Mason said, and pulled Chase into a hug.

"Always, dork."

Their hug lingered longer than usual and Chase chalked it up to Mason just needing a little extra reassurance that Chase loved her. Which she did, obviously. Mason was her best friend. Of course, she loved her.

But as Mason let go and walked over to her car, one thought kept running through Chase's mind.

What if it was something more?

Chapter 3

Mason



Mason hated feeling feelings. They threw off her usual devil-may-care attitude and made her question her sanity. She wasn't one to develop feelings for her best friend. That was the stereotypical lesbian thing to do, and Mason was anything but stereotypical.

But, alas. She was falling for Chase.

Or well, she had *fallen* for Chase.

She'd had her suspicions about her feelings for years, but never explored them. The risk of losing Chase as a friend was always too much compared to the slim chance their relationship would work out. Mason needed Chase in her life. Chase kept her grounded and was always there when she needed her. And Mason did the same for her. They were the best of friends, and a relationship would only ruin that.

At least that's what Mason would continue to tell herself. It had been easier to accept that before Chase had come out as bisexual. Mason had a needed-to-be-stricter rule about not dating or sleeping with straight women. More often than not, they just needed to explore the possibility of being with a woman to appease some part of their curiosity. Granted, she knew that wasn't the case for everything, but she liked to remain cynical about it so as not to fall into the trap.

Although Mason knew that wasn't Chase, she still had to keep her distance to not fuck up their friendship. Literally.

"Ugh," Mason grumbled as she parked her Jeep at the dog park. Her two Labradors, Chance and Odin, whined in their kennels in anticipation. Checking her phone, Mason saw a text from Blake saying she was running late. "Typical."

She tried not to fault her sister too much these days. Blake had a ton on her plate after marrying Alexis Holland and adopting her daughter, Harper. And with Alexis and Blake wanting to expand their family, Mason knew she needed to savor any time she could get with her older sister.

Letting the dogs out of their kennels in the back of the Jeep, they expertly heeled by her side as they walked over to the fence. Mason let them into the large fenced yard and gave them their cue word to go off and play. Both pups darted around the empty field as they happily barked and played. Mason loved coming to the park at dawn, as they almost always had it to themselves.

The quiet morning would have been the perfect place for Mason to sit and think, but that was the last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to talk to her sister about Chase. But with Blake running late, Mason had to find something else to occupy her time. Grabbing a few tennis balls from her Jeep, Mason got the attention of her dogs as she threw one for each of them.

Chance was an older yellow lab and couldn't run as quick or as far as he once could. Mason threw the ball a shorter distance for him so he could still fetch it with ease. Odin, on the other hand, was a rambunctious three-year-old who was living up to every stereotype of chocolate labs being crazy. Although he was well trained when Mason needed him to be, he was a hurricane of happy tapping feet and an eagerly wagging tail that knocked over everything in its way. Mason loved her boys more than anything, and the feeling was mutual.

As Mason threw a ball a long distance for Odin, she was surprised to see a golden retriever also run after it. She turned

around to see Blake closing the gate to the field. Her dog, Tucker, had already made himself at home with Mason's dogs.

"Sorry I'm late." Blake tucked her hands into the pockets of her hoodie as she walked over to Mason. Odin and Chance greeted her by dropping their tennis balls at her feet. She threw them for the dogs, and Mason was thankful they seemed to be content playing with each other instead of heading back to them.

"It's okay. No big deal."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Mason forced a smile. "How's Alexis and Harper?"

Blake beamed with pride and happiness. "They're great. Harper loves school so much, and Alexis is stressing about the baby stuff."

Mason arched an eyebrow at her.

"No, we're not pregnant. Just trying to deal with insurance and finances and then there's the house situation."

"What house situation?" It was the first time Mason had heard Blake or Alexis mention anything about a house. They currently lived in an apartment across the hall from Emily and Sophia and seemed to love it. Especially since Alexis and Sophia were best friends and Sophia was Harper's Nonna.

Blake inhaled sharply. "Don't tell Sophia, but we're looking for a house. The apartment is great, but it only has two bedrooms. When we have another baby, we'll need more space. The place was already crowded before I moved in, and then there's Tucker to take into consideration, too. We'd love for him to have a yard."

"Yeah," Mason nodded. "That'd be good."

"Don't worry. We're not leaving the Cove. And we're not moving anytime soon. It's just on our radar."

"Got it."

“Hey?” Blake waited until Mason looked at her. “We’ve only started talking about moving for the last few weeks. I would have told you sooner, but we haven’t really hung out.”

“I know, and I hate that. Our lives are too busy these days. And they’ll only get busier when you have a baby.”

“But you’ll always be my sister.” Blake dramatically wrapped Mason in a bear hug, which she pretended to hate. Mason was a few inches shorter than Blake, so she fit into her embrace perfectly. It made her feel safe; as if nothing bad could happen with her big sister protecting her. “I’ll always have time for you. Never forget that.”

“Well,” Mason laughed, “you got time now? Because I’m in a pickle.”

“Oh, boy.”

As they did a lot of mornings when they met at the park, they began walking along the dirt path that followed the fence line. Mason felt she and Blake added to the wearing down to the grass in that area with their weekly trudging as they talked about life.

“So, you know Chase, right?”

“Your best friend? Yeah. She’s been at game night a few times and she was at the wedding. I like her.”

Yeah, me too.

“Well, I don’t know if you know this part, but she recently came out as bisexual.”

“Aww, good for her. She was engaged to that dick that left her, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. Well, she has this crush on August, the chick at the bookstore.”

“Oh, she is cute.”

“Not helping.”

“Sorry,” Blake laughed. “Continue.”

“Anyway, so Chase has been wanting to ask August out for a while but keeps chickening out. And we were at dinner together last night as she was talking about it and I don’t know. I had this weird feeling come over me and I got mad at her about it. How stupid is that?”

“You’re jealous.” The matter-of-fact comment hung in the air between them. Mason stopped walking and waited for Blake to realize she wasn’t following her anymore. When Blake turned around, Mason crossed her arms over her chest. “You can give me that look all you want, but you can’t deny it.”

“You weren’t there.”

“But I know you, and it’s all over your face. You’re jealous that Chase is interested in someone who isn’t *you*.”

Mason was speechless. How had Blake nailed that so damn fast? She would have expected the quick assessment to come from their mom, but apparently Blake had inherited Isla’s intuition as well.

“Look, I get it. Chase is pretty and funny and smart and you’re friends with her, so that line is probably blurred. Maybe you need to ask her out before she asks August out.”

“She’s my best friend.”

“And Alexis is mine.” Blake shrugged. “Friends can date. It happens all the time.”

“And can easily end in disaster.”

“Well, yeah, if you go into it with that attitude.” Blake put a hand on her hip and looked almost exactly like their mom. Mason resisted the urge to point it out, as she knew Blake was about to give some hopeful speech to her. “You can spend your life wondering *what if* with Chase or you can dive in and find out. I’ve seen you two together—especially at the wedding—and things definitely dance around being flirty with you, too. Chase wouldn’t act that way if she weren’t at least a little bit interested in you.”

“Maybe.”

“At the end of the day, only you know what you want. If you want to be with Chase, I say give it a shot. And if you don’t wanna risk it, then you’ll have to get used to her dating other people.”

Although Mason knew Blake meant well, that didn’t stop her words from cutting her. Blake was right. As usual. Not that Mason wanted to tell her that. But she had a point. Either she needed to make a move or deal with Chase dating other people.

The problem was that Mason didn’t know which would keep her heart from being broken.

Mason had managed only to have had her heart broken once many moons ago. She vowed then never to get close to someone again. So far, Mason had adhered to that. It was why she’d had so many casual hookups instead of actual relationships over the years. Protecting her heart had been her number one priority.

But now, she was going to have to decide if Chase was worth the risk of getting hurt again. And more importantly, if she wanted to risk losing Chase as a friend if things didn’t work out.

“I hate when you make valid points.”

“You just can’t say that I’m right, can you?”

“No.” Mason smirked. “It leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

Their conversations were lighter as they finished their walk around the dog park. Blake told Mason about all the silly antics Harper had been into, and Mason told her about the happenings at work. As they gathered their dogs, they made plans to meet again the following week at the same time.

“I love you,” Blake said as she hugged Mason once the dogs were loaded in the vehicles.

“Love you, too.”

Back in the Jeep, Mason headed toward the office. She had brought a change of clothes with her and knew her dogs would enjoy spending time with the other dogs at Paws on a Mission.

Both Chance and Odin had started as puppies in the training program. Odin's sister was one of their current breeding dogs, and he always loved hanging out with his sister.

Mason loved the breeding program at Paws on a Mission. The dogs all had homes and only had to be at the facility for specific times during the breeding and puppy raising process. It made everything easier on the dogs and the staff for them to have real homes. Mason was beyond thankful that so many homes in the Cove had welcomed her dogs into their homes with open arms. It really took a village to make Paws on a Mission operate.

Work served as a good distraction for Mason, as she barely had time to think of anything else. Especially Chase. By the time she arrived back home that night after seven, she was exhausted. She let the dogs out in the fenced-in backyard and pulled out her cell phone. There were several missed messages, but one stood out to her among the rest.

I'm going to do it. I'm going to ask her out tomorrow.

Chase had included a praise hands emoji along with a praying hands emoji to express her feelings. Mason gritted her teeth as she thought of a way to respond. She started and deleted no less than six different messages before setting on a gif of some actress saying *finally*.

The same feeling she'd felt the night before at dinner came bubbling up again. Jealousy. How in the world had Mason become someone who was *jealous*? She used to make people jealous by the women she'd hooked up with. And now the mighty had fallen.

She poured herself a glass of wine to forget about her feelings.

Chapter 4

Chase



Chase was on her third lap around Main Street when she finally decided she'd had enough. She had to either get over her fear of asking August out or move on. Of course, it was easier said than done. Especially with the conflicting feelings about Mason trying to consume her every thought.

There was no doubt in Chase's mind that Mason had been jealous about August for whatever reason. Mason had known about Chase's crush on August for weeks and had teased her about it fairly consistently. Chase assumed that's what best friends did, but after the other night, Chase wasn't so sure. It was all very weird for Chase to process.

But Chase still wasn't willing to risk her friendship with Mason to find out if they were something more. Mason meant more to her than anyone in the world, and Chase couldn't imagine a life without her. Dating could ruin everything. Chase wasn't going to risk that.

Instead, she was going to march into Between the Covers and ask August out on a date.

After coffee.

Chase nearly bolted into Bean Me Up, a funky sci-fi themed coffee shop. She wasn't a huge coffee drinker; she had to be in the mood for it. Unlike Mason, who could and would

drink it at any time of day. But Chase wanted to take August a cup of coffee since they'd talked about it the last time Chase was at the store.

She ordered a cappuccino for herself before hesitating on what August might like. The only other order that came to her mind was Mason's, so she ordered an iced mocha with no whipped cream. Mason always said the whipped cream ruined the drink, so Chase believed her. Now she only had to hope August did, too.

Carrying the two drinks down the sidewalk and around the corner, Chase took in a deep breath before pushing open the bookstore's door with her hip. August was behind the counter with a pen in her mouth as she looked over the paperwork in front of her. When she looked up, her smile widened. It made Chase feel like butterflies had escaped into her stomach.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"I see you brought coffee this time." August jutted her chin toward the drinks in Chase's hands. Chase forced herself to casually walk toward the counter where August was standing, so her nervousness was less apparent.

"I did. I didn't know what you like, so I got you what Mason orders. She knows coffee better than me. It's a mocha. Do you like mocha?"

"I do when pretty girls bring it to me."

Chase couldn't help but blush under August's compliment. She was not used to being the receiver of such affection. It wasn't like Shane was ever forthcoming with his love or even compliments. That should have been a sign from the beginning, but Chase was naïve.

"So, what are you doing this weekend?"

"Depends on what you're about to suggest."

Holy shit. She's good at this. Maybe everyone is but me.

"Would you like to go to dinner with me on Saturday night?" Chase was surprised that the words actually made their

way from her brain to her mouth. She let out a sigh of relief as she waited for August's response. It felt like minutes had ticked by, but Chase knew barely a few seconds had actually passed.

"I'd like that."

"Yeah? Good. Me too."

"That's good. Otherwise, it would be awkward." August winked, and Chase's smile spread wider. "Do you have any place in mind?"

Shit. I should have figured that out before.

"Um, not really," Chase grimaced as embarrassment flooded over her body.

"Don't worry. I know this great new place in Portland. Meet me here at seven on Saturday and we can go together."

"Oh. Yeah, okay. That sounds great."

But it most certainly did *not* sound great. The last thing Chase wanted was to be stuck in Portland with someone she didn't know. What if the date didn't go well? Then they'd have to drive back to the Cove together awkwardly. Chase wanted to suggest she meet August there, but how would that come across? Would she think Chase wasn't interested?

Ugh. This is why dating sucks.

"So, I'll see you on Saturday then."

Chase didn't wait for August to respond before she nearly ran out of the bookstore. Or well, more hobbled thanks to her left leg's inability to do anything close to running these days. She made a beeline for her car and drove to the only place she knew would clear her brain.

The Baxter Tree Farm belonged to her cousin, Charlie Monroe, and it was one of Chase's favorite places in the Cove. After a bustling holiday season, Chase was thankful for the peace and quiet that had settled in over the farm. She'd spent countless hours at the farm over the holidays helping Charlie and working the festivals they had every weekend in December. Chase's body felt sore for weeks from lifting bales

of hay, tables, and trees. She knew she overdid it, but Chase also knew she'd do it again next year.

Charlie's truck was parked by the red barn, so Chase parked her car beside it and headed inside. There was a small storage area to the left of the entrance and a makeshift kitchen area to the right. It was there she found Charlie intently studying some paperwork on the table in front of her.

“Am I interrupting?”

“Not really.” Charlie motioned for Chase to sit down across from her. “I'm going over the revenue versus expenses from this past season.”

“And?”

“And we actually turned a profit this year. I was so stunned that I have been making sure I didn't miss anything.”

“Charlie!” Chase borderline squealed. “That's so awesome.”

“Yeah, it is,” Charlie was still in disbelief.

The farm had been running in the negative the last few years as Charlie worked to make it into a top destination to visit in Maine. She'd started by expanding the festival that was initially held one weekend a year to every weekend between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Charlie had also maintained a ball field to rent out to various teams throughout the season for extra income. She had also made a deal with Molly Jaymes, a local photographer, to use the farm for family photo sessions. Everything Charlie had introduced had been a success, and Chase knew she needed to celebrate the victory.

“You need to celebrate. Take Delaney and Sadie out somewhere special and splurge on the best steak and best bottle of wine.”

“We're actually going on Saturday night. You want to come with? It's nothing special, just probably pizza and a movie.”

“I'd love to, but,” Chase widely grinned, “I'm actually going on a date with August.”

Charlie looked taken aback by her comment. “Oh. Wow. I didn’t think that would ever happen.”

“Well, it did. Why do you say that?”

“Just that she doesn’t really seem to be your type.” As she often did when she was nervous, Charlie stood and began pacing the floor. “She’s so... I don’t know. Uptight? No, that’s not the word.”

“Are you having a conversation with yourself now?”

“I’m just trying to think. I mean, I know August’s gay, but I can’t figure out why I can’t picture the two of you together.”

“Well, you can start picturing it now. She’s taking me to some new restaurant in Portland Saturday night.”

“Ooh la la. Does Mason know?”

The question sent Chase’s brain for a loop.

“No. It literally just happened. I just left the bookstore and came here.”

“And you didn’t call Mason, your best friend, and tell her you finally asked August out?”

“Why do you say it like that?”

“It’s just,” Charlie stopped pacing and put her hands on her hips, “look. I know this whole discovering your sexuality thing is new for you, but I don’t want you to miss what’s been right in front of you for *years*.”

Chase furrowed her brow in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“Mason.”

“Mason?”

“Yes, Mason. And don’t act like you don’t know what I mean.”

“I’m not acting,” Chase’s voice rose in frustration. “I’m legit confused as to what you mean.”

“No, you’re not. You’re acting like you are because you don’t want to admit that you and Mason have more chemistry

than anyone I know. And that's saying something considering I have a *very* amazing girlfriend inside my house right now whom I love more than life itself."

"Wait, what?"

How could Charlie tell there was a chemistry between them? And why hadn't she said anything? It wasn't as if Chase and Mason made it that obvious, did they? Chase had no idea and was suddenly rethinking every time she'd ever hung out with Mason. There had been casual hand holding and lingering hugs, sure, but a lot of best friends did that. Right?

Chase didn't know.

"You're crazy."

Charlie shrugged. "Maybe. But at least I knew when to let my guard down and let Delaney in, even if it meant getting hurt again. Maybe you need to do that with Mason."

"Let her in?"

"If that's what you want."

"But what about August?"

"Do you really want to date her, anyway? Or are you just doing it because you have a crush and it feels safer than asking your best friend out?"

"Damn, Charlie." Chase leaned back in her seat. "You're bringing all the hard-hitting things today, aren't you?"

"I just want you to be happy."

"And who's saying August won't make me happy? I know you mean well by bringing up Mason, but she is my best friend. She was there for me when I was in the hospital and when Shane left and every day since then. Because that's what best friends do. They're there for you when you need them. Mason's a great friend. Nothing more. She can't be more because if, God forbid, I were to lose her as a friend I honestly don't know what I would do."

Chase could feel her voice and blood pressure rising and forced herself to calm down. After a few deep breaths, Chase

lowered her voice and continued.

“I appreciate you looking after me and wanting me to be happy, but I’m happy with the way things are right now. I don’t want to rock the boat and ruin a great friendship I’ve had for years because my *cousin* thinks something more is there.”

Charlie didn’t say a word. She simply nodded as a sly smile formed across her face. “Okay.”

Chase was tempted to ask what that loaded word meant, but Chase wasn’t up for discussing Mason with Charlie any longer. Charlie could believe what she wanted to; Chase wasn’t going to let it bother her. She had a date in a couple of days with August, who was someone she was interested in and who seemed to be interested in her as well.

Mason had never once made a move on Chase. She had never asked her out or even tried to sleep with her. It was clear that Mason only saw Chase as a friend, even if Charlie thought otherwise. And if, maybe, Mason acted like she was jealous the other night at dinner. That could mean anything.

Right?

Chase didn’t know, but there was one way to find out.

Chapter 5

Mason



Work wasn't having its usual distracting effect on Mason. Usually Mason could get so lost in her work that everything else around her faded away. However, today was different. Mason had a million things she needed to be doing—the top of which involved what was apparently going to be a local premiere for the documentary—but instead, she played with puppies most of the day.

She justified the extraneous puppy cuddles by saying they needed socialization before their foster families picked them up in a few weeks. It was always a bittersweet time around Paws on a Mission during foster week. While they all knew the pups were going to go off to be raised as model canines, everyone still missed having them around during the day.

“I should have known you'd be here.” Mallory Garner let herself into the playpen, where the seven golden retrievers pivoted their attention away from Mason. As she sat down across from Mason, Mallory was overcome by happy puppy barks and wagging tails.

The puppies were in for a temperament assessment by Mallory before they went back to their temporary home the next day. The puppies' mom belonged to Jamie Anderson, the Cove's mayor. Jamie had helped raise numerous litters over the last few years, and her dedication to the organization was invaluable.

“I have the assessments all typed up and emailed to you. I think they’re all going to be magnificent dogs. They all passed with flying colors.”

“Even this one?” Mason scooped up a puppy. “Little Jimmy spent the first five minutes here running around barking before finally chewing on my shoelaces.”

Mallory laughed. “Yeah, he definitely is the most energetic of the group. Unlike Conan, who is chill with everything.”

Each litter had a theme with the names and the current litter was named after late night talk show hosts—Jimmy, Conan, Chelsea, Seth, Johnny, Samantha, and Oliver. Mason and Mallory often spent hours mulling over names for the litters, and they might have been up too late with naming the current ones. Their names somehow seemed to work for each of them, though, so they had clearly chosen well.

“How’s the planning for the premiere going?”

“You mean the premiere that I didn’t know about until last night when Blake called and said, *oh I forgot to tell you.*” Mason rolled her eyes. “I knew they wanted to have a premiere. I just wasn’t expecting it to be in a few weeks. May will be here before we know it.”

“I know, but it’s not like you’re having to plan it all yourself. You’ll have all of us to help, and I’m sure Charlie would let us have the premiere on the farm if we want. Maybe you can ask Chase about it.”

Mason snorted a sarcastic laugh.

“What’s that for?” Mallory tilted her head. “I would expect that response if I asked you to ask someone else but Chase? Your best friend? What’s up? You two have a fight or something?”

“Not exactly.”

“Talk to me.”

“It’s just Blake said something the other day that’s been bugging me. She told me that I’m *jealous* of Chase asking August out on a date.” She laughed again, but there was

nothing funny about it. “I mean, can you imagine? Me? Jealous? *Pfft*. That’s not me.”

Mallory didn’t say anything, which said more than words ever could.

“I’m not jealous,” Mason blurted out as her voice reached an unusually high pitch.

“Oh, I can tell.”

“You and Blake are crazy, just so you know. There’s nothing for me to be jealous about. Chase likes August, and she’s going to ask her out if she ever gets up the courage. That doesn’t have any effect on me. She’s dated before.”

“But never a woman.”

Mason gritted her teeth. “Because she’s just exploring her sexuality now. It’s good. Not everyone figured themselves out early in life like we did. It’s good she’s exploring that. I’m happy for her.”

“Your voice says otherwise,” Mallory teased, but Mason didn’t find it funny. She was frustrated that everyone suddenly seemed to be interested in her and Chase being together. As if that wouldn’t be the worst thing ever. “You know I love you, right?”

“At this moment, I’m doubting that.”

“Oh, stop. You know I only say these things because I love you and want you to be happy.”

“God, are you and Blake reading from a Hallmark script or something? She said basically the same thing. So I’ll tell you what I told her. Chase is my best friend and I’m not fucking that up. The end.”

“Okay.” Mallory held up her hands to let Mason know she was surrendering to the argument. “I’m sorry. I’ll never mention it again.”

“Thank you.” Standing, Mason brushed the dog hairs off her clothes and stepped out of the playpen. “I need to get back to work.”

Mallory didn't say anything else as Mason left the kennel area of the building. She wanted to be alone to get her mind off of Mallory's and Blake's comments that only muddled the thoughts already coursing through her brain. Stopping by the small breakroom, Mason grabbed a soda out of the fridge and walked back to her office.

"Guess what!"

"Jesus Christ, Chase." Mason clutched her heart as she turned around to face Chase. "You really should work for the CIA or something. You can sneak up on anyone."

"It's a gift." Chase shrugged and followed Mason into her office. Although their office areas were only accessible by a keycard, their receptionist knew certain people always had access. Of course, Chase was one of them. "So, guess what?"

"You finally asked August out?" Mason tried her best to match Chase's excitement, but it fell flat. She plopped down into her oversized office chair as Chase sat on the chair across from her. Her shoulders dropped slightly.

"Who told you?"

"You, dork," she laughed. "What other reason would you be bouncing in here so happy?"

"I am happy."

"I can tell."

"Are you happy for me?" The question seemed to surprise them both as they locked eyes with each other and didn't say a word.

After what seemed like hours, Mason finally said, "If you're happy, then I'm happy."

"Mace," Chase's voice was devoid of the happiness from only a few minutes prior. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just under a lot of stress with work and Blake dropped the fact we're having a premiere for the documentary in a few weeks, so I have to plan that. So, excuse me if I'm not popping champagne over the fact that you finally asked out the chick you've been stalking for weeks."

Mason watched her harsh words hit Chase and instantly regretted them. Even if Mallory and Blake had planted seeds of curiosity in her mind about Chase, Mason should have put them aside. She should be happy for Chase because she is her best friend, and that's what she'd expect from Chase. After all, Chase had listened to countless recollections of Mason's nights with various women. The least Mason could do was reciprocate, even if she felt like dying inside.

Fuck feelings. For real.

“Well, I'm sorry for bothering you with my frivolous chit-chat.”

Chase stormed out of the office before Mason could apologize. She contemplated going after her, but clearly, they both needed to calm down before speaking again.

Mason had never been able to regulate her emotions. She could flip a switch in the blink of an eye and never even know why. It was the same now. She was happy for Chase; Chase deserved to be happy. But there was that undeniable part in her that was jealous. Maybe it was because Chase was going on a date and Mason hadn't been on one in months. Or perhaps it was the fact Chase was going on a date with August.

Ugh. August.

August was a fine woman. A bit on the weird side, but it worked for her. Mason would be lying if she said she hadn't flirted with her occasionally, but they never had hit it off. Not the way that Chase and August had, according to Chase. Mason had yet to see them interacting in a less awkward way than two baby giraffes trying to get their footing.

Sighing, Mason stood from her desk and trudged down the hall to Mallory's office. She leaned on the doorframe and waited for Mallory to look up at her.

“I'm only ever going to say this once. It comes to my attention that I, in fact, *might* be jealous.”

Mallory snorted a laugh. “No shit, Sherlock. Also, you don't send your girl stomping down the hallway.”

“She is *not* my girl.”

“No, because you two won’t get over the ‘*but we’re just friends*’ bullshit to see if you could be more.”

“Why are you giving me dating advice? You’ve had like one serious relationship.”

“And now I’m living with her,” Mallory smugly rebutted.

“Yeah, well. Not all of us get women like Emery.” Emery Whitlock was perfect for Mallory in every way. They complemented each other more than any couple Mason knew.

“I know.” Mallory’s contented sigh and smile did little to subdue Mason’s jealousy. “But some people have Chases and that’s just as great.”

“Oh, okay. I see how it is.” They both laugh, and Mason cleared her throat. She stepped out into the hallway so everyone could hear her. “I’d like to announce that effective immediately, there is no more talk about *feelings* allowed at Paws on a Mission. This has been a decree from your boss. Thank you and good night.”

“Suck it,” Jones yelled back from her office.

“I agree with my girl.” It was Brooke Kingsley, Jones’s girlfriend, this time.

“And on that note, no more co-mingling of coworkers,” she added with a laugh. Giving Mallory a wink to let her know she was kidding, Mason sulked back to her office with her *feelings* hanging over her like a dark cloud.

Seriously, fuck feelings.

She needed a drink. Screw the fact it was barely after four. Mason texted the one person she knew would also be up for a drink and within the hour, she and Bradley Jaymes were sitting at the bar at Straight to Ale. The two had met years ago when Bradley moved to the Cove and Mason had helped her open Jaymes Fine Art, an art studio and gallery in the Cove.

Bradley was the type of friend who didn’t need an explanation to why you wanted to drink before five on a random Thursday. She would just show up and offer to pay the tab. And that loyalty didn’t just extend to Mason. Any of

Bradley's friends—most of which were in the recreational softball league with her—were given the same treatment.

After Mason finished retelling the events of the past few days as they pertained to Chase, she asked, "So, do you think I'm jealous? Be for real."

"I mean," Bradley nervously laughed. It was the telltale sign Bradley was thinking one way, but knew it wasn't the answer that was wanted. "Look, I'm the last one who should ever give dating advice. But I have to admit that sometimes you and Chase act more like a couple than real couples I know. Honestly, when I first met you all, I thought you two *were* together."

"She's just a *friend*," Mason groaned. "People can be friends and not date. It happens all the time. You can be friends with someone and not want to sleep with them."

"That sounds so weird coming from you."

"I'm friends with you and I don't want to sleep with you."

"Right now," Bradley snarked, which made Mason laugh.

"Shut up."

"I'm just being honest."

"And I am, too. I don't want to fuck up a friendship because I'm me and I don't know how to actually have a relationship. Hookups I can do. I can do casual dating. But I know it wouldn't be like that with Chase. It would be something right away and I don't know if I can do that. I need Chase in my life. I can't lose her because of my inability to be in a relationship."

Bradley nodded. They were quiet for a few moments as they sipped on their drinks. Mason hated she was so upset when talking about Chase. No one had ever mentioned anything about Chase before, so why now? Had something changed that Mason hadn't noticed? Or was it all because Chase was *out* now? Mason didn't know.

"Okay," Bradley turned on the stool to face Mason, "answer me this. If you and Chase weren't best friends and

were just casual acquaintances, would you still hesitate to date her?”

Mason blinked, entirely caught off guard by the question. She'd never thought about it like that before.

“Damn, Bradley. That was deep.”

She shrugged. “What can I say? I'm a genius.”

“So,” Mason twirled her straw around in her drink, “you think I could date Chase? Really?”

“Honestly, Mason, I think you can do anything you set your mind to. You're amazing and anyone would be lucky to date you.”

“Aww, shucks, Brad.” Mason playfully bumped her shoulder against Bradley's as they laughed. Even though Mason knew Bradley was serious about what she was saying.

As their conversation shifted from Chase to work and their families, Mason let the question still bounce around in her head. Bradley had a point. If she weren't best friends with Chase, she would have made a move forever ago. But Mason had tried to be respectful of Chase and there was no point in changing that now. Even if it meant she'd have to get over the fact that Chase was going on a date with August.

“Another, please,” she told the bartender as she pointed at her empty Long Island.

Chapter 6

Chase



Dating sucked.

That was Chase's only thought as she changed into yet *another* outfit before her date with August. It was well after six-thirty and she had less than thirty minutes to decide what to wear and get to the bookstore. She'd decided against a dress; they showed off her scars more and Chase rather not display those. Jeans seemed too casual, but dress pants felt weird.

Ugh, I wish I knew where we were going.

Chase hated the unknown. She especially liked knowing the menu of a restaurant before she went. While she wasn't a picky eater, she was particular about what she ate. No seafood and no Chinese food were her big things.

"She's probably taking me to a Chinese seafood place."

Discarding the black dress pants into the pile of clothes on the floor, Chase picked back up her favorite pair of dark washed jeans and slipped them on. They fit her better than anything else, and they didn't scratch her leg like the polyester pants. She paired it with a hunter green button-up and rolled the sleeves up to her elbows. With the weather still cooler at night, she grabbed a lightweight jacket from her closet before putting on a pair of brown ankle boots. She didn't dare look at herself in the mirror to avoid changing once more.

The drive to the bookstore was pretty short. Chase had moved into a small, one-story close to downtown after she was discharged from the hospital. Her old two-story townhouse couldn't accommodate her needs any longer. Parking her SUV in front of the bookstore, Chase was pleasantly surprised to see August waiting on her with a bouquet of flowers.

"Great. More plants for me to kill," Chase mumbled to herself through her smile. Stepping out of the car, she slowly walked over to August. August was wearing black jeans, a red blouse, and Converse, so Chase was glad she wasn't overdressed. "Hey."

"Hi."

"Are those for me?"

"Of course." August handed the flowers to Chase.

"Thanks." She had no idea how to react. Receiving flowers wasn't a regular occurrence for her. In fact, Chase couldn't recall *ever* receiving flowers before. Chase smelled them and smiled. "These are beautiful."

"So are you."

Oh, okay. We're diving into flirting right away.

"You, too." Opening her passenger side door, Chase put the flowers on the floorboard. "They'll be safe there."

August looked confused, but didn't say anything. She opened the passenger side door of her car for Chase and she got inside. The low sports car was uncomfortable to get into, and Chase immediately dreaded having to get out of it. Her knees and hip didn't work like they were supposed to anymore, and asking August for help seemed like the most unsexy thing she could ever do.

They didn't speak a word until they were out of the Cove and on the interstate to Portland.

"So, do you like Indian food?"

"Oh, yeah. Totally. I love it," she lied. She'd never had Indian food in her life. Her lack of branching out with eating had come back to bite her in the ass.

“Good, because there’s this new Indian place that just opened up that’s been getting rave reviews. I’ve been wanting to try it for weeks, but had no one to go with.”

“Oh, well, happy to help.”

August laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant I wanted to go with someone special and I’m glad that’s you.”

“Oh.” Chase looked over at her and smiled. “That’s really sweet, August.”

Wait, why did that sound like a backhanded compliment?

Turning her attention back to the road, Chase looked out the window as the drive continued. What was her deal? She’d been so excited to finally ask August out and now that she was on a date with her, things just felt off. Chase couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d rather be at out with Mason than August. It wasn’t fair to August; Chase knew that much.

Arriving at the restaurant, August parked the car and Chase steeled herself for having to get out of it. She could thankfully pull herself up by the handle over the door before using the door of the car to brace herself.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, totally.” Another lie, but Chase didn’t care. She knew August had to know about what happened—everyone in the Cove did—but she could only hope it didn’t get brought up.

The restaurant was significantly more upscale than Chase had expected. Wood paneling on the walls and ceiling blended right into the hardwood on the floor. Mini chandeliers hung over every table that was perfectly spaced out in the open dining room. The music had an upbeat sound to it, which threw off the vibe the restaurant otherwise gave off.

“Wow, this place looks better than the pictures,” August marveled aloud as they walked up to the host. “Hi, two please.”

“Do you have a reservation?”

“I didn’t know they were required.”

Without saying a word, the young host pointed a finger at the sign behind her that said *reservations required*. Chase could almost see smoke coming out of August's ears.

"Do you have any reservations for tonight open?"

"I can get you in on," the host flipped through a reservation book, "July 21."

"But I need a reservation for tonight. Please. Is there nothing you can do to help me?"

"I can put you down for July 21, but that's really all I can do."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

"I don't get paid enough to joke around."

Chase couldn't help but laugh at the entire situation. From the cocky host to the way August looked like her head was going to explode to the fact Harry Styles was playing in the background made the entire situation laughable. August, however, did not find it funny and huffed out of the restaurant.

"I'm so sorry about her. This is a first date and clearly there will not be a second."

"Wise woman."

Walking outside where August was all but seething by her car, Chase regretted not driving.

"I can't fucking believe her. The least she could do was try to accommodate us."

"The place was pretty packed, August. I'm sure there was nothing she could do."

"Oh, I'm sure there was, and you know what? I'm going to leave them a bad review on Yelp." She whipped her phone out of her pocket. "Did you get her name? Eh, it doesn't matter."

"You know, August," Chase nervously scratched the back of her neck, "I don't think this is going to work out."

"Don't worry. I know a million other places in Portland that are better than this *dump*."

“No. I mean, this isn’t going to work out with *us*.”

August looked genuinely confused. “What? Why?”

“Because you just yelled at a teenage worker who’s probably making minimum wage over the fact you couldn’t get seated at a reservation-only restaurant.”

To say August looked stunned was an understatement. August looked pissed. But Chase really didn’t care. Chase had no desire to be with someone who treated others like that. She suddenly regretted ever finding her attractive in the first place without getting to know her.

Maybe this is all for the best.

“Seriously? You’re not even going to give me a second chance?”

“Honestly, no.” Chase shrugged. “I think I’m just going to head home.”

“Fine. I’ll drive you back to your car at least.”

“No.” *There is no way I’m getting back in the car with you.* “It’s okay. I’ll get an Uber.”

“Whatever.” Without another word, August got into her car and sped out of the parking lot.

“Whew, you dodged a bullet.” A younger man, who had been waiting outside the restaurant with a woman, laughed.

“You’re telling me.”

Chase contemplated calling her parents who lived in Portland to pick her up. But she so did not want to have to explain to them why she was in Portland without a car. Instead, she placed an order for an Uber and was back at her vehicle in just over a half hour.

Instead of going home, Chase made a pit stop at the liquor store and picked up the ingredients for a few mixed drinks. She didn’t want to drink alone, and knew the one person who would not only love a drink but would love the story of her evening. Accidentally putting the liquor bottles on top of the

flowers, Chase put the car in drive and headed to Mason's house.

Mason knew about the date, so she wouldn't be expecting Chase. And after their argument the last time they were together, Chase didn't even know if Mason would want to see her or hear about her date. Chase sat in the car in front of Mason's house for a few minutes as she debated what to do.

Part of her wanted to run up to the front door and tell her she had a great story to tell.

The other part had visions more in line with a Hallmark movie. Chase imagined going up to the front door, telling Mason she loved her, and kissing her in the doorway. She swallowed hard as the imagery overtook her mind. No matter how much she denied her feelings for Mason, they always bubbled out of the box she'd put them in.

And her brain was like a fucking bubble factory now.

Knowing Mason was jealous of August had helped put things into perspective for Chase. She knew Mason also liked her as more than a friend. Chase also knew neither of them was going to risk fucking up their friendship to try a relationship. No, one of them would have to make a move.

Getting out of the SUV, Chase grabbed the bottles out of the floorboard and headed up to Mason's front door. Her heart was nearly beating out of her chest as she pressed the doorbell and waited for Mason to answer. Chance and Odin sounded the alarm on the other side of the door and Chase knew Mason was near when their barking stopped.

Mason opened the door and held up a finger as she pointed at the phone up to her ear.

Welp, there goes that dramatic moment.

Chase felt her confidence fade away like a sunset as she sat the bottles on the entryway bench. She greeted Mason's dogs as she eavesdropped on Mason's conversation.

"I didn't say I disagreed. I said that wasn't what I would do. But I'm not the one trying to impregnate Alexis, so maybe I don't need an input on the sperm donor." Mason threw her

arms up in the air as she plopped onto the couch. Chase took the recliner across from her. “Hey, Chase is here, so I need to go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Tossing the phone onto the coffee table, Mason let out a loud sigh.

“Ugh, I swear, you’d think they announced us Alexis, Blake, *and* Mason for how involved Blake is trying to make me in this baby drama.”

“Uh-oh.” Chase knew that Alexis and Blake were trying to have another baby, but she didn’t know about any drama. Yet. “What’s wrong?”

“They can’t agree on a sperm donor. Alexis doesn’t want to know, and Blake does. And do you know who Blake suggested?” Mason didn’t wait for her to answer. “Patrick.”

Patrick Carlson was in their friend group and was also the twin sister of their friend Maddie. He was happily in a relationship with Jordan, and the two were perfect together.

“I mean, how weird would that be? Having a little Patrick running around.”

“That would be kinda cute, actually.”

“Wait,” Mason narrows her eyes at Chase, “why are you here? Aren’t you supposed to be on a date with *August*?”

The jealous way Mason said her name wasn’t lost on Chase.

“Well, it turns out August yells at restaurant workers when she doesn’t have a reservation at a reservation-only establishment.”

“Oh, shit,” Mason laughed. “Dude, I wanna be sad for you, but that’s hilarious. I never would have pictured quiet August to be that way.”

“Me either, but alas. Here we are.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She was still lying. The problem now was that Mason would know. “She was going to take me to an

Indian restaurant, so I really dodged a bullet all around.”

“You would have hated that.”

“Right?”

“Pizza or Mexican. Those would have been better options. She’d have known that if she truly knew you.” Mason’s voice was softer than before, and Chase took notice. “It’s too bad she’s going to miss getting to know such a wonderful woman because she’s an asshole.”

Chase laughed, but it wasn’t jovial as much as it was from nerves. The look Mason was giving her scared her; not because it was intimidating or frightening. No, on the contrary, it was full of love and understanding and that scared her more than anything.

“I brought some liquor.”

“I have leftover pizza in the fridge.”

Their awkward comments at the same time made them both laugh.

“I have a better idea.” As Chase grabbed her bag off the entryway bench, she tried to find the confidence she’d lost when Mason first opened the door. She should just tell her. Then they could stop dancing around their feelings like they were a minefield.

But instead, Chase thought of another idea to avoid her feelings a little longer. They involved a new literary-themed bar in town that had quickly become a hit.

“Olive or Twist?”

“I’ll grab my jacket and ID.”

Chapter 7

Mason



Mason wanted to feel bad about Chase's terrible date. She really did. But Mason couldn't get over the smug feeling that it was *her* who was with Chase now and not August. Even if it was just as friends.

It was childish, she knew. She knew she should be better, or hell, even admit to Chase that she wanted to take her out for a date. But it wasn't the right time. So instead, they were laughing at Olive or Twist as Sandra Bullock and Cate Blanchett made loving eyes at each other on one of the TV screens behind the bar. Beside her, Chase snorted a laugh.

"They're so fucking in love it's ridiculous."

"Dude, right?" Mason laughed. "That's probably what people think of us."

It was Chase's turn to laugh. "Entirely possible."

"This is from the woman over there," the bartender said, as he placed a shot of tequila in front of Mason. It was a bold move by the stranger, Mason could give her that. By all accounts it probably looked like she and Chase were on a date, so the woman must have just been shooting her shot. Mason gave her a smile, took the shot, and turned her attention back to Chase as if nothing happened.

“So, I have to ask,” Chase took a sip of her drink, “how do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Get every girl who crosses your path to fall for you.”

“Not every girl.” Mason was coy; it was how she deflected when she was nervous. And Chase was definitely making her nervous. It wasn’t an emotion that Mason was used to. She was usually too cocky for her own good. But something about Chase was different tonight. There was no way Mason was the only one who noticed it.

“Okay, fine.” Chase held her hands up in mock surrender. “Most girls, then.”

“Well, for starters, I prefer to call them *women*.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“Is it now?” *That damn arched eyebrow.*

“Yep.” Mason twirled the straw around in her mixed drink as she contemplated whether or not to change the subject. She didn’t want to like Chase like that; didn’t want to cross that line between friends and lovers. But dammit, she was only human. “So, how was your day?”

“My day?” Chase laughed. “You’re asking me about my day? The day that ended with an awful date?”

Mason nodded. Slowly, she slid her hand onto Chase’s thigh. She soulfully looked into Chase’s green eyes and watched them soften under her gaze.

“You asked me how I got people to fall for me.”

“And,” Chase’s voice was barely audible in the loud bar, “you do it by asking them how their day was?”

“Most people don’t get asked that and I find they like to share. Sometimes too much.” Mason made circles on Chase’s thigh with her fingers. She watched Chase lower her gaze. “I then pick up on something she said. Maybe a quip about a coworker or a parent or an awful date or whatever else she

tells me about. I ask her to tell me more about it, which they always do.”

Chase swallowed hard and blushed more than before. Slowly and purposefully, Mason lifted her hand to tuck a stray piece of hair behind Chase’s ear. She let her fingers brush tenderly over her cheek and enjoyed the way Chase licked her lips in response. Returning her hand to Chase’s thigh in the same slow manner, she resumed her small circles.

“Then I lean in, just enough so they know they have my full attention.”

Chase only nodded. It seemed to be all she could do, and it made Mason smirk.

“I get it now,” Chase’s voice was still barely a whisper. Her eyes slowly lifted back to Mason’s, and it was then Mason could see the desire suddenly looking back at her. Mason never expected to see Chase look at her that way, but now that she was, there was only one thing on her mind.

And judging by Chase’s expression, she felt the same way.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“I hope to God I’m going home with you.”

That was all Mason needed to hear. After they paid the tab, they were back at Mason’s house in record time. There was no chit-chat as Mason let the dogs out into the backyard and Chase waited in the kitchen. Chase seemed nervous as she ran her hands along the countertop that she’d seen a billion times, as if it were new to her.

This was always the awkward part. The intense feelings at the bar could have easily dissipated for Chase and she had realized she didn’t want to sleep with her best friend after all. Although Mason would be bummed, she’d understand. She almost opened her mouth to say as much when Chase halted her self-guided tour of the kitchen. There was an undeniable passion behind her green eyes as she crossed the room to Mason.

“Wait,” Mason held up her hands as Chase stopped walking toward her, “do we need to talk about this first?”

“Do you usually talk about it with the women you bring home?”

Fair point.

“I mean, no. Not usually.” Mason shrugged. “But I’ve also never brought my best friend home before so I’m a little fuzzy on the guidelines here.”

“Well,” Chase took a deep breath and slowly let it out, “how about we just do the friends with benefits thing? That can’t be too hard, right? People do it all the time. You’ve done it before. I haven’t, but that’s nothing new. But we can do this, right? I mean, you’re my friend and sex is a benefit so, yeah. We can do this.”

Chase was rambling and Mason didn’t know how to stop her. She thought about kissing her to shut her up but Mason was in new territory. Chase wasn’t some random person she’d met; she was her best friend. Friends with benefits with Chase would be different than any situationship Mason had ever been in before. Opening her mouth to say as much, she was surprised when a passion filled Chase’s eyes and she closed the space between them.

“Fuck it. Let’s do this.”

Her kiss nearly knocked Mason off her feet. Literally. She stumbled as her back hit the wall. Chase knew how to kiss. Mason didn’t know why that surprised her so much. Stopping herself from commenting on it, Mason instead enjoyed the way Chase’s lips felt against hers.

Wanting to regain the upper hand, Mason slowly backed Chase up against the other wall and pushed her tongue past her lips. Chase moaned, and the sound made the wetness between Mason’s legs increase. She moved her lips down Chase’s jawline to her neck. Her lips sucked on Chase’s skin as she squirmed and moaned under her touch. Chase slipped her hands down Mason’s pants, but Mason stopped her.

“Not yet.”

“But I need to touch you.”

“Not. Yet.” Mason took Chase’s hand and pinned it above her head. A guttural moan escaped Chase’s lips as she used her free hand to pull Mason’s hips closer to her.

“Mace, please,” Chase’s begging was enough to drive Mason wild. Mason pulled Chase’s shirt off over her head before quickly moving to the zipper of her jeans. Chase took hold of Mason’s arms, stopping her from removing her pants. She seemed to think for a few beats before shaking her head and shimmying out of her jeans.

It was then Mason saw the large scars that ran down her hip and knee. She’d seen it before when Chase was in the hospital, but it never occurred to her that Chase wouldn’t want anyone to see it. Hell, no one had probably seen it other than doctors since it happened.

Mason was quick to remove Chase’s underwear before Chase helped Mason undress as well until they were standing naked before each other. Putting her hands under Chase’s bare ass, she picked her up and Chase wrapped her legs around her waist and her arms around her neck. Even though Chase winced at the movement, she didn’t seem to mind. Their lips didn’t lose connection as Mason carried her the few feet down the hall to the bedroom. Tenderly, she laid Chase down as she straddled her body.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Mason slipped a hand behind Chase’s back to unhook her bra. With her breasts free, Mason kneaded one with her hand as she moved her body down Chase’s bare abdomen. She settled in between Chase’s legs and didn’t hesitate to get to work. Chase was wetter than Mason had anticipated. If her moans and squirms and the way her hands were running through Mason’s hair were any indication, she was already close. Mason moved her tongue around Chase’s wet center before sucking on her clit.

“Oh, Mason, yes!” Although Mason had been with several women, none of them had been very vocal in bed. Chase was clearly going to be that exception.

Enjoying the encouragement, Mason moved her hand from Chase’s breast and entered her with three fingers. Chase cried

out in pleasure as Mason curved her fingers inside her. Chase's hips moved with the rhythm of Mason's fingers in a dance Mason hoped would never stop.

"Fuck, Mason! Yes!" Chase's cries in ecstasy were encouraging Mason to keep going. She didn't stop her rhythmic movement of her fingers or her tongue as she kept going. She knew she found Chase's G-spot when her hips bucked off the bed and her fingers became soaked in her essence. "Oh, Mace! Yes, right there!"

Mason couldn't stop the smile from spreading on her lips. There was something different about sex with Chase. Chase was different, and Mason didn't know what exactly that meant yet.

As Mason slowed her movement in and out of Chase, she tenderly placed kisses along her hips, her abdomen, and her breasts until their lips met once more. Chase framed Mason's face with her hands as they kissed. Mason let her other hand slowly trail up Chase's body as she enjoyed the way Chase shivered under her touch.

"Can I touch you now? Please?"

"Absolutely."

Mason was surprised when Chase wasted no time scooting down the bed until her head was between Mason's legs. Her legs and arms were shaking as Chase's fingers slowly circled around her center. Mason lowered her hips, forcing more contact between her body and Chase's fingers. Chase clearly got the hint as she entered Mason with curved fingers, as Mason moaned with pleasure. She wasn't ordinarily vocal in bed, but the way Chase felt inside of her was unlike anything Mason had experienced. Mason was also turned on by how confident Chase was. It was refreshing to have someone fuck her that seemed to know exactly what her body needed.

She could feel her orgasm building and knew it wouldn't be long before she came. Mason was breathless as Chase's fingers completely undid her. Grabbing onto the pillow in front of her, Mason buried her face in it and cried out with pleasure. Her body was on fire unlike never before. She'd had

her fair share of orgasms over the years—courtesy of other women and her trusty vibrator—but none of them compared to the one Chase just gave her. Chase seemed to have a roadmap to her body even though they've never touched before.

As her breathing slowed, Mason lifted her leg over Chase's head as she collapsed onto the bed. Chase crawled up on the bed beside her, equally as breathless. Their fingertips were the only thing touching, and Mason didn't think twice as she intertwined her fingers with Chase's. They were still wet from being inside Mason, and that turned Mason on more than she was prepared for.

Never in her life had Mason had someone fuck her like that. In fact, it was rare she got anything back from someone. Most people she fucked needed their needs met, and Mason was happy to help. But having Chase's mouth on her clit was an exhilarating feeling.

"Okay, so..." Chase breathlessly rolled over and placed a soft kiss on Mason's shoulder, "I totally get it now."

Mason sat up on her elbow and looked down at Chase. She looked so relaxed, so happy. Her hand seemed to have a mind of its own as she ran it through Chase's hair.

"That was amazing."

"I bet you say that to all your women."

Mason laughed. "No. Absolutely not."

"Yeah, right," Chase snorted a laugh.

"Hey," Mason waited until she knew she had Chase's full attention, "I'm serious. That was amazing and I do not tell just anyone that. In fact, I can't remember the last time I told someone that."

"You're good, you know that?" Sitting up, Chase suddenly seemed nervous. "I can totally see how you've had so many people in your bed."

Chase stood, but Mason grabbed her hand.

"Chase."

“I should go.”

“Wait.”

“No.”

“Chase, look at me.” Mason waited with bated breath for Chase to slowly turn around. When she did, there were tears brimming her eyes. She quickly sat up on her knees so they were eye to eye. “I know this all started as a joke, but, please, believe me when I tell you that I’ve never had sex like that before. You were amazing. You made me feel amazing. And that’s not a line or anything like that. That’s just me being honest with you.”

“Well, it’s weird.” A smirk lightened the mood, and Mason took the moment to pull Chase back down to the bed. Chase sat on the edge as Mason scooted up beside her, brushing her hair out of the way to place a kiss on her shoulder. “So, what does this mean? We just go back to being friends like nothing happened?”

“We can, if that’s what you want.”

“Is that what *you* want?”

“I honestly don’t know. I’ve never slept with my best friend before, so this is all unfamiliar territory.”

“Well, I’ve never slept with another woman before, so ditto.”

“I can’t believe that after what you just did to me.” Mason winked, letting her know she was teasing.

“So...”

“So...” Mason let her voice trail off, hoping Chase would say what she wanted. The last thing Mason wanted to do was force Chase into a relationship if she wasn’t ready or open to that. Hell, Mason didn’t know if *she* was even open to dating Chase. All she knew was that she loved Chase, and she’d do whatever she wanted. She just prayed Chase didn’t suggest more than she could give.

“So,” Chase inhaled sharply, “I didn’t expect this to happen tonight. I came here to rant about this dumb date that I had so

over-hyped in my mind, and then I don't know. I just stopped seeing you as my best friend and started wondering what it would be like to be with you. And, let me just say, you did not disappoint."

"Ditto."

"But I don't want to lose you as a friend if whatever just happened is only a one-night thing. I need you in my life, Mason, and I really hope we didn't just screw something up here."

"No, Chase, baby, no." Mason got down on her knees in front of Chase. "You're always going to be my best friend. Nothing is going to change that. We can go back to being friends or we can try something else. Friends with benefits, like you suggested? At least until we figure things out?"

"Yeah," Chase nodded. "I mean, you hang out with your former hookups all the time and it's no big deal. Why would it be different with me?"

Mason didn't want to admit that things would most certainly be different with Chase because Chase was different. Mason loved her. Hell, she might be *in* love with her. The thought scared her so much she quickly pushed it aside.

"So, we're doing the whole friends with benefits thing?"

"If you're up for it."

"Hmm, let me think." Mason pretended to think as Chase laughed. Standing, Mason twirled Chase's hair around her finger and looked into her green eyes. "I'm up for it. And if at any point that changes for either of us, we tell the other right away, okay?"

"Okay." Chase contentedly sighed and looked at the clock on the nightstand. "Shit, I should get home."

"Stay."

"What?"

"We've had a lot to drink, and it's late. Just... stay."

Mason didn't know who she was becoming. In a matter of hours, Chase had captured a piece of heart that Mason didn't care if she ever got back. Laying down in bed, Mason motioned for Chase to lie down beside her. But there was a hesitation in Chase's eyes.

"Okay, so don't think I'm weird."

"You eat ketchup with your chicken nuggets, so I already do, but go on."

Chase rolled her eyes. "I can't sleep nude. I have a fear of the house catching on fire and I have to run outside and I have no clothes on."

Mason couldn't contain her laughter, and Chase playfully hit her with a pillow.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Mason held her hands up in defense. "I was *so* was not expecting you to say that."

"Well, I'm just being honest with you."

Getting up, Mason grabbed a T-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts for each of them out of her dresser before getting back into bed. She noticed how Chase was careful not to lie on her hip, and Mason made a note to sleep on the other side so Chase would be the little spoon. Chase snuggled into Mason's embrace as she kissed her shoulder more.

"Good night, weirdo."

"Good night," Chase yawned, "dork."

Mason blissfully fell asleep with a smile on her face and Chase in her arms.

Oh, yeah. I could get used to this.

Chapter 8

Chase



Waking up in Mason's bedroom was *not* what Chase had planned on happening. And she definitely did not plan the events that transpired before she fell asleep in Mason's arms as a Sandra Bullock movie played on the TV. Especially considering they had literally *just* agreed to be just friends and nothing more.

Chase still wasn't exactly sure what came over her. Never in her right mind would she have ever come on to anyone the way she did with Mason. It was so out of character for her, but Chase knew better than to blame the alcohol. She knew what she was doing. Hell, *they* knew what they were doing.

But, dammit, if Chase wasn't glad they did.

Mason had rocked her world. She'd never had her body loved and appreciated as much as Mason had. Even if it was all in the name of *teaching*, Chase didn't care.

She could still feel Mason's arms draped over her back, so she couldn't roll over to see the clock on the nightstand. Judging by the lack of sunlight coming in through the blinds, it was barely dawn. Chase adjusted her body slightly and felt Mason gently move behind her.

Unsure if Mason was awake, Chase waited a beat before moving again, so she was up on her right hip. Often, she found

it to be the most comfortable way to sleep. Behind her, she felt a gentle kiss between her shoulder blades.

“Morning.”

“Did I wake you?”

“No.” Another kiss, this one on her shoulder. “I felt you moving, and I wanted to make sure you weren’t going to leave before saying goodbye.”

“Wouldn’t that be the Mason thing to do?”

“Hell, no. If I didn’t leave the night before, it means I like the person enough to have breakfast with them the next morning.”

“Mmm, you’re teaching me so much.”

Not caring that it would hurt, Chase rolled over onto her left hip so she was facing Mason. Sleepy Mason was a whole different person. There was a sexiness in the way her hair was tousled from a mix of sleep and Chase’s hands running through it. With each blink, her sleepy eyes stayed closed a little longer as if she might fall back asleep at any minute.

Chase resisted the urge to kiss her. She wasn’t sure if their late-night teaching session had ended and if they were back to being *just friends* now.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“I’m just happy. That’s all.”

“Great sex will do that to you.” Mason winked. She brushed a few stray strands of Chase’s hair out of her face and behind her ear. “Does this change things for you, or are you still good with being just friends?”

Chase wanted to scream from the rooftop that things had indeed changed and she wanted to be more than friends. But the way Mason phrased the question had Chase concerned things hadn’t changed for her. Maybe she really could turn off

her emotions and have it be just about sex. Maybe it didn't mean to her what it did to Chase.

"I'm good if you are," she lied.

"Yeah, same." Getting out of bed, Mason stretched her arms high above her head. The hem of her T-shirt raised with them and Chase caught a glimpse of her stomach once more. Memories of kissing that very skin a few hours ago filled Chase's mind. "I'm gonna take the dogs out and feed them. Do you want breakfast?"

"No," Chase shook her head and stood. "I should head home. It's Sunday. I'm sure you wanna rest before you go back to work tomorrow."

It was a veiled excuse; Chase knew it, and Mason probably did as well. But Chase needed to clear her mind from thoughts of Mason, so staying at her house any longer was out of the question. She gathered her discarded clothes from around the bedroom and pointed to the bathroom.

"I'm gonna change."

"I've seen you naked now. You can change in front of me if you want."

"I know, but I don't." Chase darted into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Chase wondered how she'd ended up here. Sleeping with Mason hadn't been on Chase's mind a day ago, and now here she was. There would always be before sleeping with Mason and after sleeping with Mason now. And Chase didn't know how that would affect things in the future.

Mason was her best friend. They'd talked very little about what would happen if they crossed the line of friends and into friends with benefits before they'd slept together. Maybe it was the alcohol, or perhaps it was Chase's desire to know what it would feel like to be with Mason that spurred their escapades. She didn't know, nor did she want to linger on it.

Splashing some cold water onto her face, Chase quickly changed into her clothes and left the T-shirt and shorts Mason

had lent her folded nicely on the bathroom counter. She headed downstairs and gathered her bag as Mason and the dogs came back in through the back door. Mason must have gotten up at some point last night to let them back inside, but Chase hadn't heard her. Chance and Odin ran over to her with wagging tails as she greeted the happy pups.

"You sure you don't want breakfast?" Mason was leaning on the wall with her arms crossed. She looked so damn cute in the oversized T-shirt and shorts, and Chase knew she needed to leave before they wound up back in bed together.

"No, thanks. I'm just gonna head home. I'll text you later. Bye, boys."

Without another word, Chase quickly exited out the front door and nearly darted to her SUV. She didn't bother turning on music or a true crime podcast as she mindlessly drove through town. Chase knew going home was a terrible idea. Being alone with her thoughts about what happened last night would only cause Chase to spiral, which she definitely did not want to do. Most of her friends were also friends with Mason, so Chase knew going to them would be out of the question. That left Charlie.

Driving to the tree farm, Chase steeled herself for the barrage of questions she knew Charlie would have. Chase parked the SUV behind the used Honda Charlie and Delaney had purchased for Sadie and headed up to the front door. Knocking always felt weird at Charlie's house. Before Delaney and Sadie moved in, Chase used to barge in with no warning, as if she owned the place. But now, she had to be respectful.

Sadie opened the front door with a large smile that faded when she saw Chase. "Oh. I thought you were my package."

"Good morning to you, too. Is Charlie here or at the barn?"

"Kitchen," Charlie called. Sidestepping Sadie, Chase headed into the kitchen. Charlie and Delaney were sitting at the kitchen table with empty breakfast plates before them, along with two cups of coffee. "What're you doing here?"

“Good morning to you too,” she grumbled as she made herself a cup of coffee and joined them at the table. “I need to talk to you about last night.”

“Oh, your *date* was last night.” Charlie turned her attention to Delaney. “Chase went out with August, that cute bookstore clerk, last night. And, judging by her attire, stayed the night with her as well.”

“I didn’t.” Chase shook her head before burying her face in her hands. She couldn’t bear to see Charlie or Delaney’s expression when she told them where she actually was. “I spent the night with Mason.”

A hair pin could drop a mile away and Chase would have heard it. She assumed Charlie and Delaney were too stunned to speak, so she slowly looked up at them. Both had confused looks on their faces.

“So?” Charlie shrugged. “You’ve spent the night at Mason’s before.”

“No. I *spent the night* with Mason.”

“I heard you the first time I just don’t...”

“Charlie,” Delaney cut her off by placing a hand on her arm. It took a few moments for it to register with Charlie, but when it did, she gasped so loud it startled both Delaney and Chase.

“Holy shit! You *slept* with Mason!” Charlie’s voice was so loud that Chase wouldn’t be surprised if all of Moonflower Cove had heard her. “Oh, my god. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Well, apparently she had Mason in her last night.”

“Delaney!” Charlie and Chase scolded in unison as Delaney held up her hands.

“Oh, stop. I’m just saying what Charlie was thinking.”

“Anyway,” Charlie waved Delaney off and focused her attention back on Chase, “how are you? Are you okay? Do you need to talk?”

“No. Well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“So, are you and Mason a thing now?”

“See,” Chase’s attempt at a laugh fell short, “that’s the thing. We kinda slept together as friends. With benefits.”

“The benefit of orgasm, am I right?” Delaney teased, but Charlie and Chase just gave her unamused looks. “You’re right. I should finish putting up the laundry. Chase, say goodbye before you leave.”

“Will do.” Once Delaney had left the kitchen, Chase sighed and looked at Charlie. “Go on. Tell me I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.”

“I agreed to be friends with benefits with Mason. I’m an idiot.”

“Well, maybe it’ll lead to something more. You never know.”

“Umm, have you met Mason? She’s not exactly the *something more* type of woman. And you know I don’t do casual. I only agreed to it last night because,” she grimaced, “well, I was a little drunk.”

“Do I need to step into Mom Mode and tell you how drinking in excess is bad and often ends up with people in the bed with someone they hadn’t planned on sleeping with?”

“No, *Mom*,” Chase rolled her eyes, “I got that message loud and clear already. But you know what? I think I’m just going to embrace it, okay?”

The idea of going with the flow was never one Chase grasped. She didn’t like curveballs outside of the ball field. But maybe it was time for a change. Chase was in her mid-thirties after all and had yet to have a casual sleeping around phase. Maybe it was time.

“I wasted a lot of time with Shane and then I’ve wasted the last couple of years feeling sorry for myself about my scars and shit, and I think it’s time I embrace this part of life. It may have come later than some, but this is my time to figure myself out. And if I can do that with Mason—someone who loves me

and knows me and knows this isn't going to be serious—then maybe that'll help my confidence.”

Charlie's eyes narrowed slightly as she picked up Chase's coffee cup and smelled it. “Just making sure it's not spiked.”

“I got it from your pot.”

“No guarantees. Delaney made that batch. You know I hate hot coffee.”

“So, what's in your cup?”

“Chocolate milk,” Charlie giggled like a little kid. “But in all seriousness, I want you to be careful. If you think this is what you need, then I'm here to support it.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

As the cousins sat in silence drinking their morning beverages, Chase was thankful that Charlie didn't have any more to say about the situation. It was still new to Chase, and she had to figure out what it all meant to her. Hell, she didn't even know if she could look at Mason again without blushing, let alone be alone with her and not want to kiss her.

“So,” Charlie's voice was lower as she leaned in toward Chase, “how was it?”

Chase played dumb to annoy her cousin. “How was what?”

“Sex with Mason. I mean, I've heard the rumors. I just want to know now I have an insider.” Charlie chuckled. “*Insider. Inside her.* Oh man, I'll have to remember to tell Delaney that one.”

“You're ridiculous.”

As Chase recounted her evening for Charlie, she felt more at peace with the decision. Yes, she and Mason were friends and, yes, they'd crossed a line that could never be uncrossed. But Chase was okay with that. It was part of life, and she wasn't going to regret it.

Once she was back at home, she pulled out her phone that had been on silent the entire night. There were several missed

texts and social media notifications, but it was the group chat with her friends that caught her attention. Bradley had sent everyone an invitation to an art show at the gallery on Tuesday. While that wasn't unusual, it was Mason's text in response that made Chase reread it several times.

Can't wait, babe! It's gonna be fabulous! Especially with me as a date!

Accompanying the text was a winking emoji, a heart emoji, a kissing face emoji, and a fire emoji. The combination of them sent a jealous feeling coursing through Chase's body. It was an unfamiliar feeling that she wasn't sure how to process. After all, she and Mason weren't dating. So why was it bothering her that Mason was going out with Bradley?

Well, there's no way I'm going to the art show alone then.

Sending off a text, Chase hoped the recipient would be up for a fake date.

Chapter 9

Mason



The Jaymes Fine Arts Studio art show had become a regular occurrence in the Cove. Bradley Jaymes was a fantastic artist who specialized in sapphic art, so she fit right into town. Her cousin, Molly, also worked at the studio and displayed her photography that varied from landscapes to family portraits. The art show served both of them as the perfect venue to display and sell some of their artwork while also gaining more clients.

Mason enjoyed the art shows as it gave her a chance to get out with her friends. She also enjoyed hanging out with Bradley, whom Mason had hooked up with occasionally. They were friendly enough to hang out with each other casually, but Mason doubted they could ever be more. There was just something that didn't fully click with her and Bradley.

Unlike things had clicked with Chase.

Two days had passed since Mason had awoken to Chase beside her in bed, and she hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. She knew that Chase only wanted to be friends with benefits and usually that wouldn't have bothered Mason. Over the years, she'd had several friends with benefits. Of course, most had ended when the friend met The One.

As she got ready for the art show, she wondered if that's all she was going to be for Chase. It was entirely possible that

Chase could meet someone at any point and they would go back to simply being friends. History told Mason that's what would happen, but her heart was having trouble accepting it. And that scared her.

Mason hoped the night with Bradley would help clear her mind.

After saying goodbye to her dogs, Mason got into her Jeep and drove to Bradley's apartment. Mason had worn her favorite pair of black dress pants, a blue button-up shirt, and a navy-blue vest. She'd added a pair of light gray Converse to finish the look and had to admit she looked pretty damn good. Although fashion wasn't her forte, Mason had her tried-and-true outfits she often went to for special occasions.

And when Bradley walked out of the apartment stairwell in a stunning green dress with thin yellow stripes and heels, she knew it was a special occasion. Mason whistled her approval as Bradley blushed and twirled around.

"Do you like it?"

"Love it." Mason placed a kiss on her cheek. "You're gorgeous, babe."

"Back at you. I love this color on you." Bradley's long fingers ran along Mason's vest. "Maybe I'll get to take it off you later tonight."

"Maybe you will," Mason teased as she held out her arm for Bradley and escorted her around to the passenger side door. She helped Bradley inside before casually walking around to get in the Jeep. They drove to Carlson's Cafe, as was their usual routine for art show nights.

Carlson's Cafe was owned by their friend Maddie's grandmother, Maggie, and they all felt like family there. Mason and Bradley waved at Maggie behind the counter as they took a seat in the dining room. A young hostess gave them menus and took drink orders—a cola for Bradley and an iced tea for Mason. While the cafe had a casual counter service option for lunch, dinner was usually more upscale, with hostesses and orders brought out to the table. And if the

crowd in the cafe was any indication, everyone loved Carlson's.

"I think I'm breaking the cycle tonight." Bradley sat the menu down as Mason looked up at her. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a higher-than-usual ponytail, but a few strands had broken free around her face. "I'm going to do cheese fries with bacon and ranch tonight."

"What? Not a ham and cheese on rye with extra pepperjack cheese and mustard?" Mason dramatically clutches her chest. "I'm shocked."

"I want something greasy. It's been a day."

"What's up?"

"Well, for starters, Molly and Hayden are talking about kids. Can you believe it?" She scoffed. "My cousin and her wife want a baby. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Blake and Alexis are the same way. I swear I haven't had a conversation with Blake in months that didn't inevitably come back to the fact they wanted a baby."

"Molly was telling me today about how she was having to do all these self-injected hormone shots and I'm like, no. I don't want to hear this."

Mason snorted a laugh. "Dude, right?"

"At least you want kids. I could have lived forever without knowing the best place to give yourself a hormone injection."

"The ass, obviously."

"See, you're smart."

"No, my mom is a doctor and openly talks about anything and everything at the dinner table."

"Fair enough," Bradley laughed. "So, what's new with you? You still in a dry spell?"

Mason hesitated over if she should tell Bradley about Chase or not. It wasn't as if she and Bradley were dating, so she wouldn't care if Chase had recently been in her bed. But still, it felt weird to admit out loud to someone that she'd crossed

into the friends with benefits lane with the best friend she swore she'd never sleep with.

She shrugged. "Been pretty boring these days. What about you?"

"Same," Bradley sighed, and thankfully didn't pick up on Mason's lie. They chatted about their lives and families as they ate. It wasn't until they were getting ready to leave that the conversation shifted to how Bradley was nervous about the art show. "The Cove has been so accepting of my work, but I keep wanting to push the boundaries. I just don't know where the line is on artwork I should display at art shows or not."

"Have you thought about having a sectioned off area of the studios that's eighteen plus? Maybe that could help ease people into your more *mature* pieces."

"Oh, that's a good idea. I hadn't thought of that."

"You're welcome."

"Hey, are you still up for being a model for me?"

"Hells yes," Mason enthusiastically nodded. "I need my body immortalized in paint forever."

Mason had agreed to be Bradley's muse months ago, but hadn't yet posed for her. Bradley kept saying she needed to have the right piece in mind first. So Mason waited. She was eager to see whatever Bradley came up with, even if that meant convincing her moms never to look at that painting as long as they lived.

Having parked the Jeep between the cafe and the art studio, Bradley and Mason enjoyed the evening stroll. Their hands brushed repeatedly against each other's as they walked until Mason finally took hold of Bradley's hand. Bradley smiled at her, and Mason smiled back.

"Thanks for always being my date to these things. I know my friends and family will be there, but it's nice to have you there, too. When you're there, I always know I have someone I can go to when I stress out who can relieve that tension."

Bradley didn't have to elaborate. Mason knew what she meant.

"That's what I'm here for," Mason shrugged as if it were no big deal. Which it wasn't. She just didn't know why Bradley's words had rubbed her wrong.

Mason was used to being used by women. It happened a lot of the years and Mason had learned to just roll with it. It usually didn't bother her, but recently the casual sex had been getting to her. That was the main reason she hadn't hooked up with anyone since well before Thanksgiving. She was trying to turn over a new leaf.

Or well, she was until Chase.

Dammit. Why can't I get her off my mind?

She knew any woman would be thrilled to be walking hand in hand with Bradley Jaymes. She was tall, funny, intelligent, and talented. Bradley had everything going for her. Her social media pages were filled with followers singing her praises with every post she made. Some followers even traveled for hours to see Bradley's art shows in person.

And for some reason, Bradley still chose to have Mason be her date. Apparently for sex and nothing more. But just once, Mason wanted someone to want her for her and not just for sex. Mason wrestled with that as she opened the door to the art gallery for Bradley.

"Thank you, my dear."

"Welcome."

Inside the studio, Mason followed Bradley over to the small reception table where Molly and Hayden were setting up clear wine glasses and plates of cheese. It was the usual spread for casual art shows, which catered snacks saved for the more elaborate shows. Mason poured herself a glass of wine and popped a piece of cheese into her mouth.

"Is everything ready?" Bradley nervously straightened out her dress as she looked around the room. Mason popped another piece of cheese and did the same.

“The place looks great. It’ll be a great show.”

And Mason was right. Soon after seven, patrons began to arrive and not even a half hour later, the entire place was packed with people. Mason had greeted her friends as they’d arrived and made sure Bradley’s drink was refreshed, but otherwise, she’d kept to herself. The plate of cheese was empty—primarily thanks to Mason—so she headed into the back room to grab more from the refrigerator.

As she walked back out into the studio, her eyes immediately landed on Chase walking into the room with a woman Mason didn’t recognize on her arm. The new woman was tall; she easily had five inches on Mason’s short frame. She seemed to tower over Chase, but Chase didn’t seem to mind.

On the contrary, Chase looked insanely confident with the mystery woman. They greeted Bradley and Molly, which Mason would have expected as the hosts of the art show. Mason mindlessly ate the cheese squares straight from the bag as she watched Chase introduce the woman to them as if they were a couple.

Oh, shit. My curse didn’t work that fast...did it?

Mason rattled her brain for any recollection of Chase mentioning someone. She couldn’t recall a single time. Chase was typically pretty reserved with her thoughts on other women, which was the opposite of Mason. Continuing to munch on the cheese mindlessly, Mason wondered where Chase could have met someone new.

Since her injury, Chase hadn’t been back to work at the police station, so that seemed to be out of the question. She’s been working at the tree farm with Charlie, but Mason thought the work there ended months ago. But maybe the new woman came to one of the farm’s festivals, saw Chase, and they fell in love. It happened in those lame Christmas movies all the time.

And so what if that’s what happened? It wasn’t like Mason cared that Chase was at the art show with a hot woman and hadn’t even noticed she was sulking by the assortment of cheeses alone. Nope, she didn’t care at all.

Chapter 10

Chase



Mason was jealous.

That much was apparent by the way she sulked in the corner of the art studio eating straight from a bag of cheese. Chase hadn't wanted to notice her sitting by herself, but dammit if Mason hadn't been the first person her eyes had found.

While she was getting ready earlier, she told herself over and over that she would act completely casual around Mason. She would let her know that she was cool with the whole friends with benefits thing. Chase had even invited the new high school softball coach, Sawyer Hart, to be her date for the evening to keep her mind off Mason.

Sawyer had been an absolutely wonderful date so far. They had gotten dinner together at a local Mexican restaurant and had a lovely conversation. Having only moved to the Cove a couple months ago, Sawyer didn't know many people, so she was eager to be invited out. Chase made a mental note to thank Charlie for the connection.

"Wow, this place is packed."

"Yeah, the community really comes out for local businesses. It's really great."

"I love that about here." Sawyer tucked her auburn hair behind her ear as she looked around the room. "Everyone is so

nice and supportive. It's not at all what I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?"

"Honestly, just a quiet New England town with not much going on. The Cove definitely proved me wrong."

"Look at you calling it *the Cove* like you've lived here all your life," Chase teased. *Did Sawyer just blush? Damn, maybe I'm better at flirting than I thought.* "So, do you wanna look around?"

Until then, they'd been standing just inside the door as people milled about around them. Sawyer nodded toward the makeshift bar area. "Let's grab a glass of wine first."

Of course. Where Mason is.

Chase put on a smile as they walked hand in hand to the table. Sawyer picked up a plastic wine glass and handed it to Chase before taking one for herself. As she poured the wine, Chase locked eyes with Mason. She knew instantly that Mason was about to make the entire situation even more awkward.

"Hi," Mason said as she held out a hand to Sawyer, "I'm Mason. And you are...?"

"Oh, hi. I'm Sawyer. I'm with Chase." Clueless, Sawyer turned to her and put an arm around her waist. "She's showing me around town tonight."

"Well, isn't that great?"

"Mason," Chase borderline scolded, "be nice."

"I'm always nice to your *dates*." As she said the word, Mason dropped the bag of cheese on the table. "So, *Sawyer*, how do you know our girl Chase here?"

"Charlie introduced us."

"Sawyer is working at the high school now. She's the new softball coach."

"Is that right?" Mason's mock interest in what Sawyer was saying was blatantly obvious to Chase, but thankfully Sawyer didn't seem to notice. Or, if she did, she was staying on the high road, which Chase admired.

“Yes. I’m really excited for the season to get going. The girls on the team are great.”

“Sadie’s on the team. You know, Delaney’s daughter.”

“I know Sadie,” Mason nearly snapped. “So, Sawyer, the softball coach. Is that all you do? Just coach softball?”

“Mason!” It was Chase’s turn to snap.

“It’s fine.” Sawyer waved her off and Chase was fairly certain the two clearly strong-willed women were about to go at each other’s throat. “I’m an English teacher as well. So, yes, I do more than *just* coach softball.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“I think so.”

“So what do *you* do?”

“Me? Oh, I own a nonprofit that trains service dogs. I really believe in helping people.”

“How convenient,” Sawyer’s sarcastically sweet voice told Chase this wasn’t her first rodeo with someone like Mason. “So do I. That’s why I teach.”

It felt like watching two lions face off over their territory. That’s all Chase could think as she wondered who was going to cave in first. Not that Chase considered herself a prize to be won; she most certainly did not. But she’d also never had two people clearly compete to see who was the better match for her. She would have found it more amusing if she wasn’t certain a cat fight would break out if they kept talking.

“Sawyer, why don’t we go look around the gallery?”

“Don’t leave on my account.” Mason snagged one more cheese square off the silver plate and popped it into her mouth. “I’m leaving.”

Chase didn’t want to watch her go, but their eyes were locked together in a way Chase felt she couldn’t pull away from. Shaking her head, she turned back toward Sawyer as her shoulder dropped.

“I’m sorry about her. She can be a little...”

“Intense?”

“Yeah,” Chase nervously laughed, “but she means well.”

Sawyer removed her arm from around Chase and put it on her hip. “Is she an ex?”

“What?”

“I just get the vibe that there’s something going on between you two.”

“Wow, okay, no. Mason isn’t an ex. She’s my, um, friend. Just a friend. A best friend. A casual best friend. That’s all Mason is.”

“Right.” The skeptical tone in Sawyer’s voice matched the look on her face. Chase almost opened her mouth to explain that they had hooked up, but that was it when Sawyer said, “Let’s look around.”

Chase immediately noticed how Sawyer didn’t take her hand as they walked around the studio. It had caught Chase off guard when Sawyer ever so casually had taken her hand earlier in the day. There had even been a part of Chase that savored the way her hand felt in Sawyer’s. But now the absence of their hands touching made Chase keenly aware that something had changed.

And she knew that had everything to do with Mason.

Why the hell was Mason jealous of Sawyer? It wasn’t like they were dating and Chase showed up with another woman. Sawyer was just a new friend who Chase wanted to show around town. Nothing more.

Not that Sawyer couldn’t be more. Chase would have been lucky if someone like Sawyer was interested in her. Sawyer looked stunning in the form-fitting dress with the neckline that plunged tantalizing deep. Chase had no idea how she kept her breasts from popping out at any moment.

Sawyer was also funny and super smart. She loved literature and wrote poetry, which Chase had only recently found out over their dinner. Overall, Sawyer would have been a great catch.

But she wasn't the one Chase wanted.

And that fact scared Chase more than she wanted to admit.

"Are you ready to go?" Sawyer's tone held some annoyance. Chase nodded, and they headed out of the studio in silence. They walked around the corner where Chase had parked her vehicle as Sawyer cleared her throat. "So, I don't know what that was, but I need you to know that I'm not someone you can use to make your ex-that's-apparently-not-an-ex jealous. I've been arm candy before and hated it. I hoped you'd be different, but apparently, I was wrong."

"Sawyer, I'm..."

"Look, I get it. It's hard to get over some people." There was a hint of sadness in her voice. Chase wanted to protest; she wanted to tell Sawyer she wasn't hung up on Mason. But Sawyer kept talking. "I like you, Chase. But it's clear your heart is elsewhere. If that changes, you have my number."

With a small wave, Sawyer turned to leave the small parking lot.

"Sawyer, wait."

When she turned around, Chase didn't know what she should say. She didn't want to apologize; that would make it seem like she was guilty of what Sawyer had accused her of. But she also didn't want them to leave on such bitter terms. Prior to running into Mason, things had actually been fun for them both. Or so Chase had assumed.

"At least let me drive you home."

"It's okay," Sawyer sadly shrugged. "I'm going to go walk around the wharf for a bit to clear my head. I'll be okay."

"Oh. Well, okay."

They didn't say another word as Sawyer walked down the street to the wharf. Chase waited until she was out of sight before she got into the SUV. She didn't have the desire to start the car. Recently, her house felt lonelier than it had in years, and going there made her depressed sometimes. Going to her parents' house seemed like a bad idea because they would

know something was wrong. Charlie would have a thousand questions, none of which Chase had answers to.

So Chase found herself at Straight to Ale sitting at the bar while some drunk people sang karaoke on the makeshift stage. She was nursing a beer when Alexis Holland came over and handed her another one.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here, or do I just have to keep guessing?”

Chase chuckled. “Can’t a girl just come to a bar and drink without having to answer questions?”

“I’ve never seen you here alone, especially not all dressed up. So it makes me think something is wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Chase snapped. She hated when she couldn’t control her frustration and it bubbled out as anger. Therapy had helped Chase a little with controlling it, but, clearly, she had more work to do. “Sorry. I’ve just had a weird night and don’t feel like talking to you about it.”

“Fine.”

Great, now Alexis is mad at me, too.

Chase didn’t know how she’d managed to make three people mad at her in less than an hour, but she had. Setting down the empty beer bottle, she picked up the new one Alexis had sat in front of her. It was a new IPA that Alexis had suggested, and Chase had to admit it was pretty damn good. She’d already decided to take an Uber home, so she didn’t care how much alcohol she consumed.

She was three beers in when she felt a gentle hand on her lower back. Startled, Chase turned in her seat to see Mason sitting down beside her.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Alexis called.” There was no anger or frustration in Mason’s voice. Instead, it was calm and slightly worried sounding. “She said you were drinking alone and looked upset, so I wanted to check on you.”

“I don’t need you to protect me.”

“I’m not. I’m just checking on you to make sure you’re okay.”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” A confidence Chase only seemed to find after a few beers overtook her body. “Oh, could it be because you were an insane jerk to my *date* tonight? Or could it be that she doesn’t want to go out with me anymore because she thinks I’m *in love* with you or some shit.”

Mason looked taken aback by her bluntness. It wasn’t often that Chase lost her cool, but when she did, she usually didn’t stop until she’d pissed off everyone in her path. Even knowing that about herself didn’t stop her from railing on Mason.

“Why do you think you have the right to be *jealous* about someone I’m with? We agreed to be friends with benefits and said nothing was going to change, but you’ve never acted the way you did tonight. It was like you were trying to prove something to Sawyer.”

“I wasn’t.” Mason swallowed and looked down at the counter. “I don’t know what my deal is. You didn’t deserve that, and neither did Sawyer. I think she’s great. Really. It just caught me off guard that she was with you.”

Seeing Mason vulnerable wasn’t something Chase was used to. Mason usually kept a stone facade to keep herself from getting hurt, but now all that seemed to be gone. Chase didn’t know what that meant.

“Because,” Chase tried to swallow but her mouth was beyond dry, “she’s too good for me?”

“No. God, no. You deserve a queen. Or a king.”

“So, why were you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous,” she quickly quipped.

“You were.”

“I just wouldn’t have pictured you with her, that’s all. And seeing you two together caught me off guard.” Not only was Mason jealous, she was also nervous. “I wasn’t expecting you to bring a date.”

“You were there with Bradley.”

“So?”

“So, what’s it matter that I was there with a date when you were too?”

“Because I’m not dating Bradley. We’re just friends.”

“And I’m not dating Sawyer. We are just friends too, you know.”

Turning her attention away from Mason, Chase fished her credit card out of her bag and handed it to the bartender. Alexis hadn’t made her way back over to her yet, and Chase understood why. She’d text her later and apologize.

Mason inhaled sharply. “Well, I didn’t know that.”

“Now you do.”

Taking her card back from the bartender, Chase signed the receipt after adding a generous tip. She gathered up her things before she remembered she hadn’t called an Uber yet. Mason must have noticed her fumbling with the app and took the phone from her.

“I’ll take you home.”

“It’s fine.”

“Come on. Don’t be stubborn.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

Mason’s smile threw Chase off. It was so sweet and sincere, and Chase wanted to kiss her then and there. “Then prove it by letting me drive you home.”

Reluctantly, Chase agreed. She worried the entire silent drive to her house that they’d end up in bed together again. Not that Chase would complain. Chase just wasn’t sure she needed to do that again. Maybe friends with benefits with Mason was more than Chase could handle.

“Okay, get out,” Mason teased as she parked the Jeep in Chase’s driveway.

“Aren’t you going to walk me inside?”

The fuck, Chase? Get your ass inside by yourself.

“Not tonight.”

Chase didn't need to ask why. The answer was all over Mason's face. If she walked her inside, they both knew what would happen. And it was apparent neither were up for that tonight. So instead, Chase gathered her bag and her phone and stepped out of the Jeep.

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime.”

Walking up to the front door, Chase was keenly aware that Mason was watching her, which made her unnecessarily nervous. She fumbled with getting the key in the door and nearly hit her forehead on the door as she opened it. Chase waved at Mason as she closed the door behind her.

She waited by the door for Mason to knock, as it would have been the most normal thing for Mason to do. But no knock came. Instead, Chase heard Mason's Jeep head down the street. Chase sighed and refused to let the tears fall as she headed to bed.

Alone.

Chapter 11

Mason



Easter weekend meant the Mackenzie family was off to Cape Cod. It had been their tradition since Mason's moms had purchased the home when she was a teenager. The house was a typical Cape Cod style that had access to a private beach shared by other families in the neighborhood. A large pool took up half the backyard while luscious grass grew on the other half. They had even built a fire pit a few summers prior that had quickly become a favorite hangout spot on cooler nights.

Mason loved being on the Cape. Although Moonflower Cove was on the ocean, there was something different about the salt air in the Cape that eased all of Mason's troubles. And she had a lot of them these days.

It has been almost a week since the art show, which also served as the last time she'd seen Chase. They had texted a few times over the previous few days, but their conversations were very platonic. There were no talks of their feelings or anything, and deep down, Mason was relieved. She hadn't fully confronted her feelings for Chase yet and she hoped the Cape air would help her do so.

Having left her dogs with Mallory and Emery for the weekend, Mason felt she was missing a limb or two. It was so rare for Mason to go anywhere without them, so she savored the time she was pup-free. She loved Chance and Odin with

every fiber of her being, but she was thankful to have a break from their constant needs as well. Coming to the Cape meant Mason could leave all her worries and responsibilities behind, if only for a few days.

“Mace,” her mom, Isla, called out from the kitchen, “did you bring in all the groceries from the van?”

“Yeah.” Mason pulled herself away from whatever movie her younger siblings had settled on and joined her mom in the kitchen. Although Blake looked more like their mother, Mason could see her resemblance between them as well. They had the same brown eyes, the same thick head of hair. And they each had a love for shepherd’s pie, which is what Isla was preparing for dinner. “Do you need anything else? I can run to the store.”

“No, it’s okay.” Putting the casserole dish into the oven, Isla set the timer before wiping her hands on the towel draped over her shoulder. “I thought I had more eggs, but we can get them tomorrow.”

“That works.”

“Okay, so dinner will be ready in about a half hour. Vera and Alexis took Harper to the beach. Blake is on a work call, and the rest of the kids are occupied. Why don’t we treat ourselves to a glass of wine on the patio, hmm?”

“I’m all in for that.”

As Isla grabbed two wine glasses, Mason selected a red wine from the wine collection on the counter and followed her mother outside. They each took seats in the brightly colored Adirondack chairs that overlooked the pool area. Thanks to the heater, they could use the pool year-round, but Mason hated getting out of the pool when it was still cold outside. Her younger siblings and Harper would undoubtedly get in the pool at some point that weekend, Mason was sure.

“So, how are things with you?” Isla asked as she poured them each a glass of wine. “We haven’t talked in forever.”

Mason should have known that question laced with subtle guilt would be asked sooner rather than later. And her mother wasted barely three hours before asking it. While she hadn’t

exactly been avoiding Isla the last few weeks, she had made it a point to only talk to her via text. Same with her mama, Vera. They both knew her too well, and she found it best to keep certain information out of their minds.

And being friends with benefits with Chase was definitely one of those things.

“Just been working a lot. Getting ready for the premiere of the documentary.”

“Oh, remind me when we get home, I want to show you the new dress I bought for the premiere. Vera says I look hot in it.” Mason rolled her eyes but secretly loved how in love her parents still were after all these years. “So, other than work, what’s been going on?”

Does she know something?

“Not much.”

“Come on,” she playfully pushed her shoulder, “give me something. I’ve been living with seventeen-year-olds who are completely over me and a ten-year-old who’s going on forty-five. I need to know what’s going on in my favorite daughter’s life.”

“Then go ask Blake.”

“Oh, stop.” Isla rolled her eyes at Mason’s teasing. Their moms always told each of them they were their favorite, so it was a running joke in the family. Granted, Mason wondered at times if Blake wasn’t actually the favorite. “Blake is so focused on work and having a baby these days that I barely talk to her about anything else. Harper is a better conversationalist than her these days.”

“Harper came out of the womb talking.”

“Well, that’s true,” Isla chuckled. “So, nothing really going on in your life?”

“Nope. Nothing at all. Same old boring shit every day.” She lied and hoped Isla would believe it.

“Who’s keeping the boys this weekend?”

“Mallory and Emery. They have a puppy, so it’ll be good for all of them.”

“Oh, right. They got one for Christmas, didn’t they? Lucky, was it?”

“Yup, that’s him.”

“I’m glad Mallory found someone like Emery. She needed her.”

Mason gritted her teeth. She knew where the conversation was headed and it was too late to turn back. “Yeah, she is.”

“Anyone new in your life?”

There it was.

“Nope. No one new.” It wasn’t a lie this time, at least. Isla narrowed her eyes at her, and Mason turned her attention to the pool as she sipped her wine.

“Oh, well, that’s convincing.” She knew from the sigh that the conversation was far from over. “Did you go to the art show with Bradley?”

“As always.”

“That’s good. She’s a good girl.”

“Um, yeah. I guess.”

“Have you thought about dating her?”

Mason groaned, “Mom.”

“Well, I’m just asking. I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy, Mom.”

“I know, and I’m sorry if I insinuated otherwise. I’m happy you’re comfortable with yourself and your life. As your mother, it makes me happy and proud to see you doing so well.”

“But?”

“*But* what?”

“I just feel like you’re about to say something else.”

“No. I’m not.” Isla took a sip of wine before continuing.
“But...”

“There it is.”

“...I want you to have all you ever wanted in life and I know you want that to include a family at some point. So, please forgive me if I meddle in your love life. I just want to know my baby girl is going to be okay.”

“I will be, Mom.” Reaching out, Mason covered Isla’s hand with her own and squeezed. “I promise.”

“Good.” Isla picked up Mason’s hand and kissed it. Mason was thankful the conversation seemed to be dropped as her mother started talking about the twins starting their college applications. They casually chatted about family and life until Vera, Alexis, and Harper walked up the worn footpath that led to the beach.

Harper ran up to Mason and held out a large shell she’d found. “Macy, look!”

“Whoa, Harper! That’s so cool,” she tried to match the seven-year-old’s excited tone. Mason took the shell and studied it as if it was the greatest thing she’d ever seen. “I love it. It’ll look great in your collection.”

“Yep, and—and guess what?”

“What?”

“Mommy said that tonight after dinner we can go back to the beach and look for shooting stars. Do you wanna come with us?”

“Um, absolutely!”

“Yay!” Harper bounced up and down excitedly as her strawberry blonde ponytail did the same.

“Harp, let’s go clean up before dinner, okay?” Alexis took Harper’s hand and led her inside the house as Vera sat down on the chair beside Isla.

Mason hoped no one else picked up on the slight tension between her and Alexis. After Chase got drunk at the bar,

Alexis had called Mason to come and pick her up. While that wasn't enough to create any tension, what else was said on the phone call was.

Alexis had asked Mason about what could have upset Chase so much. When Mason didn't answer, Alexis rapidly put the pieces together. Mason begged her not to say anything, not yet anyway. And as far as Mason knew, Alexis had kept that promise. She also knew she needed to talk to Alexis at some point about everything that had happened between her and Chase. After all, Mason had been dying to talk about it.

Just not to her mothers.

Mason knew if she stayed outside with her parents for any length of time, they would tag team her and make her spill the beans. So to prevent that, Mason stood and smiled down at her moms.

"I'm going to get the table ready for dinner."

"Oh, honey, don't worry about that." Vera took the wine glass from Isla and took a sip. "So, did you get her to tell you anything?"

"Nope. She's a closed book."

"Oh, geez." Mason rolled her eyes. "I knew you were up to something. I mean, I know you care about my life, but the prodding on my dating life was a very Mama thing to do."

"Yeah," Isla groaned, "I went a little too Vera-y on you."

"Hey now. Don't make fun of my love for my children."

"I never would, dear." As the two kissed, Mason rolled her eyes once more.

"And on that note, I'll leave you two to keep making out while I go set the table for... Chase?"

Mason couldn't believe her eyes. Why in the hell was Chase there? Sure, Chase occasionally joined them on trips to the Cape, but there had been no mention of her joining them this time.

“What are you doing here?” The question came out with more frustration than Mason intended.

“Oh, um, Alexis invited me.” She casually shrugged as if it were no big deal. And normally, it wouldn’t have been. But as Chase stood a mere few feet away from her looking beyond adorable in jeans, a Stevie Nicks T-shirt, and a black beanie on her head, Mason had to resist the urge to run to her and kiss her. “Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s okay, sweetheart.” Always in a hosting mode, Vera stood up to greet Chase with a hug. All the while, Chase’s eyes remained locked with Mason’s. “We love having you here, Chase.”

“Thanks.” Chase was nervous; Mason could tell by the way she shifted her weight from one sandal-covered foot to the other. “Dinner smells great, by the way. Shepherd’s pie?”

“You know it.”

“It’s probably ready to come out.” Standing, Isla walked toward them as she smiled. “Why don’t you two go check on it and Mason and I will grab our glasses and be in in a minute?”

As Vera and Chase headed back into the house, Mason could feel her mother’s eyes nearly boring holes into her body. She picked up the bottle of wine off the ground before standing by Mason’s side. Mason hadn’t moved from the spot where she first saw Chase. Slowly, she turned her head to look at her mom.

“What?”

““No one new,”” Isla chuckled. “Sneaky.”

Chapter 12

Chase



To say that dinner with the Mackenzies was awkward would be the biggest understatement of the year. It was beyond apparent that Isla and Alexis knew something was up between Chase and Mason. Their eyes darting back and forth to each other weren't as subtle as they probably thought it was. Mason had also barely looked in her direction, although the two were seated next to each other at dinner. But that didn't stop their knees from occasionally touching under the table.

After dessert, the family separated to do their own things. The twins, Brayden and Ellie, were going out with some friends while Everleigh, the youngest, and Harper headed down to the beach with Vera and Blake. Isla and Mason were in the kitchen not saying a word to each other as they cleaned up. Which left Chase and Alexis alone outside by the fire pit.

“So, I'll take it you didn't tell Mason I was coming?”

“I didn't think it would be a big deal.” Alexis nonchalantly shrugged. “You come here a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is there a reason she wouldn't want you here?”

“No.”

“Well, is there a reason you don't want to be here?”

“Lex.” Chase turned her head to look at Alexis. There was the faintest smile on her lips, and it was then she knew Alexis was teasing. “How do you know?”

“Oh, please.” She waved her off. “You two aren’t as coy as you might think. I’ve known since that night you showed up at the bar.”

“How?”

“Because you were all sad and depressed and then Mason walked in and *bam!* Your entire demeanor changed. And when you two left together, I figured you would end up in bed together. Probably not for the first time either.”

“Oh, geez.” Chase covered her face with her hands. It was one thing for her friend to know she’d slept with Mason. It was an entire other thing for that friend to be Mason’s sister-in-law. “I hate how perceptive you are.”

“It’s a newfound gift.”

“Too bad I’m the recipient of it.”

“So,” Alexis sat up on the edge of the Adirondack chair and leaned in toward Chase, “are you two dating? Come on, you can tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” The giggle that escapes from her mouth indicated otherwise. Alexis arched an eyebrow at her, and Chase sighed. “There’s really not. We’re friends with benefits. That’s all.”

Alexis laughed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No,” Chase sat up on the edge of her chair, “it’s not nothing. That laugh meant something. Do you know something I don’t? Is Mason dating someone? Oh, my god, is that why she didn’t come home with me the other night?”

Chase’s mouth was spilling every thought that ran through her brain and she knew she needed to stop. She took a deep

breath and forced herself to focus. The bemused look on Alexis's face confused her.

“Again, what?”

“Nothing. I've just never seen you so jealous and nervous about Mason. It's cute.”

“Oh, so my pain is funny to you?”

Alexis held up her thumb and forefinger really close together. “Just a little.”

“Geez, thanks.” Chase sunk back into the chair as she borderline pouted.

She hated the conflicting emotions that had become normal for her since she'd slept with Mason. On the one hand, she loved Mason and wanted to be more than friends with her. On the other, she knew that went against everything that friends with benefits were supposed to be. And Chase wasn't sure if confessing her feelings to Mason would scare her away or not. It was a risk she didn't want to take.

Not yet, anyway.

“I don't know, Lex. One minute I think, oh this is great and the next I'm crying myself to sleep because she didn't want to come inside and be with me the other night.”

“Well, you were drunk,” Alexis defended Mason. “Maybe she was just being respectful.”

“Maybe. But we both know Mason has slept with people who were drunk before. I don't know why she wouldn't with me. I gave her every opportunity to say yes. But she didn't want to. She let me go inside alone and just left. That doesn't seem very *friends with benefits* to me when I'm getting no benefits.”

Alexis was quiet for a moment, which was unusual for her. “Can I say something?”

Chase nodded.

“Mason has been with a lot of people. We both know that. But I can say with absolute certainty that Mason has never

looked at anyone the way she looks at you. She loves you, that much is clear. So, maybe—just maybe—you’re more than a friend with benefits for her. Mason clearly respects you, and I know you do her as well. Maybe that was her way of showing it.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Sometimes it’s good to get out of your own head and have someone help you see what’s right in front of you. Sophia did that for me with Blake. If she hadn’t, I don’t know if we’d be together.”

“Please. You two were destined to be together.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t mean it was a walk in the park.” She shrugged. “But maybe love isn’t always supposed to be easy. Maybe it’s supposed to be messy and confusing, so we appreciate it more when things work out.”

“Do you think things could work out with me and Mason?”

Alexis nodded. “I know they can. If that’s what you both want, then I say go for it. I know what it’s like to be loved by a Mackenzie woman, and it’s pretty damn great.”

Yeah, it is.

“For what it’s worth, I support it.” Alexis winked as she stood. She must have seen Isla and Mason walk outside, because she nodded her head toward them as Chase turned around. “Isla, so you want to go down to the beach with me?”

“Absolutely.”

Looping their arms around each other’s arms, Isla and Alexis nearly skipped off to the beach. Alone in the backyard with Mason, Chase swallowed her nerves and inhaled sharply.

But before she could say anything, Mason asked, “Do you want to join them on the beach?”

“Maybe in a minute.” Chase summoned her courage. “Right now, I need to ask you something.”

“Okay,” Mason narrowed her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. At least, I hope nothing is wrong. It’s just, I’ve been thinking about why you didn’t come in the other night? After you picked me up from the bar? Why didn’t you come inside?” Tears nipped at her eyes as her voice cracked. “Is it because of my body?”

“What?” Mason’s voice was barely audible and her brow furrowed in confusion.

“My scars. I know I’m not the prettiest person you’ve been with and my body is far from perfect and I wanted you to come in so badly and you didn’t and I need to know why.”

“Chase.”

Slowly, Mason closed the space between them and brushed the tears from Chase’s cheek. Chase wanted nothing more than to run away from the intense look of understanding in Mason’s eyes.

“Your body is beautiful. You are beautiful. I’m so sorry if I ever made you feel like you weren’t the most beautiful person in the world.” Mason caressed Chase’s cheek with her palm. “I didn’t come in the other night because I knew you were drunk. But believe me, I wanted to so badly. But I respect you more than to take advantage of you when you’re vulnerable.”

Unable to control her emotions any longer, Chase let out a sound that was part laugh, part cry. She went into Mason’s arms and buried her face in her shoulder as Mason tightly wrapped her arms around her. Mason gently kissed her several times until Chase finally regained control over her emotions.

“Is it okay if I show you how much I love your body?”

“Like I’m going to say no to that.”

Taking her hand, Mason led Chase to her room on the second floor as she tenderly removed Chase’s clothes. It wasn’t rushed like it had been the first time. Things were slower, more sensual. Mason kissed her bare shoulders as she gently backed her up to the bed. As Chase lay down on the bed, Mason’s lips moved to her neck, then down to her breasts.

When Mason’s lips arrived at the start of the scar running down her hip, Chase felt her breath hitch in her throat. But

Mason tenderly ran her soft fingertips down the length of the scar. She followed it up by placing the sweetest kisses Chase had ever felt along the same line. Mason did the same to the scar over her knee before slowly trailing her kisses back up Chase's body.

She wiped the tears from Chase's cheek once more before kissing her lips. "You're so beautiful."

"So are you." Wrapping her arms around Mason's neck, Chase pulled her body closer to hers. No one had ever treated Chase with so much love and attention, and she knew no one else ever would. There was no way she could ever lose Mason. "Touch me more. Please."

And Mason did. She slipped her fingers inside Chase's wet center as Chase moaned with pleasure. As Mason's fingers thrust in and out, Chase's body fell into the rhythm. All the while keeping their lips barely parted from each other. When Chase came, she grabbed onto the back of Mason's neck and held on as if her life depended on it.

Because at that moment, it probably did.

Chase had never orgasmed like that before. And she honestly never wanted to with anyone else ever again. She was about to say as much when Mason rolled off her and onto the bed beside her. But as she opened her mouth, there was a knock at the door.

"Mason?" It was Vera. "Are you in there?"

"Shit." As if they were kids about to get caught, they each scrambled out of bed and quickly put on their clothes. "I'm changing clothes. Give me a minute."

"Oh, well, I was going to let you know that it's a little cold down by the beach, so if you want to join us to look at the stars, bring a jacket and a blanket. Okay, sweetie?"

"Okay, Mama." Motioning for Chase to go into the bathroom, Mason cracked open the door. Chase grabbed her shoes off the floor and scampered into the bathroom. "I'll be down there in a minute."

“Oh, okay. Have you seen Chase? I was going to tell her the same thing.”

“I’ll tell her, Mama. See you in a few.”

Closing the door, Mason waited a few moments before opening the bathroom door. Chase grinned at her. “I bet that happens all the time for you.”

“Honestly,” Mason nervously laughed, “I haven’t been caught by my parents having sex since I lived at their house. So this is a first.”

“Wow, I’m so honored to be your first.” Looping her arms around Mason’s neck, they locked lips once more. Chase pushed Mason up against the sink as she slipped her hand down the front of her sweatpants. Mason’s surprised gasp sent a warm wave over Chase’s entire body.

They were clearly going to be longer than a minute.

Chapter 13

Mason



The gentle waves crashing into the sandy beach were more soothing than Mason remembered. It had been too long since she'd simply enjoyed the sound, and she was thankful for the reminder. Of course, she was most grateful that Chase was sitting next to her on a warm blanket.

They'd donned sweatshirts and jackets for the cool April night along with a couple of blankets. Mason had spread one out for them to sit on while the other was draped over their legs. Under the blanket, their fingers almost mindlessly kept touching and intertwining. Not far down the beach, the rest of the family were gathered around in a circle playing some card game. A few dim lanterns were their only light, aside from the moon.

"I love it here," Chase sighed as she laid down on the blanket. She gently pulled at the hem of Mason's sweatshirt for her to do the same. Which, of course, Mason did. Chase snuggled closer to her and Mason slipped an arm under her head. "But I think the Cove is much better."

"Oh, most definitely."

"But it's nice to get away."

"Get you out of a routine."

"Helps you see things better."

“Hmm,” Mason hummed as she put her other arm under her own head for support. “What are you seeing better here?”

Mason had her suspicions she already knew the answer. It was the same thing she’d seen. She and Chase were tiptoeing to the border of friends with benefits to lovers. While Mason was still worried about any possible negative outcome from their dating, she also knew she couldn’t stand to see Chase with anyone else.

Chase shifted her position slightly and rested her head on Mason’s shoulder. “The stars.”

“Ahh, yes. The stars are pretty. But they’re just as pretty in the Cove.”

“Maybe we can look at them together sometime when we’re back home.”

“Absolutely. I’d love that.”

“Me, too.”

Under the blanket, Chase weaved her fingers together with Mason’s and squeezed. Mason turned her head to face her and was pleasantly surprised to find Chase looking back. They both giggled like little kids who had just been caught doing something they shouldn’t.

“You two seem to be having a good time.” Vera walked over to them as they both sat up. “Why don’t you come and join us? It’ll be nice to have the whole family together.”

“Um, yeah. Sure, Mama.” Standing, Mason helped Chase do the same in the unsteady sand. She could tell Chase’s body was sore by the way she hobbled. Mason slipped an arm around Chase’s waist as Chase put an arm around her neck. “I got you.”

“Thanks.”

“How bad is it hurting?”

“Not too bad,” she said through gritted teeth. After a couple of steps, Chase stopped and sighed. “Okay, a lot.”

“Do you wanna go inside?”

“We should hang out with your family.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Another sigh. Mason could see the frustration on Chase’s face. “I think it’s the sand. It hurts to walk on it too much. I hate this.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Mason resisted the urge to kiss her. “Um, Mama? We’re actually going to head inside, if that’s okay.”

“Is everything okay?” Vera turned around with concern on her face.

“Yeah, it is.”

“It’s me. The sand hurts to walk on.”

“Oh, sweetie, I didn’t even think of that. Of course. Do you want me to help you back inside?”

Mason expected Chase to say *no*, but instead she nodded. Without hesitation, Vera took her place on the other side of Chase as they slowly walked back up to the house. They helped Chase onto the couch as Vera propped her leg up on the ottoman.

“How’s that feel?”

“Much better. Thanks, Vera.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie. Let me know if you need anything else. I have my phone on me.”

“Thanks, Mama.” Mason sat down beside Chase and placed a hand on her leg. “I’ll take care of her.”

“I know you will, baby.” Vera placed a kiss on Mason’s head. “Oh, by the way, Harper decided she wanted to sleep in the kid’s room, so we moved the rollaway bed in there. So, unless Chase wants to sleep on the couch, you two will need to share a bed.”

“Oh, um, sure. No problem, Mama.”

“Good. If I don’t see you two again before bedtime, have a good night.” With a wink, Vera turned and headed back outside to join the rest of the family. Mason and Chase sat in

silence for a few moments before they both erupted into giggles.

“As if we weren’t already planning on sharing a bed.”

“Well, Mama says,” Mason teased. Putting an arm around Chase’s neck, she was happy when Chase snuggled up next to her. Mason kissed her cheek and noticed the way Chase was looking down at her leg as their laughter faded away. “What’s on your mind?”

“I was just thinking about fireflies.”

“Random, but okay.”

“When I was little, we used to run around my grandparents’ backyard and catch fireflies in jars. I really wish I could run again. Not this hobbling crap. But really run and chase fireflies again.”

Sighing, Chase tossed up her hands and leaned her head back onto Mason’s arm.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t complain. I’m grateful to be alive. I should look at it that way, right?”

“You have every right to complain in my book.” Mason gently leaned her head against Chase’s. “You didn’t deserve what happened to you. You didn’t have a say in what happened after that. And that has to be hard to accept. For what it’s worth, I think you’ve handled everything well and you’re always upbeat about it. But it’s okay for you to have a pity party every now and then though.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“And who knows, maybe one day you’ll be chasing fireflies again.”

“Mmm, I’d love that.”

As they sat in silence together, Mason wondered how she could make Chase’s dream happen. She would do anything to make Chase happy, even if it meant shipping in fireflies from Fireflies R Us or wherever they came from. Mason’s mind was already running wild with ideas when Chase shifted in her seat to face her.

“What are you doing this week?”

“Work. Why?”

“We should do something. Together. Me and you.” She shrugged as if it were no big deal if Mason said *no*. “If you want.”

“I’d love that, but...”

“No,” Chase pouted. “No *buts*.”

“I have something I’m doing for work this week that I can’t skip.”

“Is it for the premiere?”

“No, it’s something else.”

“Why are you being so vague?”

“It’s nothing, okay? I have to go out of town this week for work.”

In reality, it was so much more than a simple work trip.

Mason and Mallory had been partnering with another service dog organization to surprise Chase with a service dog of her own. Chase had been on the fence about a service dog since her injury and Mason had never forced her one way or the other. But she knew how much Chase could benefit from a service dog.

The dog, Scout, had been specially trained for Chase’s needs. Scout would be able to help Chase with her balance and help her stand. Once they picked up Scout from the trainer, Mallory would work with the dog and Chase until the two became the perfect pair. Mason had high hopes that Scout would be an ideal match for Chase.

As long as Chase was receptive, that is. Mason had offered to train a service dog for her soon after her injury but Chase wanted to wait until she was healed more to start training. They kicked the idea down the road several times until Mason finally decided about six months ago that it was time. She hoped her surprise didn’t backfire on her.

“A work trip?”

“Yes.”

“Mhmm.”

“We can hang out when I get back through. If you want.”

“Yeah, I guess if you’re not too busy.” Chase was annoyed, Mason could tell. She hated keeping something from Chase, but hoped the surprise would be worth it in the end. Scooting to the edge of the couch, Chase stood. “I’m going to bed.”

“Hey,” Mason grabbed her hand as she struggled to stand. She helped her to her feet before looking her in the eyes. “I want to hang out with you. Please believe that.”

“I do.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah,” Chase grinned. “I guess I can’t get too bent out of shape that you didn’t tell me you were going out of town. It’s not like we’re dating.”

Even though she laughed, Mason could tell it wasn’t a jovial one. It was more nervous and maybe even more frustrating than anything. Mason was about to apologize when Chase took her hand.

“Come on. Let’s go to bed. I’m tired.”

Chase turned to go, but Mason didn’t let go of her hand. She waited until Chase looked back at her to say, “Too tired for one more go around?”

“Never,” Chase giggled as they headed to the bedroom for another night together.

Chapter 14

Chase



Not having a full-time job sometimes meant that Chase got lost in her own head. Her free time was often spent pondering the *what if's* of life, which recently meant her mind went to Mason.

Mason.

There was no denying Chase could fall for her. Hell, she probably had already fallen for her. But neither had made a move to say as much. In fact, they hadn't really discussed their relationship—or lack thereof—at all. Chase had hoped that after their blissfully sweet Easter weekend on the Cape that maybe, just maybe, things were changing.

But now Mason was gone to Colorado with Bradley, and Chase had no idea why.

Of course, she had conjured many reasons in her brain over the last few days. They could be smoking pot, or hiking, or wandering around the Denver airport. Maybe Bradley had an art show there and Mason went with her. Or maybe they went to elope. Chase's brain often didn't bother to make logical assumptions.

In all reality, it was most likely for Bradley's work. She had become a well-known artist, so traveling to Colorado for a

show wasn't that far-fetched. But they didn't explain why Mason was so evasive about where she was going.

Three days had passed since they'd arrived back home in the Cove. Chase hadn't seen Mason since then, and they'd only texted a few times. Each time Chase asked for details, Mason changed the subject. It was all getting very frustrating for Chase. Snipping off a rogue branch from a pine tree, Chase let out a pent-up sigh.

"Okay, you have to stop doing that unless you're going to talk." Charlie was a few feet down from her, also pruning the trees. They had taken advantage of the warm day and headed out to do some light maintenance on the trees so they'd be in perfect shape by Christmas. "Do you wanna talk or not?"

"Leave her alone, babe," Delaney scolded from the row behind them. "She's a grown woman. She will talk when she's ready."

"She is ready. She just won't admit that."

"Hey, *she* is standing right here, okay? And I have shears and I'm not afraid to use them." She punctuated the point by snapping the pruning shears in Charlie's direction. They both laughed as they got back to work.

The truth was, Chase wanted to talk. She wanted to tell someone about how falling asleep in Mason's arm three nights in a row had been beyond blissful. Chase couldn't recall a time she'd fallen asleep so soundly since her injury. Normally, she tossed and turned all night. But not in Mason's arms. In Mason's arms, she was safe and loved, even if so far they hadn't said the latter word to each other.

It wasn't as if Chase was expecting them to. She'd never had a friend with benefits before, but she assumed it wasn't customary to drop an *I love you* while snuggled up in bed together watching *Muppets Take Manhattan*. Chase had thought about it though; thought about it so much she'd whispered the words into Mason's ear after verifying she was asleep their last night in the Cape. Although Mason hadn't heard them, Chase meant the words more than anything.

After all, Chase had loved Mason for years. Mason was her best friend, and while there were times Chase wanted to kill her, she genuinely loved her. But Chase knew that platonic friendship love was different than whatever feelings had emerged in her soul. She'd been chalking it up to the fact they were sleeping together. Prior to Mason, Chase never slept around. That at least kept the thought of *this could be something more* at bay long enough for Chase to ignore it. Chase had become quite the avoider the last few days.

"Anyone here?" Mason's voice accompanied the sound of slamming car doors. Not one, but three. Chase looked at Charlie, who shrugged. "Marco?"

"Polo," Charlie called out as they made their way to the end of the row near the barn. Standing by the Jeep were Mason, Bradley, and Mallory. All three looked like they were up to something and judging by Charlie's look, she thought so, too. "What are you all up to?"

Delaney crossed her arms. "Something suspicious by the looks of them."

"Mace, what's going on?"

"We have a surprise for you." Mason was absolutely beaming. She was up to something. There was no doubt about it. Her mind ran rampant with ideas as she furrowed her brow in confusion.

"For... me?"

"Yep." Reaching out her hand, Mason took hold of Chase's and led her around to the back of the Jeep. Everyone followed, and Chase felt nervous.

What the heck is happening?

"So, I know these last two years have been hard on you, but you've never let that stop you. I've been amazed by your strength and perseverance through all these trials and I just wanted to do something for you to help make life as easy for you as I can."

Grinning, Mason opened the back door to the Jeep to reveal a gorgeous German Shepherd inside a crate. Chase gasped as

Mason let the dog out. She was a beautiful dog; mostly black with patches of brown on her head, feet, and stomach. There was a service dog vest on her back.

“Who is this?”

“This is Scout.” Mason held out the leash attached to Scout’s collar to Chase. “She’s your service dog.”

Chase’s head was spinning. Beside her, Charlie gasped in what seemed to be shock and excitement as she bounced up and down before hugging Delaney. Taking the leash from Mason, Chase looked down at Scout and back at Mason.

“You got me a service dog?” Her voice cracked as she closed the space between them and hugged Mason. Mason held her tight as she cried into her shoulder.

Getting a service dog had been a dream of Chase’s for years. However, the expense of purchasing one was more than Chase could handle on her income. Mason had offered to fund her one through her organization, but Chase always felt she was taking away from someone who needed it more. She has basically written off the idea of even having her own service dog. Until now.

“I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Clearly.” Mason pulled back just enough so she could wipe the tears from Chase’s face. There were tears in her own eyes as she teased, “I’ve never seen you speechless before.”

“Shut up.”

“Are you happy?”

“I’m so happy.”

Not caring that anyone else was around, Chase kissed Mason. She framed Mason’s face with her hands and felt Mason wrap her arms around her waist. If Delaney hadn’t cleared her throat to get their attention, they might have made out much longer.

Chase blushed as she turned to face their friends. Charlie and Mallory looked surprised while Bradley and Delaney had

looks that screamed *finally* on their faces. Beside her, Mason awkwardly laughed.

“Well, all it took was a dog to get her to act like that.”

Playfully nudging Mason in the side, Chase turned her attention to Scout.

“So, tell me more about this beautiful girl.”

“Well, her name is Scout, and she’s a two-and-a-half-year-old German Shepherd. Mallory picked her out because she’s tall and stocky, so she’ll be able to help you stand or gain your balance. She’s super playful; so playful she got kicked out of the police academy program. But a friend of mine in Colorado saw the potential in her and she’s turned into an amazing service dog.”

As she listened to Mason talk about Scout, Mason stroked the dog’s head between her ears as she nuzzled her face against her leg. Scout was so sweet and Chase knew they were going to be great partners.

“Mallory’s offered to help you and Scout with any specific task she needs trained on, and she’ll always do remedial training with Scout, as well.”

“And I got you this.” Mallory took a harness out of the Jeep and held it out to Chase. “I’ll teach you how to use it; it can be helpful when standing or sitting to keep your balance. Otherwise, though, she’s great on a leash.”

“I can’t believe you all did this for me.” Chase wiped the tears away from her eyes before leaning down to kiss Scout between the ears. Scout returned the sentiment by licking her face. “Oh, I think we’re going to be best buddies. What do you think, sweet girl?”

Another lick on the cheek was the response from Scout, and Chase laughed.

“Hey, are you all hungry?” Delaney’s question caught all of their attentions. “We were going to grill out tonight, if you all want to join us.”

“Yeah, Delaney got some fancy grill that she’s wanting to break in.”

“What do you all say? You in?”

“I’m in,” Mallory chimed in quickly.

Bradley agreed, “Same.”

Mason looked at Chase, as if silently asking if she wanted her to stay. Chase nodded. “We’re in, too.”

“Awesome! I’ll get things ready inside. Do you all want to help me?” Despite the fact she was trying *not* to be obvious, it was clear Delaney was trying to give Mason and Chase a moment alone.

As everyone headed inside the house, Chase and Mason walked toward the barn, with Scout in the middle of them. Chase couldn’t contain the excitement she felt at having Scout and Mason by her side. Once they were inside the barn, Mason closed the door.

“So, um, what was that?”

“What was what?” Chase sat down on one of the chairs by a small table and pet Scout.

“You know what, Chase. You just kissed me in front of them.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We’re not dating.”

“I know that.” A mixture of annoyance and concern bubbled up inside of her. Why was Mason mad at her? After all, Mason had kissed her back. She could have pushed Chase away or told her no, but she hadn’t. Mason had caused the kiss just as much as Chase had. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is that we’re just friends. Friends don’t go around kissing each other like that.”

“I thought we were friends with benefits.”

“We are, but that’s not how…”

“Look, before you lecture me on *that’s not what a friend with benefits does*, understand that this is all new to me. I have no idea what I can and can’t do with you. And honestly, Mason, I hate that. Because I want to kiss you. I do. But clearly you don’t feel the same way. Come on, Scout.”

With Scout by her side, Chase stormed out of the barn. Mason, of course, followed and called out for her to stop. Chase did, and when she turned around, she expected Mason to say something—anything—that showed her she cared as much as Chase did.

“Are you going to game night at Sophia and Emily’s tomorrow?”

Chase huffed a laugh. “Really? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

Knowing she was on the verge of tears again and not wanting them to spill in front of Mason, Chase forced herself to remain strong. She wasn’t going to bow out of game night just because of a stupid fight with Mason. Game nights were often the only time Chase got to see some of her friends. And she definitely wanted to show off Scout to them.

“You know I’ll be there. As usual. And I promise, Mason, that I’ll keep my hands and lips off of you, okay?” Not giving Mason the chance to respond, Chase made her way into the house with Scout as Mason trailed slowly behind them.

The rest of the night was as awkward as Chase could have anticipated, but thankfully Mallory seemed to catch on and spent most of the time helping Chase and Scout learn to work together. By the end of dinner, the two had started to develop quite the rhythm.

“If you want, you can stop by work tomorrow and we can go over more.”

“Yeah, I’d love that. Thanks.”

“Oh, and we got you some food and toys and the basic necessities. Mason picked most of them out, so if you don’t like something, blame her.” Mallory’s attempt to break the ice between Chase and Mason only seemed to freeze it more. “If

you need help with anything else, let me know. She has a crate with a bed and is crate-trained. And you know you can always call me if you have questions.”

“I will, Mallory. Thank you.” Hugging Mallory, Chase caught Mason’s eyes as she was loading the supplies from the Jeep to Chase’s SUV. Chase was thankful that Sadie had been up for spending the night with her to help her with Scout, otherwise Chase would have been tempted to ask Mason to stay.

After saying goodbye to everyone and getting Scout loaded into the SUV, they made their way to Chase’s house. Sadie wasted no time before asking, “So, what’s the deal with you and Mason?”

“Oh, sweetie, you’re too young for me to answer that question.”

“I’m sixteen.” Sadie had her mother’s determination, so Chase knew the chances of the conversation dropping were slim to none. “I’ve had a girlfriend before, and I watched my mom and Charlie fall back in love. I also read a lot of Erica Lee books and I’m on lesbian TikTok, so really, I’m a walking vault of information.”

“Lesbian TikTok?”

“Are you so old you don’t know what TikTok is?”

“I’m not old.” *I don’t think.* “I have a TikTok.”

“If your FYP has a lot of lesbians on it, that means you’re on lesbian TikTok.”

“You know, actually, I would like to talk about Mason.” Anything had to be better than a TikTok lesson from a sixteen-year-old.

“Excellent.”

“I apparently broke an unwritten rule that you’re not supposed to kiss your—um—”

“Friend with benefits?”

“How do you know that term?”

“How young do you think sixteen is?” Sadie rolled her eyes, and Chase had never felt more like an annoying parent. “You can’t go around kissing people you’re just casual with. That’s only for when you’re serious.”

“Again, how do you know this? Do I need to be having the sex talk with you? Has your mother already done that?”

Sadie laughed. “Relax. I know all about that. And I also know what you have to do now.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to take advice from a child, but go on.”

“You have to show Mason that you’re cool with it being casual. You need to make her want you. You know, go out with someone else or don’t answer her texts right away. Don’t make yourself always available to her. Make her think you have a life.”

Chase snorted a laugh. “Geez, thanks for insinuating I don’t have a life.”

“Trust me. You do that and you’ll get Mason. Don’t worry.”

Looking out the windshield, Chase tried to think of how to respond. She had to hand it to Sadie; some of that seemed like legit advice. The saying *you always want what you can’t have* was overused for a reason, right? Maybe Chase did need to show Mason she thought it was just casual between them. After all, that seemed to be what Mason wanted.

“I’m not telling your mother or Charlie we had this conversation.”

“Ditto,” Sadie laughed.

Chapter 15

Mason



Game nights at Sophia and Emily's apartment typically were a highlight of Mason's week. She enjoyed being able to see her friends and eat junk food and drink Sophia's expensive French wine. On more than one occasion, Mason had consumed too much wine and stayed in the spare bedroom overnight. Thankfully, she'd been better at keeping her drinking under control the last few months.

Granted, that was all about to be up in the air if Chase showed up to game night.

Mason didn't care if she came or not. Her happiness wasn't dependent on Chase being in the same room as her or not. But Mason didn't want to explain to anyone why there was tension between the two of them. And she knew there would be tension after their fight the day before.

Why did she kiss me in front of them? That question had been bouncing around Mason's head like the DVD logo on a paused TV screen. She wanted answers; she needed answers. Never had Mason kissed a fling in front of her friends before. That was behind closed doors behavior, not public displays of affection for all to see. It annoyed Mason more than anything.

Maybe she hadn't made the rules clear to Chase when they started the whole friends with benefits thing. After all, they had done little talking about it before jumping into bed

together. Mason was used to the speed of flings because usually they fizzled out in a couple of weeks and she moved on to someone else.

Chase was different. Mason has known that since the beginning and yet she'd naively assumed she was wrong. Surely best friends could be friends with benefits with no problems and no jealousy.

Wrong.

Mason wanted more with Chase, but instead of telling her that, Mason pushed her away. It was typical for how she reacted anytime she got close to someone. She always thought she was better off pushing them away than risking her heart getting more involved and ultimately broken. Because no one stayed with Mason long-term. She was the layover to their final destination, that was all.

Parking her Jeep on the street in front of the apartment, Mason grabbed the chip dip she'd made the night before. Emily and Sophia's apartment was on the second floor and Mason let herself into the door using the code. Sophia was serious about safety as Alexis and Harper lived across the hall from her in the other apartment. They didn't give the code to many people, and it was a running joke for a while that Blake didn't have the code when she first moved in.

Mason took the stairs to the second floor, two at a time. She paused for a moment at the boxes sitting outside Alexis and Blake's front door. *Are they moving already? Why didn't they tell me?* Shrugging, Mason pushed open Sophia and Emily's door with her shoulder.

"The party can start now." Instead of being greeted by her group of friends, she was met only with Sophia and Emily in the kitchen, cutting up fruits and veggies for the dip trays. "Where is everyone?"

"Late," Sophia grumbled. "I don't know why *your* friends can't be on time."

"They've just running behind." Emily rolled her eyes as dropped a handful of carrots into a serving dish. "Alexis and

Blake had a meeting with a fertility specialist and it ran late. They're getting dinner, then will be here. Maddie has a wedding she's working this weekend, so she and Walker are busy with that and might try to make it later. Chase is on her way; she just called. I haven't heard from Patrick or Jordan."

"And Hayden and Molly are in Georgia for the week with Hayden's family." Mason at least knew those friends' whereabouts. "So, small crowd tonight then."

"Yeah, nice and intimate." She couldn't tell if Sophia was being sincere or sarcastic. Sometimes it was hard to tell with her. "Okay, I need another glass of wine."

"You've had three already."

"It's been a day."

"What's wrong?" Mason set the dip down on the counter before sitting on the barstool.

Emily sighed. "She wants to retire, but can't admit that."

Sophia was older than the rest of them by many years—Mason had lost track as to how many—and it occasionally caught her off guard when she mentioned things like retirement. She had been a professor at the local college as long as Mason had known her. In fact, that's how Emily and Sophia met. Mason couldn't imagine Sophia being anything but a professor.

"And there's the whole Blake and Alexis thing," Emily whispered, but Sophia still heard. She picked up her glass of wine and snorted a laugh.

"Am I missing something here?"

"Always," Sophia quipped.

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" Mason's heart was nearly beating out of her chest. Were Blake and Alexis already pregnant? If so, why hadn't they told her? "Tell me."

"They're moving. Alexis and Blake."

"*What?*"

“Oh, so you really didn’t know.”

“No, this is all news to me.”

“Same here, Mason.” Sophia handed her a glass of wine. “They need more room for the baby—whenever there is a baby—and I get that but still. I’ll miss having my best friend and Harper next door. Alexis has lived there for almost eight years. It won’t be the same without her there.”

“You’d think *I* was moving out by the way she’s been moping around here all week.” Emily playfully bumped her hip against Sophia’s, which made her reluctantly smile. “They don’t have a place yet, but they’re looking. And Alexis has already started purging stuff they don’t need and packing unnecessary things.”

“Hence the boxes outside.”

“That I almost tripped over this morning,” Sophia griped as she topped off her wine and held the bottle up toward Mason. “More?”

“I’ve only taken a sip.” Her words were useless as Sophia topped off her glass, anyway. “Thanks.”

“Knock, knock,” Chase called out from the front door as Mason nearly spun out of her chair to turn toward her. She was dressed in typical Chase fashion—hoodie, jeans, sneakers—with her hair up in a ponytail under a baseball cap. At her side, Scout proudly stood as if she’d been doing it her entire life. “Wow, am I early?”

“You have a dog!” Emily squealed as she sprinted across the apartment. She stopped just short of Scout and turned her attention to Chase. “May I please pet your service dog?”

“Of course,” Chase giggled. Mason couldn’t help but smile at the scene in front of her. Chase looked so happy and confident, and Emily was absolutely loving Scout.

Taking in a deep breath, Mason turned her attention away from them and back on her wine glass. She happily sipped away until she felt Sophia’s eyes boring into her. “What?”

“Nothing.” She was being coy. “Just haven’t seen you look at anyone like that before.”

“*Excuse me?* I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Mason felt betrayed by the giggle that bubbled up inside for her. *Dammit. Why does Chase have that effect on me? She’s just a friend, right?*

“Sure you don’t.”

“Chase is just a friend.”

“Mhmm.”

“That’s all.”

“So you’ve said.”

“And so I mean.”

“Okay then.”

“Okay.”

Mason sat her glass down and looked back over her shoulder at Chase. They had moved into the living room where Chase had taken off Scout’s vest to signal she was off the clock and it was okay to play. Thanks to Alexis and Blake having their own dog, a few rogue toys had found their way into Sophia and Emily’s apartment for Scout to play with.

She smiled at the sweet scene of Chase and Emily tossing a toy back and forth for Scout to chase as they laughed. But when Chase caught her watching, Mason was unprepared for the smile to be replaced with an almost scowl for the briefest of seconds.

Granted, not too brief that Sophia didn’t notice. She nearly snorted her wine out of her nose as she said, “Oh, someone is pissed at you.”

“Ugh.” Taking their wine glasses outside on the balcony, Sophia and Mason sat on the outdoor furniture where the two often had talks when they needed to get away from everyone else. Sophia pulled up her feet under her as she turned to face Mason. Even before Mason said a word, she knew Sophia knew. “Okay, yes. I slept with Chase.”

“Obviously.”

“How are you so damn perceptive?”

“It’s written all over your face, *cherie*. So, when did this happen?”

“Well, it has *happened* several times, actually.”

Sophia spit out her wine. “*Pardon?* Several times? How many? Like two or three?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been keeping track.”

“So more than three.”

“I mean,” she uncomfortably squirmed in her seat, “probably. Yeah.”

“Are you two dating?”

“No. Nope. Not a chance.”

Sophia’s eyes narrowed. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. She freakin’ kissed me yesterday in front of Mallory, Bradley, Delaney, *and* Charlie as if we’d been dating for years. So, I had to put her in her place and tell her we weren’t dating and she couldn’t do that.”

Mason had no idea why her voice sounded so smug while saying that. She felt anything but proud of the way she’d talked to Chase yesterday. Chase had been right; it was all new to her, and she didn’t know the rule. Not that there were rules. But even if there were, they hadn’t gone over them. They hadn’t set boundaries or expectations or anything.

She waited for Sophia to say something—anything—but her normally outspoken friend remained silent.

“Say something. Please.”

“When are you going to get off your high horse and put aside the notion that you’re unlovable and let someone love you?”

“That’s rich coming from you.” Mason knew Sophia’s history. She had felt the same way about herself when she met

Emily. But clearly, things had worked out for them. Maybe there was a chance that...

No. Don't go there.

"Chase and I are just friends."

"You can tell yourself that until you're blue in the face, but you and I both know it's a lie. You look at her like she hung the moon, and you didn't see it, but she was looking at you the same way. Mason," Sophia scooted closer to her on the couch, "you are so wonderful and full of love. Maybe it's time to let someone as wonderful as Chase love you back."

"She doesn't love me. We're just friends."

"Okay."

"We are." She was on the verge of getting angry, which was the last thing she wanted to do. Sophia was just being a friend; she was just telling her what she thought. Mason couldn't be mad at her for that... right? "Look, I appreciate you telling me this. And maybe you're right."

"I always am."

"But Chase and I... I don't know. We'll see how things go."

Sophia thoughtfully nodded a few times. "I guess that's all we can do then, hmm?"

"Yeah."

Sighing, Mason leaned her head onto the back of the couch as she looked up at the sky. It had a pink and purple hue that was speckled with barely visible stars. Although the Cove was far from a bustling big city, Sophia and Emily's apartment was in the middle of downtown, which meant the light pollution from the various shops prevented them from seeing the stars better. Mason remembered how she and Chase had laid on the beach and looked up at the stars over the weekend. She wanted to go back there, if even for a moment.

"There you two are." Blake stepped out onto the balcony. She looked like she'd stepped right out of a movie scene in black slacks and a white and black-striped sleeveless blouse.

Her hair was braided and pulled back, making her look even more like their mother. “Harper’s looking for you, Soph.”

“I’m going to go see my girl. You think about what I said.” Sophia winked at Mason before heading inside. She waited until Sophia closed the sliding glass door before narrowing her eyes at her sister.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were moving?”

Blake nervously laughed. Mason could tell, as it was the same laugh she had when she was nervous. “We aren’t moving yet. We would have told you when we were officially moving.”

“No worries. You can send me a postcard with the change of address notice on it.”

“Mace, stop.” Blake was using her Mom Voice, and it made Mason sit up straighter. “I would have told you. The only reason Sophia and Emily know is because they live next door to us. And because Alexis and Sophia can’t keep secrets from each other even if their lives depended on it.”

Mason laughed.

“You’re my sister. I’ll tell you everything and anything as soon as there’s something to tell.”

“Promise?” She held her pinky finger up toward Blake.

“Promise.” Blake wrapped her pinky around Mason’s. “Now, why don’t *you* tell me what the deal is with you and Chase?”

“Ugh, there’s nothing to tell, *Sophia*.”

“Ha, I figured that’s what you two were talking about when I saw Chase was here. So, what’s up? You two seemed hot and heavy when we were in the Cape.”

“Yes, well, Jack Frost came early and nipped that in the bud.”

“What did you do?”

“Why does everyone assume *I* did something?”

“Because Chase is one of the nicest people I know and you’re you.”

“Geez, thanks.” Mason sulked as she finished her glass of wine. Sitting the glass on the coffee table, she sighed and leaned back into the couch cushion. “She kissed me yesterday in front of some friends and I had to tell her that friends with benefits don’t do that. So, naturally, now she’s mad at me.”

“That’s why I could never do friends with benefits.”

“Well, good thing you’re married then,” she teased. “I don’t know. Until Chase, things were easy. I’ve never had to explain to a fling how to be a fling before. They just understood, and that was that.”

“But Chase is different.”

Mason sighed. “But Chase is different.”

“Mama, come on!” Harper called out as she slid open the balcony door. She ran to Blake, who effortlessly whisked her up onto her lap. “Mommy says it’s time to come inside and not be antisocial with Aunt Mason.”

“Tell your mommy she’s annoying.”

“Okay!” Harper scampered off as if given marching orders, with Blake hot on her heels telling her not to repeat that.

As Mason followed them inside, she wondered if she would ever get the chance to be a mom. Mason wanted kids and a family just like the one she’d grown up in. She just needed to find that person.

“Hey,” Chase grinned as Mason sat down beside her on the couch. A Monopoly board game was already set up on the coffee table as various food items were scattered around it and on the end tables. “Wanna be partners?”

“What?”

“In the game, silly.”

“Oh. Yeah. In the game. Yes.” Mason forced herself to take a deep breath. “I’d love to be partners with you.”

“Good. Me, too.”

Chapter 16

Chase



It was as if their fight had never happened. That was all Chase could think throughout game night. She and Mason were partners in Monopoly, as they were every time they played together. Mason still thought twenty steps ahead while Chase simply moved their piece on the board and kept up with the money. No one was surprised when they won, and they celebrated by high fiving each other.

“They cheat,” Alexis sulked as she tossed the rest of her unused play money onto the board. “This isn’t fair.”

“You just hate losing.” Mason was doing a happy dance around the coffee table, as was her usual winning routine.

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Hey, now!” Spinning around, Mason put her hands on her hips and cocked her head at Chase. “Don’t be rude to your winning partner. You win so much because of me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Go on with your bad self.” Chase waved her off and gave Scout a pat between the ears. The two had spent several hours training with Mallory earlier, and Chase was loving all the new skills they were learning. It was clear Scout was going to be her best friend.

“We better get the kiddo home.” Standing, Blake nodded toward Harper, who was fast asleep on the recliner. She

scooped her up with ease and put her on her hip as she and Alexis said goodbye to everyone.

“I should go too. I’m sure Scout needs a break.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mason responded so quickly it caught Chase off guard. She must have noticed the quick interjection and casually shrugged. “I mean, I wouldn’t want you to be out alone at night.”

“Well, no, because those streets are treacherous here in the Cove.”

“Exactly.” Putting a hand on the small of Chase’s back, they said their goodbyes to Sophia and Emily before walking down the stairs. Chase had to take them slower than Mason, but that didn’t stop Mason from staying right by her side. Flanked by Mason and Scout, Chase couldn’t recall a time she felt safer. “You got it?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Chase stepped off the slightly taller last step and sighed. “I hate stairs.”

“I know you do. Maybe we can start having game nights somewhere else, so it’s easier for you.”

“I hate making other people accommodate my shortcomings.” Chase sighed. “Do you wanna walk to the park and back?”

“Sure. And it’s not a shortcoming.”

“It feels like it.”

“Hey, don’t do that.” Mason stopped walking and took hold of Chase’s arm. “These last two years have been hard for you. I’ve had a front-row seat to your struggles. But you’ve never let your injuries dictate your life, and I admire you for that. So damn much, Chase. I hope you know that.”

Chase could feel herself blushing under Mason’s compliment. “Thanks, Mace.”

“You’re welcome.”

They walked a few blocks down the dog park. It was one of two in town and was the smaller, but it would do just fine for

Scout. Chase took her harness off and gave her the release word as Scout took off running through the empty park.

“So, do you have any plans this weekend?”

“Oh, I do actually.” It was rare that Chase ever had plans. She usually spent her weekends alone or at Charlie’s house. “You remember my friend Luke? From high school?”

“The nerdy dude?”

“He’s not nerdy. He’s an accountant.”

“Nerd.”

“Anyway. He’s in town for a few weeks visiting his family and we’re going to meet up.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen him in years, so it’ll be good to catch up.”

“I’m sure it will be.” Mason walked over to a bench and sat down. Chase waited a beat before joining her.

Of all the things to be in her brain at that moment, the words of a sixteen-year-old were the ones taking top billing. Although Chase knew better than to take Sadie’s childish advice, she had to admit that watching Mason try to act nonchalant about Chase’s date was funny.

Not that it was a date. It wasn’t.

At least Chase didn’t think so.

Luke had called out of the blue a couple of days ago and asked if they could meet up. Growing up together in Portland, the two had been close friends but never dated. He had been her date to school dances, but that was it.

“Wasn’t he your prom date?”

“Yeah, he was.”

“Ahh.”

Chase laughed. “What’s that for?”

“It just makes sense now.”

“What does?”

“He knows you’re single now and is ready to make a move.” Despite Mason’s teasing tone, Chase knew she didn’t find it funny. Mason was an expert at masking her true feelings, which had the tendency to drive Chase insane. “Smart man.”

“Luke is just a friend. That’s all.”

“Yeah,” she sarcastically laughed, “that’s what we are too, right?”

“It is.”

Ugh. This is so childish. We are grown-ass women. Why can’t we just say how we feel and move along?

Chase wished she had an answer. She hated playing games with Mason. It was apparent they both cared for each other, but neither wanted to make the first move to say that they wanted it to be more than friends. Chase felt like she was back in middle school.

“Mason?”

“Hmm?”

“This is getting ridiculous, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” Chase turned to face her. “This whole back-and-forth game we’re playing where we’re trying to see who’s going to make the first move, then getting mad when nothing happens. It’s exhausting.”

Mason sat up straighter but didn’t say anything.

“I can’t be the only one feeling this way, right? That we’re not meant to be just friends with benefits?”

Chase hated being so open when she didn’t know how Mason was going to react. There was a good possibility that Chase had been overthinking everything and reading more into things than she should. Maybe Mason truly just wanted to be friends with benefits. Maybe Chase had been imagining the fact that something more was there between them.

“Okay, fine. Maybe it’s just me.” Standing, Chase crossed her arms and looked down at Mason. “Maybe I’m just the stereotypical girl who falls in love with her best friend, who doesn’t feel the same.”

“See,” Mason stood to her feet in a hurry, “this is why I didn’t want to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be friends with benefits with you. I knew it was going to mean more to you than just a casual fling and yet we did it anyway.”

“So, what are you saying? That this means nothing to you more than a fling?” Chase felt the tears nip at her eyes as her voice cracked. Sensing something was wrong, Scout ran over to her and nudged her nose against Chase’s leg. “You and I both know that’s not true. You’re just scared.”

“Me? Scared?” Mason scoffed. “Of what?”

“Of falling in love.” She watched her words hit their mark, but didn’t give Mason the chance to respond. “You fancy yourself some heartless bitch who can flit from woman to woman without getting attached, but you’re forgetting that I know you. I know you better than anyone. And I *know* that you love me, too. Not just as a friend, but as something more. And you’re just too scared to admit it.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Then admit it.”

“There’s nothing to admit.” Mason tossed up her hands in the air.

“Oh, so, I’m just crazy for thinking that you love me?”

“I do love you, Chase. You’re my best friend, and this,” she motioned back and forth between them, “is exactly what I worried about when this whole thing started.”

“God, Mason, get your head out of your ass and look around.” Chase tossed her hands into the air. “Our friendship is in jeopardy because *you* are dead-set on self-sabotaging anything that makes you uncomfortable. I know you care

about me. I know you love me, even if you won't admit it. And if your pride is more important to you than admiring that, then yeah. Maybe this is over."

Chase refused to let the tears fall as she hooked Scout's leash onto her collar and left Mason alone in the park. If it were a movie, Mason would have run after her and kissed her and told her she loved her. But instead, Chase walked back to her car alone. She drove home with tears streaming down her face as Scout licked them away from the passenger side. Chase knew she should have put Scout into the crate in the back, but she was too upset to deal with it.

"At least you love me, right, Scout?"

Another lick on the cheek gave Chase her answer.

"I love you, too." She kissed Scout's nose and pulled into the driveway. Chase hadn't left any lights on before she left, which made the house seem more uninviting than it truly was. Opening up the Alexa app on her phone, Chase flipped on a few of the living room lights and headed inside.

Alone.

Again.

She debated calling Charlie, but didn't feel like answering the thousand questions that would follow. Plopping down on the couch, Chase curled up with her favorite blanket and turned on a movie. Scout jumped up on the sofa beside her, making herself at home by her feet. For now, that was all she needed.

Chase would deal with her feelings about Mason later.

Chapter 17

Mason



No one in Mason's path was safe. She was a tornado with a trail of destruction behind her and enough momentum to keep going for days. The old Mason would have called up Bradley or some other former fling and slept away her feelings with them. But the new Mason had stewed in her feelings for days.

It had been almost a week since the second fight with Chase. She hadn't heard a peep from Chase, not that she expected to. Chase was as mad as Mason was that night. That much was apparent by the way she'd stormed off after telling Mason it was over.

But Mason still didn't know how they could be over before they even started. They hadn't dated or anything, so how could they break up? Did Chase mean their friendship was over? Mason didn't know. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. Maybe it was better Mason didn't know. At least then she could try to move on with her life, right?

There were more questions than answers.

Opening the door to Paws on a Mission, Mason offered a half smile at the receptionist before storming back to her office. No *good morning* greetings echoed from the already occupied offices as Mason walked past. She noted how Brooke, Mallory, and Morgan all had the doors to their offices

closed, despite the fact she knew they were there. It was odd for them to be shut unless they were in a meeting. Jones's office door was open and as Mason walked past, she tossed a hand up in her general direction as a halfhearted wave.

"Mason, wait." Jones followed Mason into her office. Sitting down her laptop bag on her desk, Mason put a hand on her hip and turned to face Jones, who had closed the door behind her.

"What?"

"We need to talk."

"About what?"

"Your attitude, for starters."

"I don't have an attitude."

Jones didn't say a word. She didn't have to. They both knew she was right. But Mason was not going to admit that to Jones.

"I don't know what the hell happened between you and Chase, but you need to leave it at the door when you come here."

Mason scoffed. "Are you the boss now? Did they put your name on the door instead of mine? Because last time I checked, I still owned this place and you're just using an office."

"Look, I'm the only one who isn't afraid to call you out on your bullshit." Jones wasn't backing down, and neither was Mason. "Everyone has been walking on eggshells the last week, and it's made for a toxic work environment. But no one wanted to say that to you because you're the boss. But you're right. I don't work here. So I can call you out without worrying about being fired."

"I can take your office away."

Jones sighed. "Mason, come on. Drop this attitude and tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing is wrong!"

“What happened with Chase? Did things go bad between you two?”

“Chase ended things, although I didn’t know there was anything to end since we weren’t even dating. But I knew this would happen, so I should really play the lottery or go to Vegas because I have such good intuition.”

“Or maybe you just set yourself up for failure.”

Mason narrowed her eyes at Jones. What did she just say? She does *not* set herself up for failure. If anything, Mason was realistic. She’d told Chase up front she was worried about their friendship, but clearly that didn’t matter to Chase. So why should it matter to Mason now?

“You can tell yourself that you only want casual, no strings attached relationships, but you and I both know that was never what Chase was. You two have been in love with each other for years. It was never going to be just friends with benefits with you two. It was always going to be something right away, and that scared you. So, it makes sense you’re pushing Chase away now.”

“I’m not pushing her away. She pushed *me* away.”

“And you let her go.”

“She wasn’t mine to hold.”

“Bullshit, Mason. You and I both know that if you wanted to be with Chase, all you’d have to do is tell her. She loves you and you love her. Now get your head out of your ass and go be with her.”

Mason narrowed her eyes at Jones. “What makes you so sure she wants to be with me?”

“Because I have two eyes and am not an idiot. Believe me, you don’t want a girl like Chase to get away. I almost lost Brooke, and I honestly don’t know how my life would be if we hadn’t admitted that we wanted to be with each other.”

“You and Brooke are different.”

“Yeah,” Jones laughed, “you’re right. Brooke and I didn’t know each other very well, and I almost fucked things up. You

and Chase know each other and mutually decided to be friends with benefits, so it's not one person's fault. But if you want to be with her and you don't tell her that, then the fact it doesn't work out is all on you."

Jones's words rang loud in Mason's head.

Mason loved Chase, yes. Mason wanted to be with Chase as more than friends. But did Chase want that now, or did she really mean what she said the other night? Were they really over before they even began, or did Mason have a second chance?

"You could have at least let me have a cup of coffee before you dumped all that on me." Mason offered her a sad smile.

Jones laughed. "Yeah, that's my bad. But I knew I needed to get through your thick skull, so I figured an ambush was my best bet."

Rolling her eyes, Mason finally sat down at her desk and sighed. "You're not wrong."

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Probably still picking up the pieces of my bruised ego off the floor."

"Oh, please." She dismissively waved her off. "Why don't you come out with us? Me, Brooke, Mallory, and Emery are going to Olive or Twist for drinks, then going to Pizza Parlor for dinner. If you want to join, you're more than welcome to."

"Oh, fun. I can be a fifth wheel instead of a third wheel for once."

"Stop it. We're just going out as friends, not necessarily as couples. You're friends with all of us, so you should join. If nothing else, it would get you out of the house and out with people who aren't Chase. That might help you clear your mind."

"You really think so?"

"I do. It'll be good for you to get out. Besides, it's a Friday night. When has the great Mason Mackenzie ever stayed in on a Friday night?"

Mason laughed. “Fair point.”

“Meet us at seven.” It was a statement, not a question. Mason nodded. Maybe a night out would do her some good. She hadn’t hung out with anyone but Chase in weeks, it seemed like. Hanging out with her friends would be fun. “And I’m here if you need to talk.”

“I’m the closed off Mackenzie. Blake is the open one.”

“From what I hear, you keep your legs pretty open.”

“Okay, now I *really* need some coffee.”

“Lucky for you, I made a fresh pot earlier.”

“Thanks, Jones.” Mason took a coffee mug off the shelf by her desk and walked to the kitchen as Jones headed back to her office.

Pouring the coffee into the mug, Mason pulled her phone out of her back pocket. She found her text thread with Chase that hadn’t seen a new message in over a week. Mason typed out a generic message and reread it several times.

Hey, chick. Was just thinking about you. Hope you’re doing okay. Maybe we can hang out and catch up soon. Hope things are going great with Scout. Miss you.

She typed out *and love you* several times only to keep deleting it. Maybe it was better to keep things friendly until she knew what Chase was feeling, too. Mason didn’t expect a message to come back so quickly, but her phone dinged before she added her cream and sugar.

Scout is great. I love her. I miss you too. Hanging out soon sounds good :)

Mason let out a sigh of relief.

“Okay, maybe we can just go back to being friends, if nothing else.”

Not that that was what Mason wanted. But at this point, she’d settle for anything that got Chase back into her life.

Chapter 18

Chase



Chase's mind was anywhere but on whatever Luke Anderson was rambling on about. She hadn't remembered her childhood friend as so talkative before, but the last few minutes had only proven things had changed. Luke had barely stopped long enough for Chase to place her order at Straight to Ale, let alone say anything of meaning. She'd been stirring the straw mindlessly in her whiskey sour for so long her wrist was getting tired.

She hated feeling so bored with Luke. Back in their high school days, they had been inseparable. If they hadn't gone their separate ways after college, who knows how things might have ended for them. Chase wasn't big on *what ifs* but she often wondered about Luke.

Now, she didn't really know why.

He was a nice guy, yes. Luke was handsome, even more so than Chase remembered. His stubbly beard made him look older than his thirty-four years, but Chase found it endearing. Of course, she also thought the black slacks and maroon button-up with a tie were a little much for a casual dinner at a bar with a friend.

If only he'd stop talking about his new accounting firm in Portland and how he was so excited to be back near his family again. Chase understood the feeling; she hadn't moved far

away from Portland to stay close to her family. But she also didn't know why Luke seemed to be nervous. They were just two friends catching up. It wasn't like they were on a date.

Because if it were a date, Chase definitely would have worn something other than jeans and a hoodie she was almost confident she'd stolen from her brother the last time she visited him.

“So, anyway, enough about me.”

Finally.

“How have you been?”

The laugh blurted out before Chase could stop it. Had he seriously just rambled for twenty minutes only to ask how she'd been? Luke had to know about what happened—after all, it had been headline news for weeks—and had to know she was no longer engaged by the lack of a ring on her finger.

“Oh, you know, not much.” She forced a smile and took a sip of her drink. “Other than almost dying and my fiancé dumping me, things have been okay, I guess. I'm alive, so there's that.”

Great, now I'm the one rambling.

“Yeah,” Luke winced, “I heard about all that. I wanted to contact you, but I didn't know if I should.”

“You could have.”

“Good to know.”

“Why did you think you couldn't?”

“Because you were with Shane.” Luke shrugged his muscular shoulders. “And I still have feelings for you, Chase.”

Time seemed frozen all around her. Everything in the restaurant disappeared except her and Luke. And not in a romantic, Hallmark movie type of way. No; this was more akin to a thriller movie when the plot reaches its climax. Everything suddenly made sense: Luke wanting to reconnect after moving back, him being all dressed up, the casual way he touched her arm as they talked. Luke thought it was a date.

And there Chase was in a hoodie with her mind on the gorgeous brunette she hadn't been able to stop thinking about in weeks.

“Oh.”

“I mean, you felt it too, right?” The excitement in his face and voice mirrored that of a golden retriever. “Back in high school?”

“Back in high school, yeah. Maybe.”

She shrugged and nervously picked up her drink. The drink she took was mostly water from the melted ice, so she motioned to Alexis for another one. Chase wished she knew a secret code word to say to Alexis to help her out of the awkward situation she currently found herself in.

Luke placed a hand on her knee as he leaned in closer. Chase resisted the urge to smack his hand away, not wanting to cause a scene to the already uncomfortable date-that-wasn't-supposed-to-be-a-date.

“What about now?”

“What?”

“Do you still have feelings for me now?”

“Luke, I...”

“Hey, baby.” Mason's voice startled Chase as she felt Mason slip an arm around her waist. She quickly turned in her seat to come face to face with Mason and, in the process, Luke moved his hand off her leg. With a wink, Mason told Chase that she'd come to rescue her and Chase couldn't be more thankful. “Sorry I'm late.”

“Late?” Luke's happy tone had vanished and was replaced by annoyance.

“Yeah, Chase wanted me to stop by and meet you. She said you two were friends in high school.” Mason leaned around Chase and extended her hand out to Luke. “Mason Mackenzie. I'm Chase's girlfriend.”

“*Girlfriend?*”

“Going on what? Six months now?”

“Seven,” Chase chimed in, all too happy to tease Luke.
“She always forgets.”

“Oh, so, you’re in a relationship.” Luke loosened his tie.
“Good. Good. That’s great.”

“We think so.” Mason was having too much fun teasing Luke. Chase wanted to thank her—hell, she wanted to kiss her—but she had to deal with Luke first. He didn’t deserve to be teased, but he also shouldn’t have assumed they were going on a date.

But before Chase could think of anything, Mason seemed to have a plan already.

“Hey, Lucas, buddy. Some friends of ours are over there playing pool. Why don’t you and Chase go join them, I’ll get us another round, and we’ll all get to know Chase’s high school friend?”

Luke looked like he wanted to say no. But being a gentleman, he agreed. Having already set up a tab at the bar, Luke and Chase walked over to the pool tables in the back of the restaurant. Jones and Mallory were there with their girlfriends, along with some other women Chase only vaguely knew. One took a particular liking to Luke, which made Chase thankful.

Glancing back over at the bar, she saw Mason still standing there. Their eyes locked across the room and Mason nodded toward the bathrooms. Chase didn’t hesitate to excuse herself from the group and follow Mason into one of the bathrooms.

Locking the door behind them, she wasted no time pinning Mason up against the wall and kissing her. Mason’s moans were sexier than Chase remembered, and she wanted to tell her so. But before she could, Mason put her hands on her shoulders and pushed Chase back.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought you were signaling me.”

“I was.”

“To the bathroom.”

“I thought we could talk.”

Chase took a step back, causing Mason’s arm to fall. “Talk?”

“I wanted to see if you were okay. You looked miserable out there with him.”

“I was.”

“Okay, then.” Mason slowly nodded. “That’s what I wanted to check on.”

“That’s it?” Chase put her hand on her hip.

“Yes. Where’s Scout?”

“I left her at home. I’m not confident enough to bring her out like this.”

“Plus you’d have to explain it to *Luke*.”

Chase hated the way Mason said his name. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, well, he’s not the one I’m kissing in the bathroom.”

“And why *are* you kissing *me* in the bathroom?” Mason narrowed her eyes at Chase as a sneaky smile spread on her face. “I thought you said this,” she motioned back and forth between them, “was over.”

“Is that what you want?”

“What do *you* want?”

“For the love of god, Mason. Just tell me what you want. I can’t do this back and forth thing anymore. If you want me, I’m here. And for what it’s worth, I want you.”

And that was all Chase could say before the primal need to be together consumed each of them once more. Their bodies came together like magnets and before Chase knew it, she was sitting on the counter with her pants down at her ankles and Mason’s head between her legs. Chase ran her hands through Mason’s hair as she tried to keep her moans quiet. But with Mason on her knees, it was almost impossible.

Mason removed her lips from Chase's center as she slowly stood up. "You have to keep it down, baby."

It was the sexiest thing Chase had even been told. She was beyond sure of that. Chase nodded as Mason inserted her fingers into her. A squeal escaped her lips, but Mason muffled the sound by kissing her. Chase could feel her body inching closer and closer to orgasm and she had no idea how she was going to keep quiet.

Never in her life would Chase have expected herself to be loud during sex. Maybe she'd been having sex with the wrong person. Because Mason was clearly the most perfect person for her. In more ways than just sex.

"Mason," Chase could barely mumble between passionate kisses. She felt Mason move her kisses down her neck then up to her ear.

"Come for me, baby."

And Chase did. *Loudly*. If Mason hadn't quickly covered her mouth with her hand, the entire restaurant probably would have heard her. Chase was thankful for the loud music playing throughout the restaurant. She wrapped her arms around Mason's neck and held on for dear life.

"You are so hot." Mason's warm breath on her skin sent chills throughout her body. *How can she do that to me? With just words?*

Chase didn't have time to ponder before Mason was back on her knees in front of her. Her tongue was making slow, deliberate circles around Chase's wet center. Everything was beyond blissful until Chase heard a loud *thud* followed by Mason saying, "Ow."

"Are you okay?"

"I hit my head on the counter." Standing, Mason rubbed her head as she pouted. "You kept squirming away and I didn't notice."

"Oh, baby, come here." Chase held out her arms to Mason. She kissed the spot where Mason hit her head several times. "Does that feel better?"

“It does.” Mason grinned. “But you know what I think would make it feel even better?”

“Round two?”

“Round two.”

Taking hold of Mason’s shirt, Chase pulled her closer to her. “You know what I’ve always wanted to do?”

“Show me.”

In less than graceful fashion, Chase hopped off the counter with a wince. She pulled her pants back up in a hurry, hastily buttoned them, then once again pinned Mason against the wall. Chase took hold of Mason’s hands and put them over her head as she pressed their bodies together.

Kissing Mason was unlike anything Chase had ever dared to dream or imagine. Her lips were soft and perfect. Chase could even still taste herself on them. Letting go of Mason’s hands, Chase was pleasantly surprised when Mason moved them to her ass and squeezed. Mason slowly ran her hands up and down Chase’s back as their kissing kept deepening.

“Touch me,” Mason whispered so softly Chase wasn’t sure she heard her.

“What?”

“Please. Just touch me.”

Chase unbuttoned Mason’s pants and slipped her hand down to her clit. “Like this?”

All Mason did was nod. Chase moved her fingers in rhythmic circles around Mason’s clit while also kissing her neck. She didn’t know when, but her kissing turned into sucking as Mason seemed to respond differently to that sensation.

They were blissfully in their own world, their bodies pressed together perfectly, until a knock came at the door.

“Mason, honey, are you in there?”

Isla.

“Shit.” Mason pulled Chase’s hand from her pants. “She’s going to kill us.”

“Us? This wasn’t my idea.”

“Says the woman who pushed me up against the wall and put her tongue down my throat.”

Another knock at the door.

“Mason?”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“Okay,” Isla’s voice indicates things were anything but okay. “Well, I just wanted to check. You’ve been in there for a while.”

“She’s been busy,” Chase kept her voice low so Isla couldn’t hear it, but that didn’t stop Mason from covering her mouth with her hand once more.

“I’ll come out in a second.”

“Cause she just came a minute ago.”

Mason playfully smacked Chase’s cheek and rolled her eyes. “Thanks for checking on me, Mom.”

“Anytime, sweetie.” There was a pause, but they waited a beat just in case she was still there. They got their answer when Isla said, “Come and see me when you and Chase are done cleaning my bathroom.”

“Shit.”

“Shit.”

Chapter 19

Mason



The bathroom had never been cleaner. Mason made damn sure of that. Along with Chase's help, they'd scrubbed every inch of the Straight to Ale bathroom clean. She was thankful that the four restrooms were all in individual rooms, so they only had to clean one of them. It took Mason right back to high school when she worked in the restaurant after school.

Granted, back then, Mason didn't have to clean them because she'd just had sex with someone. No, Mason could officially say she'd never done that before. She'd also never been called out by her own mother like that before.

Sure, her parents knew about Mason's escapades but they didn't really start until after she was out of the house. During college, Mason didn't have to worry about her parents showing up at her dorm to find her in bed with someone. Mason also had a *call before you drop in before ten* policy at her house that worked surprisingly well. So it was safe to say her adventures with Chase were a first.

"I think we did good." Chase looked around the room as she tossed a paper towel into the trash can.

"You talking about the cleaning or the sex?"

"No," she shook her head, "don't even *try* to make this sexy because I swear to god your mother will make us clean this bathroom again."

“But it would be worth it.” Mason slipped her arms around Chase’s waist and kissed her neck. For a moment, she felt Chase relax. Then her senses seemed to kick in as she turned around in Mason’s arms.

“And on that note, you can finish this yourself. I should probably go check on Luke anyway.”

“Eh, he should be fine. Cassie was here tonight, so he should be going home with her.”

“You’re mean, but make a valid point.”

Cassie was a regular at the bar, and frequently flirted with all the men there. Mason knew she’d find Luke attractive. The last she’d seen before going into the bathroom, Cassie was already making her move.

Chase leaned in and kissed Mason on the cheek. “I’ll see you out there.”

“Yes, you will.” Mason watched her go, enjoying the way Chase turned back to wink at her before disappearing around a corner.

After rewashing her hands, Mason locked the supply cabinet that held the cleaning supplies and headed out into the restaurant. The usually loud Saturday night crowd seemed exceptionally louder as she maneuvered her way to the bar. She let herself behind the bar and rolled her eyes at Alexis.

“What did you do now?”

“Just further proving I’m my parents’ disappointing child.”

Pushing her hip against the swinging kitchen door, she didn’t wait for Alexis to tell her otherwise, as she knew her friend would. Mason wasn’t in the mood to hear it. Her mother was probably mad at her and Mason knew she had every right to be. It was one thing to have sex in the bathroom at any bar. But the place that your mother owns? Yeah, Mason might have crossed a line.

But, dammit, if she wouldn’t cross it a hundred more times for Chase.

Although she was beyond sure they had moved from friends with benefits to something more, Mason still wanted to clarify they were on the same page. Mason had been on the receiving end of miscommunication enough to know they needed to have The Talk about their relationship. She just had to get through whatever lecture her mother was about to give her first.

Tapping her knuckles on the door frame to the office, Mason waited for her mother to look up from her computer.

“Come in and close the door.”

“Gee, Ma, am I in trouble or something?”

“Yes, actually, you are.” Isla pushed her glasses up on her nose and Mason felt like she was back in elementary school about to be scolded for bringing a snake into the house. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you and Chase were dating.”

Mason blinked. Then shook her head and blinked again.

“What?”

“I thought we had such a good relationship,” Isla pouted as she sulked in her office chair. “But you keep me so shut out of parts of your life that it hurts me. I wish you just would have *told* me you were dating Chase before I had to find out from my waitstaff after they saw you and Chase sneak off into the bathroom together.”

“Well, there wasn’t anything to tell until then.”

Isla narrowed her eyes. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that I saw Chase at the bar with her friend Luke and she looked miserable and I could tell he thought it was a date. I went over to rescue her and then motioned for her to come to the bathroom so I could see if she was okay. Then she kissed me.”

“Oh, shit,” Isla laughed. “Then what happened? Actually, no. Never mind. I don’t need to know. So, what does this mean?”

“I guess it means we’re dating.” Mason couldn’t stop the giggle from escaping her lips. She’d never really dated anyone

before and although she and Chase hadn't said the words, Mason assumed they were.

"Well, I never thought I'd live to see the day my daughter finally committed to someone like Chase."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here." Mason rolled her eyes. "My track record doesn't give me much confidence that this will work out."

"Honey, you cannot start a relationship thinking that. If you want this, which I suspect you do, you have to believe it's going to work out. Because, honey, that's what you deserve. You deserve someone like Chase who understands and loves you for you."

Mason held up her hands. "Whoa, whoa. We haven't said that word to each other yet outside of casually as friends."

"Just because you haven't said it doesn't mean it isn't there."

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Mason knew Isla meant well. Isla wanted her daughter happy and Mason was thankful to have her support. She just wished she could silence the nagging voice in the back of her head telling her she was going to fuck things up.

"I just don't want to mess this up."

Isla nodded. "You remember when I met your mama?"

Mason nodded.

"We had just moved to the Cove and you got sick so I had to take you to the doctor. Then we met Vera. I knew she was something special. You two hit it off right away to the point I worried you'd want to go home with her instead of me." She chuckled. "So when things started to heat up between Vera and I, I began to worry how it would affect you if things didn't work out between us. You had been through so much already in your short life and I didn't know how adding someone else into our life who could leave would affect us. But if I hadn't taken that risk, I never would have met the love of my life."

Although she'd heard the story countless times, Mason never tired of hearing it. Her parents honestly had a remarkable love story and Mason longed to have that one day.

With Chase.

"Not all of us magically stumble into our soulmates." There was an undeniable twinkle in Isla's eyes. "Sometimes we wake up one day and realize it's been our best friend all along."

"Well," she smirked, "I've stumbled into enough bedrooms so it's about time one stuck."

"Mason!" Isla tossed a baseball-shaped stress ball at her. She caught it and playfully tossed it back at her. They threw the ball back and forth a few times before Isla stopped. "For what it's worth, you seem happy."

"I am happy."

"Good." Setting the baseball on the desk, Isla nodded toward the door. "Now, go back out there and hang out with your girl. Tell Lex the next rounds of drinks for you two are on me."

"Thanks, Mom." Rounding the desk, Mason placed a kiss on her mother's cheek.

"Just try not to have sex in bathrooms at my restaurant, okay?"

Mason playfully tossed the baseball back at her as they both laughed. Leaving the office, Mason ordered a rum and coke and a Long Island from Alexis before carrying the drinks over to Chase. She was sitting on one of the old bar stools that lined the wall around the pool tables.

"Mom bought us drinks." She handed the Long Island to Chase.

"So, she's not mad?"

"No, she's good."

"Good."

"Yeah."

“Do you want to go out on the patio and talk?”

“Sure.”

Taking Chase’s hand, she led her through the restaurant to the outdoor patio. Only a couple of tables were occupied and they chose a table near the railing that overlooked Main Street and the ocean. Mason placed her hand on Chase’s knee as they locked eyes.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Chase nervously giggled. “You okay?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You look nervous.”

“Well, I am. Kinda.”

“Talk to me.” Chase covered Mason’s hand with hers and squeezed.

Mason inhaled sharply. “I need you to know that I want this. It scares me how badly I want this. Because you are my best friend and I can’t imagine life without you. But even more than that, I can’t imagine living my life not knowing what it would be like to love you. Really love you. In the goofy rom-com way that makes me want to hold a boombox over my head and tell you how much I love you.”

“I love you too, Mason.”

“Yeah?” Mason’s voice cracked as she smiled. Chase answered her by leaning in and kissing her. They didn’t care that people could see them; they were so lost in each other that nothing else mattered. After a few minutes, Mason pulled back and looked Chase in the eyes. “Okay, so, I have to ask.”

“Ask away.”

“Chase, will you be my girlfriend?”

“Hmm, let me think.” Chase giggled and Mason playfully shoved her shoulder. “I’m teasing. Yes, Mason. I would love nothing more than to be your girlfriend.”

“Good, because otherwise this whole making out in public thing would have been weird.”

“Shut up and kiss me again.”

And Mason did just that.

Chapter 20

Chase



Family dinners at her parents' house was something Chase looked forward to every month. Her mom made an excellent Sunday dinner and her siblings came over with their families. It was one of the few times the entire family was together outside of holidays. As the youngest and the only sibling not married with kids, Chase took her role as the Cool Aunt very seriously.

Of course, she hadn't planned on being upstaged by Mason.

Her nieces and nephews loved her. And judging by Mason's expressions, the feeling was mutual. Chase watched as Mason threw water balloons at the kids as they all squealed and tried to squirt her with the water hose. She couldn't stop her mind from wondering if maybe one day, they'd have a kid to add to the mix.

Not that they had talked about that yet. Chase knew Mason wanted kids, so she at least knew they would be on the same page. But the timing was years away for them. Hell, they'd only been dating for a week now.

Chase had to admit though that things had been going way better than expected. Mason had fully embraced their new relationship status and Chase couldn't remember a time they were happier. Things finally felt like they were turning around for Chase. Her days of sadness and depression seemed to be

behind her and it was partly due to the gorgeous brunette chasing kids around the backyard with a water cannon.

“This is nice, hmm?” Her mother, Linda, playfully bumped their hips together as she handed Chase a glass of wine. “Having everyone together makes my heart so happy.”

“Yeah, I know.” Chase smiled at her mom. Linda Monroe was the type of mom everyone wanted to have. She was fun to hang out with, always put her kids first, and never made them feel unloved. She had been there with Chase through every up and down in her life and her love never wavered. “It makes me happy, too.”

“And I’m sure Mason has a lot to do with that happiness.”

“*Mom*,” she groaned and walked over to the outdoor table where they each took a seat. Scout laid down near her feet, resting her head on Chase’s feet. “I mean, I knew we’d eventually have this talk, but I figured it would be later. Once everyone had left.”

“Don’t you think I’ve waited long enough to hear how happy my youngest child is? Come on, talk to me. Fill me in on what I’ve missed.”

Chase knew there was no stopping her mother now. And honestly, Chase didn’t want to. She’d been eager to call her mother the night she and Mason officially got together, but she hadn’t told her much else. Not that there was anything really new to tell.

As she recounted the story of the last few weeks to her mom, Chase couldn’t stop smiling. It was as if she was telling a happy ending story to her nieces and nephews and not retelling what had actually happened in her life. Chase had to pinch herself sometimes to realize it was actually happening; she and Mason were actually together.

“And then she motioned for me to follow her to the bathroom, so I did.”

“And then what happened?” Her mother’s excitement was almost palpable. “Did she kiss you?”

“We kissed, yes.” She decided it was best to leave out the rest of the details. “And then we talked and decided we wanted to be together for real and well, here we are.”

“Here we are indeed. You know, I really love Mason. Always have.”

“I know.”

“I’m so happy you two finally figured it out.”

“Wait, what?”

Linda laughed. “Oh, my sweet daughter. You still don’t think I can read you like a book. I know all my kids better than they know themselves and you are no different.”

“Are we talking about Mason?” Her sister, Lori, sat down at the table across from Chase. Despite the fact they were sisters, Lori looked more like their cousin Charlie than Chase with her long blonde hair and blue eyes. “Because if so, I want in.”

“Oh, geez,” Chase groaned and buried her face in her hands. “I forgot this is what it’s like bringing someone to the family dinner. You can’t leave without an intrusive game of twenty questions.”

“So, start talking.”

“I already explained it all to Mom already.”

“Paraphrase, please.”

Chase rolled her eyes and sighed. “Mason and I are dating.”

“Fucking finally.”

“Lori,” Linda scolded.

“Oh, you know you agree with me, Mom.”

“I do, but not the language.”

“It’s your husband’s fault,” Chase and Lori teased in unison. As a retired Navy captain, their father had quite the potty mouth at times. Linda was also scolding him not to curse in front of the kids—and now the grandkids—but it never stopped Frank Monroe from living up to the sailor stereotype.

“So, did everyone want me and Mason together and just didn’t tell me?”

Linda and Lori exchanged quick glances before nodding. “I mean, yeah, sis. Of course we did. I like Mason a hell of a lot more than I liked Shane.”

“Lori.” Another scolding from Linda. “Shane was a nice boy, in the beginning.”

“Yeah, until he flaked out and left me high and dry.” Chase tried to laugh but it fell short. Although she was definitely over Shane and had worked hard to let the bitterness in her heart go, it still bubbled back up at times. “But now I have Mason, so it was worth it.”

“I think so, too.” Lori reached over and squeezed Chase’s knee before turning her attention to their mother. “Oh, I have to tell you what the boys did the other day.”

Chase was thankful that the two quickly got sidetracked in their own conversation about Lori’s kids. It gave her time to soak in the fact she was insanely happy with Mason and wanted many more nights exactly like this down the road. Excusing herself from the table, Chase and Scout walked over toward the pool where the kids had all gathered. Mason was toweling off her clothes just outside of the splash zone.

“You’re soaked.”

“Too bad it’s not from you,” Mason kept her voice low as leaned in and kissed Chase. It was their first public kiss in front of her family, but Chase didn’t mind. On the contrary, it felt entirely natural and perfect. “I’ve missed you.”

“Missed me? I’ve been here the whole time.”

“Uh-uh. Not right here.” Mason wrapped her arms around Chase’s waist. “Right in my arms. Just like I like it.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Yeah, well, you love it.”

“Indeed I do.” Chase leaned in and kissed Mason once more. The rest of the world seemed to fade away as they got lost in each other’s embrace and lips.

At least, that was the case until a water balloon hit Chase in the back. Chase fully expected it to come from the kids but wasn't surprised at all to find it was her oldest brother. Chad laughed from the patio as Daryl, their other brother, joined in.

“Get a room.”

Chase jokingly flipped them off as she took Mason's hand and led her around to the front of the house. It was quieter there, and they found a spot on the cool grass to sit. With Scout's help, Chase was able to brace herself enough to sit down on her own, which she hadn't been able to do in years.

“Looks like Mallory's training with you two is really paying off.”

“Scout's been great.” Chase kissed Scout between the ears and motioned for her to lie down. Mason laid down as well, so Chase happily snuggled into her arms as they looked up at the stars. Her parents' house was far enough away from the lights of downtown and the wharf that they had an almost perfect view of the pristine early summer sky. “I love this.”

“What?”

“Being here with you. Looking at the stars. It's just,” she sighed contently, “perfect.”

“Agreed.” Mason kissed the top of Chase's head. As their eyes adjusted to the dark night, more and more stars began to make themselves known. Mason pointed up at one cluster of stars. “I think that's Orion.”

Chase giggled. “It's not.”

Taking Mason's hand, Chase moved it so Mason was pointing to the correct constellation.

“*That* is Orion.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Well, I guess I gotta believe you then.”

“That you will.”

“So, Miss Smartypants, what *is* that constellation?” She pointed back to the first cluster of stars. They didn’t form any constellation Chase knew of, but she wasn’t going to let Mason know that.

“That’s the Zeus constellation. See how it’s kind of all bold and bright, like Zeus? That’s where they got its name from. And there,” she took Mason’s hand and pointed her finger toward a patch of stars, “is his horse, Pegasus.”

“I feel as though you’re bullshitting me.”

“Maybe a little.” Giggling, Chase held on to Mason’s hand as she slowly brought it down to her lips and kissed it.

“You had me going until you brought up the horse. Pegasus belonged to Hercules, not Zeus. Trust me, I know my Disney movies.”

“Disney movies are not always accurate with their Greek mythology. They could say whatever they wanted and kids would believe it. Because, fun fact, Pegasus wasn’t Hercules’s horse. He was brought to Olympus by Zeus, and he carried around his thunderbolts. See, no Hercules in the mix.”

“Well, thank god our kids will have you to ruin Disney movies for them.” Mason’s laugh quickly died down as her words must have registered. She quickly sat up, but Chase didn’t let go of her hand. “Not that I’m assuming we will have kids.”

“Mason.”

“Because we don’t have to. I was just teasing. I’m sorry. I got caught up in the moment and...”

“Mace?”

“Yeah?”

Chase could feel Mason’s increased pulse thumping as she held on tightly to her hand.

“Kids would be nice.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Chase pulled Mason back down beside her. She swung her leg over Mason’s waist, not caring that the motion hurt. Brushing Mason’s damp hair out of her face, Chase gently stroked her cheek as she looked in her eyes. “You know I want kids.”

“I do.”

“And I know you want them, too.”

“I do.”

“So, it’s only natural to wonder what *our* kids would be like.”

Mason blushed, but tried to hide it with a smirk. “I hope they have my wit.”

“Me, too.”

“And your heart.”

“And your passion.”

“And your beauty.”

Beside them, Scout sighed as she rolled over onto her side. It was so dramatic that they couldn’t help but laugh.

“Apparently Scout isn’t up for us being all sentimental tonight.”

“Eh, she’ll live.” Chase reached out and scratched her belly. “How about we go back to your place, let all the dogs out into the backyard, and then we can have this conversation in private, hmm?”

“Now you’re talking.”

Mason pulled Chase in for one more kiss before they headed to the backyard to say their goodbyes to everyone. On the ride back to the Cove, they didn’t stop holding hands as they sang along to every song that came on Mason’s Spotify. When they pulled into the driveway, Mason turned off the car and looked over at Chase.

“One day, I hope we’re coming home from your parents with some tired kiddos in the backseat.”

“I’d love that.”

Leaning over the console, Chase kissed Mason again. She felt Mason’s hands running through her hair and knew they needed to get inside. Quickly. Because Chase had thoughts on her mind she needed to put into action.

Chapter 21

Mason



Dating had never been Mason's forte. She was good at the casual hookups and could cause just about any woman who crossed her path to swoon. But *actually* dating was a beast Mason hadn't tamed.

Yet.

She was determined to make things different with Chase. Chase was worth every uncomfortable click on another webpage that promised to have the *best* date night ideas. In reality they were all so predictable that Mason couldn't imagine asking Chase to dinner and movie for their first official date. Mason needed something that would show Chase how much she cared for her.

Closing her laptop, Mason rubbed her eyes and sighed. She'd been unsuccessfully scouring the internet for date ideas for over an hour and still felt clueless. Mason knew she could ask her friends for advice, but she also didn't want to come across as insecure about her dating habits. Over the years she had perfected the persona that she knew how to get and keep women. The fact of the matter was, Mason never actually wanted to keep any of them. Not until Chase.

The office was quiet for a Friday afternoon and Mason took the opportunity to leave early. Paws on a Mission wasn't open to the public on Fridays, as they reserved those days for

cleaning up the building and getting ready for the weekend activities. This weekend Mallory was hosting a two-day puppy training class that had filled up quickly. Mallory had been busy getting prepared for the event and Mason found her in the large indoor playroom setting up for the classes.

“You need any help?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks though.” Mallory repositioned a seesaw obstacle they used to help puppies learn unsteady ground. “I’m about done here, then I’m meeting Emery for dinner and a movie.”

Mason snickered.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“Nothing, I’m sorry. It’s great you and Emery have plans. Even if they are a little generic.”

“Generic?” Mallory put her hands on her hips. “So, what kind of dates do you and Chase go on? They must be better than what I can think of.”

“Oh, the one I have planned for this weekend is gonna be,” she nervously laughed, “so great. Chase is going to love it. It’s *so* not generic at all.”

“What is it?”

“What’s that?”

“What are you two doing?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“And why not?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Not for me, it isn’t.” Mallory narrowed her eyes. “Do you even have anything planned? Or are we going to run into you two at the movies later?”

“I talk too much during movies to go to a theater.”

“Yes. I remember.”

Although they had never dated or even hooked up, she and Mallory had attempted to at one time before realizing they

were better friends. But friends also meant they went to movies together, especially on opening nights to certain franchises. Mallory clearly still held a grudge for Mason talking through *Avengers: Infinity War* to the point that Maddie finally covered her mouth with her hand to get her to shut up.

“I’ll tell you what I have planned *after* so I don’t ruin the surprise for Chase. You aren’t very good at keeping secrets.”

Mallory started to protest, but stopped.

“Anyway, if you don’t need my help, I think I’m going to head home. Are you okay with locking up?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks, Mal. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Have fun googling what kind of date to take Chase on,” Mallory called after her as Mason flipped her off. Jokingly, of course. She loved Mallory and knew the place wouldn’t be as successful as it was without her.

Heading out to her Jeep, Mason thought about going home to continue her perusal of date ideas. She could pour a glass of wine, turn on a movie, and cuddle with the dogs as she planned out the perfect date. Chase was babysitting her sister’s kids in Portland, so Mason had the entire night alone to plan.

“Or...” she thought out loud as she made a probably illegal U-turn and headed downtown. There were two friends Mason knew would and could help her with little-to-no joking around about it. She hoped, at least.

Parking behind the building, Mason let herself into the stairwell with the code and took the stairs two at a time. She knocked once on Sophia and Emily’s door before letting herself in. It was questionable to do so; Mason had learned that from past experience when she walked in on them having sex on the couch. But thankfully they were in separate parts of the open apartment.

“Hey,” Mason waved as she put her bag down by the front door. Emily waved back from the couch without looking up from the book she was reading.

“*Bonjour*, Mason,” Sophia waved her over to the kitchen where she was preparing a salad. “Emily’s lost in some new book she bought. She’ll emerge at some point.”

“One more chapter.”

“She said that twenty minutes ago.” Sophia jokingly rolled her eyes. “Can I offer you a glass of wine or some water? I made a cheese plate last night and there’s some left if you’re interested.”

“Cheese and wine sounds great. Thanks.”

Helping herself to the cheese plate in the fridge, Mason sat down at the counter as Sophia handed her a glass of wine. Sophia topped off her own glass before snagging a piece of brie off the plate.

“So, no big plans for a Friday date? Dating Chase has changed you.”

“She’s babysitting her sister’s kids tonight.”

“Ahh.”

“But we’re going on a date this weekend. If I can figure out what to do.”

“That shouldn’t be hard for an expert like yourself, hmm?”

Mason snorted a laugh. “I’m no expert at this. Hookups I can do, but planning a date? For the woman I love? That’s some pressure, and I’m crumbling.”

“So, you came here to ask your dear friend for help.” She sweetly smiled, but Mason could hear the slight sarcasm in her voice. “How sweet.”

“Oh, yeah, like I’m going to take dating advice from you, Grandma. The sock hop days are long gone.”

She wasn’t surprised when Sophia threw a cherry tomato at her.

“I am *not* a grandma.”

“You know I tease.”

“Give me my cheese back.” Sophia reached out and snagged the plate away from her.

Mason pouted. “I’m sorry. You know I love you for your knowledgeable experience.”

“I’m sure.” She handed her back the cheese plate and went back to preparing her salad. “So, you want my advice or not? I’m perfectly fine keeping all my knowledge to myself if you’re not willing to hear it.”

“I’m willing.”

“Good. So, I’m assuming you want more than dinner and a movie, yes?”

“Yes, please. I’m not Mallory and Emery.”

“Well, of course not. They’re living together.” Sophia’s teasing was something Mason has gotten used to over the years, but they didn’t stop her from rolling her eyes. “What does Chase like to do?”

“I dunno. Normal stuff. She likes softball and dogs. She’s been really into *Doctor Who* fanfic recently. And pool. She’s gotten really good at pool.”

Sophia blinked several times before asking, “Mason, do you know this woman at all? You’re dating her and *that’s* all you know about her?”

“Well, it’s hard to narrow it down when you’ve known someone for years.”

“I’ve known Emily for years and can tell you more than what game she is good at. Really, Mason. Think. What would Chase like to do on a date?”

“You’re gonna have to give her ideas.” Abandoning her book on the couch, Emily made her way into the kitchen to join them. “She needs specific instructions on what to do. Right, Mace?”

“Yes. Exactly.” Mason gave her a thumbs up. “Thank you.”

“Okay, what about boudoir photos?”

“Oh! Yes.” Emily excitedly raised her voice as she nodded. “We did those last year and it was so fun and sexy. Very on brand for you.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t scream Chase. I mean, hell, she hates showing off her body after the incident so I don’t think she’ll go for it.”

“But don’t you see that’s all the more reason to do it?” Emily’s voice softened as she spoke. “You love Chase right?”

“Of course.”

“And you love her body, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, so, see. This is the perfect way to show her that. These photos can be a way for Chase to see herself as you see her. It will give her a chance to get out of her comfort zone but she’ll have you there encouraging her as she does it. I think it could be great for you two.”

“It does make you feel sexy,” Sophia chimed in. “I was unsure about it when we first signed up for it but now, they’re some of our favorite photos of each other.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t make the Christmas card.”

“Oh, trust me,” Emily laughed, “Sophia wanted them to.”

“So, you’re serious? You think this is a good idea? And that Chase would like it?”

“I think if you suggest it and tell her you want to show her how beautiful she is to you that she’ll be so swept up in the moment that she’ll agree to anything. Right, Soph?”

“A hundred percent. I think it’s a great idea.”

“Okay, well. I guess I can give it a whirl. Who did your photos? Ava or Molly?” Ava and Molly were the top photographers in the Cove, While Ava had been a boudoir photographer for years, Molly had recently been experimenting with them herself.

“We were Molly’s first clients. She was great.” Emily looked at Sophia then Mason then back to Sophia. “We can

show you some if you want.”

“Oh, I don’t...”

“It’s okay. Really. We don’t mind. Right, Soph?”

“Are you kidding me? We look sexy in those. I’m still mad you wouldn’t let me hang one over the fireplace.”

“I told you we are not scaring Harper and any other kids that may one day be in this apartment.”

“She’s paranoid.”

“Come on. Let’s leave Miss Salad here to finish preparing dinner and I’ll show you the pictures.” Taking Mason’s hand, Emily almost pulled her up the stairs and into the bedroom.

Although she’d known Emily and Sophia for years, Mason had only been in their bedroom once. They were often very strict about keeping it off limits to everyone but themselves. Mason respected that. It was their private space; of course they wouldn’t want everybody just traipsing in and out at their leisure.

Emily opened the door to her closet—the slightly smaller of the two massive closets that were bigger than Mason’s main bathroom—and pulled out a manila envelope. They sat on the bed as Emily carefully pulled the pictures out and handed them to Mason. To say the pictures were stunning was the biggest understatement. Mason was in awe of each of them and just when she thought they couldn’t get better, Emily would pull out another that would blow her away.

“Em, these are stunning. They need to be framed everywhere.”

Emily giggled. “We have them in our bathroom and in our closets, but I like that no one else has really seen them. It makes them more special. Does that sound weird?”

“Not at all. It’s a special moment held between you two. I get wanting to preserve that.”

“Exactly.” Emily nodded. “So, you think this is something Chase would be up for?”

“I think I can convince her.”

“If anyone can, it’s you.”

They looked over the pictures for a few more minutes before heading back downstairs. Sophia invited Mason to stay for dinner, but Mason declined to get home to the dogs. Although Chance and Odin had access to the backyard at any time, Mason still liked to be home with them if she could.

On the way home, she called up Molly and made an appointment for Sunday for a boudoir photoshoot. Now she just had to figure out how to get Chase there without her overthinking it.

Chapter 22

Chase



Chase couldn't remember a time she'd been more nervous as she was as she stood in the back room of the art studio in a lace bikini. She kept turning from side to side as she examined her body in the mirror. It had been years since Chase had looked at her whole body in the mirror. While she could handle waist up, it was the waist down that always sent her spiraling.

The scars left over from the horrible night were a reminder about how much she had lost. Her career, her fiancé, and almost her life were taken from her that night. Chase knew she should be thankful to be alive, and she was. She just didn't know how to accept this was the way her body looked now.

Not when she knew Mason was in the changing room beside her looking beyond gorgeous without her clothes on.

Ugh.

Sighing, Chase ran her hand over the scar on her hip. It had faded with time, but to Chase it was still as vivid as the first time she saw it. Her doctors had warned her it would be a lot to take in, but Chase had naively believed she could handle it. She couldn't. Upon seeing it, Chase had crumpled into a sobbing mess. Her mom was there and held her as she cried, promising Chase she was beautiful and perfect. Chase didn't believe her then and she wasn't sure she believed her now.

The knock at the door startled her out of her thoughts.

“You ready?”

“Um, not yet.”

“Chase,” Mason sighed, but it wasn’t a frustrated sigh. It was sadder and Chase knew why. “Baby, please. Come out and let me see you.”

She begged the tears not to fall from her eyes. Chase hated how she tended to cry when she was frustrated. “Mason, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Chase.” Mason turned the knob on the door and opened it slightly. In the mirror, Chase could see Mason was wearing the white robe Molly gave them when they arrived. But still, Chase couldn’t bring herself to turn around and face her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” Placing a hand on her shoulder, Mason walked in front of Chase which blocked her view of the mirror. “Baby, we don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. I thought it would be fun and sexy and I thought you were cool with it, but now, I think that you might have just been saying that because you thought I wanted to do this. And that’s not the case.”

“So,” she furrowed her brow in confusion, “you don’t want to do this?”

“Well, I mean, I do. But only if you’re comfortable with it. I wanted to do this with you so I could show you the way I see you.”

“What?”

When Mason had told her their plans the day before, Chase had been skeptical about a boudoir photoshoot. But Mason made anything sound fun. Mason could have suggested dinner and a movie and Chase would have thought it was the perfect date. She had assumed Mason was trying to show her a good, sexy time so she had agreed and tried not to overthink it. Of course, that was before she was standing in the dressing room

in the least amount of clothes she'd ever worn outside of her bathroom.

"I love you, Chase. I think you are so beautiful and wonderful and I wanted you to see what I see. Because when I look at you," Mason let out a low whistle as her eyes raked up and down Chase's body. "Damn. You get me going."

"Stop it." Chase playfully shoved Mason's shoulder and rolled her eyes. "You probably say that to all the girls you bring here."

"Actually, this is a first for me, too."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah, goofball. I wouldn't bring some casual fling here. This is something I only want to do with you."

Taking a step to the side, Mason kept her eyes on Chase as Chase locked eyes with herself in the mirror. She hadn't felt this vulnerable around someone ever. But in Mason's presence, there was an added calm and peace to the entire situation. Slowly, Mason took another step to the side as she stood by Chase and looked in the mirror.

"You know what I see when I look at you?"

Chase couldn't answer; she only shook her head.

"I see my best friend. My person. The woman I know will be there for me no matter what. I see how beautiful your body is. How every scar has transformed you into the amazing woman in front of me. I love how your eyes sparkle when you smile and how those little lines appear around your eyes when you laugh."

"Mason..."

"Shh, I'm not finished." Mason winked. "I love how big your heart is. I love that you don't hesitate before you jump in to help someone. I love your hands and I love this little patch of freckles right here." As Mason kissed her shoulder, Chase felt a shiver run down her spine. "And I love the way you react when I touch you."

Chase couldn't take it any longer. She turned and framed Mason's face with her hands as she kissed her. It wasn't a hot and heavy kiss but rather a lighter one filled with a love and passion that extended far beyond the bedroom.

"You're such a softie."

"Only with you." Mason kissed her once more before taking a step backward. "So, do you want to do this or not?"

"After that, how can I say no?"

Hand in hand, they left the dressing room and walked to the studio area Molly and Ava used for the photoshoots. There were chairs, a couch, and a bed set up along with different backdrop areas.

"This is like the photoshoot scene in *The Parent Trap*." Chase wasn't sure what came over her as she giggled in excitement.

Over the next hour and a half, Molly had them pose in more ways than Chase ever could have imagined existed. They took photos together as well as separate, but Chase already knew what her favorite photo was going to be as they were taking it. Molly had positioned them in front of a stained-glass window with a light behind it that cast a colorful glow around them. Their bodies were pressed together and Mason's hands were on Chase's lower back with her thumbs under the band of her bikini bottom. Chase had her arms around Mason's neck with her hands in her hair.

Mason must have sensed how much Chase was loving the pose because she softly kissed her as Molly snapped away with the photos.

By the end of the photoshoot, Chase had never felt more comfortable in her own skin.

She had assumed the date was over after the photoshoot but Mason said there was one more part of the date. Chase sat in the passenger seat of Mason's Jeep as they drove to Maggie Carlson's oceanside house. Confused as to why they were there, Chase furrowed her brow as she looked over at Mason.

"Um, why are we at Maddie's grandmother's house?"

“Maggie and Amy are out of town this weekend and said we could use their backyard.”

“Use their backyard?” She was now more confused than before. “For what? It’s almost dark. Are we building a bonfire?”

“No.” Mason reached into the back of the Jeep and carefully picked up a small picnic basket. Chase gasped at the sight of it, unsure how she’d missed it when she’d put her bag into the backseat earlier. “We’re going to have a starlite picnic.”

“Mason, baby,” Chase leaned over and kissed her. “You’re such a softie.”

“Don’t be spreading that around.”

With a wink, Mason got out of the Jeep and nearly jogged around it to help Chase out as well. They walked hand in hand around the house to the large backyard that overlooked the ocean. There was a small dock that jutted out into the water where two chairs were perched. Chase could only imagine sitting out there reading a book with Mason beside her as the ocean gently lapped against the rocky shoreline.

Chase had been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn’t yet noticed the plaid blanket on the ground along with two tiki torches. Mason must have set it up before the photoshoot, and the thought made Chase giddy. No one had ever gone out of the way to make Chase feel so loved. She knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that Mason loved her and Chase loved her equally as much.

“Mason, this is gorgeous.”

“I was going to take us to the lake, but when I found out the Carlsons were going to be out of town I had a better idea. I love how quiet and peaceful it is here. They have their own little secluded spot on the water and I love it. I always have.”

After sitting down the basket on the blanket, Mason helped Chase sit down before taking a seat beside her. She opened the basket and pulled out a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a large

covered tray of what appeared to be various meats and cheeses.

“Sophia told me this was a charcuterie board but let’s be real. It’s a grown up Lunchable.”

Chase giggled. “I love it either way. Thank you for today.”

“You’re welcome.” Mason leaned toward her and kissed her as she ran her hand slowly through Chase’s hair. “I had so much fun with you today,” she whispered into her ear as she trailed kisses along her neck.

“Me, too.” Chase kissed her once more before they turned their attention to the food. As Mason poured them each a glass of wine, Chase saw something still in the basket. She reached for it, but Mason quickly closed the basket to stop her. “That’s for later.”

“Any hints as to what it is?”

“Nope.” She handed her the glass of wine as their conversations settled onto their friends, Mason’s work, and what they were going to wear to the premiere of the Paws on a Mission documentary. While Mason had purchased a dress for the occasion, Chase had pulled out a custom suit she had tailored a few years ago that miraculously still fit. She had dropped it off at the dry cleaners a few days ago and was eager to be able to wear it for such a special occasion.

As the last of the sunlight faded away, a blanket of stars settled over them. It was the perfect mid-May night. The air was cooler than it was in the heat of the day, but Mason had been prepared. She pulled out a sweatshirt from the basket for Chase to wear. Chase put it on as Mason pulled the basket onto her lap and looked at Chase.

“What?”

“I have something in here for you.”

“Is it a bomb?”

Mason scoffed. “Why on earth would you say that?”

“I don’t know. You’re acting all weird about it and holding it close to you like it’s going to explode if I touch it.”

“Well, I just worked really hard on this. Well,” she shrugged, “Harper and I worked really hard on it.”

“Ah, so you roped a kid into helping you plan our date.”

“I can just keep it a secret, you know.” Mason playfully pulled the basket farther away from Chase as they both laughed. “Okay,” Mason inhaled sharply, “close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

“I swear to god, if this is slime or something weird, I’m going to get you and Harper back for it.” Despite her taunts, Chase did as she was told. She could hear Mason rustling in the basket before she felt what seemed to be a glass jar in her hands. “Can I open my eyes now?”

“Go ahead.”

As Chase opened her eyes, she gasped at the sight in her hands. Mason had punched a few holes into the aluminum foil on the top of the jar to keep what was inside alive. Chase was overcome with emotions as she hugged the jar of fireflies to her chest.

“Harper and I spent most of last night finding them.”

“You got me fireflies.” Chase’s voice was full of emotion as she felt a few tears fall from her eyes.

“I thought we could let them go here and we could catch them. Together.” Mason’s smile was so genuine that Chase could have melted into a puddle on the ground. She understood Chase in ways that no one else ever had. Mason listened when she talked and knew what would make her happy. “So, what do you say?”

“Let’s do it.”

Mason helped Chase to her feet before she took off the foil lid and let the fireflies go. As they started to fly out of the jar, Chase sat it down on the ground and they began chasing them. They laughed as they mostly unsuccessfully tried to catch them in their hands. Each time she managed to catch one, Chase would squeal as if it were the greatest thing to ever happen in her life. And, in that moment, it might have been.

Chasing fireflies with Mason was a moment she'd never forget. Not only did it bring back all the wonderful memories of her childhood, she also got to create new memories with Mason. They chased fireflies together all the way down to the beach where they placed the jar in the sand for the rest of them to fly free.

"You are so sweet for doing this for me." Chase pulled Mason into a hug and held her tight. "Thank you."

"I just love to see you happy." As she kissed her cheek, Mason slowly began to sway in the moonlight. It didn't matter there wasn't any music playing; the sound of the ocean was all the music they needed. Well, that and the blinking fireflies all around them.

"This night is perfect."

"I love you, Chase."

"I love you too, Mason."

Chapter 23

Mason



With the Paws on a Mission documentary premiere only one day away, Mason was determined to keep her nerves at bay. They had spent weeks filming content for it and Mason had all the confidence in the world that the production team would make it incredible. Jones had assured Mason countless times that Phillip Bryant, the director, was the best in the indie documentary film world. Mason didn't know if that was saying a lot, but she trusted Jones nonetheless.

Jones and Brooke had handled most of the marketing for the event. Brooke had put flyers up all over town and invited all former service dog owners to attend the event. They had even booked the entire town square for the event that included catering by Carlson's Cafe, Straight to Ale, and Any Given Sundae. Maddie had donated flowers for the events while Emily and Alexis had offered their bartending skills for the night.

Mason's head spun every time she thought about all the working parts to the premiere. There was no one she would have been able to plan and coordinate it all on her own. The fact it was all coming together relatively flawlessly was a massive testament to her coworkers, friends, and the Cove. She was overcome with emotion just thinking about it.

“Coffee time,” Blake’s voice echoed down the hall. Blake had been an enormous help with the documentary and was even the narrator and makeshift reporter in it. Her expertise and name recognition had helped spread the world farther than Mason had ever expected.

Blake knocked on Mason’s slightly opened door before letting herself in. She was carrying a drink tray with only two drinks left in it.

“Hey, sis.”

“Please tell me one of those is for me.”

“Well, hello to you, too.” After handing Mason one of the coffees, Blake took the other for herself and sat on one of the chairs. “Are you nervous?”

“I don’t think I’ve been this nervous since Mom found a joint in my pants when she was doing laundry.”

“Man, I wish I could have seen that.”

“We missed a lot not growing up together, didn’t we?” Mason sadly smiled at her big sister, who was looking back at her with the same expression. “It sucks, dude.”

“It does, but at least we have the rest of our lives to hang out.”

Mason snorted a laugh. “Yeah, I’m sure Alexis would love me around all the time, especially when you all start popping out more babies.”

“Think of it this way, now we can raise our families together.”

“I don’t have a family.”

“Not *yet*. But don’t you and Chase want kids?”

Her brain flash backed to the conversation they had about wanting kids and Mason couldn’t stop the smile from spreading on her face. “I mean, yeah. We do.”

“Okay, then. So, yeah, we missed out on each other’s childhoods and that sucks but at least our kids can grow up together.”

“Do you really think I’d be a good mom?”

“Are you kidding me?” It was Blake’s turn to laugh sarcastically. “You’re one of the most caring and loving people I know. You’d be a great mom.”

Mason shyly smiled as she sipped her coffee. “We’re not gonna plan to be pregnant at the same time or some weird shit like that, are we?”

“God, no. When I get pregnant, I want all the attention on me. I’m not sharing that with you.” Blake winked and grinned, letting Mason know she was only teasing.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“I should be asking you that.”

“I’m as ready as I can be. I have my suit picked out and Chase has a dress she’s excited to wear. Jones and Brooke have everything under control, I think.”

“I’m surprised they could stop making loving eyes at each other long enough to work together.”

“Well, I told Jones that in order to have an office here, she had to keep her shenanigans with Brooke at home.”

“And that’s worked?” Blake laughed.

“Not really,” Mason laughed and rolled her eyes. “But at least they get their jobs done.”

“True that. So, hey, what are you and Chase doing tonight?”

“Nothing that I know of. Why?”

“Sophia is watching Harper tonight for us and we’re going out on a date. You two should join. We can double date, get all dressed up, and show our gorgeous women off.”

“That sounds like fun, but I don’t want to crash your date night.”

“Nonsense. Lex and I are just glad to get out of the house with a kid. We love Harper, but it’s nice to go out as just the two of us.”

Mason thought about it for a moment. She and Chase had planned on just watching a movie at home with some takeout, but a night out could be fun. “Sure. I’ll ask Chase and if she’s up for it, I’m in.”

“Awesome. Text me and let me know and we can figure out where to go.”

“Will do.”

“Oh,” Blake winced and shifted in her seat, “there’s one more thing I want to run past you about the premiere.”

“Ugh, my brain can’t handle much more. Jones presented this as stress-free and fun but so far it’s really been neither.”

“Well, the good news is the hard part is over and now all we have to do is premiere it, and get it out there for people to see the amazing work you all do here. After that, donations should hopefully start rolling in. Especially if we do this.”

Reaching into a bag that Mason previously hadn’t noticed, Blake pulled out a folder and handed it to her. Mason hesitantly took it and slowly opened it. Inside was a logo for the company but the name was changed. She gasped at the change and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Jones thought the two M’s would play well together. But if you don’t like it, you don’t have to keep it. Obviously this is still your company. Jones and I just thought this had a more personal meaning behind it. You started the company to help people like our sister so it made sense.”

Mason couldn’t stop staring at the logo.

Mason’s Mission.

“Blake, I…”

“You don’t have to keep it. It’s just an idea.”

“No. I love it.” Mason looked up at Blake as tears filled her eyes. “I forget sometimes why I started this business. It was so hard and expensive to get Everleigh a service dog. Mom and Mama worked so hard to make it happen that I told myself then I would do whatever I could to help families like ours get the service dog their kids need.”

“And you’ve done that, Mace. Look around.” Blake heals her hands out to her sides. “This is Mason’s mission.”

Mason sniffled and laughed. “Does it make me self-centered if I change the name?”

“God, no. Embrace it, sis. You deserve this.” Standing, Blake rounded the desk and gave Mason a quick hug. “Jones thought about debuting the name change at the premiere. We also have a mock-up for the new sign out front as well as business cards and shirts and about a thousand other things Jones has put the logo on.”

“I love that. Thank you both for doing this. Really. I never would have thought about changing the name.”

“Sometimes a rebranding can help.” Blake looked at her smartwatch and grimaced. “Sorry to run off, but I need to meet Phillip for a sound check for tomorrow. We have Skylar Ford all lined up and ready to go, just gotta make sure everything sounds good.”

“It’s Skylar Ford. She’d sound great anywhere.”

“Well, you’re not wrong there.”

Skylar was a local star, of sorts. She was always the best at karaoke night and often performed sets of her own songs at the local bars. Since she’d grown up in the Cove, Mason had known her since they were kids.

“Okay, so, I’ll talk to Chase and let you know.”

“Great.” Blake blew a kiss in her direction. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After Blake left the office, Mason picked up her phone and sent a text to Chase about the double date. Chase sent back a thumbs up emoji along with *sounds like fun*, so apparently they were going on the double date with Blake and Alexis.

Although Mason and Alexis had been friends for years, it was still somewhat weird to Mason that she married Blake. Of course, Blake and Alexis were made for each other. Everyone knew that. But Mason selfishly hoped her sister would have

been more focused on rebuilding her relationship with her siblings and mother instead of courting Alexis.

None of that mattered now though. Blake was right. They had the rest of their lives to bond and shit. There was no need to stay bitter about the past. Mason only hoped that when Alexis and Blake had a baby, things wouldn't change again.

Mason remained distracted the rest of the day with thoughts of her relationship with Blake and the impending premiere event. It wasn't until she pulled up at Chase's house to pick her up did her anxiety calm down. As Chase pulled her into a hug, everything that had been bothering her melted away.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Chase giggled as she cocked her head.

"For just being you."

"Well, right back at you then." Leaning in, Chase kissed her. Mason wondered if they should cancel plans with Alexis and Blake and instead go back into Chase's house for the night. "Keep thinking what you're thinking," Chase whispered into her ear.

"I have no other choice." Inhaling deeply, Mason slowly let it out as she took Chase's hand and walked her to the Jeep.

Chase had decided to bring along Scout, which Mason was thankful for. Mallory had been working with Chase and Scout to make them more comfortable as partners, but Chase had still been hesitant to take Scout out in public with her. Mason knew it was because Chase didn't want to make it known she needed help, but Mason didn't ever say that to Chase. It was something Chase had to work through for herself. Which meant Mason didn't acknowledge Scout as if it were a big deal she was there. Instead, Mason opened the back door to the Jeep to let her in.

The group had decided on pizza and mini golf, which was a better date idea than Mason would have concocted. She made a mental note of it to save it for a later time. Dinner at Pizza Palace was as delicious as ever and, after a way too intense game of mini golf, Alexis was declared the winner.

“She’s going to be insufferable tonight,” Blake groaned as she gathered their clubs and turned them back into the clubhouse.

“Just admit it. I’m a better golfer than you.”

“I love that you think this is golf.” Pulling Alexis into a hug, Blake held her tight as she kissed her. Although their love was sweet, Mason made a gagging sound to tease them.

“Oh, stop.” Chase playfully hit her arm. “They’re in love.”

“So are we.”

“I’ll kiss you like that if you want.”

Chase smirked. “I want.”

Never the one to be overshadowed, Mason dipped Chase’s body into a dramatic kiss. She could hear Alexis laughing as Blake jokingly groaned.

“Get a room.”

“Just giving you a taste of your own medicine,” Mason teased as she helped Chase back to her feet. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Are we that way?” Alexis asked Blake.

“Madly in love? Yes.”

“You know, I never thought I’d be double dating with my sister.”

“And yet, here we are.”

“But you know where I’d rather be?” Chase asked, but Mason had a feeling she already knew where. “Any Given Sundae, anyone?”

Chapter 24

Chase



It had been years since Chase had attempted to wear a dress. Not because she didn't want to. On the contrary, she missed the section of her closet she'd banished to a box in a basement after her surgeries. The scars along her leg were better covered with pants, not revealed for the world to see in a knee length dress. But that was the only thing Chase wanted to wear to the premiere.

She knew exactly which dress too—the blue one with the white flowers that landed just above her knee. Chase hadn't worn it in years but knew exactly where it was. As she and Scout slowly made their way into the basement, Chase quickly found the box marked “donate.” The question mark after the word reminded Chase of how optimistic she'd been right after her surgeries. Even when her outlook seemed bleak, Chase always tried to hold on to the hope that one day things would be better.

And that day finally seemed to have arrived.

Digging through the box, Chase found the dress and pulled it out. She held it up to her body and looked at Scout, who was sitting a few feet away.

“What do you think?”

She took Scout's bark to mean she liked it.

“It looks good, right? I think so. Let’s just hope I can still get the zipper zipped.”

Taking hold of Scout’s harness, Chase slowly made her way back up the stairs one painful step at a time. She rarely went into the basement anymore, and was reminded why as the pain coursed through her body. Even after several surgeries and therapy, Chase had been resigned to the fact the pain from stairs was there to stay. At least Scout made it easier to climb them.

Back upstairs, Chase tossed the dress into the dryer for a quick freshening up before heading into the bathroom to get ready. Mason was picking her up in a little over an hour which gave Chase more than enough time to get ready. Chase wasn’t someone who spent hours on their look. A little concealer, a little lip gloss, a quick brush through her hair, and she could be out the door in no time.

But Chase made herself take her time to get ready for the premiere. It was a big night for Mason. She’d worked so hard to get Paws on a Mission up and running and it had been hard over the years. Chase had watched in awe as Mason persevered to make her heart’s calling a reality and keep it afloat. She was beyond proud of Mason and couldn’t wait for the rest of the world to see how passionate she was about the organization. The documentary would not only get the organization’s name and mission out to more people but it would also help bring in donations, which Chase knew they desperately needed. Being a nonprofit was hard, and Chase knew Mason had put more of her own money into the organization than she’d ever tell anyone. But that was just Mason. Her heart was always bigger than her wallet.

“Knock, knock,” Charlie called out from the front door. Chase had asked her to come over and help her get ready. She’d let herself in, as usual, and Scout perked up at the sound. “Where you be?”

“Bathroom.”

“Hopefully not on the pot.” Charlie’s voice was getting closer which caused Scout’s tail to start wagging. Chase gave

her a pet between the ears as Charlie opened the door. She was wearing a blue suit with thin pinstripes and a matching blouse underneath. The black shoes brought the look together perfectly and Chase let out a whistle of approval. “Oh, stop.”

“Dude, you look hot. I’m surprised Delaney let you out of the house without jumping you first.”

Charlie smirked. “Who’s to say she didn’t?”

“Ew,” Chase groaned. “One day I’m going to keep my mouth shut so I don’t find out things I don’t want to know about my cousin.”

“Oh, please. Don’t be a prude. We all know Mason’s going to rip off whatever you’re wearing tonight the minute you get home.”

If we make it that long, Chase mused to herself.

“Where’s the dress you’re wearing?”

“In the dryer. I haven’t gotten it out yet.”

Without being asked, Charlie disappeared back down the hallway and retrieved the dress. Chase anxiously waited for her to come back. Scout must have sensed her anxiousness as she placed her head on Chase’s knee.

“You’re such a good girl, Scout.” Leaning down, Chase kissed her on the head between her eyes.

When she looked back up, Charlie was standing in the doorway with the dress in her hands. Chase had forgotten how short it was. Even with Charlie’s slightly taller frame, the hem of the dress hit her mid-calf. Which meant it would definitely show off at least some of her scar. Her hand found the scar on her leg under her sweatpants as she sighed. Again, Scout knew something was wrong and gently pawed at her foot to get her attention.

“Stop overthinking.”

“I’m not.”

“Your dog and my instincts indicate otherwise.” Charlie’s voice was borderline scolding, but Chase knew it was out of

love. “No one is going to pay any attention to your scars. They’re going to be awestruck by how fabulous you and Mason look together.”

“Stop it.” Chase waved her off, but could feel her cheeks blushing. “This is Mason’s night. People should be focused on her and the organization. Not me.”

“Well, as the girlfriend of the honoree, people are going to notice you. But that’s completely okay because you’re going to blow them all away on this. Now come on,” Charlie motioned for Chase to stand up, which she did, “let’s get you dressed.”

There was a twinkle in Charlie’s eyes as she took a few steps back and motioned out the bedroom door toward someone unseen. Chase’s heart was full of love and gratitude as Delaney and Sadie joined Charlie in the doorway. They’d come prepared with nail polish, hair products, and more styling equipment than Chase had only seen inside a beauty salon. They got to work in a flurry and within half an hour, they spun her around in the chair as Chase came face-to-face with her reflection.

She felt like Mia Thermopolis. That was all she could think as she tried to get her brain to believe that the person looking back at her was indeed herself. Her hair was pulled back in a bun—or rather a *chignon*, according to Sadie—and her makeup looked as if she’d spent hundreds of dollars to have it professionally done. The light pink shade on her lips was perfect and the mascara Delaney had chosen made Chase’s blue eyes pop more than they ever had before.

“Wow,” Chase laughed nervously. “I don’t know what to say. I barely recognize myself.”

“You look beautiful, Chase.” Charlie hugged her from behind and looked at her in the mirror. “Mason isn’t going to be able to keep her hands off of you.”

“Can’t say that I blame her.” Delaney nodded, and Sadie rolled her eyes.

“Stand up.” Charlie motioned for her to stand. “I wanna make sure the dress fits right.”

Discarding her t-shirt, sweatpants, and socks, Chase let Charlie and Sadie help her into her dress as Delaney sat on the edge of the bed watching. Miraculously, the dress fit better than it ever had before and as Chase caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her breath hitched in her throat. She rapidly blinked to make sure she wasn’t hallucinating.

“Wow.”

“You can say that again,” Charlie nodded her approval as she finished zipping up the dress and making sure everything was perfectly in place. “Sadie, will you get the necklace out of my bag, please?”

Chase furrowed her brow. “What necklace?”

Sadie handed a small box to Charlie, who opened it and took the necklace out. She tenderly put it around Chase’s neck and hooked the clasp as Chase realized what it was. The necklace was simple: a dainty silver chain with a small star hanging on the end. Chase recalled the necklace from her childhood and smiled.

“Grandma Monroe would want you to wear this tonight.”

“Thanks, Charles.” Chase attempted to lighten the mood by using her nickname for Charlie. She didn’t want to cry and ruin her makeup but the fact that Charlie had kept the necklace all these years and was letting Chase wear it meant more to her than she could express. She felt Scout gently nudge her thigh, and she reached down to pet her. “I love it.”

“I thought you would. But I want it back after tonight,” she teased with a wink.

Before Chase could respond, the doorbell rang. Her heart fluttered—literally freakin’ fluttered—at the thought of Mason standing on the other side of the door. She all but rushed to the front door, pausing only for a moment to take a deep breath before pulling open the door.

On the other side was a giant bouquet of red roses that hid Mason’s entire face. Chase giggled as Mason slowly lowered

them to reveal her sweet smile. She'd worn her hair down and in waves, which was a nice change from her usual ponytail. While Chase had opted for a dress, Mason had decided to wear a black pantsuit with Converse sneakers. The look was perfectly Mason. Especially considering the low-cut blouse allowed Chase to see she wasn't wearing anything under it. She had to stop herself from dreaming of running her tongue over Mason's soft skin.

"I should be the one giving you flowers."

"Let's be real. I'm the more romantic one." Putting the roses to her side, Mason closed the space between them and pulled Chase into a hug. Their lips met perfectly, as usual, as Chase slipped her arms around Mason's waist.

"You look amazing, Mason."

"So do you."

Another kiss. Chase fought with her desire to pull Mason inside to her bedroom and forgo the premiere altogether. She could tell by the way Mason's hand quickly found the zipper on her dress that she was thinking the same thing.

"I can't wait to take this off you tonight," her words were hot against Chase's ear and sent a shiver down her spine. She licked her lips and nodded. It was all she could do. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Were we ever that young and in love?" Delaney's comment from behind reminded Chase she wasn't home alone. Mason must have realized it too as she quickly took a step back from Chase and smiled that smile that could make Chase melt.

"We were young once but we're that in love now."

"Ew, gross. Stop," Sadie groaned as she walked out the door past them. "I'm going to FaceTime Penny and show her my hair."

"She's gonna go FaceTime *Penny*," Chase teased, knowing there was the potential for a crush if there wasn't one already.

But Sadie said they were just friends.

Yeah. I've been there.

“We should get going,” Delaney glanced at her phone. She walked over to them and took the flowers from Mason. “I’ll put these in a vase. You two go on. We’ll see you there.”

“Okay, thanks. Scout.” Chase whistled as Scout walked over to her. Sadie had added a bowtie to her harness which was beyond adorable.

With all the confidence she’d ever had before, Chase took hold of Scout’s harness with one hand and Mason’s hand in the other. And for the first time in a long time, things felt like they had finally fallen into place for Chase.



Moonflower Productions

Presents

PAWS ON A MISSION

Town Square

May 14, 2022

7 o'clock in the evening

Moonflower Cove, Maine

Thank you for joining us.



SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

INTRODUCTION	Blake Calloway-Holland <i>Producer</i>
ORGANIZATION HISTORY	Brooke Kingsley <i>Marketing Director</i>
TRAINING OVERVIEW	Mallory Garner <i>Lead Trainer</i>
PARADE OF PARTICIPANTS	Past and Present service dogs and their handlers
SPECIAL PRESENTATION	Isla & Vera Mackenzie <i>Parents of Mason Mackenzie</i>
DOCUMENTARY INTRODUCTION	Everleigh Mackenzie <i>First Paws on a Mission Client</i>
DOCUMENTARY VIEWING	Paws on a Mission: How one woman's dream became a life changing reality for many
A WORD FROM THE FOUNDER	Mason Mackenzie <i>Founder</i>
RECEPTION	<i>Featuring music by Slylar Ford. Food provided by Carlson's Cafe, Straight to Ale, and Any Given Sundae. Flowers curtesy of Little Miss Happy Plants.</i>

Chapter 25

Mason



The premiere was beyond what Mason could have ever imagined. She had given Blake and her team complete control over the event, so she hadn't been around for much of the planning. Mason knew she had to give a speech and reveal the new name, but beyond that she hoped to be able to enjoy the evening like everyone else.

Stepping out of the Jeep, she quickly made her way around to the passenger side to help Chase out. After getting Scout out of the back, they all stood in amazement on the curb as they tried to take in the sight before them. Mason told herself she wasn't going to cry, but the tears starting to nip at her eyes indicated otherwise.

The town square was completely decked out for the event. A large screen was set up on one end of the square with several seats positioned in front. Currently, a slideshow of dogs and handlers that had gone through Paws on a Mission were on rotation on the screen. Mason couldn't stop her smile as she remembered each of them. Many of them had even come back to the Cove for the event, for which Mason was beyond grateful for. It was great to be able to check in with the dogs and see them with their handlers.

Across the square from the screen was a long buffet table with more hors d'oeuvres and drinks than Mason thought would be possible to consume. But the crowd that had already

gathered was more than Mason had anticipated. It seemed all the town had come out for the documentary premiere and the local news station had even accepted the invitation. She spotted Blake talking to one of them in front of a camera being set up and waved at her.

“There’s Blake.”

“Wait.” Chase squeezed her hand. “Take a moment and soak this in. You did this.”

“I didn’t do any of this. This is all Blake and Jones and Maggie and whoever else they roped into helping.”

“No. Mace,” Chase sighed, “you did all of *this*. These people, this event, this documentary... It’s all because of you. All of this is happening because you had a dream and you didn’t stop until you achieved it.”

Mason felt a lump form in her throat as she listened to Chase’s praises. She wanted to protest, say it was no big deal. But it was a huge deal. She had taken a dream she had in her dorm room and turned it into an organization that had helped hundreds if not thousands of people over the years. Including the very gorgeous woman standing right next to her.

“I’m so proud of you, baby.”

“You’re gonna make me cry.” Mason laughed and wiped her tears as Chase pulled her into a hug. She wasn’t normally a publicly sentimental person but, dammit, she didn’t care. Chase was right; Mason had done all of this. And she had every right to be proud of that.

Pointing to the stage under the screen, Chase asked, “What’s that?”

Mason followed her gaze to a large circular item under a black cloth. While there wasn’t much depth to it, it made up for its size in height. She was about to say she didn’t know when she remembered her conversation with Blake the day before.

It must be the new sign with the new logo.

She'd kept the news on the name change to herself, wanting to have Chase be surprised by the announcement along with everyone else. But Mason suddenly didn't want to hold it in any longer. She wanted Chase to revel in the news of the name change with her. Taking a deep breath, Mason smiled.

"It's *perhaps* a new logo design."

Chase's eyebrow arched. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yep."

"Can I see it?"

"When everyone else does."

"I'm your girlfriend." Chase took hold of Mason's suit and pulled her closer. "Don't I have any special privileges?"

"I'll give you all the special privileges tonight, I promise." Mason kissed her, not caring who saw. It wasn't like their relationship was a secret. After all, Mason had even written Chase into the speech she was to give after the documentary. So everyone who didn't know they were together would know soon enough. "I want the new logo to be a surprise, but I will tell you the new name."

"Wait," Chase stammered, "what? New name? When did that happen?"

"Yesterday, actually. Blake and Jones came up with it and I signed off on it yesterday. Apparently, they were both overly confident that I would say yes because they already have a new sign and there's apparently merch around here somewhere with the logo plastered all over it."

"Well, tell me!"

Mason took in a deep breath and released it slowly. "We are changing the name to Mason's Mission."

Chase's squeal reached a level Mason didn't know was possible. She wrapped her arms around Mason's neck as Mason held her in her arms. "Oh, my gosh, Mason. I love that so much. It's perfect!"

"I thought you'd like it."

“Are you kidding?” Chase framed Mason’s face with her hands. “I love it. And I love you.”

They kissed again. And again, Mason wished she could skip the event and take Chase home to her bedroom.

But Blake walking over to them with a camerawoman and a news reporter in tow told Mason that her fantasies with Chase would have to wait. While the reporter was well dressed as usual for TV, it was Blake’s attire that caught Mason’s attention. Blake was used to walking the red carpet and going to premieres so it was no surprise that she’d chosen a form-fitting dress with a slit in the side nearly up to her hip that showed off her leg each time she moved.

“Mason, this is Annette Lee. She’s a reporter for Portland 7. And this is Jake Cowan, her cameraman.”

“It’s so great to meet you both.” Mason shook each of their hands before turning to Chase. “Annette, Jake, this is my girlfriend, Chase Monroe.”

“Pleasure to meet you both.” Chase had all the charm in the world as she shook their hands. “And this is Scout, my Paws on a Mission service dog.”

Blake was rapidly texting on her phone, but paused for a moment to make eye contact with Mason. “Annette and Jake are going to be covering the event and have a feature on the news tonight, as well as tomorrow morning, afternoon, and evening.”

“Oh, that’s awesome. Thank you.”

“It’s an honor to cover this event, Mason.” Annette wasn’t much older than Mason—maybe in her forties— but looked much younger in person than she did on TV. “My brother received a service dog from you many years ago after returning from Iraq.”

“Oh, gosh. I love that. What is your brother’s name?”

“Ricky. His service dog is...”

“Flounder,” Mason laughed at the memory of the chunky yellow Labrador as a puppy. “I remember them. How are they

doing? I'd love to catch up with them?"

"They're actually here tonight for the parade. I'm sure he'd love to see you, too."

"Please, tell him I want to see him before he leaves, okay?"

"Absolutely."

"Mace," Blake interjected, "why don't we go set up near the stage and have Annette and Jake film a little before the events starts, okay?"

Although Blake had spent most of her life in front of the camera, she did equally as well behind the scenes. She had flourished under the responsibility of creating, producing, and releasing the documentary and had even founded her own small production company. Blake had even confided in Mason that she wanted to try her hand at producing movies or TV shows in the future. Mason had no doubt her sister could do whatever she put her mind to. She was a Mackenzie, after all.

Leaving Chase and Scout to mingle with the slowly arriving guests, Mason followed Blake, Annette, and Jake to the stage. They filmed Annette asking Mason several questions before they let Mason go to get ready for the event to start. She found Chase quickly in the front row along with her parents and siblings. Alexis and Harper sat on the row behind them with Chase's parents, who were beaming with pride just like Mason's were. Mason looked around the full seating area at her family and friends as her heart swelled with pride. If she could, she wanted to thank them all individually for coming. Especially the people who hadn't gotten a seat and were standing throughout the town square to show their support.

She could feel her heart rate increasing as her nerves finally started to overtake her. Until then, the entire premiere and the surrounding event had been a hypothetical that Mason would deal with later. But later had arrived and she suddenly felt the desire to bolt. Which would look terrible considering everyone was there *because* of her. Taking a seat between Chase and Isla, she tried to ground herself but instead, her leg nervously

began bouncing. Simultaneously, Chase and Isla each put a hand on her knees to stop the fidgeting.

Mason breathed a sigh of relief. She kissed Chase on the cheek to thank her before resting her head on Isla's shoulder for a moment.

As the lights around town square dimmed, Blake took the stage to a round of applause as the spotlight followed her. She stood in front of the microphone as if it was what she was born to do. And maybe it was. Blake gave a beautiful introduction speech before calling up Brooke to do a brief historical overview of the organization.

Next up was Mallory who talked about the training program followed by a parade of dogs and handlers who had gone through the organization. Pride surged through her body as she clapped for each team as they walked across the stage.

Then her parents stood and made their way up onto the stage and Mason. She hadn't picked up one of the programs for the event, but she thought she knew everything that was happening. Mason looked at Chase, confused. Chase shrugged.

"Good evening, everyone." It was Vera who took the microphone while Isla stood by her side, hand in hand as usual. "We wanted to thank each and every one of you for coming out here tonight to support our wonderful daughter and her outstanding organization."

Another round of applause. Mason moved to the edge of her seat. She felt Chase's hand on her back and its presence calmed her nerves even more.

"All of you know our daughter Mason can be a little hardheaded, just like her mom." Vera's teasing got a laugh from the crowd. "When she first told us she wanted to start this organization, of course we supported her however we could. Granted, none of us knew what we were doing. But Mason was determined. She researched everything, visited other service dog organizations, and never gave up on her dream to make owning a service dog possible for those who might not otherwise be able to afford one. Mason, sweetie, we are so proud of you. I love you."

“Love you too, Mama,” Mason yelled up to the stage and Vera blew her a kiss. She did the same as a tear slid down her cheek. *Dammit. Don't start crying now.*

It was Isla's turn now as she stood in front of the microphone. With the spotlight shining on her, Mason could see there were tears in her eyes as well. Her parents would make her cry before the end of the night. There was no denying that.

“I promised myself I would not get up here and gush about my daughter, but it's tough not to when you created such a great human.” Another round of applause, which only made Mason want to crawl into a hole. Being the center of attention wasn't her thing, but she knew she had to toughen up at least for the next few hours. “I'm so proud of you, kid. Thanks for letting me come along on this journey with you. I love you.”

“Love you more.” Mason was on the verge of falling out of her seat. She resisted the urge to run up on stage to hug them, not knowing exactly what the schedule of events was. *Why didn't I get a program??*

“So, it is with a great honor that we get to unveil a new logo to represent this new phase of life for the organization.”

Walking into either side of the large circular object, they pulled off the fabric to reveal the new logo and name. Gasps and cheers made their way through the crowd and before Mason knew what was happening, everyone was standing up to applaud. She could feel her cheeks blush as she stood up and waved to the crowd. Even though she was still uneasy about all the attention, knowing people supported the new name meant the world to her.

As the applause died down and everyone returned to their seats, Mason's ten-year-old sister Everleigh took the stage. Everleigh looked significantly less nervous than Mason felt. Nala, her diabetic alert dog, was by her side as usual. Her role was simple: introduce the film. What Mason didn't expect was her to give a small speech.

“A lot of people have role models they don't know, like a celebrity or something. But I know mine because it's my sister

Mason. Mason has taught me to never give up on my dreams and always help people out when I can.” Everleigh took a deep breath, then smiled at Mason.

Screw it. I’m letting the tears fall.

“Thanks for being such an awesome big sister.”

“Back at you, kid,” Mason called out through tears.

“It’s my honor tonight to introduce the world premiere of *Paws on a Mission: How one woman’s dream became a life changing reality for many.*”

Yet another round of applause echoed through the square as the lights dimmed and the screen came to life. Mason leaned back in her chair and Chase put an arm around her shoulder as Mason leaned into her. It felt amazing to have someone she loved so much beside her for such a special occasion.

The documentary was just under an hour long yet managed to capture their mission perfectly. Interviews from past clients, employees, and even Mason made it into the final cut that was beyond perfect. Phillip and his team had done fantastic with the editing, graphics, and music. When the credits rolled, everyone including Mason was on their feet applauding.

It was time.

She knew after the premiere it was her turn to take the stage and give a speech before everyone was excused to enjoy the reception. Mason had written a speech weeks before on some notecards that were neatly tucked into her pocket. Pulling them out, she stood in front of the microphone and motioned for everyone to sit down. Which they reluctantly did after more applause.

“Wow,” Mason laughed. “I really don’t know what to say. I mean I do,” she held up her notecards, “I wrote a whole speech. But these words seem so inadequate after witnessing so much support tonight. And, well, always.

She let still another round of applause die down before looking down at her first notecard.

“Ever since my mom and I moved here, Moonflower Cove and its people have loved and accepted us with open arms. Here, it feels anything is possible because there is a team behind you all the way. I’m so thankful that you all have loved and supported Paws on a Mission—or well, *Mason’s Mission*—for all these years. None of this,” she motioned around the town square, “would have been possible without each and every one of you.”

Mason forced herself to take a breath. She was going to run out of oxygen if she kept going without pausing.

“I know tonight’s supposed to be about the organization, but I hope you all will spare me a few moments to thank some special people in my life. To my parents,” she turned to face them, “thank you for never letting me give up on my dream even when it seemed impossible to achieve. Thank you for loving me and never letting me think for one minute that I couldn’t do something if I set my mind to it.”

She turned her focus to her siblings. “And to my brother and sisters, thank you for being the best siblings I could ever ask for. All four of you,” Mason made it a point to look at Blake, “mean the world to me. I’m so glad we get to spend this life together.”

Mason swallowed the lump in her throat as she looked at the scribbles in words she added a few days ago.

“And lastly, to Chase.” It felt as if everyone else disappeared except her and Chase. Their eyes locked together. “Chase, there’s so much I want to say to you, but I’m afraid I’d bore everyone else here. So I’ll just say, thank you. Thank you for supporting me, for believing in me, and most of all, for loving me. I love you, always.”

Giving a simple wave to everyone, Mason nearly sprinted off the stage and ran over to Chase. Their embrace was long and tight and Mason never wanted to let go of Chase.

And thank God, she never had to.

Chapter 26

Chase



The premiere had been more than Chase had ever anticipated. Blake and her team had not only created a beautiful documentary, but they'd planned a reception that could rival any big star's wedding reception. Carlson's Café, Straight to Ale, and Any Given Sundae each had long tables covered with food, drinks, and ice cream. Maddie had created stunning bouquets of flowers that adorned the reception area and sat upon each of the small tables scattered around the town square.

And then here was Mason's speech.

Chase had no idea she was going to include her in it. Her heart had swelled with pride and love as she listened to Mason declare her love for her in front of everyone. Mason had never been one to publicize a relationship. Granted, Mason had never really been in a relationship before Chase. She felt honored to be the one with Mason now. If she'd known how it wouldn't have destroyed their friendship, Chase would have made her feelings known to Mason years ago.

But there was no sense in dwelling on what could have been if they'd made different choices. All that mattered was they were together now, drinking one too many drinks with their friends while Skylar Ford played up on the stage. They had snagged a table toward the front of the reception area

which meant the music was loud. She sat between Walker and Mason, who had her hand on her knee.

“So, Maddie, Walker,” Chase turned her attention to the couple next to her, “are you ready for the big day? It’s coming up quickly.”

“More than ready.”

“Ready for it to be over,” Walker chimed in. Maddie playfully punched her in the arm, which caused Walker to clarify. “I just mean it’s been a lot of prep and money and we *should* have just eloped like we wanted to do originally.”

“Don’t throw this on me.” It was Emily this time. She was a few drinks ahead of all of them, except maybe Alexis. To Chase’s knowledge, Blake was the only sober one amongst their small group, which also included Sophia and Harper.

“Only the guilty speak when they aren’t directly spoken to.” Chase could tell Walker was teasing. “You took her wedding dress shopping and then bam! Our house is covered with bridal magazines, fabric samples for tablecloths, and enough cake samples to feed a small country.”

Maddie finished off her drink and rolled her eyes. “And you enjoyed eating every one of them.”

“Yes, well.” Walker shrugged. “That’s the only good thing about all this.”

“Besides marrying me, right?”

“Of course, baby.” Leaning over, Walker kissed Maddie as everything else seemed to fade away. Chase thought how wonderful it was to love someone like that, and as if on cue, she felt Mason’s hand slowly move up her thigh.

Mason had been teasing her since they sat down. She’d run her finger delicately up Chase’s thigh, stop just short of her warm center, and then moved it back down to her knee. It was driving Chase crazy and if she knew of somewhere—anywhere—around where they could fuck, she had no doubt they’d already be there.

Chase glanced at the clock on her phone once more. 9:52 p.m. She didn't know how long they'd have to stay, but Chase knew she'd have to attend to certain *needs* sooner rather than later if they were going to be there much longer.

“Hey, Maddie?”

“Yeah?”

“Is the flower shop open? I need to use the restroom.”

Maddie nodded. “Backdoor's open.”

“Perfect, thanks.”

Chase did her best to signal Mason to follow her without coming out and saying it. As she stood, she took hold of Scout's harness and took a few steps toward the flower shop. She was barely a few feet past the table when she felt Mason's hand on her lower back.

“Smart move.”

“Think we fooled them?”

“Not a fucking chance. But who cares.”

Crossing the street, they made their way into the back of the flower shop. Chase commanded Scout to lie down at the bottom of the stairs as they made their way up them. She didn't care that it hurt her leg; she only cared about touching Mason.

God, why can't I get enough of her?

Thankfully, Maddie hadn't moved her bed out of her old apartment when she and Walker bought their house. Mason led her into the otherwise empty bedroom and discarded her jacket onto a nearby chair. Their lips came together the way Chase had been thinking about for hours. She'd wanted to have her way with Mason from the moment she showed up at the front door to pick her up. Finally, it seemed release was coming.

Mason started to lay Chase down on the bed, but Chase stopped her.

“No. No way. Take off your pants.”

“Bossy,” Mason borderline growled, in a super sexy way. “I like it.”

Unbuttoning her pants and kicking off her shoes, Mason shimmied out of them and laid down on the bed. Chase wasted no time crawling on top of her. She was thankful she’d taken a pain reliever before going out for the evening, otherwise her knee would have hurt much more than it currently did. Except none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was Mason.

“I’ve been thinking of this for *hours*.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Mason spread her legs for Chase. “Have your way with me.”

And Chase did. She made sweet love to Mason the way she had been thinking about for hours. Her tongue and fingers worked in unison to help Mason come. Which she did. Twice. When Chase rolled over onto her back beside her, they were both breathless.

“Maybe I need to withhold sex a few hours every time,” Mason breathlessly joked. “You made hard and fast work out of me, and I loved it.”

“I loved it, too.” Chase kissed her shoulder. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Just as Mason rolled over to kiss her, there was a knock at the shop’s door. They both froze. Maybe they were hearing things. Maybe it was just their friends being funny. Chase was about to say as much when they heard the knock again. But this time, a voice accompanied it asking, “Mason?”

“Good grief.” Rolling out of bed, Mason put her pants and jacket back on. Chase did the same, straightening out her dress and checking her hair in the mirror. “It’s probably another reporter. I thought I’d talked to all of them, but who knows how many Blake invited. Hopefully this won’t take long, then we can leave and go home.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Making their way back down the stairs, Chase once again took hold of Scout's harness. Mason took a brief moment to kiss Chase one more time before opening the door.

And who was on the other side nearly knocked them both to the floor.

Ashley Clinton.

Mason's ex.

Well, not just any ex.

Ashley was *THE* ex. The one that broke Mason's heart. The one that destroyed Mason's self-confidence. The one that Mason had fought for years—literal years—to get over. What the fuck was she doing here?

Mason clearly wondered the same thing as she asked Ashley that very question.

“Well, hello to you, too.”

Although Chase had never met Ashley, she was still exactly how Chase had always imagined her to be. She was dressed perfectly from head to toe. Not a single blonde hair was out of place, her makeup was flawless, and the red dress she was wearing was clearly chosen to draw attention. Which made Chase wonder why she hadn't seen Ashley at the premiere. Surely, she would have noticed her.

Right?

Chase's mind was running wild and by the look on Mason's face, her mind was as well.

“What the hell are you doing here, Ashley? I know for a fact you were not on the guest list.”

“Which I'm sure was a gross oversight on your event coordinator's part.” Looking past Mason, Ashley's eyes landed square on Chase. They narrowed slightly as she looked Chase up and down. “I see you've not changed at all, Mason. Always sneaking around with someone.”

“Stop right there.” She took a step toward Ashley, which caused her to step further away from the door. Mason must

have realized she had the upper hand as she took a few more steps to force Ashley farther into the back parking lot. “I will not allow you to come into *my* town and talk that way about my girlfriend.”

“Your *girlfriend*?” The way Ashley nearly spat the word sent chills up and down Chase’s spine. Ashley was *exactly* how Mason had first described her. She was a complete and total bitch. “I never pictured you as one to settle.”

“I would ask that you never picture me at all.”

“Oh, come now, Mason.” Ashley arched an eyebrow at her. “You can’t ask me to do that. Not after everything we have been through.”

“That was *years* ago. I’ve moved on. Grown up. Settled down. Just because your life is miserable, doesn’t mean mine has to be too. It’s no longer my life’s goal to make your life easier. I know that probably surprises you to hear me say because you spent so long gaslighting me. But cutting you out of my life was the best decision I *ever* made.”

Mason paused for a moment, turning around to look at Chase.

“Well, after Chase. Chase is the best decision I ever made.”

She turned back to Ashley.

“You are just a manipulative narcissist. Nothing more.”

Ashley didn’t respond. She stood quiet, seemingly thinking of a comeback for Mason’s words. But none came.

Turning back toward the flower shop, Mason pulled the door closed before taking Chase’s hand. They walked back toward the reception area with Ashley still frozen in place. Chase could feel Mason shaking, and simply wanted to hug her, to hold her until her emotions subsided.

Chase squeezed her hand tighter. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Mason stopped walking, and Chase did the same. She turned slowly to look at her and it was then Chase could see the tears in her eyes. “But I really need a

minute, okay? We are okay, I promise. I just never expected to see Ashley again and I...”

“Mason,” Chase stopped her, “it’s okay. I get it. It’s a lot. Why don’t you take a walk around town for a bit to clear your head. I’ll go back to the table and be there when you’re ready, okay?”

As she nodded, a few tears slid free from her eyes. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Oh, please.” Chase jokingly waved her off. “You have me forever. Now do what you need to do to decompress. I’ll be here waiting. Always.”

And Chase meant it, too. Every single word.

She watched Mason tuck her hands into her pockets as she walked down the street toward the pier. Looking back toward the flower shop, Chase didn’t see any signs of Ashley. *Good riddance*, she thought to herself as she and Scout made their way back to the table.

Chapter 27

Mason



***H**ow. Freakin'. Dare. Her.*

Mason was boiling mad that Ashley had crashed her big night. At least she hadn't literally crashed the premiere. That would have been the worst possible thing to happen. She found a quiet bench on the pier and plopped down.

How did Ashley even know about the event in the first place? She had clearly been watching where Mason went, which meant she had to be at the reception. However, Mason couldn't recall seeing her anywhere in the sea of people at the premiere. Granted, she'd been so focused on Chase and how gorgeous she looked to really notice anyone else.

But Mason would have recognized Ashley. Not because she still had feelings for her. Those had vanished years ago. And not because Ashley was pretty. She was, but she didn't catch Mason's eyes anymore. No, she would have noticed Ashley because she'd spent years thinking of exactly what she'd say to her if she ever got the chance.

Her mind wandered back to that fateful summer she spent with Ashley. She let the memories she'd banished to the dark depths of her mind resurface.

They met by accident. Mason had been given a summer internship at Healing Hounds, a service dog company in Connecticut. The owner, James Arwine, had become friends

with Mason's parents after they got Everleigh's first service dog from him. When he found out Mason wanted to own her own service dog company, he offered to show her the ropes.

But what seemed like a perfect scenario became a nightmare.

James's mother broke her hip and needed help getting around. He spent the summer in Delaware, leaving his ex-wife, Ashley, in charge of Healing Hounds. And in charge of showing Mason the ropes. She did, of course, teach Mason a lot that summer but unfortunately most things didn't involve running a business.

Ashley had been Mason's first love. She was ten years her senior and captivated Mason in a way no one ever had until that point. She made Mason feel loved and special. But Ashley never loved her; she just needed a release after her divorce was finalized. Mason had simply been the latest in a long line of people Ashley had used.

Mason didn't know any of that at first. She thought she'd found the perfect woman and fell hard and fast for her. It wasn't until Mason caught Ashley with another woman that things slowly began to click for her. She was being used to fill a need. Nothing more. Ashley never had any desire to start or have a relationship with her.

It was at that moment that Mason closed off her heart. She decided that if Ashley could have casual hookups, then she could, too. And so she did. Mason found she could sweet talk women into her bed to make her forget the pain Ashley caused her.

Over time, memories of Ashley faded away but Mason stayed on her same playboy path. She liked being the one people called when they needed a date for a night out. Or a night in. Either way, Mason was there.

That was, of course, until Chase.

Sighing, Mason pulled out her phone to text Chase. She wanted to check in with her—to make sure she was okay after their unfortunate encounter with Ashley. Mason told her where

she was at, and Chase responded she was about to leave the reception and would be there shortly. Chase included an *I love you*, which warmed Mason's heart. She didn't know how she got so lucky to be in love with Chase, but she'd be thankful every day she did.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Mason was on her feet in a split second at the voice. She turned to face Ashley once again and for the briefest of moments, she contemplated punching her. But that wouldn't be beneficial. At least that's what Mason's therapist had repeatedly told her.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Bullshit," Mason snarked with a dismissive wave of her hand. "The best thing you can do for both of us is leave."

Crossing her arms, Ashley took a few more steps toward Mason. "Don't you want to know why I'm here?"

"Frankly, no."

"Well, I'm here now so let me just say this." Ashley hesitated for a moment as Mason waited with bated breath. She could run away, but that was childish. Punching her had already been ruled a bad idea. The only choice Mason had was to listen to her and think of a comeback to whatever she said.

What Mason didn't prepare for was Ashley to close the space between her and kiss her. She couldn't have pushed her away faster if she'd tried. Ashley stumbled in her heels along the cobblestone path, and instinctively Mason reached out to keep her from falling. She had a tight grip on her arm and looked her in the eye.

"How dare you come here and kiss me. After all this time, don't you think I've moved on? I don't love you anymore, Ashley. You're nothing but a bad memory. Now, leave."

"But, I..."

"You heard her." It was then both Mason and Ashley realized Chase was there. A wave of relief washed over Mason

upon seeing her and Scout a few feet away. She let go of Ashley's arm. "Everything okay here?"

"Your girlfriend," Ashley spat the word, "just kissed me."

Chase feigned shock as she put her hand over her heart. "Oh, my! I can't believe it."

Mason had to keep herself from laughing at Chase's dramatics.

"Well, she did." Ashley was smug; she thought she was causing a rift between them when in reality, they were making fun of her. "She kissed me."

"Mason, is that so?" Chase held up her hand to stop her from answering. "No. Don't tell me. I'll just ask them." She pointed behind Mason and Ashley to Blake, Alexis, and Harper. They had obviously seen the whole thing too and were playing into whatever scheme Chase had going. Again, Mason stifled her laughter. "Blake, Alexis, did you see Mason kiss Ashley?"

"No."

"I saw her push Ashley away after she kissed her." Alexis took slow steps toward Ashley, leaving Blake and Harper a few feet behind her. "We don't take very kindly to liars around here."

"What is this?" Ashley's voice was higher than it had been. Her eyes nervously darted back and forth between Alexis, Mason, and Chase. "An ambush? I'll have you know that I received an invite for this event. I thought Mason wanted me here."

"I didn't. Trust me."

"And I sent out the invitations." Blake joined in as she walked to Alexis's side. They made sure to keep Harper close, but behind them at all times. "I know for a fact you weren't on the list. But I'm sure with all the publicity Mason has been receiving you heard about it and decided just to crash the party."

Mason wanted to grab a bucket of popcorn, sit on the bench, and watch her friends tear into her ex. It was riveting and she loved knowing her friends had her back.

“So, why don’t you just leave and we’ll all forget this happened, okay?” Chase stood tall by Mason’s side. Mason took hold of her hand and squeezed it.

Ashley looked around at all of them before leaving her gaze on Mason. “Is that what you want, Mason?”

“Leave, Ashley. And never contact me or my girlfriend or our friends ever again.”

For a moment, Mason thought Ashley was going to say something else. But then her shoulders dropped ever so slightly and she turned her back to them. She walked—or well, stumbled—a few feet down the cobblestone path before turning back around.

“I never want to come here again.”“ She probably thought the words would hurt, but they just made Mason want to laugh. “This town is crazy, anyway.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the Cove for you.” Mason sarcastically waved at Ashley. “Bye, bye now.”

With a roll of her eyes, Ashley turned and walked back toward her car.

But not before Harper called out, “Yeah, bye bitch!”

Alexis quickly covered Harper’s mouth with her hand as everyone busted out laughing.

“Perfect timing, Harp,” Mason somehow managed to say through laughter. “I’m so proud.”

“I’m not.” Alexis got down to Harper’s level. “Honey, I know we’ve talked about saying that word before. Do you remember what Mom and I said?”

“Not to say it,” Harper confidently nodded. “But, Mommy, that woman wasn’t being very nice to Aunt Mason.”

“She wasn’t, sweetie, but it’s still not okay to say that to someone, okay?”

Harper sighed. “Okay. I’m sorry, Mommy. I won’t call her a bitch again.” Wrapping her arms around Alexis, Harper hugged her as Alexis seemed to refrain from laughing yet again. Harper slyly grinned at Mason, who gave her a thumbs up sign that resulted in an elbow jab to the ribs from Chase.

Turning her attention away from her friends, Mason watched Ashley get into her sports car and leave. Putting an arm around Chase’s waist, she pulled her into a long hug.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Let’s go home,” Mason sighed. “I’m exhausted.”

“We need to get you home too, little girl.” Alexis stood, putting Harper on her hip as she did. “It’s way past your bedtime.”

“Aw, Mommy. Do we have to?” Harper asked with a yawn.

As they said their goodbyes and walked to their vehicles, Chase whispered into Mason’s ear, “I hope you’re not too exhausted.”

Mason opened the Jeep’s back door and let Scout inside. Gently pushing Chase against the passenger side door, Mason kissed her. “I’ll never be too exhausted for you.”

“Good to know.”

“Are you okay?”

Chase furrowed her nose. “Am I okay? I should be asking you that.”

“I’m okay. I got over Ashley years ago, you know that. I just wanted to make sure we’re okay.” Suddenly nervous, Mason swallowed the lump in her throat. “We’re okay, right?”

“Mason, baby,” Chase put her arms around Mason’s waist and held her close, “it’s going to take a lot more than a dumb ex to pull us apart. You’re stuck with me forever, you know that.”

“And thank god for that.”

Smiling, Mason leaned in and kissed Chase. She could have stayed in that embrace forever as her heart overflowed with love and happiness. After everything she'd been through in life, she'd finally found The One. And she was never going to let her go.

One
Month
Later

Chapter 28

Chase



Chase had never been so nervous. After all the intense encounters with the police force and all the surgeries she'd endured, Chase thought she was ready for anything.

So she hadn't planned on ring shopping for Mason Mackenzie to be her undoing.

"Are you sure it's not too early?" Chase asked for the third time in as many minutes.

Beside her at the ring counter, both Charlie and Sadie sighed and responded, "No."

"I mean it's not like I'm asking her anytime soon anyway."

"We know," Charlie and Sadie said in unison. At her feet, Scout laid down with a sigh, which made them all laugh.

"I just want one for when the time is right."

"Chase, honey," Charlie sighed, "if you don't shut up and look at rings I swear I'm going to text Mason and tell her what you're doing."

"Fine."

Chase turned her attention back to the countless rings under the glass display. Never in a million years did she think ring shopping would be her reality. They hadn't talked about

marriage yet, not seriously at least. But Chase had no doubt that it was on the horizon for them.

The last few weeks had been more blissful than Chase could have expected. They had overcome Mason's ex showing up unannounced without letting it come between them. If anything, Ashley showing up brought them closer together. While Mason could have shut Chase out while she dealt with Ashley's presence, she had shown Chase how serious she was taking their relationship. The old Mason would have let it come between them. But not now.

Chase smiled to herself as she kept examining the rings. None of them felt like Mason. They were all so shiny with huge diamonds and she could already hear Mason complaining it was too big. Mason wasn't one to wear jewelry as it was, so Chase had to make sure the ring was perfect.

"Maybe this is something Mason and I should do together. It's a big decision, you know." Chase shrugged, and noticed how both Charlie and Sadie seemed relieved at the decision. "I don't think I'm ready to purchase right now, but thank you for letting us look." Chase thanked the shopkeeper as the three of them headed outside in the warm summer air. "Thanks for coming with me."

"It only cost me three hours of my Saturday," Sadie sarcastically snarked. "Not like there weren't more important things I could have been doing."

They had only been at the jewelry store for *maybe* half an hour. After lunch with Delaney and Mason at the Pizza Parlor, Mason had vaguely said she needed Delaney's help with something. Chase had shrugged off the clandestine meeting and used it as the perfect excuse to sneak off to the jewelry store.

"I think Penny can manage *one day* without FaceTiming you." Charlie rolled her eyes, but winked to let Sadie know she was only teasing. "You can call her tonight after the wedding."

"Yeah. I guess." Walking a few feet ahead of them, Sadie had her nose buried in her phone. They followed her to the

Pizza Parlor parking lot where they'd left their vehicles. Chase had planned to go home with Charlie and have Mason pick her up there, but instead, Mason and Delaney were waiting for them by Mason's Jeep.

"Did your little meeting not last as long as you thought?" Chase went to Mason's arms as if they were magnetic. She held her close and kissed her cheek. "Are you going to tell me what you two are up to?"

Mason grinned. "Nope. I'm going to *show* you."

After loading Scout into the kennel in the back of the Jeep, Mason opened the door for Chase. She had a goofy grin on her face; the kind that told Chase she was *definitely* up to something. Which was confirmed when Mason handed her a bandanna.

"Put this over your eyes."

"*Excuse me?*" Chase took the fabric and held it in her hand. "Are you kidnapping me? Going to murder me?"

Mason laughed. "No, I'd miss you too much. Just put it on and trust me."

Dramatically sighing, Chase did as she was told. "You're incorrigible, you know that, right?"

"It's why you love me."

"True that."

Reaching out, Chase felt for Mason's hand. They drove hand in hand to wherever as Fletcher played through the Bluetooth radio. Four songs played through before Mason brought the Jeep to a stop.

"Are we here?"

"Yup."

"Can I take this off?"

"Not yet."

Chase heard Mason get out of the Jeep. After a beat, Mason opened the back door to let Scout out before finally letting

Chase out. She made sure not to let Chase stumble in the blindfold and they walked a few feet on what felt like solid pavement. When they came to a stop, Chase felt Mason's hand on her lower back and Scout coming to a stop beside her.

“Okay, close your eyes.”

“Mace,” Chase giggled, “I can't see as it is.”

“I know, but I'm going to take this off and I want you to still be surprised.” Mason waited a beat before asking, “Are they closed?”

“Yep.”

Mason removed the blindfold. “Okay, open your eyes.”

When Chase did, she saw an adorable one-story house with flowers lining the walkway. She recognized the house; Maddie's aunt used to live there before she passed away. Although Chase had only been inside once, she recalled it being a great house.

“What are we doing at Liz's old house?”

“I think we should buy it.”

“What?” Chase was equal parts stunned and elated. She looked around the yard for the For Sale sign. Maddie hadn't mentioned it going up for sale and the lack of any signage led Chase to believe it wasn't on the market yet. “Is it even for sale?”

“Well, not yet.” Mason shrugged. “But I talked to Maggie and she's willing to sell it to us, if we want. I already talked pricing out with her and Delaney, so, if we want to do this, we will make it happen.”

“Mason, I... I don't know what to say.”

“Wait until you see the inside.”

Taking her hand, Mason led her and Scout inside. The house had an open concept living room, kitchen, and dining room that took up the majority of space to the right. To the left was a hallway that seemingly led down to bedrooms and

bathrooms. Out the large sliding glass back door, Chase could see a small wooden deck with a big fenced-in backyard.

“It’s a three-bedroom, two-bath house. New roof, new appliances, new flooring. Maggie wanted to fix it up to sell, but never could bring herself to actually sell it. Until I asked, of course.”

Chase walked around the sparsely furnished room as Mason’s smile spread ear to ear. She seemed to look Chase over for any sign that she was happy. Which of course she was. But before she could say as much, Mason continued the sales pitch.

“Now, I know we each have our own houses now, but neither are really accommodating for a family.” They both smiled wider at the word. “Mine is two stories which means you’d have to climb stairs and I know you don’t like that. And yours is nice but lacks a big backyard for our dogs. This house just seems perfect for us. Perfect for our family.”

“Mason...” Chase felt tears nipping at her eyes. She sniffled as Mason crossed the room to her.

“What is it, baby? Talk to me?”

“It’s perfect.” Chase couldn’t contain her emotions any longer. Happy tears streamed down her face and she kissed Mason. “I think it’s the perfect house for us.” She paused for a moment and pulled back to look in Mason’s eyes. “And our family. I can see our friends and family here for dinners and I can picture playing in the backyard with our dogs and kids.”

“Kids, huh?” Mason teased. “How about we start with one and see how that goes?”

Chase giggled. “Deal.”

“I love you, Chase.”

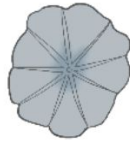
“I love you too, Mason.”

THE END



The Big Day

Maddie



Every square inch of Little Miss Happy Plants was filled with flowers. Not that that was anything out of the blue for the flower shop. But today, most of the flowers had been prepared for the day Maddie Carlson had been dreaming about for years.

It was the day she was going to marry Walker Forsyth.

They'd been putting off having a wedding simply because they didn't want to deal with all the planning. Every website that claimed to help plan an "easy" wedding seemed to list a hundred things needed to make a perfect wedding day. But Maddie and Walker didn't need a perfect wedding. They simply wanted to be married.

Thankfully, everything had gone smoothly in the planning process. So smoothly that Maddie skeptically questioned the ease multiple times. Her grandmother, Maggie, had offered to cater the wedding for free and even included a wedding cake. Emily, Alexis, and Vera had been busy bees with decorating the ceremony space, which was going to be at Lake Monroe. It had been Walker's suggestion to get married at their special spot and Maddie loved not having a wedding in a venue. Summers in May were perfect and she was going to enjoy it in the sleeveless wedding dress she'd picked out with Emily a few months ago. Maddie had been uncertain of what dress style she wanted until she saw it. The Dress. It was floor length with a fitted bodice and a simple flowing design throughout the dress. And the best part? It was on sale.

Walker had been adamant that they wouldn't see what the other had picked out to wear until the wedding day. While Maddie could care less about the big reveal, Walker's insistence on it had been so cute that Maddie had agreed. She found herself eagerly counting down the hours until she would *finally* marry Walker.

The bell over the door chimed. Maddie looked up from the bouquet she'd been mindlessly creating to see Emily walking in with a pizza box and two bottles of soda. As Maddie's only bridesmaid, Emily had taken the role very seriously and had watched Maddie like a hawk the last few months.

"I brought lunch because I figured you haven't eaten yet."

"That'd be correct." Maddie rolled her shoulders and pushed the bouquet aside to make room for the pizza. Plopping down on the stool behind the counter, Maddie let out a sigh as she took the soda from Emily. "What time is it? I've been so focused on *not* focusing on the wedding that I've lost track of time."

"That's why you have me," Emily said with a wink. "It's noon, so we have six hours before the wedding. Assuming you don't pull a *Runaway Bride*."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "Stop it."

"You know I love you."

"Whatever." Opening the pizza box, Maddie pulled out a piece and took a bite. Emily had thoughtfully gotten extra spicy Italian sausage and cheese on it, which was Maddie's favorite. "What time is Lex getting here?"

"Should be any minute," Emily said while chewing. Alexis and Emily had offered to help Maddie with her hair and makeup. While Maddie normally hated the thought of spending hours on either of those things, she wanted today to be special. She's settled on a simple updo. "Sophia's coming over later to help me get my hair ready."

"Aww, that's sweet."

"It is equally as sweet of me to *let* her help because we both know she doesn't know what she's doing."

Maddie playfully swatted Emily's shoulder. "Be nice. Sophia's so good to you. Let her spoil you some more. Especially since you won't give her her own wedding."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Emily held up her hands. "*I* am not the one holding back the Beauchamp-Crawford wedding. That

would be Sophia ‘I’m not getting married a third time’
Beauchamp.”

“Third time’s the charm.”

“Yeah, well,” Emily laughed, “tell Sophia that.”

Once more, the bell above the door chimed and Alexis walked in. She was carrying a large purple gift bag and had a goofy grin on her face.

“I come bearing gifts for the bride from the other bride.” Alexis was glowing. It was obvious that married life had been good to her, and Maddie hoped she and Walker had a marriage just like Alexis and Blake. “Here you go.”

Handing the bag to Maddie over the counter, Maddie dropped the remainder of her pizza into the box and took the bag. “Oh, my god. Was I supposed to get Walker something? I’m such a horrible wife and I’m not even a wife yet.”

“Oh, hush,” Alexis waved her off. “Just open it.”

And Maddie did.

And her heart leapt to her throat.

Inside was a hand-painted canvas of Maddie and Walker kissing at Lake Monroe. The trees were in bloom around the lake and their dog Bowie was laying down between them. It captured their relationship so well. Maddie instantly knew the painting had been done by Bradley, and the fact Walker had commissioned it made her heart soar with love and happiness.

There was a card inside as well and Maddie opened it.

My dearest Maddie,

I can’t wait to marry you. Hurry up and get dressed so we can make this official. I love you, always and forever.

Love,

Walker

Maddie wiped a tear from her eye and looked at her two best friends.

“Let’s get this show on the road so I can marry my girl.”

Walker



Walker nervously shifted her weight back and forth on her feet as she tried to calm herself down. Adjusting her suit and tie once more, she forced herself to take a deep breath to calm herself down. She reached down and pet Bowie, who was wearing a matching tie and sitting perfectly at her feet. Emily was slowly making her way down the aisle as Skylar Ford played a song softly on her guitar. She vaguely recognized the song as one from Kelly Clarkson, but all the words had left Walker’s mind. Her entire focus was on the door at the end of the flower-lined aisle.

Their friends and family had done amazing transforming the small clearing by the lake into a perfect wedding location. And Maddie had, of course, done amazing with the flower decorations. There were roses and daisies and baby’s breath and even a few sunflowers throughout the décor that lined the aisle, adorned the back of the chairs, and covered the archway Walker was standing under. Tamara Ridley, the pastor at the

church Maddie's grandma attended, stood beside Walker on one side while Vera and Lena stood beside her on the other. Walker hadn't wanted to pick between her siblings as her bridesmaid, so she'd taken Maddie's advice and let them both join in the ceremony.

Arriving at the end of the aisle, Emily winked and smiled at Walker as she took her place on the other side of the archway. Skylar changed the song to an Adele one, which Walker had insisted Maddie pick out. Maddie had chosen "Make You Feel My Love" and Skylar sang along with the selection. Tamara motioned for everyone to stand as they all stood and turned to the freestanding door at the end of the aisle. It looked out of place in the woods, but it was the perfect way for Walker to have her grand reveal she'd wanted on her wedding day. She was thankful they had found the perfect solution.

Maddie's twin brother, Patrick, was dressed in a navy blue tux and yellow tie that matched the sunflowers in the décor. He slowly pulled open the door to reveal Maddie standing there with her mother Monica at her side. Walker's entire attention focused squarely on Maddie. Her sleeveless dress was stunning, and the necklace hanging around her neck seemed to catch all the sunlight as it sparkled in the evening sun. Maddie was carrying a stunning bouquet of summer flowers that popped against her white dress.

"She looks amazing," Vera leaned in and whispered in Walker's ear.

Walker beamed with pride. "She does, doesn't she?"

As Maddie arrived at the end of the aisle, Monica kissed her cheek. She let go of Maddie's hand and handed it to Walker. "Take care of my girl, okay?"

"You know I will."

Taking Maddie's hand, the two took a step toward Tamara as Monica took her seat in the front row beside Patrick. Walker was thankful they had both agreed on a small, intimate wedding. Only their family and close friends were in attendance, less than fifty people were seated in the white folding chairs in a half moon shape around the makeshift altar.

As Skylar's song came to an end, Tamara cleared her throat and smiled.

“Good evening, everyone. Walker and Maddie wanted to thank each and every one of you all for being here on their big day. All of us know this day didn't arrive easily for them, but I know we are all thankful they are finally ready to tie the knot.”

Tamara looked back and forth between them.

“Maddie and Walker, you two have chosen to enter into a covenant with each other that is a beautiful and sacred expression of your love for one another. When you say your vows to each other in just a moment, you will be committing your life to the other from this day forward. I know I don't have to tell you this, but you will have to work every single day to make this commitment be the fulfilling marriage I know you both desire.”

Tamara gave a small nod to Maddie, who passed her bouquet of flowers to Emily to hold. Maddie took hold of Walker's hand and Walker squeezed it to let her know she was feeling all the emotions she was as well. Turning to Walker, Tamara turned a page in her binder and proceeded.

“Walker, will you take Maddie to be your wife? Will you love her and keep her as long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Walker firmly nodded as she smiled. Maddie bit her lower lip and wiped a tear from her eye. Tamara turned her attention to Maddie.

“Maddie, will you take Walker to be your wife? Will you love her and keep her as long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Her smile spread wider as she squeezed Walker's hand.

“At this time, Walker and Maddie are going to exchange their handwritten vows to each other.” Tamara took two index cards out of her binder and handed one to each of them. She nodded to Walker, who nervously looked down at the handwritten index card. But she knew she didn't need the card to tell Maddie how she felt.

“Maddie, I’ve loved you for most of my life and I can’t believe that we are finally getting married. I promise to work on our relationship every day. I know things won’t always be easy, but we’ve been through so much already that I know there is nothing we can’t face head on together. I love you with all my heart and I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life with you. I love you, Maddie Carlson.”

Walker resisted the urge to end her vows with kissing Maddie. They were both tearing up, and Walker simply wanted to hold Maddie. But Tamara interrupted her thoughts as she looked at Maddie and told her to give her vows.

“Walker, there’s so much I want to say to you today, the day of our wedding. This day has been such a long time coming, and I’m so thankful we made it here. You, my sweet Walker, make me a better person every day. You’ve been my rock, my constant, my stronghold in this crazy world and I can’t imagine anyone else I’d want to create a future and a family with. I love you more than all the flowers in the world.” Her comment got a laugh from Walker and the other guests. “Now, let’s make this official.”

Walker laughed again. “Hell, yeah.”

Once Tamara stopped laughing, she finished out the ceremony until finally it was time.

“By the power vested in me by the state of Maine, I now pronounce you two married. You may kiss your bride.”

And Walker did. She dipped Maddie into a kiss they’d been practicing for weeks as their friends and family stood up and cheered. Bowie even let out a bark of happiness. Skylar started to play and sing “You Make Loving Fun” by Fleetwood Mac.

Hand in hand, Maddie and Walker walked back down the aisle dancing and singing along to the song. They stopped at the door, as instructed by Molly at the rehearsal the night before. She told them to stop and pose for a kiss. As they kissed, Maddie held her bouquet up high in the air. Molly snapped away on her camera as she quickly captured the moment.

The most perfect moment.

“I love you, Maddie.”

“I love you too, *Mrs. Carlson.*”

About the Author

Addison Clarke is a self-proclaimed nerd who loves all things Disney, Marvel, and dogs. She grew up watching Disney princesses reach their happily ever after and now she writes her own modern fairy tales. She is currently working on too many projects at once. Addie can be found tweeting at [@AddisonClarke_](https://twitter.com/AddisonClarke_).

Please tell your dog she said hi.

And if you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review. Thank you!