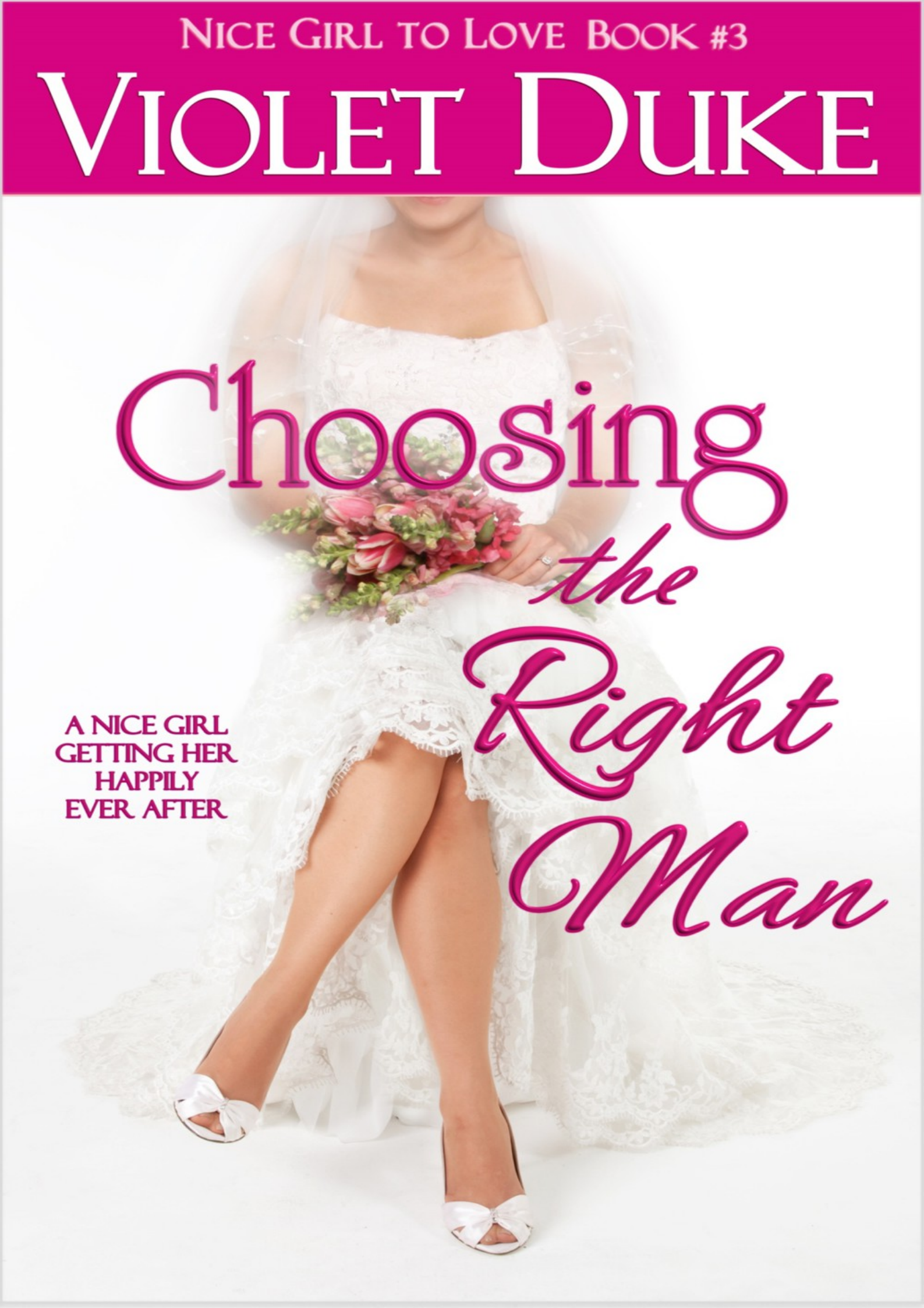


NICE GIRL TO LOVE BOOK #3

# VIOLET DUKE

A bride is shown from the waist down, wearing a white lace wedding dress and white high-heeled shoes with bows. She is holding a bouquet of pink flowers. The background is white.

## Choosing *the* Right Man

A NICE GIRL  
GETTING HER  
HAPPILY  
EVER AFTER

**CHOOSING  
THE RIGHT MAN**

NICE GIRL TO LOVE  
BOOK THREE

VIOLET DUKE

## **DEDICATION**

To all my readers. You are just the best fans an author could ask for.



## CHAPTER ONE

“CONNOR.”

Abby wasn't sure if she'd actually said his name out loud, or if he was even standing there, really. But when a few quick blinks confirmed the latter, she repeated the former. Just in case.

“God, I've missed hearing you say my name in that sexy voice of yours.”

What *was* it with the Sullivan brothers and her voice?

She took a wary step back when he entered her office fully. “Why are you—” The rest of her words got wedged in her throat. Because he'd finally lowered that gigantic flower arrangement he was holding so she could see him now, closer than he'd been to her in months. Close enough for the full impact of his presence to hit her like a wrecking ball. Close enough for her to see his ice blue gaze darken, lock on her eyes, then dip down to her lips.

And linger. As if he just couldn't help himself.

She'd never felt so thoroughly kissed from a single glance before.

“You defended your dissertation today,” he replied to her unfinished question. “I've...been having my mom keep tabs on you for me.”

*He has?* Well that would explain all the probing, borderline invasive discussions Helen had pulled her into over the past few months.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “So how does it feel to be *Dr. Bartlett* now?” He sounded so affectionately proud, his voice just as heart-grabbingly rough and intense as she remembered. And fight it though she did, Abby found herself being transported back six months. As if he'd never left.

As if things had never ended between them.

*“What the hell are you doing here?”*

Abby’s heart dropped down into her stomach. Guilt speared through her as she looked over Connor’s shoulder at Brian standing in the doorway looking equally angered, betrayed, and...hurt.

“This is what you do after I bare my soul to you?” growled Brian, blasting the full force of his anger over at Connor, while leaving just the raw pain for the brief look he cast Abby’s way.

Connor frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You told me to call you when...” Brian’s eyes flickered in Abby’s direction before returning to glare back at Connor. “I couldn’t get a hold of you so I left you a voicemail.”

With another confused frown, Connor reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone. Or rather, what looked exactly like his phone, only with a small *Rosie the Riveter* decal on the back proudly exclaiming ‘*We Can Do It!*’ in all its iconic glory.

“Shit, I grabbed the wrong phone again this morning.”

An explosion of jealousy hit Abby like a sucker punch to the gut.

This time it was Brian that looked baffled, and more than a touch indignant. “You’re walking around with another woman’s phone in your pocket and you’re here giving Abby flowers? What are you, into harems now? Isn’t one woman ever going to be enough for you?”

Connor went as still as a statue, tension vibrating off of him in waves. His jaw clenched and unclenched before he replied through his teeth, “I’m not here to ruin Abby’s day.” He stepped up to Brian and ground out in a dangerously low murmur, “You and I, we’re going to have a serious talk later.” Turning back to Abby he added gently, “Us too.” His expression shuttered then, closed off a bit defensively. “...If you want to, that is.”

Honestly, Abby had no idea what she wanted right now. So she just nodded mutely.

All the while, she kept her eyes on Brian, willing him to look at her. And that's when she saw it. A flash of white in the box he was holding. Peering down, a small gasp escaped her when she finally got a good look at the box Brian was holding.

Or rather, at the beautiful white egret orchid plant sitting inside.

It was like looking at a page straight out of her most cherished memories.

She *felt* more than saw Connor leaving, *felt* more than heard him whisper softly from the door, "Brian was always better with the gift-giving than I ever was."

She watched him look from the massive array of flowers he'd brought, now sitting on her desk, to the delicate potted orchid Abby was already reaching for reverently. "Congratulations again, Abby," he said in a voice stripped raw and almost palpable in its quiet envy. "I'll call you tomorrow some time."

Then he left.

And for one brief moment following, Abby was sure a tiny piece of her heart went with him.

Never had she seen him look or sound so vulnerable before.

It wasn't until she felt a strong hand on her shoulder that she realized she was still staring at the closed door. Swiping her palms over her eyes, she plastered an overbright smile on her face. "And here I thought you were the dramatic Sullivan."

A sympathetic light filtered into his gaze. "Are you okay?"

All the feral coarseness in his voice from the last few minutes had vanished. He was back to being the Brian she knew and loved. Perfect, protective Brian—her rock, her anchor.

The only one who could undo that turbulent feeling of free-falling she always got around Connor.

No, she wasn't okay. But she couldn't think about that right now.

*Tomorrow.*

She pulled her brain back to what she could understand, back to what she was *supposed* to be focusing on, back to what was right in front of her.

Brian.

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she sank into his python hug, thankful that he felt the need to hold on for longer than usual. She could hear his heart hammering, the pace nearly matching her own. But while his was because of anger toward his brother, hers...wasn't.

The guilt over that simply compounded when she opened her eyes and caught sight of her amazing gift from Brian once again, perched on her file cabinet. So ethereal and magical in its delicate beauty, it stole the air out of her chest just as it had when she'd first seen it as a child.

Soon, she was flipping backward through the memory album of her life, to the days before all the pain Brian still didn't quite know about or understand but kept doing everything in his power to help her overcome.

And she felt grounded once again.

"Where did you—" She reached over and touched the tiny wing-like petals of the flowers, marveling over the fringed softness, just as she used to when she was a kid. "How did you \_\_\_"

Goodness, for someone who'd just survived a dissertation defense, she was doing a horrible job stringing together the words for a complete sentence.

He stepped back and finally, all the remaining traces of tension were erased from his face as he broke into a boyishly excited smile. "Do you like your surprise? I found a grower who could ship it out here last month. Skylar and I have been keeping it alive ever since."

Abby chuckled over his choice of words. "So already this flower is faring better than all the poor fish that have passed through your house." Carefully pulling out the plant, she held it in front of her and just stared at it for a minute, turning it this way and that, feeling the rush of happy memories filling her heart once more—memories she'd lost track of over the years.



“Thank you,” she uttered, sounding just as awed and supremely blown away as she felt.

“Don’t move.” Brian backed up, pulling out his smartphone. “I’m under strict instructions from Skylar to take a photo of the new Dr. Bartlett holding the orchid.”

Abby’s smile broadened, easily imagining Skylar demanding just that as Brian snapped the photo. “I better send it to the rugrat now. If not, she’ll be texting me every ten minutes until I go pick her up.”

He tapped out a quick message on his phone before studying her carefully. “You still up for having a celebratory dinner with us tonight? Because if you aren’t—”

“Of course I am,” cut in Abby firmly. “You guys are still sleeping over afterward, right? Skylar has been talking my ear off about this new dessert she wants to make later tonight.”

“We’ll pick you up at seven.” He smiled and leaned in for a kiss.

For reasons she couldn’t fully comprehend, or stop, she found herself turning her head to the side at the very last second.

Though he faltered a beat, Brian skimmed a kiss against her cheek like it was nothing and then turned to leave. But not before she saw the crushed look in his eyes.

“Brian—”

“Not today, Abby. Today’s your day.” He kept his face averted. “We can talk about all this tomorrow.”

Tomorrow.

Because she didn’t know exactly what she’d say even if they were to talk about this right now, she gave him a silent nod and watched him leave. It wasn’t until she was completely alone in her office that a sad realization rained over her, gave her heart a hollow ache.

For the first time in weeks, Brian had left without telling her he loved her.

BRIAN WAITED UNTIL HE WAS in his car before he allowed himself to lose it. He slammed both hands onto the steering wheel and grabbed for his phone. Too angry to even call forth the digits in Connor's phone number in his brain, he had to search his phone book to have it dial for him.

"Hello?" called out a soft, sultry voice from the other end.

*Goddammit!* "Are you and my brother going to be returning each other's phones anytime soon?" he barked, not caring in the least that he sounded like a major tool right now.

The woman didn't even seem to notice. She just laughed cheerfully and replied, "You must be Brian. I'm at a lunch party right now but I'll be done soon. I'll be sure to drive his phone back over to him right after."

Great. A socialite partying it up in the middle of the day during the work week. Will his brother never learn?

"Do you want me to relay a message?"

Huh, this one sounded different than his other women though. She also knew his name—that was new. Usually, Connor's bimbos barely knew or cared that he had a brother.

Maybe *this* was that mysterious 'nice girl' that Gabriella had been talking about who'd surpassed Connor's one-month parameters. The possibility of it had hope filling his veins like a shot of heroin. "No message." He gentled his voice a bit. "But thanks. I'll try him again in the morning."

"Are you sure? You might not be as spitting mad as you were a minute ago if you wait all the way until tomorrow morning," she teased.

*Definitely* not like Connor's usual women. He fought the small smile that was inching its way across his face. "I'll take my chances."

"Suit yourself." The sound of plates shuffling in the background filled the phone line before she exclaimed, "Oh! It's cake time! I've got to go, Brian. It was fun almost talking to you!" And with that she hung up.

Strange woman.

Connor's tastes sure were changing.

Brian pulled in to the front of Skylar's school and shut off the engine. He still had about a half hour until she was done with band practice. Fortunately, talking to Connor's latest flavor of the month had served to calm him down considerably. *Unfortunately*, the loss of that rage forced him to focus on what tomorrow could bring.

The very thing he'd been afraid of for months.

He'd hoped after all this time that his brother's hold on her heart would have let up. Clearly, it hadn't. Seeing the look on Abby's face when he'd first walked into her office had absolutely shredded his insides.

*"Hey dad!"*

Brian made sure to wipe all the anxiety from his expression before he glanced up. Skylar was rushing across the courtyard, waving her phone excitedly. "Thanks for the picture! Abby looked so happy!"

The kid could make a Buckingham Palace guard crack a smile. Despite everything, he chuckled at his daughter's utter lack of volume control as she neared the car pelting him with nonstop questions about Abby, interspersed with spontaneous anecdotes about her own day, all tied together by very thin tangential threads.

"Sounds like you had almost as big a day as Abby. How was band practice? You guys finished pretty early today."

"We always finish at this time." She buckled up quickly. "I just didn't stay back to talk to anyone; I wanted to make sure we had enough time to get everything set up in the orchid house since we're showing it to Abby after dinner. Were you able to find those twinkle lights?"

"Yep," he replied slowly, proceeding with ultra vague hedging. "But you know what? Let's hold off on showing Abby the orchid gazebo."

"Why?" Skylar whipped her eyes over to him quizzically.

"Well, I've been thinking that it might be better if we showed it to her on another day. Let her get her bearings and

all first. Besides, if we show it to her tonight, we may not have enough time to make that special dessert you have planned at her house.” It sounded like a pretty good argument, really. “So how about we do it next weekend instead? We’ll have her over and maybe barbeque outside or something.”

*Next weekend*—shoot, maybe he should’ve bought himself more time.

Disappointment streaked across Skylar’s face, and her shoulders slumped in silent disagreement even as she acquiesced to the rain check.

“Can we still put the twinkle lights up though? So Becky and I can do our sleepover out there with our sleeping bags tomorrow night?” She blinked up at him hopefully.

He chuckled. “Well played. You’ve got yourself a deal, munchkin.”

Taking one last bite of the ‘punchbowl cake and candy bar trifle’ Skylar and Abby had made, Brian marveled at how he was the only one suffering from a sugar high at this point. Both Skylar and Abby had passed out a half hour prior, leaving him to finish the DVD they’d rented, and the rest of the dessert, on his own.

Granted, he didn’t have nearly as much experience as those two did in this particular field event. After all their years of daily sugar training, it was very likely the pair were fully immune to the stuff by now.

He shut off the TV and quietly carried Skylar to the guestroom to get her settled in. After a minute of listening to her hold a one-sided discussion that was more sleep-drunk word bubbles than anything else, he tucked her in and headed back out to the living room.

Abby was only about a quarter awake and in the middle of a sleepy kitten stretch when she peeked open an eyelid and caught him gazing at her.

“What are you smiling about?” she fell sideways back down onto the couch. “Was I snoring?”

“Like a fog horn,” he lied, dropping down onto the ground beside her.

“Well get ready for an encore,” she murmured, already starting to doze off again.

“If you fall asleep out here, I’m going to have no choice but to join you,” he warned, testing the waters to see if the effects of Hurricane Connor were still lingering. As he slid a thumb over her lower lip, he watched her sleep fog lift in a slow panic. Her expression changed and she looked up at him as if she wanted to say something but just didn’t know what.

He knew what.

“Things aren’t the same between us now are they? Now that Connor’s back in the picture?”

Clutching a throw pillow against her chest, she admitted softly, “Honestly, I don’t know. I feel like I need to hear him out at least. Find out what he has to say.”

Knowing he wasn’t going to like the answer, he asked anyway, “And if he says he wants a second chance?”

The small flare of hope in her eyes wasn’t exactly a shocker. But it still clobbered him in the gut.

He cupped her face in his palms and slid back the curtain of hair she was hiding behind. “If you decide that Connor’s the one you want to be with, I’ll respect your choice and step aside, sweetheart, I promise.”

Pulling her into his arms, he whispered, “But that doesn’t mean I won’t fight for you the entire time until then.” And with no other warning than that, he brought his mouth down onto hers in a searing kiss and slid his hands under her legs to lift her up off the couch. After a brief startled second, her legs immediately wrapped around his waist in reflex.

*Christ.*

Tearing his lips from hers, he fought to draw in a calming breath. Slowly dropping her back down onto the couch, he placed another soft kiss on her lips before pulling away. “Not until you’re sure, Abby. Not until you know for certain who you want kissing you for the rest of your life.”

And though every fiber in his body fought to hold on to her, called him a fool for not doing everything in his power to drive all thoughts of his brother out of her head *now* before it was too late, he let her go.

It took all the strength he possessed not to follow her as she walked away.

“I love you, Abby,” he said softly as she retreated down the hall to her bedroom, knowing there was no way she could hear him.

Knowing that she would convince herself to come back to him if she did.

Before she disappeared completely into her bedroom, she paused for just the briefest of moments. And in his heart, he swore he heard her say the words back to him, even though the only sound his ears registered was the sound of her bedroom door closing shut behind her.

Grabbing his usual pillow and blanket, Brian dropped down onto the sofa and burrowed in, hoping sleep would take him before all the shoved-aside questions did.

No such luck.

The house was so deafeningly silent, he could hear the hum of every electronic device in the room like a chorus of white noise playing against the symphony of jumbled thoughts crashing around in his head.

It took a full hour for sleep to finally draw him under...and a mere split second to wake up again when the sharp gasp and tortured whimper he'd heard had him bolting to his feet and rushing to Abby's room.



## CHAPTER TWO

ABBY TOSSED AND TURNED, both hypnotized and frustrated with the images swirling in her mind, ebbing her in and out of sleep, forcing her to straddle the edge of reality...and sanity. One minute she was in bed curled up under the covers, and in the next, she was flat on her back on the counter in her kitchen in mindless bliss. Her sheets were wound tight around her legs, binding her in her dreams as a pair of strong hands skimmed under the fabric, higher and higher, edging her closer to the brink.

She bucked and felt the countertop against her skin once again as she dragged her palms over the flexing, sinewy muscles of his back, memorized every granite hard ridge with her fingertips. Her legs were free now but only for a second before he pulled her hips against his and bound her in newer, better ways. His arms wrapped around her like steel bands as he slipped between her thighs and rocked gently against her heat. Over and over until her entire body erupted with sensation.

And then he was gone again.

Her own hands replaced the invisible ones from her dream and she arched her back, silently calling him back to her. She could hear him. Whispering to her. Telling her all of the things he wanted to do, would do. She arched again and felt his lips graze over her belly, and lower.

Her body wasn't her own to control anymore. Demanding her eyes to open did nothing. While the swipe of his tongue against her flesh kept her legs pinned to the counter.

No, the bed.

A silent scream escaped her as she felt him plunge into her in one long, slick thrust, his entire length buried to the hilt.

Only to have him retreat. Again.



She bucked up and then slammed back against the bed—no, the counter—as the feel of his teeth closing over her nipple sent her spinning, spiraling toward an orgasm she couldn't reach.

Lifting her head, she tried to see his face but he stayed hidden in the shadows of her mind even as she felt his gaze sizzling a determined path across her skin, branding her, further chaining her to her dreams.

To him.

His name, poised on her lips, scattered into the empty room as he drove into her one more time and slid his hands down the lines of her torso once again. But the fingers slipping between her legs were her own and the sound of his groan splitting the air was her undoing.

Waves of pleasure twisted over her and his mouth caught hers in a kiss that had her coming all over again with a surge of heat. She felt split in two—her body, her dreams.

Her mind, her heart.

Everything crashed together and she felt him pulling away before she was ready to let him go. She fought to open her eyes, panic coursing through her at the thought of losing him, fear of the unknown clawing at her heart at the thought of finding him.

He slipped from her arms completely and she jolted upright in bed.

Breathing hard, the ability to lift her eyelids returned and she adjusted her vision to the darkness.

Her bedroom, not the kitchen.

Her own hands, not his.

And all the questions in her mind were now weighing a thousand times heavier on her heart.

Drawing in the thick air all around her, she thought about getting up to get some water to cool her parched throat. But the idea of facing Brian so soon after that dream had her swallowing down the sandpapery shards of her guilt, filling

her lungs with every conflicting thought that was tearing her in two.

Because she just didn't know.

So she fell back against her bed and drifted back off into another restless sleep instead.

With the man of her dreams whose face she couldn't see.

**H**OLY SHIT. Brian paced in the living room and tried to calm the hell down.

She'd been having a sex dream.

He'd left as soon as he'd figured out she wasn't having a nightmare but *good lord*. It had been the hottest three seconds he'd ever witnessed.

There weren't many things sexier than watching...that.

He couldn't even think the words in his brain without torturing his self-control. Worse, Abby had done it with such reckless abandon. Every whimper, every moan had been an intoxicating narcotic in his bloodstream that had taken over his senses, stolen most every civil thought in his brain.

For three heart-thudding seconds, his legs had simply refused to move.

And the resulting image he'd caught of Abby sliding her hands over her own body was burned into his brain.

With a frustrated groan, he grabbed his keys and headed for his car. There was no way he could stay in Abby's house a second longer. He was well past the cold shower stage. Hell, he was past the *hot* shower stage.

He checked the time on his dashboard. It was too late to get a drink, not that he was in the right mind place to do so. The irony that he couldn't ask either of his two usual drinking partners to join him tonight just made his foot press down on the accelerator a little harder, made his destination that much more obscure.

For a half hour, he drove around aimlessly, wanting so desperately to believe that she'd been dreaming about him, that he'd been the one turning her on that much in her dreams.

He didn't want to even *consider* the alternative.

"Dad, telephone!"

Groaning, Brian stretched up off the couch to reach for his phone...and ended up muttering hello into the TV remote.

"No, my phone." Skylar handed him her blinged out purple cell. "Grandma said she's been calling yours but it's been going straight to voicemail. Where *is* your phone, anyway?"

Right, his phone. It was probably still on the floor of his passenger seat where he'd thrown it after reading the missed text message from Connor that had come in some time between dinner and the movie.

>> *I didn't know, man. I just listened to your voicemail.*

Brian saw that a missed call from Connor's number was recorded in his log shortly after, followed by another text.

>> *We really need to talk. Call me in the morning.*

No further explanation, not even an apology.

That latter fact had set Brian off, detonated the shrapnel of jagged emotions he'd been keeping at bay all night. Because it meant that not only was Connor not sorry, he had no intention of stopping, or undoing what he'd done by barging back in to Abby's life yesterday.

Brian's phone had paid the price for that discovery.

"Hey mom, what do you need?" he grouched tiredly.

"Well someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

The reminder that he hadn't spent the night in Abby's bed last night did nothing to improve his mood. "Sorry, I just haven't had my morning coffee yet. Did you need something?"

"Actually, I was calling to invite you three to breakfast."

Seeing Abby groggily stumble out of her room, looking as tired as he felt, he quickly opted to get them out of going as

politely as he could, “Do you think we could we do it some other time? Skylar has a ton of homework to get done before her sleepover tonight and plus, I don’t even know what Abby has planned today.”

At the sound of her name, Abby looked up and gave him a sleep-fuzzy, adorably rumpled smile that sucked half the air out of his lungs. God, he loved her. If he could wake up to that sight every morning for the rest of his life, he’d have led a charmed life.

“Interesting,” continued Helen into his ear, “because I already talked to Skylar and not only is her homework slightly less taxing than she’s apparently led you to believe, she informed me that Abby was planning on spending the morning with you two.” She paused for a pointed second while he silently tried to smother himself with the pillow. “So I’ll see you all in a half hour, dear.”

“Mom—” Criminy, ever since she’d stopped drinking and turned her life around, she’d gotten to become a much bigger, much more *motherly* force to reckon with.

“I want to hear all about Abby’s defense, Brian, is that so terrible? And it’s been so long since I’ve seen Skylar.” A suspiciously vulnerable crack in her voice came then with a tapered off, “But if you can’t even schedule in a few hours for me...”

Well this was a new and unnervingly effective tune she’d added to her repertoire—it sounded like *Guilt the Son in B-minor*.

He sighed. “We’ll be there at eight.”

At eight on the dot, Brian pulled up the back driveway of his childhood home.

“Hey, Uncle Connor is here!” Skylar unbuckled and hopped out, running excitedly past the parked black Lexus and up to the front door.

Brian glanced at Abby. “I think we’ve been set-up.”

Though she looked far paler than she had a minute ago, she managed to give him a weak chuckle. “That Helen is a wily one.”

“If you’d rather I take you home...”

“No, it’s okay. Might as well face the music now.”

He wanted to hold her hand, put his arm around her, something to stake his claim before he walked into that house. But he didn’t. Abby’s expression looked like she was steeling herself for an unknown attack. And that same guilt he’d seen in her eyes yesterday was back.

“Just in time!” his mother called out cheerfully from the kitchen, where she appeared to actually be cooking. *Yikes*. “Congratulations, Abby. Come here and give me a hug. I’m so proud of you.”

Brian saw a tiny bit of the tension ease out of Abby’s shoulders as she smiled her thanks and went over to help his mother with what he assumed was their ‘breakfast.’ Skylar was having a grand old time poking at it like it was a fascinating new science experiment.

Meanwhile, he was focusing all his energy on keeping a lid on his temper as he scanned the house for the one man that was jeopardizing everything he’d been wanting for so long.

“Hey, Brian.”

Try as he did, he couldn’t stop the feeling of resentment that crushed his windpipe in an angry death grip at the mere sound of his brother’s voice. Glancing over at Abby and seeing her watching them warily, he turned around and gave Connor a barely civil nod in greeting.

“She ambushed me, too,” explained Connor in a gruff whisper. “I only came over because she said she threw out her back and needed help with errands this morning.”

Both men watched their mother practically prance around the kitchen, gathering up the ingredients for a second batch of pancakes, this time with Abby at the stove. The first batch of burnt gooey blobs was nowhere to be found.

“Clearly, she’s made a miraculous recovery,” replied Brian dryly.

“Boys, could you do me a huge favor and move the outdoor dining table over to the other end of the patio, closer to the

lawn? I've been wanting to do that for some time."

Abby's head snapped up. "Uh, Helen, are you sure you want to have them do that now?" she asked, alarmed.

"Yes." The response brooked no argument. "It definitely needs to be done *now*."

Brian was already halfway out the door. He'd been spoiling for this fight for nearly a full day.

Abby's worried murmurs were sealed shut inside the house with the closing of the sliding door behind Connor, who silently followed him over to the lawn around the side of the house.

"So are we going to talk or are you going to take a swing at me?" he asked with a smirk.

The latter. Brian was sorely tempted to do the latter. He spun around and glared at Connor. "You told me you were going to step aside to give me a chance with Abby."

All humor faded from his brother's face. "Yes, *a chance*. To see if there was something more than friendship there between you two. I never said I was just going to give her up."

*What the—* "So this was just some sort of twisted challenge for you? To have her realize that she really does have feelings for me only to try and steal her back?!" *Who does that?*

Connor grit his teeth and sighed wearily. "Of course not. I just...I wanted her to figure out her true feelings about you before..."

"Before what? Before you deigned to let her surpass your dumb-ass one-month rule?"

A hard edge slashed across Connor's features. "Not all of us are like you, Brian," he growled in defense. "Love doesn't just come easily to everyone."

*Easy?* Was the man a total moron? "You think everything I went through with Beth was *easy*?"

Connor blanched. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Criminy. For an ivy league grad, you've got to be one of the most idiotic people I know. Love isn't easy or hard. It's a

choice you actively make despite all that. I *choose* to let people in and let myself care about them, regardless of how easy or hard it may be. The only reason you haven't been in love is because you've never chosen to be, you jackass."

"Until now," interjected Connor quietly.

Brian stilled and registered for the first time how tortured Connor looked.

It was all there—the confusion, the helplessness, and that damn irrepressible softening in his features that a man got when he was thinking about the woman he couldn't get out of his head. *Shit.*

"You're in love with Abby." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

Every gene he shared with his brother jerked in sympathy. But only for a brief moment before his annoyance came racing back to the helm twofold, eclipsed only by the flashing memories of how hurt Abby had been all winter.

That just led to plain, white-hot anger.

"Then what the hell were you thinking leaving her the way you did?" Remembering the few times he'd caught Abby covering up her tears, or worse...the few times she hadn't been able to, had fresh rage-soaked agitation charging through him.

Screw talking. Brian drew back and rammed his fist into Connor's jaw.

Connor staggered a step and smiled through the trail of blood seeping out of the corner of his mouth. "You want to go a few rounds like in the good ole days?"

All the adrenaline in his body went on full deployment. Sounded fan-friggin-tastic to him. True, fighting never solved anything between them growing up but hell if hadn't felt good to do it anyway. Circling his brother as they moved off onto the grass, Brian found himself smiling as well.

Until Connor shot forward and flipped him on his ass with a double-leg takedown.

*Sonofabitch!*





## CHAPTER THREE

A SPLIT SECOND LATER, Brian watched, in downright shock, as Connor dropped and tumbled over him, yanking his left arm back and nearly out of its socket. *When the hell did Connor learn to do an arm bar?* And a nasty one at that.

“See what happens when you bulk up to the size of The Incredible Hulk, little brother? It slows you down.”

Smug bastard. Pivoting, Brian got control of one of Connor’s legs and rolled. But Connor was ready for him. He twisted out and shoved forward, slamming Brian back into a guard position, crushing down until Brian felt his lungs trying to breathe around his own knees.

The fricker was pulling *jiu jitsu* on him. Brian almost laughed out loud. Damn if he wasn’t starting to have fun. “You learned MMA,” he managed to gasp out as he freed his legs and hooked one back for a sweep, tangling Connor up into a quick chokehold. “That’s a little extreme. Couldn’t you just have gotten Abby more of those obnoxious flower arrangements throughout the past six months instead?”

In the next instant, he saw stars. Connor’s foot clipped him on the side of the head with surprising viciousness. His own fault, really, for insulting the man about his flowers and all.

This time Brian did laugh. And he just kept laughing as they kept right on grappling and basically making a huge mess out of the lawn.

Served their mother right for instigating this.

Brian would have to remember to thank her on the way out.

Because her devious plan was working. After who knows how long later—between jabs, kicks, joint-locks and the occasional uncalled-for punch for shits and giggles—they’d managed to talk their way through to a semi-tolerable compromise. Or an understanding, at least. And all it took was

a few bruised organs, and maybe a majorly sprained ligament or two.

*“I knew it! Stop it, both of you!”*

Brian peeked out from under the dirt-covered forearm smothering his face and saw Abby racing toward them, shouting panicked, irate curses along the way. When they simply ignored her and clocked each other with another set of bell-ringing blows, she then did the unbelievable.

She dropped an atomic f-bomb on their asses.

Both of the brothers froze.

“Get up! *Now!*” Uh oh, she was busting out the teacher voice and the mom voice in one. So not good.

Brian quickly yanked his knee off of the side of Connor’s neck and Connor instantly stopped trying to make Brian’s elbow triple-jointed.

“What the heck are you two doing?!” she barked in all her lioness glory. “You’re grown men behaving like children!”

Connor gave him a look that said, ‘*You take this.*’

To which, Brian silently shot back a, ‘*Hell no.*’

With a drawn-out sigh, his stupidly brave brother offered a quick and very vague, “We were just ironing out the details of our plan regarding this...errr, situation we have on our hands.”

Brian took an ever so subtle step back.

Abby swung the entirety of her frustration over to Connor with the weight of a falling axe. “So let me get this straight, you were ironing out a plan—with your fists—that affects all three of us, and you failed to include me in the discussion?”

Her eyes narrowed when both brothers chose to treat that as a rhetorical question. Of course their silent solidarity seemed to rile her up even more. “Okay, enlighten me—what’s this brilliant plan the two of you came up with?”

*Crap, don’t answer that!*

“Well—”

Huh, Connor the great, slayer of the impossible court trials actually sounded nervous about presenting his case. If Brian

weren't smack dab at the center of the shit storm that was about to hit the fan, he'd be wholly entertained by the exchange.

"Since we know that you didn't exactly have a normal 'courtship' with either one of us..."

Yeah, maybe another step back just to be safe.

"Brian and I decided that we could have a joint custody dating agreement with you." Connor looked over to his side and did a double take when he saw he was standing there alone.

Abby exploded. "*Joint custody dating agreement?! Of all the ridiculous, insulting plans you two could have cooked up,*" she fisted her two tiny hands on her hips and looked ready to throw some blows of her own. "Of all the asinine solutions to our problems, *this* is what you guys came up with? A surefire way to get us guest spots on a talk show?!"

Finally, Brian re-engaged. "It's not as bad as it sounds. 'Joint custody' was probably a poor choice of words." He glared over at his brother. "We haven't established any ground rules beyond a few basic tenets but basically, all it means is that we'll just do some regular non-exclusive dating. The kind most normal couples do before getting into anything serious."

"Non-exclusive meaning you guys are going to date whoever you want?"

"No," they replied in unison.

She lifted an eyebrow. "So...non-exclusive meaning *I'll* date whoever I want?"

"*No!*" This time it was a dolby-rich shout in stereo.

"Just us," growled Connor.

"Which is where the joint custody part comes in," added Brian when she simply stared at them like they were out of their minds. "We'll switch off weeks. And promise not to interfere or contact you when it's not our week. Until you've made your decision."

"Oh, well that makes more sense. So you weren't thinking a feature in a talk show, you two were thinking more along the

lines of the world's weirdest, most awkward reality dating show—*The Bachelorette*, the totally twisted and wrong edition. Lovely.” She skewered them with a look.

“It’s no different than regular dating,” argued Connor.

“Except for the fact that you two are brothers!”

He shrugged. “I’ve dated sisters before.”

Brian bashed the back of his fist into Connor’s chest. “Dude, you aren’t helping.”

“*Neither* of you are helping.” Abby folded her arms over her chest. “We’re not doing this. What’s the alternative?”

The guys glanced at each other. “We keep fighting, I guess.” Brian grinned at the prospect.

Abby stomped her foot on the ground. Her frown as ferocious as a ferret’s.

Again, if they weren’t in the middle of a nuclear-infused negotiation, Brian would find the situation all kinds of funny right about now.

“What exactly are you hoping to accomplish with this joint custody dating?” she asked finally, calling forth that level-headed researcher inside of her that always thought every decision to death.

Both he and Connor instantly took a microscopic step forward.

Because the fact that she was considering it meant an invisible checkered flag had just been dropped. Meanwhile, the vulnerable worry in her eyes was like the bat signal for any and every protective, red-blooded male in the vicinity. It was a potent combination. Brian had no doubt in his mind that if Abby weren’t standing there, he and Connor would be going another round right now to work off all the alpha compulsions she was inadvertently triggering in them both.

A coyote gleam crept into Connor’s eyes.

But Brian beat him to the first punch.

“Honestly, I think Connor would like to show you that he’s attempting to grow a heart in that tin man chest of his,” he

fired off the first verbal shot, grinning when his brother tossed him a scowl scalded to a temperature that could deep fry a turkey. “Luckily for him, he has a lot of fertilizer to work with.”

That made Connor’s lips twitch to the side in reluctant humor. “I’m going to take the higher road and resist the urge to slander my brother,” asserted Connor, breezily. “Because we all know that unlike Brian here, my maturity would never be questioned by the *Cheez-It* cracker testers.”

A tiny chuckle escaped from Brian’s chest, which inspired one in Connor as well.

Abby slapped two hands against her face and groaned. “Seriously? Dealing with one of you on something like this is bad enough. Together, you’re a million times worse.”

“This idea isn’t that horrible is it?” reasoned Connor, no longer grinning. “Why not just try it for a few weeks? What could it hurt?”

Her silence loudly answered, ‘*everything.*’

No one could dispute the possibility.

“Do you have a better solution?” asked Brian gently, largely hoping she actually did because though he agreed with Connor’s goals and rationale, he absolutely detested the idea of him dating Abby.

After a few exasperated beats, she shook her head. “No.”

“We’ll keep all weirdness to a minimum,” assured Connor. “We won’t contact you when it’s not our week, and we’ll never talk about each other when it is.”

Long, huffed out moments later, Abby conceded. “Fine. But if we’re doing this, there will be absolutely no sex, obviously,” she made a face, “and no kissing or anything of the sort, either.” She frowned, looking like she considered herself crazy for even contemplating it. “We’ll just hang out. Treat it like a blind date.”

With his lawyer rebuttal face on, Connor opened his mouth to say something and Brian nailed him again in the chest. “Shut. Up.” Between the three of them, they were well aware

that Connor's boundaries for a blind date far differed from Abby and Brian's.

Quickly turning back to Abby, he nodded. "Those terms sound acceptable."

Abby spun on her heel and stalked back over to the house, muttering under her breath. "I can't believe I'm agreeing to this."

Brian stood there for a second watching her stomp away, looking quite adorable in all her fiery annoyance.

When he looked over and saw Connor doing the same, he shoved him off balance. "Stop staring at her."

Connor swung his foot around and took out both of Brian's knees. "I will if you will."

"There now, I knew you two could work things out," called out Helen from the patio. "I'm taking Abby and Skylar shopping. Try not to kill each other."

"...At least not before you move that table I asked you to."

"**W**HAT WERE DAD AND UNCLE CONNER doing outside in the yard for so long?" asked Skylar, climbing in the backseat of Helen's car.

Abby exchanged a look with Helen. She couldn't possibly tell Skylar about this whole joint custody dating thing. It was just be too weird.

"Ohmigosh, were they working on your SUV?" guessed Skylar bouncing in her seat, clapping excitedly.

*What?*

Abby knew her SUV was the butt of most of her friends' jokes, mostly since it was held together with more duct tape than metal by now. Still, she was madly attached to it. Fiercely protective of it. She had no intention of replacing it until it had taken its last quart of oil and needed to be towed off her driveway.

“They’re going to do something to my SUV?” She was seriously contemplating having Helen turn right back around.

Skylar giggled. “Geez, don’t freak out. It’s nothing bad. Dad just found you another soft-top for your SUV at the junkyard and he needed Uncle Connor’s help to install it since I’m too short. You had him so worried after the last dust storm that he’s been calling every junkyard in Arizona since to find one.”

“Your dad did that?” Abby felt her lungs grow weightless.

“Yeah, most of the junkyards just laughed when he told them the make and model of your SUV. The last junkyard we found was the only one that had it. It was so cool, Abby. The junkyard was this massive place with piles and piles of cars all shoved together. They told us the SUV that had the soft top compatible with yours was blue. And that was it. They pointed us to one section of the junk yard that was as big as a football field and told us to go find it. Crazy, right?”

Helen gasped. “You can’t tell me you went out there with him.”

Skylar nodded vigorously. “It was fun! We had to shimmy our way between most of the cars and it took us like two hours to find the right one. Dad had to climb over a bunch of cars and trucks to even get to it but he was like on a mission the whole time.”

Abby smiled. That sounded like Brian. He was as doggedly loyal to her SUV as she was. Not because he loved it like she did. In fact, he hated it. Worried about her driving it farther than a few miles, or at speeds higher than thirty-five miles per hour. But instead of telling her to dump it like everyone else did, he’d just show up every few months to keep changing its oil or tuning up the engine.

“It’s no big deal, Abby,” he’d always say.

But it really was.

Brian got her in ways no one else did. Always had, always would.

It was in the little things. Like when the electricity would go out in her house, Brian was the only one who knew her house’s ‘time zones.’ She always set her bedroom clock ten

minutes fast because she was horrible about getting up, her bathroom and kitchen clock were five minutes less than that because she always lost track of time when she was cooking, and the old clock in her dining room—the one that used to belong to her grandfather—needed to be set ahead three minutes upon any reset for it to read the time accurately a few hours later.

In every way that resonated in her heart, Brian really was the perfect man.

He just...wasn't Connor.





## CHAPTER FOUR

SO WHAT'D YOU HAVE TO DO to get me this week, win a coin toss against Brian?" Abby asked without thinking as Connor's hand accidentally brushed hers across the table, causing the equivalent of a power surge in her brain.

At Connor's now innocently-whistling focus on his glass of water, her hackles rose, and all nervousness over this 'first date' was quickly forgotten. "Are you freakin' kidding me?!"

"Even the Super Bowl is started that way!" he defended, the tiny crinkling at the corner of his eyes his only tell. "Besides, *Brian* wanted to rock-paper-scissors for you but I told him that was just downright insulting."

She smothered the smile that was threatening to make itself known. "You haven't changed one bit."

Then all at once, the humiliating reminder of how she'd spent months waiting for him to return extinguished her good humor in a flash.

He noticed.

"I didn't mean to stay away for so long, Abby."

This time, it was her glass of water that was the star of the show. "Then why did you?" she asked quietly, doing everything she could to convey a casualness she certainly didn't feel.

"I didn't think Brian was going to take so damn long to try and sweep you off your feet. Hell, I wouldn't have."

Scowling, she looked up, utterly confused. "Wait, what?" Understanding tumbled over her like a twenty-foot wave. "You two talked about this before our month was over. You *told* Brian to pursue me?" She shoved away from the dining table. "And now, what? You're back because you don't like that your brother is playing with your toy? Was this all some big game to you?"

“Dammit, you and Brian really do think alike.” He clamped a hand on her wrist to prevent her from running out of his house. “Do you honestly think that little of me?” His eyes drilled into her, pinned her to the spot.

No, she didn’t.

Dropping back down into the seat, she watched his hand slide from her wrist down to her fingers, and she did her best to swallow back a shiver when his thumb trailed over her palm.

“Then what was the whole point, Connor? Or did I decode your gift and letter wrong? If you were always planning on coming back, why push me toward Brian in the first place?”

“I didn’t know what else to do.” He pulled back and scrubbed a frustrated hand over his face. “Nothing about what you and I had was planned. My whole life, I’ve planned absolutely everything. Until you came along. Instead of planning my life, you made me want to simply live it.” Searching her gaze he added, “More and more, I found myself never wanting to let you go. Not after a month...not ever.”

None of this made even a lick of sense. And her instant, melting reaction to every paradoxical thing he was saying was the most illogical part of it all. “So why—”

“Because you two are perfect for each other,” he cut in almost bitterly. “And because you’re both so goddamn good and nice, you were each just ignoring what was plain as day between you two.” His jaw ticked. “So I stepped aside. Even though all I wanted was to hold on to you and keep you as mine forever, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not without letting you two figure out if there really was something there. I didn’t want to short either of you that, and frankly, I didn’t want to wonder over it my whole life.”

Every long term phrase spilling from his lips was effectively tangling her thoughts, confusing her heart, rebinding what she thought was all but lost.

“Of all the things I’ve had to give up in my life, you were the only one I couldn’t bear to lose, Abby,” he whispered roughly. “But it was killing me to think there would always be

that possibility that I could lose you anyway if I held on. If I didn't give you two a chance to see if the kind of love you had for each other was more than you thought it was."

"Because that kind of thing never goes away. So I told myself that I'd give you both one month, just like you and I had..."

*To fall in love.*

It hung there silently between them though neither had ever said it aloud.

"I allotted one month for Brian to see if things would've worked out for you two without Beth being a factor." He lifted his gaze to snag hers. "One month for you to see if he's the one you really want."

Abby rewound her time with Brian. Had it really only been a month? It felt like longer, like there'd been no real start date to her feelings for him. "Did Brian know about all this? About your one-month plan for us?" He'd let her believe that Connor wasn't ever going to come back.

"Not about the one-month, no. And not about my feelings for you either, not really. At least not until that morning at the house."

Right, Helen's house. His spy. "So your mother was the only one who knew the whole story." Abby sat there for a few minutes and attempted to make sense out of all this information. To make sense of Connor.

An improbable feat.

When she eventually looked up from her food, she saw him eyeing her like he was about to face a firing squad.

Good.

Leaning forward, she steepled her hands and asked the only question that hadn't stopped echoing in her mind for the past few minutes. "When you said you waited one month, how many days exactly did you wait?"

He blinked at her, startled, and then seemingly pleased, before answering with a head-shaking smile, "Twenty-eight

days. I waited exactly twenty-eight of the longest days of my life.”

Abby sat back with a nod wondering how it was that even though her brain seemed not to know what to do with that information, her racing heart was reacting like it had gotten the answer it was searching for.

CONNOR FELT HIS HEART pounding in his chest. Count on Abby to ask the most unlikely question—a question that looked deeper into him than most people knew how to or cared to...a question that gave him hope.

“So am I forgiven for leaving you?”

“Of course not,” she replied before biting into the summer roll she’d been turning into a voodoo doll for the past ten minutes.

Well, it was worth a shot.

“But,” she conceded, “you are forgiven for the length of time you left me.”

That was more than he was expecting, and truthfully, more than he thought he deserved.

“Gabriella mentioned you’d started seeing someone,” she said then from straight out of left field.

*What?* “When on earth did you talk to *Gabriella*?”

She paused in thought for a second and then answered as if surprised by her own answer. “About a month ago.”

Ah, and another piece of the puzzle in the Abby and Brian saga was revealed. “I haven’t dated anyone after you, sweetheart.”

“What about the woman you were with at the hospital?” Her voice was bolder now and hot damn if that wasn’t a spark of jealousy firing those sweetly sexy brown eyes of hers.

“She’s a friend, nothing more.”

Her eyes narrowed in naked disbelief. “You don’t have female friends. Besides Victoria, that is, and we both know

that friendship will always be partly a get-into-bed-free card on her end.”

Another flare of jealousy. Along with a small smile she hid behind her napkin.

Funny, he never thought such a thing would ever factor into his feelings over a woman but the fact that Abby could see the good in Victoria meant a lot. He remembered now feeling the same way when she'd actually been complimentary about her, seemed to have liked her a bit even, after their first train wreck of an introduction to each other months ago.

Even though that hadn't been a test, Abby was the only person in his life, man or woman, who'd ever aced it.

“The woman from the hospital is helping me with a few pro bono cases I'm working on,” he explained. “She's one of the major representatives of an organization I care a lot about. And she's a hell of a grant writer as well. The night you saw us, we'd been preparing for a trip the following day to the east coast for a day-long set of meetings we had regarding a series of cutting edge clinical trials she'd found and researched.”

A twinge of respect colored Abby's expression. “She sounds incredible.”

None of the other women he'd been with in the past would've given the qualities he'd just listed the proper respect they deserved. Another aced non-test. “She is incredible. I admire her a lot, which was why we became friends so quickly. Nothing more. I wouldn't lie to you about that.”

She nodded. “I know you wouldn't.” Her mouth turned down at the corners. “But I have to admit, I'm still a bit envious of her. Where was that sort of devoted friendship with us? You just up and extracted yourself from my life completely. I'd thought I meant enough to you that you'd want to stay friends at the bare minimum, that our friendship was worth at least that.”

Dumbfounded shock slapped him across the face. “Oh honey, I'm so sorry I made you feel like it wasn't. Because it was monumentally important to me. Still is. You don't know how many times I've picked up that phone wanting to call

you, how many times I've dialed your number just to tell you about something that happened that day."

He'd hated not being with her all those months, and knowing just how deeply his leaving had hurt her made it all that much worse. "This time, no matter what happens, I'm not leaving you like that again. Ever."

"Promise?" she asked softly.

His heart ripped from the inside out over that. "I promise, sweetheart."

They sat and ate in silence for a few minutes before she finally ventured in that adorably intrepid way, "So...what sort of things did you almost call me about?" She lifted a shoulder and smiled. "You can talk to me about 'em now if you want."

Christ, he'd missed her sweetness.

"Like I said, it was a daily thing. Good and bad and everything in between." He paused in thought. "But the one time I'd actually dialed your entire phone number and nearly pressed 'send' about a dozen times was the day Marcus went to go see you and Brian."

A dark cloud of sympathy quickly blanketed her features. "I remember that day. I'm so sorry, Connor."

"Not to throw your own words back at you sweetie, but don't apologize for him. Especially not for this. I'm thankful not to share any of his genes."

Still, the sadness lingered in her eyes. "Was it your mother who called to tell you or Brian?"

"My mother." He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "But Abby, I already knew."

Her eyes jolted wide in shock. "How?"

"I'd overheard the conversation between Marcus and Brian years ago, about my being a Sullivan bastard."

She shook her head in confusion. "But I thought you were at Columbia then."

No amount of time could keep his anger from boiling to the surface when he recalled the memory of what Marcus had

done to Brian. Back teeth grinding, he explained bitterly, “I knew Brian was going to tell Marcus that Beth was pregnant so I’d rushed back, wanting to be there to jump in if things got out of hand.” He shook his head, remembering the rush of giddy relief he’d felt when he’d first learned that he wasn’t related to Marcus, along with the overwhelming surge of emotion that had come over him shortly afterward when he’d heard Brian fight for him harder than most brothers—half or full—would.

Brian was just that kind of guy.

“He didn’t know that I’d overheard everything from out in the hall. So when he told me his partially-omitted version about the deal Marcus struck with him later on, I kept quiet about it...something that was considerably harder to do when Marcus then spun the deal a different way to me the next day.”

Something very close to hatred flashed across Abby’s face. “That man has no soul.”

Yes, Connor had long thought the same thing about the man who wasn’t his father. “Not that I think a lack of a soul is a genetic thing, but that was one of the big reasons why I was so unbelievably grateful to hear him say that I wasn’t his son. I’m just sorry that my mother had felt she needed to rush into a marriage with someone like him just because she was pregnant with me.”

Abby idly skated the tips of her fingers over his forearm, and drew her hand back quickly after, almost as if she didn’t trust herself with even that small gesture. Suddenly, a slow thoughtful look bloomed across her face then, and she looked up at him in wonder. “It was you, wasn’t it? You’re the one who told Brian and Beth not to rush their wedding.”

He shrugged. “It was what Brian wanted to do anyway. All I did was suggest it and tell him to screw what everyone else thought about it if he and Beth wanted it that way.”

“It was more than that.” Abby gazed at him like he was ten-feet tall. “I remember now. Beth must have been only in her second trimester, just starting to show and she’d started second-guessing their decision to wait. Then Brian told her that *you’d* suggested their kid be in the wedding as a ring



bearer or flower girl, so it would be a whole family event. I swear to God, Beth broke down and started bawling over that idea.”

It wasn't *that* big a deal. Connor shrugged again. “I just figured it'd be kind of cool for all of them to look back on it later. That's partly why people make such a big deal about vow renewals, right? So their kids can be a part of it?”

“You have no idea how special that family wedding photo is to Skylar.” She sighed. “Like I said, you haven't changed one bit.”

If she didn't stop staring at him like that he simply would not be responsible for his actions.

A distraction. They were in serious need of a distraction.

He stood abruptly and held out his hand. “Come on. I want to show you something.” Walking her over to the kitchen he added, “I've been thinking about what kinds of things we can do on our date nights.”

She looked up at him and he nearly groaned aloud at the buried heat he saw in her eyes. “Chaste things,” he clarified, hoarsely, his voice tight.

At the tiny sound of disappointment she let out, he did groan. “You haven't changed a bit, either, Abby. You still have the ability to drive me completely insane with seemingly very little effort.”

Cheeks flushed, she withdrew her hand and stepped back instantly. “I'm sorry. I just—”

“Honey, don't ever apologize for reacting to me,” he caught her hand and slipped his fingers back between hers. “Sanity is overrated.”

Glancing down at their intertwined fingers, she smiled shyly, “Okay, I give. So what were those chaste date activities you had in mind?”

He opened the door to the walk-in pantry and showed her the world map he'd put up on the far wall.

She peered at it and then looked up at him questioningly.

“Pick a country you haven’t visited yet on your culinary tour. I figure for starters, you and I can travel on your culinary tour together—you pick the country, we’ll research the recipes we want to try out and do our best not to screw them up.”

“Really?” Pleasure infused her features so candidly that he simply stood there, transfixed.

She threw her arms around him and gave him a laughing hug. “That would be great!”

It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to resist pushing her back against the wall and drinking in that laugh right from her lips.

*Damn.*

Unable to help himself, he caught her chin between his fingers and tilted her face up to his.

“It’s taking all the control I have not to kiss you right now, Abby. Every second I’m this close to you, my brain is imagining at least a dozen ways to make love to you.” He leaned forward and felt his control slip another notch at the feel of her breath against his lips. “Tell me you still think about me too.”

Her eyes dilated with a speed that tested his resolve even more.

So much better than a yes.

But before either of them could go down a path they wouldn’t be able to come back from, she pulled away. At the very last second. And the only salve to his bleeding heart was that she’d looked just as torn and disappointed as he felt when she did.

He drew back from the temptation of her soft lips, and rested his forehead against hers. “You asked me what sort of things I almost called you about? This was one of them. I wanted to call you to tell you that I was thinking about you, about kissing you and stripping every inch of clothing off of you so I could take you right then and there. And tonight, I’m going to pick up that phone and *not* call you again, *not* call to tell you that I wish you were asleep next to me in bed so I could hold you,

kiss you awake in the morning, and spend the entire day thinking about you and missing you...”

“Just so I could come home to you and start the whole process all over again.”



## CHAPTER FIVE

SHE'D ALMOST KISSED HIM. Sugarplums, who was she kidding, she'd almost stripped all her clothes off for him right there in the kitchen. Sure she had pulled back at the last moment, and yes, they'd called it a night shortly after, but it was over a week later and that non-kiss was still sizzling away in her brain.

The all-determining coin toss had never looked so appealing.

Granted, Connor had been kidding about having applied it to their dating arrangement but still, the idea held merit. Mostly because it was the only one she had.

After spending a week with Connor and a week with Brian, Abby was no closer to making a decision than she'd been at the beginning of this insane joint custody agreement.

Because as intensely as Connor could make her heart race, Brian could just as quickly make it melt.

Brian had requested this past week for his date week because he and Skylar had the week off of school for spring break, just as she had. And in true Brian fashion, he'd planned the perfect vacation. He took them up north for three days of sledding and rabidly competitive snowman building, and three nights of toasting marshmallows in front of the fire and drinking hot cocoa.

"You said you'd always wanted a snow day during school when you were growing up," he'd explained when he and Skylar had revealed the surprise. "And since this is officially your last semester as a student, *ever*, I thought we'd better get that snow day in."

Heartmelting man.

Which was precisely why she was right back between a rock and a hard place.

Every time she thought she was leaning one way in her decision, something would happen to swing her vote right back.

“Your move, Abby.”

Shaking her head, Abby glanced up and saw a pair of dice rattling in front of her face.

“Earth to Abby,” called out Skylar with a grin. “It’s your turn.”

Abby looked down at her nearly depleted Monopoly money pile and then over at the overflowing stacks of bills on both Brian and Skylar’s ends of the table. Like father, like daughter. With a sigh of defeat, she rolled the dice and waited to see which triumphant hoot and egging holler she’d hear when the numbers landed.

3 - 2 - 1...

Soprano it was. “I win!” Skylar bounced up and down in her chair.

Starting about two years ago, when it was clear that even Skylar as a ten-year old could whip Abby’s butt in Monopoly, they’d decided they needed a new end-point to their board game nights since playing with only two people wasn’t any fun. That was the birth of the whoever’s-winning-when-Abby-loses ruling.

To be fair, she and Skylar had a similar ruling when they played Jenga against Brian with his bear-like paws.

Brian chuckled and gave Abby a consolation kiss on the forehead. “You lasted almost an hour. That’s a new record.”

Abby whacked him in the chest and started cleaning up the board with a laughing pout.

“Okay Sky-bug, bedtime.” Brian tugged on Skylar’s braid. “Are you going out with Becky tomorrow?”

“She’s coming over after lunch.” Skylar tucked the board game back on the shelf. “Are you sleeping over tonight, Abby?”

Abby shot a glance over at Brian, but found not an iota of help there. Since starting this whole joint-custody dating

arrangement, aside from their snow country trip, she'd made sure to sleep in her own house every single night because the alternative didn't sit well with her at all. This was the first time Skylar seemed to notice anything different in that department.

"Maybe," she evaded. "But I have a ton of work to catch up on so I may just head home, too."

"Okay, well 'night." Skylar came over to give her a hug. "Can we hang out this weekend?"

"Of course." Abby smiled. "It's a date."

"Cool. Love you, dad."

"Love you too, sweetie. Sweet dreams."

As soon as Skylar's door clicked shut, Abby felt her nerves buzz to life, rendering her mute. This was the first time in weeks she and Brian had found themselves truly alone together. And all she could think about was how long it's been since his last python hug.

Before her thought was even complete, she felt Brian tug her close and wrap his arms around her waist.

Never had she appreciated his mind-reading abilities so much.

She sighed and sank into his embrace.

"Is this okay?" he asked, ever the gentleman.

At her silent nod, he squeezed her tighter, whispering into her hair, "I've missed having you in my arms."

She missed it too.

...But not without feeling like she was betraying Connor.

"It kills me that I can't hold you anymore, Abby."

"No one said you couldn't." She wrapped her arms over his. "Everyone knows you're a big hugger."

"It's not the same."

*No*, it wasn't.

Turning in his arms, she looked up and saw the sadness in his eyes, felt it echo in her heart. "Brian, we don't have to keep

doing this. We can go right back to how it was before Connor came back. Stop this whole joint custody craziness.”

Though in her brain, she meant every single word, the stab in her heart as she said them almost took her breath away.

“Have you made your decision?” The hope laced through his tone tore at her heart.

She dropped her gaze down. “No.” God, she was a horrible person.

“Hey, none of that.” He tipped her chin up and rested his forehead against hers. “You take as long as you need. No feeling bad.”

“How can I not feel bad?” Guilt lanced through her. “You’re hurting. And I can’t even imagine how Skylar’s going to react if she finds out. I feel like everything is changing in a way we won’t be able to survive or undo.”

And it scared her.

Brian pulled her over to the couch. “I told you, honey, no matter what, you and I are going to be in each other’s lives for the long haul. Nothing can ever change that.” He draped back against the cushions and slung an arm around her shoulders lightly. “Case in point: remember the time we got into that huge fight back in college? Just before Skylar was born? And Beth had to force an intervention between us so we’d make up?”

She grinned and settled against his chest. “I remember the intervention. I don’t remember what in the world we were fighting about though.”

“Neither do I.”

“You can’t possibly think this situation is going to end up like that ten years from now.”

“Of course not.” He peeked down at her and raised an eyebrow playfully. “Because ten years from now, we’ll be looking back at what an awesome decision you made by picking me.”

She shook her head, laughing lightly. “You’re impossible.”



He snapped his fingers. “Wait, I remember what we fought about now.”

She drew back. “Really?”

“Yes, it was because of that douche bag you were dating at the time. I told you that I thought he was cheating on you and you didn’t believe me.”

The memories came rushing back. “Oh, you’re right. I was upset because I thought you were just trying to make him look bad and set me up with one of your close friends instead.”

“And I was pissed that you didn’t believe me.”

She frowned. “You didn’t have any evidence.”

“So why’d you go and tell the jerk-off about my suspicions?”

“Okay, so maybe I believed you a little.”

“Not that it mattered. You still took his side anyway,” grumbled Brian.

“Well, he said he didn’t do it.”

“And you kept believing him over me.”

“*Again*, you didn’t have any evidence.”

“I told you about the pair of panties I found,” he argued back.

“Yes, but you didn’t tell me where you found it. When I pushed you to tell me more, you kept avoiding answering me. That’s when I figured you were lying, which was when I got mad.” She paused. “Come to think of it, you never did tell me where you found those panties. How the heck did we make up without you telling me the truth?”

“Because by then, we’d all discovered that he wasn’t cheating on you. But he was stealing your panties along with a bunch of other girls’ panties in his dorm...and wearing them.”

Abby covered her face in embarrassment. “Oh god, I’d completely blocked that part out.” She peeked through her fingers as she remembered the rest of the story. “I called Beth to tell her about the whole thing and she must have showed up two minutes later, nine-months pregnant mind you, to drag me

back over to your house with threats that we had to make-up *or else*.”

She chuckled over the reminder. “That was one hardcore intervention, too. She locked us in that spare room with no food or water or anything.”

“Yep.” Brian smiled. “She *really* wanted us to stop fighting because she was nearing the end of her third trimester and evidently, I was irritating the living daylights out of her.”

“Okay,” she pressed, utterly curious, “so now that it’s been more than ten years, tell me the truth, where did you find those panties and why didn’t you tell me about it back then?”

He sighed. “Because you’d have gotten legitimately pissed at me if I told you the whole story.” Sulking a bit, he added, “I don’t come across looking so hot in this particular story. But keep in mind, I was just trying to protect you. That guy really was a creep. Even before the panty thing, he was a major asshole that I really didn’t think you should be wasting your time on.”

At the time, she hadn’t seen it, but afterward, yes, she’d have concurred quite adamantly with that assessment. Still. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, she didn’t relent, “What exactly did you have planned out?”

Looking as though he was fighting a losing battle with laughing his ass off, he replied quickly, “I was just going to put a little itching powder in his jock strap on the day of your date with him so if you ended up at his place that night, he’d have a full-blown rash that would look like...you know.” Another stifled chuckle.

She gaped at him. “That’s horrible!”

“I was only going to put a tiny amount,” he defended weakly. “Just enough to turn you off of him so you wouldn’t sleep with him. But when I went through his gym bag to do it, that’s when I found that pair of panties. And since Beth said you and he hadn’t done anything yet, I knew it couldn’t have been yours.”

“And you couldn’t tell me where you found the panties without revealing your awful plan to begin with.” Now it all

made sense.

“I’m sorry we fought, honey. But I’m not sorry about trying to keep you from sleeping with him. Can you imagine if you had?”

Abby shuddered.

“So what do you say...water under the bridge?” he asked hopefully.

She held back her smile. Well this was an interesting development. “I don’t know.” She sighed dramatically. “That was pretty invasive what you were planning on doing... And then you lied to me just to maintain your cover for all these years...”

One corner of his mouth tipped up in admiration. “Alright, what’s this going to cost me?”

She leaned forward in full-negotiation stance. “I want to hear some of the poker stories you and your buddies used to clam up over as soon as Beth and I would walk into the room.”

His brows drew together sharply. “The guys would kill me.”

“How would they ever find out? You did manage to keep the jockstrap thing a secret for *a decade*,” she reminded him, smiling as she made herself comfortable on the couch. She grabbed a throw pillow and rested her arms on it. “Okay, start talking.”

After a few dozen of the most unbelievable tales she’d ever heard, Abby was still holding her stomach and laughing so hard she was seeing stars.

No wonder the guys never wanted her and Beth to hear about these.

Every time she tried to catch her breath another image would pop in her head and cause another fit of endless giggles.

“Hey guys.” Skylar scuffle-shuffled out to the living room, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. “What’re you two cracking up about? I could hear you two from my room.”

Abby clapped a hand over her mouth but couldn’t smother her humor completely.

“I’m sorry munchkin,” chuckled Brian. “Did we wake you?”

She yawned. “No, I was having weird dreams all night. So I’ve been up for a while.”

*A while?* Peering over at the clock, Abby sat up, startled. “Brian, it’s 4:30 in the morning. We’ve been talking all night.”

“Another new record.” Grinning, he got one of his great-idea faces and stood to gather their jackets. “Since we’re all awake, what do think about having a 5 am meeting of your little donut club?”

Skylar perked up. “Really? A *Krispy Kreme* run?”

A warm nostalgic blanket enfolded Abby’s memories. Whenever Skylar hadn’t been able to sleep when she was a baby, Abby would take her to watch the donuts come out of the big conveyer belt machine at their local *Krispy Kreme*. For some reason, watching those huge machines used to work like a charm and lull her to sleep. Of course, as Skylar became older, the excursions became more about the donuts, but the fun times they’d have remained the same; it used to be one of their favorite ways to spend time together. Only, they’d stopped going after Beth passed away, and hadn’t been back since.

Brian ruffled Skylar’s hair. “What do you say about resurrecting the tradition Sky-bug? Maybe adding one new member? That is, as long as you don’t mind your old man joining the club.”

“I’m in!” Skylar hopped up, grinning at Brian. “And of course you can join, silly. It’s a family thing.” She looked over at Abby expectantly. “How about you, Abby?”

“You in?” He held her jacket out for her.

*A family thing.*

Yet another swing in her vote right back this way.

“Yes,” she said softly with a smile over the invite. “I’m in.”

“YOU SURE YOU’RE FEELING OKAY, honey?” Connor’s worried gaze drifted over her face. “You look beat.”

Abby’s head was spinning. How did other women do this? Dating two men at once was slowly but sure driving her batty. She pressed her fingers into her temples. “I’m sorry, Connor. I have a little headache. I think my brain is just exhausted.”

“Well then why don’t we call it a night? If we stay home, I’ll be tempted to drag you into bed with me and if we go out, the noise from all the drunken folks celebrating St. Patrick’s Day will make your headache worse.”

Her sluggish brain processed that information at a snail’s pace. It was a good two minutes later before her cheeks flushed with heat over his suggestion for their at-home activities.

“*And* there it is,” he teased. “Wow, you really *must* be under the weather. Normally, you go from zero to sexy in a few second flat.”

She grabbed a couch cushion and mashed it into his grinning face.

“Keep that up and I’m going to have to collect payment for you not wearing any green, babe,” he warned eyebrows bobbing.

She tilted her head and smiled. “Who says I’m not wearing anything green?”

He quickly scanned her from head to toe again, groaning long, low, and *hot*. “Below the belt, Abby.”

“Exactly,” she giggled when it became apparent that he was counting to himself silently.

She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed flirting with Connor.

“Do you know how many nights I’ve stayed awake remembering that little red crotchless number you wore in my car?” he asked roughly, sliding his hungry eyes over her.

Yowza, she couldn’t feel more stripped if he’d had x-ray vision.

“These aren’t crotchless,” she said quickly, trying to wade them back to safer waters. “These are just plain green cotton panties.”

With a deep frown, she again caught the niggling thought tapping on the inside of her brain at the repeated mention of the word green.

Connor stopped visibly undressing her with his eyes and came over, concerned. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know...” Searching her memories and her thoughts, she tried to pinpoint her feelings of unease.

Then she gasped.

“Oh crap. I can’t believe I didn’t realize today’s the 17th. I need to take a rain check for tonight.” Shooting an apologetic look at Connor, she ran over to get her bag. “Do you think you can drop me off at Brian’s? We have an annual tradition.”

Connor hopped up to his feet and grabbed his keys. “Sure thing. What tradition?”

It wasn’t her tradition to share, and she didn’t want to lie to Connor, so she just went with the next closest truth. “The 18th is Beth’s birthday.”

“Damn, that’s right.” With a sympathetic nod, he climbed into the car.

But Abby knew he didn’t get it. No one got it. Everyone only remembered the date of Beth’s birthday, if that. The date no one remembered was the day before, the one Brian tortured himself over every year.

The day he’d committed Beth into the care home.

As they drove over to Brian’s house, Abby looked over at Connor. “I know you guys have that rule about not crossing weeks and all—”

“Honey, you don’t have to explain. Brian’s your best friend. Part of the reason why I love you so much is because of how good of a person you are. You never have to feel like you can’t be there for Brian or Skylar or anyone.” He pulled her hand up to his mouth and pressed a gentle kiss over her knuckles.

“Now tell me, what can I do? Should I take Skylar out for the night?”

Shoot, Skylar. Normally, Abby was so much better about arranging for Skylar to be at Becky’s on St. Patrick’s Day each year, at least for dinner if it fell on a weekday.

“Actually, that would be great, Connor. Do you think you could take Skylar out to the movies? And maybe get some frozen yogurt or something afterward?”

“Sounds like fun. I’ll text her right now.” He pulled out his phone and started typing out a quick message.

Before Abby even got a chance to ring the doorbell, Skylar yanked open the door with a bright smile. “Oh hey, Abby! I thought it was just going to be Uncle Connor.”

Connor grinned. “Gee, thanks for the ‘just,’ cutie.”

Skylar giggled. “You know what I meant.” Turning back toward the living room she called out, “Hey dad, Abby’s here too. Are you sure you don’t want to come to the movies with us?”

“Actually,” Abby interrupted, “I need your dad’s help with some business writing logistics for an article I’m working on,” she fibbed.

“Okay,” shrugged Skylar. “We’ll bring you guys back some dessert later.”

“Have fun.” Abby went into the living room and plopped onto the couch beside Brian.

He gave her a look. “I’m fine. You didn’t have to cut short your date with my brother,” he made a bit-into-a-pickle face, “just to come babysit me.”

“I know.” She grabbed the remote and began flipping through the channels. Dealing with Brian was a little like dealing with a wild animal at times. You had to let him come to you.

“It’s not a big deal anymore,” he maintained mulishly, stealing back the remote from her and flipping over to ESPN.

“Of course it isn’t,” replied Abby quietly as they sat in silence and did what they always did every March 17th. While

most folks their age were out drinking green beer and partying the night away, she and Brian actively did nothing.

Together.

Ironically, they had a similar celebration on *Cinco De Mayo* as well.

Only that one was for her.

It was actually how this whole tradition was born, in fact. For that one day each year, Abby allowed herself to grieve... for her failings and her losses, for the tears she'd forced herself to stop shedding. For that one day each year, she took a day of mourning even though no one else in the world was mourning with her. For that one day each year, she reminded herself that just as it had the year prior, the next day would come.

Where once this was a solo tradition she'd never told anyone about, after a few years, Brian caught on. He never pried, he never prodded. He'd simply taken it upon himself to make it a non-solo tradition. He just plain began showing up to actively do nothing with her.

Apparently butting in without asking was also a tradition for them.

On her part, she was glad to have him share her May 5ths with her. Even though Brian had no idea what it was she was actively 'not celebrating,' every year, without fail, he'd show up for their annual tradition of not celebrating together.

As only her best friend could.

"I really am fine, you know." He nudged her shoulder with his. "But thanks for coming. I didn't think you'd remember this year."

"Why would you think that?" she frowned.

They watched TV in silence for another minute before he eventually answered softly, "I feel like you're slipping away from me, Abby."

The words were a knife wound in her chest. And the only way she could chase it away was by turning to give him her best, 'you're crazy' look and reassuring him with every



confidence in the world, “Well, I’m not. I’m right here. Nothing has changed between us.”

It wasn’t until after she’d finished saying it that she realized she’d just said her second fib of the night.

And it was a big one.



## CHAPTER SIX

SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE she was doing this.

She felt like she was going to hurl.

“Relax, Abby. You have nothing to be nervous about.”

Easy for him to say. “Are you sure this dress is formal enough?” She checked her reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator once again while Connor pushed the button for the top floor. Though she'd searched high and low, her favorite thrift store did not have a section for ‘corporate mixer cocktail dresses.’ So, she'd gotten the dressiest thing she could find that didn't look like it belonged at a music award banquet.

“I should have gotten fancier heels.”

He came up behind her, his rock solid frame nearly molding against her as he leaned in to whisper, “For the hundredth time, you look beautiful.” He met her eyes in the mirror and raked his heated gaze slowly over every curve of her body. “But, if you need me to convince you in other ways...” Splaying his hands on her hips, he pulled her back against him. Close, but not nearly close enough. “Does that tell you how gorgeous I think you are?” His voice was hoarse, tortured, and the brush of hard evidence outlining his ‘thoughts’ were tempting her to reach over and pull the stop key to bring the elevator to a halt.

And it had nothing to do with the fact that she was afraid of getting out on the top floor.

When he caught her eyes flickering over to that red button on the electronic panel, he groaned.

“You're killing me here, Abby. At this rate, I'm going to stop this elevator right now, if not for every last reason you have in mind, at least to avoid walking out of here with the granddaddy of all erections in front of everyone I work with.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him to do it.

Until the elevator chimed and the doors slid open on the ballroom floor.

Saved by the bell.

He backed up a step and shoved a hand in his pocket uncomfortably. “You’re hell on all my good intentions, woman.” Drilling her with one more sizzling hot look, he slid a hand on the small of her back and led her out of the elevator. “And if you don’t stop biting your lip, I’m going to pull you in the nearest bathroom and pretend we’re back in that elevator. Twice.” His hand slipped an inch lower, daring her to rise an inch higher and prove that a bad boy with good intentions...

*Was still a bad boy.*

She swiped her tongue over the teeth marks on her lower lip in response to her own thoughts.

And a low, sexy growl rumbled out of his chest.

“Connor! There you are. We’ve been looking for you.”

Abby finally let out the breath she’d been holding.

Connor’s assistant came running up and flashed a warm, contagious smile at her. “Hello, you must be Abby. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.” Abby smiled back at the chic older woman, liking her instantly. “Thank you for the two flower arrangements you’ve ordered for me in the past, by the way. They were beautiful.”

Laura looked both charmed and surprised. “Why, you’re quite welcome. But I only ordered one set of flowers for you.” She glanced over at Connor with a raised eyebrow. “He must have ordered the second one himself. Although to my knowledge he’s never once stepped foot in a flower shop before.”

Abby turned back to Connor and found him avoiding her questioning gaze, focusing instead on fiddling with his watch rather intently.

Adorable man.

A chirp from Laura’s phone had her jumping and grabbing Connor by the elbow. “I hate to do this to you, Abby, but I

have to steal Connor away for about five minutes. I was hoping one of the other assistants would be free to keep you company but it appears you'll have to mingle on your own for a bit."

"Not a problem. I'll be fine." *Yeah, big talk.* She flashed them both a bright white smile.

Connor cast her a worried glance.

"Go, before you give Laura an aneurysm."

As the two quickly made their way to the other end of the room, Abby contemplated finding a quiet table in the corner and pulling out her ereader. But she remembered her purpose for coming here tonight and stuck to the plan.

If she was going to seriously consider being with Connor, she needed to be able to exist in his world.

Eyeing the different groups of people around the room, she had no idea how to even strike up a conversation with any of these strangers.

"Hi, are you here with Connor Sullivan?"

Okay, well that was easy.

Abby turned around and did her best to keep her smile on her face when she saw who was speaking to her. It was the vampire-like woman who'd warned her away from Connor at his house party last summer. Great. Following up with a similarly cheerful voice, Abby replied, "I'm his date for the evening, yes. So nice to meet you."

"You look so familiar—" The woman tapped one extravagantly manicured nail against her lower lip. "Oh I know! We met at one of Connor's parties, didn't we?"

Wow, if the woman wasn't an actress by trade, she was seriously missing her calling.

"Yes, I believe we did. I'm afraid I don't remember your name, however."

"I'm Cassandra, and these ladies here—talk about standing in the woman's shadow—are Janelle, Deborah, Elizabeth, and Clarissa."

Abby nodded politely at each of the ladies, who were in turn, each looking at her like she was a mutant they wanted to dissect and run experiments on.

They descended on her like a circle of vultures.

“So you’re the one who’s taken Connor off the market,” sniffed the Deborah woman, looking down her sharp pointy nose at her.

*Ah*, so it was going to be one of *those* conversations. Well, here goes nothing. “Off the market? You make him sound like real estate for sale.” Abby tipped her head back and did a terrific imitation of Cassandra’s laugh.

Cassandra did not look amused.

“Oh, it’s a compliment,” reassured the one with the eye-blinding overabundance of jewelry draped on her like a vault had just exploded. “No one has been able to tame him yet.”

Abby resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she tossed out without a thought, “Well then all his other women are simply doing it wrong.” She cupped a theatric hand to her mouth for a stage whisper, “It helps if you take turns at it.” Impressively, she kept her laughter at bay.

When she looked up, she saw Connor nearing their group, a grin curving one corner of his mouth up.

Darn the man and his bat-like ears.

“Abby’s right, it’s way more fun that way,” he broke in. “Though I have to say, I much prefer Abby *undomesticated*.” Sliding his arm around her waist, he pulled her away from the group. “Ladies. Always a pleasure.”

A silent giggle attacked her middle as they made their way across the dance floor.

He whispered quietly. “Very nice. You effectively shut those women up. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Skimming a kiss over her cheek, he asked, eyes laughing, “So I take it you’re not so nervous anymore?”

No, she wasn’t.

She knew now that she could hold her own with this crowd and survive these parties.

The only question was if that's really the life she wanted to live.

“Did you see that woman Connor brought tonight?”

Abby froze and silently sat back down in the ballroom restroom stall; Connor would just have to think she'd had some bad shrimp because she'd had just about all the snippy conversational warfare she could take tonight. These women were vicious.

“Was it that bitchy lawyer he brings sometimes?”

“No, this one has this whole *adorable* wide-eyed, gollie-gee-whiz thing going.”

Ouch. How the woman managed to make *that* into a biting insult was precisely why she was keeping her butt in the stall.

“Seriously? Connor? Are we talking about the same man who wore out the Hanley twins? Because from what I hear, he's into some kinky stuff.”

“Really? I thought he was pretty vanilla. We only had sex a few times because of that stupid one-month rule of his but... meh, it was alright. I tried to get him to go to a bondage club with me but like I said, he wasn't into it.”

Abby felt bile rising up in her throat.

“Well, he must be doing something right because he's slept with half of the women out there tonight and most of them are still fawning all over him.” A syrupy sweet giggle. “Maybe he's into the innocent virginal type now. A lot of these high powered guys like doing the whole role playing thing. Maybe corrupting the really pure ones gets the kinky side to come out.”

A toilet flush effectively drowned out their voices for a few precious seconds before the clacking of stiletto heels brought with it a voice she vaguely recognized. “Oh god, I'd let him dress me in braids and a schoolgirl outfit if that's what it would take.”

*Janelle.* One of the women she'd been talking to earlier. Wasn't she married?

"Well if he's into threesomes, why don't you just ask his date to let you join in? She probably lets Connor do whatever he wants."

Abby couldn't breathe. Bracing her hands against the stall walls, she tried to keep the room from spinning even more than it was.

"Ooh, ooh! I heard Rachel got him for a one-nighter by just showing up at his house in a trench coat and crotchless panties. Ohmigosh, can you imagine his date wearing something like that?"

The women laughed.

Abby shut her eyes and fought the waves of nausea slamming into her. She could hear her own heartbeat thrumming in her ears, a gray haze blanketing her vision.

All those women...

One by one, she heard the women leaving. But she couldn't get their voices to leave her head.

All those women...

And now she was trying to become one of them.

After emptying her dinner in the toilet, she went to the sink and stared at her reflection. Turning on the faucet, she cupped handfuls of water and splashed her face over and over again.

But no amount of water could wash all the ugliness of the past ten minutes away.

She grabbed a napkin and wiped away every last trace of the cosmetics on her face. Pulling a hair tie out of her purse, she jerked her hair back up into a ponytail. Half of it was drenched anyway.

Even if Connor didn't want to leave yet, she was getting the hell out of the building.

"Abby, there you are." Connor dropped his phone back into his pocket. "I was starting to think you abandoned me for the



night.” He smiled, studying her hair. “Hey, you pulled it back. You look cute.”

Cute. As in gollie-gee-whiz adorable. The walls started closing in on her again.

His grin faded. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“I’m feeling a little sick. Do you mind if I head home already? I’ll call a cab.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll drive you.” He quickly took her purse and put a steadying hand on her back. “Do you want to sit down for a bit more? You look really pale.”

“No, I just want to go. Are you sure it’s okay for you to leave already? It’s not even nine o’clock. What about the party?”

He shrugged. “What about it?” His worried gaze deepened as it drifted over her face. “If you feel faint, let me know. I’ll carry you the rest of the way.”

For some reason, that caused a riot of laughter to hit her in the belly. And she couldn’t stop it. Her head started spinning again but this time it felt like it was floating away.

“Abby, I’m calling an ambulance. This looks serious.”

Finally the giggle fits stopped. “No, I’m fine. I just...have a really bad headache. It’s making me a little loopy.”

He opened the car door for her and gently helped her in.

Abby’s head was in complete disarray. How could this man be the same one the women were talking about earlier? It’s not that she wasn’t aware of Connor’s past. His one-month rule alone was a good indication. But just the sheer numbers were hard to wrap her brain around. After being with all those women, how could one woman ever be enough for him? She pressed her fingers into her temples.

“I don’t want you to stay alone tonight, Abby. If you’re not comfortable staying at my house, I can sleep on your couch and keep an eye on you there.” He paused for a beat before adding quietly, “Or I can drop you off at Brian’s if you’d prefer.”

She heard the hurt in his voice when he offered the last option and though a part of her was tempted to choose it, she shook her head. “I’ll be fine, Connor. Alone. But if I need to talk to someone, I promise I’ll call you.”

And while this was yet another fib to add to the stack this joint custody dating was racking up, this one, she truly wished she could deliver.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

ABBY WAS ALREADY HALFWAY ASLEEP when she dropped down into bed to turn in for the night. And she was down to only a quarter consciousness when her phone rang.

“Hello?” she muttered sleepily into the receiver.

“I almost forgot how sexy you sound on the phone.”

She jolted awake in a flash. “Connor?”

“Glad to know you remember my voice,” he smiled over the phone line. “I was planning on waiting in bed all night for you to call me but then I remembered that I have fingers that can dial a phone number too.”

She valiantly fought back a smile. The man was entirely too charming for his own good. “Connor, really, I’m fine. I must have just eaten something funny.”

“Okay, then how about *you* keep *me* company on the phone. We can play a round of *Twenty Questions*,” he bulldozed right along. “Or rather, just the version where we have to answer each other’s questions no matter what.”

Oh, that was tempting. Not the answering part but the asking part, definitely.

“There are no off-limit questions...” he anted up lightly.

That sounded like a dare. What was it about talking on the phone that made things seem less dangerous than they probably were? “Okay, let’s play.”

“True or false?” he fired off quickly. “Everyone deserves a second chance.”

Geez, he was intending to play down and dirty stickball. Warily, she answered, “True.”

“Interesting. Okay, your turn.”

She asked the first question that came to mind. “Do you like strip clubs?”

He chuckled. “Depends.”

“Hey, no fair.” She glared at the phone. “That’s not an answer.”

“It is too,” he decreed. “You just need to make your questions more specific if you don’t want vague answers.” The last came out as a taunt.

Huffing, she sat up fully in bed. Now, it was on. “Fine. Your turn.”

“Yes or no? Do you still use that pink vibrator we played with in the tub that one night?”

She gasped. “Do you really expect me to answer that?”

“I’d reply, but then I’ll have to count that as one of your twenty questions.”

*Argh!* “Fine. No, I haven’t. I...can’t seem to bring myself to.”

A long pause, and then a gentle, “Your turn.”

“Have you slept with anyone since September?” Without realizing she was doing it, she held her breath.

“No, I haven’t,” he answered softly. “I haven’t wanted to, either.”

Oh. “Your turn.”

“Do you miss me?” Now it sounded like he was the one holding his breath.

“Yes,” she admitted. “As much I did the day you left. More, maybe.”

For a while, neither of them spoke.

And then he broke the ice again, “It’s your turn to ask me a question, sweetheart.”

Heart in her throat, she asked the question she’d wondered over more days than she cared to admit. “If I’d come to you during the months you stayed away, what would you have done?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “I would’ve locked you in my house and asked you to never leave again,” he replied quietly.

Holy swizzle sticks.

“My turn. There was a day last fall when I saw you as I was getting some Chinese take-out in town. Did you see me, too?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. So he *had* seen her. “Yes. And I jumped into a Brazilian wax shop to avoid you.”

“I know,” he let out a weary breath. “You don’t know how many nights of sleep I lost thinking about that day.”

“Really? Why?”

“Honey, the shop you ran into had a poster advertising 30+ different wax designs. I can guarantee you that I had at least 30+ hot nights being tormented by the possibilities.”

She flushed. Right, of course. The designs. The shop had a flipbook of photos they’d shoved in her hands that day and she’d had to pretend to flip through them while she was hiding out.

Most awkward day ever.

Speaking of awkward. May as well ask the question that had been plaguing her all night.

“Yes or no. Do you truly believe one woman would be enough for you...someday?”

“Yes. If it’s the right woman.” His voice dropped an emotional octave. “And if it’s the woman I’m thinking it is, I believe she’ll be more than just ‘enough’ for me.”

Wow.

A weighty pause, and then he came back with, “Do you ever think about that last time we slept together?”

Darn him. “No.”

“Liar.” The playful tone was back. “You know, there are penalties for lying in this game.”

“Okay, fine. Yes.”

“Too late. It’s time to pay your fine.” He was doing an impressive job sounding matter-of-fact about this.

Covering up the smile in her voice, she asked warily, “What’s the fine?”

“Describe that night for me. I want to see it in your eyes.”

“Connor—” They were treading dangerously close to crossing a line.

His voice sobered then. “I took it too far, I’m sorry honey. Let’s go back to the game.”

But it was too late. All the vivid memories of that night came barreling into her brain, one after the other until it was all her mind’s eye could see. “I-I...I remember you kissing the inside of my thigh...” Her heart raced just recalling the image.

“Sweetheart, we don’t have to do this.” His voice was strained tight.

“It’s not phone sex if we don’t do anything with our hands, right? If we just talk?” she asked, not entirely sure she could keep to those constraints at this point.

“I guess not. But honey, any memory of you would inevitably lead to my needing to ‘finish the job.’ You’re so damn sexy I get hard just thinking about you.”

A quick burst of heat shot through her. “Then we’ll stop if it gets that far.”

“No promises,” he hedged.

She’d take it. “I remember that I was wearing a pair of black satin panties.”

“That were held together by bows at your hips,” he finished.

She slipped her hands up above her head and held onto her pillow to keep them from straying. “You lifted me up and put me on top of the dresser with the mirror...and then you let me touch you.”

His breathing picked up over the phone line.

“We both watched in the mirror as I wrapped my hand around you—”

“Abby,” he groaned. “Honey, I’m about two seconds away from not being able to stop at all.”

So she remained silent. But her mind didn’t. Heat sparked over the phone line as she remembered what it felt like to feel his bare skin brushing against her breasts. His large frame

bracketing hers as he settled between the vee of her legs and ground himself against her, anchored her mouth to his while he thrust into her slippery heat.

Eyes shut, she arched into the memory, felt his tongue and teeth as he'd latched onto a nipple and took her to the brink with just that stimulation alone. He'd been relentless, driving into her over and over again, harder and deeper, until she'd clamped down on his rigid length to keep from spinning into oblivion as her orgasm began crashing over her.

"Connor," she gasped too far gone in the memory. "I can't stop."

"Then don't," he replied hoarsely. "*Come for me, Abby.*"

The words were straight out of her most private dreams, only infinitely more potent live. She clutched the blankets as shivers of electricity shot down her core. Blinding, white-hot pleasure built to a crest that slammed into her in a wave so intense she cried out when she never cried out. Her body arched as the unexpected release charged through her, whipping all around, throwing her into a vortex of twisting pleasure she'd never felt before. It swept through her, jolting her again and again, a mindless bliss that exploded across her senses, and shattered her into a thousand pieces.

He'd made her come just by his voice alone.

"God, I wish I were there with you, sweetheart," rumbled Connor into the phone.

"I do too," she whispered, feeling the truth in that throughout every cell in her body.

CONNOR WAS PROBABLY IN THE BEST MOOD he'd been in months. Sure, he'd used up nearly all the cold water in his house last night—something he didn't think was possible—but he'd also been privy to one of the sexiest things he'd ever not-witnessed in his entire life.

An extremely fair exchange.

"Hey, Connor. You have a minute?"



Seeing that his firm's best investigator had one of his magic folders in his hand, he made the time. He pushed the intercom on his phone. "Laura, hold my calls for the next half hour."

Motioning for Jay to sit, he opened up the folder. "What case is this for?"

"Your father's."

Frowning, he tossed the folder back. "I'm not getting involved."

Jay shoved it over again. "You need to read this, buddy."

Puzzled at his intensity, Connor flipped the file open and scanned the first document in the pile. His eyes flew up a second later and his hand shot out to grab Jay by the throat. "What the hell are you doing investigating Abby?"

Jay, stand-up guy that he was, sat there without striking back. "Your father insisted."

"What the hell was he hoping to find?"

"Nothing, frankly. He was just fishing."

"You could have said no."

"Dammit, Connor. You know I couldn't have. The request didn't just come from your father. It came from everyone. With his ass on the line, the whole firm looks bad. Plus, far be it for me to actually compliment the rabid she-cat but Victoria is in top form with this case. You'd think she had something personal against the guy. I mean on any given day she has ice running in her veins but damn, even I'm afraid to cross her in the street after going through what she has planned next."

He released his hold on Jay's throat and took hold of the file again. "Did you find anything?"

"Everything I found that was relevant to the case, I gave to your father. Which was nothing. I kept everything in this file for your eyes only because I can only imagine how your father would hurt that sweet girl with this information."

A look of sympathy passed over his features. "Read the second page."

Connor flipped to the next document in the file and felt his stomach drop, his heart clench in pain. This information explained so much.

“I’m sorry, man,” said Jay quietly. “She’s a really nice girl. I met her at the party. I know it means jack shit at this point but tell her I’m sorry for this whole invading her privacy thing.”

Connor closed the file and looked up at his friend. One of the few people he’d still classify as a friend after a stunt like this.

“As always, you’re an asshole.” Connor clenched the folder in his hands. “But thank you. I owe you one.”

Clicking off all the lights in his living room, Connor was just about to head up to bed when he saw a familiar set of uneven headlights coming up his driveway. He quickly went over to the front door to let Abby in.

She looked stricken, scattered.

“Honey, what’s the matter?”

He quickly led her into the house and sat her down. But instead of replying, she silently wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his chest.

“Abby, you’re scaring me here. Is everything okay?”

For another few long moments, she just held him. He felt her shoulders sag in defeat shortly before she looked up at him and said in a too-quiet voice, “I didn’t get the position at ASU.”

Sympathy hit him first and foremost. She’d worked so hard and had really been hoping to become a professor here. “How is that possible? You were perfect for the position.”

She shook her head. “It was no contest. A full professor from another school is moving here in the fall. She’s way overqualified for the position but she’s willing to take a substantial pay decrease to work here. They would’ve been crazy to pick me over her.”

“I’m so sorry, Abby. We were really rooting for you.” He stroked her hair gently. “But hey, look on the bright side. You

still have those other schools to choose from.”

She pulled out three envelopes. “I heard back from the others, too. I didn’t get the east coast position but I got offers from both of the California universities almost immediately after I got home from my interviews. My department head thinks it’s because they knew the other was also considering me.”

“That’s amazing, sweetheart. Two positions to choose from. Aren’t you excited? I know it’s not your alma mater but you’ve told me yourself, these are great schools. Plus, it’s California. You love it there, and you’ll be closer to your parents—”

“And an entire state away from you and Brian.” Her hands clenched into his shirt. “*And Skylar.*”

The reality of it slammed into him. “I know, sweetheart. But, it won’t be so bad. We’ll all call you, I’m sure, and Skylar will probably have you permanently linked to her online chat. We can take turns visiting. It’ll be fun.”

Abby shook her head. “We both know it won’t be the same. And what if...” Her voice trailed off, pain and worry streaking across her face.

“If Skylar ends up having Juvenile Huntington’s?” asked Connor gently.

She nodded, tears running down her cheeks. “I’d never be able to live with myself if I weren’t here for her. I know I’d applied for the California positions as my Plan B but in my mind, there’d never been any other choice. How arrogant was I to believe I’d get this position my first year out of school?” Frustrated, she ground her palms into her eyes. “I’ve asked my department head if there were any instructor or other full-time positions but evidently, there aren’t any right now due to the budget cuts. And because I’m an idiot, I didn’t apply for any other type of positions at ASU.”

“Stop it, you’re not an idiot.”

“I am. I should’ve planned for other ways to stay here. I’ve checked at the community colleges as well but none of them have anything over a part-time lecturer. So I’m thinking maybe

I could do that for a while and pick up a few other side jobs as well.”

He loved her so much it hurt sometimes.

“Abby, look at me.” He cupped her face in his hands. “You just finished your PhD and you have two universities who want to hire you as a professor. You can’t turn down those opportunities just so you can stay close to us.”

She looked up at him, confused. “You *want* me to go to California?”

No. A thousand times over, no. “It’s what’s best for your career, sweetie.”

“I don’t care. I’ve helped raise Skylar since the day she was born. I can’t abandon them. Not now. Not ever. We’ve always been a team.”

Connor held her close, smoothed his hand over her hair and let her vent, let her tears of frustration run with no end. “We’ll get through this, sweetheart. We’ll figure something out.”

Honestly though, he wasn’t sure they would.

Hours later, with a wrung-out Abby sound asleep in his arms on the couch, he was woken up by a sound in the dining room. Startled, he adjusted his eyes to the darkness.

He wasn’t prepared to see Brian standing there in his home.

...Looking as if his soul had been torn out of his body.

“Sorry to wake you,” mumbled Brian woodenly. “Mom left behind a bunch of the paperwork you’d laid out for her the other day and she needed to finish them before tomorrow. She’s been calling your phone all night.”

Damn. He’d been ignoring his phone for the past few hours while he’d been tending to Abby.

“Anyway, you know how she is driving at night so I offered to come here and pick it up for her.”

Robotically, he turned to leave.

“Brian, it’s not what it looks like. I know it’s not my week anymore but she came over because she had a rough night.”

“I’m glad she had you to turn to,” Brian replied, a resigned hurt throbbing in his voice. “Sorry for barging in on you two.”

“Brian, stop. She just needed someone to talk to. She didn’t get the position at ASU and she really needed a shoulder to cry on. That’s it. It’s not like she’s made her decision or anything yet.”

Eyes gazing lovingly at Abby, Brian whispered brokenly, “Yes, she has. She just won’t admit it to herself yet.”

With that, he left the house without another word.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

THIS WAS KILLING HIM.

Brian sat and listened to the poor kid playing the tuba next to Skylar attempt to find his place in the big concert finale number after missing what sounded like a few full beats in the song, much to the wincing sympathy of all his band mates. And the audience.

Okay, so two things were killing him.

What should have been a pleasant, albeit slightly off-tune evening enjoying Skylar's first middle school band concert had turned into two torturous hours seeing—and doing his damndest to ignore—the obvious chemistry between Abby and Connor.

Abby had done the diplomatic thing and went to sit with a few of the English Department teachers she worked with, leaving him and Connor to sit together two rows behind her.

And somehow, Brian still felt like the third wheel.

“Hey man, you okay?” Connor nudged him in the shoulder, studying his face in concern.

Brian forced a half smile. “I just feel bad for that poor guy.” He nodded over at the dejected-looking tuba player who was packing up his instrument now. All his friends were patting him on the back and trying to make him feel better but it didn't look like it was helping much.

He knew exactly how the kid felt. “It's like he blinked and lost his place for a split second and couldn't ever get back. After a while, he never even had a chance, really.”

Connor's frown deepened. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then stopped.

Brian added quietly, “It wasn't anyone's fault. These things just happen. Still. It sucks for him, is all.”

They both knew he wasn't talking about the tuba player at all.

“Brian—”

“*Dad! Dad!*”

He instantly pinned a smile on his face and swiveled around, dropping everything so he could catch his daughter in the flying hug she hurtled at him. “Hey, sweetie, you were amazing up there.” He gave her a genuine grin then when she beamed at him. “I can't believe that clarinet is the same one that sounded like a dying animal just a few months ago.”

“I know, right?” She giggled and threw her arms around Connor as well. “Thanks for coming, Uncle Connor!” Turning around, she scanned the crowd. “Hey, where's Abby?”

“Right here, kiddo.” Abby came up behind them and Skylar lit up, flinging the biggest hug of all over at Abby. “Did you hear? I didn't make a single mistake! Thank you so much for practicing with me all month.” She blew out an adrenaline-rich breath. “I totally thought I was going to screw up.”

“I didn't. I knew you were going to rock it.” Abby hooked her arm through Skylar's and they gabbed in parallel speeds as they walked to the parking lot, both of them all but forgetting he and Connor were even trailing behind them. “Did you know you were grinning like a hyena at the end of the first song? You totally nailed that one really difficult part. It was perfect.”

Skylar hopped up and down, clapping excitedly.

“And I saw you give your tuba friend a hug at the end. That was really nice of you,” added Abby in that motherly voice of hers that always sounded like second nature.

Brian looked over and saw Connor staring after the pair as well.

Connor shook his head in amazement. “Has she always been like this with Skylar?”

Brian nodded. “Every day of Skylar's life. From day one, Abby was a natural born mother.”

A dark, troubled cloud settled over Connor's expression and this time, it was Brian's turn to be worried. “What's the



matter?"

"Nothing."

That was a lie. Brian's bullshit radar was pinging like crazy but before he could press further, he saw that he wasn't the only one who'd noticed something was wrong. Abby glanced back and snagged Connor's gaze. "*Are you okay?*" she mouthed silently over to him, her concern for him radiating in waves.

Brian could barely breathe for the pain stabbing him in the heart.

He was losing her.

Where once, Brian had thought that Abby was the other half of his soul, when he saw her with Connor, all he saw were two souls that clearly belonged together, complemented each other.

It was nothing overt. Connor and Abby seemed to be doing everything in their power not to be within ten feet of each other. But even a blind man could see the almost tangible connection between them. It occurred to Brian that he'd never actually seen the two together after they'd had their month fling. If he had, there was a good chance he wouldn't have pursued Abby at all.

Because not only was it obvious that Connor was in love with Abby, but Abby was in love with Connor too.

And Brian had never even stood a chance, really.

As nightfall came, with Skylar over at Becky's for a sleepover and Abby and Connor gone, Brian pulled another bottle of beer from the case he'd brought out to the backyard and slowly walked around the orchid shade house gazebo he'd made for Abby.

That she hadn't yet seen.

The modifications he'd made to turn it from just a shade house into a cozy little gazebo as well were simple, but Skylar loved it. Treated it like her castle. More often than not lately, he'd find her out there a lot of days and even some nights,

draped across the bench just talking on her phone or reading. Seeing that always made him imagine Abby having done the same thing when she was young. And inevitably, he'd imagine a few other adorable little children growing up doing the very same thing, following in the footsteps of their big sister and mother.

Tonight, for the first time, it really did seem like it was all a big fantasy.

He sat on the bench and looked over at the thick tree trunk he'd built the gazebo around. Like the shade house in Abby's childhood home, he'd built this one right up against the lone tree in their yard so he could transplant some of the wild orchids into the bark of the trunk. They were doing well, already starting to take root.

The irony of that was a bitter pill to swallow.

Was that why he hadn't planted the white egret orchid into the tree? He'd given it to Abby to take home the day of her defense. After the way she'd reacted to Connor showing up at her office, Brian hadn't been able to bring himself to show the shade house to her.

Perhaps his subconscious already knew.

He drained his beer and tossed in onto the pile of jagged empties laying in the lawn.

After the sixth or seventh bottle, he'd stopped flinching at the sound of the glass shattering. He had no idea what number he was on now. Pulling out another one from the case, he popped off the cap and balanced the open bottle on the knob of the trunk he'd reserved for Abby's white egret orchid. To pay homage. When it rocked and teetered over the bark, he didn't even move to catch it. He watched almost in slow motion as it came crashing down and flooding the floor of the gazebo with beer.

*Shit.* He made a mental note to hose that down before Skylar got home tomorrow.

Stumbling over the broken shards, he reached for another, and saw a flash of movement in the house. Laughing in his head as he did it, he called out to the fleeting shadow. "*Beth?*"

Damn, he must be really drunk off his ass if he was seeing the ghost of his dead wife.

He let go of the fresh bottle he'd picked up and dragged himself back into the house.

Maybe if he went to sleep now, he could chat with his dead wife about Abby. Maybe Beth would know why it was that the women he fell in love with couldn't stay with him.

ABBY TUCKED HER CHIN atop her knees and gave Connor her CIA stare. It was less menacing than her FBI glare but it packed a lot more hidden ammo. Usually, it preceded a full interrogation, not unlike the one she was about to unleash on Connor.

“Tell me what’s wrong.” She lowered her brows down even more. The look of sorrow that had blanketed Connor’s face shortly after the concert had haunted her all night.

And clearly, Connor was positively shaking in his boots, based on the way his eyes crinkled at the corners as he repeated for the third time, “Nothing. I told you, everything’s fine.”

She was just about to switch to her FBI glare when he added, “Hey, before I forget, my assistant Laura is going to call you with some info I think you’ll be really interested in.”

Well that was a blatant evasive maneuver. And dangnabbit, was it an effective one. She pouted. “Okay, I’ll bite. What info?”

His tilted his head, an excited little smile brewing. “I know you’re not thrilled about your Plan B options in California—and as I’ve told you, I’ll support you whether you go to the West Coast or Timbuktu—but there might be one other option for you to consider.”

“There aren’t any more full-time teaching positions available, Connor. And believe it or not, I’m over-qualified for many of the other positions. They won’t even consider me. I could stay on as a lecturer and wait until another tenure-line

position opens up but honestly, my department has already told me they aren't expecting another opening for a few years."

"What if you did something more in line with your degree?" he asked, eyes dancing.

"Any positions like that would be filled with doctoral students—"

"No, I mean what if you focused on academic research for a bit first. That's the other half of being a professor, right? You could do research, work on getting published, and lecture some of those courses you were talking about on the side if you find yourself missing teaching. Then, when a tenure-line position does open up in a few years, you'd be in a really strong position."

Abby was at a complete loss for words. Not just because Connor had presented her with a great plan that she really should've widened her focus to consider, but because of what he was offering with this option.

A chance for her to stay here with Brian and Skylar.

"Doesn't your firm have a location in California?" she asked then, locking her gaze on his.

"Yes."

"Would it be hard for you to transfer over there?"

"With my seniority and trial history, no, not at all."

She chewed on her lip. "Tell me the truth. Have you already checked to see if you could relocate to the California office?"

He hesitated for a beat, and then replied, "They have a corner office ready for me, along with a list of potential homes for me in the area as well."

The air in her lungs suddenly felt thinner. "And the reason why you haven't told me this is..."

"Because moving isn't an option for my brother. It wouldn't be fair to him if this became a determining factor on your decision."

Abby slapped both hands on top of her head and rolled off the couch, falling to the carpet in a heap. "Bad boy, my ass.

You, Connor Sullivan, are as much of a hardcore goodie-goodie as I am.”

Chuckling, he crouched next to her and helped her up. “For one, don’t talk about your ass again unless you mean business. And secondly, I’m not doing this to be good, I’m doing this because you deserve to make the decision that’s best for you, with as little external factors forcing your hand. If you ended up choosing to be with me because of something like geography, and I wasn’t the one you really wanted...I wouldn’t want that for you, or for me.”

Trying not to get her hopes up too much, she finally dared to ask, “What’s the research position entail?”

“If you get it, you’d get to keep working with writing, specific to different native reservations that choose to participate. There are a few grander scale projects as well, and maybe even some statewide duties. The position involves some field work in the classroom, teacher training, curriculum planning, professional development modules, and work with standards and assessments.”

Whoa. It sounded like an amazing opportunity. She was brimming with excitement, and for the first time in the past few months, she wasn’t thinking about the position in context to its location in Arizona. “Connor, I couldn’t have custom built a more ideal position for myself. How did you find this?”

He looked like a kid at Christmas. “I thought you’d like it. It wasn’t me though. I asked Laura to do some digging. It helped when she worked her way backward with the native reservations focus. So you have her to thank, not me.”

He kept doing this, she realized—giving her opportunities she couldn’t imagine were within her scope. Allowing her not just to dream but to extend those dreams beyond even the farthest reaches of everything she dared to wish for herself. With Brian and Skylar, with work.

With love.

Even though she knew it was treading on dangerous waters, she crawled over and wrapped her arms around him, and held him tight. His arms snapped shut around her just as securely.

“I’ve missed this—having you in my life, being a part of yours,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Me too,” she admitted out loud. Finally.

That was when she *knew*...and what he said next just confirmed it for her.

“Brian and Skylar are your family. And I know this position isn’t a professorship but it combines so many of the things you love. If this position can help you stay here and be with them...well, I just wanted you to have that option.”

“You’re always doggedly seeking the most options for me. Why?”

His tone hardened. “You had your options ripped away from you by that monster from your past.” Tension vibrated his frame. “You deserve every option for your every happiness, Abby. No matter whether you choose me or Brian, or god forbid, some other man. I want you to have every choice afforded to you so the dreams that you make into your reality are the biggest and best ones you could dream up.”

He pulled back and gazed down at her, his emotions all laid out on the line for her to see. “Because before I met you, Abby, I couldn’t have possibly dreamed up the future I’ve imagined since...the one with you in it.”

A storm of emotions hit her from all sides and she just stared at the amazing man before her. Afraid that what she was about to say would change the way he was looking at her in this moment. “Connor, there’s something you should know.”

She felt the tensing in his arms, the possessive way he cradled her closer. And she let herself dare to dream that he wouldn’t see her differently, view her as damaged goods.

“Whatever it is, we can work through it, sweetheart.”

“I-I should’ve told you—and Brian, for that matter—about this before you two went through the whole joint custody thing over me. Maybe it would’ve had you guys reconsider.”

“Not freakin’ likely, honey.” He pressed a soft kiss to her temple and asked her quietly, “Do you want to tell me about it now?”

The words wouldn't come out. A whole night she'd spent rehearsing this, ignoring all the images of Connor calling out, "Honey, I'm home," like he had that one night months ago. Images she wanted to hold on to with hope, not fear.

"I didn't tell you the whole story about what happened to me in high school, Connor. About what happened...afterward." The storm of memories crashed into her, stole her ability to speak, to breathe. Tears burned the back of her eyelids as it always did whenever she allowed herself think about it.

"Honey, don't cry. It's okay, you don't have to talk about it if it's too painful," he whispered into her hair, drawing her tight into his arms. "...I already know."

She jerked her gaze up to his, jaw agape in shock. "That's impossible. Besides my parents, no one knows. How could you—" Her eyes narrowed in anger. "It was that investigator of yours again wasn't it? He got a hold of my medical records?"

"Jay *is* very good at what he does."

She cursed under her breath.

The annoyance helped. It gave her the tiny burst of strength she didn't think she possessed to say the words aloud. "I told you my parents and I moved out of our home all those years ago after they found me that night, but really, we didn't move until later...nineteen weeks later, to be exact," she whispered brokenly, as she thought of the one word that still held the power to bring her to her knees in helpless anger, jagged pain.

*Fetus.*

The only term the hospital would use to refer to the life that had died in her womb that May.

In their eyes, she'd 'lost a fetus.' Not a baby, not even a stillborn.

And every question they'd asked her regarding the group hospital funeral plans were phrased in terms of what she'd like to do for 'it' and never 'him.' Even though she'd lain on that hospital bed and pushed, watched this perfect, beautiful little boy come into this world with ten fingers and ten toes.

But not a single breath in his lungs.

He was so small she'd been able to cradle him in her two hands while they kept telling her they needed to take the 'fetus' away.

*"They never once called him my son."*

The icy daggers of those memories speared through her heart over and over again, drowning her, filling her with the same hollow pain she'd spent years thrashing her way through only to just barely survive it.

"It was a different time then." Connor's voice was shredded with sympathy. Grief for a baby he never got to meet. "We didn't have the laws we do now."

Abby had actually already been here in Arizona when they'd passed the *MISSing Angels* bill. And she'd cried through the news as the first set of birth certificates for stillborn babies were issued. "The bill wouldn't have helped my son. He missed the twenty-week mark by two days."

"I've heard of some states making exceptions," he began quickly, resolutely. "I'll draw the paperwork up right now, Abby. We'll get you that birth certificate with his name—"

"No." She put a hand on the side of his face and smoothed away the pain etched in his features. "I admit that it was all I'd been able to think about at one time. It took me years to find peace with all of it, but I did. I don't need to petition any state organization to classify the child I'd had to bury as a baby. And though a part of me will always ache for the injustice it is to him not to have it, I don't need a piece of paper to tell me that he'd had a life worth remembering."

"Sweetheart, I am so sorry you went through that."

The exact phrasing of his words brought the next fresh wave of heartache pummeling through her. "It's not just something I 'went' through, or something I've laid to rest in my past," she revealed quietly, raising her gaze up to meet his. "It's an inevitable part of my future, too. I have uterine abnormalities that would put every baby I tried to carry to term at risk."

Breaking her gaze away, she whispered softly, "I'd understand if you..." She squeezed her fists and forced herself



to say it. “I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted someone who could give you a child. Because you’d be such an amazing father, Connor. You talk about always wanting *me* to have everything for my happiness. I feel the same way for you. You deserve to be with a woman who you’re able to have a family with.”

He cradled her face in his hands and kissed away the stray tears streaming down her cheeks. “I’m not going anywhere, Abby. All of this just proves to me how strong you are, makes me know you’re an even more amazing woman than I already thought you were.”

“But don’t you want kids? A family you could come home to and have all those classic American meals with?” Though he never said it aloud, she knew that was a part of why he gravitated toward those meals as his favorites—because it was the furthest thing from what he’d had growing up, all of it.

“Honey, you and I both know that parenthood isn’t dictated by birth, or sometimes even by family. A child doesn’t have to bear my gene for me to want to be his or her father.” He slid a hand over hers. “I’ll do everything in my power to be even half as strong as you. We can try for a child as many times as you’re willing. But if it’s not in the cards, or even if it is, there are a lot of great kids out there who need parents that will love them. No matter what, you’re going to make an incredible mom to some very lucky kids in the future.” Twining their fingers together, he added in a voice rough with emotion, “And if you choose me to be the one right there beside you throughout it all, I’ll consider myself among the lucky ones as well.”

She fell back into his arms again. “It all sounds so perfect,” she said softly.

*“You bitch!”*

Gasping, Abby spun around and saw Skylar standing not ten feet away, confused and hurt, eyes red with angry tears.

Connor shot off the couch and went over to her. “Skylar, did you walk over here from Becky’s? Does your father even know you’re here?”

She swung her betrayed gaze over to him, and held the keys in her hand like a weapon. “Don’t pretend like you care about my dad! You’re here stealing Abby away from him behind his back.”

Abby approached her slowly. “Sweetie, that’s not what’s happening here.”

“No?” she shot back bitterly. “So you’re not here dreaming up a new family when dad and I have been doing everything we can to show you how much we want you to be a part of ours?” She backed up, eyeing them like a caged animal. “Becky’s sister drove me back home because I forgot my overnight bag and I saw him. He was outside drunk and sad and breaking beer bottles in the orchid shade house *we built for you*. Because we love you. But here you are with Uncle Connor, cheating on my dad and dreaming up a new kid.”

Her voice broke and Abby felt her heart breaking as well.

“Why don’t you want us, Abby? Aren’t we good enough for you? I thought you loved my dad...” A shattered sob racked her tiny frame. “I thought you loved me.”

“Skylar, of course I do. I love both you and your father so much.”

“*Liar!*” Skylar was shaking uncontrollably now and Abby was on the verge of losing it. Something wasn’t right.

“*You’re a lying bitch who just wants Uncle Connor now. You don’t want us! You don’t want to be my mom! I hate you! I wish you’d never butted into our lives!*”

Before they could stop her, she turned and ran off down the driveway.



## CHAPTER NINE

SHE WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.

Skylar had ducked into a neighbor's yard and disappeared into the night. Abby and Connor had scoured the neighborhood first by foot and then by car. They'd called Becky's parents and when they found she hadn't returned there either, they'd picked up Brian and immediately went to all of the girls' favorite hangout spots.

Abby was a wreck.

After four hours of searching, the police regrouped everyone who'd joined the search party and advised them to check their phone messages and their homes once again. Abby refused to stop looking. She tossed Connor her house keys and took a flashlight out to go search every nook and cranny of the houses in the area, waking up every single neighbor in a one-mile radius.

She'd just begun pounding on the door of a neighbor she hadn't yet spoken to personally when she heard Connor's Dodge Charger come rumbling down and screeching to a stop in the driveway beside her.

"We found her, sweetheart," he left the car running and sprinted toward her. "She was curled up—safe and sound asleep—in your guestroom."

Abby dropped to her knees on the graveled ground and simply broke down, crying gibberish and clenching the gravel so hard her hands bled.

When Connor could finally get her to stand, he drove her straight back to her house.

Only, Becky's parents had picked up Skylar and taken her and Brian back home before Abby got a chance to see her. To see for herself that she was okay.

Once inside her home, she ran straight to the guestroom and ran her hand over the comforter.

“Was she still upset when you found her?”

Connor shook his head. “I didn’t think I was the first one she’d want to see so I waited in the living room and Brian was the one who woke her up.”

She nodded and dropped onto the ground at the foot of the bed.

He asked quietly, “Do you want me to stay here with you tonight?”

Abby no longer knew what she wanted. No longer *cared* what she wanted. Skylar had been hurt beyond measure tonight and Abby had only herself to blame. “I think you should go, Connor.”

“None of this was your fault, sweetheart.”

She turned away from the words of comfort.

She didn’t deserve them.

All night, Abby sat on the guestroom bed and stared at the clock, listening to the ticking to make sure her own heart was still beating.

At five o’clock sharp, the dam in her heart burst, and galvanized her to action.

She pulled into Brian’s driveway minutes later, reckless speed a definite factor.

Brian opened the door before she could knock and dragged her into the hug they both needed.

“Brian, this was all my fault.”

“No, honey. Irrational, compulsive behavior like this is a classic pre-symptom of Juvenile Huntington’s. I’ve already talked to her doctors and we’ll be starting the process of genetic testing as soon as she’s gone through some therapy.”

“No!” Abby backed away from Brian. “*No*. It’s not a symptom. It’s me. It’s me, Brian. She can’t—” Gasping for air, suddenly her lungs felt too small, the world too big. “She

doesn't have JHD. This isn't a symptom. This is my fault. She just hates me is all. My fault. Just my fault."

The whole world shifted on its axis and Abby found herself on the ground, the tiled floor ice cold against her cheek.

"Please... Please..."

Brian dropped to the floor beside her and pulled her into his lap, holding her until the words stopped spilling from her lips, until her breathing calmed and the tremors ceased. "Abby, none of this is your fault. And believe me, if I could wish it away, I would too. But we can't ignore it anymore, we all have to face the reality that Skylar may have JHD."

Shards of pain burst through her.

"We won't know for sure for a while. And there are still a lot of variations to how they may present, but if Skylar does have JHD, we'll do everything we can to help her. Give her the best possible life."

*The best possible life for Skylar:*

Pulling herself up out of his lap numbly, she stood, a decision forming in her heart. "Can you show me the orchid house?"

Brian blinked, startled.

"Skylar told me about it. Could I see it?"

Brian held out his hand and led her out to the backyard. "There's some broken glass out there so be careful."

Abby felt like she'd entered the magical fairy kingdom she'd had as a child. Only this one was bigger, brighter, and infinitely more special.

"Brian, it's beautiful." Redwood slats and richly colored orchids filled her field of vision. She looked back at him. "I can't believe you built all this for me." She stepped into the gazebo and saw the broken beer bottle shards and took in the sharp scent of hops. *Oh, Brian. You're wrong. This is all my fault.* In her mind, she could only imagine what Skylar had seen last night.

"Come out of there, Abby. Let me clean it out first. I don't want you to see it like this."

Abby took his hand and followed him as he navigated her around the puddles of broken glass littered around the yard.

There were so many.

Once back inside, Abby took in a deep breath and tried to pull herself together. Already her brain was planning out the next decade of her life. “Let me know when Skylar starts therapy. I’m not sure what my schedule is going to be but I’ll take her as much as I can.” She dragged in a stuttered breath. “I haven’t read up a whole lot about the genetic testing process but I will. And I’ll start looking into specialty tutoring as well because I know that’s going to become an issue soon. When we—”

Brian’s hands closed around hers. “No, sweetheart. Not we. Me. *You* need to go to California and take one of those professor positions. You can’t stay here just for us. Especially not now.”

“What do you mean ‘especially not now?’ I’m not going anywhere. End of discussion.”

A hard light entered his eyes. “So you’ve made your decision then is that it? Can you stand there and tell me that you want to spend the rest of your life with me?”

That was easy. “Yes.”

He flinched as if he’d been struck.

“Then can you also look me in the eye and tell me that you’re in love with me and not Connor?”

This time, it was Abby who flinched.

He let out a quiet, pained sigh. “Abby, I love you so much. And a part of me wants to let you do this. Because I meant what I said—I’ve dreamed up a lifetime of ways to love you, a lifetime of ways to make you happy.” He cupped her cheek gently. “But I know you, sweetie. Even though you’ll make the best of it, deep down, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life if you don’t allow yourself to be with the one you really want.” Another sigh, but this one more resigned, resolute. But no less sad. “We both know that man isn’t me. You and I have a deep history together but Connor...he’s your future.”

That sounded like goodbye. “Brian, I don’t want to lose you,” she whispered, feeling everything she’s known for more than a third of her life seemingly dissolving right in front of her.

“Honey, you won’t ever lose me. I promise you that. Skylar and I, we will always be a part of your life, just like you’ll always be a part of ours.”

She looked back out into the backyard, at the orchid gazebo this wonderful man had built for her. To build a life with her. “But what if I stay?”

Brian shook his head softly. “Then you’d be settling for being my wife. Just so you could be Skylar’s mom.”

Her gaze shot back over to meet his. “Being with you would never be *settling*,” she argued firmly. “I love you, Brian.” But even as she said the words, she knew she could never love him the way that she loved Connor, and she knew also that what he’d said was the absolute truth—there weren’t many lengths she wouldn’t go to for Skylar. Was he right about all this? Was that why her heart and mind couldn’t agree on a decision?

“Connor told me about your son, Abby.”

A red hot blade of betrayal sliced her open in two. “He had *no right—*”

“Sweetheart, we’ve been best friends for over thirteen years. While I’d hoped it wasn’t the case, I’ve always suspected. I’ve heard your nightmares. And I’ve seen the way you clutch your womb without even realizing it...especially in the month of May.” He slid his hand over hers now and she looked down to see that she was doing it right now. “Tonight, while you were searching for Skylar, you kept saying over and over again to yourself that you couldn’t lose another one, that you wouldn’t survive if you lost another one.”

She didn’t remember any of that. But it was the cold, honest truth. The thought of losing Skylar in any way...terrified her.

“*Abby?*” a small voice called out from behind them.

They both spun around and saw Skylar, stricken, staring at Abby as if she’d never seen her before in her life.



“Sky-bug, you should be in bed. You’ve had a long night.”

Skylar ignored Brian and shuffled forward, tears running down her cheeks. “I didn’t mean it, Abby. I don’t hate you.”

Abby’s legs almost gave out. Hearing Skylar say the three pain-shredded words back at Connor’s house had blown a gaping hole in her chest. “It’s okay if you do, kiddo,” she managed, meaning it even as she said it, “I’d hate me too right about now.”

“I swear I don’t. It’s just... You’ve been the only mom I’ve had my whole life, Abby. When I heard you and Uncle Connor talking about a new family—”

“Skylar, what you heard wasn’t the full story.”

“I know that now.” Skylar nodded in that way she did sometimes whenever life forced her to grow up faster than she needed to, faster than it had any right to expect her to. “You would’ve been as great a mom to him as you’ve been to me,” she said softly, looking up with eyes brimming with more grief than Abby had ever seen in them.

And just like that, she felt the last paper-thin dam holding back the rest of her emotions crumble.

“Abby, I don’t think you should give up on those dreams you were making with Uncle Connor just for me,” whispered Skylar as she gazed down at the scar on her ring finger, rubbing her thumb over it. “I’m not stupid. I know you guys think I may have JHD. And I know it’s starting super early, so I might...” Her lower lip quivered and she dropped her eyes back to the ground, “...so I might never get to fall in love before I—”

Abby covered her hand over Skylar’s, covered the scar and everything it represented. “Don’t talk like that. Don’t even think it. You are going to have an incredible life, you hear me? Whether you have JHD or not.” Never before had she felt so helpless, wished so hard that she could make good on her words.

When Skylar’s tiny frame shook with silent sobs, Abby nearly lost it. There was no way she could do this. She

couldn't just walk away and effectively end the family they've built over the years.

"You have to do it," whispered Skylar, as if reading her mind. "Even if I don't want you to." Voice still teeming with emotion, Skylar clutched her hands to her mouth and ran to her room.

Abby tried to run after her, to tell her she wouldn't, couldn't ever leave. But Brian held her back. "Let her go. You have to let her go, Abby...just like she and I have to let you go."

Every last wound in her heart, even the ones she'd thought were long stitched up and healed, burst open at the seams in that instant. She was losing everything she'd been holding on to.

All over again.

"Don't look at me like that, sweetheart. You were never ours to keep. Not really. And I'm not anywhere near as strong as you think I am. If you don't leave now, there's every chance in the world that I'll turn weak and let you stay. Let you give up everything for me and Skylar—your career, the man you're in love with, and the family you're destined to have...with Connor"

*Connor.*

Abby felt another sharp, crushing ache in her chest then at the thought of not being with him for the rest of her life. A different pain, but just as devastating.

How in the world was she supposed to make this decision?

"Even though you've always fit in my life and my soul, I don't know that I was ever that counterpart for you. Not the way Connor is." Brian pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Skylar and I, we love you enough to let you go. But we also love you enough that we'd let you stay as well. So don't make us have to choose. Because that's your choice to make. You just have to *let* your heart choose, Abby."

"Let your heart choose the right man for you."

Abby spent a day locked away in her house thinking about... everything. Everything she felt, everything she was afraid to imagine, and everything she hadn't yet dared to say aloud.

To the one person who needed to hear it the most.

She smoothed open the note Connor had sent her all those months ago, and then picked up the short note she'd written out that morning.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up her phone and started texting, restarting over a dozen times because her fingers wouldn't stop shaking. When she was done, her thumb hovered over the send button for a long while. Afraid. Brian was right; allowing her heart to love was a choice.

She hit send.

Then waited.

And waited.

She paced her living room all evening and into the night, feeling her heart drum in her chest every time she saw a pair of headlights come up her street.

Only to have it nearly stop completely when he didn't come.

She shut her eyes and tried to stop herself from doing this. From torturing herself.

She'd made her choice. For better or worse. Risky or not.

But each passing minute on the clock was another ticking flick of doubt, another stab in her heart warning her that perhaps the one she'd chosen was going to be a stubborn noble ass and not allow her to make that choice.

The loud knocking at her door had her eyes flying open, her pulse racing with hope as she went to turn the knob.

"Are you kidding me with this text message, woman?" came the thundering, emotion-laden greeting.

Tears ran down her face and an almost hysterical silent laugh bubbled out of her.

"Do you know how long it took me to decipher the damn thing?"

“Didn’t you have your magic decoder ring?” she asked, her voice trembling worse than her limbs. How on earth she was managing to speak right now was beyond her.

Connor placed his hands on the doorframe and leaned in, piercing her with those ice blue eyes of his, both warmer and hotter than she’d ever seen them before. “Yes, but do you have any idea how many sentences can result out of those five number combinations you sent?”

“How many?”

“Too many,” he grumbled, his gaze roaming over her like he was memorizing, cherishing every bit of her. “It took me hours to decode!”

“Hours?” At this point, one-worded responses were the best she’d be able to get out.

“Well, about five minutes to translate it once I figured it out.” A loving timbre dropped his tone a vulnerable octave lower. “But it took me another two hours after that to try every other possible number-letter conversion just in case my first deciphering was simply wishful thinking on my part.”

Her heart soared.

WHEN CONNOR HAD FIRST OPENED the text message from Abby’s phone number earlier in the evening, he’d thought it was the cruelest butt-dial in the history of mankind. After what had happened back at the house the night before, after they’d finally found Skylar curled up in Abby’s guestroom, he’d been so sure...

He’d spent the entire day preparing his heart to let her go.

It was by sheer luck—and perhaps the fact that he’d been staring at the nonsensical string of numbers in her text like a lovesick pup—that he’d discovered the strategic spaces between the number sequences. Those four little spaces had sent hope rushing in his bloodstream like a drug, which he’d nearly OD’d off of when he started seeing the words unravel before his eyes.

*I'm in love with you.*

Trust Abby to put him through the emotional torture of translating a coded message using a magic decoder ring cipher.

The woman was going to drive him crazy for the rest of his life.

He couldn't wait.

Shoving his phone back in his pocket, Connor stepped through the doorway, nearly stalking Abby as he edged her back through the foyer and into the living room. “*Hours*, Abby. I spent hours driving myself crazy when I could have been here driving you crazy instead. Doing this—”

In one hard swoop, he strapped a steel arm around her waist to pull her flush against him before he caught her jaw, and molded his mouth to hers.

An eternity later, which still felt far too soon to let her go, he pulled back, breathing ragged, heart stripped bare as he whispered against her lips, “I’m in love with you too, Abby.”

Seeing her face light up with such joy, such love, Connor steeled his heart one final time and asked, “Are you sure, sweetheart? Are you sure I’m the one you want?”

“Yes. A thousand times, yes.” Her voice overflowed with emotion. “Brian’s my best friend. I love him, I have for years. But you’re the one I’m in love with, Connor. In more ways than I can describe or define, in more ways than I’ve ever even imagined, and in more ways I discover every day. I’m in love with you.”

“Thank god.” He sagged against her. “You don’t know what it cost me to ask you that.”

When he smoothed her hair back and saw not just the shining love in her eyes, but the lingering sadness still in there as well, he tried to offer the only comfort he could.

“Skylar will come around, sweetheart. If it helps, she texted to tell me that if I ever hurt you, she and Brian would come after me and ‘go postal on my ass.’”

Abby’s eyes crinkled affectionately at the corners as her soft laughter filled the room. “Sugarplums, I love that little girl so

much. I've been with her from the very beginning. I don't know how not to be a part of her life. Raising her all these years, I felt like..."

"Her mom," he said gently.

"Yes." She looked up at him as if he held all the answers. "So how do I go backward from there? How do I become just her friend Abby after all that?"

Connor studied her expression and ventured cautiously, "You could meet her in the middle and be her favorite aunt."

Abby chuckled. "Skylar's too old to call me that. We stopped having her call me Aunty Abby when she was three."

"Well, what if we have her call you *Aunt* Abby, instead?"

She froze on a silent gasp and he saw his words finally filtering through. She stepped back and searched his gaze, as if she were looking for another hidden message there.

"You're never going to need another decoder ring to know how I feel, sweetheart. I meant it exactly as I said it."

"We can't—" She bit her lip. "Yet. We can't yet, Connor, it's too soon."

"I know it is," he replied pulling her into his arms. "So I'll wait. I've been waiting my whole life to find you, Abby. And now that I have, I'm not going anywhere. You tell me when you're ready to be my wife, when you're ready to be Skylar's aunt."

"And I'll have a ring on your finger so fast it'll make your head spin."



## CHAPTER TEN

### *Ten Months Later*

“YOU ABOUT READY, Sky-bug? If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late for the ceremony.”

The faint, dull stab Brian felt in his gut when he said the word no longer wrenched at his insides as it had when he’d first learned that Abby and Connor were engaged.

But it still hurt.

Falling out of love always does, he imagined.

Skylar shuffled out of her bedroom looking equally torn about the day ahead. “How long is the drive up to Lake Powell?”

“About five hours. So you can bring your video games but you’re leaving it in the car when we get there, you hear me? This is a big day for Connor and Abby.”

A faint smile tilted her lips just a bit at the mention of Abby’s name, before a cloud of sadness passed over her expression again. “She’s never going to sleep over here again is she?” It was more a resigned statement than a question.

He hugged her close. “No, probably not, sweetie. But I’m sure you’re more than welcome to have a sleepover at your uncle’s McMansion. You’d have your pick of rooms.”

She sighed. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

No, it wouldn’t.

She gave him a look about ten years too old for her face. “Besides, part of the fun was watching Abby bash you in the face with pillows in the morning.” With a resolute shake of her head, she gathered her things and headed to the closet to get a jacket. “So if you’re not going to sleep over, neither am I.”



The kid was just too lovable for words some times.

“Why don’t we play it by ear then? I’m sure Connor wouldn’t mind if I crashed on his couch every once in a while. So maybe you could keep Abby company while your uncle and I watch a game or something. I wouldn’t want Abby to feel like the third wheel after all.”

Though she wasn’t facing him, he could hear the glimmer of joy in her voice even as she shrugged, “Sure, I mean, if you’re already going to be there and stuff.”

A bolt of guilt hit him then when he realized how long it’d been since they’d really spent time with Abby. With Abby’s new job and Skylar’s therapy, not to mention the wedding planning, they’d hardly seen each other the past few months. But he wondered now if it was more than that.

“Hon, I know we haven’t really talked about it much but I really am okay with how everything ended up. I’m happy for them, truly. Abby and I are fine. You shouldn’t feel like you can’t hang out with her or—”

“I know dad,” she interrupted quietly. “I’m happy for her too. Really. But I can’t help it that I’m still a little sad. So that’s why I’ve been avoiding her. Because I know she’ll be able to tell and I don’t want her to feel bad. Especially not before her big day.”

He exhaled heavily. “You are one amazing kid, you know that?” He wrapped her up in a big hug. “You know what I think? I think after we see them exchange vows, we’ll have the closure we’re both needing. And we’ll be able to let go of that tiny bit of sadness we can’t seem to shake.”

She looked up at him with an adorable middle school furrow. “What do you mean by closure?”

“It’s a chance for our hearts to say a proper goodbye.” He closed his eyes on the hollow ache in his heart. “Before we move on.”

She nodded solemnly. “Closure,” she agreed softly.

A sharp knocking at the door had him checking the time. Who would be coming by this early in the morning?

“Delivery!” called out a bright young voice from the porch.

Brian opened the door and immediately had two garment bags plopped into his arms. “Mr. Sullivan, these are for you. I just need your signature here.” A digital pen and tablet were thrust in his face by a very determined looking high school kid.

“I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding—”

“My instructions were very clear, sir. I was told to make sure you didn’t refuse the delivery and to tell you to open it ASAP. Now if I could just get that signature...”

First his students and now the delivery boy. This next generation of business sharks in training scared him a bit at times. He quickly signed for the delivery and brought the bags into the house.

“What are those?” asked Skylar curiously.

“No idea.” He unzipped the smaller one first, and uncovered a shimmery, lilac covered dress. Pulling it out, he grinned when Skylar began gushing over it. “I think this is for you, cutie.”

“Open the other one, too! I bet that one’s for you.” Skylar grabbed the dress and held it up to the light, swishing the shimmering fabric to and fro. “It’s so pretty! Who do you think sent it?”

He unzipped the other garment bag and sure enough, saw a tuxedo in there awaiting him, along with a note.

*Brian,*

*If you’re not up there with Abby and Connor during the ceremony, you’re going to regret it for the rest of your life. Plus, c’mon let’s face it, there’s a good chance I’ll mess things up and lose the rings or something before the vows if you don’t take over. And God knows lilac isn’t my color—clearly, Abby was thinking about someone else when she picked the maid of honor dress. Which is why I special ordered a second one in a smaller size just in case. Frankly, I’m tired of doing your jobs for you two so get dressed and get your asses down here!*

—Victoria (aka the stand-in best woman and mistress of honor)

Despite the weight of what the note was asking of him, Brian found himself chuckling. He was well aware that Victoria had appointed herself as both best man to Connor and maid of honor to Abby months ago—for the sole purpose of throwing both the bachelor and bachelorette parties, it'd seemed—back when it had been too early, too raw for Brian and Skylar to take on the roles.

But it appeared she'd had an ulterior motive all along.

Who would've thought?

Seeing an added note at the bottom of the page in a different handwriting, he chuckled again.

*P.S. Brian, this is your mother. I did not spend an evening getting lost in the abyss that is your closet and the black hole that is my granddaughter's closet (I see where she gets it) for nothing. The tuxedo and dress should fit you two perfectly so no excuses. I'll see you in a few hours.*

Wow, for a woman without any years of practice, she did the motherly guilt bit just fine.

"I thought my closet looked cleaner!" exclaimed Skylar, peeking at the note over his shoulder. "Remember? It was one of the nights you had a game and Grandma really wanted to come over and make dinner." She cringed at the memory.

Ah yes, the burnt casserole night. The smell of smoky asparagus had hung on the walls for two days. "Yes, it appears your grandmother has crossed over to the dark side and joined forces with your uncle's friend on this one." He studied his daughter carefully. "So what do you think, munchkin? It's your call. You and I are a team, always will be, so whatever you decide will be my decision too."

Skylar took a deep breath and pivoted, walking slowly back to her room. "I need a little time to think about it."

Brian called out gently, "Just remember, make this decision for you. And maybe for your uncle and soon-to-be aunt. But not for me, you hear?"

Nodding, she swiped a photo from the hallway bookshelf and disappeared behind her bedroom door.

ABBY LOOKED OUT across the rows of people seated on the sand. She'd only been working as a research associate for a few months now but she absolutely loved it, and she'd made fast friends with two similar specialists who were in attendance at the wedding today. She scanned every last seat, smiling briefly at the few faces who were turned her way. Then she searched the rest of the beach as well, but she couldn't find them.

The two faces she'd been looking for all morning.

Willing herself not to cry before the ceremony even started, she took in a deep breath and hooked her arm around her father's as they waited for the processional music to start.

He patted her hand gently. "Maybe they had some car trouble, honey."

Chuckling, she leaned her head on his shoulder, wishing it were that simple.

"It's okay. I'm going to wear them down eventua—" Abby's words stuttered in her chest, directly over her heart as she saw Connor step up to his spot in front of the minister. He turned to her and lit up the whole beach with his smile.

Every last person in the audience instantly turned in their chairs, not needing the pre-recording of *Canon in D* to signal her arrival.

Because Connor's look said it all.

As the crowd stood and the music started, Abby couldn't remember the aisle being quite so long, the beat of the music being quite so drawn out.

"Slow down, pumpkin," chuckled her father and she flushed, realizing she was walking nearly a step in front of him.

She looked up and saw Connor grinning at her as well, pleased as sin.

So she slowed down.

Just to show him she could. Sort of.

And that made him grin even wider.

It felt like a lifetime had passed before she was finally within arm's reach of her husband-to-be...and that's when Victoria stepped between them.

"Wait, stop the wedding."

Abby felt her jaw go slack, her shock mirrored in Connor's face.

Victoria looked at them both and rolled her eyes. "Not for me." She nodded over toward the parking lot. "Your real wedding party just arrived."

Abby spun around and saw Brian and Skylar running across the sand, Skylar waving her arms like she was trying to land a plane and Brian following close behind trying not to swallow any of the sand she was kicking up in her spastic running.

Tossing all wedding etiquette out the window, Abby and her groom ran down the aisle to meet their best man and maid of honor halfway.

"Sorry we're late," apologized Brian sheepishly. "Car trouble."

"And guess what, Abby? *Your SUV* was the one that got us here!" squealed Skylar, jingling their set of her spare keys triumphantly.

Half the crowd laughed out loud at that.

Abby's half, of course.

"Dad drove like a speed demon the whole way here. It was awesome!"

Yes, that would impress a middle schooler.

And a very emotional bride.

"You did?" Abby asked, feeling her heart melt. Brian never did anything so reckless.

"I couldn't miss being in my best friend's wedding." He glanced over at Connor with a grin. "Oh right, or my

brother's."

Connor chortled and they exchanged one of those super emotional double-thump guy hugs. "Glad you could make it, man. It wouldn't have been the same without you."

Victoria cleared her throat loudly. "Yes, yes. And the whole crowd sighed. We've got a wedding to carry out, people!" She quickly directed the guys back up to the front and ushered Abby and her father back up the beach, while she stayed behind and gave Skylar instructions about the procession.

As they waited once again for the soft music of Pachelbel to play over the speakers, Abby hooked her arm back through her father's and looked down the way at the two other most important men in her life. Her soul mate and her kindred spirit...her groom and her best friend.

Then out of the corner of her eye, she saw a swirling bundle of lilac come rushing toward her.

With an annoyed Victoria chasing after her.

"Abby," Skylar smiled through her huffs and puffs, "You know that photo of me at my mom and dad's wedding? The one I love so much?"

Abby nodded, smiling as she always did when she thought of that photo sitting in its place of honor on Brian and Skylar's shelf of treasured memories amongst other photos of Beth, a few family trips, and a dozen or so photos of Skylar and Becky over the years.

"I'm going to put the photo from this wedding right next to that one," she whispered, hugging Abby fiercely. "I love you so much. And I'm so happy that I get to call you Aunt Abby from now on."

A flood of fresh tears ran down Abby's face and her heart swelled to a thousand times over capacity. That feeling Brian often referenced of things just clicking into place? She felt it now in an almost overwhelming tidal wave of emotion.

After thirteen long years, she now had a true and permanent place in this amazing little girl's life that just...fit.

“I love you too, kiddo—your entire life, every day more than the last.”





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *About an hour after that...*

CONNOR WATCHED Brian and Victoria talk, civilly, and actually *laugh* together as they made their way over to the reception site.

So miracles *do* happen.

Who would've thought? Victoria, the woman he would've voted least likely to become a romantic, the woman who used to think his one-month rule was *generous*, was now a diehard convert. Seeing her light up when her date for the evening joined her and Brian over at the refreshment table, Connor smiled.

Jay was the last person he would've paired Victoria with, but quite frankly, those two were a match made in heaven.

After being given a slight run for her money during his mom's divorce proceedings—thanks to all the investigative info Jay had managed to dig up for Marcus—Victoria had sought Jay out with the express purpose of stealing him over to her firm, offering nearly double his current investigator salary. He'd played hardball of course and had her wine and dine him for three nights in a row. On the day following, he'd told her he had no intention of leaving his firm but he would be at her house that night at seven sharp to pick her up for their fourth date.

Connor was glad to see his two friends so happy.

“If she weren't the official guardian angel/doberman of this wedding, I might take offense to you looking at another woman right now.”

Connor smiled when he felt his wife's arms snake around his waist.

*His wife.* He'd never get tired of that. Gathering her in his arms, he simply stared at her, loving her so much he couldn't speak for a moment.

"Okay, never mind," she whispered breathlessly, in that sweet and sexy as sin voice of hers. "You can stare at however many women you want as long as you save that look right there just for me."

"You promise you'll only ever sound like that around me and you've got yourself a deal, honey."

She smiled. "Do you want to head to our room for a bit to 'seal' this deal?"

Who needed air quotes with a sex kitten purr like that?

Groaning, he pulled her in close and growled in her ear, "Behave, woman. These tuxedo pants don't exactly have a whole lot of give."

"I know," she said appreciatively, brushing up against him in that complete feline, utterly feminine way that always drove him nuts.

His fingers flexed involuntarily into her lush hips. "Might I remind you that waiting until tonight was *your* bright idea." He nipped at her earlobe gruffly. Whoever first suggested the insane idea of engaged couples taking a break from sex before their wedding ceremony was a masochist.

"You're right," she sighed, looking not in the least bit contrite. "But I really do need to head up to our room. According to the doberman, I only have about thirty minutes for my wardrobe change before the reception."

That was news to him. "You have another dress for the reception? I didn't know that."

"It'll be a quick change. Can you come help me?"

"Sure."

Up in their honeymoon suite, Connor sank back onto the couch and kicked his legs up for a bit. Thirty minutes, huh? He might be able to sneak in a quick nap.

Or a quick something else.

God knows he needed it.

Since his bride had insisted on *a whole month* of celibacy before the wedding, he was riding a fine edge. Hell, a strong enough breeze off Lake Powell was probably all it'd take to get him going right about now. And the seductive imp had darn well guaranteed he'd be this strung out too, what with the way she'd basically tortured him daily for the past few weeks—hang-drying more new pairs of barely-qualified-to-be panties in their bathroom, and other equally fiendish things like that.

“Hey Connor? Can you help me with this latch?”

“Sure—” *Holy. Shit.* With the now rapidly diminishing blood supply to his brain, he managed to rasp out quickly, “I thought you needed to change your dress.” She hadn't mentioned anything about lingerie.

Sexy as hell lingerie.

Drive him insane lingerie.

“No, not my dress, just my underwear.” She smiled. “So can you help me with this latch down here?”

Evil, evil, evil.

Christ, he loved her.

He made quick work of the little latch that really didn't seem like she needed all that much help with.

Not that he was complaining.

“Thank you,” she said as she slid her arms around him and pulled him down for a kiss.

He groaned low and loud, dragged himself to the other side of the couch to stop himself from jumping her right then and there. “You can't kiss me like that, Abby. Not right now. I'm on a hair trigger here.”

“But we have a whole twenty minutes to spare now that you've taken care of my wardrobe needs so quickly,” she argued back in a bedroom soft voice as she traced her hands slowly down her midriff. Lower. And then lower.

Oh, good lord. “Sweetheart, you said you wanted to wait till our wedding night.” He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Maybe if he held it long enough, the rest of him would even out his color so he could be their ‘something blue.’

“No,” she said simply as she took advantage of his sight loss and toppled him back down onto the couch. “I just said our wedding.” She straddled his legs. “Well, it’s our wedding. And I think I’m in the mood for a little wild and fast.”

“At this rate, you’ll have to be the ‘wild’ then because sweetheart, I’m definitely going to be the ‘fast.’”

His eyes flew open in surprise, and then slammed shut again at the feel of her hand curving around him, torturing him through his tuxedo slacks. “Christ. Abby, honey you can’t...” A shudder racked him and he grabbed her hand. His chest rose and fell unevenly. “I can’t take much more of that.”

“What can’t you take? Just my hands?”

He swallowed thickly and watched, practically catatonic as her fingers traced the edges of her bra, before drifting down her stomach to the edges of her panties.

“Or are you saying I can’t put my mouth on you either, Connor?” Her lower lip jutted out in the most devastatingly seductive pout. “Because that’s what I’ve been fantasizing about for the past few weeks.”

There went her clasp of her bra.

His sanity seemed to disappear with it.

She stretched back up to her full height then, hypnotically slow, arching against—but not quite touching—his torso with her own. So. Damn. Sexy.

He sank back against the couch, resolve obliterated. “Dress back on, honey. Can’t take much more.” Proper grammar was now officially beyond his scope.

His eyes squeezed shut to keep the fantasies from coming alive right in arm’s reach. The sound of fabric sliding down silky smooth skin made him even harder. Hotter. “Abby,” he warned roughly.

More silky rustling.

And a warm bra landed on his lap.

A pair of miniscule panties followed soon after.

Connor's hands immediately shot to her hips when she settled atop his lap. He tried not to choke on his own tongue as he forced himself to open his eyes...and not look down.

Keeping his tormented gaze above the utterly naked temptations pressed against him, he searched her face.

And saw pure, undiluted desire.

His body tightened as if he'd been whipped.

Her lips went to the clenched cord of his neck. "This," she whispered hoarsely. "Being completely naked while you're fully clothed..." She shuddered, her husky voice trembling as she brushed her bare thighs further up along his clothing-covered ones.

"We'd better take these off, Connor. I'm afraid I'm a little... wet."

All the air was knocked right out of his lungs. But still, he somehow managed to force out the noble words one more time: "Are you sure, honey? I want tonight to be special for you."

She shut him up with a whole body caress that lanced over every nerve in his body. "Connor, tonight is going to be special no matter what. That has nothing to do with this. With us. I want you. In me." Her stormy eyes trapped his. "Now."

Somehow, his legs found the strength to stand. With Abby strapped to him, naked and scoring his neck with her teeth, Connor hotfooted it across the seemingly football field length suite to the king size bed. By the time he reached it, nearly all of his clothes had disappeared.

Ditto on his control.

Of course, most of the credit had to go to the not-so-nice-anymore bride in his arms, who'd been impressively creative at ridding him of both.

When he flung her onto the bed, all that was left on him was his boxer briefs. And the way she was eyeing it, he knew it wouldn't be on him for long. "Last chance," he managed

hoarsely. He was so turned on, if she changed her mind, there was a very real chance he'd bawl like a baby. "Sweetheart, I have to be sure you won't regret this."

A small foil packet seemed to magically materialize in her hands. "I'm sure," she said softly before tearing the packet open with her teeth.

Off flew his boxer briefs.

Tumbling into bed with her, he tried damned hard to slow things down but it was a losing battle. His skin was on fire and his lungs refused to cooperate as he coaxed her lips open with a barely controlled kiss while he worked to get his rioting body under control.

Clearly, Abby was not going to be an ally in his quest for control. Her curious hands wreaked havoc on his body as she slipped the condom on with what felt like far more than ten fingers.

Just the feel of her against him sent a wildfire flaring through his veins. Before he knew it, her hips were hitched against his. All it took was one scorching shift and slide and he was experiencing mind-blowing pleasure in maddeningly hot inches.

A low growl vibrated in his chest at the snug, perfect fit. Nothing had ever felt this good before. Body strung on a wire, breathing shattered, he drew back slowly and kept his eyes on hers this time as he slid into her again. As deep as he could go. His eyes slammed shut. Hands fisted in the sheets, he buried his lips against her neck and began a cautious rhythm that was a test of sheer discipline, every stroke an intense fire incinerating him alive. A roar of excitement thundered in his veins as he strained to focus solely on her pleasure instead of his own.

But then she began tensing and rippling around him, urging him to go wild. And he was lost. Unable to stop himself, he thrust forward so hard she let out an untamed, wanton cry that made him almost dizzy with need. His mission to give her sweet and gentle was quickly becoming more impossible by the second. Teeth clenched, he pulled back and gripped her waist to keep from taking her how he wanted...how she was

begging him to with those faint, intoxicated whispers. Slanting his mouth over hers in a smoldering kiss, he drank in her whimpers, each one rasping erotically over his senses and lashing at his control. He was already so close to the edge, he didn't trust himself to stay inside her a second longer.

"Where are you going?" she gasped, sinking her nails into his biceps in disbelief when he managed the insane feat of pulling back completely.

She stared up at him and a lust-filled haze clouded his judgment at the sight she made—dewy flesh, feline grace, and flushed desire. He skimmed his hands down her body, following with lips, teeth, and tongue to try and give her even a fraction of the all-consuming pleasure he was feeling. "I'm so close, Abby. Too close. Just let me..." He sucked in a harsh breath when her hand mercilessly slid between them, inciting him to continue what he'd started.

Helpless, he rocked against her and her eyes blazed in triumph.

"Oh god. Stop," he hissed, grabbing her wrist to prevent her from torturing him more. Abruptly, he sat up in the middle of the bed and slid down her body, flexing his fingers into her thighs as he whispered against her belly, "Let me take care of you first—"

"Like hell."

In a flash, she pushed him to sit upright and moved to straddle him. A heartbeat later, her expression turned to pure bliss as she took him in one devastating stroke straight to the hilt.

With a muffled shout, he tugged her back up, held her suspended for one agonizing second before stealing a hard, feral kiss and driving up into her again. Sexy moans spilled out of her as she clamped her legs around his waist and began riding them both to the brink of sanity. She arched her back and he groaned. When he dipped his head down to draw one tantalizing peak into his mouth, she gasped, the new angle of his hips causing her muscles to pulse, wild and erratic around his length. His arms banded around her in a full body shackle, pulling her closer, sliding him deeper, seizing what was left of

his control and shoving him over the edge. Powerless to stop now, he surged into her one final time, his entire body cording violently as his release pounded through him in an endless tide of white-hot pleasure.

Long moments later, when the riptide finally settled, he was left floating, barely coherent as he laid her back on the bed and lifted his weight off of her. Every sensationally sex-drained muscle in his sated body protested the separation, her wet heat now an irreversible necessity that made the air hitting his skin feel icy cold in contrast.

Sapped of strength, the only thing keeping him from falling into an unconscious slumber was the knowledge that she hadn't come. He cradled her face in his hands. "I'm such a jackass," he rasped when his voice finally returned, his words thick, his throat raw. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart." He dropped his forehead to her chest in apology.

"Don't be." She gave him a tender smile and sifted her hands through his hair, steadying her splintered breathing even as her voice, her whole body continued to vibrate with need. "I told you I wanted my wild and fast."

Trailing kisses along her skin, he felt the heady shockwaves of heat still rippling through her, holding her hostage, teetering on the edge. Sizzling jolts and trembling whimpers she couldn't contain. Every kiss, every touch was bringing her that much closer to her own release.

But not close enough.

He groaned when he saw the unquenched, impossibly sexy hunger burning in her eyes.

His new blushing bride was—as always—a sex goddess.

And not surprisingly, he was ready for her again.

Capturing her mouth in a slow, reverent kiss, he gently settled her back against the pillows. The way she was smoothing her hands across the muscles of his back, he knew she was under the severely misguided impression that he meant to roll over and head back down to the reception.

Almost chuckling at that crazy notion, he dropped a soft kiss on her lips and watched with avid focus as her sweet,



understanding expression spiraled from surprise to unabashed lust when he shifted his hips against hers. Just enough to show her how ready he was again.

Grinning, he hooked his forearms under her knees.

“What are you doing? We need to head back to the reception already.”

“No can do. You got your chance to be wild. So now it’s my turn.” He bent down and slid his tongue over her hot flesh. “And honey, you better believe that after what you put me through the last few weeks, ‘fast’ is nowhere on the menu for you.”

## EPILOGUE

“HEY, YOU’RE Skylar, right?”

Skylar looked up at the pretty dark haired woman in the chef’s outfit. “Hi, yeah. Are you a friend of Abby’s?”

“A friend of Connor’s actually.”

Skylar did a double take.

The woman chuckled. “I must say, that’s been a common reaction today. I take it your uncle doesn’t have a lot of female friends?”

“Not so much. At least not before he met Abby.”

“Ah, makes sense.” She grinned. “I’m Tessa, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you. I like your hair.”

Tessa tugged on the streaked hot pink tips. “Thanks. It’s a sister thing. It’ll wash out in a few days and I won’t look quite so crazy.” She started pushing forward a huge rolling tray of fruits and tarts and miniature cakes. “Hey, if you’re not too busy, I’d love some help with these desserts.”

“Really? Okay!” Skylar hopped up and followed her to the buffet line. “So did you make all this stuff by yourself?”

“All the desserts, yes. As for everything else, my catering partner and I split the cooking duties.” Tessa motioned for Skylar to line up the tarts on the serving table. “Do you like cooking?”

“I love it. Abby and I cook all the time. Nothing this fancy though. But we make lots of cookies and brownies and other stuff.”

“Perfect,” said Tessa with a smile. “Then I’m going to ask you to be my sous chef for today. You up for it?”

“Sure, what do I have to do?”

“I’m actually all done with the buffet line but I wanted to do a little something extra for Connor and Abby. Want to help me turn these plain old fruits into some real works of art?” Tessa

led them over to a wide open table off to the side of the buffet line and pulled out a bunch of different knives, from little itty-bitty ones to ones that looked like they belonged on a slasher movie.

Skylar eyed the knives warily. “Um...”

“You can just watch if you want but it’s actually pretty fun to see all these animals and flowers come to life in the fruit. Plus, I figure with two of us working, we’d be able to make something really pretty.”

Taking a deep breath, Skylar nodded. “Abby would really love that. Okay, let’s do it. But go slow...I’m not that great with knives.”

“Neither was I. Just takes practice.” Tessa pulled out a bright green u-shaped contraption that sort of looked like a football mouth guard. “Here, just in case. These will keep your fingers safe.”

Skylar sighed with relief. “Okay, now I’m really ready. What are we going to do first?”

“A melon swan, a couple of pretty birds out of apples, some assorted fruit flowers flowing out of a pineapple basket, and two gigantic roses out of watermelon halves if we have time.” She showed Skylar a few photos of what they’d look like when they were through.”

“Oh wow, cool!”

*“What the—”*

Brian bolted up from his seat and stalked across the tented reception area over to the tables next to the buffet line where his daughter was currently wielding a knife as long as her forearm to core a pineapple.

“Skylar, what do you think you’re doing?”

Giggling happily, Skylar waved at him. With the knife. “Hey dad, look what we’re making!”

Brian couldn’t see anything past her sawing the huge blade back and forth mere millimeters from her fingers. “Skylar,

why don't you put that thing down. Who gave it to you anyway?"

"Tessa did."

"Who's Tessa?"

"That's me," called out a cheerful voice from behind him. "Your daughter's awesome by the way. She helped with all the wings on the apple doves and did a pretty amazing job helping me shape the melon swan. We were thinking of tackling a watermelon rose next. Want to help? I'll even let you use the big cleaver."

Was the woman high? "Skylar, I think Becky and her folks are back from taking pictures. Why don't you go find her and bring her over here to show her...all of this."

That's when he finally did notice all the intricate fruit decorations spread across the silver tray on the table before him. They were pretty incredible.

"Oh! Good idea!" Skylar looked over at the strange woman. "Tessa, if Becky wants to, can she help with the watermelon rose too?"

"Of course, the more the merrier. You can use the sink in the kitchen to wash up."

Brian snagged the woman by the elbow and walked her over to a quieter part of the tent. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Tessa."

"What?" Definitely high.

"What the hell were you thinking, *Tessa*.' If you're going to yell at me, we may as well be on a first name basis." She shrugged. "To answer your question, I was thinking it'd be fun for your daughter to help make some of these fruit decorations. And it was."

"So you think because it's fun, it's okay to arm random children with knives without at least asking their parents first?"

"I didn't arm her, I taught her how to use a cooking utensil. And I didn't ask you because I knew you'd say no."

He'd never lost his temper so irretrievably before.

"Let me get this straight. You thought this was dangerous enough that I would say no, and you just plain did it anyway?"

"No. I think it's perfectly safe with the right training and supervision. I knew you would say no to it regardless."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Brian—"

"And how in the world do you know my name?"

"We talked on the phone once a long time ago."

Suddenly, he remembered her voice. And her unforgettable weirdness. "You were the one with Connor's phone, the one who likes hanging up on people to go eat cake."

"Actually, I was serving cake that day but...huh, you know what, that *does* sound like something I would do," she beamed, visibly pleased.

Weirder and weirder.

"Look, just because you know my brother, doesn't mean you know me. Don't make baseless assumptions about me."

"Oh, they weren't baseless."

And then the woman up and simply walked away.

Of all the aggravating... He stomped after her. "Explain." He didn't trust himself with longer sentences at this point.

"I was at the hospital that day Skylar cut her finger off."

She was?

"That's why I knew you'd think this was too dangerous."

He took in a long, slow breath. "So you knew Skylar cut her finger off, and your brilliant idea was to then give her a gigantic knife to play with?"

"Yes. Skylar clearly developed a fear of knives after that accident. I saw the way she looked at them. So I was trying to help her."

"What are you a part-time shrink as well?"

“Nope. I just know that she’s better off without harboring an unnecessary fear.”

“You don’t know anything about her. You may have been at the hospital, but you don’t know a damn thing about what she’s gone through. What she’s going through.”

Tessa finally stopped working then. She came toe to toe with him and said, “Maybe not all of it, but I know some. I do a lot of volunteer work with Huntington’s patients. That’s how I met Connor, in fact. I’ve been working with him on a lot of grant projects for new clinical trials and a few of his pro bono cases that involve alternative healing practices for Huntington’s patients.”

Brian just stood there and stared. Connor never said he was working on anything like that.

“Plus,” her voice crackled with pain, “my sister died of Juvenile Huntington’s. She had more than enough things to be afraid of in her life. If I’d been able to help her overcome even one more of her fears before she died, I would’ve done it in a heartbeat.” She flashed him a stubborn look. “I realize that Skylar doesn’t know if she has JHD yet but I can guarantee you she’s scared. So what’s the harm in my helping her get rid of one of her other, smaller fears?”

Well hell, when she put it like that.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” Brian said softly.

“I’m sorry about your wife,” she replied, just as softly.

Mulishly, he maintained, “I still think you were wrong about giving her a knife.”

She burst out laughing then. A musical, effervescent laugh full of life and hope and things he couldn’t remember, even.

How the hell was she still able to laugh like that?

“I think I like you, Brian. I think I like you a lot, actually.” Still chuckling to herself, she walked back to the kitchen, her long, dark, pink-tipped ponytail swishing behind her like a metronome.

What a strange woman.

Never had he met anyone so frighteningly good at pushing his buttons.

And damn, if she didn't have the cutest smile too...

*~ The End ~*

**Note from the Author:**

*Fear not dear readers, Brian **will** be getting his HEA.  
If you fell for him with Abby, just wait till you see him with  
Tessa...*

*Stay tuned for:*

**FINDING THE RIGHT GIRL**

*(A Nice GUY to Love Spin-Off Novel)*

*Brian & Tessa's Story*

*COMING OCTOBER 2013*



—EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK—



***PLAYING WITH HER HEART***

by

*New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author*  
Lauren Blakely

Coming August 20, 2013

**BOOK DESCRIPTION**

When you're acting the role of a lifetime, how can you know if love is real—or all just a part of the show?

Twenty-three year old rising theatre star Jill McCormick has built a life out of pretending. Pretending she's happy, pretending her long-distance crushes add up to something real, pretending she's not haunted by the dark secret that shattered her world six years ago. Cast in her first Broadway show, she desperately needs to keep her façade intact, but that's before she comes face to face with her devastating new boss...

Hot-shot director Davis Milo knows the first rule of directing: never fall for your leading lady. Captivated by Jill's raw talent, he fights his feelings, but watching Jill on-stage with another man is more than his jealous streak can take. Keeping things professional isn't an option. He wants all of her.

Soon the ingénue and her director are staying late in the empty theatre, their private rehearsals spiraling into new, forbidden territory. Caught up between fiction and reality, Jill struggles to find the truth in all their staged kisses. But how can she be sure that what she feels is real, and not a part of the play? And when two people spend their lives pretending, what happens after the final curtain falls?

**EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT**

He glances down at the black pumps. “Nice shoes.”

As I follow his eyes, I realize my hand is on his shirt, my fingers fisted around the cloth, clutching it. I should let go. But I don't. Because I can't help but notice he has that clean and freshly showered smell that makes any woman want to lean in and lick a guy's neck.

Close her eyes. Inhale, and trail a tongue all the way to his earlobe, enjoying the sound of a low groan.

“Nice shirt,” I say softly, running my index finger across one smooth button. Then I look up to find him staring down at me. His dark blue eyes aren’t cold anymore. They’re not keeping me at bay. Instead, they’re heated, searching mine.

It’s hypnotic the way he looks at me. Completely hypnotic, as the room goes quiet, the air between us charged.

I press my teeth against my lips, and I think, but I’m not entirely sure, because thought has vanished, that I nod briefly, almost as if I’m giving him permission. Then he bends towards me, and my breath catches. Before I even process rationally what’s happening, his lips are on mine, and my pulse is racing. It’s a barely there kiss, just him brushing his soft lips against mine, but I want more. So I pull him closer and deepen the kiss. He groans, and then suddenly his hands are in my hair, and he’s twining his fingers through my long, blond strands, and tugging me close. I thought I was leading this kiss, but I’m not anymore, because he’s claiming me, tracing his tongue across my top lip, then nipping at the bottom lip, then kissing me so deeply and with so much heat that I shudder. That only makes him kiss me harder, and everything else falls away because this is a kiss I can feel in every single cell in my body. Deep, and fevered and possessive.

It makes me want things I’m not supposed to have.

It makes me want him.

My heart pounds wildly as he presses closer, so dangerously near to me that I’m longing for him to slam me against his body. Touch me all over. His lips own me, his hands want to know me, and I swear I might combust from this kind of electric contact.

He breaks the kiss and I’m honestly not sure where I am anymore. Or who I am. I look at him, at Davis, but everything is so hazy right now, that I don’t know what to say. I don’t think he does either, because he doesn’t speak for a moment. He exhales deeply, collecting himself. As if he doesn’t know how the kiss transpired either.

“I’m sorry,” he says, then steps back, pushing his hand roughly through his hair. He looks away from me, staring at some distant point on the wall. “That was a mistake,” he says quietly.

My mouth is open in shock. A mistake? That was a kiss that begged to become so much more.

But I manage to hide my embarrassment at having kissed my first Broadway director by doing what he hired me to do. Act. “Yes. A mistake,” I say confidently.

“It won’t happen again,” he adds, now turning his gaze back to me, his eyes cold once more. Stripped of all that longing from seconds ago.

“Of course not. Thank you for the script. I’ll see you when rehearsal starts.”

“Yes.” He returns to his desk and I grab my coat, my head cloudy even as my heart beats fast, my body still racing, still wanting.

Wanting more.

*[END OF EXCERPT]*

—EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK—

***RUSH (Phoenix Rising)***

by

USA TODAY Bestselling Author JOAN SWAN

Coming August 27, 2013

**BOOK DESCRIPTION**

*“Gutsy, jawdropping style!” Larissa Ione*

*“Joan Swan writes riveting twists and turns like no one else!” New York Times bestselling author Stephanie Tyler*

Jessica Fury, Washington lobbyist, has money, connections, and her own firm. But five years ago she had something better: happiness. Her firefighter husband, Quaid, was handsome, courageous, and crazy about her. Then one day he walked into a chemical inferno and never walked out. Jessica has been through hell to get back on her feet. And then a rumor surfaces that could bring a miracle or shatter her world again.

Q has been a prisoner forever. He’s honed his mind and body into weapons. He’s developed abilities no one else understands. But he’s still at the mercy of a cabal of ruthless men, who blank his memory, test him like a lab rat, and tell him lies. Although his past has been erased and his future looks grim, instinct tells him he has a woman to live for. What his mind can’t remember, his body can’t forget...

The heat is on.

**EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT**

Jessica focused on the man’s eyes once more, and the breath left her lungs in a quiet swoosh. How many times had she dreamed of looking into her husband’s eyes again? Millions. It had to have been millions.

This isn’t reality. You’re not really here. This man’s eyes look like Quaid’s because you want them to look like Quaid’s.

And she did. God help her, she did. She so badly wanted these eyes to be Quaid’s she would have sold her soul to the Devil. Which was exactly why she’d told Teague and Keira she couldn’t do this.

“Shit ...” Her voice shook as her logical mind tried to make sense of what she saw even if her heart was ready to leap at the one-in-a-billion chance.

Then he smiled. Or tried to around the cuts. His lips curved and his deep brown eyes glinted beneath those heavy lashes ... and ... Jesus, Mary and Joseph ... that was her Quaid in those grinning eyes.

“Haven’t ...” He licked dry lips. “Seen you in so long.” His voice was rusty, not altogether different, but not familiar either.

He rolled toward her, and the chain above his head clanked. She lunged to grab the metal and keep it quiet. The move pressed her body against his and an instant, deep hit of tingling awareness penetrated everywhere they touched. His free arm curved around her hips as he made a sultry hum that sent fireworks through her body. He turned and pulled her into him until her breasts were snug against his chest. He kept his head tilted back, his eyes on her face with an expression of awe

and pleasure and affection. But he was obviously a little gone, because he showed no fear, as if her presence didn't pose a threat to them both.

"You have to be quiet." Her breaths came quickly—because of the fear, she told herself, not the way her body lit up being pressed against him.

"I miss seeing you." His hot gaze slid down her throat, lower to her chest and rested on her breasts. She knew that look. The hungry one. The one that made her skin tighten and her nipples harden. Like now. "Why were you gone so long?"

Confusion. Desperation. Suggestion. That's what this was about. Because if this was truly Quaid, those comments didn't make sense.

"Look at me." She lifted his chin. When those brown eyes were on hers again, she quickly just pushed out the words before she couldn't. "Who am I?"

His smile grew wider. His lids grew heavier. The man was half drugged out of his mind. This was a ridiculous effort. Then his arm tightened around her, drawing her close. "Woman of my dreams."

She frowned. This was crazy. She was starting to believe she'd gone crazy. Or she was about to. Those eyes had to be a fantasy. A trick of the mind. Something she saw because she so desperately wanted Quaid. Or because she so desperately didn't want this to be just another dream where she would wake up to the stone-cold reality that her husband was in the grave and she'd never touch him again.

"Who's with you?"

His whisper brought her gaze up from full lips surrounded by several days of stubble to find his eyes filled with a liquid heat that made her body ache in ways she'd forgotten.

"No one." Which reminded her of what a mess she was in. "It's just me."

"Then ... " His smile faded. His gaze darted past her, scanned the room, and came back. "Why are you here?"

What kind of question was that? And why the hell was she here? And where the fuck was here? Her mind wobbled on a razor-thin tightrope wire.

"To find you," she only half-lied. "I came for you."

"You came ... for me?"

The astonishment in his voice, the surprise in his eyes, made her feel ten shades of guilty for having refused Keira and Teague. "Yes."

"I've waited so long to hear you say that."

The sexy timbre of his voice was still caressing her when he lifted his face and pressed his lips to hers. Jessica pulled back, an instinctive move made out of confusion. But his hand slid up her spine and cupped her head. And his lips moved over hers, firm and warm and oh, just ... so ... right.

His lids fell closed, and those long lashes lay just millimeters from her own. Her brain clouded. Her body softened. A fresh undercurrent of power flowed between them, sending adrenaline to her heart and energy to every cell in her body.

His kisses lengthened, deepened, until his lips caressed and suckled hers as if he were exploring them for the first time. And like waking from a deep, refreshing sleep, everything inside her lifted, stretched and filled. Each press, pull or slide of his mouth erased a shadow from her past.

A sound floated from her throat, one of pain and loss, disbelief and hope. She tried to remember if Quaid had ever kissed her so perfectly when the slow sweep of

his tongue along her bottom lip stole her breath. Then he tilted his head, opened his mouth on a groan and fully tasted her.

And she knew.

This was her husband. This was Quaid.

Jessica whimpered, tightened her arms around his neck and kissed him hard and deep while a tidal wave of emotion flooded her chest. She couldn't stop, couldn't let go, couldn't open her eyes for fear he'd evaporate into the mist of a fading dream. Nor was she able to conceive what she'd done to him by believing he'd been dead all these years. Guilt and pain and fear prowled like starved beasts waiting to attack, but she had to do whatever it took to remain strong long enough to get Quaid out of here. Then she could feel all she had to feel. Deal with all she had to deal with. Then she could spend the rest of her life making it up to him.

When she broke for air, Quaid's dark eyes burned with lust beneath heavy lids. His lips were wet, his mouth open and ready for more. He breathed hard, his muscles straining as he pulled against the restraint to bring her closer. "I knew you'd taste amazing."

"Don't talk." She pressed her fingers against his lips. His words were messing with her head, and she needed to stay focused. "You're not making sense right now. It's the drugs. I just want to get you out of here and then we can talk, straighten everything out." All those emotions crashed in another heavy wave. She took his face in both hands and pressed her forehead to his. "Then we can be together forever. I won't ever leave you again."

He grinned—all straight, white teeth and uneven crescents curving deep on either side of his mouth. Her Quaid. She'd never forget his grin as long as she lived. Her heart blossomed, so big, so beautiful, she was sure her ribs would crack.

"I knew it would be like this with us," he whispered before taking her mouth again with vital, life-affirming passion.

She was completely lost in Quaid when he turned his head sharply, breaking the kiss.

"What the fuck are you doing awake?" Another man's voice came from the direction of the door.

The man lifted his foot and kicked out. A tingling rush zipped through Jessica's whole body as his boot passed through her. She gripped Quaid tighter, trying to protect him, but the boot hit his chest, dead center, as if she weren't even there. He jerked hard and flew back against the wall.

"Quaid!" She reached for him. The coin that had opened this door or hole or whatever it was that had enabled her to reach him, flew from her hand, hit the wall and rolled across the floor.

*[END OF EXCERPT]*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Violet Duke is the pen name of Nina Nakayama, lovingly chosen in honor of her two wacky children. A former professor of English Education at the University of Hawai'i, Nina is ecstatic to now be on the other side of the page writing wickedly fun contemporary romance novels. Besides writing and feeding her book-a-day reading addiction, she can often be found tackling reno projects with her power tools and trying pretty much anything without reading the directions first, or cooking 'special edition' dishes that laugh in the face of recipes. Nina lives in Hawai'i with her two cute kids and similarly adorable husband.

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*The One She Never Thought She Could Keep...*  
*The One She Never Hoped She Could Have...*  
*A Decision She Never Dreamed She'd Have to Make.*

**Read the Entire Collection**



**The • Nice • Girl n.** 1. female of the species who never does anything or anyone bad: Hands-off, she's a nice girl. 2. the woman that men take home to meet mom: Find my son a 'nice girl to love.' SEE ALSO: a good girl; girl scout; Abby Bartlett

This is the **complete Nice Girl to Love series collection**, which contains: Resisting the Bad Boy (Book One), Falling for the Good Guy (Book Two), and Choosing the Right Man (Book Three).

***THE ONE SHE NEVER THOUGHT SHE COULD KEEP...***

Abby Bartlett is the quintessential nice girl. Between teaching, volunteering, completing her PhD, and helping her best friend raise his daughter, Abby never gets the chance to be anything but nice. That is, until the all-wrong-for-her man she's only ever known from afar starts daring her to simply take that chance for herself. His sage advice? Try something wild and fast. Preferably him.

An unbridled, hotshot attorney with a not-so-little black book, Connor Sullivan has earned himself quite the bad boy reputation. But in his defense, he's a very conscientious one. He knows far too well that sometimes in life, love isn't enough...or worse, not even a factor at all. To avoid that misery—and repel the drama—Connor has a firm 'nothing over a month' rule. Who knew a nice girl would be the one to make him want to break all his rules?

***THE ONE SHE NEVER HOPED SHE COULD HAVE...***

Abby is well aware that everyone thinks she's in love with her best friend Brian. He is, after all, the type of man a nice girl should be with—the polar opposite of the bad boy—the kind of guy who didn't let his wife's decade-long illness stop him from showering her with a lifetime of love every second until her dying day. But

everyone's wrong; she couldn't possibly be in love with him. Because she's never once allowed herself that option.

It's taken a while but Brian has finally come to terms with surviving the woman he spent half his life loving, a third of it losing. Truth is though, he wouldn't have 'survived' any of it really had it not been for Abby—sweet, incredible Abby—the woman he's never once had to picture his life without, never realized he couldn't truly live without. Until now. Now that he's finally able to love her the way she deserves, the way he knows she wants to be loved...by his brother. Who's giving him exactly one chance to speak now or forever hold his peace.

***A DECISION SHE NEVER DREAMED SHE'D HAVE TO MAKE...***

And now it's up to Abby to decide between the bad boy wanting to start a life with her and the good guy fighting for the life they've already built.

Print Length: 491 pages (Based on paperback edition, available August 2013)



*VIOLET DUKE is the pen name of Nina Nakayama, lovingly chosen in honor of her two adorably wacky kids. Nina blames her lifelong addiction to reading on the public library she all but lived in as a kid. Now decades later, she's still a bonafide book junkie with a book-a-day habit she can't kick and nightly reading-by-flashlight binges. You could say that reading was her gateway obsession, with writing being its natural progression. And she couldn't be happier for it. She gets to scramble after a bunch of untamed story characters in her head for a living, without the fear of men in white coats and butterfly nets coming after her—not for those reasons anyway.*

*Like the heroines in her novels, Nina has had her fair share of ups and downs in life...along with a quirky happily-ever-after she couldn't have written better herself. Her dream house on O'ahu is one that some crazy builder let her draw up the plans for via an old bargain bin architecture software readable only on WinXP or older. And the hero of her romantic tale is a guy who, after getting her number from her former student, tricked her into nightly marathon phone calls while she'd been trying to focus on her doctoral dissertation. She ended up falling in love with the sneaky man within weeks—before ever meeting him in person—and marrying him a few months later. Now, whenever folks ask what inspired (possessed) her to one day put a pin in her career as an English Ed professor to pursue her dreams of becoming a romance author, she smiles and points an accusatory thumb at him.*

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### ***Resisting the Bad Boy (Nice Girl to Love, Book One)***

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Preferably him.

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Turns out, a whole lot can happen in one month.

Print Length: 164 pages (Based on paperback edition, available August 2013)

Note: This is Book One of a three-book serial romance series.

### ***Falling for the Good Guy (Nice Girl to Love, Book Two)***

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Because she's never once allowed herself that option.

It's taken a while but Brian Sullivan has finally come to terms with being a widower at the age of thirty, surviving the woman he spent half his life loving, a third of it losing. Truth is though, he wouldn't have 'survived' any of it really had it not been for Abby—sweet, incredible Abby—the woman he's never once had to picture his life without, never realized he couldn't truly live without. Until now. Now that he's finally able to love her the way she deserves, the way he knows she wants to be loved...by his brother.

Who's giving him exactly one chance to speak now or forever hold his peace.

Print Length: 142 pages (Based on paperback edition, available August 2013)

Note: This is Book Two of a three-book serial romance series.

### ***Choosing the Right Man (Nice Girl to Love, Book Three)***

Connor's back. Just when Abby's life seems all but perfect, the infuriating man comes charging back in to wreak havoc on her emotions once again. And in typical Connor fashion, he has yet another proposal for her. But instead of a wild and fast fling, he's proposing...forever.

Brian's not giving her up without a fight. Normally the tame one of the pair, Brian is holding nothing back in the battle for Abby's heart. He has a decade-long head start in knowing and loving everything about Abby—but is that enough to break the intense hold his brother has on her heart?

In this third and final book in the Nice Girl to Love series, Abby must decide once and for all between the bad boy wanting to start a life with her and the good guy

fighting for the life they've already built.

Print Length: 151 pages (Based on paperback edition, available August 2013)

Note: This is Book Three, the series finale of a three-book serial romance series.

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