

NY TIMES & USA TODAY bestselling author

# JILL SANDERS

## *Fools in Love*



A Pride Oregon Novel

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# FOOLS IN LOVE

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PRIDE, OREGON

BOOK 11

JILL SANDERS



GRAYTON

# CONTENTS

[summary](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Jill Sanders](#)

[About the Author](#)

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## SUMMARY

Kate didn't really want to be back in her hometown of Pride. But thanks to a recent injury that had ended her dancing career, she was stuck at home. She'd considered the move to be temporary, until she'd run into the new law in town. What was someone that good-looking doing in such a small town?

Tom had always dreamed of being a cop and had picked a job in a picturesque town along the coast hoping to escape his dark past. But the sleepy little town holds some big secrets, and the pretty dancer he meets on the beach one night isn't the only surprise he finds.

## PROLOGUE

**T**hirteen-year-old Kate stood just outside her new school and couldn't help but do a little dance of excitement.

“Are you sure you're ready for this, kiddo?” Her father looked down at her.

“I've been waiting for this my entire life,” she answered.

She shuffled her big duffle bag and held onto her dad's hand. It wasn't the first time she'd been in the big city, but it was the first time that her parents would be leaving her here for an entire year. All by herself.

After today's orientation, they would be heading back home to Pride, Oregon, without her. She was a big-city girl now, having just moved up from one of the best dance schools on the West Coast to the School of American Ballet.

She squeezed her father's hand and tried to hold back the excitement as they walked through the main doors.

She really had been waiting for this moment all her life. From the moment she could walk, Kate had danced. Or so her parents always said.

Her mother had enrolled her in the closest dance studio shortly after her third birthday, after Kate had begged her to do so every single day for an entire month.

She'd sweated and improved—bloomed, really—more than anyone else beside her. She'd quickly moved up to a larger school after a scout had spotted her. Then another. In the following years, she'd gone from a small regional school to one of the best in the state. Now, she was going to SAB.

She was only thirteen, which she knew limited the roles she could perform, but she had high hopes of becoming the youngest prima ballerina SAB had ever seen.

Ten years later....

Kate held onto her father's hand as she made her way slowly towards her parents' house. The crutch under her left shoulder did little to help her walk. Her father taking most of her weight helped the most.

He was as strong as she remembered and just as handsome as ever, even with the new streak of silver hair running along his temple.

"Easy, kiddo," he said in a deep voice.

"Dad, I'm fine," she told him for the billionth time since she'd hobbled from the hospital room into his waiting arms.

"You don't look fine," her mother said, frowning at her. "You're too pale. Are you in pain?"

She was, but Kate didn't want them to worry. Her mother would just shove another pain pill in her, and then Kate would spend the next few hours in a daze.

She was home.

For the first time in almost thirteen years, she was home for more than just a weekend or holiday break.

That thought made her slump a little more on her dad's shoulder. It wasn't that she didn't love home. It was... the



best. But being here meant her dream was officially dead. Her entire life gone.

Everything she'd spent all of her life working for had disappeared in one misstep by her partner. Then she and all her dreams had come crashing to the floor, broken and useless.

"Here." Her mother patted the sofa as their two dogs rushed over to sniff the bags her mother sat down at the base of the stairs. "We've given you our room so you don't have to go up and down the stairs."

"I am not going to—" she started but stopped when her father gave her a look. Sighing, she nodded. "Thanks." She sat down on the sofa, where her mother had fluffed a pillow for her. Instantly, her father lifted her right leg and laid it gently down on the ottoman.

Just having the weight off it helped with the pain, and she realized just how tiring the trip home had been.

"You need some rest," her father said, setting the duffle bag down next to her other bags. Everything she owned was in the two rolling suitcases and the large duffle bag that she'd moved to New York with.

"Yeah," she agreed. "But for now, I'd like to sit out here."

Her father handed her the remote for the television.

"I'll go make you some lunch," her mother said. Kate thought she saw her mother wipe a tear from her eye as she headed to the kitchen, but she'd turned away too quickly to be sure.

"Dad?" she said as her father sat beside her.

"Yeah, kiddo?" He took her hand in his.

She shifted to look at him and set the remote down on the armrest of the sofa. “What am I going to do now?” Tears burned her eyes as her father wrapped his arms around her.

“Whatever you want, kiddo,” he said into her hair. “Whatever you want,” he repeated, and she heard his voice crack.

## CHAPTER ONE

---

Tom stood back and held the umbrella as he waited for Patty O’Neil to walk through the door of the police station. Patty had been the first to welcome him to town when he’d moved here from Las Vegas almost three years before. The older woman used a walker but still moved around pretty quickly.

Switching from one of the largest police forces in the country to a small-town police station had changed his life—and saved it. He’d only just passed his exams when he’d requested the transfer and hated himself for saying on his application that he had over a year of experience in the field instead of only the three months he really had. Still, there wasn’t a day that went by that he wasn’t thankful for the job and the town.

“Thank you, Tom,” Patty said as she continued towards the front counter slowly.

Patty’s silver hair was tied up in a bun at the base of her neck. She was always wearing brightly colored pants and even brighter shirts. Stylish, but very bright.

“Are you sure there isn’t something I can help you with?” he asked for the third time.

“No, I’m just here to gossip.” Patty motioned towards the town’s long-standing mayor, Lacey Stevens, who was sitting behind the counter talking to Aiden Brogan, Tom’s boss and the chief of police in Pride.

Lacey had been the third person he’d met in town. The short woman was a spitfire, which was probably why she’d been mayor for so long. No one in their right mind would go up against her.

Aiden Brogan was the son of the old police chief in town, Robert, who still showed up to the office every now and then and filled in for one of the dispatchers. Aiden had taken over when his father had been seriously hurt in an accident years before. The older man walked with a slight limp, but outside of that, appeared in perfect health.

“So, it’s true?” Lacey said, jumping up from a chair. Lacey often sat in the station to chat. Tom knew firsthand that she visited every business in town at least once a week.

“It is.” Patty nodded as she sat down in one of the waiting room chairs. “She’s home for good. She arrived two days ago, apparently, and hasn’t left the house since.”

Lacey sighed and sat down again. “That poor girl. To have her career and dreams taken away so soon.”

“Now, she’s had more than ten years to bask in the spotlight. She made some really great memories and touched a lot of people with her talent. God only knows what he has in store for her now,” Patty replied.

Tom tried not to eavesdrop, but he was busy filling out his time sheet at the main desk and couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Who?”

Everyone turned to him with strange looks on their faces.

“Why, our very own Kate,” Patty answered.

His eyebrows shot up. “Kate...”

“Sean and Becca’s girl,” Lacey added.

“Nick’s sister,” Aiden said at the same time.

Becca Farrow ran Sara’s Nook with her sister Sara, the owner, and her daughter, Brook Masters.

Tom had taken Brook out on a date or two, but they just hadn’t felt any spark for one another. Instead, they’d fallen into a friendly relationship. She was more like the sister he’d never had.

Sean Farrow headed up the big Coast Guard facility outside of town along with Allen Masters. A lot of people living in Pride either worked or trained out there.

Sean’s son, Nick Farrow, had moved back to town shortly after Tom had taken the job. Nick was ex-military and had started working shortly after his return to town. Tom and Nick had been made partners after their first year on the job.

“Right.” Even though Nick didn’t talk about her all that often, he’d heard all about his sister and how she’d been a dancer in New York.

“What happened to her?” he asked. He’d been out on vacation for the past week and hadn’t talked to Nick. The extended fishing trip had been just what he’d needed to reset. His job wasn’t stressful, but he’d needed some downtime.

“Her partner dropped her. Right before her big performance opening night,” Patty answered.

“It was such a horrible thing.” Lacey shook her head. “Rumors are floating around that it wasn’t an accident. Kate’s

understudy has been fighting for the lead for months, and it is widely known that she is dating the guy who dropped Kate.”

“Okay,” he said, his timesheet totally ignored now. His legal brain kicked into gear. “Are the police—” Aiden’s laughter stopped him. “What?” he asked with a frown.

“It’s New York. Rumors may get an officer looking into something in a small town, but New York?” He shook his head. “I doubt it.”

“Right.” Tom leaned on the counter. “How badly was she hurt?”

The three of them went silent before Lacey finally answered. “Enough that her career as a prima ballerina is dead.”

“It’s a damn shame too. I went out with her for a while, long time ago in school. Kate is... well, basically family. Nothing would stop me from kicking the guy’s ass if I could,” Aiden said with a shake of his head.

Tom couldn’t help but think about what he would do if he was suddenly unable to do the job that he loved. For as long as he could remember, he’d wanted to be a cop.

Watching his father being hauled away had solidified in Tom’s young mind that the police saved people. He wanted to be a hero just like them.

His first few years after graduation hadn’t been smooth. And his choice had not been popular with his father. But he’d plowed through the training courses. Even after his mother’s and Ryan’s death. Because of their deaths.

Losing his mother and younger brother had almost broken him. There could never really be enough justice for their

murders, that belief had taken Tom down a very dark path. One that this small town had finally helped him break free of.

His grandfather had moved to the United States from the Philippines when he was ten years old, which had put a target on his back and, later, onto the backs of Tom's father and Tom and Ryan. Still, that didn't justify the evil his father had carried in his heart. Nothing could ever justify that.

Tom loved being a cop and being a cop in Pride was like winning the lottery, twice. When he'd moved into town, Patty had rented him the one-bedroom apartment above her grocery store, O'Neil's.

In less than a year, he's purchased a small three-bedroom home down by the docks with his hard-earned money. He'd spent the next year fixing it up as best he could. Thankfully, he'd run into Parker when the man had gotten a flat tire one snowy night. Parker Clark was Pride's local handyman.

Tom had pulled over and helped the man change his tire and, in return, Parker had come in and replaced the old water heater and furnace at his new place for free.

After that, Tom had hired Parker as much as he could around the place. It was home, and at least now he was pretty sure it wouldn't fall down around him.

He was also no longer considered a new resident of Pride. That had finally happened about a year after moving into town when a few new people moved into town, bumping him off that list.

It hadn't taken him long to get to know all the locals after working in town and manning the booth in the festivals the town held every holiday season. Spring, summer, fall, winter—you name it. If there was any reason for a festival, Pride

held one. And at each one, the police set up a booth, handing out glow sticks, police whistles, first-aid kits, and badges for the young kids.

Growing up in the city, he'd never believed a town like Pride existed. The kind of place where everyone knew everyone else. Where they looked out for one another and stood up for them too.

Sure, the town had its share of problems and troublemakers. But it was nothing like the big city. In Vegas, he hadn't even known the names of the neighbors who had lived next to him for years.

Three years in Pride and he not only knew everyone's names, but he pretty much knew their family histories as well.

Nick may not have talked a lot about his sister, but the rest of the town had. Of course, he'd heard all about Kate's exciting career. He'd even been shown a few pictures of her in full costume on stage. From what he could see, she was one hundred percent ballerina.

"Ready to head out?" Nick asked him half an hour later.

"You know it," he answered as he finished putting on his rain gear.

"Looks like we got school traffic today," Nick said with a slight groan.

"Yup." To tell the truth, Tom didn't mind directing the cars in and out of the elementary school's parking area. It was one of the jobs he could do while still allowing his mind to wander. Since it was his first day back from his mini vacation, he was struggling to get his mind back in gear.

An hour later, standing in the pouring rain, soaking wet, he changed his mind.



Nick too seemed to want to be somewhere else. For the first time in the three years that he'd known the guy, he was quiet. He had barely said two words in the last hour.

When the last car left the parking lot, they both climbed into the patrol car, with Tom at the wheel, and headed out to make their rounds on the highway.

"You okay?" he asked Nick as he drove.

"Yeah. Just..." Nick took a deep breath. "You ever think about the future?"

Tom glanced over at him. Nick was his age, roughly his build, and, according to him, a perpetual bachelor. He knew Nick had spent a few years in the Army and when he'd come home, he'd joined the force immediately.

"All the time," he admitted. "Is this about your sister coming home?"

Nick shrugged. "She spent her entire life aiming for one thing. Then"—he snapped his fingers—"poof, it's gone."

"Is her injury that bad?" he asked, concerned.

"Bad enough that she'll never be a prima ballerina again."

"But she can walk?" he asked.

"Sure. I mean, right now she's on crutches. She had surgery, but the doctors think that she'll be fine. May even dance again someday. But once you're out, you're out." He shook his head.

"That sucks," he agreed. "Still, she was lucky to reach the level of fame she did."

"Oh, she never wanted the fame."

“Then what?” He didn’t really understand. He thought that all professional dancers did it for the glory and recognition. Why else would anyone subject their bodies to so much... torture.

Nick shrugged. “Kate’s not...” He glanced over at him. “Kate’s hard to explain.” He chuckled. “Hell, most of our childhood she was shuffled from one dance class to another. Then she went away to school, and we only saw her during her breaks or on stage.”

“I thought you said you two were close?” he asked.

“Oh, we are.” Nick smiled. “I’d take out anyone who hurt her. Which is why it killed me when my folks wouldn’t let me go to New York to get her.”

“You wanted to take out the guy who did this to her?” he asked, totally understanding after hearing the rumors about what had happened.

Nick nodded. “Wouldn’t you?”

Tom pulled over into one of the spots where they hung out to catch speeders before answering. “If I had a sister, I don’t think even the cops could have stopped me from hunting down who had hurt her.”

Nick pointed to him. “See, you get it.”

“It’s still a good thing your folks stopped you from going,” he added. “You’re a cop.”

“Ugh!” Nick groaned, holding up the radar gun as a car sped by them. They both paused and looked at the screen before returning to their conversation. “I know you’re right, but still, I’d like to drop the skinny guy from a balcony seat or something.”

Tom chuckled. "I'm pretty sure most of those guys are in better shape than we are."

Nick glanced down at himself then over at Tom. "What are you bench-pressing now?"

Just like that, the conversation moved on. Nick was easy to talk with, and the boring time stuck doing speeding tickets went by quickly.

By the time they walked into the station at the end of their shift, they'd handed out more than a dozen tickets and had helped change a flat tire.

"Hey." Nick caught up with him as he was walking out. "You up for shooting hoops tonight?"

"Sure," Tom answered as he tossed his bag over his shoulder. "Eight?"

"You know it." Nick slapped him on the shoulder.

As he drove home, he thought about his and Nick's conversation. As he ate dinner alone, he wondered if he'd done everything he could for his mother and Ryan before their deaths. Even now, Tom still felt as if he'd failed them.

The darkness threatened to seep into his mind once again. He was thankful that he'd agreed to meet Nick and the usual gang down at the Boys and Girls Club for a basketball game.

When he'd moved into town, he'd agreed to play because he'd needed something to help draw him from the darkness. Sort of like a therapy session. He had only committed to playing a few games, but he'd kept playing, and it had become more than therapy. It had become fun.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

She didn't know why she'd allowed her brother to talk her into going with him to the gym. Maybe it was because for the last two days she'd done nothing but sit on her parents' sofa and watch television. Mostly professional dancing.

The more she watched, the more she felt sorry for herself. And the more her body ached to follow the movements that it knew all too well.

She'd thought that if she went to the gym with Nick, there was a chance that she could sneak away and do some stretches, something her parents didn't want her to do, as the doctor's orders were to stay completely off her leg until her next doctor's appointment. Not to mention she still had four bruised ribs, a sprained wrist, and several large bruises all over her body.

When Nick had helped her out of the car at the Boys and Girls Club, she was itching to find a place to stretch and be alone.

Normally, she was a bundle of energy, but having spent almost a week in a hospital bed or on her parents' sofa, she doubted her energy levels would stay high for very long.

She didn't want to waste that time sitting in a gym watching her brother and his friends fight over fouls and rules.

When she suggested she was going for a walk, her brother shook his head and steered her towards the gym.

Nick played the role of older brother perfectly and had always done everything he could to look out for her. When they had gone to school together, he'd always walked her to and from the bus. He'd once beat up a kid who had picked on her during recess. She couldn't remember the kid's name, but she was pretty sure he'd done it because he liked her.

She and Nick were still close, but it had been ten years since they'd lived together. Even now, Nick had a place of his own. In reality, they were practically strangers.

She stopped just outside the door by yanking on his arm.

"I've been cooped up for almost a week now." She groaned. "Please, I'll just walk..." She glanced to the small path that led to the beach and motioned with her head. "It's like ten steps to the beach. I'll sit in the sand and watch the waves." She added enough annoyance to her voice that he groaned.

"Mom and Dad told me not to let you out of my sight."

"I really don't want to watch you and your friends argue over basketball. How would you feel if you had to sit in on my rehearsals?"

"Fine." He threw his hands up. "You're a big girl. But if you hurt yourself, I'm going to tell our parents you snuck off while I was playing."

She reached up and hugged him. "Thanks," she said, and started making her way down the narrow pathway.

There were huge bushes on either side of the beach entrance. She could feel her brother watching her, so she went

very slowly to make sure she didn't slip or stumble along the way.

When she was out of Nick's sight, she took a deep breath and moved farther onto the cool sand, where she sat down to watch the waves.

This was the first time she had been by herself since the accident. In the hospital, the nurses or her parents had come and gone all day and night. At her parents' house, one of them was usually hovering. They had even involved her aunt, uncle, and cousin Brook.

Brook was a year older than Kate and somehow had gotten all the looks in the family. At least that's what Kate had always thought.

Kate was shorter and, thanks to years and years of training, built like a dancer. Her blonde hair was nothing special. She had freckles that she usually covered with makeup, and her eyes were a dull dirty water blue.

Brook was almost Kate's complete opposite. She had beautiful hazel eyes like Kate's mother, which were so exotic that people did a double take. Kate was five-four while Brook was a slender five-nine and towered over most other women in town. Brook also had the body of a dancer, but hers came naturally, unlike Kate who'd had to work for years and years to achieve the look. Brook's skin always appeared tan, thanks to her father's naturally darker tones.

Her cousin was a bombshell not only in looks but also in personality. She knew everyone in town and could strike up a conversation with anyone. Kate was more reserved and, after all her years away, felt like she hardly knew anyone in Pride.

Pulling her good leg up to her chin, she took several deep breaths. God, she wanted to dance or just to move. Her muscles were feeling atrophied from the lack of motion. Her joints hurt. Even her mind felt foggy.

Most of her bruises had started turning yellow, signaling it wouldn't be too much longer before they were gone. Her ribs still ached when she took a deep breath and her injured leg felt like it was on fire if she tried to put weight on it.

Outside of that, she was perfectly fine.

She missed dancing. Missed showing up to the studio each morning after her brisk walk from her studio apartment. She'd normally stop off at Bella's and grab fruit and coffee for breakfast.

She was always the first into the studio and would have it to herself for ten minutes before everyone else would arrive. She would spend that time either warming up or, at least twice a month, sewing and breaking in her new pointe shoes, which was a chore and a workout on its own.

Closing her eyes, she ran through the last day before her accident. She had gained the lead in a new ballet written by one of the greatest living choreographers, Gabriel Léandre. The ballet, titled *Sonya Petite*, had never been seen before. It was about a down-on-her-luck French woman who sells flowers on the street corner. A handsome prince in disguise falls for her—a real Cinderella story.

Kate had won the lead as Sonya. Dmitri Golubev had gotten the part as the handsome prince.

It wasn't the first time she'd worked with Dmitri nor was it his first lead role. But he had recently started dating Kate's understudy, Isabella Ramani.

The entire six months they had been training, Isabella and Dmitri had done everything in their power to undermine Kate. Not only with Gabriel, but with everyone else on set.

During some of the rehearsals, things would happen that no one could explain. She hadn't thought anything of it at dress rehearsal when her wardrobe had gone missing. When Isabella had shown up dressed and ready, Kate had understood everything. When she went to Gabriel with her concerns, Dmitri had been there, defending Isabella. In the end, Kate looked like just another worried diva.

Until two hours before the opening.

With the sound of the waves and the cool night air surrounding her, the sun disappeared over the Pacific without her even noticing. Her mind was thousands of miles away, in the rehearsal room, replaying those last few moments before everything came crashing down.

She lost track of time as she sat there and ran over her routine, how she and Dmitri had moved across the stage hours before the first ticket holder would step into the American Ballet Theater.

Growing more frustrated at the memories and her inability to rewind time and warn herself about what was to come, she stood up and made her way towards the water's edge.

She lifted her arms over her head as she stood on her good foot and ran through one of her favorite routines. She couldn't move physically across the sand, but in her mind she could.

Her arms moved, flowed as if liquid through the air. Her muscles were tight from the week-long hiatus, but it felt so good that she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.



As she held her bad leg up, knee slightly bent, she could almost believe she was just here on a weekend trip. Her pain was minimal.

She shifted her weight slightly as she continued through her routine, and her foot sank in the soft wet sand. The cold water rushed around her good foot just as a wave crashed around her, causing her to lose her balance.

She'd set her crutch down in the sand that had just been washed away with the wave, and when she went to lean on it to steady herself, her entire body tilted.

It felt like everything moved in slow motion. She braced herself as best as she could and cried out as her arms went out to block her fall and try to prevent the pain she knew was coming.

“Whoa,” a deep voice said as strong arms wrapped around her. “I don't think you're supposed to be out here like this yet.”

Then she heard a soft chuckle as she practically melted against the man.

In all the years of dancing with a partner, not once had she been afraid or embarrassed to touch a man. Normally, her fingers would wrap around strong biceps or thighs to find purchase while she was lifted, tossed, or twirled. Always, she had thought of it as work.

Now, however, the strong arms she felt under her fingertips sent a sizzle of awareness through her entire body. It could have been the chuckle. Most partners didn't laugh and none of them had laughed at her.

Somehow, while she'd sat in the sand, wallowing in her self-pity, the night had crept up on her. Hadn't it just been

moments ago that she'd been watching the sun sink toward the water?

"Thanks," she said. She tried to right herself, but her good leg still refused to work. It was probably from days of not using it. Would she ever dance again?

To her horror, a sob escaped her lips. The sound, a gargled gasp, echoed on the empty beach.

"Oh god," she said. She didn't want whoever had just rescued her to see the tears, so she did the only thing she could think of. She buried her face in his chest as more tears flowed. A tsunami of water gushed from her eyes as her sobs caused her body to vibrate against his.

Her fingers fisted in the man's T-shirt, holding him prisoner as everything she'd held in for her family's sake was finally released.

Why? Why couldn't she stop? She kept telling herself to shut up. To get a hold of herself. To be better than this.

The more she tried, the harder it was to control.

When she realized the man was just standing there like a statue, holding her as much as she held him, she finally stopped.

"I..." she started to say, without looking up.

He was taller than her, but then again, most everyone was. He was strong, solid, and she could tell by the fact that he didn't push her into the sand and leave her in a heap that he was kind.

"I'm sorry," she finally blurted out, dashing the water from her eyes.

She hadn't realized he'd moved them further up the beach, out of the way of the crashing waves, until her eyes finally focused on their feet.

He was wearing shorts and flip flops, worn ones that told her he was most likely a local. He had on a gray T-shirt.

Her eyes moved higher and the first thing she noticed was his smile. His white teeth were almost a beacon in the night's darkness.

"Feel better?" he asked.

There was just something about his voice—it's rich deep tone, the hint of humor in it.

She swallowed and, instead of answering, she nodded.

"Are you okay? You didn't hurt your leg?" he asked.

She followed his gaze down to her leg and then jerked her head up and shook her head.

He tilted his head slightly, as if he had a question but wasn't sure how to ask it. Then she heard him take a deep breath.

At this point, he was still holding her upright.

How many of her partners had held her waist as she danced on pointe? Too many to count. But the hands of this mystery man, here in the darkness on the beach, felt so different. They somehow lit a fire deep inside her that felt stranger than anything she'd felt before.

"I'm Tom," he said suddenly. "You're Kate?"

She stilled, suddenly realizing she was alone with a stranger on a dark beach. She never allowed anyone she didn't

know to get this close to her. Especially at night when she was alone.

His chuckle broke her thoughts. “Easy, I think your brother was just a little ways behind me.” He motioned behind them, where she could see the lights from the Boys and Girls Club. She relaxed a little. “Think you can stand on your own?” he asked, nodding his head.

She shifted and then moved her crutch further under her armpit before nodding.

The moment his hands dropped away, she swayed slightly, and they returned.

“I’m okay,” she said softly.

“She does speak,” he joked.

She smiled. “Thanks, I—”

“Hey, sis,” Nick called out. They both glanced over to see her brother jogging towards them. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” she answered quickly. She tried to take a step away from Tom and almost fell again.

“She’s just a little unstable on the sand,” Tom said as Nick stopped beside her.

They each wrapped an arm around her and practically carried her back to the parking lot. She felt like a piece of luggage being carted around.

“I can walk,” she said, her anger growing at how her brother and Tom, who was obviously a friend of her brother’s, were handling her.

When they stopped next to her brother’s Jeep, Nick released her. Tom took a few moments more and made sure

she was steady before dropping his hands.

“I didn’t mind,” he said under his breath, and Kate felt her face heat. “Helping,” he added quickly.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you go off on your own,” Nick was saying as he opened the door for her.

“Go off on my own?” She turned on her brother. “I’m not a child.”

Her brother shot a glance over his shoulder at her. “No one said that. But I should have guessed that you’d hurt yourself trying to push yourself too hard.”

Her eyes narrowed. Raising her chin, she turned to Tom. “Do you know where my parents live?” she asked him. His chin dropped slightly and he nodded. “Good. Then you can take me home.” She started moving away from her brother’s Jeep.

“Kate,” Nick sighed, “come back,” but she was already trying to cross the parking lot towards the only other vehicle there.

“No,” she threw over her shoulder. “Tom is going to take me home.” With that she turned her eyes towards Tom, hoping he saw anger in them and not the hurt she was truly feeling.

Thankfully, Tom turned to her brother and nodded. “I’ll get her home safe,” he said, and then he rushed to open the car door for her.

## CHAPTER THREE

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They drove in silence for the first mile. He wasn't quite sure what to say to her. The way Nick talked about his sister, Tom had assumed their relationship was good.

After what he'd just seen, maybe it wasn't as good as he'd thought. Then again, he knew all too well that pain could cause anyone to be on edge.

When he'd spotted her dancing on the sand in the darkness, he hadn't been sure who she was at first. Then he'd seen the bandages on her knee. His foggy brain had registered her fluid motions, and he'd realized who she was.

He'd moved closer to her, drawn by the beauty of her movements. He'd seen that the wave was going to hit her, and thankfully he'd been close enough to race over to catch her and stop her from falling.

When he'd wrapped his arms around her, everything in him had shifted. He'd never felt anything like it before. Almost as if he'd touched a live wire. His entire body vibrated with something new.

He understood the desire she had to move. It had been there in her attempted dance on the wet sand. She loved it. She missed it.

“I shouldn’t have freaked out like that,” Kate said with a sigh, breaking into his thoughts.

Tom glanced at her and realized she was rubbing her leg just above the wrap that covered her knee. He knew what pain could do to a person. He could remember times when he’d been in pain, how he’d wanted to lash out at someone. Anyone. Usually, it had been whoever had been closest.

“Are you in pain?” he asked, suddenly concerned that she’d hurt herself.

“No,” she said quickly, then she sighed. “Have you ever had surgery or been injured?”

He was quiet for a moment, remembering all the times he’d suffered, and then swallowed the memories to answer with a simple, “Yes.”

She turned slightly towards him. “It’s like being hangry. When you’re in pain.”

He nodded. “Your brother will understand.”

“It’s not about him. I...” She glanced down at her leg. “It’s the reason haven’t been going out. I’m... bitchy. I don’t want anyone else to get in the path of... well, me.”

He raised his eyebrows as he pulled into her parents’ driveway and killed the car.

She unhooked her seatbelt and turned to him. “First impressions are important. I’m sorry if I made you believe I’m a spoiled woman who treats her family bad and cries on stranger’s shoulders.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t mind. Besides, Nick deserves some attitude. He once put shaving cream in my work boots.”

Kate's eyebrows shot up. "I didn't know you two worked together."

He nodded. "Your brother and I have been partners for almost three years."

"Great." She groaned. "Is there some sort of cop rule that you tell your partner everything?"

He chuckled again. "No. Not when it comes to his sister. I think you can work things out with him whenever you want."

She was quiet for a while. "Tom...?"

"Reyes," he answered easily. "Is Kate short for anything?" He'd only ever heard people call her Kate.

"Katherine," she answered.

"You know, getting outside in the fresh air will help. When you keep yourself cooped up, you tend to dwell on the sorrow of what you've lost instead of focusing on the good that can come from the changes," he said, giving her advice he'd been given years ago.

She tilted her head, and her long blonde hair fell over her shoulder. "You sound like you know that from experience."

He nodded once. "It's the reason I moved to Pride in the first place." He glanced out the dark windows and noticed Nick's Jeep pulling into the drive beside them. "It's obvious your brother loves you enough to want to work things out." He motioned with his chin.

Kate groaned and reached for the door handle. Tom rushed out, and Nick met him by the side of his car to help Kate out.

"I'm sorry," Nick blurted out. "I'm just concerned—"



Kate wrapped her arms around her brother. “I was a jerk,” she said into his shoulder. “Thanks for breaking me out tonight.” She waved towards the house. “I promise, next time you do, I won’t bite your head off.”

Nick smiled. “If you do, I’ll just make Tom deal with you,” he warned.

Tom instantly thought that it wouldn’t be such a hardship.

Kate was smiling at her brother. “I am thankful. I love our parents, but Mom has been hovering. I think she’d worried I’m going to stand up at any minute and try to do pirouettes in her living room.”

“Anytime.” Nick hugged her, then turned to him. “Thanks for driving my sister home.”

“My pleasure,” Tom said, nodding to Nick and then to Kate. “I guess I’ll...” He turned to go, but Nick stopped him.

“The least we can do is offer you a beer.” Nick slapped him on the back.

Tom thought to deny the offer, but then his eyes fell to Kate, and he realized he wanted to spend more time with her. Even if it was in the company of her entire family.

He followed Nick and Kate to the front porch, and they helped Kate up the stairs.

“I can do it myself,” she said, but they both ignored her. “But thanks,” she added after taking a deep breath.

When they stepped inside, Becca Farrow, Nick and Kate’s mother, was standing in the entryway. Her eyes ran over Kate and then visibly relaxed.

“How are you feeling?” she asked Kate.

“Tired,” Kate said with a sigh. “I’m going to head in and lie down.”

They all stood there as she hobbled down the hallway and disappeared into a room. When the bedroom door shut behind her, Becca turned and seemed to notice him for the first time.

“Hi, Tom,” Becca said with a smile. “Come on in. We were just sitting out on the back deck.” She walked over and hugged her son and then waved them back. They followed her through the house, and Nick stopped and grabbed a couple beers before they headed out the large glass doors.

The house sat along the same road as his but up the hill from him. While he was down on the dock level, their house overlooked the docks from above.

“Evening.” He shook Sean Farrow’s hand as he stepped out onto the large deck area.

“Evening.” Sean motioned for him to sit.

“Nice view,” he said, looking out over the lights of the town below them as he sat down and took the beer that Nick offered.

He’d run into Sean more times than he could count over the past few years. It was thanks to Sean and Nick that Tom had a love for sailing.

Sean was one of the nicest men in town and could always make you laugh. Still, Tom knew that he wasn’t a man to cross.

“Yeah, you should see it during the day. It’s the reason we bought the place.” Sean held up his beer. “How was the game?”

Tom chuckled. “I think you need to teach your son a few more tricks. He sucked so bad tonight that I wiped the floor with him. Thirty-six to six.”

“Ouch.” Sean winced.

“I was distracted.” Nick shrugged.

“By what?” Becca asked. “Or should I ask, by whom?”

Nick rolled his eyes. “It was just us guys there. I haven’t been sleeping a lot. I’m trying to replace all the hardwood in the house and ended staying up late.” He rolled his shoulders for show.

Tom chuckled. “You’ve used that excuse for too long. I’ve mentioned I could help you out. I replaced my flooring last year.”

“When I get to the point of laying the floor, I’ll hit you up. For now, I’m still just tearing out all the old stuff.”

“You know your father and I could always—” Becca started, but Nick gave her a look and she laughed. “Okay, but the offer is always there.”

“My home. My sore back.” Nick shrugged.

“Tom, how is your place coming along?” Becca asked him.

“It’s pretty much done. I have a few small things left.” He scanned the scene below and spotted his blue lights. Being so close to the water, he’d changed out his normal lights so he could spot his place from the water easily. Smiling, he motioned with his beer. “You can see my blue lights from here.”

They all looked out over the darkness.

“We can see your roof in the daylight,” Sean added. “Then again, we can see most of Pride from here.”

“How was your sister tonight?” Sean asked Nick.

“Okay. She spent her time on the beach,” Nick answered and then turned to him. “Tom and I had to help her back to the car.”

“She was just unsteady on the sand,” he pointed out, not wanting Kate’s parents to worry. After all, he was pretty sure she wouldn’t have had any problem if the wave hadn’t almost knocked her over.

“She was downright bitchy,” Nick added. “What?” Nick rubbed his arm where his mother had elbowed him. “It’s true. She about bit my head off.”

“She’s in pain,” Tom said. “And just lost her entire way of life. You can’t blame her for showing how that feels. It’s the worst feeling in the world.” He knew all too well what that felt like. Having to pick up and reinvent yourself. Leaving your hopes and dreams in the gutter to try and piece some sort of normalcy together, all while wishing for something more. Hoping that one day, in the near future, you can find happiness again.

Suddenly, he realized all three pairs of eyes were on him.

“With that.” He cleared his throat as he set his still-full beer down. “I’m going to call it a night. See you in the morning,” he told Nick. When Becca started to get up, he waved. “I can show myself out. Thanks again.” He nodded and started walking through the house, heading towards the front door.

He hadn’t expected to see Kate standing just inside, not too far from the screen door. “Feeling better?” he asked her.

Her eyes ran up and down him. “Yes, thank you,” she said softly. “For... understanding.”

He smiled. “If you need another walk on the beach, hit me up. I’m always around.” He started to walk past her, but she stopped him by taking his hand.

Instead of saying anything, her eyes searched his for a moment before she dropped her hand.

“Goodnight,” she said softly.

As he drove home, he thought hard about the look she’d given him, the power of what her eyes had said, even if she hadn’t voiced any of it.

She must have overheard him, must have understood what he hadn’t said. That he too had gone through such a life-altering event that pieces of him had shattered off.

When he parked in his garage, he closed his eyes, leaned his forehead on the steering wheel, and thought about just who he had lost. And his heart ached just as much as it had eight years before.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Every time Kate thought of throwing something or yelling, she remembered hearing the sadness in Tom's voice the other night.

How many times had she felt as if the entire world should stop turning just for her, because of her pain? Too many. Didn't the world know that she was hurting? Didn't every single person care?

Even though the pain had dulled slightly, she was still on edge. All it took was her moving wrong or too fast and the sharpness of it would steal her breath again.

She'd fallen, twice, since she'd been allowed to move around more freely. The first time, she hadn't even told her parents. The other, she'd fallen in front of them.

This had led to her parents pampering her even more. Already, her mother was watching her like a hawk. Or... well, a mother hen. Which she was. Thankfully.

Kate didn't want them to know that, deep down, she was enjoying the extra attention.

She'd been so independent for most of her life that she'd forgotten what it felt like to have someone look out for her.

She was beginning to think that if she didn't do something soon, she'd grow so accustomed to it that she wouldn't want to leave.

But what? What could she do? Dance was her everything. A lot of retired or injured dancers went on to teach, but she couldn't imagine herself doing that.

"Honey," her mother said, sitting beside her and turning off the television. "I'm running into town. I thought you might want to get dressed and come with me."

"Where?" Kate asked, already not interested. It was raining out and probably cold. She was nice and warm in her fuzzy pajamas.

"The Brew-Ha-Ha, to begin with. Then I was going to meet Sara and Brook at Baked for lunch."

She thought about spending time with her aunt and cousin and perked up a little. Since returning, she'd only seen them twice, since they were busy running their bakery, Sara's Nook.

"I guess I can go. I'll need to shower." She looked at herself.

"That's fine. Do you need any help?"

"No." She made her way down the hall, dumped her crutch, and sat on the edge of the bed.

There was a stack of trash bags that she had to wrap her leg with before climbing into her parents' shower, which thankfully had a long seat along the back.

As she passed her reflection in the mirror, she winced. Her blonde hair was dull, and her eyes were even duller. She looked mousy. Boring. Like a child. Her body, thanks to years of eight-to-ten-hour workout days and a strict diet, was rail

thin and full of lean, strong muscles. Her barely-B-size breasts and narrow hips had always been suited to dancing. As a woman of twenty-three, she wondered just what someone would see in her.

She had no future. No possibilities. Would her body go flabby? Would she gain a bunch of weight and let herself become something... different?

What?

She sat in the shower and let the water run over her, her tears mixing with the droplets.

There was still so much she had hoped to do. All of the lead roles she'd coveted. All of the dances she'd yet to learn. All of the theaters she'd wanted to dance in.

All of that was just... gone.

She looked down at her garbage-bag-wrapped leg and felt like hitting something. Instead, she washed her long hair, shaved her good leg and armpits, then climbed out of the shower.

She wiped the fog from the mirror and looked long and hard at her reflection.

About the only time she'd felt alive since her injury was when she'd been talking to Tom. That brief interaction had played over in her mind so many times since then.

Maybe she'd run into him in town?

That thought had her spending a few extra minutes on her hair and makeup.

Since it was still raining, she pulled on a pair of black leggings. It was harder than she'd imagined to pull them on



over her bandages. Then she added an oversized white sweater and low-heeled tan ankle boots.

When she stepped out of the room, her mother ran her eyes over her and smiled.

“Don’t you look lovely.” She walked over and hugged her. “You look like you’re feeling better.”

“I am,” she said with a smile.

She allowed her mother to chat the whole short drive into town.

“Oh, I have to go into Patty’s place for a quick stop. Do you need anything?” her mother asked, pulling into the grocery store’s parking lot.

There were a few things she wanted. “I’ll come in.”

“Sure.” Her mother smiled and then rushed around the car to help her out.

This was Kate’s first official outing since arriving in town. If she had thought about it ahead of time, she would have probably taken a little more time to prepare herself for the onslaught of attention.

She knew how Pride worked. It was a small town, and every single person knew everyone’s business. If they didn’t know what was going on in your life, they had no problem stopping you and asking.

Patty O’Neil owned and ran O’Neil’s Grocery. The woman had been at the small store for as long as anyone in town could remember. There were a handful of Pride townspeople, like Patty, who were... well, staples.

Even though she was getting older, she was as boisterous as ever.

“There she is,” Patty barked out when they stepped through the glass doors. “Finally come to pay us a visit?”

Kate’s mother smiled and replied. “Kate’s finally feeling up to an outing.”

“That’s good. Young people bounce back so much quicker than us old farts.” Patty chuckled. “If you need anything...”

“Thanks.” Kate smiled at the woman and took the cart her mother offered her. She figured she could lean on it instead of her crutches as she walked through the store.

“Get what you need. I’m going to grab a few things.” Her mother quickly disappeared down an aisle.

Kate strolled to the beauty section and grabbed the few things she needed. A few of her favorite brands weren’t available, and she had to settle for what was there.

She was comparing two different brands of tampons when Tom came around the corner. Seeing him, she quickly dumped both boxes into the cart, instantly embarrassed for some reason. She wouldn’t have been embarrassed in the city or with any other man she’d been interested in. But now...

Then she realized he was wearing his police uniform. The black shirt and pants somehow made him look dangerous. The gun and the other tools of his trade on his hip made him look even more so.

Her heart did a little leap at how sexy and perfect he looked in the uniform. It fit him. Just as much as toe shoes and leotards fit her.

“Morning,” Tom said with a smile as his eyes moved to her leg. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” she answered quickly. She had never been shy before. Never. For as long as she could remember, she’d been secure about everything. Her body. Her choice. Her career. Everything. Yet, for some reason, around Tom, she felt like a silly schoolgirl.

Then she noticed the bundle of flowers in his basket and felt like a fool. Of course he had someone in his life.

She’d been a fool to think otherwise. Someone as handsome and kind as him was probably married or in a serious relationship already.

“I saw your mother.” He motioned with his head down the aisle. “She mentioned you were going to hit the Brew-Ha-Ha and then lunch at Baked.”

She nodded. “I haven’t eaten at Baked yet,” she admitted.

Tom smiled. “Best pizza along the coast. They’ve opened six other locations.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Seriously? I thought it was just owned by locals?”

“Twin brothers. Corey and Carter Miller. They started to franchise a few years back and, since it’s amazing pizza, it took off.”

“You sound like a true fan.”

Tom chuckled, and the warm rich sound had her relaxing. She could still enjoy his company, even if he was already taken. Small towns were usually not great for their pickings. It had taken her going away to dance school before she’d found her first boyfriend. Now, as her eyes ran over Tom, she wondered what kind of woman had tied him down.

“I was going to head over to Baked myself for lunch,” Tom surprised her by saying. “I mean...” He cleared his throat. “Nick and I, on our break.”

Seeing him slightly flustered made her smile. “I guess we’ll see you over there,” she said, noticing her mother heading towards her.

“There you are.” Her mother stopped beside her. “We’d better head out. Did you find everything?”

“Yes. Tom was just saying that Nick and he were heading to Baked for lunch. Maybe we can hit the bookstore after?” she asked, feeling her stomach growl at the thought of food.

Her mother’s smile grew. “Sounds wonderful.” She turned to Tom. “We’ll see you over there.” Then her mother stopped. “Oh, what lovely flowers. Who is the special someone?”

Thank god for her mother, Kate thought as she waited to hear Tom’s answer.

“It’s Alice’s birthday,” he answered easily. “We all pitch in and get her flowers and a card. I drew the straw to make the run.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. It pays to work in a small town. Everyone watches out for one another,” her mother said. “We’ll see you over there.”

Tom started walking towards the front.

“You don’t find too many men like that,” her mother whispered when they were alone. “Someone would be wise to snatch him up for themselves.”

Kate glanced over at her mother, but she was facing away from her, and Kate couldn’t tell if her mother was meddling or not.

Still, it was nice to find out that Tom was single. At least her mother believed so. And that the flowers were for a coworker. Kate knew Alice. The woman had worked as the police dispatcher for years and was a grandmother.

That didn't stop her from wondering if Tom was seeing someone. As they made their way down the main street, Kate noticed a bunch of changes in the small town.

All in Bloom, the town's flower shop, sat off the main street next to the old beauty shop. Kate had worked at the floral shop whenever she'd been in town for more than a few days. She loved working with flowers almost as much as she loved dancing. Suzie Jordan, the owner, was a good friend and now married to Aiden Brogan, one of Kate's old boyfriends. Actually, Aiden had been Kate's first major crush back when she'd been in school. They had been official boyfriend and girlfriend, until Aiden had broken off things by writing her a note. He'd been in fifth grade, but still, she'd fallen hard and fast for the guy.

There was a sign for Sunset Weddings, the wedding venue owned and run by two sisters. It was just down the road from the flower shop and sat in a huge, remodeled barn.

Her mother stopped the car in front of Classy and Sassy, a boutique owned and run by her friends Riley and Lilly. Her mother parked the car directly in front of the shop. Instantly, Kate's eyes zoned in on the cute white shirt-and-shorts combo in the window.

Even though it was raining now, she knew summer would be here soon.

"That's cute," she told her mother as she got out of the car.

Her mother glanced over and smiled. "I'm so thankful for those girls opening up their shop. I used to have to drive into Edgeview to get stylish clothes. Now it's just a short walk from the house. Oh, they put some new things up." Her mother walked over to the window.

Kate followed her and noticed Riley Jordan hanging up a soft yellow sundress beside the shorts and shirt.

Riley noticed them and waved, then rushed out the front door.

"Gosh, you're home." Riley hugged Kate.

Riley was a few years older than Kate. They'd been in gym class together and had even been in a school play together once.

"How are you feeling?" Riley asked, pulling back.

"Good, much better," she answered. Then she remembered that Riley had recently gotten married. "How is married life treating you?" She took Riley's hand in hers. The short blonde was built a lot like Kate was. Both of them were roughly five foot four or five foot five.

"Great," Riley squealed, holding up her ring finger. "Carter Miller. I'm Mrs. Carter Miller." She squealed again. "And Lilly is still enjoying being married too." She motioned to the window. Kate saw Riley's cousin Lilly glance up from the register and wave at them.

Lilly was a year or two older than Riley. Kate waved back to her.

The Jordan clan were all well known and liked in Pride.

Not only did they own most of the successful business in Pride, but Lilly's mother, Lacey, was the town's mayor and her

father was the town's doctor. Kate had an appointment scheduled with him in a few days to check her progress.

Riley's father owned the Golden Oar, the best restaurant in town. Her mother was a famous painter. The list of the Jordan's many accomplishments went on and on.

Just thinking of them, Kate felt her shoulders slump a little.

"We're heading over to your husband's place now for some lunch," Kate's mother chimed in.

"Oh, I won't keep you then." Riley smiled and then hugged Kate again. "Stop by when you can and check out our new summer items."

"I like that." Kate motioned to the window. "The shirt and shorts."

Riley's smile grew. "I'll set them aside for you. What are you? Size..." Her eyes narrowed. "One?"

Kate nodded. "Thanks."

Riley chuckled. "Anytime. I'm sure glad you're home," she added before turning around and disappearing back into her shop.

Somehow, after that little meeting, the weight of her own future felt even heavier. She was a complete failure and had no future to speak of. Nothing to look forward to each day. Nothing to get her out of bed.

By the time they walked through the front doors of the pizzeria, Kate was second-guessing leaving the house that day.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Tom didn't know what had happened to Kate between the grocery store and the pizzeria. She had been flirty and happy at the store, if not slightly embarrassed about a few of the items in her cart.

Now, as he watched her come in with her mother, he could see the dullness behind her eyes. Her cheeks were a little pink from the cold outside, and the moment her eyes scanned the room and landed on him, the blush widened and she smiled.

Waving, he scooted over in hopes that Kate would sit next to him and her mother would sit next to her son. Nick glanced over his shoulder and shifted over for his mother to sit.

"We thought you two had gotten lost," Nick joked as they sat down. He wrapped an arm around his mother's shoulder when she sat next to him. "How are you doing today, sis?" he asked Kate.

"Good," Kate answered quickly as she leaned her crutches against the wall.

"I see you've finally showered and gotten out of your fuzzy pajamas," Nick said.

"I see that you're still a cop," Kate joked back.



“Still hangry I see,” Nick joked, earning him an elbow in the ribs from his mother.

“Enough you two. Behave,” Becca hissed. “Tom, I heard you had to rescue a bird yesterday?”

From there, he relayed saving someone’s pet parakeet from their chimney. “Rodney is his name,” he started. “He has figured out that if he flies up the chimney, he gets a lot of attention. I’ve warned Ken that he should block it off with some sort of netting.” He shrugged.

“Whenever we have to go over there, we play rock, paper, scissors to decide who has to climb onto the roof and get the little guy out,” Nick added. “Tom lost yesterday.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Kate said with a frown.

“Not really. Ken’s house is only one story, and the chimney isn’t in working order,” Tom answered. “Besides, Rodney is a sucker for blackberries.”

“No, it’s not the blackberries he likes. It’s Tom.” Nick laughed. “That bird has a crush on him.”

“He is a cutie,” Tom joked. “I’ve often thought about getting my own pet. Maybe not a bird who likes to cause trouble with the police, but still...”

Tom rolled his eyes and noticed that the light-hearted story had lightened Kate’s mood.

“You should head out to Carrie’s place. Check out all the animals she has out there. She may not have an attention-seeking parakeet, but maybe she’ll have something that is more your speed,” Becca said with a smile as their food arrived.

“Is that all you’re eating?” he asked Kate when she started eating her salad while everyone else dug into a large pizza with extra cheese, extra bacon, and sausage.

“It’s a huge salad,” Kate said with a smile. “And looks wonderful.”

“My sister is part rabbit,” Nick joked, earning him another elbow to the ribs. “What? Kate has never eaten anything bigger than a chicken wing.” This time Nick blocked his mother’s elbow and laughed. “Okay, I’ll stop teasing.” He turned to Kate.

The smile that Kate gave her brother hinted to Tom that she was enjoying the brotherly banter.

While they finished eating, several townspeople stopped by their table to chat with them. He’d gotten used to never having a meal undisturbed the first year after moving there. After all, Pride was a small town, even if it was growing at a rapid rate.

With the newly finished first phase of the housing project Hidden Cove, there were more and more families moving into the countryside.

Jacob and Rose Jordan were hard at work designing the next phase. Most of the new construction in town was thanks to those two. He chatted briefly with the pair, who were taking their lunch break and were seated at the table across from them.

Jacob was one of the guys they played basketball with each week, and Tom considered him a really good and reliable friend. Actually, there were a handful of guys that they played with each week that he could say that about.

Even though they were trying to keep it a secret still, he knew that Rose was three months pregnant. Jacob hadn't been able to hide his excitement the previous week during basketball practice and had told the guys. He was sure that, by now, the entire town knew.

He noticed, however, that Kate remained quiet through the meal, even when Rose tried to engage her in conversation. She didn't come off as rude, but rather as shy. Which seemed strange for someone who had lived in the big city for a long time.

He doubted anyone who'd lived in New York that long could walk away from the city shy.

Maybe she was just deep in thought. After all, she'd grown up in Pride and knew the names of everyone who had stopped by to talk. She had been cordial towards them, but he could tell something was eating at her.

Just before everyone was done eating, his and Nick's radios buzzed, and they were dispatched out to a car accident on the highway.

"There are so many accidents on this part of the highway," Nick said as they pulled over behind the black truck that had slid into the ditch.

"Job security," he said as the older man waved them down.

For the next fifteen minutes, they helped the man back the truck out of the mud and get him on his way. After that, they were called out to a property dispute, followed by a shoplifting at the local gas station.

By the time they pulled into the parking lot at the station, he was tired and wanting a shower. The last thing he expected was a message waiting for him.

“Evening, Tom.” Alice waved him towards her desk. “I have a message for you.” She pushed it towards him, then lowered her voice. “From your old chief in Las Vegas.”

He felt every fiber in his body stiffen. He quickly slid the note into his pocket and nodded. “Thanks.” He made his way into the back locker room.

Tom hung around for a while and chatted with the rest of the officers coming on or off shift, like he normally did, but he felt the note in his pocket burning with each moment he was delayed in reading it. He knew that whatever it said, Alice wouldn’t spread it around the station.

Actually, she was probably the only one besides Aiden Brogan, who had hired him, who knew where and what he’d come from. He hadn’t hidden anything, but at the same time, he didn’t wear a sign telling everyone about his dark past.

Finally, he climbed into his personal car and read the note.

“Tom, Just a heads up. Your father’s parole hearing is next month.–Larry”

He crumpled the note and suddenly felt like hitting something. He drove to the gym instead of home, figuring the punching bag would help him lose the anger.

He dumped his gym bag in his locker and headed to the boxing area. He waited a few moments for the heavy bag to become available and then strapped his gloves on. He took his stance and, with each hit, his father’s face flashed before his eyes.

Scenes of what had happened that night years before replayed in his mind until his knuckles felt bruised and his arms were so heavy, he doubted he’d be able to lift them the

next day. Still, the ache to punch something was as strong as it had been when he'd walked in.

“What did that bag ever do to you?”

He glanced over and saw Kate sitting on a weight bench watching him.

Suddenly, his sour mood was completely gone. Taking a deep breath, he walked over and sat beside her to remove his gloves.

“Surely you'd like to punch someone just as much?” He motioned to the bag and then held up his gloves. When she didn't take them, he added, “I heard that the guy that did this to you is still dancing the lead with his girlfriend.”

Her eyes narrowed as she took the gloves from him. “I've never punched anything before.” She fumbled to put on the gloves.

He smiled. “It's not that hard.” He took the gloves from her and slipped them on her hands, letting his fingers linger on the soft skin over her wrist. He helped her stand. When she reached for her crutches, he held onto her. “You've got one good leg, and something tells me you have a good sense of balance.”

She smiled up at him and then nodded. “Okay, what's next.”

He helped her move over to the bag. “Stand at almost arm's length from the bag. Now, you stand like...” He shifted her a little. “Legs apart. Well, at least shift until your good leg is farthest from the bag. Shoulders square.” He nudged her shoulders. “Lift your arms.” He showed her while still helping her stand. “Then...” He swung out with his free fist and sent the bag swaying.

She frowned slightly and was concentrating so hard that he wondered if she was going to move. Then she swung out and just tapped the bag. Her weight shifted and he had to catch her from falling into the bag.

“Easy.” He chuckled. “Not bad,” he said when she was balanced again. “Now, imagine the bag is what’s his name.”

“Dmitri,” she supplied.

“Imagine it’s Dmitri.” He nodded and then stood back while she punched the bag almost a dozen times. Her form got better with each swing.

“It’s heavy,” she said, motioning to the bag. “I thought it would be easier to push around.” She leaned against the bag. “I’m tired already. You were punching it for almost half an hour.”

His eyebrows rose slightly. Had she been watching him? Had she been here working out? She was dressed in those black leggings most women wore to the gym and a tight tank top. She had on tennis shoes, and her long blonde hair was in a long braid that lay over her shoulders. There was a slight pink to her cheeks but the rest of her looked pale. Her eyes looked dull, and he could see she was in pain. Taking her elbow, he led her back to the bench.

“Does your family know you’re here?” he asked, suddenly worried. How had she gotten here?

Kate frowned and then let out a low growling sound.

“I’m so tired of being treated like a cripple.” She threw up her hands and then motioned for him to help her remove the gloves.

“Hey.” He sat down beside her. “I’m not treating you like that. There’s no doubt that you are capable of knowing your

own limits,” he said as he removed the gloves. “I’m just wondering how you got here if you can’t drive.”

He watched her relax a little. “I walked.”

“From your parents’ house?”

She nodded. “It’s not that far.”

He shifted as he tossed his gloves into his gym bag. “Did you work out?” He motioned to the gym equipment.

She nodded. “Pilates helps me loosen up.”

He glanced towards the two machines against the other wall. He’d never really understood how pulling your body in different directions was a workout.

“What?” she asked with a laugh.

“Hm?” he shook his head.

“You look like you don’t like Pilates.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’ve never done it, so I couldn’t tell you. But I just don’t see how it could be helpful to someone like me.”

Her eyebrows rose. “You’d be surprised. I had never boxed until now. I bet if you gave Pilates a chance, you’d like it.”

“Did you like boxing?”

She glanced over to the bag and nodded. “I wish I had the strength to hit it a few more times.”

“If you want, we can meet here again, and I’ll help you with your form,” he suggested.

She ran her eyes over him slowly. “Only if you agree to some Pilates.”

He groaned but then realized it was an excuse to spend more time with her. “Okay, it’s a deal.” He stood up and then helped her stand. “Now, how about you let me drive you home?”

She sighed and relaxed slightly. “I was hoping you’d offer. I really didn’t want to walk back.”



## CHAPTER SIX

---

As they headed out on the short trip back to her parents' place, she realized she didn't want to go back just yet. After he helped her out to his car, she turned to him.

"How about keeping me company while I eat something at the Golden Oar?" she suggested.

He glanced over at her. "I haven't showered after my workout."

She shrugged. "Neither have I. We can sit outside on the deck."

"Avoiding going home?"

She laughed. "Just trying to get some fresh air."

"Okay, I could eat." He turned his car towards the Oar instead of her parents' house.

He helped her out of his car when they parked in the Golden Oar's parking lot. One thing she did remember from her youth growing up in Pride was this restaurant. It had been her downfall when trying to maintain her weight when younger. That and her aunt's eclairs. She could eat a dozen of them in one sitting.

Now, as they stepped through the custom glass doors, the smells of good food hit her, reminding her even more of her

childhood. Her stomach growled as they made their way to the back deck, which overlooked the Pacific.

The sun would be setting in an hour, and the deck was fairly packed with people. Most of them said hello to Tom.

“Do you know everyone in town?” she asked as she sat down.

“Most.” He set her crutches against the railing and sat down. “That’s the benefit of being a cop in a small town. You grew up here. Don’t you know most everyone?”

She thought about it. “I know a lot, but not everyone. A lot of new people have moved into town with the new housing development.”

“You know the Jordan clan, right?” he asked, motioning towards Sara, who was heading towards them with a tray of waters.

“Sure,” she said quickly. “They’re basically family.”

“Evening,” Sara said with a smile and a hug after setting the tray down. “I had heard you were back in town, Kate. Have you seen Suzie yet?”

“Yes,” Kate answered easily. She’d run into Suzie at the book shop the other day. Kate used to work at Suzie’s shop and, out of all the Jordans, had been the closest to her growing up. “How are the twins doing?”

“They’re great. They grow up too fast,” Sara said, putting a hand over her growing belly. “Then again, we’ll have another one soon enough to keep us busy again.”

“I’d heard. Congratulations,” Kate said cheerfully.

“Your usual?” Sara asked Tom, who nodded.

“Thanks,” he said with a smile. Tom didn’t just know everyone in town, he was friends with them as well.

After ordering and getting their drinks, they were left alone, and suddenly Kate realized that most of the other people on the deck were couples out on dates.

Suddenly, she felt awkward. She hadn’t meant for this to be a date. It was true that, out of everyone in town whom she wasn’t related to, Tom was the easiest to get along with. For some reason, she felt closer to him than anyone else at the moment. Including her family.

Maybe because she could see something behind his dark eyes that she hadn’t seen in anyone else. There was a story there. One that he was hiding from everyone he knew.

“So,” she said after taking a sip of her lemon water, “where did you move from?”

The corner of his lips curved just the slightest. “Making small talk?”

She shook her head. “Getting to know my brother’s partner,” she corrected.

He nodded. “Okay, I’ll answer, but only if we do a question for a question.”

She thought about her dull life. How she had basically only been eating, sleeping, and breathing ballet for the past... well, all of her life... and nodded.

“That’s fair.” She motioned to him with her water glass.

“Las Vegas,” he answered. “When did you move to New York?”

“When I was thirteen,” she answered. “Do you have family?”

His eyes darkened. “Yes. Where did you live when you were in New York?”

“SAB’s housing. Brother? Sister?”

“SAB?” he asked instead of answering.

“School of American Ballet.”

“So, you lived at a school the entire time?”

“No, not the entire time. When I could afford it, I moved into a small apartment just down the street. I wanted”—she shook her head—“needed my own space.”

“And now you’re forced to live in your parents’ place, indefinitely?” he said.

Her heart sank slightly. “I plan on changing that soon.”

“Oh?” His eyebrows shot up. “Where would you go?”

“Patty’s apartment will be available soon,” she answered, remembering her brief discussion with the older woman earlier that day. “When I can climb the stairs without worry, I’ll move in. She’s holding it for me. She even told me that she has some furniture that she’d move in for me.”

“I lived there myself until I purchased my place,” he surprised her by saying.

“Where is your place?”

He leaned his head and pointed. “Just down there, the blue roof.”

She glanced over and saw the brown home with a blue roof that sat just off the docks.

“Nice,” she said, not sure if she had ever noticed the place before.

“It is now. You should have seen it when I moved in.” He chuckled. “Your brother’s place is a million times better than what mine was when I moved in. But hey, that’s why I got it for cheap.”

As their food was delivered, she realized that he’d steered the subject away from his family. While she dug into her favorite meal there, the chicken salad, and he into the steak he’d ordered, she asked again. “Are you an only child?”

“I am now,” he said, softly.

“I’m so sorry.” She immediately felt like a prying fool.

“It’s been ten years, and not a day goes by that I don’t think of calling or texting Ryan.” Tom set down his fork and took a sip of his beer.

“What happened?” she asked, wishing she’d just shut up. It was so obvious he didn’t want to talk about it, but she kept digging a deeper hole.

His eyes met hers. “He was killed, along with my mother.” He shifted to look behind her. “It appears your family has found you.” He pointed, and she glanced over to see her parents standing just inside the doors.

Kate waved as they made their way towards them. She’d texted them that she was taking a walk, but that had been a couple hours ago. They hadn’t texted or called her, and she figured they trusted that she would let them know if she needed help.

“How wonderful,” her mother said, cheerfully. “We were just coming to join the Stevens for dinner. I take it by your attire that the two of you hit the gym?”

Thankfully, her parents stood instead of taking the two vacant seats at their table.

“Yes,” Tom answered easily. “I ran into Kate and gave her a quick lesson in boxing.”

Her father smiled and looked down at her. “How’d you do?”

“Not so good, but Tom has agreed to teach me a little more tomorrow,” she answered.

“That’s good,” her mother said. “Just don’t... push yourself too much.”

Kate nodded. “I won’t.”

Her father touched her mother’s arm. “There’s Lacey and Aaron now.” He motioned to the windows, and Kate noticed the other couple.

Lacey Stevens had always been a role model to Kate. The woman was smart, funny, and powerful in the town, but she wielded her power with grace.

Neither she nor Aaron had changed in years. They were still one of Pride’s “it” couples. They were always smiling, and it was obvious just how much they still loved one another. Even after all these years.

“We’d better head inside,” her mother said, “Have a nice dinner. Do you have a house key?”

“Yes.” She waved as her parents disappeared back into the restaurant. “Does it bother you?” she asked, turning back to Tom.

“What?” he asked, sipping his beer.

“Knowing everyone? In the city, you could walk down the same street every day of the year and never have anyone stop and talk to you.”

“I’d bet that would be lonely. I felt that way in Vegas,” he admitted. “One of the reasons I moved here.”

She supposed that to anyone who didn’t have a little social anxiety, like she did currently, it would be a blessing to be surrounded by people you knew.

With her injury and the stories about her on everyone’s minds, she felt as if the spotlight was on her every time she stepped outside of her parents’ place. She was used to being in the spotlight, but this was different. This was personal. It was as if her life, her choices, were being weighed and criticized.

Whenever someone stopped off and talked to him, she felt her pulse spike, just like she had at the pizza place the other day. Everyone inquired about her health, about her future. She didn’t have answers for them, which only made her feel more and more frustrated.

It reminded her of her pre-show jitters. She didn’t know what she was anxious about, other than having to explain herself.

“What are the other reasons?” she asked, trying to make the conversation casual again.

“Vegas is an expensive place to live,” he said with a shrug.

“New York, too. Still, I guess I liked living there just the same.”

“I bet you didn’t get that.” He motioned with his chin to the sun setting over the water. “You can’t beat that view.”

She watched the sun sink to just below the horizon and realized she’d been holding her breath. He was right. There wasn’t a better view anywhere.

She'd traveled with her company to Paris, Rome, and all over the States over the years. Nothing could compare to the sunset she was watching now.

"Beautiful," he said softly.

"It is pretty amazing." She turned back to him and felt her face heat when she noticed that he'd been watching her instead of the sunset.

"Do you plan on sticking around Pride once you're back on both feet?" he asked suddenly.

She frowned. She hadn't planned on leaving, hadn't even thought about it. Her dancing career was basically shot. It would take years and years of training her leg to hold her up again. She knew that most dancers with similar injuries never danced professionally again.

She supposed she could ask Suzie to hire her on again. After all, she'd really enjoyed working with the flowers and with her friend.

But that made her feel she was going backwards. Working at your friend's shop during downtime was a lot different than turning it into a career. A future.

"Wow, okay, I can see your inner struggle." He reached over and laid his hand over hers. The simple contact somehow shook her out of the dark feelings and thoughts. "Sometimes it's best just to take one day at a time."

She knew he was right. But still, in the back of her mind, she was having a full panic attack.

"Tomorrow," he said, rolling her hand over until he was holding her hand in his. "I'll pick you up and we'll hit the gym. I'll show you even more ways to punch out all those thoughts and fears while you teach me how to stretch out



mine. Who knows, maybe I'll even like Pilates and start wearing tights like the guys you dance with."

She laughed at the thought of him in leotards.

"No, you have a boxer's body, not a dancer's."

His dark eyebrows rose. "I think that's a good thing."

To her it was. She'd enjoyed watching his muscles work as he'd hit the bag earlier. He'd been wearing a black tank top and gym shorts, and all she could think about was playing her fingers over those muscles. How they would feel wrapped around her, over her, under her.

She'd never dated a dancer for one reason—none had the body type she liked. Tom did. That should have scared her, as she needed to focus on her future and her life and career change. Instead, it excited her.

"Yeah." She smiled. "It is."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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The following day, Tom sat in the small meeting room at the station with the rest of Pride’s police force. There were eighteen employees in total—four dispatchers, Aiden as chief, and the rest cops like him. A few had been on the force for years and years, such as David and Simon. Tom Rowlings, the other Tom, or Tom Sr. as everyone jokingly called him, had retired early last year but still came around and lent a hand when they were busy.

Even Robert, Aiden’s father and the previous chief, was present today, which meant, the meeting was important.

“Thanks,” Aiden said, holding up his hands to get everyone’s attention.

Of course, there had been donuts and coffee, so everyone was hopped up on sugar. It took a moment or two for everyone to finally settle and sit down.

“Thanks,” Aiden said again. “I’d like to say that I’ll keep this brief, but...” Several people groaned and Aiden nodded. “Yeah, we have a few things to go over. First, next month is the Fourth of July Festival, which means, the town will be flooded with people from all over the state. Downtown will be blocked off and, this year, parking for the event is going to be in the Chamberlin’s field. There will be shuttles, and the

Chamberlins have agreed to have their horse-drawn carriages running again.”

There were several cheers.

“Yes, since it was a huge success last year, they’ve added a carriage. The Porta-Potties will be set up on second street, by the firehouse. We will need bodies to man the—” Before Aiden could finish, several people raised their hands. “The booth.” Aiden rolled his eyes. Then he turned to him. “Tom and Nick, you’re up this year.”

Everyone who had their hands up groaned.

“The rest of you are on traffic and parking duty.” There were more groans.

Once the conversation about the July Fourth celebration finished, the rest of the meeting was about schedules and standard reminders.

He’d worked parking for all of last year’s festivals. They held one four times a year—in the spring, Fourth of July, in the fall, and another to light the huge Christmas tree in the town square.

Parking lot duty was by far the worst job he could think of during the festival. Standing in the police booth, you got to chat and visit with everyone who walked by. You usually handed out plastic police badge pins to the little kids along with little bags filled with stickers, coloring books, and other fun items. You talked to the townspeople about their concerns or just stood there, watching everyone else have fun.

He was looking forward to manning the booth and wondered what he and Nick had done to get on Aiden’s good side. Whatever it was, he wasn’t going to knock the opportunity.

As he and Nick walked out and headed to their patrol car, Nick slapped his shoulder.

“We just won the freaking lottery,” Nick joked.

“No kidding. What’d you do? Butter Aiden up?” Tom asked.

“Me?” Nick laughed. “I was thinking you’d done something.” He slid into the patrol car.

Tom headed out towards the school, since they were on parking lot duty again this morning. “Nope. I did run into him last night while Kate and I—”

“Oh?” Nick broke in. “You were what?”

“Having dinner at the Golden Oar,” he finished. “I ran into her at the gym, and she suggested we grab food since I was driving her home. She’d walked to the gym,” he said quickly, feeling the need to explain.

“Easy bro.” Nick chuckled and slapped his shoulder again. “I know, my folks mentioned it to me last night. They said you’re going to teach her how to box?”

Tom relaxed. “Yeah, and she’s going to show me how to work out on those Pilate machines.”

Nick laughed. “Now that I’d pay to see.”

“No.” He practically growled it, causing Nick to laugh even more.

As they strapped on their vests and started waving traffic through, he thought about that night. He was really looking forward to spending more time with Kate.

Since his first run-in with her, she’d changed. He understood the frustration she felt, losing her way of life so

quickly. Having it ripped from her by a madman. But she was lucky to have her family here to support her. Lucky to have people who loved her and helped her get back on her feet.

Tom hadn't had anyone. Until he'd moved to Pride, that is.

Near lunchtime, he and Nick headed to Baked for food and ran into a group of high school kids. They ended up hanging with the teens until they had to head back to school.

It was strange how well liked the police were with the majority of the kids. In Vegas, the last thing any of the teens would want to do was chill with the cops in a pizza shop. Hell, when he'd been a kid, he would have never even looked at an officer, for fear of getting their attention. He hadn't gotten in a lot of trouble, but still, his father would have given him a hard time if he'd known he was hanging out with those he deemed the enemy.

The rest of his shift flew by, with more than a half dozen minor calls. When he grabbed his gym bag and headed for the door, Nick asked.

“Heading to the B&G Club?”

“Yeah, I'm meeting your sister there for boxing lessons.”

Nick smiled. “And your Pilates lessons.” He nudged him with his elbow.

“Hey, if it gets your sister out of the house...” He shrugged.

Nick slapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, man, I saw the way she looks at you. Like you're her freaking savior.”

Tom stopped in the parking lot and frowned at him. “No.”

Nick laughed. “Whatever, dude. All I know is, I doubt she'd let me or my dad teach her how to box.” He disappeared

towards his car.

Tom thought he heard a “thanks,” but he wasn’t quite sure.

Still, as he drove to pick Kate up, he felt his entire body grow more excited to see her. When he pulled into the driveway, she was sitting outside on the front porch with a gym bag at her feet.

“Hey.” He jumped out and rushed to carry the bag for her.

“Hey.” She smiled at him. “I’m eager to get going.”

He smiled. “Sorry, we had a meeting this morning that caused everything to be pushed back about half an hour.”

“It’s not a problem. I was just enjoying the fresh air,” she said as he helped her into the car.

He backed up and headed towards the Boys and Girls Club.

“It is a nice day,” he agreed. “We’re due for some warmer weather next week.”

“I can’t wait for it to be warm enough for swimming. Do you know, I used to hit the B&G Club every week for laps.”

He glanced at her. “Ballet and swimming?”

She nodded. “Along with tap, theater, and FFA.”

“Wow, overachiever?” he joked.

“I like to stay busy.” She shrugged. “What about you?”

“Boxing,” he answered. “I suppose I like running, but I wasn’t in track.”

He wanted to tell her that the only reason he’d picked up boxing was to fight back when his father hit him. But he stayed quiet.

“You went to school in Vegas?” she asked.

“Arizona, Flagstaff, for a while. Then we moved to Vegas when I was fifteen,” he said. “You were thirteen when you moved to New York? You went to school here before?”

“Regular school, yes. For a while I went to dance classes in Portland. Shuffling from here to the city each week helped prepare me for the big city.”

“Being a thirteen-year-old living in New York must have been scary,” he said as he parked at the club.

“No, it was exciting,” she answered as he turned off the car. Then he rushed over and helped her out, grabbing both of the gym bags and tossing them over his shoulder.

They signed in at the front desk and showed their badges, and he carried her bag to the women’s locker room door.

“Can you handle it from here?” he asked.

She opened the door, and he set the bag just inside. “Yes.” She smiled. “I’ll meet you out there.” She walked through the door with her crutches.

He turned and stepped into the men’s locker rooms. As he changed into his gym attire, he thought of what it would be like, being so young and living in a huge city all by himself. What could he have accomplished if he hadn’t been held back by his father?

At one point in his life, he’d been offered a boxing career. He hadn’t been at the top of his weight class, but he’d been good enough that with a few more years training, he could have done something with it.

He’d also been offered a scholarship because of it. Tom had been good at school but not good enough for an academic

scholarship. But with the boxing, he could have gotten his foot in the door.

Then again, he supposed he had been destined to become a cop. Even before...

He stepped out of the locker room and saw Kate across the room using a Pilates machine.

She'd changed into gray tights with a soft pink leotard over it. Her good leg was stretched over her head as she lay on her back. Her toe pointed farther than he imagined he could ever stretch with his. She looked ever much the dancer. Even with her hurt leg wrapped up, she appeared in peak physical condition.

Quite literally every thought in his mind disappeared in a puff of steam, and his entire body was now on fire. He watched her move with the machine, slowly using the bands to stretch her good leg clear above her head in a split. All he could think about was how it would feel to have those legs wrap around him.

He didn't know how long he stood there, watching her stretch, but apparently long enough that someone nudged his shoulder so he would clear the pathway to the locker rooms.

He moved towards her as if in a daze and stopped next to the machine.

"Hey," he said. His voice sounded off slightly.

She sat up and smiled slowly. "Ready for your torture?"

Hell, yes, he was. His mouth had gone dry, and his entire body was already sweating. Thoughts of her tying him up, using him, played over and over in his mind until he realized that if he didn't stop, he'd have to excuse himself.



He nodded slowly, trying to think of anything other than how sexy she looked.

“Okay, sit.” She motioned to the machine next to him.

He had yet to even look at the machine and somehow managed to sit down without falling over. His eyes were still glued to her.

“Do what I do,” she said, and for the next half hour, he followed along as best as he could. Her body was a million times more limber than his, even though she didn’t work with her bad leg at all.

The crazy thing was, after half an hour, he was sweating and knew that he would be sore the following day. Some of the muscles that he stretched on the machine had never been worked before. Hell, most of them he didn’t even know he had. He’d never worked them out before.

It took all his willpower to not limp towards the boxing bags. He helped Kate strap on a pair of gloves.

“Remember how to stand?” He leaned her crutches on the wall, then placed his hands on her waist until she was steady. Stepping back, he moved over and held onto the bag.

“Keep your shoulder up, elbow out a little more,” he said as she took her first swing. He coached her as she took a few more swings.

A few swings in, her form improved, and she actually had some power behind each hit.

She stopped and hugged the bag, and he noticed she was a little breathless.

“I think it’s your turn.” She motioned towards the bag. “Show me what you can do.”

She leaned over and took her crutches and then stood against the wall while he pulled on his gloves.

Today, the news about his father wasn't as fresh in his mind, but still, he pulled up an image of his father the last time he saw him and took his first swing.

Ten minutes later, with sweat dripping down between his shoulder blades, he stepped back and met Kate's eyes.

Instantly, he could see they were full of desire, just like his had been earlier for her.

He rested his gloved hand on the wall next to her and leaned in until he was a breath away. Her eyes moved to his lips for a split second, causing him to lower his gaze to hers.

They looked so plump and kissable that without thinking, he dipped his head towards hers as she moved towards him.

The kiss was quick, soft, and more damaging than anything he'd ever experienced. He knew that, now, he wouldn't be able to go without more. Without experiencing just what it would feel like to explore her mouth, her body, all of her.

"Kate," he said, closing his eyes and resting his forehead on hers.

"Are you done?" someone said, clearing their throat.

Tom glanced over and saw Reece Crawford motioning towards the bag.

"Yeah," Tom said, straightening up. "We're done here."

"Hi, Kate," Reece said with a smile.

"Hi." Kate's face flushed slightly.

Reece Crawford was a few years younger than Tom. The guy was easily as built as him, if not more so. He was well over six foot three inches, whereas Tom was just shy of six feet.

“Hannah told me you were back in town,” Reece said, pulling on his own gloves. Reece glanced between Tom and Kate. “I hadn’t heard you two were...” Tom cleared his throat, and Reece’s smile grew. “Well, it was good seeing you again.” Reece started hitting the bag.

Tom motioned towards the locker rooms. “Shall we hit the beach for a walk to cool off?”

Kate nodded and followed him towards the back door.

They walked in silence until they hit the sand. Then Tom took Kate’s arm as she switched her crutches to her bad side.

“Maybe I should—” he started, but she gave him a look, and he stopped. He held in a chuckle. Clearly she wanted to do it on her own.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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**B**y the time they made it to the water's edge, Kate had a bead of sweat rolling down her back. How had she gone from being a super healthy athlete in top form to breaking into a sweat and panting when she walked ten feet across sand?

“Are you okay?” Tom asked her.

“I swear I'm in better shape than this.” She sat down in the sand.

Tom chuckled as he sat in the sand next to her. “Of that, there is no doubt. I would wager you could dance circles around me. Before...” He motioned to her leg.

She had reached down and was rubbing it, without realizing.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“No, the incision itches. I get my stitches out in a few days. I've pulled most of them out myself.”

“Dr. Stevens?”

She nodded. “It will be good to go back to him. He's been my doctor since I was born.”

“He's been almost everyone's doctor here in town, at least those under the age of thirty.” He laughed. “Before him,

everyone had his grandfather, or so I've heard like a million times," Tom said as she pulled her good knee up to her chest and looked out over the water.

He leaned back on his hands and watched her.

"Did you like growing up here?" he asked.

She rested her chin on her good knee and sighed. "It was possibly the best place to grow up. Everyone knew you, supported you in what you wanted, watched out for you. If I'd had that in the city..." She shook her head, remembering the betrayal from Dmitri and Isabella. Whose idea had it been to take her out of the equation, she wondered. She'd believed that her friendship with Dmitri had been solid after all the hours they had trained together.

Tom nudged her shoulder with his. "Are you okay?"

"I was just thinking... wondering, really, why Dmitri would do something like this?" She motioned to her knee.

"There was some sort of investigation, right?" Tom asked.

Kate shrugged. "I was immediately taken away in an ambulance. So far, my parents haven't really told me what they were told. And to be honest, I'm too... deep in my own thoughts to look at any news about it."

He shifted and pulled out his cell phone. She held her breath until he finally pulled up an article. "Want to?" He held his phone between them. She could have pushed it away and continued being swallowed by her self-pity. But the look in his eyes somehow gave her strength.

She scanned the article while Tom looked over her shoulder, reading along.

“There really isn’t anything here,” she said after reading the short article about her fall, about how Dmitri claimed that he’d slipped on the stage, and she’d ended up at the bottom of the orchestra pit.

It went on to describe her injury and then how Isabella, Kate’s understudy, would be filling in for her during the entire tour.

Tom took her phone and scanned for more articles.

“There really isn’t anything more on it, other than a few reviews of the show since Isabella took over for you.” He showed her those.

She read, soaking in each and every word. One reviewer described Isabella as stiff with a serious lack of emotion in her dancing. Another said that it was the most dispassionate display that they had seen all year.

The more they read about Isabella taking over for her, the more it seemed that everyone had really been looking forward to seeing her dance instead.

“Was she really that bad?” Tom asked as he put his phone away.

“No.” Kate frowned. “But then again, she was my understudy. She practiced when I wasn’t there. At times, to begin with, we practiced side by side. But I was too focused on my own form and portraying my character to even look in her direction. Then again, I would have thought Gabriel Léandre would have spotted any issues and chosen someone else if he didn’t like what Isabella was giving him.”

“So, the question is, why would your partner dump you for Isabella then?” Tom asked. “Rumors were that they were an item.”

Kate frowned at this. “No.” She shook her head. “There’s no way. Dmitri is...” She dropped off as she bit her lip, remembering she’d been sworn to secrecy.

“Gay?” Tom asked.

Kate shook her head. “Not all male dancers are gay.”

“I didn’t mean to assume,” Tom added.

“No, at one point, Dmitri dated men. I walked in on him and his old partner once. But in the past year he’d confided in me that he’d found someone new. Someone he really wanted to be with. He didn’t give me a name, only that it was a woman this time. Anyway, I’m sure the rumors are just a misdirection somehow from the real reason. Maybe he did just... slip.”

“How do you stop yourselves from slipping all over the stage?” Tom asked, shifting slightly. His knee brushed up against her good one, and she felt her heart rate spike.

“There are many ways to stop slipping. For big performances, a sort of wax is placed on the stage. For practices, dancers can dampen the bottoms of their shoes.”

“What did Dmitri use that day?”

Kate shrugged. “I didn’t ask or check. We trusted one another.” She felt her heart sink slightly. “It’s hard to recover after something like that.”

He was silent for a moment, and when she glanced over at him, she realized he was staring off over the water.

The sun was finally setting, and she felt her stomach growl. When she was dancing, she would be on her feet for almost ten hours a day, either walking to and from SAB or dancing in classes, which meant she had a very tight eating

schedule and her calories all laid out for her each day. Since returning home, she'd just eaten whatever she'd felt like or whatever had been set in front of her. The first few days, that hadn't been a lot due to her medications.

Now, however, if she didn't get back on some sort of schedule, she would be fighting the same weight issues she had as a youth.

"How about we head to Baked?" she suggested and was thankful when he smiled and then helped lift her from the sand.

She hadn't meant to lean on him so much but ended up plastering her body against his. He stilled, his eyes moving to her lips.

"Kate." Her name was a whisper in the warm air.

She didn't know what caused her move, or even who moved first, her or him. The moment their lips touched, it was as if she'd been dancing for an entire day. Her breath hitched and her heart raced as her body arched into his even more.

The taste of him was almost too much. Every fiber of her being ached for more.

Her fingers dug into his jacket, holding onto him as if he was her lifeline. His hands snaked up and buried in her hair, pulling it free from the ponytail she'd had it in. When it fell around her face, he groaned and tipped his head slightly until his lips ran over her neck.

A shiver of excitement raced through her entire body the moment his lips touched just below her earlobe. His warm breath played along her skin, causing bumps to rise over her everywhere.



“Tom,” she sighed and leaned her head back, watching the sky grow darker above them as he continued to trail kisses over her neck.

Then, she shifted. It was stupid, really. She’d been so focused on the pleasure that she’d totally forgotten about her leg. Forgotten that she couldn’t trust her own body to do something as simple as hold its own weight.

Stars burst behind her eyes. White hot pain seared her mind as her entire body buckled. If not for Tom’s strong arms around her, she would have crumpled to the sand beneath them.

Instead, she felt her entire body go numb and weightless as Tom lifted her in his arms.

“I’ve got you,” he said next to her ear.

Then she realized he was walking at a fast pace across the sand.

“I’m okay,” she said, feeling the pain lessen with each moment.

“No, you’re not. I’m taking you to see Dr. Stevens.” His voice was laced with concern.

“Tom, I just put weight on it. Really. See.” She shifted slightly in his arms and motioned to her leg. “The pain is already gone. I just... forgot.” She smiled slightly.

He stilled and looked down at her. “You went white.”

She nodded. “Yeah, it was a lot of pain. I’m not supposed to put weight on it yet. Really, I’m okay.” She smiled and realized that all of the pain was now pretty much gone. At least it had returned to the dull ache that she’d felt since she’d woken from surgery.

He ran his eyes over her face and seemed to believe that she was telling him the truth.

“I left your crutches.” He motioned behind them.

“Set me down here.” She nudged his shoulder and instantly enjoyed the play of muscles under her fingers. She’d been so preoccupied with what his mouth was doing to her, she’d forgotten to enjoy them earlier.

She vowed not to make the same mistake next time. He set her down softly in the sand and crossed the sand quickly to pick up her crutches and her bag from where she’d left them.

When he came back to her, instead of handing them to her, he shifted them under his arm and easily lifted her back into his arms and carried her to his car.

She didn’t complain because it gave her more time to explore his arms and shoulders as he walked.

“Kate,” he said when they reached his car. “You’re killing me.” He tossed her crutches in the car and then let her slide down between him and the car.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and, this time, made a point to stand firmly on her good leg.

“Good,” she said with a smile, right before she leaned up and kissed him again.

She enjoyed herself until another car pulled into the parking lot, then he took a step back and helped her into his car.

They drove the few blocks to Baked in silence. When he parked, however, he turned to her.

“This...” He motioned between them. “Is your brother going to beat me up?”

She laughed. “No, Nick knows I kiss and other things.” She reached over and took his hand. “He’s not a psycho protective brother. At least not when it comes to me and men.”

“Good, because I was hoping we could do more of the kissing and possibly other things.” He smiled and leaned closer to her. But before he could kiss her, someone honked, and they both looked up and saw Nick and Brook walk into Baked.

“Think they saw us?” she asked him, and he sighed.

“Let’s go find out.” Before she could move, he leaned over and kissed her quickly. “If I’m going to get in trouble for this, then I might as well enjoy it beforehand.”

Since it was Friday night and they lived in a small town, Baked was completely packed. If not for luck, they would have had to stand in line and wait for a table or booth. But when they walked in, Corey waved them forward.

“Disabled people get first seating,” Corey said, quickly.

Of course, this caused everyone in the line to groan, especially her brother and cousin.

“We’re with them,” Brook said quickly. She took Kate’s arm and followed them to a booth.

“You’re lucky we like you,” Kate joked as she sat down. Brook took her crutches and leaned on the table.

“I hope you didn’t mind. It’s not like we’re interrupting a date,” Brook said quickly. She motioned to their attire. “You two look like you just got back from the gym.”

“Tom is teaching me how to box,” Kate chimed in as Tom sat next to her, leaving Brook and Nick on the other side of the booth.

Tom reached under the table and took her hand in his. Just the simple touch had her smile doubling.

“How’s that going?” Nick asked, sneaking a peek over the menu at her. “Is she ready for the championships yet?”

Tom chuckled. “Her form is improving.”

Nick set down his menu and smiled. “And your Pilates?”

Brook leaned forward and practically whispered. “You’re doing Pilates with Kate?”

Kate couldn’t help but laugh at the look Tom gave them.

“She’s a machine. I stopped working out with her in sixth grade,” Brook said with a smile.

They hadn’t planned on having dinner with her brother and cousin, but by the end of the meal, she was very thankful they had run into them. She’d forgotten how much fun it could be hanging out with people she liked.

As far as family went, they were the best. Brook and Nick had been there anytime she’d needed them growing up.

They, along with her parents and aunt and uncle, had flown to the city for opening night the first time she’d gotten a lead role. They had supported her in everything she’d done.

Not once growing up or in the past few years had she ever questioned if she’d been loved.

Then she remembered how Tom had said that his mother and brother were dead. He hadn’t told her the details of how he’d lost them. What about his father?

He seemed distant and sad about the entire thing. So much so that she was leery of asking him for more details.

Maybe her brother knew more?

Tomorrow was Saturday. She could ask him then. On Saturdays, her brother usually came over and helped their dad with his latest project. For as long as she could remember, her dad and brother had a car or another piece of machinery they were rebuilding or fixing.

Their current project was an old Ford truck that they were rebuilding in her parents' four-car garage.

"I like your family," Tom said as he drove her back to her parents' place. "I have ever since moving here."

"They seem to like you right back." Her stomach bubbled with excitement. Would he kiss her again? It was practically all she could think about. That and the fact that she probably had pizza breath. She had found a mint at the bottom of her purse when she'd gone to the bathroom after eating. Still, she worried about it. And when she worried, she tended to rattle on about things, which she was currently doing.

She talked about her life in the city. Her classes. The shows that she'd been in.

By the time Tom parked in her parents' driveway, she was pretty sure he knew all there was to know about her.

Finally, she shut her mouth as he turned off his car.

"Thanks," he said, turning towards her. "For tonight. It's not often I step outside my comfort zone."

"Me either," she agreed. "I would have just stuck with my Pilates until I could get back to my normal routine. I would have never thought of learning how to box."

He was frowning slightly. "You... Do you think you'll be able to go back to what you were?"

She looked down at her leg and felt her heart sink. “No, my career as a professional dancer is over.”

“Still,” he said quickly, “there are other things you could do.”

She looked up at him. “Don’t say teach.” She practically groaned it.

He shifted a little more towards her. “Why not? Someone had to teach you how to dance.” He tilted his head as his eyes ran over her. “Are you discounting the women and men that did?”

She frowned and then thought back to the many dance instructors she’d had over the years. She’d looked up to them. Each and every one. Her heart did another funny flip, only this time, the pain was self-inflicted. She *had* discounted the career of teaching dance. It was true—those on the top rarely looked up to those below them. She felt so foolish.

“I can see that, again, you’re stepping outside your comfort zone.” He chuckled. Then he surprised her by leaning over and brushing his lips gently across hers. “Good. Think about it. If it’s right for you, things will fall into place. If not...” He shrugged. “You could always become a professional boxer.”

## CHAPTER NINE

---

Every day after work, Tom picked up Kate and they hit the gym. She'd had her stitches removed, and the large white bandage on her leg had been replaced with skin-colored medical wrap. She still had to walk with a crutch but had switched to just using one and claimed it was easier to get around that way.

Her boxing was improving.

His Pilates wasn't.

Actually, the more he worked with her, the sorer he got. He limped into work every morning as if he'd run a marathon the night before.

Everyone made fun of him, but at the same time, he could tell they were happy he was helping Kate get out of her funk. He was pretty sure her parents had spread the word around town about the change in Kate's attitude.

Not that he'd had an issue with her before, but even he could tell that she was happier than when she'd first come back to town.

He'd noticed a change in her attitude about her future after the talk about teaching. She didn't say that she wanted to teach, but she no longer put the idea down.

When the big Fourth of July town festival rolled around, he was thankful he and Nick were working the booth since Kate sat with them the entire day and helped hand out stickers and prepackaged goodie bags to all the kids.

Later, they sat together in the bleachers and watched the town's fireworks. Somehow, even the festival was more exciting with her by his side.

When the evening of the weekly basketball game came the following week, Kate sat in the bleachers and cheered them on. Brook came along too.

The two of them were obviously very close. They laughed and joked with one another, and the longing for his brother surfaced whenever he saw them together.

Actually, it was always after being with Kate and her family that thoughts of his family and his past surfaced. While he was with her, his entire mind and body were consumed with thoughts of her.

She was slowly becoming an addiction. The more he was with her, the more he wanted to be with her.

It wasn't until a month after she came back into town that he realized that Nick was, for the first time since they'd known each other, asking him about his family and his past. Maybe he was just being a protective brother?

It wasn't as if Tom was trying to avoid telling anyone. But the past, his past, hurt.

"You had a brother?" Nick asked one afternoon as they were directing traffic away from the high school. Graduation week was always busy and everyone in uniform had to be present. Even if it was their planned day off.



“Yes,” Tom said, waving the rows of cars out of the massive dirt parking lot. He had never personally attended a high school graduation. After his mother and brother’s death, he’d skipped the ceremony and had his diploma mailed to him instead. Still, everyone leaving the event looked happy. “Ryan was four years younger than me.”

“I’m sorry. I know you mentioned you lost him and your mother at the same time.” Nick stopped the traffic and allowed a few cars in the other lane to pass by.

“Yup,” Tom said, stopping his traffic at the same time. It was mindless work, but the weather was nice and at least they could be outside enjoying it instead of being stuck inside somewhere sitting behind a desk.

Nick turned to him and the look he gave him had Tom sighing. “Let’s talk later. Okay?”

Nick nodded, then moved over to switch the traffic again.

Over an hour later, the two of them were changed out of their uniforms and sitting at the bar at the Golden Oar.

“So, what is going on, really, between you and my sister?” Nick asked.

Tom almost spit out the sip of beer he’d taken. Instead, he purposely swallowed the amber liquid and took a moment to try and think of the right words.

“That’s up to your sister,” he finally said.

Nick’s eyebrows shot up. “Which means?”

“I like your sister,” he said finally. “And as long as she’s okay with it, I’m going to be around her. Are we good?”

Nick smiled and then slapped him on the shoulder. “We’re good. I know you’d never do anything to hurt her.” Nick’s

hands tightened on his shoulders briefly, and Tom understood his meaning.

“Right.” He nodded. “I don’t plan on hurting her.” He turned slightly towards him. “Your sister, on the other hand... if she decides not to stick around...”

Nick nodded and let out a loud sigh. “Yeah, I think we’re all more worried about you. We all remember when you moved into town. How lost you looked back then. It was almost a year before that changed. Kate had the same look as you did. Just by being around you, she’s already lost most of it.”

Maybe that was why Tom was drawn to her. What they’d been through was totally different, but still, they had both arrived in town betrayed and broken.

He’d had the people of Pride, the police force, and remodeling his house to help shake him out of the slump.

He wanted to be there for Kate as much as he could.

“She’s killing me with the Pilates though.” He groaned as he rolled his shoulders.

Nick laughed. At that moment, the hold Tom’s past had on him slipped a little. He trusted Nick. Trusted him every day with his life. The reasons he’d held back from telling Nick about his past dulled and no longer mattered.

“My dad used to beat us,” he said quietly as he looked down into his beer. “The first memory I have is being kicked around for being too loud. He’d lock me in the closet with nothing but underwear on. It was summer in Vegas. Then, when Ryan came around, for the first time in my life, I wanted to protect someone other than me. I used to take his punishments. I’d purposely get my father’s attention off Ryan

in hopes that my dad would leave him alone. When we got older and started school, he turned his attention on my mother.” He lifted his glass and took a sip of the beer, but somehow, now, it was too bitter, and he pushed it away and continued. “We weren’t allowed to be in any sports, but I’d been sneaking time in at the gym to learn boxing since fifth grade. It was my senior year. Homecoming. Another thing we weren’t allowed to do, any social events at school. I lied and snuck out to take a date to the dance. My first and only time.” He closed his eyes. He couldn’t remember anything about the night, not really. Not anymore. What he did remember wasn’t pleasant. “When I arrived home, the house was dark. I found my mother first. I knew instantly that she was gone. I rushed to Ryan’s room. My father was standing over him, the knife raised. He’d waited until I got home. He blamed me for sneaking out. ‘This is all your fault,’ he said. ‘If you had obeyed me and stayed home....’” Tom shook his head. “I... flew into a rage. When the police came, it took them days to figure out... what had happened.”

“Your dad?” Nick asked.

Tom turned to him. “He’s up for parole tomorrow.”

Nick visibly tensed. “Is there anything we can do?”

Tom smiled slightly as he shook his head. “I’d like to say yes, but the truth is, the parole board doesn’t even want me there.”

“Will you keep me posted?” Nick asked.

Tom nodded then lifted his beer. “That’s the first time I’ve told anyone.”

Nick tapped his glass to his. “Thanks for opening up to me. I hope it helped.”

He thought about it and realized that, even though he'd built up what it would feel like to tell someone else, he was more relaxed than he'd imagined.

"It did. Thanks,"

Nick smiled. "What are partners and friends for?"

Tom felt a prickle of awareness and turned to see Kate walk in with Brook. The first thing he noticed was that she was wearing a soft summer dress in white. Her hair was curled in soft ringlets that lay over her shoulders. Her skin practically glowed. Her lips were a soft shade of pink, making him wish he could taste them.

"Damn, okay, you really do have it bad." Nick slapped him and almost dislodged him from the barstool he was sitting on.

Kate and Brook made their way towards them.

"It looks like you two are celebrating," Nick said, raising his empty glass to the bartender.

Kate moved towards him, and he jumped up to pull out the barstool for her to sit on. Brook moved to Nick's side.

"Hey," Tom said, taking Kate's hand.

She smiled at him and leaned closer to brush a kiss across his lips. "Hi."

"You look... stunning," he said, wishing he had thought of something smoother to say to her.

Her smile brightened. "Thank you."

"Who are you?" Nick said, getting everyone's attention.

The bartender who had served them earlier had been replaced with a dark-haired woman in black pants and a tight white-and-blue-striped Golden Oar uniform top.

“That’s always a smooth way to greet your bartender,” the woman said with a slight southern drawl.

Nick leaned on the bar a little more. “I know everyone in town. I don’t know you.”

“Leave her alone,” Brook said, nudging Nick. “Hi, I’m Brook. This idiot is my cousin, Nick. That’s Tom and my other cousin, this idiot’s sister, the very famous dancer Kate Farrow.” Brook made cheering noises while Kate’s face heated and turned pink.

“Harper Davis,” the brunette said with a smile. “New bartender and new Pride resident.” She leaned on the bar a little more, her eyes burning into Nick’s. “What’ll you have?”

“A round of shots and beers. On me,” Brook broke in. “It’s my birthday.”

Tom felt Nick wince and heard him say, “Shit,” under his breath.

“He forgot,” Kate whispered. “He always forgets everyone’s birthdays.”

“Do not,” Nick retorted. “Just... hers.” He motioned to Brook.

“Right.” Kate laughed. “When is my birthday then?”

Nick frowned and his eyes narrowed. Tom waited, wanting to know this information himself so he could lock it in his memory.

“July...” Nick started, and Kate laughed. “August...” he said, and Kate rolled her eyes. “It’s on the tenth of...”

“January,” Brook supplied. “Your birthday is in July. The fourteenth, if you didn’t remember.” She nudged Nick, who

nudged her back. He turned his attention to Harper Davis when she set the shots and drinks in front of them.

“You just moved here with your...” Nick asked, ignoring the drinks.

“Family,” Harper answered with a smile.

Kate leaned closer to Tom. “Be prepared to be amazed at my brother’s ability to turn off the only new woman in town.”

Nick glared at Kate, then turned back to Brook and held up his shot glass. “To my cousin Brook, who just turned... twenty-one.”

“Three.” Brook rolled her eyes.

“Right, that’s what I said, twenty-three.” Nick laughed.

Tom turned to Kate and, as their eyes locked, he downed the shot.

Two hours later, they closed out their tab after Kate, Brook, and Nick had three more shots and dinner. Kate was leaning heavily on him as he helped her into his car. Brook and Nick had piled into the back seat. Without really deciding it, he’d switched to drinking water after that initial beer and shot.

He dropped Nick off at his place first, since it was less than a block from the restaurant, then headed towards Brook’s place. She was living in a small cottage just outside of town. He’d never asked her if she owned it or rented, but it was one of the cutest places in town. It sat directly off the beach and had a killer view.

After making sure Brook got inside okay, instead of driving back to Kate’s parents’ place, he detoured to the small beach access just down the road from Brook’s place.

“Let’s go sit on the log,” he suggested.

“That sounds wonderful.” Kate started to get out, and he rushed around and helped her.

The deadwood log wasn't far from the parking area. Still, since she was slightly drunk, they went slow. The last thing he wanted was for her to fall and hurt herself.

When they sat, he took her hand in his. “Did I mention how nice you look tonight?”

She chuckled. Her eyes ran over his simple gray T-shirt and shorts. “You look...relaxed.”

“If I'd known there was a party going on tonight, I would have dressed up.” He looked down at their hands and suddenly he got an idea. “Friday.” His eyes met hers. “How about we go out?”

She smiled. “We are out.”

“I mean, on a date,” he corrected. “An official one.”

“I'd like that.” She leaned against his shoulder. “Dr. Stevens says I can put weight on my knee by then.”

“Really?” He leaned back and looked down at her. “That soon?”

“It's been almost two months. I've been putting some weight on it and working the leg out some.”

He nodded. “Right.”

She leaned on his shoulder again. “I'll be moving into the apartment above Patty's this weekend.”

“You will?” He thought about all the stairs leading up to the apartment. “Think you can manage all those stairs?”

He felt her chuckle. “I'm not sure, but I'm too excited to be back on my own to wait.”

“Do you need any help moving?”

“No, Nick’s going to help. I only have a couple of boxes.”

He frowned. He’d had more than that when he’d moved from Vegas. He’d sold most of his parents’ things, not wanting to take those memories with him. It had been hard to go through his brother’s things, but he’d done it and had kept a few things that held good memories.

“You said you had your own place in New York. How can you only have a few boxes?” he asked.

“I rented a fully furnished apartment. Putting down roots wasn’t really important to me back then.” She shrugged.

“And now?” he asked, holding his breath.



## CHAPTER TEN

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**K**ate thought about it. Her head was dull thanks to the three shots and two drinks Brook had insisted on buying her, but she knew what Tom was asking her.

Was she sticking around Pride now that she was on the mend? Did she even know the answer herself?

Patty had agreed to rent her the apartment on a month-to-month basis.

At this point, Kate didn't even have a job. She had plenty of money in her savings, though, as she hadn't really touched it in the city other than to pay a few bills and for any expenses she had for her career. Pointe shoes were not cheap.

"I... I'm going to take it one day at a time," she finally said, keeping her head resting against Tom's shoulder.

She knew that if he looked into her eyes, he would see her indecision. Whatever happened between them, she didn't want to scare him away. Not when they'd just set their first official date.

In the past month and a half, they had gone out plenty of times. But besides hitting the gym five nights a week and grabbing dinner after, they hadn't planned an official evening. Until now.

She was both excited and nervous thinking about it.

Tom's arm tightened around her shoulders. "I told your brother about my past tonight," he said softly.

She leaned back and looked up into his eyes. He was looking out over the water, as if searching for something on the horizon.

"And?" she said when he didn't continue.

"And I know he'll keep it to himself, but I'd like you to know too." He glanced down at her.

Every part of her body sobered as she sat up straight.

"If you're willing," he added.

She nodded.

She could hear the pain in his voice as he told her about his childhood. The hurt. The sorrow for what he'd lost. The anger at the man who had tortured him, his brother, and his mother. When he told her about his father being up for parole tomorrow, she tensed.

"How can that be? What's it been? Ten years?" she asked. "Shouldn't he have gotten life?"

Tom had leaned his elbows on his knees as he'd talked, but now he stood up and started pacing in front of her.

"No, he was sentenced to fifteen years and up for parole after ten," Tom answered.

Kate's stomach rolled at the thought of such a monster only serving ten years for torturing and murdering his family.

"It makes me sick," she said softly.

"Yeah," Tom agreed. "I'm sure the board is going to keep him in, but just the thought that he might be free..." He shook

his head as he ran his hands through his hair.

She stood up and slowly hobbled towards him. He met her halfway and wrapped his arms around her.

“Whatever you need,” she said softly. “I’m here. We’re here,” she corrected, knowing her brother would have promised the same thing.

“Thanks.” He leaned back and cupped her face. “I have tomorrow off. I was going to take the boat out. Do you think you’d be up for a sail?”

“You have a sailboat?” she asked, surprised.

He chuckled. “Okay, so there’s a lot we haven’t gotten to know about one another still. Yes. My house is right by the docks for a reason. I love to sail.”

She narrowed her eyes. “But you’re from Las Vegas.”

He laughed. “I learned when I moved here. You can trust me. It’s safe.”

“I do.” She hugged him. “I’d love to go sailing with you tomorrow.”

His arms wrapped around her, and she felt drunk all over again, even though the alcohol was out of her system at this point.

When Tom kissed her, she felt her entire body vibrate with want. She wanted to tell him to take her to his place. She wanted him to touch her, to be inside her.

He deepened the kiss, and she tugged on his shoulders until he laid her down gently in the soft cool sand.

Feeling his body cover hers had little moans escaping from her lips. His hands snaked up her legs and hiked up her skirt.

She felt his fingers flexing on her good thigh and willed him to understand what she wanted. What she needed from him.

“Kate, I’m trying to go slow,” he said against her neck.

“Don’t.” She arched for him as her hands reached under his shirt and played with the muscles that lay over his stomach.

As sand mixed with her hair, he trailed kisses down her neck and slid his hand higher until he cupped her over her panties. She’d never felt anything like this before. He played with her through the silk until finally nudging it aside.

When Tom slid a finger into her, stars burst in her mind as her body pulsed for him. She couldn’t catch her breath, couldn’t think, couldn’t stop wanting more.

She wrapped herself around him, needing to feel even more. For the first time since her accident, she felt something other than sorrow and pain.

“Kate,” Tom groaned against her neck, “I need to take you home.”

He rolled away from her, and she tried to reach to pull him back, but he was already standing up, facing away from her. Her first inclination was to be hurt, but then she noticed that he was breathing heavy and that it had started to sprinkle.

This was not the ideal place to make love for the first time.

She sat up and shook the sand from her hair and her dress. She could only imagine how messy she would have been if they had gone any further in the sand.

Tom’s hand was there to help pull her up when she moved to stand. She wrapped her arms around him and held on for a moment, feeling the hardness of him against her hip.

“You know, we could head back to your place?” she suggested. She swayed slightly, and it didn’t go unnoticed by him.

“You’ve had too many drinks, and I’m sure you want to be rested for our sail tomorrow,” he said with a slight sigh. “I’ll take you home.”

“Tom.” She stopped him from moving away. “Tomorrow, I plan on finishing this.”

He smiled. “So do I.” He kissed her lightly.

The following morning, she stood looking down at her clothes.

What did someone wear on a sailing trip? She’d grown up in Pride and, as a child, had gone on plenty of boat trips. Most of the time, she’d dressed in swimsuits, shorts, and T-shirts.

The weather app claimed that it would be clear skies and in the high seventies, which was perfect weather to jump into the water.

She started with her new white two piece, then switched to her blue, and finally settled on her red one. She pulled on a pair of cut-off shorts and a blue and white tank top. She stuffed an oversized hat and her dark sunglasses into her bag, and then for good measure, some condoms she had in her purse. Just in case.

There was no doubt that Tom was responsible, but she had to look out for herself first and foremost.

Since she’d stopped dancing two months ago, her body had changed in so many ways.

First, she’d gained almost seven pounds. She hated the scale in her parents’ bathroom. Every day, she watched it go

up, knowing that there was little she could do.

She enjoyed working out with Tom, both the boxing and doing Pilates, but nothing could compare to the hours she used to work in New York.

Her entire dancing career, her monthly cycle had been sporadic. She'd used birth control pills to regulate it but had stopped taking them since her injury, which had caused its own changes to her body.

She was excited to spend the day with Tom and to be with him. If last night was any hint to what being with him would be like, she just knew that today was going to be magical.

She pulled on a pair of white tennis shoes and walked out to see her brother and dad with their heads bent over a computer.

“This one should work,” her dad said.

“Mom’s going to kill you for spending so much money,” Nick replied.

“Spending all your retirement savings on car parts?” she asked, setting down her bag.

They both jumped and then looked up at her.

“No,” her father said, then he sighed. “Maybe.”

She smiled and hugged him. “Mom knows you spend money on cars.”

“Where are you off to today?” Nick asked, running his eyes over her.

“Sailing with Tom.” She walked over to the fridge and poured herself some orange juice.

“Is that getting serious?” her dad asked.

“It could.”

“That kid has been through some stuff. He’s a good kid. In the years that he’s been in Pride, I haven’t seen him go on a serious date with anyone,” her father said with a slight frown. “He took Brook out once, but I think they settled on being friends before the dessert arrived.”

“I won’t break his heart.” She touched her father’s shoulder.

Her dad nodded and then hugged her. “Sounds like he’s here,” he said when they all heard a car pull into the driveway.

“Kate?” Nick said, stopping her from leaving the room. “Today is... a hard day for him.” Nick glanced towards their dad and then back. “Thanks for going with him.”

“I know, he told me.”

Tom was just about to ring the doorbell when she opened the front door.

“Ready?” she asked, handing him her bag. She didn’t want to take her crutch with her, so instead, she was using the cane Dr. Stevens had given her.

“That’s cool,” he said, motioning to the thing.

“Like it?” She twirled it once. “I added bling to it.” She showed him the sparkles she’d glued on.

He chuckled and tossed her bag over his shoulder. Then he held out his hand to help her down the stairs.

When they were in his car heading back down to the docks, she asked, “So, where do you normally sail to?”

“Normally? Up and down the coast. I find someplace to anchor and fish for a few hours, then cook up what I’ve

caught. If the weather is nice, I'll take a dip, lie in the sun, then head home."

"That sounds wonderful." She sighed and leaned back in the seat.

"When was the last time you went sailing?" he asked her.

"Sailing? Never. I've been out on a lot of boats before, though. My dad is a Coast Guard trainer. But not sailing," she clarified. "He and Nick both have fishing boats."

"Yeah, I've been out on both of theirs. Actually, it's the number one reason I chose a sailboat. I like taking things slow. Besides, if I want to go out for a week, I have my cabin with a queen-sized bed and supplies all ready."

She was even more excited for the trip now, knowing a real bed was available.

Tom parked in front of his house. Since she'd met him, she'd driven by it a few times but had yet to go inside.

"The docks are half a block away. It's easier to park here." He got out to open her car door for her. "I have a cart of supplies all loaded up," he said, opening his garage. There was a blue wheeled car with a cooler and a basket of other supplies in it. He set her bag on top and then shut the garage door. "Ready?"

She nodded and followed him the half block to the docks. He used a key code to get into the fenced area. She could see her parents' boat and her brother's boat, but followed Tom to a large white sailboat that sat at the end of the dock.

"Here she is. I haven't officially named her yet, but the last guy who owned her named her *Fool's Run*." Tom chuckled. "I guess it sort of stuck. At least until I can come up with something else."



“I like it,” she said as he helped her on board.

It was far bigger than her father’s or brother’s boats. The mast was twice the height of any other sailboat in dock.

The wide wood deck shone in the sunlight. There were large cabin doors that she assumed led below deck.

“Have a seat, I’ll just be a minute.” He motioned to a large wood bench. She sat down while he emptied the cart and took the cooler and box down below.

When he came back up, he held out a glass for her. “Mimosa?”

She took the drink and then took a sip. “It’s perfect.” She sat back. “Do you need any help?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve got this. You sit back and relax.”

She felt guilty, sitting and enjoying herself while he did all the work. Then again, he had told her that he loved to sail. By the time the sailboat hit the open water, she was done with her mimosa.

“Want another?” Tom asked her as he sat down behind the wheel.

“No, that was perfect.” She leaned back to let the wind wash over her. “How did you learn how to do all that?” She motioned to the two large white sails above them.

“Your brother, father, and uncle. When I first moved here, the four of us would hit the water almost every weekend. I think they could tell I wasn’t in a good headspace back then. They and this”—he nodded to the view in front of them—“helped.”

She wanted to tell him that he'd helped her. Hitting the gym every day, having someone to talk to, someone who had gone through something far more terrible than she had, had really helped her put her life in perspective.

Knowing what he went through, she felt shallow and selfish.

She watched him close his eyes for a moment. When they opened again, they landed on her, and he could see that he'd overcome the dark moment.

“Have you given it some more thought? About staying?” he asked her.

She had. Actually, it was all she thought about. She knew that she'd probably have a better chance of dancing again in a big city. She'd most likely be a background dancer—and it would take months or even years of retraining her body, learning to trust her leg again—but she'd be dancing.

One thing was certain, she would never dance with a partner again. She hated to admit it, but she actually had nightmares about trusting someone like that again.

“I think I'll stick around here for a while,” she admitted. “The thought of heading back to the city right now...” She shook her head. “Why did you choose to move to Pride?” she asked, wanting to move the spotlight off of her.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

Should Tom tell Kate the truth? He'd always gotten the feeling that he could trust her. But still, there was that fear that he'd be putting everything he'd worked hard for on the line.

"I guess it was just luck," he said quickly. When she gave him a look, he knew she wasn't satisfied with his answer. But at that moment, he spotted movement in the water and drew her attention to the pod of dolphins swimming alongside them.

He smiled as Kate took videos and tons of pictures as they continued up the coast. He had plans to stop at a little spot that he knew where they could anchor and enjoy a few hours alone.

Thankfully, the conversation never returned to his transfer. Instead, they talked about the local area and other trips he'd taken on the sailboat.

The coastline grew taller, with the cliffs hovering over the water's edge.

Pride sat in a lower valley than the lands to the north of town. Here, huge pine trees filled the landscape above, keeping the coast wild and free of all the people settling or building homes there.

To the south of town, there were more and more homes. Edgeview sat further inland, but there was a small portion of the town that sat along an inlet. He didn't usually sail south unless the winds happened to carry him that way.

Today, the winds drove him directly where he wanted to go.

When they pulled into the secret cove, he let down the sails and dropped anchor. He was thankful that they were the only ones there.

"What now?" Kate asked, looking around. "Gosh, it's picturesque. There isn't a soul for miles." She leaned on the railing and looked at the sandy beach.

"Now, we load up the dinghy and row ashore to enjoy our very own private beach for a few hours." He pulled her into his arms. When he kissed her, she melted against him.

"You have a dinghy?" she asked when she pulled away, causing him to laugh.

"Yes, it's inflatable. Sit, I'll get everything ready."

He'd purchased the sailboat the year after moving to Pride. He'd used some of the money he'd saved up after his father had been locked up. The sale of the house, the three cars, and his mother's life insurance, not to mention all the money that his mother had hidden away from his dad, had been more than he'd imagined.

There hadn't been much left after purchasing the house here in Pride, but he figured the best way to alleviate his guilt about the money was to purchase *Fool's Run*. That way, every time he went sailing, he'd think of his mother and brother. It was his way of being closer to them, at least in his mind.

The first few times he'd gone out, Nick or his father had ridden with him, sort of like training wheels. Even Kate's uncle, Allen Masters, Brook's father, who also worked as a Coast Guard trainer, went out with him a few times. He'd learned most of what he'd needed to know from them.

His first overnight trip had been to the cove. He'd dropped anchor and had spent the night worrying about the sailboat drifting away.

The next time he'd sailed overnight, some of that worry had disappeared. After about a dozen or so trips, the worry had dissipated completely.

He'd purchased the inflatable dinghy after realizing he couldn't reach the cove without one. It was big enough for two people and the supplies they would need.

He loaded up the small cooler that held their lunches and a basket he'd stuffed with a large beach blanket, his snorkeling gear, and anything else they would need.

Lowering the dinghy had taken some practice. The first time he'd tried, it had ended up upside down. Now, however, he was a pro at it.

Getting down the ladder was easy enough for him, but he had to help Kate climb down, which was a slow process. Still, she was great and didn't seem afraid at all.

Once she was settled across from him, holding onto the cooler and basket, he pulled out the two plastic oars and started rowing towards shore.

It took less than five minutes to row to the small private beach.

"Do you come here often?" she asked when they hit the sand.

“Almost every weekend during the summer. I usually bring Nick, Brook, and a few other friends.” He helped her out of the dinghy. “We’ve had a few bonfires here.” He motioned to the spot that someone had made long before he’d started coming there. Large round rocks encircled a firepit, and massive driftwood logs had been pulled near it so people could sit and enjoy the fire.

“It’s a perfect spot,” she said, moving slowly across the wet sand and then finally sitting down in the dry soft sand.

He’d noticed she’d been using her hurt leg a little, almost as if she was testing herself.

“One of my favorite places. I’ve looked at the land to see who owns it.” He motioned to the cliffs above them that surrounded the small cove. “No one does. It’s State Forest land.”

He pulled out a blanket and tossed it down in the sand, then set the basket of food on top of it and handed her a cold water.

On either side of the cove’s opening there were high rocky cliffs with massive pine trees that hung over the edge in places. The cove’s entrance was narrow enough that it kept larger boats out. The only way to the sandy beach was by small boat.

The beach itself was only a hundred or so feet wide and long. Behind it sat another large cliff easily fifty feet high and full of dark rocks. Even if someone owned the land above, they would have to build a long staircase to get to the private area.

Normally, the water was a dark blue with the waves crashing onto the sandy shore, but today the ocean was calm,

and the water had settled to a deep emerald green.

He could even see some of the larger rocks at the bottom of the cove, under the water.

He set the cooler and basket down on the blanket and sat next to Kate.

“Want to go for a swim?” he asked. “Or food first?”

“Swim,” she said eagerly, and started unwrapping her knee.

When her scar was exposed, he leaned closer and looked at it, tracing the small L-shaped scar gently with his fingertip. Her white skin was a little puckered and pink around the area, but it looked better than any scars he’d had. Her skin was practically healed, but he knew that underneath, the damage was probably far worse.

It would take time before she could trust her body again. He was sure the physical therapy helped. He knew that she worked more and more on that leg every time they hit the gym.

Dr. Stevens had agreed to allow her to start some exercises to build up her muscles around that area again.

But this was the first time he was getting a look at the scar.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“No, not now. When I try to do something that I shouldn’t, like putting too much weight on it or twisting my knee the wrong way, I get sharp pains. Which is why I move slowly.”

Kate set her water bottle down and then pulled off her shoes, her shorts, and her tank top.

His mouth watered as he watched her striptease.

“Well?” she said, looking over at him.

He jumped into motion. He removed his shirt and shoes so quickly that, if he'd been standing, he was pretty sure he would have fallen over.

“Help me to the water?” she asked as she held out her hands to him.

He stood and then pulled her up from the sand. Instead of helping her, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the calm water.

She laughed and then gasped when they hit the cold water.

“It's deceiving. It's warm out today, but the water is freezing,” she complained with a chuckle.

“We'll get used to it.” He walked in deeper until their shoulders were almost under water.

Kate pushed off away from him and started swimming in circles around him. She ducked under water, and he laughed when she pulled him down playfully.

“The water is so clear here you can see the bottom,” she said when she surfaced.

“I brought along some snorkeling gear.” He motioned to the bag.

“Later,” she said, pulling him under again.

As she rubbed her body up against his, he wondered just how he was going to make it through the day without bursting.

Her hands wrapped around his arms and played over his shoulders and back. Was she doing that on purpose? Was she trying to kill him?



They lost track of time playing in the water, flirting and teasing one another until they were both breathless.

After swimming for almost half an hour, he retrieved the snorkeling masks. The anti-leak, anti-fog all-in-one mask and snorkel sets were one of the best purchases he'd ever made.

For the next hour, they swam around the cove, looking at all the fish that darted in and out of the massive black rocks under the water. She found a few sand dollars, and he discovered a ton of starfish on the backside of one of the massive boulders that sat near the mouth of the cove.

When they grew hungry, they sat on the blanket in the sunlight and ate the sandwiches that he'd made earlier that morning, along with some chips and fruit. He noticed that she ate more than she normally did. Since he'd met her, she normally only picked at her food, taking a few nibbles here and there.

Today, she ate the entire turkey sandwich and even had a handful of chips along with a few apple slices. He liked that she was looking healthier and happier than she had when she'd arrived home.

After he put away the rest of the food, she lay back on the blanket and looked up at the sky. He lay beside her, holding her hand.

"Today is... perfect," she said with a sigh. Then she rolled over and leaned on her elbow. "How private do you think this cove is?" she asked, her eyes searching his.

"I've never seen anyone here other than the people I brought along with me. Why?" He smiled as she leaned down and kissed him, plastering her body against his.

He'd hoped and prepared for this. He knew what she'd wanted from today. He wanted it too. He would be a fool not to.

He rolled her over and looked down at her. Her long blonde hair was fanned out on the blanket, and her blue eyes were laughing up at him. Laughing, and filled with desire.

"Tom," she said, pulling him back down to her until his lips covered hers. "Please," she said against his mouth.

Her hands nudged his board shorts down his hips as he pulled her bikini top aside and cupped her breasts. She was perfection. Her warm skin puckered for him. When he dipped his head and licked her skin, she tasted like salt and sex, and he had to have more.

Trailing his mouth over her, he untied her top and then reached for the ties that sat just above each of her hips. She lay under him, naked, as the sun lit up her skin, making it practically glow.

Leaning back, he ran his eyes slowly over her.

"Perfection," he said softly, then she pulled him back to her. His mouth found hers again as his fingers brushed over her sex slowly, softly, just a light touch until she arched into his hand.

Her soft moans encouraged him to explore her skin even more. He ran his tongue down her neck, over her peaks, across each rib and her hip bone, until he settled between her thighs. He gently nudged them wider and lapped at her pussy as her fingers dug into his hair, pulling, holding him to her as she cried out with pleasure.

When he slid a finger into her, she arched her back, her hands fisting in the beach blanket as she screamed his name.

He smiled, knowing that the sound would carry on the wind and waves. Knowing that it would be etched in his memory.

He took a condom from his bag and slipped it on while she lay there, eyes closed, her breathing settling. When he moved back over her, her eyes opened slightly. They had changed to a softer blue color. When he slipped into her, they darkened ever so slightly.

“Tom,” she sighed, wrapping her legs around his hips. “Please.”

At that moment, he knew that he would have given her anything and it went beyond the physical. In his heart, deep down in his soul, he wanted more than he’d ever wished for anything in his life for her to get what she wanted.

He hadn’t believed it was possible to feel the way he did towards her since he’d never felt anything like it before. Now, watching the sun play over her blonde hair, seeing her eyes turn color for him and fill with desire, he knew that he never wanted to lose that feeling. Whatever happened, he had to hold onto it and to her.

“Whatever you want.” He started moving slowly. “Just ask and it’s yours,” he said. And then he fell.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Watching small puffy clouds float slowly overhead, Kate smiled as she trailed her fingers over Tom's shoulder blades. She was too blissfully unaware of her surroundings to notice that she was tracing a jagged scar on his skin at first. The massive thing covered his left shoulder blade and ran down his back to disappear under his armpit.

When her fingers stilled, Tom shifted to lie beside her. He rested his head in his hands as he leaned up on his elbow.

"How did you get that?" she asked.

Tom sighed. "It was the day my mother and brother died," he said, his eyes avoiding hers.

They were lying naked on the beach blanket as the sun shifted slightly in the sky. She didn't know how much time had passed, nor care. All that mattered was that he had been what she'd wanted. What she'd needed.

Hearing this news, however, she sat up and hugged her legs to her chest. "You didn't mention that you'd been hurt."

He shifted until he was sitting beside her. "I... don't like bringing it up." He shrugged. "It was just skin deep."

She twisted slightly until she could see the scar. She hadn't seen him without a shirt before. He'd worn tank tops before,

but had never gone fully shirtless.

The scar looked a million times worse than her little L-shaped one, making her feel foolish for the slight vanity she'd felt earlier when he'd traced it with his fingertips.

She traced the jagged white skin with her fingertips and when she reached his ribs, he sucked in a breath.

"This is more than just skin deep." She turned again until their eyes locked.

"There's nothing really there. Under there is fat, a few smaller muscles, bone. Which wasn't affected." He shrugged. "Thirty-six stitches, some antibiotics, and I was good to go. Compared to your months of physical therapy and possible lifelong limp, my incident was a cakewalk." He took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips. "Want to take another dip?" He motioned to the water.

But it had already cooled off. The sun had shifted and gone behind one of the tall rocky walls that closed the cove off from the Pacific.

Shaking her head, she sighed. "I'm tired and a little cold."

He reached over and handed her clothes to her. "We can head back?" he suggested.

She stopped him from standing up by placing her hand on his arm. "Tom, thank you for today. It's been my first full outing since coming home."

He smiled at her and nodded quickly, then he pulled on his shorts and started to gather everything up.

When he helped her back into the rubber raft, she took one last look at the cove and tried to sear every detail into her brain, not knowing if she'd ever return to this spot.

Getting up the ladder to the sailboat was somehow more difficult than going down. Finally, Tom flipped her over his shoulder and went up the ladder as if she weighed nothing.

She laughed when he set her down gently on the bench.

“You could be a fireman instead of a police officer,” she joked.

His smile didn’t reach his eyes, but he chuckled softly. “My second choice in careers.” He pulled up the raft.

When he was done deflating it, she asked, “You never did tell me why you picked Pride. I mean, you said it was luck, but why did you stay?”

He glanced over at her as he rolled up the raft. “That’s an easy one. Your family and the rest of the people in Pride. They saw that I was broken and set out to fix me, even when I didn’t want to be fixed. For the first year after moving to Pride, there wasn’t a day that went by where my doorbell didn’t ring. Someone was always dropping off meals or delivering baked goods or even offering to lend a hand fixing up my place.” He chuckled as he pulled up the anchor. “I swear I thought there was a sign on my back that said ‘in serious need of help.’” He sighed.

“That’s one thing that has stuck with me my entire life. Whenever you need something, all you have to do is ask anyone in Pride.” She smiled. “You know how normally there is always that one gang of bullies in every school? Not here. At least not in my class. We all knew one another and still reach out to chat. Even now, besides a few rotten apples, there isn’t anyone in town that wouldn’t gladly give a kidney to another.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, that’s why I stuck around. I’d never realized I needed that in my life before. Not until I came here.” He steered the sailboat farther out.

She frowned. “Why are we heading out to deeper water?”

“We’ll catch the north wind back to Pride. It’s usually about half a mile out.” He motioned to the horizon.

Suddenly, she was worried. To get to the cove, they’d stuck close to the shoreline. Now, he was talking about taking them much farther out.

“What if the wind isn’t there?” she asked.

“Then we use the motor to get back. It will take us a little longer, but we’ll still get home.” He smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ve done this many times, the north wind is always there.” He glanced off the boat as if he could see the breeze already.

She held her breath until she saw the massive white sails fill with a gust of air. When the boat took off, heading back down the coast, Tom smiled over at her.

“It’s colder.” She felt a shiver race up her spine.

“Northern winds usually are. There’s a blanket underneath the seat.”

She quickly pulled a wool blanket out and wrapped it around herself and instantly felt better.

“So, what do your folks think of you moving out again?” he asked once they were on their way.

“I think they’re happy to get their room back.”

“What do you have to move in? You mentioned that Nick is lending you a hand.”

“Patty has ordered some new furniture for the place. Since the last few people who’ve rented from her have come without furnishings, she’s decided to have it professionally furnished. Blake Jordan ordered everything, and Nick has agreed to help haul it up. Right now, the apartment is getting new floors, paint, and some other work done by Parker. It will be ready for me Saturday evening.” She leaned back and thought about having her own place again. Privacy was one thing she’d learned to cherish in the city. “It’s funny, even when I was surrounded by a million strangers, I felt as if I had more privacy in New York than I do here.”

Tom chuckled. “Because in a small town such as Pride, everyone cares about one another,” he reminded her.

“True, but it’s also that everyone is a ton nosier here than they are in the city,” she pointed out.

He nodded as he laughed. “Both things can be true.”

She was smiling when his cell phone rang. She saw his face drop when he noticed the number.

“What’s up, Larry?” he answered, his eyes avoiding hers. “Yeah.” She saw him stiffen and then his eyes turned to lock onto hers. “All right.” He listened again. “How soon?” He closed his eyes and then said, “Thanks. Yeah, I’ll be in touch. Send it over and I’ll... deal with it. Thanks,” he said before hanging up.

“News about your father?” she guessed.

“The parole board approved his parole. He’s been released.” He sat down on the edge of the railing.

Kate stood up and made her way over to wrap her arms around him. “I’m so sorry.”



“Ten years,” he said into her hair as he wrapped his arms around her waist. “That’s what the lives of my mother and brother were worth. Ten fucking years.”

“He’ll still be on parole? Right?” she asked.

“Yes, of course, but he’s a free man. Larry Jameson, the lawyer who worked with me back then, is going to file a restraining order for me.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed. “Where is your dad? Isn’t he in Nevada?”

“Yes, but...” He sighed. “It’s just an insurance policy.” He nudged her backwards and smiled up at her. “I doubt he even knows where I live now.” He pulled her down to brush his lips over hers. “Now, what do you say we grab ourselves some pizza and have a sleepover? We can rent a movie or...” He pulled her between his thighs.

“Or?” She smiled as her fingers dipped into his hair.

His smile was all the answer she needed.

They docked a little before sunset and, after securing the sailboat, made their way back towards his place. They dumped everything off then walked to Baked, since it was only a block and a half away. Thankfully, her leg was feeling up to the task.

By the time they returned to his place, she had to admit, she was tired and needed to get off her leg.

“How can I be worn out? I used to spend ten hours a day in classes.” She sighed as she walked through his back door.

There was a sort of mud room off the back of the house and from the hooks filled with coats, hats, and other items, she assumed this was how he came and went most of the time.

A bench sat against one wall with a couple of pairs of shoes housed underneath it in bins.

This was the first time she'd been in his place, and she took in everything as he led her into the kitchen, which sat directly off the back area.

He set the pizza down on the counter and then took her bag from her. "Why don't you head in and get off that leg?" he suggested. "I'll dish us up some pizza and get us drinks."

She had a moment to look around his kitchen. She could tell it was newly remodeled. The cupboards and countertops were done in a soft white and gray. There was a long bar that held the sink and dishwasher. A double-wide refrigerator sat on the wall with the door that led to the mud room. There were six bar stools on the other side of the bar area. A long table with six chairs sat between the bar and the living room.

The open floor plan allowed her to see into the large living area across from the kitchen. A two-story stone fireplace sat in the center of the back wall with wide tall windows on either side that overlooked the water beyond. She could make out a deck that ran the entire length of the back of the home and guessed that the view from there would be amazing for sunsets.

His furniture looked new, as if he'd bought it in the past couple years and hardly used it.

She was slightly surprised that his decorative color palette was in soft grays with hints of deep shell blues. It wasn't until she made her way into the living room that she noticed the obvious nautical theme. The place suited him.

She sat down on the sofa and sighed as the weight was removed from her leg.

“Here,” Tom said, handing her a bottled beer. “Put your leg up.” He motioned to the coffee table.

“You’re not one of those neat freaks that doesn’t allow feet on the furniture?” she asked, motioning around his clean house.

He laughed. “No. Up until last year, I didn’t have a lot of stuff in here.”

“It’s nice stuff.” She nodded to the coffee table. “It looks brand new.”

“That’s because it is.” He set two plates down on it.

“I don’t want to ruin—” she started, but he took her bad leg and gently lifted it and then laid it over his knees. She sighed and relaxed back.

“Better?” he asked.

Nodding, she took a sip of her beer while he drank his.

“Nick said you remodeled the place. I like what you’ve done.”

“Thanks. At first, I tried to do a lot on my own. After I made a fiasco of painting, I hired Blake to help. She picked the color palette and a few key pieces. The sofa, the table, and chairs, most of the bedroom furniture and so on.”

“It’s nice,” she told him. “The place suits you.”

He chuckled and handed her a plate. He turned on the television, which happened to be on a national news station.

Kate didn’t see it at first, but when Tom tensed, she jerked her gaze to the set.

“The top story of the hour comes to us from Las Vegas where notorious killer James Reyes was approved today for

parole. Reyes was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for the brutal killing of his wife Nichole and his son, Ryan. Both of them had been hacked to death with a butcher knife. They were discovered by his older son—”

The television set turned off and Tom stood up, gently removing her leg from him as he tossed the remote down on the sofa. He walked over to the windows to look out at the darkness beyond.

Kate stood up and slowly made her way to him. She wrapped her arms around him as she leaned against his back.

“I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

“I should have known. It was all anyone could talk about back then.” He sighed and turned in her arms. He wrapped his around her and pulled her closer.

“Is there anything I can do?” she said against his chest.

He was silent for a moment. “How hungry are you?”

She leaned back. “Need to blow off some steam?” When he nodded, she smiled. “Want to box?” She wiggled her eyebrows and saw the anger and hurt slip away from his eyes to be replaced with desire. Good. If he was thinking about her, then his mind wasn’t consumed by his father and his dark past. Her hands moved up his sides until she nudged him closer. “Take me to bed,” she said before his lips devoured her.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Tom woke when he heard the thud. Jumping out of bed, he almost tripped over Kate, who was sprawled on the floor between his bed and his bathroom.

“Sorry,” she said, sitting up.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned.

“Yes, it was dark and... I thought I could make it to the bathroom without waking you,” she said as he helped her stand.

He chuckled slightly. “Need any help?”

“I left my cane in the living room. I think.” She frowned.

He turned on the bathroom light and saw that she was still gloriously naked. Then again, he was as well. Thankfully, Kate didn’t try to cover her body. Instead, she hobbled into the bathroom and, as she smiled at him, shut the door in his face. “I’ll be out in a minute,” she called to him.

“Take your time.” He walked over to pull on his gym shorts. Then he gathered her clothes and set them on the bed close to the bathroom. “I’ll go heat up the pizza.” He walked into his kitchen.

Because he needed to, he turned on the television. It took him a moment to find a news channel that was doing a report

on his family.

He listened as they talked about how his father had been paroled and the details of ten years ago. Even though some of it wasn't quite accurate, the report was close enough that people understood what had happened.

Ten years before, most news stations had gone down a conspiracy black hole that claimed his father was an illegal alien from the Philippines. Some groups had marched outside the courthouse, demanding his father, and even Tom, be sent back to where they'd come from. On the day of his father's sentencing, there had even been a brief riot.

Someone had defaced the courthouse and thrown a brick through a window with a note tied to it, telling them to send the gooks back where they'd come from.

Even though Vegas was a relatively progressive city, there was still hate there. Enough that he knew he wanted to move on. The day that he received his high school diploma, he'd enrolled in the police academy. Less than three months after graduating and getting his badge, he had applied for the job in Pride.

Even with the exaggerated experience he'd put on his application, a junior cop like him shouldn't have gotten the position he had here.

He'd felt guilty the entire first year of working on the force and had been sure they would walk in and fire him at any moment. Or worse, arrest him for lying.

But that hadn't happened. Instead, the townspeople had welcomed him and treated him with so much kindness that he'd relaxed into the job.

He'd zoned out briefly while listening to the news report, until a new image flashed on the screen. It was a video of his father leaving prison.

"Is that..." Kate asked, moving across the room.

"Yes," he answered, his eyes running over his father, trying to remember the man that had taken everything away from him.

The last time Tom had seen him, his father had been skinny, but he must have been using the gym in prison. His arms were huge, and his chest was now easily twice the size it used to be.

Kate's arms wrapped around him as his father spotted the news crew. When his eyes locked on the camera, a wicked smile formed on his lips, one that Tom remembered all too well.

He hated that his body tensed as he felt a shiver race up his spine. Even now, ten years later and thousands of miles away, the man could get to him. Shutting off the television, he turned back to heat up some slices of pizza for them.

"I'm here," Kate said as she moved over and sat at the bar area.

"Thanks," he said. He stopped when she laid a hand on his.

"I mean it. You helped me crawl out of my slump. If you need anything..." She tilted her head. "When is your next day off?"

"Tomorrow," he answered quickly. "Which is why I suggested that you spend the night."

"I mean, after that."

"Same days next week."

“Okay, how about we head into Portland for a day of shopping and food? A mini vacation.”

For most of his vacations, he’d gone out sailing alone. He didn’t really have any desire to head into Portland. He’d been pretty much done with cities since leaving Vegas. But the thought of spending a day away with her was definitely appealing.

“Okay,” he said with a smile. “I could—”

“Nope.” She held up her hand. “I’ll arrange everything.”

“Are you sure?”

She glanced up at him and the smile on her lips told him that she was going to enjoy arranging everything.

While he heated a couple of slices of pizza, she looked at her phone. Then they moved back into the living room and switched on a movie.

When he felt her drift off to sleep against his shoulder, he carried her back into his bedroom and snuggled up against her while his mind replayed that night so many years ago.

If it wasn’t for Kate next to him, somehow keeping him grounded, he was pretty sure that he would have had bad dreams. Instead, his dreams were filled with music, warm beaches, and sex.

When he woke, Kate’s body was wrapped around his. Her head rested on his chest, and her long blonde hair fell over his shoulder and arm. It was probably the best feeling in the world. One he could easily see himself wanting each morning for the rest of his life.

Then, the realization of what had happened yesterday hit him. His father was a free man. Tom knew in his gut that his



father wouldn't leave him alone. No power on earth would stop that man from coming after him. His gut twisted until Kate shifted slightly, then his mind focused on her and the fact that he had the entire day to be with her.

His mind cleared and he realized that his father probably wouldn't be dumb enough to skip out on his parole check-ins this early.

For today, he could at least enjoy being with Kate and not act as if there was certain doom hanging over his head.

He rolled over slowly and rained soft kisses all over her to wake her up. She arched into him and suddenly, he knew exactly what he wanted to do all day with her. Not one single idea involved leaving the bed.

"Mmm," she moaned, and when he trailed his fingers over her warm skin, she arched into his touch.

"Kate?" he whispered against her neck.

"Tom," she sighed, wrapping her legs around him.

He slid a finger into her heat and had her arching even more into his hand. God, she felt like heaven. Warm, soft, welcoming. He leaned down and dipped his head until he could take her nipple into his mouth, sucking, lapping at her skin as if his life depended on it. Which, at this point, it felt like it did.

Rolling slightly, he covered her, her thighs spreading wide to welcome him. When he slid into her, her eyes opened and focused on him. Her smile grew as he started to move slowly. She reached around and dug her nails into his sides.

He could see the pleasure in her gaze, feel it in the way she moved under him. He'd believed, foolishly, that last night, he'd gotten his fix. That somehow he wouldn't want her as

much as he had. But instead, his desire for her had grown. It was now a beast that he wasn't able to control. Soon, if he didn't regulate it, his desire for her would consume him completely, overcome even his basic desires for life.

"Tom." Kate's fingers burrowed into his hair, pulling him down until their lips met. He poured everything he was feeling into the kiss as he continued to move over her, inside her. Her legs tightened around his hips, and by the soft sounds she was making, he could tell she was close. So close. He knew he had to wait until he felt her convulse around him, counted the seconds, the heartbeats, until she cried out his name. Only then did he allow himself to follow her. By then, he'd given her everything he was. He'd promised in his head and heart that he would spend the rest of his life building her up and that he'd be the one there, catching her.

"What do you want to do today?" Kate asked after they had showered together. Of course, there had been a repeat of what they'd done earlier. Due to her injury, they had used the long tile bench in his shower.

Her hair was still damp, and she'd pulled on her swimsuit from the day before, a pair of cut-off shorts, and a new tank top, different than the one she'd worn on the boat.

"I had high hopes of spending the day in bed with you, but since we need to eat..." He watched her smile. "How about we head down to your aunt's bakery for some sugar, then take a stroll. If your leg is up for it."

"That sounds wonderful. I promised Riley I'd stop in Classy and Sassy. She's holding a few things for me." Kate wrapped her arms around him. "Besides, I'd like to show the town that you're taken."

He chuckled. "I doubt the town cares that much about my love life."

"Oh?" Kate's eyebrows shot up. "You'd be surprised. I think you being single since moving here would be a hot topic."

He frowned slightly. "I've never heard..." Kate's chuckle stopped him.

"One simply doesn't gossip in front of the subject matter," she said in a hushed tone. "It isn't civilized."

He smiled. "Okay, so the town talks. I get it. I have lived here for three years."

"Then you know exactly why I intend to parade around town, holding hands, and displaying as much PDA as possible to squash any doubt." Kate leaned up and brushed her lips across his.

"If you're sure," he said with a sigh as his hands moved to her hips. He could already feel himself burning for her again, but he knew they needed food first.

Kate leaned back and ran her eyes over him. "If you are."

He thought about the previous day and night, about that morning. There was no way he was near done with her. He wanted a million more days and nights just like it. "I'm very sure," he said, sounding a little too eager.

Still, Kate's smile grew. "Good, then, shall we?" She took his hand.

Since he was concerned about her leg, they walked slowly down the street to Sara's Nook. The bakery was still packed at this time of morning, so they waited in line to order and then

for a spot to sit. It didn't take long, as someone willingly gave up their seat for Kate, who was using her cane.

"I think everyone in town knows about us now," Kate whispered over her coffee.

He smiled and took her hand in his, then lifted it and placed a kiss across her knuckles. There was a few sighs and oohs that filled the space, making them both smile.

"If they had any doubt, they don't anymore," she added.

He couldn't explain how it made him feel that she wanted everyone to know about them. It was almost a branding moment. He'd never had that in his life before. Someone who didn't just want to be with him but wanted everyone else to know.

Halfway through their meal, Nick walked in and pulled up a chair at their table.

"How'd your sail go yesterday?" Nick asked them.

"Wonderful," Kate answered. "I'm hoping Tom will take me out again soon." She gave him a wink.

Her brother, thankfully, didn't see the move and continued to talk while he shoveled his cinnamon roll into his mouth.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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**K**ate stood in the middle of the room, in front of the large windows that looked out over the main part of town, and smiled. She was home. At least, for now. She hadn't realized how important being self-sufficient was to her until she'd spent two months living with her parents.

She loved her family. Really. But there was just something about being on her own. Something she needed.

Lifting her bad leg, she did a pirouette right in the middle of her floor, lifting her arms over her head and laughing.

When a knock sounded on her door, she smiled as she opened the door to her brother.

"This is the last of it," he said as he carried a box through the living room and back into the bedroom. "Now, where's that pizza your promised me?" he said when he came back.

"It's down at Baked." She smiled and wrapped her arm through his. "You earned it. And a beer." She led him out of the apartment, making sure to lock the door behind her. Nick went down the stairs first, slowly, as if he wasn't sure she could handle them on her own yet.

The funny thing was that stairs didn't bother her. It was the odd twisting of her knee, the kind you did almost daily by

changing direction or moving your leg the wrong way that caused the pain to spike.

“Are you good?” he asked once they reached the bottom.

“Perfect.” She smiled and took his hand again. Just as long as she kept her knee and leg stiff while she walked, there was no pain at all. For the first time since being injured, she had started to trust her body again.

Dr. Stevens had even suggested that she could start dancing again if she took it slow.

First thing in the morning, she was going to hit the gym and see what she could do. But for now, she was going to enjoy having some pizza and beer with her brother.

When they walked in to Baked, Riley and Lilly waved them over to a large table.

“Join us. The entire gang is going to be here any minute,” Riley said, giving Kate a hug.

“We have pizzas already ordered,” Lilly said. “It pays to be married to the owners,” she added with a laugh. “Beer?” She motioned to a couple pitchers.

Kate and Nick sat down and within five minutes, almost every chair at the tables around them was filled. Most of them by Jordans.

Sara and Parker had been first to arrive. Since she was six months pregnant, she was sipping on a glass of sweet tea instead of beer.

They were followed by Suzie, who explained that Aiden was still working and might stop by later after he got off shift. Conner and Kara arrived with George and Robin.

Kate had enjoyed working with Kara and Robin when she'd worked at Suzie's flower shop. The sisters were now married, and their business was an even bigger success than before. Kate had heard that people came from all over the States to have a destination wedding at their venue.

Jacob and Rose arrived later. Rose sat next to Sara and sipped her own tea.

Seeing the two pregnant friends with their heads huddled together, laughing, Kate thought about her own future. She'd never really thought about having children of her own. Sure, somewhere in the back of her mind she'd always known someday she would get married and have children. But she'd been so focused on her career that nothing else was as important.

Now, however, with her career and goals shot down, she'd spent the last few weeks reevaluating her life. Especially since she had started kissing Tom. The man made her want to think of her future. No one else had ever done that for her.

When the pizzas arrived, everyone dug in as the conversations grew louder and split off in many different directions.

She ended up talking with Suzie for most of the time since Tom was still on shift as well.

They talked about her shop, how she'd hired two full-time employees since Kate had left her to go back to New York years back.

At one point, Josh and Carrie came in and sat in a couple of empty chairs next to Suzie.

"You know," Suzie said, pushing her empty plate away, "the old hair salon next to me is still empty. Someone came

and cleared it out last year in hopes of selling it. It would make an amazing dance studio.”

Kate felt her stomach do a little twist. She’d been thinking the same thing. The last time she’d walked by All in Bloom, she’d spent most of her time looking through the large glass windows next door.

The place had solid hardwood floors, two empty walls, and what appeared to be a bathroom and storage rooms off the back.

It wouldn’t take much to turn it into a studio. Mirrors for each of the walls, barres on each side. Maybe some roll-up mats if she wanted to add yoga classes. Kate could even teach tap since she’d spent almost five years learning and dancing it herself.

The more she thought about her prospects, the more she realized that Tom had been right. She’d only thought of teaching as a bad idea when she was at the top of her game. Looking down her nose at the profession when she, herself, had relied on so many others to teach her had been shortsighted.

How many kids in Pride would love to learn like she had? Learn in town, instead of having to carpool to Edgeview or, worse, Portland.

She and her parents had spent so many hours traveling in the car to and from the city when she was younger.

“Do you know who owns it?” Kate asked Suzie.

“I do,” Josh said, breaking into the conversation.

“Josh bought up a lot of the old buildings in town a couple years back,” Carrie said with a sigh. “He gutted that one in



particular, hoping to rent it out, since no one seemed to want to open another hair salon in town.”

“I had hoped to get someone in there before the end of the year. You’re welcome to take a look at it,” Josh added. “I can meet you over there in the morning, or we can walk over now. Up to you.”

Kate practically jumped up. “Now is good.”

Josh smiled, then turned to Carrie. “We’ll be back.” He kissed her cheek.

Josh and Kate walked down the street. The three-unit building sat on the other side of town, which was only about four blocks away.

“So, how are you feeling?” Josh asked, motioning to her leg.

“Much better. I’m excited that I have the go-ahead from Dr. Stevens to push myself a little more and get back to what I love.” They passed the building that housed his business, Internal Security. “How’s business?” She motioned to the two-story brick building.

He smiled. “Better than ever.” He nodded to Carrie’s Sanctuary. “We’re going to be expanding that building soon too. We still house all the bigger animals out on our property, but here we needed some more space.”

“That’s great.” She sopped by the windows to watch a small white fur ball roll around and play with a black one. The puppies were no bigger than her fists and looked so darn cute, she instantly thought of getting them.

“They’re not ready for a forever home just yet,” Josh said beside her. “But if you want, I can have Carrie put you on the list for when they are.”

“I...” She thought of turning him down, but then watched the pair of them wrestling and smiled. “Okay.”

“So, it’s really true?” Josh said as they started walking again.

“Hm?” She glanced at him.

“You’re sticking around?” he asked as they passed the police station and the fire station.

“I’m not sure I...” She shook her head. She’d known Josh all of her life. He was a few years ahead of her in school and, as far back as she could remember, he’d been totally infatuated with Carrie. Which had worked out, since they were now married and, if rumors were true, trying to start their own family. “I don’t think I’d make it dancing professionally. At least not in New York. I’m washed up. Everyone in the city knows about my injury. Besides, I think it’s time I took a break and put down some roots.” She thought about Tom. About wanting to spend more time with him.

It was funny. Before, she’d only ever felt trapped in the small town. Her eyes had been on a prize and the only way to obtain it had been to head to the Big Apple. There, everything she’d ever imagined she had wanted waited for her.

She’d dreamed of the bright lights, the loud noises, and the people. Thoughts of the stage had filled her mind to the point that her hometown was nothing more than just... well, a nuisance.

Now, however, with life in the city behind her, she was finally looking forward to something different. Even though she’d been raised in Pride, she’d always felt like an outsider. Most of the people she’d grown up with had always wanted to stay here. Sure, a few had moved on after school, but none had

done so as young as she had. Even now, people like Josh were returning and putting down their own roots. Marrying, building homes, starting businesses, and having children. There was an entire young generation just waiting for her to teach.

Young girls with maybe the same desires that she'd had.

"It's the reason I came back to Pride myself," Josh said with a smile as they turned the corner and the three-unit building came into view. "Suzie owns the flower shop, but I own the other two units," he said as they stopped in front. "I gutted this one a couple months back in hopes that it would rent faster. So far, I haven't gotten a lot of interest. The other unit, I've got some interest in it. It needs some work, but I'm hoping it will be rented soon too."

Kate was too busy looking at the space she was interested in to ask any more questions. She held her breath as Josh opened the glass door.

The place was big enough for a small dance studio. As she walked inside, she could just imagine it. Maybe she'd paint the walls a soft taupe color? She could get her dad and brother to hang the mirrors and barres.

"There's a bathroom and two large storage rooms off the back of the building that could easily be converted into changing rooms," Josh said, interrupting her thoughts.

"What are you asking for rent?" She turned to him suddenly, making up her mind.

When he gave her the amount, she tried to hold in her excitement. She easily had enough in her savings accounts to cover a year's worth and doubted it would come down to having to pull anything from that account.

Josh smiled. “You can take some time to think on it if you need?”

She held out her hand and smiled when he put his in hers without hesitation just as the patrol car pulled up outside. “No, I don’t need any time. I’ll take it.”

“Looks like Tom found us,” Josh joked. “We can meet tomorrow to sign the lease if you want. If there’s anything that needs to be done to the space, just let me know,” he said as Tom walked into the front.

“Hey,” Tom said, walking over to her and placing a kiss on her lips quickly. Then he shook Josh’s hand. “Carrie mentioned that the two of you walked down here to take a look at the place.”

Josh nodded. “Yes, and we just agreed that it’s hers.”

A look of surprise passed through Tom’s eyes quickly, then he pulled her into a hug. “Congrats,” he said into her hair.

Everything was moving swiftly, but Kate wasn’t worried or afraid. Instead, she was excited. She chatted nervously about what she would have to do to get the place ready as they headed back down to Baked.

Since Tom had driven the patrol car, she and Josh walked back and talked about all the details. Tom was waiting for them, along with Nick and Aiden, who had joined the large group.

Everyone hung out for a few more hours, and she filled everyone in on her plans.

Several people hinted that they would be interested in joining a couple of her classes, mainly the yoga class that she’d mentioned she was thinking of having each morning.

Kara suggested the possibility of using her venue for events such as recitals. Kate had been to the large facility that held Sunset Weddings, now Sunset Events. It was a massive old barn that had been remodeled into a magical place. Each event held there brought more and more out-of-town guests into the small town.

Kara and her sister Robin were the main reason Pride had grown so much in the past few years. Destination weddings had become so important to the town that the woman interested in renting Josh's other space was opening a bridal and dress boutique.

Suzie seemed eager to hear this news, since the shop would be next door to her. It did make Kate wonder if she was doing the right thing. After all, what did she really know about running a business? Sure, she knew all the ins and outs of dance. She'd taken so many classes in her childhood that she could teach not only ballet, but tap, hip-hop, swing, and even some ballroom dancing. Not to mention the yoga and Pilates she had planned for adults.

She wanted to pack each day with so many classes that she wouldn't miss the city or her dead career. A moment of worry flooded her mind. Was she doing the right thing? Could she really be happy here? What if she started this business and it failed? What if no one showed up or Pride was just too small of a town for what she was hoping to build?

Then Tom took her hand under the table, and just the simple touch somehow squashed her fears. Whatever the future held, at least he was by her side.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Over the next few weeks, Tom helped Kate get her new place ready as much as possible. They spent a wonderful full day in the city shopping, where she purchased a few items for her new apartment. He was thankful he had enough room in his car to fit everything and take it back to her place.

They ate dinner along the river in Portland at a place she'd picked, and he enjoyed the Mexican food so much that he thought he'd probably eat there any time he returned to the city.

A bout of summer flu had circulated in the station, leaving them shorthanded. Everyone who wasn't sick had to work double shifts. Tom had been one of the lucky ones that it had skipped. Once everyone was finally back at work and healthy, only then did he feel the fever hit him.

He'd taken two days off and had spent it with Kate, since she'd gotten the flu at the same time. He'd never had anyone dote on him before when he'd been sick.

Most of the time growing up, his mother had been working, leaving his father to care for him when he'd been home from school sick. His father couldn't even be bothered to make him lunch.

Tom was pretty sure his old man had seen children as nothing but a burden. Actually, everything had been. His mother could never do anything right, according to his father.

His dad had complained about everything. If the laundry was done, the dishes weren't. If they were both done, the floor was dirty. There was always something his mother couldn't get right. She'd worked a full-time job at the poker tables at a casino and shortly before her death had even picked up a part-time job at another casino.

Tom's father had been between jobs and spent most of his days and nights drinking and gambling. Which is how that fateful night had turned dark.

"Hey, are you okay?" Kate asked as she came into his room holding a tray with a bowl of soup balanced on it. "You look..." She frowned as she sat next to him on the bed.

"Sick?" he asked, then he coughed a few times.

Kate had gotten the flu, most likely from him, but, she'd bounced back after the first day and was now making it her mission to nurse him back to health.

Kate smiled. "Sad," she finished, running her hand over his forehead.

He sat up in the bed and sighed. "I was just thinking about my family. My mother never really had time to nurse me back to health when I was young. She worked two jobs." He took her hand in his. "I like being pampered."

Kate chuckled. "My mother claims that all men do."

He smiled. "Is that soup?"

"My mother just dropped off a pot of it for you. She would come in, but she has to fill in at the bakery and doesn't want to

get sick again.”

“That’s the thing about small towns. Colds and flus spread just as fast as gossip,” he said as she set the tray over him.

The thought of food was finally appealing to him. Over the last two days, he’d barely eaten anything. He’d sipped some hot tea, but everything else he’d tried to eat had ended coming back up.

“Think you can keep this down?” she asked as he shifted.

He nodded and took the spoon. “Can you sit for a while?”

She shook her head. “We’re hanging the barres today. I want to be there to make sure they get the right heights.”

He nodded and took a sip of the soup. “Thanks for stopping by to check on me.”

She smiled. “If you want, I can come back later. If you’re feeling better, maybe we can watch a movie. I can stop at the Golden Oar and get us dinner.”

“I’d like that.” He set down his spoon and took her hand in his. “Thanks.”

She shook her head. “I like looking after you.” She leaned over and placed a kiss on his forehead. “Your fever has gone away.”

“Yeah.” He smiled at her. “I think I sweat through my sheets.” He rolled his eyes. “After this, I’m going to try for a shower.”

“Do you have spare sheets?”

“I’ve got it. Go, put up your bars,” he said.

She smiled. “Barres.”



He frowned. She'd basically said the same word. "Isn't that what I said?"

She laughed and nodded. "Yes, but you made it seem..." She shook her head. "Never mind. I guess I'm just used to Nick's teasing. He used to call them poles, like pole dancers use."

Tom's eyes shot up and suddenly he had a vision of Kate on a stripper pole. He smiled.

"See." She rolled her eyes. "Now you're thinking about them too."

He lifted her hand to his lips. "Maybe I'll feel well enough that you can show me the difference later?"

She shook her head, but then leaned down and kissed him again. "Until later. Enjoy the soup."

"Thanks, again." He sobered. "Giving you a house key was the best decision I've made so far."

"Dating me wasn't a bad choice either," she joked. He smiled for an hour after she left. Then he tried to shower, and everything sucked again.

He was breathless and dizzy when he finished, and he still had to change his sheets. By the time he was done with that, he collapsed onto his sofa face-first and basically passed out.

He woke with strong hands rubbing his shoulders and arms. Moaning into the pillow, he allowed his entire body to float until he felt Kate kissing his neck.

"You're a very hard man to wake," she purred next to his ear.

"I overextended myself." He groaned. "How can showering and changing bed sheets make me so tired?"

“That’s a good sign. It means your body is healing,” she said as he sat up. “Feel better?”

He thought about it and nodded. “Other than feeling like I just ran a marathon, all the other symptoms are gone.”

“Good. That means you have your appetite back.” She stood up and walked into his kitchen. He followed her, a little more slowly. She had set the table and, as he watched, she lit the candles he’d put on it for decoration.

“This looks amazing,” he said, sitting down.

“We’re celebrating. The studio is ready. I should be opening my doors by the end of the week. Maybe Monday morning.”

“Then you decided on a name?” he asked as he pulled open containers from the Golden Oar.

She frowned at him. “No, not yet. I haven’t decided on it. I’m stuck between In Motion or Pure Motion.”

“How about just... The Dance Studio?” he asked. “Simple. Easy.”

She tilted her head as she dished him up some lasagna. “I like that too. Now I have three names to pick from.”

He chuckled. “I guess you don’t need a name to open your doors.”

“My mother registered the business under my name. Lacey says I can add a DBA to it when I decide.” She sat down, and he noticed she was eating a salad instead of the lasagna.

Still, while they ate, she reached over and took several bites of his food, and after dinner they shared a slice of apple pie while they watched television.

“I’m thinking of getting a dog or two,” she surprised him by saying once they were done eating.

“Or two?” he asked with a chuckle.

“There’s a brother and sister combo that Carrie has. They’re puppies still and won’t be ready to adopt for another couple weeks.”

“Okay,” he said, shifting until she rested her head against his shoulder. “I like dogs,” he assured her.

“Why don’t you have one already?”

He frowned, remembering the last animal he’d brought home, what his dad had done to it. How he had to bury what was left of it in the yard. He supposed that he hadn’t gotten another dog because of that memory.

As an answer to her, he just shrugged and pulled her closer. “Are you going to get both of them?”

“I’d hate to break them up. They’re so cute when they play together.” She sighed and rested back against his chest.

He ran his fingers through her hair and relaxed back. He was tired again but figured that by morning he would feel well enough to head into work. If he could convince her to spend the night in his bed.

“Then get both of them. I have a fenced yard on the side of the house that they can play in when you come over.”

She glanced up at him. Her smile warmed him. Then she moved quickly until she was straddling his hips, which placed her breasts pretty much in his face. He smiled and held her close by putting his hands on her hips.

“So,” she practically purred next to his ear, “you seem like you’re feeling much better.”

“I am,” he agreed as she started to move slowly over him. She had on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. His hands itched to feel her skin against his. He wanted to taste her, to feel her wrapped around him.

“Tom,” she said, moving over him, rubbing herself against his jeans, causing his dick to grow even harder.

“Hm?” His eyes moved to her lips, and he watched as she slowly licked them. He had to hold in a groan, just thinking of how wonderful she was going to feel.

“Are you going to take me to bed?” she asked just before she trailed her lips against his neck.

In one swift move, he lifted her into his arms and carried her back into his bedroom. He was slightly breathless by the time he laid her on the bed. Then she reached for him, and he would have run a hundred miles to get to her. At that moment, she was his entire world.

As he slid into her, the words he'd never said to a woman slipped from his lips. Thankfully, Kate smiled up at him and whispered them back to him. After that, he lost track of time and place as he spent the rest of the night pleasing her.

The following day, he walked into the station to applause, the same cheer that everyone else got when they returned from sick leave.

Chuckling and taking a bow, he turned and disappeared to change into his uniform. He walked out just in time to attend the morning meeting.

“Now that everyone has recovered from the bug,” Aiden said, motioning towards him, “we can get back to regular shifts.” Everyone clapped and he felt his world settle in place a little more.

Nick and Tom worked highway duty that morning. For lunch, he met Kate at the Brew-Ha-Ha for sandwiches.

“I’ve settled on a name,” she said when she walked in. He’d gotten them a couple of pre-wrapped sandwiches and had picked a booth near the front windows.

“Oh?” he asked as she sat down. “Hit me.”

She smiled and leaned forward. “I took your idea and ran it by a few of my friends. They loved the simplicity of it. I’m going to call it Pride’s Dance Studio. Riley thought it should be Kate’s Dance Studio, but...” She frowned and shook her head. “I don’t need my name on it. Besides, Lilly’s come up with a really great design.” She shoved a piece of paper towards him. “For the sign.”

*Pride’s Dance Studio* was in print. *Pride* was in smaller text and sat above the larger cursive word *Dance*, while the word *Studio* sat under in wide bold lettering. The design was both simple and elegant.

“I love it,” he told her. “It’s perfect.”

Kate happily bounced a couple times on the seat and pulled the design back towards her. “I’m heading over to order the sign after lunch. Lilly has a hook-up in Edgeview that can make this and install it. She claims it can be done by Monday. Which...”—she bit her bottom lip and looked at him—“will be my official first day.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Will you be ready?”

She shrugged and leaned back in the booth. He noticed she hadn’t even reached for her sandwich yet. “I’m pretty much ready now. I’m going to make flyers and posters to hang around town describing the classes I’ll have and my schedule.

Lilly's helping with that too. I figure by Monday, I should have enough people signed up to start."

"Well, if you need help handing them out..." He thought about it. "I'm working all this week and weekend. But I can carry some with me and hand them out to locals if you want. You can drop a bunch off at the schools. Even though it's summer, they have a bunch of kids in summer school. Most of the small kids attend day care as well, and the parents will see the flyers."

"That's a great idea." She reached over and pulled the meat and lettuce out of the sandwich and nibbled on it.

"You're eating like a rabbit again," he pointed out, and she laughed. "Since I'll be teaching, I have to get back in shape. I've gained ten pounds since my injury."

He ran his eyes over her and realized she didn't look any different. If anything, she looked happier, healthier, than when he'd first seen her.

"You look good," he said, taking her hand.

"Thanks, but if I'm going to trust my leg to carry me, I need to get back in shape. Which is why, after I work with Lilly on the flyers and the sign, I'll be heading to the new place to see how far I've fallen."

He frowned at this bit of news. Sure, she'd been hitting the gym with him, but Pilates and boxing were a far cry from what he knew her old routine was.

"Are you sure you're ready for it?" he asked, concerned.

She smiled. "Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything crazy. I know how far to push myself. If I push too hard, it'll only set me back farther." She squeezed his hand, and he relaxed a little.

“Maybe I can swing by and watch you practice?”

Her cheeks turned a light shade of pink, and she smiled even more as she nodded. “I’d like that.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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**K**ate held onto the barre and rested her bad leg on top of it, stretching it until she felt the tension in her muscles relax. Even though it had been almost three months since she had danced, she hadn't thought her body would regress this much.

For this first day, she moved through all of the warmups she knew until she'd worked up a sweat.

Even with the knee brace and tape on her bad leg, she was cautious as she began her basic stretches. She warmed up for more than an hour before moving around the floor in a dance she knew by heart.

The music she'd picked as background noise reminded her brain that, at one point, she would have flown across the floor. Her body ached to do so again, but her mind kept her grounded.

Everything was ready for opening day. The mirrors and barres were up, and her dad, her brother, and Tom, when he hadn't been sick, had all helped convert the two storage rooms into changing rooms. Parker had built little privacy booths with benches and hooks and curtains. Blake Jordan had found some old high school lockers at an auction, which the men had installed in both rooms. She'd painted them warm blue and



pink to cover the bright orange they'd been before. Massive wood benches were hauled in for both rooms.

When the door opened, she smiled at Tom as he walked in. He'd changed out of his uniform and was wearing a pair of sweat shorts and a T-shirt. In his hands was a small bouquet of pink roses.

"How's it going?" he asked, running his eyes over her.

"Good. Are these for me?" She took the bundle from him.

"Yeah, it pays to have your place right next to Suzie's," he joked as his eyes continued to scan her.

"I'm fine," she said, touching his arm. "Really. I haven't done anything too strenuous."

He shook his head. "That's not it." His eyebrows rose and fell several times. "I'm just seeing you for the first time in..." He waved his hand towards her. "And may I say, wow."

She laughed. "I'd do a twirl, but I'm limiting myself today."

"Good idea."

Her eyes moved over him. "You're dressed to work out."

He shrugged and rolled his eyes. "I thought I'd do some of those stretches you showed me. I'm pretty tense after fighting off the bug."

"You've come to the right place." She set the roses down on the counter at the back where she had her laptop. Josh had helped her set up software to receive payments that would even automatically charge clients each month for classes. He'd agreed to set up her website and social media pages, and Lilly had emailed him her logos and pictures of her dancing over the years.

They'd put her site information on all the flyers, and she already had people signing up for classes. She received a text message every time someone joined a class.

She moved back over to Tom and, for the next hour, ran through basic stretches and yoga poses with him. She had to admit, he was getting much better at it.

At only one point did she push her injured leg too far. When she was cooling off and tried to get off the floor to stand, her lower leg moved sideways, and the sting of pain almost made her fall on her face. Thankfully, Tom was there to catch her.

"You've pushed yourself too far," he worried, holding onto her.

"No, I just got too comfortable," she assured him. "Really, I should have been more cautious getting up."

She felt him relax. "How did it feel? Getting back to it?"

She smiled, her hands remaining on his shoulders. "Great. I should be able to go back up on point without too many problems soon enough."

He glanced down at her feet. "Does it hurt?"

"Everything about ballet hurts." She laughed.

"Then why do it?" he asked, dropping his hands from her.

"Because it's all I ever wanted from as far back as I can remember. The first thing I imagined myself doing in life." She walked over to pick up the roses he'd given her and buried her face into their soft petals. "I loved working with these when I worked next door," she admitted. "I've missed having time to be around flowers and plants."

“You could always come over and help me with my yard,” he suggested. “I’ve been meaning to plant something but have no idea what. Besides...” He held up his thumbs. “They’re not green at all. I’d probably destroy or kill whatever was there.”

She smiled. She’d noticed his flower beds were empty and had itched to plant something there. She hadn’t asked for fear she was overstepping, even though, since that first night, she’d spent more than half her time at his place. She was even keeping some basics things over there—a bottle of her shampoo and conditioner, a toothbrush, a bag of makeup. Hell, she was practically living there, compared to her old relationships, most of which hadn’t lasted longer than a week.

“Are you sure?” she asked, biting her lip.

Tom took her shoulders and pulled her closer. “I’m sure. Plant whatever you want. We can hit the hardware store on our way home.”

She smiled against his chest and wondered if he’d done that on purpose. Calling his place, theirs.

“Suzie will have what I need next door,” she said. “We can catch her before she locks up.”

Just then the door to the studio opened, and they both turned. Kate was totally shocked to see Dmitri walk in.

“Dmitri?” She frowned over at her ex-dance partner. “What are you doing in Pride?” She felt Tom tense next to her and held onto his arm, just in case.

“I... came to officially apologize,” Dmitri said, moving into the studio another step. “I know it’s too little, too late, but...” He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. She’d spent half a year working with the man almost every single hour of every day. Still, he was as much a stranger to her as

any of her ex-dance partners. She'd never really allowed herself to get too close to anyone before. She'd had a handful of friends, but the dance world was such a cutthroat business, you had to keep your guard up.

"You came all the way to Oregon to do that?" she asked, shaking her head.

"Yes, well, I'm heading back to Russia," he said. "And I didn't want what happened to eat at me. I screwed up. I trusted someone I shouldn't have. Isabella said she'd waxed the stage." He shook his head and opened his mouth but then closed it quickly. "I should have checked."

Kate could see sincerity in the man's eyes. He looked worried and... broken. Much like she'd been when she'd returned home.

"I appreciate you coming all this way." Kate moved over and took Dmitri's hand. "I'm sorry things fizzled out after I left."

Dmitri shrugged. "We deserved it." He took a deep breath. "After the reviews started flooding in, the show was shut down. The damage was done. Isabella, she... snapped. Anyway, it's why I'm heading back to Russia. To try and salvage my career while I still can. No one in New York will have me, have us, not now."

"I'm sorry," Kate said.

Dmitri shook his head. "I'm the fool. I fell for the wrong sort of person." Dmitri's eyes moved past Kate and landed on Tom. "It appears you've found a place for yourself."

"I have." Kate smiled. "I wish you the best."

Dmitri nodded. "I really am sorry." He took both of her hands in his. "If you ever need anything..." He kissed both of

her cheeks.

“Can you stay? Dinner?” she asked.

“No, I’m heading to the airport. I only had a few hours for layover. I needed to do this in person. I have and now... I can feel at peace. Good luck, in your future.” He smiled at her.

“You, too,” she said, and then she watched him leave.

“Okay, now I don’t have the urge to punch the guy anymore,” Tom said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

She smiled. “I had always thought it impossible that he could do something like that. I guess falling in love makes you stupid.”

Tom chuckled. “Being a fool in love will make you do just about anything.” He turned her. “Like Pilates.”

Kate laughed. They walked next door just as Suzie was closing out the register.

“Hey, how’s my new neighbor?” Suzie asked when they walked in. “In trouble with the law already?” she joked.

“I’m loving the new place,” Kate said. “We just broke the studio in.” The words were out of her mouth before she realized the implications. Feeling her face heat, she shook her head. “I mean—”

Suzie’s laughter stopped her as she held her hands up. “I get it. I heard the music and figured you were working out. Besides, Tom here stopped in and got my last bundle of white roses. I remember how much you loved them when you worked here.”

“They still are my favorite,” Kate admitted. “I was hoping that you still carried those flower garden starter kits.”

“Sure do.” Suzie motioned to her left. “They’re along that wall. Are you thinking of planting indoors, in your apartment?”

“No, Tom has several empty flower beds in his front yard.”

“I haven’t any idea how to make things grow,” Tom admitted.

“Oh, that’s wonderful.” Suzie clapped her hands. “I’ve been dying to see some flowers there.”

For the next fifteen minutes, she and Suzie picked which flowers would be great in the beds. In the end, they settled on a variety of wildflowers and perennials and loaded everything, including a couple bags of topsoil and plant fertilizer, into Tom’s trunk.

“I know what I’ll be doing this weekend,” she told Tom as she turned off the lights in her studio and gathered her things, including the flowers he’d given her.

“Will you be okay working on that all by yourself? I work all weekend.” He took her bag from her and threw it over his shoulder while she locked the front door.

“Of course.” She smiled. “It will help keep me busy and take my mind off opening-day jitters.”

“Speaking of which, I noticed a few flyers around town already,” he said, as they walked towards his car.

“Lilly’s and Riley’s doing. They’ve been handing them out to everyone who walks into Classy and Sassy,” she said with a chuckle.

After tossing her bag into his car, he nodded. “Can I give you a ride to your place?” He took a step closer and lowered his voice. “Or…”

“Or?” She smiled and, still holding his flowers, wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

He brushed his lips across hers. “Or...take you back to my place and spend the night pleasing you again.”

“I like option number... two,” she said against his lips.

Just then Tom’s cell phone rang. Before answering it, he opened the passenger door for her. As she climbed in, she heard him answer the call.

He was frowning when he got behind the wheel. He’d already ended the call.

“Is everything okay?” she asked him.

He took a deep breath and then turned to her. “That was a call from my father.”

“What?” She held in a gasp. “How... how did he get your number?”

Tom shrugged. “I have no clue. But I’ve already blocked his number.” He started the car. “Don’t give him another thought.” He reached over and took her hand. He no doubt could see the worry in her eyes for him.

“Are you okay?” she asked as he drove the two and a half blocks to his place.

“I am.” He glanced over at her. “Do you need to stop at your place?” he asked as he slowed down by O’Neil’s.

“If you don’t mind.” She would need a change of clothing. She’d pulled her sweats on over her tights and had a pair of shorts in her bag, but if she was going to be doing gardening, she’d need other clothes.

“Sure.” He pulled into the parking lot. “You head up and grab what you need. I’ll grab us something inside for dinner.” He shut off the car just as his phone rang again.

“Is it him again?” she asked, trying to see his phone’s screen.

“Unknown caller. I’m not taking the chance.” He hit the button to send the call to voicemail.

He jumped out and walked around to open the door for her. Then he kissed her, and she tried to see just how he was feeling, but his eyes were shaded by his sunglasses.

“I’ll just be a minute,” she said, and then she headed towards her stairs.

It was great living above the grocery store, and the apartment had been what she’d wanted and needed at the time. But the more time she spent at Tom’s place, the more she hoped for something different. Like spaces for gardening and areas for dogs to run.

She threw some clothes into a bag and was just coming down the stairs when Tom stepped out of the store with two bags in his arms.

“Did you get everything you needed?” he asked. She could tell instantly he was even more annoyed than when he’d walked into the store. Hearing his phone go off, she guessed why.

“You can just turn it off,” she suggested.

“Nope, on call.”

She set her bag in the back seat of his car along with the groceries he’d gotten and pulled out her phone.

“Hi, Aiden,”



“Hey, Kate. I see that your about ready to open your new studio. We’re sure proud of you,” Aiden said.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “Hey, Tom is having issues with his cell phone tonight. If you need him, can you call mine instead?” she asked, her eyes going to Tom. She smiled when he visibly relaxed.

“Sure thing,” Aiden said easily. “Have a great night.”

“You, too.” She hung up, then reached into his pocket for this phone. It still ringing with an unknown caller ID when she switched it off. “Better?” she asked as Tom pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

“Much.” He sighed. “I’m afraid I might have angry shopped.” He motioned to the car.

She chuckled. “I know. I saw a box of Ding Dongs in there.”

He groaned. “Okay, yeah. Maybe we can watch a movie and eat junk food?”

She thought about her tight diet and then realized that she no longer had to be on the crazy regimen she’d been on before. Yes, she wanted to watch her weight, but at this point, even Dr. Stevens was pleased with the pounds she’d gained.

“That sounds wonderful,” she agreed.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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**T**hat entire weekend, Tom's phone rang. Every time the unknown caller ID flashed on his screen, he'd block the number, but a few moments later, it would start ringing again.

Since he was on shift, he locked his personal cell in his locker, turned it off, and only took his emergency work phone with him.

He'd left Kate working in his yard, knowing full well that she was enjoying herself. When he and Nick had stopped by for lunch the first day, Suzie was there delivering more dirt and potted flowers.

They ate a picnic lunch out on his back deck and talked about possibly adding some flower boxes on the railings.

When he arrived home later that night, she'd had her father deliver some flower boxes from the hardware store and had already installed them and filled them with colorful wildflowers. He had to admit, they really added to the view.

The entire yard was completed by Sunday afternoon when he returned home. In those few hours, she had transformed the outside of his home from dull and boring to extraordinary and vibrant.

She had cut flower beds along the entire length of his front walkway and filled them with white and blue flowers. The nautical theme now started outside the home and then continued inside.

There were large white flowers just outside the front windows and little yellow ones in the flower boxes she'd hung off each of the windowsills.

On the sides of the house were large flower boxes that she'd filled with a plethora of tiny colorful flowers that should have appeared wild and crowded but ended up looking natural. He could sit and stare at them for hours. Which was good because those were the flower beds near his grassy yard and the area he deemed his hangout spot.

She had even trimmed the bushes in the front and near his garage, which somehow made his home look more... picturesque.

"You're amazing at this." He gave her a hug as they stood in the front yard. "The place is transformed."

She smiled up at him. "I had fun. I may have to dip in every now and then and help Suzie out again, just to get my fix. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy gardening."

"Well, there's always your parents' place. I noticed your mother's roses were growing crazy."

"My mother is like you, no green thumb. Dad does all the yard work." She smiled. "I suppose I could see if they're game. But something tells me that, after Monday, I'm going to have my hands full. Already today, I took more than a dozen calls from people signing up for classes. Both of my Monday morning yoga classes are full," she added with a smile.

"That's great." He kissed her forehead.

“Of course, I’m pretty sure that all my family and friends signed up to support me. Who knows how many will stick beyond the first week.” He felt her shoulders slump a little.

“Hey, take it one day at a time.” He took her hand. “How about we head out to the Golden Oar for dinner? I’m in the mood to have someone else serve me food and maybe have a glass of wine since I have tomorrow off.”

“You can enjoy the wine. I have yoga first thing in the morning. But I could go for my favorite chicken salad. I swear, in New York, there was nothing close to it.” She kissed him again.

“I know you’ve just spent the last two days working outside”—he touched the tip of her nose with his fingertip and noticed that her once pale skin had a nice glow to it—“but how do you feel about walking?”

“I love the idea.” She took his hand in hers.

They strolled the couple blocks hand in hand and talked about opening day for her the next day.

Her sign wouldn’t be installed until Wednesday, but she seemed happy to be opening her doors. She filled him in on who had signed up for yoga and who had signed up for dance classes.

“I had a lot of questions about adult dance classes,” she said as they were seated in the dining room. “I’m thinking of maybe adding one class a week for older dancers.”

“Professional dancers?” he asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “Women like my mother. She says that her book club has been wanting to do a pop dance class. They read a book where a group of friends met at a dance class.” She smiled and leaned her elbows on the table

and rested her chin in her hands. “My aunt has talked to me about wanting to learn tap. And Brook wants to learn ballet.” She smiled.

“Don’t you have to start as a kid to learn it?”

“No. Plenty of adults start learning later in life. They’ll never have a full-time career at it, but most of them are doing it for the exercise and the pure joy of dance. In the past few months, I’ve missed that the most. I think I’ve realized that it no longer matters if I dance professionally. Sure, I’ll always miss the stage.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “The thrill of stepping out into the bright lights, hearing the cheers and music. Knowing I’m center stage and captivating everyone’s attention.” She opened her eyes and shrugged slightly. “I’m hoping to get that fix of excitement by teaching.”

He didn’t want to think about what would happen if she decided it wasn’t enough and that she wanted to move back to the city. There was no doubt in his mind that she could fully recover from her injury and dance. Maybe she’d never be the lead again, but she could easily be on the stage in New York if she worked hard enough for it.

Already, he’d noticed the limp she had was almost completely gone. She rubbed her knee every now and then, and he doubted she even knew that she did it. He’d seen pain cross her face on occasion, usually when she was twisting her leg.

Did dancers do that often?

Halfway through dinner, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He’d gotten so use to ignoring it over the last couple days that it took him a moment to glance at the screen.

Seeing Larry Jameson's name flash on the screen, he answered it. "Hello, Larry."

"Tom, I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time?" Larry said, sounding slightly breathless.

"No, what's up?" Tom asked, holding his breath. His old lawyer usually only called when there was bad news.

"Well, I wanted you to hear it from me first. Your father skipped out on his parole meeting today. He was set to check in a couple hours ago and, well, they sent a patrol car over to the halfway house where he was staying, and they claimed he packed up late last night and left."

"Shit," he said under his breath.

"The Las Vegas police department has already put out a warrant. I thought you should know," Larry said.

"He's been trying to reach me the last few days. He keeps changing numbers, so I stopped answering my phone."

Larry was quiet. "How did he get your number?"

"That's a question I'd liked answered as well," Tom admitted.

"Okay. I know you're local PD, but I thought you should keep an eye out. Maybe talk to your chief and see what he can do to help. I doubt he'd head your way—he shouldn't even know where you are—but if he's gotten hold of your number..."

"Yeah," Tom broke in. "Thanks," he said and hung up.

"What?" Kate asked, looking concerned.

"My dad bailed on his parole meeting today." He felt a headache build behind his eyes.

Kate looked around the restaurant.

“Easy.” He took her hand in his. “He can’t jump on a plane, which means it would take him about twelve hours to get here.” He calculated and then cursed under his breath. Depending on what time he left last night, his father could already be in Pride.

His stomach tightened, and suddenly he realized just how vulnerable they were. Hell, he’d put Kate directly in the line of danger. They’d walked there. Had his father seen them already?

His stomach lurched, and he began to sweat. He knew better. He was a cop, damn it. He knew better than to endanger the only person he loved.

“Hey.” Kate’s voice broke into his self-berating. “He’s probably not here. He may not even come here. How would he know where you live?” She smiled weakly at him.

He nodded and pulled out his cell phone again. “I’m calling your brother to pick you up and drive you home.”

“No, you are not.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ve planned on staying with you—”

“Kate,” he interrupted her. “Do this one thing for me. Until he’s found, stay as far away from me as possible.” He walked over to his waitress and handed her enough money to pay for their meal as he dialed Nick’s number.

“Hey, what’s up?” Nick answered on the second ring.

“My dad skipped his last check-in. We’re at the Oar. Can you come take your sister home?” he blurted out as his eyes locked with Kate’s. He could tell she was angry at him. Good. Let her be. The farther she was away from him, the better. Physically, mentally, and emotionally.

“Shit, you think he’d come to Pride?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know, but until he’s found, I want Kate somewhere safe, and that means she needs to be as far away from me as possible,” Tom said quickly.

“I’ll be there in five,” Nick said and hung up.

“I am not going home,” Kate said when he returned to their table. The waitress had dropped off a couple of to-go containers for their meals.

Tom knew that it would be impossible for him to eat anything more that evening. Still, he dumped the rest of his burger and fries into the container, then tossed Kate’s chicken salad in the other.

“Nick’s going to be here to get you. I’ll drop your things off tomorrow at your studio.” He took her arm and walked towards the door.

“Tom.” She yanked her arm away, and he hated seeing the tears in her eyes. “I...”

“Please.” He handed her the food containers and then took her shoulders in his hands. “Do this for me.” He brushed his lips across hers. “It would kill me if anything happened to you. Just... I need to know that you’re safe.” He rested his forehead against hers. “Please.” The last came out as a groan.

Kate sighed heavily and then nodded once. “But the moment he’s in custody, we’re going to talk about our living arrangements.”

He looked into her eyes and nodded. “Deal.”



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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The following morning, Kate's parents showed up at her place and dropped her off at the studio. She'd hated spending the night alone in her apartment. She'd worried about Tom the entire time and had spent more than two hours on the phone with him after Nick had dropped her off at home.

Sometime over the past few months, she'd gotten used to sleeping in his bed. After this was all over, she wanted to go right back to doing so. Full time.

She'd never lived with a man before, but deep down in her heart, she knew that it was the next move she wanted to make. She'd never felt this way about anyone before. Tom was all she could think of, day and night.

Even now, as she prepared to open her doors for the first time, she was worried that she hadn't heard from him yet that morning. Since she wasn't sure what the day would hold, she changed into a pair of soft pink leggings and leotards with a pink skirt, knitted shoulder wrap, and matching leg warmers. She took some time pinning her hair up in a tight bun and realized that she hadn't done so since leaving New York.

Looking at herself in the mirror in the changing room, she tried not to focus on the extra pounds she could easily see on herself.

She'd wrapped her leg with athletic support tape and even put on a knee brace over her leggings and under her leg warmers. Slipping on her pink dance shoes, she took several deep breaths.

Thankfully, all of her payments would be digital. Most everyone who had signed up for a class had already paid on the online portal Josh had set up for her. For the rest, she could easily take other digital forms of payment. One thing she didn't want to do was deal with cash payments.

When she stepped out of the changing room, she was surprised to see a few people waiting outside the glass doors. Smiling, she walked over and opened the doors to her aunt, her cousin, and both Lilly and Riley.

“Good morning.” She smiled and motioned for them to come in. All of them had stopped in to look around while the work had still been underway, so she just waved them towards the back. “If you need to change...”

She was given several hugs before the four of them disappeared into the back.

In the next five minutes, a dozen more women including most of the Jordan women, came in and all disappeared into the back.

She switched on soothing music and started stretching as people made their way out of the changing rooms with their mats.

She rolled out her yoga mat and talked everyone through her very first yoga class.

An hour later, she finished up the class and reminded everyone to hydrate. Riley and Lilly walked over to her with smiles on their faces.

“We’ve been talking,” Riley said. She nudged Lilly.

“You should order some water bottles. You know, the refillable type with your logo on it.”

Kate instantly thought it was a great idea.

“And T-shirts and yoga mats and bumper stickers,” Riley added.

Kate laughed. “Okay, how about I start with the water bottles. I can tell they’re needed.” She motioned around to the group of women rolling up their mats.

“We know a guy. If you want, I’ll email you the website and you can pick out the bottles and how to order them,” Lilly added.

“Thanks, that would be helpful.” She heard the door open and when she saw Tom walk in, her heart did a little flip in her chest. Her brother followed him inside and started talking to their aunt.

“We’ll... talk to you later. Thanks.” Lilly pulled Riley back to gather their mats.

“Hey,” Tom said, stopping next to her. “I wanted to stop by before your class but...” He frowned.

“Are you okay?” she asked, searching his eyes.

He nodded slowly. “You?”

She smiled. “I’d say my first class was a huge success.” She waved to the women disappearing into the changing rooms.

“When is your next class?”

“In an hour.”

“Have you eaten breakfast?” He held up a bag from Sara’s Nook. “Nick and I thought—”

“It depends,” she broke in, frowning slightly.

“There’s an egg white and spinach quiche in here. Your mother thought that would be better than the donuts I got.”

“She wanted to be here for the first class, but my aunt and cousin beat her to it, so she got stuck working at the bakery. She’ll be in my second class,” Kate said with a smile.

“I know, she complained to anyone who would listen when we were in there.” Tom laughed.

“Can you wait until everyone leaves?” she asked as people started coming out of the dressing rooms.

“Sure.” He stood aside and then moved behind the counter as she answered questions or just chatted. Nick walked over and waited with him.

When everyone had left, she glanced between the two of them.

“What happened to staying away from me?” she asked. She’d meant it as a joke, but seeing him tense, she wished she’d kept her mouth shut.

“That’s why I’m here,” Nick said. “A buffer. If anyone is watching, they’d think we stopped by because of me.”

“I figured...” Tom started, but Nick coughed. “We figured,” he corrected as he looked down at his hands and took a deep breath, “that you were due a congratulations on opening day.” Tom glanced at Nick.

“I’m just...” He motioned towards the front. “Going to go stand watch.” He took a donut and walked to the front windows.

Tom turned back to her and took both her hands in his. “I knew this day would come. I should have stopped myself from falling for you.” His eyes returned to hers and she saw the love there and melted. “Your brother pointed out a lot of things this morning.”

She tensed. “Nick shouldn’t have—”

Tom stopped her by holding up his hands. “No, everything he said was right, but then he went on to reminded me that you’d been hurt by someone else long before I came into your life. And that you’d probably have a better chance of being protected with a cop by your side.”

“Does that mean I can come home?” she asked.

He frowned and shook his head. “Not yet. Larry Jameson, my old lawyer who’s been watching out for me, informs me that the local law believes my dad is shacking up with a woman he met through a prisoner religious reform class he was taking. The woman came to see my father several times over the past year and even had conjugal visits.” He said this last part through clenched teeth.

“Your dad got remarried? In prison?” she asked, feeling slightly shocked.

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, the local police believe the two of them have run off together somewhere. They believe I’m the last person he’d want to bother,” Tom said with a sigh.

“What about the phone calls?” Kate asked, finishing up her quiche and then taking a sip of her water. Her next class was due to arrive in less than ten minutes.

“They believe he was calling to see about getting some money from me. That’s what he asked in the few seconds I allowed him to talk.” Tom shook his head. “He said I owed

him.” He closed his eyes. “Anyway, until we know for sure, this breakfast”—he motioned to their empty containers—“will have to be it. I... shouldn’t have even come here, but I thought... You deserved better.”

She took his hand in hers. “I deserve you.” She squeezed his hand. She wanted to kiss him, but just then two women in her next class walked through the front door and started talking to Nick. “When can I see you again?” she asked, feeling her heart sink.

Tom frowned and glanced towards the large windows. “I... It’s not a good idea. Until we know something more.” Tom’s hand reached up and touched her arm. “Kate, I would do anything to go back in time and protect my mom and brother. I won’t make that same mistake. Until he’s behind bars again, it’s best I steer clear of any personal relationships.”

Kate swallowed as she felt tears sting her eyes.

“I want nothing more for you to come home with me, to spend every night in my bed.” His voice had lowered as his eyes searched her face. “Kate, I...”

Just then they were interrupted when more people came through the door.

“Later. I promise.” He dropped his hand. “Congratulations on what appears to be a very successful first day.” He smiled at her. “If you see us driving by a few times this week”—his voice was just a whisper now—“know that it’s because I’m thinking of you.”

She smiled and, this time, her heart jumping in her chest was a good thing.

She didn’t trust her voice, so she gave him a quick nod before he turned and walked out with her brother.

One thing was clear to her after her second yoga class. She'd paid the toll for the almost three months of inactivity. After everyone from her second class left, her mother stuck around and helped her prepare for her first dance class for the younger kids.

Since it was summer, she had scheduled two classes during the day and one in the evening. When school started up again, she'd have to shift all of the classes to evening hours. But for now, her class for children under ten started mid-day and the one for ages ten and above was in the early afternoon.

She was happily surprised that the class for younger kids had a dozen kids in it, including two boys.

She spent almost an hour before and after class talking to the parents and answering their questions: What outfits would be best for their kids to wear? How should they practice? Where and when could they show off their children's progress?

Kate knew that she would have to hold recitals. She couldn't count how many she'd been in during her youth.

After her last class, she'd have to head over to talk to Kara and Robin about the possibility of using Sunset Events to host Pride's very first dance recital.

She was spared that trip when Robin and Kara showed up for her evening adult dance class. For this class, she would be teaching everything from ballet to jazz. It was more of an exercise class than anything. The women all seemed eager to learn while still making it a social event.

After class, several women suggested she allow them to bring wine and snacks for when the class was over. Kate realized then that the women were using her class as a means

to escape for an evening. She knew a lot of the women in attendance had small children at home or busy day jobs.

Her morning yoga classes were filled with the die-hard exercise types, but she figured her evening classes could cater to those looking for a more relaxed and fun environment.

Allowing them to bring wine and snacks was a small sacrifice to keep the women coming each week. Maybe she'd even purchase some folding chairs and a couple of folding tables for them to use.

"This was so much fun," Robin said as they all stood around. "We needed something like this in Pride, a place for women to gather."

"I'm just thankful Roy was able to watch the kids tonight. I need some me time instead of mommy time," Julie Duffy chimed in. Julie was a stay-at-home mom. Both of her girls were in Kate's under-ten class. When Kate had mentioned the evening class for adults, Julie had been hesitant. Kate was happy she'd come that evening.

Kate vaguely remembered Julie and Roy from school. They'd been two grades above her and had been dating since middle school. The couple seemed happy, and their two daughters were super cute in their little leotard outfits. Julie was the one who'd asked her about the recitals.

"Well, I'm so glad you decided to give it a try," Kate said. "I was hoping to talk to Robin and Kara about using their place for our first recital."

"Oh, that would be a great idea." Julie clapped and glanced towards the sisters.

"For us?" Kara asked with a chuckle.



“No.” Kate smiled. “For the younger children. I figured I could have the kids ready and put something together for a Christmas recital.”

“That’s an amazing idea,” Robin said happily. “I’ll let you know what days we have available and mark them off.”

“What about having a small recital at the next festival? Maybe have a select few, your top students, do a little presentation at the gazebo? It would be a great way to promote your business,” Lilly suggested.

“When is the next festival?” she asked.

“About two months from now. The fall festival,” Lilly answered.

A handful of the older dancers showed enough potential that they could be ready by then. And she could allow a group of the younger kids to muddle their way through something simple. After all, adults loved it when little kids tried their best.

“I like that idea,” Kate admitted. “We could do a larger holiday show at your place, say a month after the fall festival.”

After that, most everyone left, leaving only Lilly, Riley, and Suzie behind. The four of them chatted while they changed in the back room. Kate pulled on a pair of sweats while everyone else changed out of their workout outfits.

“So, is it true what we’ve heard about Tom’s father?” Suzie asked as they walked out of the studio.

Kate frowned and then filled them in quickly about what Tom was going through. She knew he wasn’t trying to keep his life private any longer. The entire town was being asked to keep an eye out for his father, after all.

“Is that why your brother is waiting for you?” Suzie motioned to her brother’s car and then sighed. “Our men are so protective of us.” Aiden’s car was parked behind Nick’s, and the two men were standing on the sidewalk, talking to one another.

“It’s nice being close to family,” she admitted. There was no way she would have said so a few months ago. But now, seeing her brother standing there, watching out for her, she smiled.

Sure, she wished more than anything that it was Tom waiting for her, but she was glad Nick was there, if for no other reason than she’d spent the entire day on her feet and her leg was sore. The thought of walking home troubled her. But it also felt like it was about to start raining, and she didn’t want to get soaking wet.

Then she remembered she’d be going back to her place that evening. Alone. Feeling deflated, she waved goodbye to her friends and walked to her brother’s car.

Nick climbed in and started heading towards her place.

“So, how did it go today?” he asked her.

She thought back to the amazing day and smiled. “Perfect.” The only thing that could have made the day any better would be returning home with Tom.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

Being away from Kate this long was killing him. How was it that in such a short time, he'd grown accustomed to having her around? It was like losing a limb, returning home to an empty house each night.

So far, a whole week had passed without anyone spotting his father. Of course, a parole skipper wasn't as high priority as other hardened criminals out there on the loose. Still, he was a murderer, which should put him near the top of the list.

Tom was growing frustrated that his father had disappeared so easily. The family of Crystal Cummings, his father's wife, was very concerned for their daughter. She was apparently fifteen years his father's junior, and her family had been opposed to the relationship from the start.

Her family had reached out to him through his lawyer, but so far, Tom hadn't responded, per his lawyer's advice.

Aiden had assured him that he and everyone else in Pride were on the lookout for the two of them. They had even shared updated photos of his father and Crystal on local websites and social media sites. If either of them stepped foot in Pride, someone would know.

Still, that didn't change the fact that Tom wanted Kate back home. He missed her. Missed spending time talking to

her, hearing her laugh, seeing her smile. God, he was such a goner.

They had planned to head to Portland for another shopping trip, but that was postponed, as was the sail he had planned.

Her studio was a huge success and had been featured in several local papers, as well as a national one that had reached out to Kate to get her story after the big scandal.

Her sign had arrived and been hung over the large windows. He'd driven by it several times at night and was very impressed.

Every evening, after he knew Nick or her father had driven her home from her last class, they would text or video call one another.

Still, seeing her face through the small screen wasn't the same as holding her.

Tonight was one of the few nights she didn't have an evening class. When he got off work, they video called each other, and he propped his phone up while he moved around the kitchen making dinner.

She was sitting on her sofa, eating a salad from Golden Oar while she filled him in on how her classes were going.

"I'm feeling stronger each day," she said between bites. "After the first day, I slept like the dead. My body ached, and I was pretty convinced I'd just made the biggest mistake in my life." She chuckled, and he stopped chopping carrots to appreciate her laughter. "But now I feel stronger and more back to myself."

"That's good." He started chopping the vegetables again. "I've heard from several people in your classes that they are enjoying themselves. Especially that night class."

Kate rolled her eyes and then laughed. “It’s turning into more of a social hour. Still, it’s fun teaching those women what I can. Yesterday, they actually just danced around to eighties music. I don’t think I’ve had more fun in my life.” She laughed again. “It’s nice to blow off steam every once in a while.”

“I bet.” He thought back to his boxing sessions. Since his evenings were now Kate-free, he’d been spending a lot of time at the Boys and Girls Club. The exercise helped him get rid of some of his frustration. Talking with Kate each night removed most of the rest. Most of it.

Every night, he still tossed and turned, replaying that night so many years ago in his dreams. Only instead of walking in on his father killing Ryan, it was Kate lying in the bed under his father’s knife.

It grew so bad that most nights, he only got a couple hours of sleep. What he needed was to hold Kate in his arms at night.

Kate had grown quiet on the phone, and he glanced over to see her frowning at the screen.

“What’s wrong?” He set the knife down and picked up the phone.

“I miss you,” she said with a heavy sigh. “What happens if... your dad isn’t caught for a long time? Some people hide from the law for years.”

He thought about it and shrugged. “I’m not sure. I don’t intend to stay away from you that long,” he assured her, and the corners of her lips curved up. “We’ll give it until the end of the month,” he suddenly said.

Her smile grew. “Promise?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I—”

Just then there was a loud noise and her phone dropped. He heard her scream. He almost dropped his phone as he called out to her over and over.

He was rushing towards the door when she finally came back on the screen.

“I’m here,” she said, a little breathless. Her hair looked messed up, and she had a panicked look on her face.

“What happened?” he asked, taking his car keys off the hook by the back door.

“I...” She was glancing around. “Someone threw something through my window. It’s...”

“I’m on my way over there,” he said quickly. He wanted to keep her on the phone, but knew he had to call backup. “Is your door locked?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said, rushing over to it and making sure. “Yes,” she said again.

“I’ve got to hang up and call for backup. Stay put. Don’t open the door until you hear back from me.” When she nodded, he hung up and called Aiden as he drove like a madman to her place.

When he got there, there were already two patrol cars outside. He punched Kate’s number, and she answered on the first ring. “Nick and Aiden are here,” she said. “I let them in.”

“Good, I’m coming up.”

He ran up the stairs, a little breathless when he reached the top. He burst through the door and wrapped his arms around her, taking in the shattered window and her broken glass-top coffee table.

“Are you okay?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said, her voice muffled against his chest. “It just scared me.”

“It’s a brick,” Aiden said, showing him. The word *bitch* was written on it with white paint.

Shit. Even though he’d steered clear of Kate, somehow, his father had found her anyway.

“Pack your things,” he told her when he noticed that she was still pale and shaking. “You’re going to go stay with your folks.”

She shook her head and took a step away from him. “No, I’m not.”

“Then you can stay with me,” Nick suggested.

“No.” Kate frowned at her brother. “I can stay with Tom.” She turned back to him. “If he already knows about me, then it’s too late. I’m better off with you.”

He hated the idea, but seeing the determination in her eyes, and getting the nod from both Nick and Aiden, he relented.

“Fine, go gather what you need.” When she disappeared into the bedroom, he turned on the men.

“How the hell did he get into town without anyone seeing him?” he growled.

“Good question.” Aiden turned the brick over in his hands. “Are we sure it’s him?”

Nick took the brick, walked over to the window, and looked out. The broken glass from the window crunched under his feet.

“Whoever threw this had to be standing just there.” He motioned as his eyes pinpointed a spot directly in front of

O'Neil's below them. "Any chance Patty's security camera might have caught it?"

"I'll go check," Nick said, and quickly disappeared.

"What about my father's new wife?" he suggested. "He could be using her?"

"We've got people looking for her as well. I'm going to have anyone on shift right now drive around. Maybe check a couple of the hotels and see if anyone matching their descriptions have checked in recently," Aiden suggested. "Until then, Kate's right. She's better off staying at your place." Aiden lowered his voice. "She doesn't want to worry her folks, but Nick has already called them." Aiden motioned to the parking lot below them, where her parents' car had pulled in and parked next to his. Her mother and father rushed out and headed towards the stairs.

Shit. Now he'd have to apologize to them about causing this mess. If he'd just stayed away from Kate...

"Where is she?" Becca rushed in. Sean was right behind her.

"She's in her bedroom packing," Aiden answered. "She wasn't hurt," he assured them.

Sean walked over to them and took the brick from Tom's hands.

"Any ideas?" Sean asked.

"It's no doubt thanks to my father. If not directly, then indirectly," he explained. "Nick's downstairs seeing if Patty's cameras caught anything."

Sean walked over and looked down at the front of the building. "It would take some doing to chuck this thing up



here.”

“Yeah.” Aiden sighed and pointed. “From the angle, they’d have to stand about there, we figure.”

“Here.” Tom picked up a blue ball that Kate had to roll out her muscles. “I’ll give it a try.” He walked outside and down the stairs.

It took him two tries to get the right position so he could throw the ball through the gaping hole in the window. When he returned upstairs, Kate and Becca were back in the living room. Her bags sat by the doorway.

“A brick is a lot heavier, but yeah, it could be done.”

Everyone looked out. “Classy and Sassy has cameras,” Aiden said. “If someone stood there, it might be in view.”

“I’ll call Lilly.” Becca pulled out her phone.

While he walked Kate’s stuff down to his car, the rest of them hunted down any videos of the incident. He wanted to help, but his first priority from here on out was Kate’s protection.

When he returned upstairs, everyone was gathered around Becca’s phone screen, watching the video from across the street.

“It’s too dark to see who it is clearly, but it’s obviously a woman,” Aiden said. “Send me a copy and I’ll pass it around the station.”

Becca sent him the video. “What now?” Becca asked.

“We keep an eye out. Kate will be staying at Tom’s place, and we’ll have more patrols drive by her studio each day.”

“It’s obviously Crystal Cummings,” he pointed out, and everyone turned to him. “My father’s new wife. He’s put her up to it so he can hide in the shadows.”

Everyone was quiet. “It’s late,” Aiden said suddenly. “Suzie has dinner waiting. Why don’t you all head home.”

“Patty’s going to have someone come replace the glass tomorrow,” Nick told Kate. “She mentioned something about getting some more cameras installed as well.”

“Thanks,” Kate said, hugging her family. Then she took his hand and followed him down the stairs.

They rode back to his place in silence. Only after he parked in his garage did she finally speak.

“This isn’t on you,” she said, turning towards him.

“How can you say that?” he said, feeling his stomach roll.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and turned towards him, then took his face in her hands and placed her lips gently over his. “This is not on you,” she said more firmly. “This is on them. You did not cause this. Just like you had nothing to do with your mother’s and brother’s deaths. Your father is a very sick man, and he will be found. For now, I’m just happy to be back here.” She smiled and then kissed him again. “Now, I seem to remember you were making dinner? My chicken salad got glass in it.”

He nodded and wrapped his arms around her. “Yeah, I guess it was a good thing I hadn’t started cooking yet.”

He carried her bags into the house and, after dropping them off in the bedroom, they worked in the kitchen together making dinner.

He was too afraid to talk about what had happened, for fear that she'd come to her senses. Instead, they talked about everything else he could think of.

She surprised him by letting him know that the two small dogs she'd talked to him about were now ready for her to pick up from Carrie's Sanctuary.

"Carrie held onto them until they were healed from getting spayed and neutered. She says they're all healed and ready to come home. I was going to pick them up in the morning, if you're okay with that."

He pulled the pan of fish he'd been cooking off the fire and wrapped his arms around her. "We can go in the morning. I have tomorrow off."

Her smile was all he'd needed. The feel of her in his arms. The smell of her. He didn't want to go that long without her again.

"Kate," he said into her hair.

"Hm?" she moaned next to him as his hands started roaming over her.

"I think our food is going to get cold." He kissed her.

"Okay." She held onto him when he lifted her into his arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

He laid her down and took a moment to just look at her. She was everything. All he'd ever imagined he wanted. Her long blonde hair was fanned out on his comforter. Her cheeks had turned slightly pink, and her blue eyes were so filled with want, he was having a difficult time denying her.

He hovered over her, taking his time running his hands over her body.

He could see and feel the changes that had taken place in her body over the last week. She'd toned up from being active again, but she wasn't as skinny as when he'd first seen her. She looked healthier and happier.

"I love the look of you," he said after pulling off the large sweater she'd worn over her leggings. As he peeled those down, he ran his hands over every inch of those long legs of hers, pausing briefly to pull the brace off her knee. When she lay under him, completely naked, only then did he toss off his own clothes.

"God, I've missed you," she said, reaching for him.

"I've missed you," he said, covering her again. The kiss was more desperate, more passionate, just more everything. He could feel it deep in his soul and knew that, whatever happened, he would do everything he could to ensure nothing bad ever happened to her again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Tears of joy filled Kate's eyes as Tom moved over her and slowly slid into her. Her body ached so much for him that she felt her first release moments after he was embedded in her. Stars burst behind her eyes as she cried out his name.

"My god," he groaned next to her ear. "Again. Do that again." He came back to kiss her.

She doubted she had the energy, but he was still moving in her, and she could already feel herself building again.

Her legs tightened around his hips as her nails dug into his shoulders.

She wanted to tell him, to show him how she felt. What he did to her. Smiling, she pushed his shoulder and rolled until she sat over him, looking down at him.

"My turn to drive." She flipped her hair out of her face.

His hands moved up to cup her breasts as she started moving, taking him more deeply into her. She ground her hips against his, using her inner thigh muscles to hold onto him.

"My god," he groaned. "Kate."

"Tell me," she coaxed him. "Say it."

His eyes opened and focused on her. “I love you,” he said easily, smiling.

“I love you.” She leaned down to kiss him and felt her entire body explode just as he cried out her name.

She lay on top of him until their breathing settled. His hands were wrapped around her hips, holding her close.

“I hope I didn’t force you to admit anything you didn’t want to,” she joked when she felt her body cool. She enjoyed the feel and sound of his chuckle.

“No, I’ve been wanting to tell you that again for a while now. I just... held off until I could do it in person.” He nudged her until she looked down at him. “I meant it. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.” He pulled her down for a kiss.

“Me either.” She sighed. “I think that I’ll tell Patty I won’t be moving back into the apartment.”

His quick smile was all the answer she needed. “I’d like that.”

They ate dinner in the living room and watched television. When she fell asleep on the sofa, he carried her into the bedroom and held her tight as they both drifted off.

They woke to the sound of his phone. She missed his warmth when he rolled over to get it. Instead of answering it, she heard him send it to voicemail.

“Your dad again?” she asked.

“Unknown caller.” He turned off his phone. “Everyone knows to call you if they can’t get me.” He pulled her back against him again.

“What time is it?” she asked, holding in a yawn.

“Almost eight.”

She tensed. “In the morning?” She was a little disoriented since it was so dark in his room. One of the reasons she slept so good at his place was that he had light-blocking window coverings over the sliding doors that led out to his deck.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “How about we head down to your aunt’s place and have some breakfast before we get our dogs?”

She smiled and rolled over until they were nose to nose. “You read my mind.”

But instead of moving, he brushed his lips across hers, and she could feel his hands moving over her body, causing her desire to grow.

“Mm, after.” He rolled over onto her.

It was one of the most joyful days of her life. Even though the night before had been scary, she was now walking into her aunt’s bakery hand in hand with the man she loved. The man she now lived with. The man that she knew she wanted a future with.

Thanks to the power of small-town gossip, they were greeted with questions and concerns. Everyone was thankful she was okay but also curious about what had happened.

After about the fifth time telling the story, they finally settled down in a booth and ate breakfast. Kate had never allowed herself to get hooked on coffee, even though she loved it. For years, she’d forced herself to only have a sip or two. Now, she enjoyed a full cup while she ate the egg-white spinach wrap her aunt had made especially for her.

Tom had ordered a bacon-and-egg croissant and a large coffee. Before they finished the meal, her cousin sat down in the booth with them, and she had to retell the story one more

time. Thankfully, before she was done, her aunt set a plate of apple turnovers on the table.

The wrap had been good, but she'd been craving something more. She'd missed her aunt's turnovers. Actually, she'd missed everything her aunt made. Growing up, she'd indulged in what she could without breaking her diet. Now, even though her health was still on her mind, she could finally relax a little.

"Wow, you ate the entire thing," Brook pointed out. "I haven't seen you eat an entire turnover since..." Her cousin tilted her head as if she were thinking about it. "Ever," she finished with a laugh.

"I no longer have weekly weigh-ins," she pointed out. "Besides, with four classes a day, four days a week, I figure I'll work this off... tomorrow." She smiled. "Now we're going to go pick up our dogs."

"Oh." Brook clapped. "I've been stopping in Carrie's and playing with them as much as I can. They're adorable. What are you going to call them?"

Kate looked over at Tom, but he just shrugged. "It's all you."

She'd thought about it and had come up with a couple of possibilities.

"Okay, I guess I need some help." She pulled out her phone and started giving them her top ten choices. Since they were brother and sister, she'd picked famous brother and sister duos from history.

After running through her list, Tom finally jumped in. "You forgot a pair of sibling names."

"I did?" She frowned down at her list.



“How about Luke and Leia?” he asked.

“Oh, I love it.” Brook clapped her hands.

Kate smiled. “It’s perfect.” She smiled and then hugged Tom. “I knew I was off the mark with all of these.” She shut her phone down, but seconds later it rang.

“Hello?” She was still smiling when she answered the call.

“You bitch,” a voice hissed. “You think you can ruin my life like this? I’ll make you pay.”

She held the phone out after the call was disconnected, frowning at it.

“Is everything okay?” Tom asked.

“I... someone just called me a bitch and told me that I’d pay.” She shook her head. “I...”

“Give me your phone,” Tom said, taking it when she handed it to him. “Unknown caller.” He groaned. “Shit. They’ve found you. I should have known,” he said, and she watched him block the last call. “Don’t answer any more calls from unknown callers.” He handed back her phone then took her hand. “I’m so sorry.”

She hadn’t thought anything about answering the call from an unknown caller, since she’d always done so before. His father had been calling him, not her. But after last night, she should have known better.

“It’s not you,” she assured him. “I should have known...” She shook her head and took a deep breath, then shook off the sour mood. “Let’s head next door and get Luke and Leia,” she said with a smile.

When they walked into Carrie’s Sanctuary, Carrie was waiting for them. The puppies had bows on their collars and

were playing together.

They walked out of the shop half an hour later with both dogs and enough puppy supplies and toys to last the dogs a lifetime. Tom had bought almost everything in the shop.

Tom carried the bags of supplies while she walked Luke and Leia on their new leashes. Since the puppies weren't leash trained, it was slow going back to the house. The leashes got tangled, both dogs stopped to pee and poop, and Luke barked at almost every passing car or person along the way.

"Carrie says we should kennel train them," she said when they walked into the house. "The last thing we want is for everything to be chewed up."

"I can pick up some kennels tomorrow after work," Tom suggested. "For now, they can stay in the mud room when we need to leave them alone."

For the next two hours, they played with the dogs until they each passed out on the sofa. Kate and Tom sat back to enjoy some downtime, but half an hour later, the dogs woke up, and they took them outside to do their business and play in the yard. Then they decided to take them on a walk to the beach. Tom packed them a picnic lunch, and they ate turkey sandwiches while the dogs played in the sand.

It was the most perfect day Kate had ever enjoyed. She felt like she finally had her own family. Her own place in life. Beyond dancing.

"Happy?" Tom asked as they strolled back home.

"Very." She smiled. "You?"

"Very."

Her phone had rung only one more time that day. Thankfully, it was only her mother checking in on her.

When they returned home, they lay down and took a short nap with the dogs. When they woke, Tom suggested they make dinner and sit out on the back deck to enjoy the sunset.

While the dogs raced around the yard, Tom grilled fish and vegetables while she scanned social media on her phone.

She hadn't checked in that day, since they'd been busy, but seeing the hate message on her new business page had her frowning.

"Tom?" She waved him over to the table. "Look at this." She showed him the message. The account it had come from was named KateFarrowisaBitch.

Tom glanced at her screen and then walked over and turned down the heat on the grill. He sat down beside her and took her phone from her.

"Kate Farrow is a liar and a bitch. She single-handedly destroyed Isabella Ramani and Dmitri Golubev's careers. The world has been spared from her mediocre performances, and she deserved everything she got and more. The bitch will pay."

"It sounds a lot like whoever called you earlier," Tom pointed out.

"Yes, and possibly the brick was from the same person," she pointed out. When she'd read the message, the first thing that had come to her mind was last night.

"This message was posted last night shortly before the brick was thrown through your window," Tom pointed out.

Kate glanced at the screen and nodded. "I think someone else might have it out for me instead of your father." She felt

her stomach drop. “But who?”

“What about Isabella? Dmitri basically told us she is responsible for him tossing you off the stage and ruining your career,” Tom pointed out as he walked over to finish grilling.

“I suppose. But I didn’t ruin her career. She got everything she wanted. Why come all this way? I don’t have anything else she could possibly want.” She bit her bottom lip. “Should I report this to Aiden?”

“Send him a screen shot and tell him about the call earlier. If it’s not my dad, he’ll get to the bottom of it. Posting an online social media message is a lot different than making a call to a cell phone from a blocked number. Maybe Josh can get to the bottom of it?”

She sent what she had over to Aiden’s cell number. “It’s nice knowing the cops are only a text message away.” She smiled up at Tom.

He smiled back. “Hey, this cop is only a few steps away.”

She laughed. “And having the best cop in town this close is why I love living here,” she said, taking the plate of food he offered her.

The following morning, Tom dropped her off at the studio before her first yoga class. Around noon, several large boxes were delivered, and she happily pulled out the refillable aluminum water bottles and T-shirts with the studio’s logos on them. When the next class arrived, she sold twenty of the bottles and sixteen shirts.

When Suzie stopped by to buy one of each for herself, she mentioned that she should have a shelf to place them on that could sit in front of the windows.

“Parker built my flower boxes, remember? I bet he could build you something sleek to sit just here.” Suzie motioned to the window area.

Then to Kate’s horror, her friend turned very pale and slipped to the floor. If Kate hadn’t rushed over and caught her, she would have hit her head.

“Suzie?” she cried out as she caught her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Tom answered Kate's call on the first ring. He had been thinking of swinging by the studio before her night class started, but then he'd gotten a call about a loose dog and had to chase it around town until it finally jumped in the patrol car like it was done having fun.

"Hey, I was just—"

"Tom, I need you. Suzie's passed out," she said quickly.

"I'll be there in a minute." He looked at the dog in the seat beside him. It was Nick's day off, so he was driving around solo.

As he turned on his siren, he radioed Alice and relayed what was going on. He told her to tell Aiden and to get an ambulance on the way.

When he arrived at the studio, Aiden was already there.

Tom rushed in to see if he could help, but Suzie was sitting up in a chair, drinking a sip of water.

"Sorry," Suzie said, looking very apologetic. "I... shouldn't have pushed myself."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Kate asked, worry for her friend lacing her voice.

“I’m fine.” Suzie touched Kate’s shoulder. “Really.”

Aiden sighed heavily, then nudged Suzie’s knee. “Tell her.”

“What?” Kate asked with a worried tone. “What’s wrong? Oh god, are you sick?”

Suzie chuckled. “No, I’ve...” Aiden nudged her knee again.

“We’ve just joined a very elite club in town,” Aiden said as he chuckled and shook his head.

“A...” Kate frowned. “What?”

“The pregnancy club,” Aiden answered with a smile.

“You’re...” Kate leaned back as if she’d been slapped, then she was hugging Suzie. “My god. You’ve been doing yoga and dance.”

“Yes, and pregnant women do that all the time,” Suzie said with a chuckle. “I’m fine. I just went too long without water and stood up too fast. Really.”

“With so many pregnant women in town, maybe you should have a pregnancy yoga class?” Aiden joked.

Just then, Dr. Stevens rushed in with his medical bag.

“Damn it, Suzie, don’t scare us like that,” Aaron said, taking her wrist in his hand to check her pulse.

“Uncle Aaron, I’m fine. I just got up too quickly.”

The door opened again, and this time Suzie’s parents rushed in. Over the next ten minutes, Kate and Tom watched as most of the Jordan clan either stopped by or called to check on Suzie.

“Word travels fast,” Tom said under his breath to Kate.

“I think it’s wonderful,” she replied with a smile. “This is why I know I live in one of the safest places.” She hugged him. “They’re starting their family.”

“So are her sister and cousin,” Tom pointed out. “They’re going to have a herd when everyone’s done,” he joked, causing Kate to chuckle.

“Just more students for my classes,” she pointed out. “Maybe I *should* think about having a pregnancy class? Pregnant women need to exercise differently.”

“True.” He nodded as he thought about a couple of kids running around the studio who looked a lot like him and Kate mixed together. “Thinking of having your own herd of kids?” he asked her.

She smiled. “Eventually. Maybe not a herd. Two, maybe three.” She shrugged. “You?”

“Three’s good.” He smiled and then kissed her.

“Whose dog is that in your patrol car?” someone asked.

“Damn it.” He remembered the dog in his front seat. “Got to go. I’ll be back later.” He kissed Kate before rushing out.

After delivering Ralph back to his owner, he swung by the station and changed out of his uniform. Since he knew Kate’s evening class had already started, he swung by Carrie’s and picked up a couple of large kennels for the dogs. Then he headed to the gym to box for an hour until her class was over.

He parked in the parking lot and was just about to head inside when he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye.

At first, he thought his eyes were fooling him. But then he blinked and realized that his father really was standing just at



the entrance to the beach. The same pathway he'd taken when he'd met Kate that first night.

When his father saw him, he quickly turned and disappeared down the pathway, heading towards the beach.

Dropping his bag, he pulled out his cell phone and called Aiden as he chased after the man. He quickly relayed what was going on and his location to Aiden.

"Don't do anything," Aiden warned him. Tom hung up the phone and shoved it back in his pocket as he raced down the beach after his father.

The old man may have lifted weights in jail, but it was obvious he hadn't run. Tom easily caught up to him a few moments later and tackled him to the ground.

"Get off me," his father yelled as Tom put a knee into his back and tried to yank his arms behind his back.

"You're under arrest," he said firmly.

"You're no son of mine," his father spat as Tom shoved his face into the sand and tried again to get his hands behind him. His father squirmed and somehow elbowed Tom right in the nose. Tom felt the gush of blood but didn't lose his grip on his father. The entire time, his father was cursing and yelling at him. "I should have killed you first," he was yelling.

When he finally had both of his old man's hands firmly gripped behind his back, his father stilled and seemed to change tactics.

"I only came here to show you how much I've changed. To apologize. To make amends," his father spat out.

"Yeah? Tell that lie at your next parole hearing." He looked up to see Aiden and Nick racing towards him.

“Shit,” Nick said, stopping beside him. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“Yeah, he elbowed me,” he answered as Aiden slapped a pair of cuffs on his father.

“Where’s your wife?” Aiden asked his father.

“My...” His father laughed. “She was no wife. Not like my Nichole.”

Tom’s anger grew and he growled. “Don’t you dare say my mother’s name. You don’t have that right any longer.” He felt his entire body vibrating.

“She was my wife. I have every right. Son,” his father spat back as Aiden lifted him from the sand and started marching him off the beach.

“Don’t.” Nick held his shoulder as Tom jerked to go after him. “He’s not worth it. You did your job. Now let Aiden and the rest of us do ours. He’ll be transferred before you have to deal with him,” Nick said. “I’m sure Aiden’s going to tell you to take the next few days off, so I’ll do it before he gets around to it.” Nick slapped him on the shoulder.

“I don’t need—”

“Go home. Go to Kate’s studio. Just... go. We’ve got this.” Nick nudged him.

Tom wiped the blood from his nose. “Shit.” He sat down in the sand. “Shit, shit,” he said, and felt his entire body start to shake.

Nick sat down beside him. “You okay?”

“That man took everything from me,” Tom said, closing his eyes. His nose was aching, but he knew it hadn’t been

broken. He'd been punched enough by his father as a kid to know when something was broken.

"Yeah, and he'll have to pay. Again," Nick pointed out.

"Why? What makes someone like that?" Tom asked, maybe for the first time in his life.

"Some people are just born... twisted," Nick answered.

"I'm from him." Tom turned to his friend. "Does that mean —"

"No," Nick broke in as he shook his head. "We are not our fathers."

"That's easy for you to say. You have a really great dad," Tom pointed out.

"True, but..." Nick sighed. "Did I ever tell you the story of why I'm named Nicholas?"

Tom frowned, unsure of where Nick was going. "No," he finally said.

"My mom fell in love and was engaged to a man before my dad. Nicholas and my dad were best friends. They joined the military together. Nicholas was killed in duty, and Sean returned home a year later. Nicholas had purchased a surprise cruise for he and my mom for what was going to be their honeymoon. My dad persuaded my mom to take the trip. She agreed, only if he'd go with her. During their stay in the Bahamas, they went scuba diving. My dad and a young boy by the name of Ronny somehow got separated from the group. A strong current pulled them out to sea."

"What's this got to—" he started, but Nick held up his hand to stop him.

“My father and Ronny spent eighteen hours in the water before being picked up by some illegal fishermen. My point is, I don’t know if I could follow in his footsteps. He’s a hero. I joined the force to try and be just an ounce of that. My entire childhood, I compared myself to that. Believed I had to do something great to make my mark, only...” He laughed. “I’m not my dad. My dad’s a hero, yours is a criminal. It doesn’t matter what they are. We are who we are. He chose to break the law and hurt others, you’ve chosen to enforce the law and help others.” Nick slapped him again. “You are nothing like him.”

Tom sighed. Even though he still didn’t see how Nick’s story related to him, just listening to him talk somehow took the anger and the worry out of his mind. At least for the moment.

“Thanks.” He shook Nick’s hand. “I guess I had to be talked off that ledge.”

Nick laughed. “Yeah. At least now you don’t look like you want to punch someone.”

“Oh, I still want to,” he joked as they both stood up.

“What do you think happened to the new wife?” Nick asked as they walked back to the car.

Tom shrugged. “Not sure. If she’s the one who threw the brick, she’ll be around. If not...” He sighed as he picked up his gym bag.

Aiden’s patrol car was just pulling out of the parking lot. He could see his father glaring back at him through the windows.

“Are you okay?” Nick asked, getting his attention again.

“Yeah.” He threw his bag over his shoulder.

“Hey, if you still want to hit something...” Nick motioned to the gym. “It was my day off. I was heading over to the gym when I heard the dispatch.”

“Yeah, I’d better call your sister first,” he said.

“I’ll meet you inside.” Nick walked over to his car and pulled out his gym bag.

Kate’s phone rang three times and then he remembered she was probably in class. He was about to hang up when she answered it. He could hear a bunch of laughing in the background.

“Hey,” Kate answered. He could hear the humor and joy in her voice and hated to squash it.

“Hey, I thought you should hear it from me, but I caught my dad. He’s in custody. Aiden has him.”

Before she responded, the music stopped and everything went quiet. He didn’t know if she’d stepped outside or if she’d just turned it off and everyone had stopped talking.

“*I*... as in you? Or *I* as in the police?” she asked.

“Me. He was spying on me at the Boys and Girls Club. I came here to box until your class was over. I chased him down on the beach.” Remembering that it was basically the same spot he’d first saved Kate from the wave had his stomach rolling. Had his dad been squatting on the beach? He knew that a lot of beach bums came up from California and hung out around the Boys and Girls Club. They didn’t get a lot of them in Pride, but over the past three years, he’d had to deal with a handful of them.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. He elbowed my nose, but it’s not broken.” He wiped his nose and was pleased when his hand came away clean.

“I’ll be—” Kate started.

“No, finish your class. Your brother and I are going in to take out my pent-up frustration on the bags.”

“Tom?”

“Yeah?” he said, closing his eyes.

“I love you.”

Just hearing her say those words relaxed him. “I love you too. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

“I’ll be here.” She hung up.

He walked into the gym, changed, and then met Nick at the boxing bags. For the next hour, they pummeled the bags and even sparred for a couple rounds. Nick was a pretty good boxer. Not Tom’s level, but still, he was a good partner.

After showering and changing, he drove over to the studio to pick Kate up. When he arrived, the lights were off, and the place was locked up. Suzie’s place was closed and dark as well. The unit on the other side had just begun construction for the new tenant, but it was dark inside as well.

He dialed Kate’s number and frowned when it went to her voicemail. He tried calling her again. After the third try, he called Aiden.

“Hey, we’ve got your dad all processed—”

“Kate’s missing,” he broke in. “I’m here to pick her up, and the place is dark and locked up.”

“Do you think she walked home?” Aiden asked, but Tom could hear him rushing somewhere.

“No, we agreed I’d pick her up,” he said, moving around the building to check the back door.

“When was the last time you talked to her?” Aiden asked. Tom heard his car start as Aiden headed over there. The police station was about two blocks away and, already, Tom could hear the siren.

“An hour. I called and told her what happened.” He pulled on the back door to the studio.

“I’m calling Suzie to see when she last saw her. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“I’m checking the back doors,” Tom said. He hung up and rushed over to the flower shop to try that door. It was locked as well.

Then he heard a noise coming from the other unit and jumped into action.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

**K**ate decided to wait out on the front walk for Tom after class. She locked up as she chatted with Lilly about ordering more bottles and shirts. They'd come up with even more ideas for swag, as Lilly called it. Warm-up jackets, sweats, yoga mats, and even gym bags.

Since classes were going so well and each one was packed, she figured she could splurge on a couple dozen of each. Lilly was going to help her order them all in the morning after her first class.

Lilly had just driven away, and she pulled out her phone to call Tom as she stood under the light from the studio's sign. She jerked to the side when she heard someone rushing towards her. The blow to her temple took her down, and she landed on her hands and knees on the sidewalk.

The kick to her stomach and head knocked her unconscious before she could even scream.

She woke again as she was being dragged somewhere. It was too dark to see, and the kick to her stomach had her emptying what little lunch she'd had.

"Bitch," someone hissed, and she was kicked again in the ribs. She wretched again, which made the person even angrier. The hands that had been holding her arms, pulling her,



disappeared. She fell forward and hit the side of her head on the ground as she continued to be sick all over the person's shoes. Then she was being kicked over and over again. She felt some of her ribs break with one kick. The next one hit her arm as she tried to roll away. The third kick got her in the lower back, and she grunted with the pain.

She had yet to catch her breath to scream for help. It was too dark to see anything, which meant the person attacking her couldn't see her either. If she could just roll away, she could maybe catch her breath and cry for help.

She rolled and heard a low curse. Now she knew that her attacker was a woman and, more importantly, she had missed the last kick.

The floor was covered in a layer of dust or dirt. As Kate rolled, it collected on her clothes, her hands, and her hair. Still, she didn't stop rolling until she came up against a wall.

She still felt as if she couldn't get any air in her lungs. Had they been punctured when her ribs had broken?

Then the booted foot found her again, this time just below her left ear. Her head snapped back, and tiny little stars exploded behind her eyes. A loud screeching sound filled her ears.

"I'll kill you for this," the woman hissed. "You took him away from me."

As her world started go black again, Kate could only think of Tom.

But then the kicking stopped, and Kate heard grunting just beside her. Someone was fighting off her attacker.

Her breathing and the ringing in her ears were so loud that she could barely make out what was going on. Then colored

lights flooded the room. She had to blink a few times before she realized that she was in the end unit of the building, the one that was under construction.

Then Tom's face came into view.

"Easy," he said, holding out his hands as tears rolled down his face. "I've got you."

"Don't move her," someone said.

Was that Aiden? Kate tried to see past Tom, but it was just darkness.

"When's that ambulance going to get here?" Tom barked.

Kate's breathing was so shallow that she just couldn't get a breath. Her ribs hurt. Her head hurt. Her knee hurt. Her ears were ringing.

Lifting her hand, she touched Tom's face and mouthed, I love you, just before everything went dark.

She woke with a cry when she was lifted from the ground. In her head she was screaming, but nothing came out.

"We've got you." Tom's voice sounded right by her ear.

She blinked a few times, and a bright light was shined in each eye. Someone started talking in the background about her health, but she was too focused on Tom's voice to listen clearly.

Lights flashed over her head as they rolled her under the sign to her studio. Pride's Dance Studio. Her baby. Her life.

Then Tom's face appeared above hers. He looked so sad. So... lost.

She wanted to tell him that she was okay. If she could just catch her breath, she could assure him of that.

They put her in the back of an ambulance, and shortly afterward, everything went... soft. Numb. She was floating, and suddenly she no longer cared. She watched the top of the ambulance as she felt them traveling. She thought she would sleep or pass out again, but she didn't. Her eyes remained open, and she watched the medic work on her as they traveled along. The woman kept checking her heart rate. Her pupils. She kept talking to her, but Kate didn't answer. She just stared straight above her as if in a daze.

The ambulance stopped, and she was rolled out. Only when the bright lights inside the ER flashed above her did she finally close her eyes.

She floated and lost track of time. She would occasionally hear someone talking quietly. She was rolled several places but kept her eyes closed. She heard the hum of an X-ray machine followed by an MRI. She was lifted, shifted, and rolled so many different times that she lost track. Thankfully, during this entire time, everything was numb.

Even her breathing had leveled out. Her broken ribs didn't hurt as much, which allowed her to breathe more easily.

She didn't know how much time had passed, only that when everything finally stopped, she heard her mother's voice.

"How many?" her mother asked someone.

"Three," a woman's voice answered.

"Mom?" she croaked out.

"We're here honey." Her mother's voice grew closer.

"Kate?" It was Tom.

"Tom?" She opened her eyes, and the brightness stung and caused her head to swim.

“Can we turn down these lights?” Tom asked. “There, now try,” he said a moment later.

She opened her eyes. It was dark, but she could still see her mother’s and Tom’s faces hovering over hers. They were fuzzy, but they were there.

“Hey,” she said with a shallow sigh.

“Baby.” Her mother cried and leaned over to kiss her forehead softly. Tears dropped onto Kate’s face and hair from her mother’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I—”

“Shh,” her mother said. “You’re okay. That’s what matters.”

“Three broken ribs?” she asked. “That’s all?” She winced. “Feels more like a hundred.”

Her mother smiled as she stroked her hair. “Baby.” She shook her head.

“Tom?” Kate asked, then suddenly his face reappeared over hers.

“Hey.” he leaned closer as her mother leaned back.

“Who?” she asked, feeling groggy.

Tom’s face grew somber. “Isabella Ramani.”

Kate frowned just as she drifted off into the darkness. The next time she woke, soft light was coming in through the windows.

Tom sat in a chair next to her bed, fast asleep.

She looked around the room and noticed a ton of flowers and balloons, no doubt from all of her friends.

Wanting to see them all, she hit the button on the bed. When the bed started moving, Tom jerked awake and rushed to her side.

“Hey.” His eyes ran over her face.

“Hey,” she said softly, and held in a groan. The bed continued to move until she was sitting up, which took a lot of pressure off her ribs.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her.

“Sore,” she admitted. “Where is everyone?”

“At home. They’re going to stop by again”—he glanced at his watch—“in about an hour.”

“Are we in Edgeview?”

He nodded and sat on the side of her bed.

“How bad am I? Besides the three broken ribs?”

“You have a concussion, a broken wrist.” He motioned to her left hand, which she had yet to notice the bandage on. “They’ve confirmed your knee is just inflamed and not torn again.”

She looked down at her bandaged leg and groaned. “Damn it, I just started using that again.”

He smiled. “The ribs are going to keep you down for a while.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I broke a rib as a kid. I knew the second she kicked me that they were broken. It was Isabella Ramani?” she asked, wondering if her memory was fuzzy.

“Yeah.” Tom took her right hand in his.

“Why? She got what she wanted. She took over for me.” Kate frowned and rested her head back.

“Not sure. Aiden claims she was ranting about how you were the reason her career was ruined and that you stole her man away from her.”

“Dmitri?” Kate shook her head slightly. “He went back to Russia.”

“Yeah, we’re not sure what she means either. Aiden believes that the article you did for the New Yorker set her off. That, along with Dmitri leaving. We know that the show you were in closed down after all the bad reviews.” Tom shifted as he trailed his fingertips over her palm.

She closed her eyes and then remembered. “Your dad?” Her eyes jerked opened, and she focused on his face. She saw slight bruising on his left cheek.

“He’s been transferred to Portland, where he’ll be extradited back to Nevada.”

“What about his wife? I thought... I thought that was who was attacking me. I can’t believe it was Isabella.”

“Crystal’s family claims she left my dad when he broke his parole. She’s been staying with a friend until he was caught. She said that he beat her the first night he was out of jail.” He took a deep breath. “I guess a tiger can’t change his stripes.”

“At least not that one.”

They grew quiet and then Tom lifted her hand to his lips. “I love you. I’m sorry I let you get hurt. I promised you that I wouldn’t.”

“Tom, it’s not your fault. I should have waited inside. I just thought... with your dad being in custody.” She sighed, and tears rolled down her cheeks. “I let my guard down.”

“Hey.” He gently wiped them away. “We’re both fools.” He rested his forehead on hers.

She closed her eyes and held onto the feeling of him being so close.

“I love you,” she said easily.

He leaned back, his eyes locking with hers. “Are you going to marry me?” he asked her, cupping her cheek with his hand. “I promise that when you get out of here and feel up to it, I’ll take you on a romantic sunset sail and propose to you properly. I’ll even get down on one knee, ring in hand and all.”

She smiled. “I’ll hold you to that, but for now...” She nodded. “Yes, I’ll marry you.” She tugged him down and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

## EPILOGUE

**K**ate laughed as she sat in the sand and watched Luke and Leia race around in the surf. The two dogs were happiest when near the water.

It had taken them a while to train them to be on the sailboat. But now the pair of them loved to go out and knew better than to jump off the side. At least while it was moving.

Still, Tom had purchased life vests for them, which they wore every time they took them out on the water.

“They’re happy,” Tom said.

“Yes.” She turned to him. “I can’t believe they’re already a year old.” She sighed and rested back on her elbows.

They had spread a blanket out on the sand and had brought a picnic lunch down to the beach to enjoy.

“Actually, it was a year ago today that I saved you from a rogue wave,” he said, taking her hand in his.

“Was it?” She frowned. “A whole year?”

He nodded. His eyes moved slowly over hers. “Which is why... I have this for you.” He pulled a small box from his pocket.



She sat up and took the box, smiling. The small silver chain inside held a diamond heart.

“It’s beautiful.” She moved over to allow him to put it on her.

“You’re beautiful.” He kissed her neck, then pulled her close to his side. “It’s my heart,” he said. “It’s yours.”

“And you have mine.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I can’t believe it’s been a whole year.”

“A lot of crazy things happened. I heard they moved Isabella to a state mental facility.”

Kate frowned, remembering the pain the woman had caused her. “Her family was mortified. Mental illness mixed with her privileged attitude. I never pegged her for someone who would kill to get what she wanted.”

“I guess Dmitri leaving to go back to Russia was the final straw after the show closed down. She still claims he is the only one she could ever love,” Tom said.

They had talked about what had happened so many times over the past year, but every time something new happened with the case or with Isabella, it was like reliving that horrible night all over again.

“Let’s not dwell on the past.” She snuggled down further into his arms. “For now, let’s talk about what we have planned for the future.”

He chuckled, the sound causing her entire body to vibrate. How was it that she loved him more and more each day? She hadn’t thought it possible.

“Okay, well, we did talk about starting a family. Now that there are four new Jordan members and three more on the way,

I think it's time we added to the brood in town.”

She glanced up at him and smiled. “Way ahead of you.”

“You are?” He frowned.

“Open the box.” She sat up and handed a small bakery box to him. “I had my aunt make this just for you.”

He took the box and slowly lifted the lid.

Inside sat a frosted cookie in the shape of a baby stroller. “Baby on Board” was written in frosting in fancy gold lettering.

Tom jerked his gaze up to hers. “You are?”

Kate smiled and nodded slowly. “Yes, we are.” She wrapped her arms around him.

Tom dropped the cookie and as they hugged and kissed, and neither of them cared that Luke and Leia rushed over to gobble up the cookie.

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<http://JillSanders.com>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Jill Sanders is a New York Times, USA Today, and international bestselling author of Sweet Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, Western Romance, and Paranormal Romance novels. With over 85 books in eleven series, translations into several different languages, and audiobooks there's plenty to choose from. Look for Jill's bestselling stories wherever romance books are sold or visit her at [jillsanders.com](http://jillsanders.com)*

*Jill comes from a large family with six siblings, including an identical twin. She was raised in the Pacific Northwest and later relocated to Colorado for college and a successful IT career before discovering her talent for writing sweet and sexy page-turners. After Colorado, she decided to move south, living in Texas and now making her home along the Emerald Coast of Florida. You will find that the settings of several of her series are inspired by her time spent living in these areas. She has two sons and off-set the testosterone in her house by adopting three furry little ladies that provide her company while she's locked in her writing cave. She enjoys heading to the beach, hiking, swimming, wine-tasting, and pickleball with her husband, and of course writing. If you have read any of her books, you may also notice that there is a love of food, especially sweets! She has been blamed for a few added pounds by her assistant, editor, and fans... donuts or pie anyone?*

