

CAROLINE SILER

Het
funny
Valentine

An illustration of a man and a woman in formal attire. The man is wearing a white dress shirt, a red bow tie, and black trousers. The woman is wearing a black sleeveless dress and black high-heeled shoes. They are standing close together, with the man kissing the woman on the cheek. The woman is holding a small red bouquet of flowers. In the background, there are several balloons, some red and some pink, floating in the air.

a Pine Hollow Romance

CAROLINE SILER

Her Funny Valentine

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To my siblings, Kathy, JoAnne, and Joe for all the stories, laughter and love we share. We'll always be best friends forever.

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Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1



A^{va}

I'm being chased by Bigfoot through a flower garden, and he grabs me. I scream and kick and lash out with my arms. I can't get away no matter how hard I try! He throws me over his shoulder and walks out of the garden towards the forest. I renew my kicking and screaming, and I pound on his back which smells like dirt and skunks. His fur gets in my nose and mouth, and I gag. I may never get away if I don't do something quick. I can feel my rapid pulse in my head as I hang over his back screaming. I arch my back and buck like a horse trying to get away as my terror increases.

I gasp and try to jolt out of bed, but my legs are twisted in the cover and I fall on the floor. I lay there with my heart pounding. I push my hair out of my eyes and look around for a moment not sure where I am, what day it is, or what time it is. My breathing and pulse continue to race until I come back to reality and realize I am safe at home.

Man, that was terrifying! Good thing bigfoot is not real. I sit up trying to gather my wits and stop trembling. I become aware of a throbbing in my elbow and my backside where I hit the hardwood floor. I crawl to the bedside and hoist myself up onto the mattress.

I reach for my phone to see what time it is. *Nine! Oh my gosh, why hasn't my alarm gone off?!* I check my sleep app and see that I didn't set my alarm after I finished that book I had been reading the night before. I push out of bed and run for the shower.

I catch myself as I trip over my bra strap hanging off the arm of the chair next to the bathroom. I really need to clean this place up; I groan as I turn the water on. I will feel better after a hot shower but I'm going to be so late for work.

As the hot water hits my shoulders, I begin to relax a little bit from the anxiety storm I woke up in. I let out a soft moan as it washes over my tired aching muscles. It feels so good that I could stand here forever. But I quickly rinse off and get out.

This is not a great way to start the week. Valentine's Day is twelve days away and Valentine's week is always crazy at my floral shop. It's also a busy time of year for my landscaping business as we nurture seedlings. I usually look forward to the rush and the excitement after a slow winter, but this year is not the same. I feel a bit sad and lonely and I'm not looking forward to all the lovey dovey stuff for Valentine's Day.

I put some product in my short-cropped brown hair, apply some moisturizer and a bit of mascara to my dark eyelashes. My golden-brown eyes are bloodshot from reading so late. What was I thinking?

I quickly put on cargo pants, a long sleeve tee, and grab my hoody. I'm not a coffee girl but I need some caffeine this morning, so I guzzle a coke zero while I eat a banana and a couple of precooked bacon slices.

I text Tia as I walk out the door. I hired her five years ago when I first opened my shop. She has been my right hand since. She's funny, creative, dependable, and balances me out.

Ava: I'm so late. Heading your way.

Tia: No problem. I got here early because I woke up at 6 from a stupid dream of chasing a chocolate cupcake through my house. So weird! It's not like I have even given up chocolate.

She adds a sideways laughing face emoji.

Ava: I forgot to set my alarm and woke up to bigfoot chasing me through a flower garden. Must have been a weird dream night. See you soon.

I add a laughing face emoji and throw the phone and my wallet on the passenger side of my truck. I know some people think it is

unusual for a girl to drive a truck but in my line of work, it is my number one tool. I saved for a long time and got the exact truck I wanted. I love its cobalt blue color and warm leather seats. Best of all it has a great sound system and GPS, essential when you are trying to find a house to deliver flowers for a wedding.

Weddings make me think about my best friend Vi's wedding next Friday, the day before Valentine's Day. It's a terrible time for me to take off and be a bridesmaid, but I wouldn't miss this for anything. If it were anybody else they would probably not want to get married on a Friday the 13th but not Vi. She chose it for just that reason. She got stuck in a Goth rut in high school and has mostly come out of the phase, but she still likes black lipstick and nails and flaunts most superstitions, including Friday the 13th.

She is my third friend to get married since October. I have a growing pile of bridesmaids' dresses. At least we have black dresses this time that can be worn again. I'm not sure what Gigi was thinking with those lime green dresses in December. The pink dresses that Cara chose last month are a bit frilly and formal to wear again. I make a mental note to donate the dresses to one of those prom dress charities when I clean my room.

Traffic is heavy for 9:30 on a Monday morning and I have to swerve to miss a car drifting into my lane. I spill coke zero down the front of my hoodie. *It is gonna be a great day*, I think sarcastically as I honk at the offending driver. I have to work to control my road rage and desire to yell out at her to "Watch out stupid!" It is one of my worst faults I think.

I take a few long breaths as I pull into the parking lot of the shop. Seeing the brightly painted façade and busy lobby makes me so happy. I feel pride in the work we have done. I had a dream of this for so long. I love to smell the flowers every morning, make the arrangements, and bury my hands in the earth of garden beds and planter boxes for my clients, when I get the chance. It is hard and satisfying work.

"I'm here, Tia," I say as I walk in the backdoor. She is seated at the long table in the center of the room surrounded by long stem red roses, pink carnations, and baby's breath. It smells heavenly and I take in as much air as I can.

"Good, I was beginning to wonder if Bigfoot had gotten you on your way to work." We both laugh and it feels good to release the tension I had been carrying around since I woke up.

"Nah, I run faster than him." I laugh again. "But no joke, that was a scary dream. I would much rather a chocolate cupcake be chasing me."

"Trust me, a big chocolate cupcake is scary too. It's funny how your brain can mess with you," Tia adds as she finishes the bouquet she is working on.

I grab my white apron and tools, "So what do we have in store for us this morning?"

"It's going to be a busy one. The phone has been ringing all morning, I printed off the online orders for the day and Jayden is handling the counter."

"The lobby was full when I drove up. It seems a little early for Valentine's Day purchases. Is Nic coming in today?"

"He should be here anytime now. He is scheduled for 10 to close. I think we must be getting lots of anniversary bouquets. It's the month of LOVE after all," she adds with a bit of sarcasm as she picks a ceramic basket for another arrangement.

"I'm going to go see if Jayden needs help. He may be pretty swamped."

"Let me know if you need extra help out there," Tia says as she comes out of the cooler with pink roses.

I push open the door to the front of the shop and I'm hit by the noise of many customers talking at once. It's music to my ears but also a little jolting after the peace of the back room.

“Hey Jayden,” I say as I approach the counter. “I thought you might need some help.”

“Thanks, Boss,” he smiles, “That would be great. We could get this crowd cleared a bit.” He’s a tall lanky blonde with blue eyes and dimples. He’s a wonder with the ladies and his lankiness disguises his muscular strength that saves my back on most jobs. He’s also very kind, has a wicked sense of humor, and is humble to boot, a rare find in a guy with his looks.

I mill through the crowd asking customers if they need help, answering questions, and taking orders. In a few short minutes, we have helped all of our customers, taken a dozen orders, and sold several pre-made arrangements.

“Why don’t you take five,” I say to Jayden, “you deserve a breather after that.”

“Thanks, Boss. I would like a soda.”

“Hey, Jayden,” I say to him as he walks away. “It’s Ava.”

He flashes a smile and I get a quick peek at his dimples, “Thanks, Boss... Ava.” I hear him laugh as he disappears.

I laugh too as I start straightening shelves and gathering orders to take to the back. The shop is usually salve for my soul, but today I am restless. I don’t want to examine why I feel the way I do because I know it has to do with almost all of my friends getting married and me being single.

It’s not because I need a man to make me whole, take care of me, or run my life. I am getting by just fine on my own. It is about having someone to share hardship and success with. Someone to be there in the middle of the night when bigfoot is chasing me or someone to come home to when I have just gotten a huge landscape job. It’s about delivering Valentine’s flowers and candies when I don’t have a valentine of my own.

And I don’t like feeling this way. I get a broom and start sweeping. Tia comes out of the back, “Hey, Ava, I’m taking these tickets to the back.”

“Thanks, Tia. If you see Jayden, send him my way and I’ll come help you. Is Nic here yet?”

“Yeah, he came in about 15 minutes ago and is unloading the truck that arrived.”

I grab the broom to sweep the front walk.

“Good deal. When he gets done, put him on deliveries. I am going out to sweep the sidewalk,” I say as I walk backward. She disappears to the back room, and I turn around and run straight into something very solid and warm. An embarrassing squeak comes out of me as I feel myself stumble backwards towards the shelf of knickknacks, my arms flailing awkwardly. I grab a shirt collar and grip it tight as I continue to fall.

I hear a shouted “whoa” just before my back hits the concrete floor and the air rushes out of me.

A muffled umph sounds close to my ear as a pleasant weight settles on my chest. It takes a moment for me to realize I have just pulled a strange man down on top of me. I freeze trying to catch my breath.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry! Are you ok?” says a gorgeous pair of lips just above me. I look up into the clearest gray eyes I have ever seen, and I lose the last shred of coherent thought I have. My mouth drops open at the sheer beauty of the face so close to mine: the finely chiseled jaw, the straight nose, the full lips made for kissing.

“I’m such a klutz,” the mouth says, and I snap out of my trance.

He pushes away from me and I’m sorry his solidness is gone. He touches my cheek where tingles rush up my neck and down my spine right to the center of my stomach. “Are you alright, miss? I didn’t mean to knock you down.”

I finally catch my breath and my senses return to me. I can feel the blush begin to cover my face. “I’m ok. It was totally my fault.” I scramble to my knees trying to maintain some piece of my dignity.

We sit and study each other for a second before he stands and offers me a hand up and I take it, noticing small calluses on the palm of it just below his fingers. For some reason this sets off tingles again, goosebumps erupting up my arm.

I step back and he drops his hand and I miss the contact. "It was totally my fault," I say again, this time in a breathy voice that does not sound like my own. "Just sweeping," I hold up the broom, I realize I'm still gripping, for him to see. Smooth, Ava, smooth. This gorgeous man is going to think I am a dolt.

He shifts to the side. "Sorry I got in the way."

"No problem." I stand there awkwardly staring at him like he is a Greek statue on display in a museum.

"I'm looking." He stares just as awkwardly at me. "I... ummm, I mean I'm here to look at flowers." His face turns red, and he looks over at a potted plant.

"Sure, let me know if you need me." I feel my cheeks turn red and flee the store to avoid more awkward conversation with this man-god who has stolen any intelligence I possess.

Chapter 2



Hudson

I stare at the retreating back of the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. She probably thinks I'm an idiot, just standing there watching her flee. She has the most stunning eyes I've ever seen. They are gold, well brown, but with gold flecks and a gold ring surrounding the iris. They seem to glow in her beautiful face with its perfect lips.

"Can I help you?" I jump, snapping out of the trance I have been in since she bumped into me.

"I was just looking," I say.

"I could see that," the man says as I turn towards him. He has a protective look on his face. "I was looking for some flowers." I feel the need to clarify.

"Well, you have come to the right place for *flowers*," he says with that protective edge to his voice. "I'm Jayden. I can help you."

"Right," I say as I approach the counter.

"What did you have in mind?" he asks.

Kissing your coworker. No, I can't say that. He'll throw me out. "Roses?" I say instead.

"Does she have a favorite color?" Jayden asks.

"She likes Tropicana roses. Do you have anything like that?" I try to keep my mind on the task at hand as I think of the gorgeous woman who is outside sweeping. I wonder what her favorite flower is.

"I'm sure we do in the back. How many stems do you want?" Jayden asks as he takes out a pad and starts writing.

"Can I get sixty-five?"

“You can get as many as you want,” he says without skipping a beat. “She must be special.”

“She is. It’s for an anniversary.”

“That’s fantastic!” Jayden says as he jots it down. “What kind of container do you want them in?”

“I haven’t thought that far,” I admit. “Usually, my assistant takes care of these things,” I say, “but she is out of the office today. So, I guess use whatever works best.”

“When do you need them?” he asks.

“Could I get them this afternoon?” I ask.

“I’m not sure we have that many Tropicana stems right now. Let me check.” He goes through the door behind him to the backroom, I assume. I let out a breath that I hadn’t been aware of holding and look around the shop. It’s bright and cheery, not cluttered like some florists are. Not full of knick-knacks that I might break, but still, I feel a bit like a bull in a china shop so I stay where I am. I look towards the front window and catch a glimpse of dark hair. I wonder how long it will take her to sweep a sidewalk as I think of abandoning the flower order and finding her.

“We have fifty Tropicana style stems,” I jump again as Jayden walks back through the doors. “We could finish the arrangement out with some coordinating buds if you want it today. Otherwise, we won’t get them in until tomorrow afternoon.”

“I will take the fifty and coordinating buds then,” I say.

“Would you like to fill out a card to go with it?” he asks as he reaches for a calculator.

“Please,” I say, hoping for anything to keep my attention from straying to the window again.

As I fill out the note for the arrangement, Jayden writes up the order and gives me a total. “We can have it delivered for an extra fee or you can pick it up at 4:30.”

I hand him my credit card and the card for the arrangement. "I will pick it up," I say, hoping to maybe see those golden eyes one more time today and be able to make a better impression. Besides that, I have dinner with grandma so I can deliver the bouquet myself.

Jayden hands me a receipt and I thank him. I step out the door onto the freshly swept sidewalk and am disappointed to find myself alone. Maybe I will see her when I come back, and Jayden won't be around. What kind of name is that, anyway, sounds more like a girl's name to me. I open the door to my SUV and put the receipt for the flowers in the glove box.

With one more look at the store, I pull out of the drive thinking about golden eyes and kissable lips. I smile as the line "I'll be back" in Arnold Schwarzenegger's voice goes through my head.

Chapter 3



A^{va}

I disappear around the edge of the building as I see the door open because I don't want to repeat my awkwardness with Gray Eyes again. Hopefully, he doesn't see me as I duck into the backroom.

I hurry over to the door to the front of the shop and peek out. I see a gray Audi SUV drive away and let out my breath in a long sigh.

"What on earth are you doing?" Tia asks over my shoulder. I jump and bump into the door.

"Good gosh, Tia, you scared me to death. Why did you sneak up on me?" I rub my nose where it hit the door.

"I wanted to see what you're looking at. Jayden said some rich guy just came in and bought sixty-five roses. Is that what you're looking at?"

"Yes. Wait, he bought sixty-five roses?"

"Sure, did and according to Jayden, he didn't even question the costs, just handed over his credit card."

"I wonder who they are for? Must be someone special."

"Apparently, it's for an anniversary. And they were Tropicana roses too. He wanted them today."

"Holy cow! We don't have near enough."

"Jayden told him, and he said make a blend with other complimentary roses. Jayden also said that Mr. Money was sure looking out the window for a glimpse of you."

"Probably wondering where the weirdo went after I knocked him down, he fell on top of me, and I laid there gawking at him

like a simpleton.”

“You did what?!”

“I knocked him down and he fell on top of me because I grabbed his shirt when I was falling. He helped me up and I just laid there gawking at his gorgeous face.” I let out a sigh, feeling so stupid.

“Well, that must have been awkward, but I have never seen you gawk like a simpleton at anyone, let alone a man.”

“Trust me, honey, I was gawking. He was possibly the most handsome man I have ever laid eyes on. And those clear gray eyes are not going to be easy to forget.” I said over my shoulder. “You can see for yourself when he comes back this afternoon.”

“I can’t wait. I’m going to go get coffee. Do you want a soda?”

“Thanks, I already had one this morning and I think it made me jittery.”

“I think it’s hormones making you jittery if that man is as beautiful as you say he is.”

I laugh, “You wait till you see him and then we’ll see who feels jittery.”

“Honey, I like feeling jittery when it comes to men. Maybe we can get you a Valentine’s date.” she says as she slips out the side door to go down the street to Caraway’s coffee shop.

I brush off her comment as I walk into the cooler for the Tropicana roses and some buds to go with them. I place the flowers in a bucket of water at my feet and I realize this is going to be a massive bouquet. I will have to be careful, so it doesn’t look like funeral flowers. I go back in for some soft orange alstroemeria, daisies, and other fillers.

I search for a container big enough to hold that many flowers and run into Nic. “Morning, Boss,” he says in his soft southern drawl. “Sorry, I was late. My dog was sick, and I had to take him to the vet. Turns out he had eaten a whole block of cheese.”

“Where in the world did he get cheese?” I eye him skeptically.

“It had fallen out of a grocery bag when I was unloading it the other day. It slid under the table, and I didn’t see it until this morning when I was cleaning up after him.”

“I bet he had a stomachache.”

“Yes, he did. I left him with the vet until I get off work.”

“I hope he feels better. Did we get a load of new containers today?”

“We did. I was just sorting the last of them.”

“I need something that is large and classic but won’t weigh a ton. We have an order for an arrangement with sixty-five roses.”

“Wow! That’s a lot of roses. I think I saw a long white tin container in this load. Where did I put it?”

We spend the next few minutes looking before we come up with the container.

“If you are through we can use your help up front. You and Jayden can flip for who gets to watch the counter and who gets to deliver flowers.”

“I’ll be done in a few, then I’ll talk to Jayden.”

“Thanks.” I take the container to my workbench. Tia arrives as I start working. “You doing that big bouquet yourself?” She asks.

“Yeah, what do you think of the mix?”

“That will be stunning. Add a few of those rosy-orange calla lilies we got yesterday, to finish it off.”

“You’re so right,” I added. “That’s the perfect touch.”

We settle into work quietly for a few minutes. Tia’s a real artist and her arrangements make us a unique shop. We work well together. She respects my introverted nature and doesn’t make me carry on a conversation the whole day. I like that about her. She’s also very positive and gregarious. I envy her ability with people sometimes.

“Did you get your dress for the wedding, yet?” she asks as she comes out of the cooler with another armload of roses.

“Yes. I picked it up yesterday. I still have the final fitting for it though. I’m glad that at least it’s a nice black dress I can wear again.”

“That’s good. After that green nightmare, anything would be better.”

“It was pretty awful. I just don’t know what she was thinking.”

“She wasn’t. She was just coordinating. And all those lime Gerbera daisies we had to make into centerpieces. At least we toned them down with the white daisies.”

“I’m glad we don’t have to do much for Vi’s centerpieces. Those black roses will be stunning with the baby’s breath and candles. Very simple and elegant.”

“I have to admit that I was skeptical that it would work but the mock-up you did is gorgeous. I’m glad it’s simple with Valentine’s Day on us. The black was a pleasant change after all this red.”

“It’ll be beautiful.” I muse as a pair of gray eyes and a tingling sensation flash through my memory.

“Do you have a date yet?” Tia asks.

“What?” I feel like I’ve been caught sneaking a cookie.

“For the wedding?” She looks at me like I’m losing it.

“Oh, I’m not taking a date.”

“You gotta take a date.”

“I don’t want to. It would just be making awkward small talk with someone I’m not really interested in. Besides, since I’m a bridesmaid, I’ll be busy with pictures and other stuff that comes with the job.”

“You don’t want to go alone though. Isn’t there someone you could ask?”

An image of Mr. Money flashes through my mind. No, definitely not. “I don’t want to take anyone. Really.”

“Okay, if you insist. Hey, I was thinking we should set you up on one of those dating sites online.”

“Heck no. I don’t want some pervert swiping through my profile.”

“There are good guys on those sites too. And you can set security to keep the pervs off your account. We’ll use your middle name or another username and a pic of you in a hat or something that disguises you.”

“I do *not* want to do online dating.”

“It’s perfect for you. You can do it in the comfort of your own home in your pajamas. No *awkward* small talk. And you can swipe til you find someone interesting.”

“Maybe you’re right, Goodness knows I’m not meeting Mr. Right in real life.”

Unless you count that beautiful man who just had me in his arms. Now, I could get used to making small talk with him.

Tia emits a squeal. “I’m so glad you said yes. I already have a profile set up for you on Perfect Match. All you have to do is submit it.” She pulls up the site on her phone, flashes me a glimpse of the account she has set up, and hits submit.

“Tia! What did you just do?” I shriek as I try to snatch her phone.

“I’m getting you a forever Valentine.” She smiles and dances away from me.

Chapter 4



Hudson

“Happy anniversary, Grandma,” I say from behind the huge arrangement of roses as she answers the door.

“Goodness, Hudson, did you buy out the whole shop?” she says, moving back to let me in.

“Yep, I did, because nothing is too good for my grandma.” I laugh. “Honestly, I didn’t know sixty-five roses would be so huge. Can I sit them down somewhere?”

Put them here on the coffee table,” she says. “They’re gorgeous and I love the color. Thank you for remembering, sweetheart.”

I put the enormous container on the table and realize it almost covers it from end to end. “You won’t need anything else on that table for decoration for a while at least,” I say, feeling silly. “How’s your day been?”

“My day has been lovely and just got better for seeing you,” she smiles. “Come on in the kitchen. Your Pops almost has dinner ready.” I follow on her heels. She is tall and elegant and in good shape for someone her age.

She and Pops had raised me through my teenage years after my mom had passed away in a boating accident and my dad remarried my wicked stepmother. At least that’s how I think of her. She never wanted me around and was only concerned with their money. Pops ran the company we own until I was 25, then he turned it over to me. That had been 6 years ago. I don’t feel like I have filled his shoes very well.

“Hudson!” Pops calls as I enter the huge kitchen. “Just in time for dinner. I hope you have a good appetite. I have ribs, burgers, and all the fixings.

"I am. I missed lunch today because Whitney was out of the office." I say as I hug him and he claps me on the back.

"So you shopped for those flowers on your own?" Grandma asks.

"I did. I went to the shop and everything, all by myself like a grown-up," I wink.

I help her set the table as Pops cuts and plates the ribs. "I might just do all my own flower shopping from now on," I say.

"Why's that?" she asks as she puts the last fork down.

"The most gorgeous woman I've ever seen, outside of you, works there."

"Oh, does she now?" Pops asks as he washes his hands. "And does she have a name?"

"I'm sure she does but I didn't get it. She skedaddled before I could and when I went back this afternoon, she was nowhere to be seen."

"Well, now that is disappointing. You will have to go back since Valentine's is only days away," Grandma added.

"You're such a smart woman. I hadn't even thought of that. They also do landscaping and I thought I might hire them to do the condo I just bought to flip."

"You're a smart one too. I hadn't considered *that*," she smiles.

"I have considered our food is going to get cold if we don't eat," Pops adds.

"Hold your horse's old man. This is important stuff. Hudson has never told me he has seen the most beautiful woman in the world before. We have to make a plan to find her again."

"We can make plans after the blessing, Woman," Pops replies, and I chuckle at their false grumpiness. I love them so much. I hope one of these days I can have a marriage like they have. So far I've only found women who want my money.

"Do you have a date for Bryce's wedding yet?" Grandma asks.

“I’m not taking anyone. Since I am a groomsman, I will be busy with pictures and things and just don’t want to worry about a date.”

“You can’t go by yourself to a wedding.”

“Why not?”

“Because there will be women there looking for a single guy.”

“Then why do I need a date? I should be able to find a woman to sit with in that case.” I laugh. “Gran, I’m not taking a date. You can’t change my mind, besides it’s just too short notice.”

“Momma, leave the boy alone,” Pops says. “He knows what he’s up to, I reckon.”

“Thanks, Pops,” I say even though he called me boy.

“Suit yourself. Let some woman accost you,” she says and takes a big bite out of a rib. “On a similar subject, have you thought of going on one of those online dating sites?”

I choke on my water. “What?”

“You know, a dating site online, like Perfect Match. Evelyn was telling me her grandson found his fiancé through that site.”

“I’m not sure the right kind of women are on those sites, Gran.”

“Evelyn says her grandson’s fiancé is the sweetest girl, from a good family too. Besides, it’s pretty anonymous. You don’t have to say you’re rich, you might find someone who isn’t worried about your money. And you can do it from your phone or in your workout clothes at the gym.”

“It just seems awkward and then there is the whole ‘is it safe to meet this person in real life’ thing. I’m just not sure.”

“I think you should consider it.” Grandma looks pleased with herself. “You don’t actually have to “meet” anyone you don’t want to.”

“Alright, I will consider it,” I say, just to get her to change the topic. “Jace is on one of those sites. I’ll ask him.” Jace and I have

been best friends since kindergarten. He knows my reasons for wanting anonymity, plus he will be straight with me about the dating sites.

“Now we got that settled, how is work going?” Pops asks and we launch into shop talk. Pops built the largest real estate investment firm in the state. He then taught me everything he knew or tried to at least. He still comes in occasionally when he needs a distraction from Grandma’s honey-do lists and keeps his finger on the pulse of the market.

He’s a very wealthy man but you wouldn’t know it by the way they live and by his down to earth demeanor. He helped me work my way up through the company and taught me to recognize good deals. He was there to guide me as I built my own wealth and bought my first house. I owe everything to him. He’s a good sounding board for problems and has never steered me wrong.

“Things are going pretty well. We close on that big deal in Bentonville next week, then the one around Maumelle the week after. I’m looking at a property in the River Valley as well. We’ll see what comes of that.”

“Good, good.” Pops nods as he gnaws on his rib. “They keep saying the market is slowing, but I haven’t seen any evidence of it.”

“Me neither, but I’m trying to prepare in case it does.” I sit back and pat my belly. “That was a fine meal, Pops.”

“Thank you,” he says as he tosses his last bone on his plate.

“If you ever want to come out of retirement, I know a great location for a rib house.” We laugh at the old joke.

“I might just surprise you sometime.” He smiles. “I have my eyes on a few good locations. I’d do almost anything to get out of your grandma’s honey-do lists,” he winks at her as she swats his arm.

“You old coot,” she says as she leans to kiss his cheek. “Which makes me think, Hudson, can you change that porch light while

you are here? I do not like for your Pops to get on that tall ladder.”

“I sure will Grandma,” I say as I clean my plate. “Let me slip out of my jacket, first.”

“I’ll get the ladder while you do that,” Pops says as he heads out the door.

* * *

“Call Jace,” I say to my phone as I walk into my house an hour later.

“Calling Jace,” The electronic voice responds. On the second ring, he picks up.

“Hey man, what’s up?”

“I was at my grandma’s, and she suggested I try a dating app.”

“Your grandma?” he scoffs. “Your grandma suggested you try an app?”

“Yes, she made some good points. Like it is fairly anonymous, and I do *not* actually have to meet anyone.”

“So, for months, I’ve been trying to get you to try the site I’m on and you won’t but since your grandma suggests it, you’re doing it? Man!”

“It sounds really lame when you say it but she’s one smart lady and I trust her.”

“Thanks a ton, buddy. You trust your married grandma over your best friend. What am I, dog poop?”

I laugh at him, “You know what I mean. You’re still single bro.”

“By choice, bro. Your grandma... man. Are you serious?”

“Serious as I can be. What site are you on?” I say before he can start in on me about my lameness.

“Perfect Match. It’s super easy to sign up and use. I’m lazy and it works great for me. No pressure and fairly anonymous. They

have good cybersecurity too.”

“Well, sign me up.” I say, laughing at him. “Well not you, but you know what I mean.”

“Dude you are so awkward.”

“I know. I made a fool of myself today. I bumped into the most beautiful woman in the world at a florist shop, then I just stood and stared with my mouth hanging open. It was totally awkward, and she grabbed a broom and ran out before I got her name.”

Jace is laughing so hard he snorts, “Why were you in a flower shop?”

“I was getting my Gran flowers.” This just makes Jace laugh harder. “Shut up, man!” I say and then I join in the laughter. “I told you I was awkward.”

“When you say “bumped” into her, did you physically bump into her?”

“Yeah, literally, we bumped into each other. She was walking backward and turned right into me. I knocked her down and when I helped her up...”

“You knocked her down?”

“And fell on top of her.”

He laughs harder, “Bro! Was she ok?”

“Yes, she apologized for pulling me down when she fell. I felt like an idiot.”

“Oh man! That is a new one even for you.” Jace snorted.

“I know. She smelled so good and had these gorgeous golden eyes. I just stood there in shock at having had this beautiful woman in my arms. And she walked away, and I didn’t see her again.”

“Loser award for today.” He laughs so loud that I have to hold the phone away from my ear.

“I’m glad you find me so funny. You are great for my ego.” He just keeps laughing. “Call me back when you stop laughing.” I say and hang up. I love Jace like a brother but right now I wouldn’t give a dime to save his hide.

I change clothes, head for my treadmill, and put my tablet up on the shelf built into it. I open my playlist then look up Perfect Match and scroll through reviews while I warm up. At least it gets good reviews. Maybe I should try it.

Gran did have some valid points. I laugh at the idea of my gran telling me about a dating site. Jace is right, I win the daily loser award. I decide, since I have nothing to lose, I will sign up using my middle name, Aaron, and an older picture to be safe when I’m done with my run.

Chapter 5



A^{va}

I'm unloading bags of fertilizer behind the shop when my phone dings. I take a break and look at it, thinking it is a message from my mom. Instead, it's the dating app.

I open it to see that I have seven matches that have smiled and waved at me. I groan, put my phone back in my pocket, and finish unloading the manure from the truck. The irony of the situation is not lost on me.

"Nic, can you park my truck and bring me the keys when you're done?" I ask. "I'll be in the backroom."

"Sure thing, Boss. Let me finish this stack first," he says as he lifts the bags I have unloaded onto a stack near the building.

"Tia, what did you get me into?" I ask as I enter the back of the store.

"What are you talking about?"

"That dating app has been sending me notifications all morning."

"Have you looked at them?"

"Yes, I have seven matches that smiled and waved at me." I say in disgust.

"You need to answer those, she says as she stabs a rose into wet floral foam. Do it now while you're not doing anything else."

"Yes, *mom*, right after I wash the manure off my hands. I'm sure some guy just can't wait to get a smile and a wave from this manure toting woman," I say as I scrub my hands and reach for a new apron.

"Open it. I want to see these guys." Tia says as I approach the workbench.

“Be my guest,” I hand her my phone and get my tools.

I hear her say, “Noo, no, no, maybe, and wait a minute, who is this? Ava, you have to come look at this guy. His name is Aaron.”

I look over her shoulder out of curiosity. Staring back at me is a good-looking guy and his profile says he is a businessman in my hometown of Pine Hollow. She scrolls through the pictures. He is very good looking. He has long hair and a beard, but I can't tell much about his eyes because he is wearing glasses. Although there is something a bit familiar about him, I don't recognize him.

“What are his interests?” I ask as I reach for the phone.

“He likes the outdoors, working in the yard, hiking, skiing, reading, and a whole list of things you have in common with him. Oh, and he likes *cooking*. That would be handy for you since you don't cook.”

“I cook.”

“Honey, you cannot call heating up a can of ravioli or ramen noodles cooking.”

“Hey, I can cook lots of other things too.”

“Hamburgers and spaghetti don't count either. Now I'll grant that the macaroni and cheese you fix is really good.” She smiles mischievously.

“Thanks, Tia. You keep me humble.” I smile at her. “I survive on my cooking.”

“Surviving is good,” she says, “You should wink and wave at him.”

“Wink and wave? You think so?”

“Yes, wink and wave.”

“I'm not the winking type.” I say trying to stall because, for some reason, a virtual wink makes me nervous.”

“It's a virtual wink and you might find out that you are the winking type. Do it, woman.”

“Do what?” Jayden asks as he walks in.

“I’m telling Ava that she needs to wink and wave at the guy on her dating app.”

“Wait, Ava, is on a dating app? Why?”

“Uh, to get dates.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t need an app for that.” Jayden looks at me then Tia.

“I’m just doing it for fun,” I say. “I’m sure I won’t get any dates on here either. Why start a new trend?”

“Boss Ava, I am sure there are plenty of guys who would like to date you.”

“Well, I don’t see any lines forming outside,” I reply.

“Guys are dumb then. Mr. Money yesterday would have asked you out if you had come back in. He had to practically pick his jaw up off the floor.”

“He just couldn’t believe my level of awkwardness,” I say as I scroll through the pictures on the app again. “I mean I literally knocked the man down on top of me then ran away.”

“Eh, it was an accident. And he was interested. I just think that you don’t need an app for dating,” he mumbles as he heads to the cooler for the flowers that will be picked up in the next couple of hours. He comes back out with two arrangements and takes them up front grumbling about stupid dating apps and dumb rich guys.

I look at Tia and she cracks up. “He seems to take exception to dating apps. Did you wink?”

“Yes, I winked and waved. Now I’m going to do some work. It is good for the boss to set an example.” I wink at her, and we both laugh.

“See, you are the winking kind,” she says as she ties the bow on the vase she’s working on.

“You are incorrigible! Give me some flowers.”

“You’re bossy,” she smiles as she hands me a bunch of pink roses and filler.

We work silently for a while then my phone dings. “I bet he winked back.” Tia says.

“His wink’ll have to wait while I finish this vase of flowers,” I say and she snorts.

“That didn’t sound like I meant for it to.” I laugh, my cheeks turning pink.

“You better hurry up with that vase. I want to know what he did.”

I hand her my phone. “Here make yourself useful.”

“What?! I have been working hard all morning,” she feigns anger.

“You know what I mean. See what he did.”

“This man will run from your bossy self if he knows what’s good for him,” she says as she opens my phone. She has known my access code since two days after she started working for me. “Oooh!”

“OOOH, what?!” I ask, “What does oooh mean?”

“He sent you a DM.”

“A DM? He sent me a message? Like real words?”

“Yes, like real words. What else would you call a message? Want me to open it?”

“Nooo, I can open my own messages.” I drop my clippers and take my phone from her. I open the message with trembling fingers. Why are my fingers trembling? This guy cannot see me right now, my fingers should not be trembling.

I open the message and read it. *Hi, nice to “meet” you. I see you’re living in Pine Hollow. Wouldn’t it be odd if we had already met? Did you grow up here?*

“What did he say?” Tia asks impatiently.

“He says it’s nice to ‘meet’ me,” I say with air quotes “and then he asks if I grew up here and that it would be odd if we already met. Not much really.”

“He put the ball in your court though.” Tia smiles. “You should answer him.”

“What if he is just fishing and is a perv who can find me and kill me in my sleep?”

“You need to lay off the caffeine and murder mysteries,” Tia says, “He is not a serial killer who is going to kill you in your sleep. He’s just making small talk.”

“I’m not sure I believe you, but I guess there’s not much he can do to find me since my username isn’t my real name. “What should ‘Maria’ say to him?”

“How about the truth and ask him if he has always lived here.” Tia snips the ends off some pink carnations and puts them in a vase as she talks. I like watching how she works. There is a grace in her that shows through her designs. I have to work a lot harder than she does. She’s very Zen.

I type a message, then delete it, then type another message and delete it. “I feel and sound stupid,” I sigh as I throw my phone on the table.

“You’re not stupid and that feeling is your untreated social anxiety,” Tia interjects. “Just say, Hi, yes, I’m from around here, you? And hit send,” she says. “I promise it won’t kill you.”

I silently finish the bouquet I’m working on before I answer. It helps recenter me and calm me down. I clear away the extra stems and cutoffs from the flowers and clean my bench, then take the vase to the holding cooler before I pick up my phone again.

I pick up the offending device and open the app. I reread the message. It’s as simple as Tia says it is. I type: ***Hi. Nice to “meet” you too. I moved here in middle school. Did you grow up here?*** and I hit send.

Three little dots appear, and I drop the phone like it is hot.

“What?” Tia asks.

“He’s answering me already!” I frown.

“He must be very interested,” she says. “See what he said.”

I hesitantly pick up the phone. I’m very far from my comfort zone. I can be a confident businesswoman but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, I get so nervous. Letting people in has been hard since my dad died.

I was fourteen. It’s like I got stuck at that awkward phase and never moved on. He could always help me out with just a look or nod. My mom never had much patience with me because she is a people person like Tia. It came easy for her, and she didn’t understand my anxiety, but then again neither do I.

I check the message. ***Him: I grew up here, went to Pine Hollow East high school. It will always be home. Which high school did you go to?***

My fingers only slightly tremble as I answer. ***I went to Pine Hollow Westside. That means our schools played each other. Were you in sports or band?*** I hit send before I can overanalyze.

Him: I was not into sports in high school. You?

How did I tell him that I was in the 4H and Agri club without looking like a geek? ***Me: No, I wasn’t into sports or band. I liked going to games, but I was in other clubs. Were you in other clubs?***

The three dots show then disappear. I probably scared him off. I close my phone and start another arrangement.

“You got quiet.” Tia says. “Almost like you were having a good conversation via message.”

“It’s awkward, I’m awkward. At least he isn’t a jock so maybe he won’t mind that I’m a nerd.”

“If he doesn’t like you for who you are, you don’t want him anyway,” Tia says as she takes her latest Zen creation to the

cooler to wait for delivery. “I’m hungry. You want to go to lunch?”

“Sure, I haven’t started this arrangement yet. I need a stretch of my legs. I’ll tell Jayden, we are going to the Grill.”

“Ok, meet you after I go to the bathroom,” Tia says, and she seems a little more tired than usual as she shuffles down the hall towards the toilet.

Chapter 6



Hudson

I read the last message I got on the app, and I message Jace.

Me: I got a message and I'm not sure what to do.

Jace: Who is messaging you?

Me: A girl on the dating app

Jace: That is good man. What did she say?

Me: She asked what clubs I was in in high school. What should I say?

Jace: Tell her what clubs you were in. Why is she asking about high school anyway?

Me: I asked her if she grew up here and she said yes, and I asked what high school. Was that stupid? That was stupid, wasn't it?

Jace: No man. Get a grip. This is a virtual conversation. Background is good.

Me: I can't tell her I was in the chess club. That is like universal code for geek.

Jace: You have a point. What else you got?

Me: 4H, chorale, Agri, shop, Math club, ballroom dance

Jace: Man, you can't tell her you were in dance. She will run for sure. You really took dance?

Me: Heck yes, there were more girls than guys so I always had plenty of girls to dance with. I told you that you should take it with me. It's good for coordination and fitness too. It would've helped you with sports.

Jace: Dude, you are so weird.

Me: I believe we established that last night, thanks. What do I tell her?

Jace: *Tell her Agri and Shop and Chorale. Ladies like a guy who can sing.*

Me: *And how do you know this?*

Jace: *I have plenty of experience dating women who like a man who can sing. We did do Chorale together, remember?*

Me: *Oh, I remember. Mr. Stevens asked you to sing solo- so low we couldn't hear you.* I laugh as I hit send.

Jace: *Don't make me come to your office and punch you. Why are you texting me when I am down the hall, by the way?*

Me: *I'm less awkward on texts and I didn't want to walk down there.* I hear a loud bark of laughter from three doors down. *I heard that, bro.*

I hear more laughter down the hall. *Shut up man, I pay your salary.* I text him back and open the dating app. The laughter down the hall stops and I smile.

I message her: *I was in Agri, shop, and chorale. What clubs were you in?*

I try to work as I wait on her messages. I can't focus so I get up and pace with the real estate listing in my hands. I keep checking my phone like it is going to make a message appear.

Pull yourself together. She has a job after all. She's probably working like you should be. I settle in and make some phone calls, hoping that will take my mind off the situation.

I'm in the middle of a phone call on my office phone with the general contractor for the condo flip when I feel the phone in my pocket buzz. I want to snatch it out but wait until my call is over.

Her: *I was in Agri, 4H, and chorale. What was your favorite subject?*

I do a fist pump in the air, she was in Agri too, and chorale. And she just asked another question. This has to be a good sign.

Me: *My favorite subjects were science and English. What were yours?*

Her: I loved science, especially biology, music classes and, not to sound like I am copying you or anything, English was one of my favorite subjects.

Me: I know a lot of people that either love science and hate English or the other way around. I never understood it. Which English class was your favorite?

I wait for her answer with a silly smile on my face. Maybe this dating site stuff works after all.

Her: Don't think I am a total nerd. Shakespeare was my favorite. It's funny and rich.

Me: Shakespeare? I expected you to say something like Austin.

Her: Why because I am female, and we must all swoon for Austin? She bites back.

Me: No, I cover my tracks, because Shakespeare is hard to read and understand and most high schoolers don't go for the language. I like Austin myself. I add a winking face emoji.

She sends back a smiley face emoji.

Her: What foods do you like?

Me: I like lots of food but especially Asian and Pizza. What about you?

Her: Indian, Asian, and seafood. But nothing beats a good burger and fries in my opinion.

Me: I was afraid you might say sushi.

Her: What's wrong with sushi?

Me: I just like my seafood slightly more cooked.

Her: Haha, me too but I have had some good rolls.

Me: Me too. I can't believe I'm having such a good conversation online with a woman. I'm usually nervous talking to women.

Her: I really should get to work. It's a busy week for us.

I feel a little sad that we are ending our conversation so soon. I think about how to answer her. I start to type several messages

but keep changing my mind. I finally settle on.

Me: Sorry to keep you from your work. Can we talk this evening after work?

Her: I would like that. I'll message you when I'm home.

Before I know it, I'm up doing a victory dance in my office. I can't believe I'm so excited to talk to someone online. I message back.

Me: I look forward to it. With a smile emoji.

I'm sitting back in my chair with a satisfied smile on my face when Jace knocks and sticks his head around the door.

"You look like the cat who ate the canary," he says. "Does that mean you had a good conversation?"

"It does and she's going to message me tonight when she gets off work," I try to act nonchalant about this news, but Jace knows me too well.

"Way to go, man. Just don't lay it on too thick at first. You don't want to scare her away."

"Hey!" I say, "I'm being cool."

"You being cool? Is that possible?"

I throw a stress ball in the shape of a frog at him. He easily catches it. "My point exactly," he smirks as he holds up the stress ball.

"Point taken. But I'm pretty sure I wasn't awkward this time. It was an easy conversation."

"What did you talk about?"

"Our favorite school subjects, Shakespeare and Austin and favorite foods."

"A complete geek-fest." He rolls his eyes. "Except for food, which brings me to why I'm here. I am starving, let's get some lunch."

“It was *not* a complete geek-fest and she’s messaging me tonight. Food’s a great idea. I’m in such a good mood, I’m buying lunch.”

“Alright! I could get used to this side of you, even if you are a geek.” He punches my shoulder as he turns to walk out the door.

I make sure he isn’t looking and rub the spot he just hit.

“You rubbed your shoulder didn’t you?” he says without turning around.

“No!” I lied.

“You so did,” he says and laughs.

“You better shut up or I won’t buy you lunch.”

“Okay, you win,” he says as I follow him out the door, both of us laughing.

“Where are we going?” I ask him.

“I’ve been wanting to eat at The Grill for the last couple of days. Is that ok with you?”

“Sounds good. I haven’t been there for a while. I’m driving.”

“Fine, you have a better sound system than I do anyway,” he says as we exit the building. “Besides, since you are paying, I can put up with your driving.” This time I punch him and quickly swerve to my side of the car before he can punch me back.

Chapter 7



Ava

Tia and I find a seat at The Grill. It isn't too crowded today and we're able to get a booth near a window. It's nice to feel the sunshine streaming in on my skin.

"Are you going to actually text him back tonight?" she asks as I put my phone away. Normally when we're at lunch I keep my phone tucked away so we have time to talk, but the guy from the app had continued to message me so I answered.

"I think so. It was a pretty nice conversation."

"You were engrossed. Admit it, I had a good idea."

"You had a good idea. There, does that make you happy?"

"It does," she smirks and looks at her menu. "What are you getting today? I know I've been craving fries but I'm not sure what else I want to eat."

"I'm getting a bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a giant Coke Zero."

"Sounds like a good idea, except I think I'm getting Dr. Pepper."

After the server takes our order, we fall into an easy conversation about work.

"Have you noticed Jayden acting strange lately?" Tia asks.

"Strange how?"

"Like he might be crushing on you?"

"What are you talking about? He does not have a crush on me."

"I think he does, he got really territorial about Mr. 65 Tropicana roses staring at you. Then today he didn't like you being on a dating site."

"I think he's just being protective."

“I don’t think so. I think it was jealousy.”

“I hope not. He’s good looking and sweet but I don’t think of him that way at all. He’s a good worker and I don’t want to lose him.”

“You might have to talk to him.”

“You talk to him if you think he has a crush on me. I’m not bringing it up without proof. I don’t want to offend him if I’m wrong.”

“Better to talk to him now than later when he has it really bad.”

“You talk to him. I wouldn’t know what to say. *Please.*” I say with the best pitiful face I can muster.

“I will if you stop looking at me like that. You look constipated.”

“Ewww! Not what I was going for at all.” I hear the bell on the door ring and happen to look up. “Oh no! What is he doing here?” I slump in my seat.

“Who?” Tia asks about to turn around and look.

“Do *not* look! He will see you and might come this way.” I grab my water glass and put it in front of my face. “It’s beautiful Mr. 65 roses.”

“It’s not!” Tia turns to look just as the waitress leads them to the table across and behind us.

“He is soooo gorgeous! So is his friend. That should be against the law turning two men loose on society when they look that good. They obviously have money too.”

“Let him face the other way, please oh please,” I say as I bend over closer to the window to put Tia between me and him.

“Quit that, you’re going to draw his attention to us by being so goofy. Sit up and act like you belong here. You’re a successful businesswoman.”

I give her the evil eye. “You weren’t there when I bumped into him and nearly knocked him down. I could’ve died then. I just held up my stupid broom and ran away. So dumb.”

“Maybe he won’t realize it’s you since you’re not at the flower shop.”

“Hopefully.” I sit up straight as our server comes with our food. Unfortunately, this catches the eye of Mr. 65 Buds and I see him turn a bit red. He whispers something to his friend who turns to look in our direction.

A slow smile crosses his friend’s face, and he gets a devious look in his eye. I look at Tia, who slowly turns around to face me.

“Did you see that devilish look in his eye? I think he might come over here,” she says.

“Gorgeous man is tugging his sleeve like he doesn’t want him to come over though. Maybe he won’t.” The words die in my throat as his friend walks our way with a huge smile. He stops at the end of our table, and I try not to look up.

“Hello ladies, sorry for my intrusion. My name is Jace Carpenter. That’s my friend Hudson Carlisle over there. Would you ladies happen to work at Stop and Smell the Roses across the street?”

Tia looks up at him with a huge smile on her face, “Yes we do. Do you need some flowers?”

“Actually, we do, and I was wondering if you could give me your names so when we go to the store later we could ask for one of you to help us,” he smiles again.

“I’m Tia Moreno and this is Ava Miller,” she smiles back. I feel his full attention shift towards me, and I finally look up into startling green eyes. He gives me the full force of his smile.

“Hi,” I say, breathlessly.

“Nice to meet you, Ava,” he says much louder and I’m afraid the whole restaurant will notice.

“Nice to meet you too.” I look around him to where his friend is silently standing and staring at me.

“Hudson was right, your eyes really are gold... and quite beautiful,” He winks, and I can feel my cheeks turn pink. “I won’t

bother you any longer. Enjoy your meal.” He turns on his heel and takes a seat at their table.

Hudson still continues to stare until Jace calls his name and draws his attention to the menu. He sits down and faces his friend.

Tia leans close so she can whisper. “That was strange. And Mr. 65 buds says your eyes are beautiful.” She gives me a wicked smile.

“I want to wither and die right on this spot,” I say in a very quiet voice.

Chapter 8



Hudson

“You didn’t have to be so obvious, Jace.” I say through gritted teeth.

“Oh, I know that.” He smiles his evil smile. “What fun would that be though? And it did get me her name for you. Now after lunch you can go right over there and order flowers for your office and get her to help you.”

“I could’ve done it myself.”

“Would you have done it, though?”

“Yes, in my own way and on my own time.”

“Awkwardly, when you are eighty?” He pokes at me.

“No, today. And I would’ve done it smoothly.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure. But now you don’t have to do it. I got both of those gorgeous ladies’ names. I’ll have to go with you and ask for that lovely Tia to take care of me,” he wiggles his brows.

“You will just have to behave yourself. I want to make a good first impression.”

“Too late for that bro. What are you getting for lunch?” Jace asks, abruptly changing the topic.

“I haven’t even looked at the menu yet, but I’m thinking of a cheeseburger.”

“Yeah, I bet that’s not what you’re actually thinking about. I’m getting their chicken fried steak with all of the trimmings. Your lady just got herself a cheeseburger and fries, and so did her luscious friend.”

“Stop it will you? Be respectful.”

“That is me being respectful.” Jace laughs. “You know I can get not so respectful. I keep it PG for you.” He laughs.

The server takes our order as I try to get a glimpse of Ava again. She’s more beautiful than I remember. Her hair is very glossy but that is about all I can see because she keeps hiding behind her friend. I catch glimpses of creamy skin and an elegant neck occasionally. She is definitely avoiding making eye contact with me.

I wonder if I should apologize. I decide to wait until I go to the shop and then I can apologize without an audience. I try to focus on Jace’s constant barrage of conversation, but I’m lost, only getting bits and pieces.

“Blah, blah, blah,” I hear him say and snap out of my quest to catch a glimpse of Ava.

“Sorry,” I say.

“You should be. Not listening to your best friend in favor of woman watching. What is the world coming to?” He glares at me.

I sigh and say sorry again. “I’ll try to pay attention, but this is your fault. You had to go get her name and make fools of us while you were at it.”

“I did not make fools of us. I was merely assertive. It’ll get you ahead in life.”

“I’m assertive.”

“In business, but not with women or your love life. Just ask your Gran.” He smirks.

“Alright, you’ve made your point,” I say. In an effort to keep my mind off of Ava, I ask him questions about the deal we have going on. “How’s the Maumelle project going?”

“We’re set to close next week. That complex is in a great location and all but two of the units are full. Are you planning on keeping the price per unit the same?” Jace asks.

“I think we’ll leave them for a while. I know they need some updating so we do that as units empty out, then we’ll raise prices on those updated units.”

“The tenants will like that and it’s a good plan. It has really grown since I was in that area of the state last.”

“That’s why I think it’s a good deal. We’re getting a good price. The owners hit retirement age and are doing some downsizing. I want you to go handle the closing. Are you up for that?”

“I’d love to do it.”

“Makes sense for you to do it since you’ve handled most of the deal so far anyway. They trust you and so do I, except with women.”

“You had a good thing going there for a minute, but you had to ruin it,” he laughs back.

Our server arrives and we dig in. Jace has been my friend forever. We’re about as opposite as two friends can be but that balances us out. He’s very creative and focused with properties that we invest in. It was a no-brainer for me to hire him when Pops was still running the show. Jace worked closely with us and learned the ropes just like I did. He stepped into my old position when I took over the reins of the company.

“Don’t look now but your lady is leaving.”

“I looked up in time to see Ava dash behind a potted plant and almost run out the door. “She seemed embarrassed. It must be because I was such a dolt the other day.”

“Possibly. You can find out when we hit the shop after lunch.”

“Who are you buying flowers for?”

“My assistant and Helen.”

Helen was Jace’s mother, and they had a strange relationship. She always wanted to pretend that she didn’t have a son his age because that would make her old. She was certainly not the gooey type of parent, gushing over everything their child did.

“How are Helen and John?”

“They’re doing well. I think they’re in the Bahamas or Caymans right now. But she’ll be home in time for Valentine’s Day. So, I’ll have flowers there for her. I think I’ll get some for Nani too.”

Nani was Jace’s grandmother, and she fit the bill, round and soft and full of laughter and love. We spent many days at her house making cookies and running in her yard. She was like an aunt to me and more like Jace’s mother than Helen ever was.

“Maybe I should get Nani flowers too.”

“I’m sure she’d like that. I think she gets lonely these days. I try to visit at least once a week. I take her to lunch most Saturdays. She loves her Italian food.”

“Tell her I said ‘Hello’ next time you see her.”

“You should just come to lunch with us Saturday.”

“Sounds like a plan. Right now, I’m going to get a glimpse of the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen,” I say as I toss my napkin in the empty fry basket.

“Does that mean that you’re giving up your online friend tonight?”

It hadn’t occurred to me that there might be a conflict in that department. “I don’t think so. I haven’t entered into a serious relationship with either of these women yet.”

“Look at you acting all grown up with two women. I’m so proud of you.” Jace pretended to sniff back tears.

“Shut up man! And let’s go.” We talked smack all the way out the door.

Chapter 9



Ava

“What’s he doing coming back here?” Jayden says as I’m straightening shelves.

“Who are you talking about Jayden?”

“Mr. Money, that’s who. He’s coming across the square with another man. We did a good job on those flowers. Well, you did a good job on those flowers. He better not be coming to complain.”

“Shoot! Shoot!” I duck behind a rack of vases. “I thought he might not come.”

“Why are you hiding?” Jayden asks right behind me. He was close enough for me to feel the warmth emanating off of him.

“I’m not hiding. I’m straightening these vases.”

“Good. You’re the boss and shouldn’t be hiding. You want me to wait on them?”

“No, but go get Tia for me if you will.”

“Sure,” he said, “I didn’t want to wait on them anyway.” He sounds a bit surly to me. I’m beginning to think Tia might be onto something about him that I have overlooked.

“You wanted me?” Tia asks and makes me jump.

“Yes! Look who is coming.” I nod my head in the direction of the two beautiful men crossing the street.

“Yippee!” She has the audacity to clap. I give her a stern look.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m excited I get to see them again. You need to buck up. You’re a beautiful, powerful woman who built this business. You need to own it.”

She's right. I had just had an awkward encounter with this man, that didn't mean I was awkward all the time. "You're right. I was just doing my job last time. I'm not always an awkward person." I add, more for my benefit than hers.

I look out the window one last time to see the two men crossing the street to our parking lot. I check my reflection in the glass of the cooler boxes to make sure my hair isn't acting crazy or something.

"You look great. Quit fussing." She says as the door opens, admitting a cool breeze along with Jace and Hudson.

Jace smiles broadly, "Hello again, Tia and Ava." He says, first looking at Tia, then at me. He's a very handsome man with light brown hair with threads of gold shining through it and the greenest eyes I think I've ever seen. He's tall and chiseled. He has the body of an athlete.

But he's nothing compared to the man standing shyly beside him. Hudson has a strong jawline, raven black hair, and the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen. He's tall and lean but well built, but he doesn't seem like a jock. His clothes are tailored to show off his body and he has an air of money about him. He seems vaguely familiar to me now that I'm calmly looking at him.

He isn't the usual kind of guy who asks me out. I'm not in his league at all with my average height, average build, and average everything else. I'm not sure why he would even look at me twice, even though Jace said he thought I had beautiful eyes. They're just brown, nothing special either.

I'm sure they are here to see Tia. Now *she's* gorgeous with her chestnut curls that hang to her waist, her long slim legs and perfect curvy body. She's also very open and outgoing. She never needs makeup to highlight her beauty.

I hear her say, "How can we help you gentlemen?" and snap out of my thoughts and into reality again.

"We want to order some flowers for the women in our lives," Jace says as he leans his hip against the counter. "Right, Hudson?"

“Yes.” Hudson says and looks at me. “My grandmother loved the roses so much, I thought I would buy some for the uh, women in my uh, office,” he finishes quietly.

“I would like some for my administrative assistant and my grandmother as well.”

“I’ll be happy to assist you, Jace.” Tia smiles and “I’m sure Ava would love to help you out, Hudson,” she turns her smile on me and gives me a little nod of encouragement.

“Of course, I would be happy to help. What do you have in mind?”

Chapter 10



Hudson

What do I have in mind? I have kissing you in mind, but I cannot say that, so I say “Uhh... not sure. I have three staff members that I would like to get Valentine’s bouquets for. Nothing romantic,” I quickly add, so she doesn’t get the wrong idea, “just something simple to say thank you.”

“Got ya,” she says back to me, although she doesn’t really look at me. “I would suggest three pink or pink and white carnations with baby’s breath in a bud vase.” I have to force myself to concentrate on what she is saying because I keep getting distracted by her lips and her eyes.

“If you think that’s right, then I’m happy with that. Can you deliver them to my office?”

“Yes we can. I just need the address and what day you want them delivered. Do you want to write cards for each one of them?”

“Sure, I can do that.” I take three cards from the stack on the counter. I take out my business card and hand it to her. “Please deliver them to this address on Friday, if that works.” I smile at her. This hasn’t been so awkward, I think.

“You work at Carlisle Properties?” she asks.

“I sure do,” I say hesitantly. I don’t add that I am the CEO, and I don’t have it on my business card. I hate to see women’s faces change when they find that out.

“My grandpa bought this building through Carlisle many years ago. He also invested in a few other properties. He always said it was a good and honest company. He did alright investing with them.”

“I’m glad to hear he thought favorably of us.”

“Are you one of the Carlisle family who owns it?”

“Uh, yeah. My grandpa started the company many years ago.”

“That’s really awesome. Our grandpas had something in common.” She blushes and it somehow makes her even cuter. “I got your order written up,” she says and gives me the total. I have the wildest desire to ask her to the wedding as my date as I hand her the money for the flowers.

“Thank you. I can’t wait to see your creations. My gran loved her bouquet, even though it was huge.”

“I hope it wasn’t too big. If you didn’t like it, I can give you a refund.”

“Oh no, no, not at all. It was gorgeous. I never realized it would be so big when I ordered it. I never even thought of how many roses that was. I don’t have much experience with ordering flowers.” I smile. “I’m practically a virgin.”

Her eyes get really big and she covers her mouth to stifle a giggle.

“That sounded better in my head.” I turn beet red. “Sorry. Umm, I’m gonna go now before I make it worse.” She busts out laughing. I smile and make a hasty retreat. My last sight is of her holding her stomach and laughing, I think I hear a little snort as the door swings shut behind me.

Chapter 11



Ava

“Oh my gosh! I can’t believe he said that!” I laugh as Hudson and Jace leave the store. “I thought I was awkward.”

“I can’t believe you snorted!”

“There’s no way he heard that! ...Is there?” I’m suddenly nervous again.

“Does that mean you’ve changed your mind about how gorgeous he is?” Tia asks.

“Not at all. I think it makes him more adorable.” I say as I grab the stack of orders on the counter and take them to the back room.

I almost run into Jayden who is bringing flowers from the cooler in the back to the cooler up front. “Sorry, Jayden. Let me get the door for you.”

“Thanks, boss.” He says and I don’t correct him this time, because I hear Tia’s warning that he has a crush on me in my mind. “Can you watch the counter for a while? I’m going to work with Tia.”

“Sure, Boss.” Is it my imagination or does he sound disappointed? Tia is right, I better keep this relationship professional.

“Holler if you need us.” I say and let the door close.

“Tia,” I whisper as I approach the workbench, “I think you might be right about Jayden. You have to help out here. This isn’t going to be a good thing.”

“I’ll talk to him if you won’t. I may be reading the thing wrong, so don’t worry too much about it. Did you get Hudson’s phone number?”

“I got his business card. Does that count?”

“It’s a step in the right direction. That Jace just handed his number to me and winked.”

“He just handed you his number?”

“Yes. Didn’t you see him?”

“No, I was too busy looking at Hudson and barely functioning.”

“Jace-man is too arrogant for my tastes. I just put his number down on the form and pretended to throw it away. I wanted to take him down a notch or two. I hope he bought it, not that I will be the one to make the first call. If he wants me, he will have to make that call.”

I laugh, “I think you may be the first woman to put up much resistance where he’s concerned. I bet not many women throw his number in the trash.”

“I bet you’re right. It’s good for him to get treated as a normal human.” She makes a snipping motion with her trimmers. “I will nip his arrogance in the bud,” she makes a face and we both giggle.

“I think he has met his match.” It’s good to see Tia interested in a man. Her first marriage just ended in divorce and even though it was amicable, she’s been hesitant about dating again.

“Speaking of matches, any more texts from your guy on Perfect Match?”

“I doubt it. He’s working and says he’ll message me after he gets home.”

“Maybe you have some other matches. Have you checked?”

“No, and I don’t feel like it right now. I think two guys in one day is plenty for me to keep up with. I might explode if I have any more conversations with the opposite sex,” I chuckle, “I’m more used to talking to plants. They don’t talk back.”

“I know that tone, so I won’t waste my breath by arguing with you.” Tia says and starts clipping the ends off some rose stems.

“What tone?”

“Your ‘do not argue with me’ tone. Your ‘I’m going to be a hermit now’ tone.”

“My hermit tone?” I’m a little hurt by her words. “I don’t have a hermit tone.”

“Yes, you do, and I love you for it. You’re a true introvert so you need to be a hermit sometimes. It’s perfectly ok, too. I wasn’t insulting you, just trying to respect your boundaries.”

“Thank you, I think.” I say as I take my turn to snip flower stems. Tia is right, I’m an introvert and I can easily be overwhelmed with people and noise.

As I start working, I get into a flow and my mind wanders over the day’s events. Texting a stranger and talking about growing up, meeting Jace and Hudson at lunch, and my very short conversation with Hudson. He’s still drop-dead gorgeous. He looks oddly familiar to me. Maybe I have met him before somewhere. I spend a few minutes trying to pinpoint where that might’ve been but come up empty handed.

After making several arrangements, I stand and stretch. “I’m grabbing a bottle of water,” I say to Tia. “You want one?”

“That would be great.” She stretches and finishes off the arrangement she is working on. Just as I reach the fridge, the phone rings. I’m close to it so I grab it.

I can hear Jayden on the other end talking. Then I recognize the other voice. It’s Hudson. “She is busy, can I take a message?” Jayden says. He knows I can take phone calls when I’m working, why is he putting Hudson off.

“I got it Jayden,” I say to let him know I’m on the call.

“Oh. Ok, Boss,” he says and hangs up.

“This is Ava. How can I help you?”

“Uh, hi Ava, this is Hudson Carlisle.”

“Hi, Mr. Carlisle.”

“Please call me Hudson.”

“What can I do for you Hudson?” I feel shivers racing down my spine as his smooth voice comes back over the line.

“I’m flipping a house and realized that you do landscaping. I’d like to meet with you to discuss that if possible.”

“I would love to talk about landscape work with you. It’ll have to wait until Valentine’s Day is over. It’s such a crazy week.”

“How about the week after?”

“Tuesday or Wednesday of that week will work.”

“Tuesday I’m booked all day and most of the day Wednesday, I have meetings. How does Monday work for you that week?”

“Monday after 11 will work out just fine.” I say and notice my hand trembles a bit on the phone cord.

“I will come by Monday at 11:15, maybe we can grab lunch.”

“That would be nice,” I say. ‘I’ll put it on my calendar.”

When I hang up, Tia says, “Mr. Carlisle? Was that Hudson?”

“It was. He was calling about landscaping.”

“He was calling because he wants to see you again and this is a good way.” Tia squeals. “Did I hear you say something about lunch too?”

“Yes, he said we could grab lunch while he tells me about the landscaping project. It will be a working lunch.”

“It will be a date.”

“A working lunch.”

“A working lunch is a working date. Mark my words, that is what he has in mind.”

“Tia?”

“Yes?”

“Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“This whole dating thing. I might just back out of it if you don’t.”

“You won’t because it’s business *aaaand* a date,” she smiles and snips a fern as if to add emphasis to her statement.

I stick my head in the refrigerator to get some water and cool my hot cheeks. I hope she is right but I’m not going to get too excited because my heart could get broken too easily. I need to play it cool, “Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

* * *

I flop down on my couch with a sigh. It’s so good to be home and not working. It was a late night and I know the next few will be too. I just don’t know if I have the energy for texting tonight.

But I did promise, and I am in control of how long I text.

I pull out my phone and flip open the app. Ughh, I have several waves, a couple of winks and one kissy face. Really a kissy face! Who sends a stranger a kissy face?

I open my inbox and there are a couple of messages waiting. I open the first one from a guy whose username is cute_as_pups. I’m more than a little skeptical of a guy with that name, but I open his message anyway.

Hi Maria, I saw your profile. You have beautiful hair and eyes. I see you like plants. I like animals and spending time outdoors. I guess you can tell that from my user name. I have attached a pic of me and some of my animals. I hope to hear from you soon.

Matt

I open the picture. It’s him with three dogs, two cats and a giant snake. Nope, I do not do snakes - *at all*. I have a crew to handle that for me on job sites. I message back.

Hi Matt,

Nice picture of you and your animals. You have cute dogs and cats. But I’m not a snake person at all. I don’t see it working out.

I don't even bother with a signature. He was good looking but all I could focus on was that snake. I'm not answering him, again.

I click on the next message. I feel my heart leap a little. It's the guy, Aaron, I was texting earlier in the day.

"Hi, how was work today?"

Me: "It was a busy day but really good. How was your day?"

I watch the floating ellipses bubble indicating he is writing a message. It takes a while, so I snuggle into the corner of the couch and put my feet up under the blanket on the opposite end.

"It was a really busy day for me too. We're working on finalizing a project at work."

"Big projects can be a lot of fun or a big headache. I'm at a busy time of year and have quite a few small projects too."

"Your profile says you like plants. Does that factor into your work?"

"It does. I own a floral shop and plant business. What kind of work do you do? Your profile says you like photography. Are you in that line of work?"

"I do like photography but it's a hobby. I also like hiking and rocks. I'm in business management."

"You are a manager?"

"Basically. You said it is a busy time of year for you, but isn't the plant business slow in the winter?"

"With Valentine's Day coming up, we are super busy. Normally in the winter, we're dealing with cold tolerant plants and gearing up for the spring in the greenhouses. We have thousands of tiny seedlings we're getting started."

"I hadn't considered that it would be busy at all. I think of plants dying off or going dormant this time of year. I love learning new things like that. Is your plant business in town?"

"My storefront is but the greenhouses are outside of town. Do you have offices in town or some other city?"

“The firm has a few offices, but I work here in Pine Hollow. Do you live in town or near your greenhouses?”

“The greenhouses are near my grandparents’ house. I live closer to town.” I was not entirely comfortable telling him that I live in town yet. He might still be a creeper. *“What about you? Are you in town?”*

“I’m in one of the older neighborhoods. I bought an old building last year. It’s taken a lot of work, but I love it.”

I try to imagine what kind of house he might have. I pictured dark greens and blues and lots of wood.

“Maybe when we get to know each other better, you can come look at my flower beds and tell me what I’m doing wrong. They just don’t seem to be blooming like I want them to.”

“If we get to know each other better and decide to meet, I would like to look at your flower beds. I’m a flower geek.”

“I bet you are not a geek. Besides, I like rocks after all.” He added a smiley face emoji, and I sent back a laughing emoji.

“I happen to like rocks too, especially well-placed rocks in landscaping.” I add.

“Landscaping? Do you do much landscaping?”

“I do quite a bit in the summer. I want to add more of it to my business as we grow.”

Chapter 12



Hudson

Could it be a coincidence that the two women I have talked to today are in the plant business and do landscaping? How many women in town are in the landscaping business? I decide to ask a more pointed question.

“Is your storefront on the square?”

She doesn’t answer for a long time. I wonder if she is debating the safety of giving me more information.

Her: *“Yes, in one of the old buildings.”*

What the heck? Is this Ava?!! I look at her profile picture, but she has a hat and sunglasses on. It is hard to tell anything about her features. And her username is Maria the Flower Girl, which doesn’t give anything away. I can’t tell but I’m very suspicious that it is actually Ava.

“Are you near The Grill?”

“Yeah, pretty close.”

I sit up on the edge of the chair. I think I’m talking to Ava. I pace around for a minute. I wonder if I should ask her or reveal who I am. No, no this could work to my advantage. I can get to know her without being so awkward.

“I love those old buildings downtown. It seems like a great place to build a business.”

“It is. My grandfather purchased our old building, and the inside has lost quite a bit of its character, but I love it.”

I had heard those same words from Ava earlier today. Her grandfather had purchased the building from my grandfather. I’m pretty certain I’m talking to Ava, the same woman I have a date with on the Monday after Valentine’s Day. I do a little dance

in my chair, but then remember she could have a sister, or a cousin for that matter. I deflate a little. Still, it *could* be her.

“Your grandfather was a smart businessman. Those properties are not cheap today if they are taken care of, plus he preserved some of our town’s history. You must be really proud.”

“I am very proud of him. He was a great man. He passed away a few years ago but he always took pride in our town.”

A wave of sadness for her washes over me. *“I’m sorry to hear that. It’s hard to lose someone you love.”*

“Yes it is. Let’s change the subject. What are your other hobbies?”

I smile and follow her lead. *“Cooking, reading, and traveling when I can.”*

“I would like to travel. I haven’t had a vacation in several years. That is what it’s like when you own your own business. I cook a little. I love to read, hike and swim.”

“I like swimming too. Are you a swimming pool only kind of swimmer?”

“I like to swim anywhere I can. Tell me you are not just a pool swimmer.”

“Haha. I like to swim pretty much anywhere I can too. What has been your favorite place?”

“I have loved every ocean I have gotten to swim in. You?”

“I love oceans as well. I swam in a big clear water sinkhole in Florida once. There was nothing like it. “

“I’ve always wanted to go to one of those! They’re on my life list.”

“Life list? Is that like a bucket list?”

“It is a bucket list. I just like how life list seems more positive than a bucket list.”

“A good point, it is way more positive than a list of things to do before you die.”

She adds, *“Exactly, it focuses more on the living,”* and ends the sentence with a smiley face emoji.

I settle in for a long talk. I cover my legs with a blanket and lay back on the couch. *“What is the first thing on your bucket list?”*

If this is Ava, I’m going to find out all I can about her and keep her talking as long as I can.

Chapter 13



A^{va}

I slowly open my puffy eyes the next morning and stretch. As I stumble to the bathroom, I think about the “conversation” I had with Aaron via text last night. Aaron is a good name. I smile when I think about him and all we talked about.

It was such an easy conversation, so easy that I stayed up *way* too late. I’m going to need some caffeine for sure this morning. I stand in the shower stream and let the water flow over my face soothing my puffy eyes.

I can’t believe we had so much in common! He asked good questions and gave thoughtful answers. I already want to talk to him today. I hurry with my shower even though I could stand under the soothing water all day.

I dress, grab a soda, and put some bread in the toaster. Just as my toast pops up, I get a message.

“Hey boss, I’m going to be late today. I have to pick up my dog from the vet and take him home.”

“Is he better?”

“Yeah they just wanted to keep an eye on him for a couple of days. I will hurry in as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Nic. See you soon.”

I put the toast back in to heat up a minute more so it will melt the butter better. I slather it with butter and peach jam when it pops up.

My phone sounds again.

“How was your text conversation last night?”

“It was great! Will fill you in at work.”

“You better not keep me waiting too long.”

“I won’t. See you soon.”

I gather my things and have to look for five minutes for my shoes. Somehow they had gotten stuck under the edge of the couch. As I head to the door my phone chimes again. “What now?!”

It’s a message notification from Perfect Match so I open it.

“I hope you’re having a lovely morning.” There is a flower bouquet emoji at the end. My heart does a little flip like when you go over a crazy hill in your car.

“It just got a lot better.” I message him back. ***“I hope your day is off to a nice start too.”***

“It is. Just on my way to work and thought of you.”

“That’s nice to hear. Speaking of work, I better get going. Those flowers will not arrange themselves. Can we talk later?”

“I would like that. Will you text me when you take a break?”

“I will. Have a good morning.”

“You too. I look forward to hearing from you later. Hopefully not too much later.” He ends the message with a heart.

I feel a silly smile on my face as I put my phone in my bag. Then I practically skip to my car.

* * *

When I open the shop door, total chaos greets me. Flowers are everywhere, Tia is hidden somewhere behind all of the blooms, Jayden has a cart full of vases and I can hear customers in the front of the shop.

“Whoa! Did we have a flower explosion?”

“Very funny.” I hear Tia’s voice from the other side of the mound of blossoms. “In case you don’t remember, we have the biggest

flower holiday of them all coming up and we work in a floral shop! What do you expect to find when you walk in?”

“Somebody miss her morning Joe?” I say as I stash my bag on a shelf and grab my gear for the day.

“Somebody stayed up too late and is paying for it this morning. I need chocolate too. Now that you are here you can bring me some.”

I smile back at her and hug her from behind. “Don’t be grumpy. Life’s too short.”

She spins her stool around and looks at me from head to toe. “Where is Ava and what have you done with her?” She lifts her right eyebrow.

“What? I can be happy in the morning.”

“You can?” I have never seen it,” she snips. “This is a new side of you. What is the cause of this sudden change? Could it be a man?” She gives me a sly grin.

“Well, maybe I just slept well.”

“Right,” she says as she spins her stool back towards the table.

“Hi Boss,” Jayden says as he walks through the door from delivering the vases to the front. “Is Nic in yet? I could use his help out there.”

“He’s running late. I can come help.”

“That would be great! The lobby is packed. It seems even more than usual for Valentine’s.”

I follow him through the door to the front lobby. It is filled to the brim with customers. “You weren’t joking,” I say to him. “I wonder what’s up.”

I grab a pad and start circulating through the crowd taking orders. The first lady I help wants an enormous order of 12 arrangements. As I finish with her order, I ask how she heard about us and she says, “Several of us were at Maggie Carlisle’s for our garden meeting this morning and she showed us the

gorgeous, enormous bouquet her grandson bought for her from your lovely shop. I decided I would get my flowers here too.” She gives me a huge smile. “Actually, most of us did,” She looks around the shop and waves at her friends.

“Thank you for choosing us,” I say as I finish taking her order. I give her the ticket and she gets in the line to Jayden who is handling the register.

It takes me an hour to get most of the orders written up and gradually the lobby empties.

“Boy that was intense,” I say to Jayden as I straighten the last of the shelves.

“Intense is a good word for it. I thought we were never going to get through with customers. We may have to hire someone just to answer phones too.”

“Nic might be here by now. I will check and send him out to give you a break. I can take all of the tickets to the back too.” I hold out my hand for them.

“Boss, um I mean, Ava, would you like to get dinner sometime? Umm dinner with me, I mean?”

Oh boy here it is. Tia is right. Jayden is interested in me.

“Jayden, I have a policy of no dinners alone with employees that are of the opposite sex.” I sure hope that takes care of the matter.

“So, if Tia went with us, it would be ok?”

“Sure, if we all went out as friends, it would be ok.”

“As friends?”

“As friends.”

“I will see if Tia will go with us.”

“Maybe we should ask Nic as well. It might hurt his feelings if we all went out without him. We could all hang out together as friends.”

“Alright,” he seemed a bit deflated. “I will ask him too.” He picked up the tickets and handed them to me.

“I will ask Tia and Nic when I get back there so you don’t have to worry about it. Dinner will be on me too.”

He gives me a sad smile and says, “Thanks,” his shoulders slumping a bit as he turns to straighten the cooler.

I push through the door to the back room. “Tia, is Nic here yet?”

“Yep, he got here right after you went up front. He’s been helping me with these arrangements and just went to get a vase for another one. Why?”

“I want him to go up and give Jayden a break. He just asked me to dinner; I think you were right about his crush on me.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him that I had a policy to not go to dinners with employees of the opposite sex alone. He asked if it would make it ok if you went. I told him we could as friends and that we should ask Nic too if we asked you because it would seem like we were intentionally leaving him out. He seemed disappointed but ok.”

“I think you handled that well. It’s good to have that policy, too. It would make things very uncomfortable around here if a couple of us were dating each other and a breakup happened or anything else.”

“Uncomfortable is right. Miserable even. We got all of these sales while I was out there. It seems that word got out from Hudson’s grandma about her flowers.”

“Woah, all of these are from her friends?” she asks as she thumbs through the stack.

“Pretty much all of them. Can you get your cousin, Margaret, to come help for a few days? We are going to need the extra help this coming week with the holiday and all of these additional orders too.”

“I will ask her. I don’t think she has a full-time job right now,” she says as she pulls out her phone and sends a text.

I reach for my apron and tools as Nic comes in with a beautiful clear vase. He sets it in front of Tia and turns to me. “Hi Boss.”

“Hey, Nic. How’s your pup?”

“He’s doing well. I put him in his kennel, and he was asleep before we got home. Sorry about all of that.”

“Not a problem. Sometimes things come up. Speaking of that, I want to take all of you guys out for an employee dinner tomorrow. Does that work for you?”

“I don’t have anything on my calendar right now. I’m always up for a free meal anyway,” he laughs.

I chuckle back, “Starving college student answer.”

“You got that right.” He gets a vase for himself and starts pulling together some daisies and pink carnations. “It seems busier today than usual.”

“Oh yeah, I totally forgot. Can you go give Jayden a break for a bit? It definitely has been a busy morning.”

“Sure, I will go give him a break now.” He puts the flowers back in the water bucket and goes to the front.

Tia looks up from her phone, “I can make it tomorrow too. Meg can work any time you need her.”

“Ask her to come on Monday at nine, if you will.”

“Done. Now where are we going for dinner?”

“You guys pick. I will pay.” I smile and bury myself in the flowers I’m working with.

Ten arrangements and several hours later, I put down my clippers and stretch.

“Is that your stomach I hear?” Tia asks from her own stack of flowers.

“Fraid so. I’m going to grab my lunch from the fridge in a minute.” I pull out my phone and check for messages. I don’t have any and I am a bit disappointed until I remember I was supposed to message Aaron on my break. I guess it’s as good a time as any, so I message him and head to the fridge for my lunch. I take it to the table and wait patiently for his response.

“Hiya,” he says back, **“how is your day so far?”**

“Swamped. We had a full house today. A client’s grandmother told her friends about the flowers she got from him, and all of her friends showed up this morning. It was wonderful and chaotic. How is your day?”

“Chaotic without the wonderful part. We hit some snags in a big project, but we got them sorted out now. Do you have any fun plans this coming week?”

“Mostly work. I am having dinner with my employees tomorrow night. My friend is getting married soon, so I’ll start having bridesmaids’ parties and such. But other than that, I have no fun plans. Do you have any fun plans?”

“One of my best friends is getting married too. But I am not sure I would call being a groomsman fun. I was wondering if you would maybe like to meet for lunch somewhere this week?”

I drop the phone with a shriek.

“Are you ok?” Tia pokes her head around the corner to look at me.

“He wants to meet for lunch.”

“Who?” She takes a seat.

“Aaron from the dating app.”

She shrieks and then covers her mouth. “Are you ready for that?”

“No, I do not think so.”

“You should tell him. I’m sure he will understand and if not, then you can move on.”

I frown a little at that thought. “I really like talking to him, so I do not want to break that off, but I’m really not ready to meet yet.” I look at my phone. “You’re right. I need to tell him. Honesty is the best policy.”

Me: I’m not sure I am ready for that just yet.

Him: Ok I understand. I can wait til you are ready then.

“He says he can wait until I am ready.” I give Tia a sappy smile.

She raises her eyebrow at me, “Have you been bitten by a bug?”

“What?!” I say looking at my hands to make sure I have no bites.

“The love bug?” She clarifies.

“NO!” I shake my head to add emphasis. “I have not been bitten by the love bug. I just like talking to him. He is funny and interesting, and I can be myself without awkwardness.”

“I see. Then why are you blushing and smiling like a goofball?”

“This is my normal smile.”

“If you say so. She reaches over and grabs some of my grapes and cheese and stands up. “I’m going to get myself a Dr. Pepper and some fries. See you when I get back.” She grabs her jacket and heads out the door, leaving me sitting like a goofball with a smile on my face. I message Aaron back.

Chapter 14



Hudson

“Hey buddy, will you take a look at this?” Jace plops down across from me.

“What is it?”

“The proposal for that house project in the valley. Are you ok? You look odd.”

“How do I look odd?” I say as I toss my phone on the desk.

“Like you lost your puppy, but you don’t own a puppy so that can’t be it.” He puts the stack of papers on my desk, leans forward and looks at me closely. “Girl troubles, that’s it. Did the girl on Perfect Match dump you?”

“No! She didn’t dump me. I’m pretty sure it is Ava by the way. She said she was swamped at her floral shop because a client’s grandma told all of her friends about the shop.”

“That’s great! Then why do you look dejected?”

I sigh, “You won’t let it go unless I tell you will you?”

“You know me too well. Out with it!”

“Alright! I asked her to meet me for lunch and she said she wasn’t ready yet.” I frown. “I think she just doesn’t want to meet me.”

“Dude, she’s just being cautious. Look at it from her point of view. She doesn’t even know if your picture and name are real yet. Give her a bit more time.”

“Are you sure that’s why?”

“Absolutely, unless she knows it’s you and how goofy you are. I’m just joking.” I throw an eraser at him and bean him right between the eyes.

“Oww! Good throw by the way. You’re improving.”

“Because you give me so much practice.”

“True, I do. Anyway, loads of people video chat for a while before they meet.”

“I just feel so awkward on video calls. I never know what to do with my hands. I don’t know if I should look in my camera or at the screen. It’s just a mess.” I shrug, “Also, I have been thinking about something else she said.”

“What’s that?”

“She said her friend is getting married soon. And my friend is getting married soon. I wonder if it is the same wedding.”

“That’s a possibility. Maybe you should ask her a few more questions about it. But try not to give yourself away if you figure it out. If you know and she doesn’t then you can get to know her without her knowing.”

“That was confusing, yet I still understood you. It seems dishonest, don’t you think?”

“I try not to. Now, enough about your love life, what about my proposal?”

“I will look it over and let you know what I think.”

“Are you going to make me wait very long?”

“No, I’ll look it over now and tell you.” I smirk. “Since you’re so impatient.”

“Impatient to make a lot of money!” he says and throws the eraser at me. I duck just in time, and it plunks as it hits the window behind me. “Score two for me.” I say and laugh.

“Oh, I will get you back, when you least expect it.” He gives me a creepy smile.

“You look like a crazed stalker.”

“Maybe I am.” He gives me the smile again.

“Will you shut up so I can focus on this?” I wave his proposal in front of him.

He sits back and takes out his phone, so I focus on the proposal.

“I think this is a good deal and you need to move forward on it.”

“Anything glaring that I missed?”

“Not that I can see. I assume you have done a walk through and inspection?”

“Check. With your approval we’ll go ahead with it.”

“You got it.”

“Now, if you go out with Ava, you have to talk me up so I can go out with Tia. That is one beautiful woman.”

“Why don’t you just ask her?”

“And why don’t you just ask Ava out?”

“Bro, I just did. Score three for me!”

“It hardly counts since she doesn’t know it’s you and she said, ‘not yet’. Minus one for you.”

“You better go before I find something bigger to throw at you.” I say looking at my desk.

Jace backs away but just before he leaves, he says “I think you owe me a raise.”

I throw the stress ball and it hits the door frame next to him.

“You missed, minus two,” he says as he ducks out of sight. I hear him laughing all the way to his office.

* * *

After work I meet up with my friend, Bryce, to get my final tux fitting before the wedding. All the groomsmen pile into the small shop and it soon becomes a crazy riot of laughter and vests. I get a chance to get Bryce to myself.

“Bryce, do you know if there is a bridesmaid named Ava, who is a florist?”

“Yeah man, she is one of Vi’s best friends. How do you know her?”

“I was in her shop the other day and we got to talking. She mentioned the wedding in passing.”

“She is really pretty. I’m not sure why she hasn’t been snapped up by somebody yet.”

“She seems to be an awesome person. I’m getting her to do some landscaping work for me.”

“Cool. Hey, do you want me to get Vi to pair the two of you up at the wedding?”

“Won’t Vi want to know why? I don’t want to cause a stir or anything.”

“Nah man, I’ll be smooth and convince her you guys would be a great pair. She will love the whole matchmaking thing. It’ll be alright.” I groan. Why did I have to ask him, now Vi will talk to Ava.

“I don’t want Ava to think I asked for this.”

“I will convince Vi to do it on the down low, so Ava doesn’t get suspicious.”

“Thanks, I think.” He claps me on the back.

“No worries. It will be ok.” The tailor calls me back.

“I guess I better go get measured.”

* * *

I look at my phone when I get home and see I have a message on Perfect Match. I sign on and find about a dozen winks and smiles but none from the woman I think is Ava. I hope I didn’t weird her out by asking to meet. I know it’s a busy time of year for her so maybe she’s still at work.

I change into workout gear and do some free weights and then run on my treadmill. I decide to order takeout from Brando's, the Italian restaurant not far from my house. I throw on some sweats and a hoodie and run to get the food.

As I turn onto the block that Brando's is on, I see Ava. For some stupid reason I duck into the doorway of another business, so she won't see me. This is the first time I have seen her since I figured out that she is my girl on Perfect Match. "My girl" where did that come from?

I peek around the corner of the building to see if she's still there. She's standing in front of Brando's.

I hear Jace's voice in my mind calling me a chicken. Why am I hiding? I like this woman. But I am afraid I will be awkward. Jace wouldn't be awkward, he would be confident. I can be Jace for a couple of minutes. I straighten my shoulders and come out of hiding.

"Hi, Ava." I say as I walk up behind her.

She turns to look at me, surprise and maybe a bit of embarrassment on her face. Her pink cheeks make her even more beautiful.

"Hi, Hudson. How are you?" She smiles shyly. She has on an amber sweater and jeans with a black coat and purple scarf. The pop of color brings out the gold in her eyes and hair.

"I'm doing well, or I will be as soon as my food is ready. How are you?"

"Really good. I had a craving for Italian and since I got off work late and didn't want to cook, I thought Brando's would be a good choice for dinner."

"Great minds think alike," I say. "Did you get takeout too?"

"I was thinking I might eat here but it looks pretty full tonight, so I got it to go."

“You’d be welcome to eat at my place. I just live a couple of blocks from here.”

“Thanks, but I could not intrude on your evening.”

“It’s not an intrusion at all. It would be nice to have company. I promise to be the perfect gentleman. I’ll use a fork and everything.” I grin. I can’t believe I just asked her to my apartment. This acting like Jace stuff is working.

She laughs out loud and the sound of it makes my stomach do somersaults. It’s very musical.

“Well since you put it that way, how can I resist? If you’re sure it wouldn’t be an inconvenience.”

“Absolutely not an inconvenience, a pleasure, really. I’m glad that’s settled.” The attendant brings her food and says, “Mr. Carlisle I brought yours as well.”

“Thanks, Carlo. Did you throw in that extra bread?”

“How could you doubt me? You wound me so,” he says with his hand on his chest.

I laugh, and hand him a generous tip. “I never doubted you. I know I can always count on you Carlo.”

“Have a good night Mr. Carlisle. Miss.”

“I believe I will,” I say to him and wink at Ava. This makes her blush even more.

We walk back out into the cold. “We could take my truck,” Ava says pointing towards her truck in front of us.

“That sounds fantastic. We won’t have to eat cold food that way.”

She unlocks the doors and climbs in the driver’s side. I climb into the passenger seat and enjoy the opportunity to stretch out my legs. “This is great.” I say. “Lots of legroom.”

“Thanks. I like it because it has plenty of cargo space for my business but it’s not too big. Which way?” She asks me and I give her directions.

“Wow! This is your house?” she asks, looking at the three-story building we park in front of.

“I live on the bottom floor and rent out the other two floors.” I say as she stares at the old warehouse style building. “It’s a building we restored a couple of years ago. One day I’ll buy a house, but for now this is home.”

“I remember watching as it was restored. I was glad to see it saved. I had no idea it had been converted to housing.”

“I fell in love with all the windows and had to save it. It needed a lot of work and we had to get rid of some old machinery. But it was worth it.”

“It’s a beautiful old building. It wouldn’t have been the same without the windows.”

I get out of the truck, and she follows. “Wait until you see the inside.”

I balance the food bags and unlock the outer door. It opens into the hallway with the landing. There is a modern stairway with sleek black metal and cable railings leading up and an elevator tucked in behind that. At the very top is a piece of industrial-looking modern art. “Every landing already had a window and that let so much light in during the day. It bounces off of the glass in the art piece at the top.”

“It’s a gorgeous space. A lovely marriage of the metal and all the wood.”

I turn to the alcove where my door is and unlock it. I open it and motion her inside.

She gasps, “Hudson, it’s breathtaking.”

A knot loosens in my stomach, as relief washes over me. I’m not sure why her approval means so much to me, but it does.

She has stopped just inside the door to take in everything. I watch her and feel so happy to see her in my space. “I’m glad you like it,” I say. “Come on in and let’s eat.”

I put our dinner on the counter and turn to get out some plates and utensils.

“I usually don’t like industrial architecture much because it seems cold to me, but you’ve given this such a warm and cozy feeling. All the windows give so much light and the wood adds warmth. It really is just beautiful.”

“Thanks. You just captured how I wanted it to feel. I wanted a warm and cozy industrial space.”

“Are the other units like this?”

“Pretty much the same style. Different colors and textures in cabinets, flooring, and tile but similar in layout. They all have the warm wood details.”

“How many bedrooms?” she asks, looking around.

“Three in this one. Upstairs we have a three bedroom and two other two-bedroom units.”

“Fantastic. Can I help?” she asks.

“Can you get the glasses down from that cabinet right there?” I ask as I grab a pitcher for some water and fill it as she comes around to get the glasses.

Just as I turn to put the pitcher on the island counter, she plows into me. Water sloshes down the front of both of us, soaking our shirts.

“Cold!” she gasps. “I’m so sorry,” she says looking from her shirt to mine.

“I’m sorry. It was totally my fault,” I sit the pitcher on the counter next to me and search for hand towels. “Here you can use this to dry off. I start dabbing at my shirt but soon realize it is not going to dry it enough, so I take it off and turn to her.

She is dripping and her shirt has become nearly see through and I can just make out a hint of flowers on her bra. She realizes her shirt is rapidly becoming see through and covers herself with the

towel. “Ummm,” she looks up at me and freezes. Her eyes travel over my bare chest and I stop in my tracks.

Chapter 15



A^{va}

I take in his gorgeous bare chest and my heart rate increases and I forget my shirt is now see through. I'm totally mesmerized by the sleek expanse of muscle moving as he dries himself and don't realize he has moved closer to me until I feel his skin brush the back of my hand.

"Hudson, umm, I need to leave."

"Why?" I look up into his face and my eyes land on his lips so close to mine.

"Because my shirt is wet enough to see through."

"Ahh. Well, you could take it off."

"What!" I jump back. "Are you crazy?" I blurt out.

"Wait, that sounded totally wrong! I didn't mean it that way. I meant that I can get you a t-shirt and you can change in the bathroom."

My heart rate slows down a bit and I take a deep breath. "That would be nice," I say as my teeth start chattering.

He backs away, his eyes never leaving my face and then he turns to go down the hall. In a couple of minutes, he is back with his shirt on. And I must admit that I am a little disappointed that he is no longer bare chested.

"Here" he says as he hands me a soft gray t-shirt. You can use the bathroom in the hall. It's the second door on the right.

"Thanks," I almost run down the hall to get away from his gaze. My cheeks are burning, and my chest is freezing as I close and lock the bathroom door.

I do a quiet check of the bathroom cabinet and find a hair dryer. That should dry my bra off some. I strip off my jacket and soaked shirt. I pull a hand towel out of the cabinet and do my best to get as much water out of my bra as I can. I dry my belly and use the hair dryer on my jacket and my bra until it feels warm and pretty dry.

The soft gray shirt smells so good and feels incredibly soft as I pull it over my head. I have to roll up the sleeves a couple of rolls and it's long, but it fits me well everywhere else. I hang the towel on a hook and put away the dryer.

I straighten my hair and give my reflection a small smile before I leave the bathroom.

"All better now." I say as I enter the kitchen to find Hudson, drying up drops of water from the floor.

"I'm really sorry about what happened before. I can be such a goofball," he says shyly, and he turns red. "I turned on the fireplace so you can warm up if you want." he nods towards a huge electric fireplace in the living room. I can feel the heat from here.

"Thanks, but it's not a big deal, honestly. Do you have a dryer I can toss my shirt into?"

"Sure," he holds out his hand for my shirt and after I give it to him, disappears into the first door on the right in the hall. He is back out in a couple of seconds. "I put it on delicate, I hope that's right.

"Perfect, now let's eat." I give him a big smile and he returns it.

"Yes, let's. I am starving. I hope it hasn't gotten cold."

"Feel free to try some of mine," I say as we dish up the food.

"Help yourself to mine too. They always give more than enough to share."

"One of my favorite reasons to eat there. But mostly I just love their homemade garlic rolls."

“They are so good aren’t they? I have to pace myself or I will eat them all before I eat my food.”

“I sometimes just want to order the bread by itself, but I feel weird doing it.”

“Next time we should. Buck tradition,” he says as he pours water in my glass and places a lemon wedge on the rim. He never even realizes what he just said.

I try to watch him without being caught as we dig into our food. He closes his eyes as he swallows his first bite and savors the flavors. I sit watching him and wondering what it would feel like to touch his strong jaw where a slight shadow of stubble shows.

His hair gleams in the soft light and he licks his lips right before he takes a bite of a breadstick. I suddenly want to taste those lips and a slow curl of desire unfolds in my stomach. I look away and stab a piece of ravioli with my fork.

“Are you enjoying it?” he asks.

“Huh? I’m sorry,” I say, thinking I have been caught looking at him.

“Are you enjoying your food?”

“Oh! Of course,” I say to cover my embarrassment. “Their food is always delicious. How’s yours?”

“Very good. You want to try some?”

“Sure.” I expect him to let me put some on my plate. Instead, he holds out a fork full cupping his hand underneath. I hesitate for a moment at the intimacy, realizing he’s not aware of what he’s doing, then I take the offered bite. This time I close my eyes and savor the flavors.

“Good huh?” he asks, and I open my eyes to see him watching me with great interest.

“Yes, very good,” I say and lick my lips to see what effect it has on him.

His eyes widen and his nostrils flare a little bit. So, I am not the only one affected. Who knew Italian food could be so sexy.

I break the contact to spear another ravioli, “Want to try some of mine, I say?”

“I sure do,” he says and leans forward as I offer him a forkful. I miss his mouth on the first try and get sauce on his face.

“I’m so sorry,” I say as I take better aim and make it this time.

“Hmmm. That is delicious,” he says while staring into my eyes and I’m not sure if he is talking about the food or the experience. He reaches up and wipes his cheek with the corner of his napkin and my eyes follow as he cleans his lips as well.

I clear my throat, trying to think of something to say to get my mind off of jumping across the bar and kissing this gorgeous man, instead I ask, “Are you working on any more of these old buildings?”

He looks at his food and allows me to shift the mood, “We just finished one across town. It has more windows than this place. I’m thinking of retail downstairs and apartments upstairs. It’s not far from your shop actually.”

“What street is it on?”

“Walnut. Do you know where that is?”

“Yes, I do. I take Oak out to my nursery on the edge of town.”

“That’s your nursery?”

“It is. We run the landscaping business from there.”

“So, is that where I need to meet you about my project?”

“You can come by the shop. I have plenty of workspace and the software I need there. Is it a very large project?”

“Not really. It’s a condo I bought recently to flip. It’s about 1700 square feet and sits on a corner lot. It has a large driveway on the side of the house and a walkway in the front with your standard beds in front of the house. Even though it’s a corner lot, the yard

is not huge. There will be a deck in the back, and I was wondering about a fire pit area. I want it to complement the other condos but not be the same.”

“I can’t wait to take a look. I love flowers and enjoy the shop, but landscaping is my passion. I’ve had a hard time getting a foothold with it though because of the established and larger businesses that do volume work. They can under bid me.”

“Have you done any of the home shows?”

“I have and it has gotten me some work. I have a couple of businesses and small apartment complexes. It’s growing but in the meantime, the shop downtown is my bread and butter.”

“Sounds like a good solid business model and plan for growing the landscape business. Are there many garden shows around here?”

“Not like the scale of the British shows and some of the northeast and eastern garden shows. I was thinking a flower festival would be great for the town to pull people from some of the larger areas.”

“That’s a fantastic idea. I’d be willing to be a sponsor.”

“Really? Just like that.”

“Yes, we need a signature festival to bring money to town. The city has been thinking of some events but hasn’t landed on anything yet. It could happen anytime from April to June right. It’s perfect for the festival season.”

“You could even do it in the fall festival season too, but earlier in the year would certainly be best.”

“We could do a kickoff parade and then the flower show and have a king and queen and little miss and mister.”

“Wait a minute, you know about little Miss and Mister pageants?”

His cheeks become bright red and it spreads all the way to his hairline. “I know some.” He refuses to look at me.

“You were a little Mr. Something weren’t you?”

He gets redder, which seems impossible. “I might have been a little Mr. Farmer.”

I giggle. “Did you have to wear a suit and have a sash and everything?”

“A cowboy hat, boots, and bolo tie might have been part of my outfit.” He chuckles. “I also had a red bandana that I wanted to wear but my momma said no. I was outraged and didn’t want to do the stupid thing after that.”

“I gather she made you do it anyway.”

“Yes, and then I won the dang thing, so she entered me the next year.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Were you little mister again after that?”

“As a matter of fact, I was little Mister in every age category I could have been in until the year I was about to start school. My father said no after that, thank goodness. He saved me from being humiliated in school. It was bad enough as it was.” I detect a bit of bitterness in his voice.

“Did you ever do the pageant circuit?” he asks me.

“Oh no! Thank goodness my mother didn’t get into any of that. I did the obligatory ballet lessons for a few years and then piano after that. But no cheerleading or pageants. Four H was my big activity. Did you ever do 4-H?”

“I did. I’m surprised we never ran into each other at those meets and events.”

“Maybe we did in passing. I was pretty shy except in the ring with my animals. Of course, I entered the plant show every year too.”

“Did you have a relative who loved plants?”

“My grandmother and grandfather grew everything. I tagged along after them in the garden from the time I could walk. I guess it was just in my blood.”

“My grandmother is the gardener in our family. I love working in the yard with her and in her beds. She has a green thumb but I’m not sure I inherited it. I enjoy it though.”

I finish my food and take my plate and utensils to the sink. My phone chimes and I look. It’s Tia. I decide to answer her later.

Hudson clears his plate and rinses the dishes. “I will wipe down the bar if you hand me a cloth.” I say.

“Go make yourself comfortable in the living room. I’ll finish here,” he smiles as he closes the dishwasher.

I wander into the living room and look at his photos over the fireplace. The heat feels good. There is a family photo of him and his parents and a younger girl. I’m guessing that’s his sister. There’s one of him with an elderly couple that must be his grandparents. My favorite is one of him and Jace sitting on mountain bikes at the edge of a cliff overlooking a gorgeous valley. “This is Pine Hollow Falls Trail isn’t it?” I ask.

He comes up from behind me and looks over my shoulder at the picture. I can feel the warmth of him through my borrowed shirt. “Yes, it is. It was our first time out biking.” His breath tickles the hair at the nape of my neck and sends goosebumps down my spine.

“Do you ride often?”

“Not as much now that we both are working full time at the firm. We get out a couple of times a month. Do you bike?”

“It’s been a while. My business keeps me busy. I hike as often as I can, especially when the flowers are blooming.” I pick up a picture of him at the beach.

“That’s my favorite place.”

“The beach or this beach in particular.”

“Both,” he laughs. “The beach refuels me but that’s Orange Beach, Alabama and I love it. I’d like to buy a house there, but I haven’t gotten up the gumption yet. Maybe after this flip house is sold.”

“I love the beach too. It’s almost like I need to go there yearly and get my body clock resynced.” I laugh. “But I haven’t been for two years.”

“We need to fix that. You have to get to the beach.” There he goes again with that “we” stuff. I put the picture down and turn around to face him. I miscalculate how close he is, and I stomp his toe. When he says ouch and crouches down to grab his foot, I reach out to steady him. He lifts his head as I step closer and the back of it comes up and hits me square in the jaw. My teeth clack together, and I stagger back with a yelp, seeing stars. He groans and grabs the back of his head.

“Oh my gosh, Ava! I’m an idiot. Are you ok?”

“I think so, I say rubbing my jaw. Are you ok? I totally didn’t mean to stomp your foot. You were closer than I realized.”

“I’m fine, only a small lump on my head,” he says, rubbing the spot where my jaw and his head connected.

My jaw is aching, and I’m embarrassed so I get quiet. He looks at me and a grin crosses his face. “I have always been a bit of a klutz, but it seems worse around you. First, I knock you down then I nearly knock you out.”

“It’s me.” I say quietly. “I’m an introvert and not good around people. I get anxious.”

“Me too,” he returns quietly.

The silence grows and I get more uncomfortable. “I better be going.” I snatch my purse and edge closer to the door. “Thanks for letting me crash your dinner.”

He winces at the word ‘crash’. I feel even more awkward.

“You don’t have to go now. I promise I won’t crack your jaw again.”

“It’s getting late, and I have another long day tomorrow.” I open the door. “Thanks again.” I squeeze through the door pulling my last shred of dignity with me.

Why am I such a goofball around people? Hopefully I won’t see him again before I can regain my composure.

I’m driving away as I see him come running to the door waving my shirt. I pretend I don’t see him. More embarrassment washes over me as I squall my tires pulling out onto Maple Street towards home. Great! Now he’s going to think I couldn’t wait to get away from him. I smack the steering wheel as a tear trickles down my chin. I still have his shirt on and will have to get it back to him somehow.

Chapter 16



Hudson

“I jacked her jaw!” I text Jace.

“Whose jaw did you jack?”

“Ava, who else?”

“What?!! How did this happen?”

My phone rings and I answer.

“What?”

“Spill it, bro. How did you jack her jaw exactly?”

“She stomped my foot; I bent over to rub it and she leaned close to see if I was ok as I lifted my head. The back of my head connected with her chin. I’m such a klutz.”

“How did you wind up close enough to Ava for her to stomp your foot? Did you ask her out?”

“It was by accident actually.”

“Accident?”

“We both ended up getting dinner at Brando’s. I saw her in front of the building as I rounded the corner of the street it’s on. My first reaction was to duck into the store doorway I was in front of.”

“Why on earth would you do that?”

“I don’t know, but I heard your voice in my head telling me to go for it. So, I straightened my shoulders and walked up behind her. I said hi. We talked, then brought our food to my place and ended up having a great time. Then she was looking at photos in the living room and turned around when I was standing behind her and I jacked her jaw.”

“Wait, that was not quite the awkward story I was expecting. What did she say afterwards?”

“I apologized for hurting her and then she left as fast as she could. End of story.”

“Dude! That doesn’t sound too good.”

“I know, hopefully I can smooth it over when I go to give her her shirt and get my shirt back from her tomorrow.”

“Wait, how did she end up with your shirt on?”

“I dumped a pitcher of water on her before dinner.” I sigh.

“Ahh, it sounds like a disaster, man.”

“I don’t know why I hang around you. You’re so bad for my ego. Why are we friends again?”

“I keep you humble man. If I didn’t tease you, you’d be so arrogant nobody could stand you. You have the looks, the body, the money, and the brains. I would never get another date if I didn’t keep you in check.”

“Oh thanks, so you bust me every chance you get to keep me from getting arrogant?”

“Yep. I do.”

“You’re fired, man!” I say it very seriously.

“What?!” I hear panic in his voice. “You can’t fire me. You need me. I make you lots of money.”

I laugh out loud. “Two can play the game, bro. Just keeping you humble.”

“That was *not* funny.”

“It was to me.”

“Man, I can’t believe I believed you for a minute. You had me scared.”

“Maybe you’ll be nicer from now on,” I say sarcastically.

“Yeah, yeah I will. Now what are you going to do to smooth things over.”

“I don’t know. There was definitely chemistry, and we had such a good time at dinner before it got awkward. I really like her. I could take her flowers, but she already owns a shop full of them. Any suggestions?”

“Chocolate usually works. You might take her some when you take her shirt back.”

“Great idea! I will keep you around I guess.”

“Aww thanks,” he says sarcastically. “Are you going to tell her about Perfect Match?”

“Snap! I forgot about that.”

“Does anybody still say snap?”

“Yes. I still say it.”

“So, do you still think the girl on Perfect Match is Ava?”

“I think so even more, but I’m going to find out. I’ll text her and find a lame reason to ask her what she had for dinner. If she says Brando’s then I know it was her.”

“That’s a pretty good idea but how many girls do you think ate at Brando’s tonight?”

“Probably a lot, but how many of them own a floral shop?”

“Good point. Put in a good word for me when you see her tomorrow. Make sure Tia hears it.” He laughs.

“Dude, go ask Tia out yourself.”

“That woman scares me. I’m not sure I’m brave enough.”

“Do it! If I can face Ava, then you can talk to Tia. I’ve never seen you let a woman intimidate you before. You could be kissing Tia instead of talking to me on the phone.”

“Yet another good point. I’ll think about it. Night.”

“Night. See you tomorrow.” I hang up and plop back into the soft sofa.

* * *

How was your day? I message Maria the Flower Girl.

It seems like forever before I get an answer back.

“It was a really great day! How was your day?”

“I had a really nice day. I just got done with dinner.”

“Me too. I just grabbed something on the way home from work.”

“Where did you stop?”

“Brando’s. Do you know it?”

“I do. I really like Brando’s. One of my favorite places.” I do a fist pump. This is definitely Ava. That unsettles me a little because I know she was just eating dinner with me, but now she’s talking to another guy. At least, that’s what she thinks. *“Maybe we can meet there sometime in the future.”*

She takes a while; I see the three bubbles indicating that she is typing. They stop and I wait. Then she answers, *“Who knows, maybe.”*

That is a very noncommittal answer, and my heart feels better.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to push. I will wait until you are ready. You’re in the driver’s seat. So have you seen any good movies lately?”

She messages me back and we have a long discussion about movies. We agree that we don’t see the draw that *Pretty Woman* has, that we liked the *Avengers* and *Walter Mitty*. We do not agree on *Star Wars* versus *Star Trek*. I agree to watch *Star Wars* again.

“I’m a huge Lord of the Rings fan and I admit to being a Potterhead,” she messages me.

“Books, movies or both?”

“Lord of the Rings books and movies, not The Hobbit movie so much. Potter books more than the movies but both are good in their own ways.”

“I totally agree with you on both counts. They could have been better. I thought Jackson messed up Faramir.”

“Me too! Why did he do it? I never forgave him for that.” I laugh. This woman may be my soul mate.

We keep messaging until I realize it’s almost midnight. *“I better let you go. Morning is going to come too soon.”*

“Oh my gosh! I didn’t realize it was so late. I have to go in early tomorrow so I can stay on top of things. I better get. I’m not a morning person.”

“Sleep well. Sweet dreams.” I text.

“You too. Talk to you later.”

I drop my phone in my lap. I feel conflicted that I haven’t asked her if she is Ava. She thinks she’s talking to another guy. I should ask her tomorrow. Then we can end this situation and start dating, like I want to. I resolve to ask her when I see her in the morning right after I apologize.

Chapter 17



Ava

What am I going to do? I have two guys I am attracted to. That was a great dinner with Hudson earlier and I get butterflies just thinking about it until I remember stomping his toe, busting his head, and practically running away wearing his shirt. Yeah. I might not have to choose.

And I had such a good chat with Aaron on Perfect Match. He's so easy to talk to and we have so much in common, but I don't even know if we'd click in person like I do with Hudson. It would be great if I could meld them into one guy. Why did this have to get complicated?

I'll talk to Tia about it at the shop today before I arrange to exchange shirts with Hudson. If I don't like her advice, I can just ignore it. I really don't have time for one guy in my life right now, much less two guys. It's so busy at the shop and we're about to go into spring planting season with the nursery and landscape business. Then there's the wedding on top of all that.

I add a little more mascara and call my make-up done. I look in the fridge for breakfast and realize I need to buy groceries. It'll have to be yogurt, I guess. This gives me more of an excuse to take Tia to lunch alone. Oh no! I forgot I'm supposed to take them all to dinner tonight. Fun. Not!

Two hours later, I walk in from the warehouse to see Tia with Jayden cornered, fussing at him.

"Hey guys!" I say and Tia does not even stop what she's doing and Jayden gives me a wild eyed look. "What's up?" I ask as I approach the pair.

"Jayden made a big mistake," Tia says without looking at me.

“What kind of mistake?” I ask as I put my hand on Tia’s arm, hoping to calm the situation.

“He broke two vases, messed up three orders and then he just *yelled* at me to hurry up on an order! I’ve had it with him today.”

Jayden starts to say something, and she points her finger at him. “Shish!”

“Tia, why don’t you go take a break and I’ll talk to Jayden, Ok?” I ask as I step between them with my back to Jayden. I give her a look that means no arguing with me. She huffs and folds her arms. “Tia, take a break, ok?”

“Ok,” she storms off and I turn to Jayden. “What made you talk to Tia like that?”

“Well, ummm... I had a bad night, all of the orders that came in yesterday and I had already broken those vases. I just snapped.”

“That’s not an excuse to yell. We don’t do things that way here do we?”

“No. I had just had a really frustrating morning and...”

“And you took it out on someone else?”

“Yep,” he hung his head. “I need to apologize to Tia.”

“You do but you should give her about five more minutes. Next time, communicate more calmly.”

“I will, Boss. Sorry, it won’t happen again.”

“Don’t make promises your mouth can’t keep.” I smiled at him, “Now go check the front and then come back and apologize to Tia,”

“I will,” he said and disappeared through the door.

I found Tia with her head in her hands. I sat down quietly next to her and asked, “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” she replied then, “I get really stressed at this time of year and he hit the wrong button.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You think so?”

“I think I’m just tired, my mom called, and you know how draining that can be for me.”

“I do. I’m sorry. Why don’t you take the day off since we aren’t really open on Sunday? We can manage for a little while without you.”

“I can’t do that to you.”

“I’m offering, so you are not doing anything to me. Besides, I can’t afford for you to get sick or have a breakdown from exhaustion and overworking, can I?”

“That would be no good for sure.”

“So go home, take a bath, take a nap, take care of yourself.”

“Ok, I will after I do the orders on my table and apologize to Jayden.”

“He owes you an apology, not the other way around.”

“No, I was not professional, and I need to apologize for that.” She stands up, stretches, and gives me a hug. “Thanks, Ava.”

“My pleasure. Now after you take a nap, I have some juicy news for you.”

“Juicy news?”

“Oh yeah, juicy but it will keep.”

“You cannot hold out on me. You’ll dish when I get back from apologizing.”

“Alright, you win.” I laugh. “Hurry.”

I grab my apron and tools and get to work on the orders piling up on the table. I put the first red rose in the center of the vase of flowers and Tia walks back in from the front.

“Everything squared away with you and Jayden now?” I ask her.

“Yes, even though I might still shut him in the cooler. He’s grumpy for some reason and I’m grumpy and it is not a good mix.”

“I think we need to move our plans for pizza up to lunch time and all take an early break.”

“I forgot we’re supposed to have dinner tonight. I’m really just not up for it at all.” Tia sighs. She grabs an order blank and starts on another vase of flowers. “Lunch would be much better, that way when I get home this afternoon I can crash and not worry about getting out again.”

“Lunch it is. I’ll tell Jayden and Nic. After lunch you’re going home and getting some rest.”

“Not until you tell me your juicy news. Come on, tell me.”

For some reason I didn’t understand, I’m reluctant and shy about sharing details of my evening with Hudson with her, “Well…”

“If you’re this nervous about telling me then it must be really good. Spill it!”

“Alright, Grumpy pants.”

“Did you really just call me Grumpy pants?”

“I did. Because you are.”

“I’m not letting you off the hook.” She gives me a look she would use on an unruly child.

“Hudson and I had dinner last night!” I blurt out and go back to arranging my flowers.

“What?! She shrieks and jumps up, “What? How? When?”

“Shhhh, you’ll have Jayden back here with his nose in my business again.”

“Right”, she whispers, “Give me all the details now, please.”

“I decided since we worked so late last night that I would stop and get some food instead of cooking. Which I couldn’t do anyway because my fridge is empty. I haven’t bought groceries.”

“Ava! Details.”

“So, I stop at Brando’s and I’m waiting for my food and Hudson walks up behind me. He also bought Brando’s for supper, and he invited me back to his place to eat with him. My shirt got wet, so I put one of his on. We had dinner and it was great until-”

“Slow down. Back up to where your shirt gets wet, and you put one of his on.”

“He had a pitcher of water and we bumped into each other in the kitchen. Water spilled all over me and soaked my shirt and his. Only you could see through mine right down to my bra, so he got me one of his soft gray t-shirts and I put it on while mine dried in the dryer. Then we ate and I stomped his toe and cracked his head.”

“Ava!” She looks horrified and impressed. “What did he do?! I bet he got what he deserves!”

“What? No! Nothing, it’s not like that.”

“How did you stomp his toe and crack his head?”

“I was looking at pictures in his living room,” I lower my voice and lean closer to her, “He came up behind me and looked over my shoulder. He was close enough his breath was tickling my ear. I went to turn around thinking I would be nice and close to him and could flirt with him. I miscalculated, stomped his toe and he bent over to check it. I did too, and when he raised up the back of his head connected with my jaw. I felt stupid and left.” I crumple. “It had been going so well ‘til then.”

“Uh-oh. Not cool. Do you think you’ll see him again?”

“I hope so. We have to exchange shirts.”

“Alrighty then. That’s great. It may be worth hanging around here for that.”

“I really like him and there were some sparks last night. He fed me from his fork.”

“Woohoo! That’s pretty steamy.”

“It was, right up until I blew it.”

“I’m sure it will be ok. Just explain that you got embarrassed and you can go out with him again.”

“You’re right. We’re both adults and can deal with this. I just hope we don’t keep up the klutzy stuff.”

“So, are you dumping the Perfect Match guy, what’s his name again?”

“Aaron? No, I had a very enjoyable conversation with him last night. I don’t know. It’s so easy to talk to him and there’s no pressure. It’s not like Hudson and I are *dating*.”

“I can understand that line of reasoning, but Hudson might not.”

“If we start dating, I’ll tell Aaron about it.”

“You better play it safe. You know how guys can be.”

“I do and I will.” I finish the arrangement I’m working on. “I’m going to tell Jayden and Nic that we’re going for lunch and getting pizza.”

“You’re shutting down work in the middle of the day?”

“Yes, I am. I’m feeling a little rebellious today. Besides, it’s Sunday and the only reason we’re here is because of Valentine’s Day.”

“You need to date more often.” I hear Tia say as I walk through the door to the front, and I don’t disagree with her.

* * *

We all pile in my truck and drive to Old Town Pizza a few blocks away. It’s as busy as usual and we have to wait a few minutes for a table. Of course, when we get to the table, Jayden has to try to sit next to me, but Tia slips in at the last minute. I really owe her big time.

As we’re waiting to order, I hear a familiar voice and look up to see Jace just inside the door on the phone. “Tia, look.” I say quietly and nod my head towards the door.

“It’s Jace,” she looks around to see if Hudson is with him. He must feel her eyes on him because he looks our way at that moment and a big smile spreads across his face. He says something into the phone and hangs up. The next moment he’s coming our way.

“Hello ladies. Nice to see you again, he says as he approaches our table. “How are you today?”

“I’m great, Jace. How are you?” I say.

“So much better now,” he winks at Tia. “How are you, Tia?”

“I’m fair.”

“You certainly are. The fairest in all the land.”

“Where is Hudson?” she asks and for a split second Jace’s face falls a little bit. “He’s at home. I’m playing errand boy and getting lunch.”

“You’ll have to tell him hi for us. Let me introduce our friends,” she says. “This is Jayden and Nic.”

“Excuse my manners,” he says, “I’m Jace Harper. Nice to meet you.”

Nic puts out his hand. “Nice to meet you too.”

Jayden scowls. “I remember you from the shop.”

I give Jayden a look reminding him of his manners, and he turns back to his menu.

“I better get my pizza and head back to Hudson’s. Ladies, I hope we’ll see each other again soon,” he smiles in our direction.

“Good to see you,” I say. “Tell Hudson hello for us.”

“I most definitely will. Bye, Tia. He says.”

“Jace.” She squares her shoulders and looks at the menu. He looks a bit puzzled and sad, then smiles at me and turns to walk away. I pinch Tia.

“What’d you do that for?” she hisses.

“Why’re you being so rude?” I hiss back. “I thought you like him.”

“I don’t know. He just brings it out in me. I’m too tired for men right now.”

“Speaking of,” I nod my head towards Jayden and lower my voice. “He was rude.”

“I was talking about men not boys,” Tia says.

“I snicker and cover my mouth. True. There’s no comparison.” I turn to Nic and Jayden. “Do you guys know what you want for lunch?”

“I want a thin crust supreme,” Nic says.

“Jayden?”

“I don’t care.” He shrugs and sullenly looks out the window where I see Jace get in his expensive sports car.

“Tia, do you have any suggestions?”

“Anything with pineapple. No anchovies. You know how I feel about those.”

“Oh, yes, I do and I share the feeling. So, a Hawaiian, a thin crust supreme, and a mega meat. Breadsticks?” I ask the table.

“Sure” they say in unison.

“Does anyone want a salad?” Only Nic wants a salad. I give the order to the server when she comes, and she takes our drink order. This is turning out to be a stressful meal when it is supposed to be relaxing. Nic and Jayden start talking about sports, which I care nothing about, and Tia sits quietly by my side.

I study her. I’m not sure she has been completely honest with me about what’s going on with her. I’ll try to pull it out of her later. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought she had just broken up with a boyfriend, but she and Paul separated a couple of months ago, so that couldn’t be it. Maybe the divorce was final. I will find out before she goes home.

Chapter 18



Hudson

“Oh man that smells good,” I say as Jace walks in with the pizza boxes. “I’m about to start drooling.”

“You might have if you had been at the restaurant with me.”

“Did it smell that good?”

“Yeah, but that’s not why. Ava and Tia were there.”

“Man! Why didn’t I go with you?”

“Tia seemed pretty tense, but Ava was all smiles.”

I get a big goofy grin on my face and Jace says, “Oh gosh, you have the look.”

“What look?”

“The man-in-love look. You’re smitten.”

“Woah, I would not go throwing the L word around. I really like Ava, but I wouldn’t say I am in love with her.”

“I *would* say that, especially if she agrees to start dating you. You’ll give up your safe, quiet bachelorhood before long.”

“It was one dinner, dude. Nowhere near a relationship.”

“There’s that look again. You are so gone.”

“Knock it off. Was it just Ava and Tia?”

“Nope, there were two dudes there too. They work at the shop with Ava.”

“She told me they were going to dinner together. I’m guessing that’s why they were there.”

“Tia did not look too happy at all.”

“I wonder why?”

“She looked very tired and hardly responded when I talked to her. That guy Jayden was sulky too. Maybe they had a fight or something.”

“Probably a work thing. Give me some of that pizza. I’m starving.”

We talk about work while we eat and get a lot of loose ends tied up. Before long we are done.

“So did you talk to the Flower Girl on Perfect Match last night?” Jace asks.

“Maria? I did. It was such a great conversation. She is so easy to talk to.”

“Do you still think it’s Ava?”

“I’m like 99.99 percent sure it is. But that just makes it more awkward now. She thinks she’s talking to two different guys. It appears that I’m talking to two girls at once. I’m afraid it’s going to get messy.”

“It could blow up in your face if you’re not careful. When do you plan on asking her?”

“I’ll bring it up when I go get my shirt back.”

“That’s a good plan. How are you going to do it?”

“I haven’t figured that one out yet. I may ask her out to dinner and see if I can steer the conversation that way.”

“You better tread carefully so it doesn’t backfire on you.”

“You’re right. Help me figure it out, so I am prepared, or I’ll blow it.”

We spend the next few minutes talking it out and by the time we’re done, I have a good plan, starting with calling Ava.

Jace goes to the kitchen to give me some privacy. I take a deep breath and dial her shop number which makes me realize that I don’t even have her personal number. I need to get that.

“Stop and Smell the Flowers, this is Ava. How May I help you?”

“You could start by letting me buy you dinner.”

“There is a pause on the other end, and I imagine her getting a little freaked out then she asks, “Hudson?”

“Uh yeah. Sorry, that probably was not the best way to answer you.” I hear her chuckle.

“You threw me off balance for sure for a minute there.”

“So, will you go to dinner with me?”

“Tonight?”

“Please?”

“I’m sorry but I can’t. I already have plans with Tia. “How is tomorrow night for you instead of lunch? I’m going to be busy throughout the day.”

“Tomorrow night will work great. I can pick you up at six.”

“That sounds good. I look forward to it. I promise I won’t stomp your toe. Will you pick me up at my house?”

“I’d like that. I mean the dinner part, not the toe stomping part.” We laugh and I feel my face go red. “I need your address, and can I get your cell number in case I get lost?”

“Sure, give me yours and I will text you. I can’t believe I haven’t given it to you already.”

“It dawned on me when I picked the phone up to call you that you didn’t have my number and I didn’t have yours.”

“I’m not in the habit of giving guys my number unless I know them.”

“I totally understand. I’ll keep it secret. Jace said he saw you today at the Old Town Pizza.”

“We were having our employee lunch.”

“How’d it go?”

“Odd and strained. Tia and Jayden had an argument this morning and they were both out of sorts at lunch.”

“Jace said Tia was quiet. Is she ok?”

“I think so. It’s an exhausting time of year for us. I sent her home to get some rest. I’m sure she’ll be fine later when I check on her.”

“I hope she feels better. So, how was your day otherwise?”

“It’s been really good. Productive. How has your day been?”

“Really good. I’ve been in an uncommonly good mood. Of course, I had a great evening last night so maybe that is why.”

“Did you now?” I hear the smile in her voice.

I lower my voice and reply, “Yes, I did. It was a great evening, the best I can remember. At least until I nearly broke your jaw. I’m so sorry.”

“Me too,” she says shyly. “I look forward to dinner tomorrow night too.” She’s speaking quietly now.

“Me too. See you at six.”

“I’ll be waiting. You should find the house fine but call if you have troubles.”

“I will. See you then.”

“Bye.” She hangs up and I sit holding the phone with a grin on my face.

Jace sticks his head around the door. “A goner man.”

“Shut up! Have you been listening the whole time?”

“No. I was in the kitchen cleaning up. So did she say yes to dinner?”

“Tomorrow. She’s hanging out with Tia tonight. She sounded worried about her.”

“I hope she’s ok.” I notice that he has a concerned look on his face.

“Looks like I’m not the only one that is a goner.”

“Shut up.” He says as he plops down in a chair. For once he is quiet as I look for a movie to watch. Yep, he’s a goner too. I’m

going to find out if Ava thinks Tia might go for Jace when we have dinner and maybe do a little matchmaking of my own.

Chapter 19



Ava

I knock on Tia's door and hear, "Come on in, Ava," from the other side. I open the door to find Tia sitting on her couch in her pajamas. She looks pale and not at all like herself. It's obvious that she has been crying.

"Tia? What's wrong honey?" I drop my bags and go sit by her on the couch and put my arms around her. She starts crying harder. I hold her for a few minutes as her tears slow and she starts snubbing a bit. "Tell me what is wrong. Maybe I can help."

"You can't help." She says and reaches for the tissue box on the table. I hand it to her; she takes a handful and blows her nose.

"Maybe I can do a little. And I can surely listen."

"I'm pregnant," she says hollowly.

I sit speechless for a minute. "Pregnant? Are you sure?"

"Yes. I am. The test was positive. I would guess I'm a little more than three months."

"That means you got pregnant right before you and Paul separated right?"

"Yes." Tears roll down her cheeks. "I don't know how it happened. I'm on the pill. We weren't trying to get pregnant. We were still working on our marriage, but shortly after that we decided to separate. We were both very ok with it ending. I don't know how I'm going to tell him."

"I put my arms around her again. I know it doesn't seem like this is a blessing in your life right now, but it is. We can get through this. I'll be right here with you."

"I'm not sure I can do this by myself Ava. I may give the baby up for adoption."

"I'm sure Paul will help you out if you decide you wanna keep it."

"I don't know if he will want me to keep the baby or not. He's in a new relationship already. They have been dating for about a month. We talk often and I'm very happy for him, but this is a game changer for both of us."

"I cannot imagine how you feel. I will help in any way I can. Are you feeling ok physically?"

"Just a little nausea. I had about a week a month ago where I threw up a few times, but I thought it was a bug going around. I have been more tired than usual. I thought it was all of the hours we are putting in right now, but when my period still didn't come this month, I bought a test. I threw up when it came back positive then I sat on the bathroom floor and cried. You're the only person I have told."

"Have you eaten anything other than lunch today?"

"No."

"I brought some fried rice and egg rolls. You should eat. It's good for the baby and you. Plus I hear the nausea and morning sickness are worse if you go long periods without eating. I'll fix you a plate and we can talk."

"Okay," she says. "I'm going to the bathroom to wash my face. I also have to pee. It seems like I have to pee all the time lately." We both laugh and I feel like she has turned a corner.

By the time she comes out of the bathroom, I have the table set and the food laid out. I even lit a candle she has on the table. I shovel in my first mouthful, and it is savory and delicious with hints of ginger and garlic.

"This is so yummy," Tia says. "Thanks for bringing it and being there for me. Nothing has changed but I feel more hopeful."

“I will always be here for you. You’re my best friend and I hate eating alone.” She smiles a little. “Do you wanna watch a movie?”

“As long as it’s not a romcom,” she says.

“You got it. How about Star Wars?”

“Avengers?”

“Perfect! I’ll wash up and you go get comfy on the couch.” I ponder her situation as she settles in the living room. This is a game changer for all of us, but I’m excited about the prospect of a baby. Hopefully she will be too when she gets over the shock. I’m sure Paul will support her. He’s a good man.

Chapter 20



Hudson

It's almost quitting time. I throw down my pen and stretch. My anxiety has grown as the time for my date with Ava has gotten closer. I'm not sure why I'm nervous other than the whole Perfect Match thing. What if Ava gets really upset when I ask her if she's on the app? She might think I have been tricking her.

"Are you leaving?" Jace asks as he walks into the office interrupting my thoughts.

"In just a minute. I want to go home and change before my dinner with Ava."

"You look a little green. Are you ok?"

"Just anxious about telling her I'm on Perfect Match."

"Ahh. I understand. But it's early on and she'll probably take it really well. She likes you in both worlds."

"I'm worried she might think I've been tricking her."

"If she doesn't believe you and thinks you're lying and doesn't want to see you, maybe you dodged a bullet. Just breathe and it will be ok."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too, because it will give me an excuse to chat up Tia," he laughs as we walk out. "It'll be great! You guys will get some good laughs out of it. Trust me."

"I'll let you know how it goes."

* * *

I check my hair in the mirror as I arrive at Ava's house. It's a beautiful cottage in an older part of town. Its craftsman style

shows in the columns and lines of the front porch. She has painted it an earthy green color and added cedar shingles to the peak. It's very similar to what I would have done with it. I notice a house we flipped two years ago across and down the street. It's also green and fits really well with what Ava has done.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans and straighten my sweater and leather jacket as I get out of the car. I don't want her to notice how nervous I am. Sweaty palms are not a good thing on a date if you hope to hold hands.

I ring the bell and the door opens before I can lower my hand. And all of my nervousness flows away when I see Ava standing in front of me with a huge smile on her face. "Hi, Hudson."

"Hey yourself," I say and hand her the flowers and chocolates I brought for her.

"Flowers and chocolates. Thank you."

"I hope it doesn't seem silly since you have a florist business."

"Not at all. I never get flowers myself, so it's lovely. Come in while I put them in a vase."

I follow her down the short entry hall admiring the sway of her hips in her black leggings and boots. She has a simple style, very classic, like Audrey Hepburn.

"You have a beautiful home."

"Thank you. I love the craftsman period so when I found it, I snatched it up. A bunch of houses have been redone since I did this one."

"Prices have gone up in the neighborhood a lot in the last two years. You made a good investment."

"I'm glad you think so, but I bought it because I loved it. That it's going up in price is an added bonus." She talks as she quickly arranges the simple flowers into a gorgeous bouquet.

"You made those flowers into something gorgeous."

Her laughter flows like warm honey as she says, “I have a lot of practice. Ready?”

“I am.” I say as she approaches me. My heart skips a beat as she stops in front of me and looks into my eyes. “Hungry?” I ask.

“Yes,” she whispers, and her cheeks redden. “You?”

My mouth goes dry and all I can think about is sliding my arm around her and kissing her softly on the lips. “Yeah.” I say quietly as I close the distance between us.

“We better go before I forget all about food,” she giggles and takes my hand in hers. I’m so glad I wiped the sweat off of them earlier.

I lead the way to the door before I follow the impulse to pull her down onto the couch for a long kissing session.

* * *

The restaurant is crowded and I’m glad I made a reservation. We are escorted to a table facing out over the lake.

“I took a risk that you liked seafood.” I say as she slides into her booth.

“I do. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Whew, glad I didn’t blow that one then. So how was your day?”

“Busy, busy, busy. I’m not complaining though. That just means money in the bank. But it will be nice when Valentine’s Day is over. Nerves get frayed and tempers get short in the shop this time of year.”

“Jace said things seemed a bit tense at lunch the other day.”

“Tia and Jayden had a disagreement. It’s better now though.”

“That’s good. Tension between co-workers can be hard to deal with.”

“I try to keep communications open. It gets tiring being the boss and peacekeeper.”

“It does. Did you have a good night with Tia?”

“I did. We watched an Avengers movie.” We launch into a discussion about the Avengers.

Before I know it, dinner is over and we’re walking to my car. The evening went by so quickly. I slide my arm around her waist and pull her close. “Thank you for such a nice dinner.” She smiles up at me.

I open her car door for her, and she turns to me and kisses me very lightly on the cheek before getting in. I stand there stunned for a split second before I get in the driver’s seat. She keeps me off guard with these unexpected twists. I could get used to this.

I take it slow as I drive towards her house, in no hurry for this night to end. “Would you like to stop off for a cupcake?” I ask as we approach Heavenly Delights cupcake shop.

“I’m always up for a cupcake, especially death by chocolate.”

“A woman after my own heart.” I smile.

I hurry around to let her out and as we walk into the store, a woman catches my eye. It’s Vi.

“Ava! She squeals. What are you doing here?”

“We stopped for a cupcake.” Vi’s eyes shift towards me, and she smiles as Ava introduces us. “This is Hudson.”

“Hey Hudson, how are you? Good to see you again.”

“I’m doing great, Vi. How are you?”

“I’m running around like a chicken with its head cut off. All this wedding planning is making me crazy. I was just finalizing the cake and making sure it would be delivered on time.”

Ava stares at me, “You know Vi?”

Vi saves me, “Honey, he is one of Bryce’s friends. We met a while back at a get together. Are you all set for your final fitting tomorrow?” she says, smoothly changing the subject and drawing

Ava towards the counter. I get tugged along by Ava's grip on my hand.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Thank you for picking such a lovely back dress that I'll be able to wear again."

"I had to make up for that lime green monstrosity," she laughs. Vi is one of those women who oozes confidence and loves people. You can't help but be drawn to her and she seems oblivious to her magnetism.

Watching Vi and Ava together, I'm struck by how different they are yet how they seem to strengthen each other. Ava laughs at something Vi says and I'm drawn to her like a moth to a light at nighttime, content to hover around her flame.

"Find what you want?" I ask her as there is a lull in the conversation.

She smiles at me. "I do believe I have."

Vi laughs. "I can see I'm not needed here. See you tomorrow." She gives Ava a quick peck on the cheek. "Hudson." She gives me a smile and a wink. "See you at the wedding."

"I wouldn't miss it."

"You better not, it wouldn't be the same without you." She exits the shop.

"I didn't know that you knew, Vi. It's a small world."

"Yes, it is." I felt a little sheepish for not telling her I'm a groomsman. I'll tell her later when we're alone.

We take our cupcakes to the car, and I drive the long way back to her house, through town past her shop and the square. "Penny for your thoughts," I say as she sits quietly beside me.

"Hmmm. I'm just thinking how nice this is, a beautiful town, a lovely evening with great company. I feel so relaxed after the stress of the work week."

"I'm so glad. I've really enjoyed the evening too." I turn into her drive and kill the engine. We sit in the comfortable darkness, and

she puts her hand on mine where it rests on the gear shifter. “Thank you for tonight. I didn’t realize how much I needed to unwind.”

“It’s been my pleasure,” I turn my hand over and softly take her fingers. “I could sit here like this forever, but we might get a little chilly.” I feel unwilling to leave the warm cocoon of the dark car.

“Let’s take our cupcakes inside and light a fire.” My pulse speeds up as I think about lighting her fire.

She laughs, “I felt your pulse speed up when I said that.” She leans closer to me and kisses my cheek.

I’m glad she can’t see my red face. “I bet it just sped up again,” I say and turn my head to capture her lips for a brief kiss and feel the pulse in her wrist match mine. “Let’s go inside so I don’t have to kiss you over this console again.”

She laughs, “It is pretty uncomfortable.” She releases my hand and gathers her things as I sprint around to her side of the car to open her door. “Thank you,” she smiles as she hands me the cupcake box so she can take my hand again.

It makes me feel good that she so easily takes my hand. It’s amazing how something so simple as hand holding can feel so intimate and right.

The soft glow of the porch light beams like a spotlight after the dark of the car. Ava quickly opens the door and we’re surrounded by the warmth and soft glow of the hall table lamp. I lean against the closed door and pull her to me not wanting to wait a minute longer to kiss her.

She leans into me for a soft slow kiss, that sends tingles spiraling down to my stomach. Her hands run slowly up my chest and over my shoulders into the hair just above the collar of my sweater and I shiver at the contact.

I turn so she is pressed against the door, and I free my hands to run through her short curls and down to her jaw. I tilt her head back to deepen the kiss as fire rushes through my veins. I have

never experienced this type of thrill at kissing someone. I could kiss this woman forever.

I move my lips down to her jawline and across her neck to nuzzle her ear. She grabs my shoulders and lets out a soft moan. I move back to her lips for more soft kisses before I pull back and break the kiss.

Our ragged breathing breaks the silence as I brace my hand on the door next to her head. “Wow! You weren’t kidding about lighting a fire,” I say softly.

I feel her fingers run along my jawline, “I believe you lit that fire,” she giggles and pushes against my chest.

I step back and she says, “Come on, let’s eat our cupcakes and let the flames burn a little lower.”

I follow her to the kitchen where she grabs a couple of saucers, a knife, and forks. “You eat cupcakes with a fork?” I question.

“No, but I thought you might, so I covered the bases.” She chuckles. “This is how I eat my cupcakes.” She peels back the wrapper and breaks the bottom half off the cupcake and stacks it on to the top. I watch, amazed, as she takes a bite.

“I have never seen anybody eat a cupcake that way before.” I chuckle.

“But it makes perfect sense, right?”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Look, this way, your icing is between the layers so you can get icing in every bite. What could be wrong with that?”

“But don’t you get icing in every bite the traditional way too?”

“Not at all. Here try it,” she extends the chocolate cupcake in my direction. I take a huge bite off the end closest to me.

“See what I mean,” she says.

“Uh huh,” I shake my head as I swallow. “It’s delicious that way.” She reaches towards my face and I feel her finger brush just

below my lip. I watch transfixed as she pops her finger into her mouth.

“You had a little icing,” she says, as I round the corner of the kitchen island and pull her to me.

I kiss her like I have never kissed any other woman. She tastes of sweet chocolate cake and decadent chocolate icing. I understand death by chocolate so much more now. I keep kissing her, fire burning through my veins, until we are both nearly senseless.

She pulls back wide-eyed and breathless as I end the kiss before it gets beyond my control. I notice her hands are trembling a bit as she whispers, “Wow!”

I feel my body vibrating with the force of that kiss, “I’m not sure we should do that again.”

Her cheeks get pink, and she replies breathlessly, “Not right away at least.”

“Exactly. Ummm, can I get a glass of cold water?”

“Would you like some milk instead?” she asks as I release her.

“No, just some very cold water.”

I see her eyebrows furrow as she thinks about what I just said, and she starts laughing. “Oh right, do you need it to put out that fire you started.”

My cheeks burn. “Something like that, yes.” I step a safe distance from her before I am tempted to take her in my arms again and kiss her some more.

I take the water after she slides it across the island, that I have put safely between us, and down it in a few gulps. She watches me with barely suppressed laughter in her eyes.

“If you play with fire, you’re gonna get burned, has taken on a whole new meaning for me.” I say sheepishly. And laughter finally bursts from her lips. I can’t help but join her.

“I completely know what you mean,” she smiles as we catch our breath. “I think maybe we should leave the luscious lemon and

sinful strawberry cupcakes for another time.” This sends her into another fit of giggles.

“I will never look at cupcake names the same,” and our laughter increases, leaving no room for talk.

My stomach hurts as I catch my breath, grateful for her sense of humor. I’m not sure I could have resisted kissing her again without the release of tension the laughter has brought.

“As much as I hate to end our evening, I think I better go.” I sigh, filling the awkward moment after our laughter has faded. I take her hand across the counter.

“Mmhm,” she says as I rub my thumb across the palm of her hand. “Especially if you are planning to keep doing that.”

I lean forward and give her a quick peck on the lips, “Goodnight, Ava. Sweet Dreams.”

She sighs, “Sweet dreams, H,” as I turn towards the door.

Chapter 21



A^{va}

I drop onto the couch. What in the world just happened. I feel like I spent the whole night kissing Hudson. Not that it was a bad thing, but I have never gotten that serious that quickly with anyone.

I'm usually a fourth or fifth date kind of person. If I really like the guy, I might be a second or third date kissing kind of person, but we have barely had a date. He's so easy to be with and so adorable. And he is super-hot and a great kisser.

I feel like I need to put the brakes on the kissing and try to get to know him a little better. He just makes it so darn difficult. At least there was no awkwardness tonight- no jaw whacking or falling on the floor. Although that might have happened if he had kissed me again.

Tomorrow is going to be a long day. I have my dress fitting; the shop will probably be a madhouse and I need to begin to get the greenhouses ready for planting seedlings. I will have to run by there before I go to the shop.

I call Tia. "Hey there. How are you feeling?"

"Much better. I had a talk with my ex, and we have decided to keep the baby. He wants to be a father and I cannot give up my own child. I'm not sure how we will make it work. I know it won't be easy, but I have a lot of support to make it happen. I just don't know if I can handle my mom right now though."

"I can run interference anytime you want and I'm sure you don't have to tell your parents just yet." I laugh. "You know I will help however I can. We can set up a room at the shop for the baby's cot and you can keep working so you have an income. I have been thinking I need to hire another worker anyway; the

business is really growing. I can get someone trained in time for you to take leave. ”

“Ava, you do not have to go to so much trouble for me. We will work it out.”

“Yes, we will, and it is no trouble. You have been there with me from the beginning.”

“How was your date with Hudson?”

“I see how you changed the subject. It was amazing and confusing.”

“How was it amazing and confusing?”

“We had a great dinner and conversation. He is super easy to talk to. I like his company, maybe too much.” I laugh. “After we had dinner, we got a cupcake and took it back to my place, but we mostly spent that time kissing.”

“Woohoo!” Tia blasts over the phone. “Kissing is good.”

“Oh, it was better than good. It was great. The best, but it makes me so confused.”

“Why are you confused by kissing?”

“I’m not used to throwing caution to the wind and having make out sessions with someone I just started dating. That is so not me.”

“Maybe this is a new you because Hudson is a different kind of guy than you have dated before.”

“But I’m also very attracted to my online guy, Aaron. I haven’t even gotten to meet him in person yet. I would kinda like to do that before things get more serious with Hudson. That makes me feel shallow. I really like them both.” I whine.

“That is a dilemma. Maybe it’s time to meet Aaron. Maybe have him come to the shop to meet you for lunch. It would be a safe place.”

“And have Jayden be a big jerk again.”

“You could give Jayden some time off that day. You are the boss after all.”

“I will think about it. You have a good point. Although I haven’t heard from Aaron today so maybe he isn’t interested anymore.”

“He might be waiting for a hello from you.”

“I’m not sure I have the energy for that tonight. I guess I better let you go. I have a long day tomorrow with dress fittings and the shop and nursery. I’ll be a little late getting to the shop. I have to stop by the greenhouse before I come in.”

“Ok. I’ll be there with bells on. This is all going to work out - for both of us.”

“It will. Love ya. See you tomorrow.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up and look at my messages on Perfect Match. Aaron messaged me after all. ***Did you have a good day?***

I debate about closing it and taking a long hot bath. I don’t want to blow him off though. ***I did. It was a long day but a good day. How was your day?***

I watch as three little bubbles float across the screen as he writes his message.

It was an exceptional day. Lots of good things are happening.

Glad to hear that. I’ve been thinking about meeting you.

Really? Have you made a decision yet?

Yes. I would like to meet you at my shop soon. It is a safe place for me.

I understand. I think that’s a great idea. When would you like to make this happen?

How about next Monday afternoon? I’m super busy with Valentine’s Day coming up and my friend’s wedding.

Monday will work great for me. After lunch?

Yes, will 1:30 work? I have a business meeting from 11:30-12:30.

That will work great for me.

*I'm going to turn in early because my day is so full tomorrow.
Talk to you later.*

I look forward to meeting you. Have a good night.

You too.

I fill the bathtub with hot water and soaking salt and sink down into the deliciously steamy, fragrant water. It soothes and calms me. A long, hot bath is often my best thinking place.

I hope I'm not making a mistake by meeting Aaron. I just really don't want to give up our friendship before I have given it a chance, but I really like Hudson too. He's so easy to talk to, not to mention kiss. Hopefully, a nice long bath and early night might help clear up my thinking.

Chapter 22



Hudson

I feel kind of upset that after such an exhilarating evening with Ava, she has made a date to meet another guy. I pace the living room. I thought we had a great connection tonight. The kissing was phenomenal.

Maybe it was a little too much for her. I may have been pushing her too fast. I certainly thought she was enjoying it as much as I was. She initiated some of those kisses herself.

A twinge of guilt twists around in my gut. I know that Aaron and I are the same guy, but she doesn't. We haven't made any plans to be exclusive so why shouldn't she cover her bases. I could be a flash in the pan thing for all she knows.

"She is talking to 'Aaron' on Perfect Match after spending the evening kissing me." I text Jace.

"You were supposed to tell her about that tonight. Why didn't you?"

"The right time never presented itself."

"You were kissing her instead, right?"

"Maybe..."

"You were and you know it."

I call him so I don't have to type it all out.

"Kissing was more fun than talking to her about 'Aaron'. Waaay more fun! It just slipped my mind."

"She's going to get really hurt if you don't tell her, man."

"I know. I know."

“You have no right to get jealous of her talking to another man unless you confess and make it official between you two. That is if you are ready for officially dating.”

“I am. I have never enjoyed a woman’s company so much before. I’m not sure if I will get to talk to her and tell her tomorrow though.”

“You better before the wedding Friday or she will be surprised to see you there and may figure it out on her own.”

“You’re right. I’ll find the right time and tell her. Thanks for the advice. It was actually good this time.”

“What do you mean this time? I give you good advice all the time.”

“All the time? Like that time in high school when you told me to ask out Haley Jo Miller?”

“I dared you so that does not count. It wasn’t advice.”

“Or the time you told me to buy that lime green t-shirt and gold chain?”

“I was a teenager, cut me some slack.”

“Or just recently when you advised me to buy that...”

“Alright, you made your point.” He interrupts. “I’m right this time though and you know it.”

“I do. See you tomorrow.”

“Hey wait. Did Tia come up in conversation tonight?”

“Yeah, she did. Apparently, she and Jayden had a disagreement before you saw them the other day so it wasn’t you she was turned off by.”

“Yes!” I imagine Jace doing a fist pump in the air. “I’m thinking of asking her to the wedding.”

“You should do it now. It’s only four days away.”

“I’ll call and ask her tomorrow.”

“Alright! I can’t wait to hear her answer. See ya”

“Night.”

I feel better about the situation with Ava but scared to tell her the truth. Hopefully we can talk tomorrow so I can tell her before the wedding.

Chapter 23



A^{va}

I arrive at the greenhouses at seven the next morning and enter the warm comforting space. I can feel all of my tension melt away as the humid air and earthy smells fill my nostrils. Earth! There is nothing quite like the feel of it as I run my fingers through it, plant bulbs with the hopes of blooms, and work it to create a fairy landscape. This is my passion. I need more time here like my little seedlings need light and water.

I walk through rows and rows of miniature little plants that hold the future inside. In a couple of weeks, the whole place will be blooming with color from tulips, crocuses, daffodils and much more. Their heady fragrance will fill the air and almost overwhelm the senses.

I make my way through the other greenhouses where calla lilies, caladiums, hostas, and herbs like lavender and thyme grow as I head to the office. There is a quiet here filled with the hope of Spring and life. It makes my situation with Hudson and Aaron drift away. It eases the worry of Tia's baby and the busy world of the shop. My head empties and all the stress blows away like sand before the wind.

By the time I reach the office, I feel rejuvenated and refueled. I sit at the desk and pull up the spreadsheets, the plans for each greenhouse and harvest cycle. It's all so orderly compared to the chaos of the shop the last two weeks. I am grateful that I hired Dallas, the nursery manager. She's not only creative but also methodical and organized, two qualities very necessary for this business.

"Hey boss," Dallas says in her soft Texas twang. I'm sure that is how she got the nickname Dallas. Her real name is Victoria, and she could have easily been called Tori. I have often wondered

who called her Dallas first. “What do you think about the houses?”

“They’re in fine shape. You’ve done an amazing job since you came here. I realized I need more time with my hands in the soil though.”

“Is there ever enough time with your hands in the soil? It’s my favorite thing to do this time of morning, but I don’t often get that luxury since planting season hasn’t started back up.”

“With Valentine’s Day coming, I have been stuck at the shop too much. Next week though, I plan to be out here every day.”

“It will be nice to have the extra set of hands. The spring buying and planting season will be on us in a couple of weeks. I already have businesses clamoring for their plants. Individual gardeners will be coming soon.”

“Let’s look over your plans and you can fill me in on what we need. I have a possible landscaping project coming up soon too. We’re going to be busy for quite a while I think.”

When I walk into the shop two hours later, it is ordered chaos. Jayden, Nic, and Tia are almost invisible behind stacks of roses, carnations, baby’s breath and greenery.

“Hey, “I say as I shrug out of my jacket and reach for my tool apron.

“Hi boss,” Nic says as Tia and Jayden return, “Morning.”

“Who’s up front?”

“The part-timer,” Jayden says.

“Her *name* is Margaret,” Nic replies.

“Well, she is a part-timer.”

“Jayden, learn her name. It’s respectful.” I say as I head through the doors to the front to say hi to Margaret.

* * *

Margaret is tall, with curves in all the right places and with bronze skin and beautiful hair like Tia's. She has helped out during busy seasons the last three years, but I'm thinking of hiring her full time now. She is efficient and good with customers, and she has Tia's artistic flair with her designs.

"Hiya, Meg," I say as I approach the counter.

"Ava! It's so good to see you again!" She is a hugger and throws her arms around me for a tight hug.

"It's good to see you too. Thanks for coming in to help out."

"No Worries. It's not like I currently have another job." She sighs in frustration.

"I wanted to talk to you about that. How would you like to go full time with us?"

"You're not joking right now, are you?" She beams.

"Not at all. We need extra help. I am split between two businesses and we're growing fast."

"I would love that so much!" she shrieks and hugs me again.

"I can pay \$14 an hour to start, if that works for you."

"Are you kidding? That works great for me. I am so excited. Thank you so much for believing in me."

"You have proven yourself the last three years. We couldn't have made it without you. Let us know if you need help up here."

"What was that shrieking about?" Tia asks as I sit across from her to work.

"It was Meg. I hired her as a full-time employee."

"What?!" Tia asks.

"You heard me. We need extra help all the time now and we'll certainly need it in a few months. She's trained and I like her work. It was a no brainer."

“We have several months before we need full-time extra help. I can work just fine.”

“Tia, I know you can work just fine. We are going into the busiest season for me. I’ll be at the greenhouses more and more over the next few weeks and if I land that landscaping gig with Hudson, that will mean I’ll be gone a lot.”

“I had no idea you would hire someone so soon.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for several days now. We need extra help all the time. As a matter of fact, I was thinking about asking you to become manager of the flower shop. Take over scheduling, ordering, but maybe right now is not the best time.”

“Ava! You don’t have to do this because you feel sorry for me.”

“You think I feel sorry for you?”

“Can we go somewhere more private for a few minutes?”

“Yes. Let’s go to the warehouse.” I call to the back, “Jayden, Nic, we will be right back.”

I lead the way. *How can she think this is because I feel sorry for her? I guess I could have handled it smoother.*

We barely clear the doors to the warehouse when Tia lights into me. “Ava, I do not need your pity or charity. I can make it fine on my own.”

I stand looking at her for a second before I let loose. “You think this is because I feel pity for you?! Pity and charity.” I walk away a few steps then back. “Tia, you are the best designer in this place. You know the business as well as I do. You help me with ordering and scheduling and everything else already. I haven’t had a vacation in almost 5 years. I’m tired. And the landscape business is my passion. I’m going to be back and forth a lot in the coming months. I NEED you.”

It’s her turn to stare at me. “You never complained about needing time off, you never said you were tired. Why didn’t you say

something? You could have taken days off and left me with the business.”

“I just didn’t feel secure financially to take off at first, then it became a habit to be here, I guess. I didn’t even realize until the other day when Hudson showed me the beach picture that I hadn’t taken time off since before I opened the shop. It seems like the perfect time for both of us. When you have the baby, I will fill in here until you are ready to come back. We can make this work.”

“Manager? I’m not sure I can handle all of that. You’re so good at it.”

“I know you can handle it. You’ll get six weeks maternity leave, can bring the baby to work with you, and you’ll get a ten dollar an hour raise. I’ve crunched the numbers. We can do this. What do you think?”

“I am going to need the extra income once the baby comes. It will be nice to be able to bring Baby to work with me until they’re older. Are you sure I can do the job?”

“Absolutely! I will also give you hiring and firing power. I will be here to help often too. But this frees me up to move forward on the landscape end of things. Is it a deal?”

“Let me think about it for a while. I’ll give you an answer by the end of the day.”

“That’ll be great.” We hug each other. “You’ll never be a charity case Tia,” I whisper in her ear.

She sniffs back tears and hugs me tighter. “Thanks for believing in me Ava. Sorry I overreacted. Hormones.”

“It’s ok. No apology necessary. That’s what friends are for. I guess we better get back in there. Those flowers won’t get in those vases on their own.” I throw my arm around her shoulder, and we walk back towards the work room. I hope she says yes.

* * *

I open the door to the dress shop and hear giggles coming from the back. There is no mistaking Vi's giggles. I round the corner to the fitting area just as Vi spins around on the dais in her calf length wedding dress. She has conformed to the traditional white dress but in Vi fashion, she has given it her own twist.

At her waist is a black ribbon and she is wearing black lace elbow length gloves, black fishnet stockings and black stilettos. To complete the ensemble, she has chosen a black fingertip veil. I wolf whistle, and they all turn to look in my direction.

My friends squeal in delight as they run to surround me in a group hug. "Ava! You made it!" Gigi says. We shortened her name from Georgina when we all met in 8th grade and formed our friend squad. We'd somehow wound up in Mrs. Carpenter's homeroom class and had all of our other classes together. We were assigned a group project in our literature class that year and we bonded over our common nerdiness. We've been inseparable since.

Lydia, or Di as we call her, was the first one to get married in October. Gigi had come in December and Cara had gotten married in January. Now Vi, and Kat will follow right on her heels. I expect the save-the-date card any day. I have been on a bridesmaid merry-go-round for almost six months now. I'll be glad to be off of it.

"I would've been here sooner, but I was convincing Tia to become my store manager."

"What?! Does that mean more girl time for you?"

"I hope so. Vi, you look stunning!"

"Thank you, sweetie." Vi talked to all of us like we were her sisters, calling us sweetie, honey, and baby. Sometimes it was like my grandma was coming out of her mouth. "Speaking of stunning. You looked stunning with Hudson Carlisle on your arm last night. Are you coming to the wedding together?"

"I've been a bridesmaid enough lately to know that it would put any date I had through a lonesome evening, so I'm coming alone."

“That’s not fun. Especially when you could have Hudson on your arm.”

“I’ve made up my mind.”

“I will let it drop then. I know how stubborn you are when you’ve made up your mind,” says in her soft southern drawl as she turns back to the shop owner who has been patiently waiting on us to finish our greetings.

“Ava, how long have you been dating Hudson?” Gigi asks.

Followed by Cara who adds, “And keeping it from us?”

“That was our first official date.”

“Official?” Kat asks. She’s the most logical and analytical of the five of us so of course she would catch that.

“We bumped into each other at Brando’s getting takeout and took it back to his place to eat it together. It doesn’t really count.”

“He’s so dreamy but I haven’t known him to be in a serious relationship,” Vi adds. “I really haven’t known him to date much at all in the last couple of years.”

“How do you know him, Vi?” Cara asks.

“He’s been friends with Bryce since high school. We hang out all the time, but he’s never brought a girl with him. I always thought maybe he was a late bloomer.”

“Maybe it just took the right gardener.” Gigi giggles.

“I see what you did there.” I say as we all laugh at her joke.

“So are you ready for the big day, Vi?” I ask.

“I’m so ready for this to be over. Just elope when you get married. Planning is such a headache and with all the food testing, it’s hard to stay in your dress size.”

“Since, I’m nowhere near the marrying point, I’ll file that advice away for later. If marriage ever comes up for me.”

“That’s what I thought, too, and it happened to me very quickly.” Kat says. She met Chase in August at a conference, and they were engaged by November.

“But that doesn’t happen for everyone,” I say, “You were lucky to find Mr. Right at a conference.”

“It happened pretty quickly for all of us.” Gigi adds. “Keep an open mind and it’ll happen for you too. Maybe Hudson is already the one.” She winks.

“I’ve only had one date with the man. One pretty steamy date, but just one.”

“Steamy? You, Ms. I don’t kiss until the fourth date?”

“If you call a make out session over cupcakes steamy then yes, it was steamy. And, yes, it’s different from my normal fourth date rule.”

“Ok, you better dish out the details.” Cara says as she makes herself comfortable in a chair. I tell them everything as we try on our dresses.

“Seems to me that you might want to pull back on the reins if you’re not ready to get serious. For your sake as well as Hudson’s. I would hate for either of you to get hurt.” Gigi says.

“Or you could trust your feelings and go with it. See where it leads.” Kat says as the seamstress puts the final pin in her bridesmaid dress.

“I’m not sure I’m a *trust-my-feelings-and-go-with-it* kind of person when it comes to dating. I’ve made a lot of mistakes doing that.”

“We all made mistakes with dating before we found our guys. I know I did.”

“Then how did you know when you met *the guy*?”

“For me there was something that just clicked, and I fell hard. I wanted to be with him all the time. I couldn’t think of anything else.” Gigi responded.

“For me it was like a door had opened and all this light came rushing in.” Di said.

“At first, I hated him. He could make me unreasonably angry over the smallest thing. Then I realized it was tension because I was fighting this huge attraction that I didn’t want,” Kat adds.

“For me, it was like this comfortable pair of pajamas!” Cara sighs.

“What?” I ask, laughing. “Pajamas?”

“Yes, it just fit and felt so right. I fought it at first thinking that it couldn’t be that easy. But it was and still is.”

Vi chimes in, “For me it was a heart racing adventure. It never gets old being with him.”

It was different for each one of you then? *NO* commonalities?”

“I think the connecting factor is that none of us can imagine life without our guy. They’re always in our thoughts and hearts.”

“Yes!”

“That’s it!”

“Exactly!”

“Are you feeling any of those things?” Gigi asks me.

“Well... Umm I’m not sure. I mainly feel awkward until we start kissing then, BOOM! It goes away fast. I think it’s my social anxiety.” I throw myself into the nearest chair and cover my face. “I just don’t know, but it feels good when we’re together and kissing. There is this other thing. It may be complicating it a bit.”

“Another thing? Like?”

“Like I may be ‘dating’ a guy online, kinda thing.” I peek between my fingers.

“Wait? You are dating two guys?”

“I’m not sure you call it dating. I’m talking to a guy online, every night and morning and sometimes in the middle of the day. I love talking to him. He gets me so well.”

They all look at me as if I have grown another head. “Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“Because it’s like looking at a whole new Ava.”

“One we haven’t seen before.”

“You are online dating a guy.”

“And real life kissing a dreamy man.”

“*And* you are online dating!”

“You said that one already.” I mumble.

“It just doesn’t seem like you at all.”

“I know. That’s why I’m so confused. Do you understand now why I don’t want to take Hudson as my date? Why I’m not sure I need to pursue this with him?”

“You’re saying you may have two Mr. Rights.”

“Yes. If they were one man, they would be *the* Mr. Right. Why does it have to be so complicated?” I moan.

Chapter 24



Hudson

I sit staring at my screen. All I can think about is Ava and the fact that she thinks I'm two different men. I don't know what to do to correct it. I think I'm falling in love with her and I'm afraid it's going to hurt her when I tell her I'm her online guy too.

Our last date floats into my mind. It's not like we did much talking on that date. I know I can't keep up this love triangle much longer.

But she has a secret too. My mind rebels against the idea that I should be the one to tell her. Maybe she already knows. Maybe I need to do some questioning, just to see if she is catching on to the fact.

How did I get here? More importantly, how am I going to get out of it?

"Are you ready for lunch?" I jump as Jace sticks his head around the door and breaks into my thoughts.

"I guess."

"Man, are you ok?"

"Yes. No."

"What is it?"

"Ava."

"Did she dump you?"

"No. What makes you ask that?"

"The way you look right now."

"She will dump me when she finds out that I'm her online crush too."

“How’s she going to find that out, when you haven’t told her?”

“I need to tell her after our last make out session. Before this gets too far in.”

“You don’t necessarily have to tell her. Just let the online thing fizzle out.”

“That’s not very honest and it might hurt her too.”

“Make out session? You had a make out session? I thought it was just a few kisses.”

“Yes. It was hot! So hot.” I drag my fingers through my hair.

“Way to go, Hudson!”

“Stop man. We’re not in junior high anymore.”

“Still, when was the last time you had a make out session? It’s been a dry spell.”

“True. But that’s not the problem.”

“Just let the online thing go.”

“The problem with that is that I like the online thing. I can really talk to her. I can’t seem to do that in person.”

“That kissing’s getting in the way.”

“Yes! Honestly it is.”

“You could just tell her.”

“Then she’ll be mad and dump me.”

“Maybe not. It isn’t like she is being completely honest either.”

“I just don’t think she has realized the connection yet. When she does, I don’t think she’ll be too happy with me.”

“Drop some hints and see if she can figure it out herself.”

“That’s just what I was thinking when you came in.”

“Good! Problem solved. Let’s eat.”

“Ok. Where are we going?”

“Anywhere with chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes.”

“Ruby’s then?”

“Alright! I’ll even pay this time,” he says as he stretches.

“That will be a miracle.” I grouse.

“I pay all the time. I just had a counseling session on your love life.”

“Point taken. I say as I follow him out the door.”

* * *

I open my apartment door, drop my gym bag on the floor and plop down on the couch. I’m tired and it’s been a long day. I haven’t been able to talk to Ava all day. I worry that she thinks I’m ghosting her.

I pull out my phone and realize there have been no messages from her either. Maybe *she* is ghosting *me*. A shower and food might help clear my head, but I don’t move.

How am I supposed to tell Ava that I’m talking to her online and seeing her in real life? She’s going to be super upset with me. Maybe I can get a few private minutes at the wedding tomorrow to tell her.

I push off the couch and go to the kitchen. I stand looking in the fridge for a few minutes before I realize that I’m just staring into space. I grab a protein shake and head to the bathroom.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I look at it hoping to see Ava’s name but it’s just a reminder that a package has shipped to me. I toss my phone on the bed in disappointment, hoping the hot water will wash away the tension I feel.

Chapter 25



A^{va}

I drop on the couch, glad to be home. The day was long and after my fitting, I'm even more confused about what I should do about Hudson and Aaron. I check to see if I have any messages. Nada, nothing from either one of them. After last night with Hudson, he might think I'm ghosting him if I don't message him.

Maybe *he* is ghosting *me*. The thought hits me hard. Maybe he's a kiss and leave kind of guy and that's why he hasn't seriously dated anyone in the time Vi has known him. I send her a message.

Hey, Vi. Has Hudson dated much in the time you have known him? I throw the phone on the couch and go to the fridge. I pour a cup of milk and decide to eat the luscious lemon cupcake.

I take it back to the couch and curl up in the corner.

My phone lights up with Vi's message. *I don't really remember him dating anyone actually. He has brought dates to different things but not dated. Why?*

I was just wondering if he was a kiss and run kind of guy. I haven't heard from him all day.

I don't think he is. Have you messaged him?

Not yet. It was a hectic day. Should I?

If you want him, you should. Love ya' gotta run.

Thanks. Love ya, too.

I throw my phone down on the couch again. I finish my milk and cupcake before I message him. My thumb hovers over the keyboard before I decide to just say, **Hi**.

I turn on the tv and find a sappy romcom to watch while I wait. I wake up to my phone buzzing. I wipe the drool from my cheek and the sleep from my eyes as it continues to buzz.

The number is not familiar, so I hit decline and check my messages. There aren't any from Hudson. I check the dating app and there are tons of stupid winks and waves, but nothing from Aaron. I decide to brush my teeth, go to bed and wallow in my misery over losing two guys at once.

Tomorrow is the wedding rehearsal and I need sleep. Maybe I will get a few minutes to talk to him before that and see what's up

Chapter 26



Hudson

I can't understand why Ava isn't answering my call. It goes to voicemail, so I leave a message. I hope it makes sense to her.

I check the dating app but there are no messages from her on there either. I want to throw my phone. I can't understand what went wrong. Maybe she found out I was the same guy on the app and real life. I debate calling her again. *If she wants to talk to you, she will call*, my brain shouts at me.

I give up and go to bed. I will call her in the morning. If I don't get her on the phone then, I'll track her down at the wedding.

* * *

My head is pounding from my rough night and lack of sleep, when Jace sticks his head around the door.

"You look awful this morning," he says in a cheerful way that makes me want to throw something at him.

"Thanks. I could tell that when I looked in the mirror."

"Why do you look terrible?"

"I had a hard time sleeping."

"Woman troubles?"

"No. Sleep troubles."

"Because of a woman." He smiles knowingly.

"People do not like a know-it-all, you know."

"I thought things were going well with Ava and Maria."

"They were."

"Were?"

“I haven’t heard from her since our date the other night.”

“Ouch. That stings”

“I mean I thought we had a good time, but she didn’t message yesterday and she didn’t answer my call last night.”

“Maybe she is swamped. I mean there is the wedding rehearsal today, then the wedding and Valentine’s Day after that.”

“You’re probably right. It just feels off to me.”

“You could call her this morning.”

“I called last night. She can return my call if she wants to talk.”

“Great logic. I mean the love of your life could be a phone call away. You can just wait and see, or you can be proactive. I can see why you would wait. All the trouble, the fuss...”

“I hear ya, but if she doesn’t want me, I can’t help that and I’m not going to beg.”

“Okay. Sit here and feel miserable.” He says as he walks away. “I’m calling Tia.”

“Good for you,” I grumble. I hate it when he’s right but I’m not in a mood to call Ava right now. I need some caffeine. “Whitney, I’m going to Good Grounds for some caffeine. Text me if anything comes up.” I tell my administrative assistant.

“Sure thing, Hudson. For what it’s worth, I think she’d like for you to call her again or maybe even stop by her shop.”

“I will take it under advisement.” I say as I walk out the door.

The sky is that stormy gray that looks like ocean waves and I can feel the moisture in the air, which has a distinctive chill to it. Some winter days in Arkansas are beautiful and warm, especially in February, but it can change on a dime and snow can cover the ground in a matter of minutes. I hope it’s not one of those days.

I hunch inside my coat and walk the three blocks to Good Grounds and order a white chocolate frappe with a shot of

caramel, caffeine, and vitamins. Hopefully it will wake me up. It's going to be a long day and night with the wedding rehearsal.

"Well, look who the cat dragged in." A soft southern drawl captures my attention and I turn.

"Hey Vi. You're out awfully early."

"I have loads to do today. You look like five miles of bad road honey. Are you feeling alright?"

"I just didn't sleep well last night."

"Woman troubles?"

"Why is that the first thing everyone thinks is wrong?" I snap. "I just couldn't get comfortable. I think I need a new mattress."

"Uh-huh." Vi says, "And a phone call from Ava."

"What?" I look her in the eye wondering how she knows that.

"She texted me last night and asked if you were a love 'em and leave' em kind of guy."

"What? Why would she ask that?"

"She couldn't figure out why she hadn't heard from you."

"What did you tell her? You know I'm not that kind of guy."

"I told her of course not and that you had probably been really busy."

"I called her last night, and she didn't answer. I had no messages from her either."

"Well darlin' that's because she's running two businesses, had fittings for her bridesmaid dress yesterday, and it's Valentine's Day and she's a florist. I bet her butt hardly touched a chair seat yesterday. She'd just gotten home when she texted me and it was almost 10 o'clock."

"I feel like a huge jerk." I say rubbing my face with my palms. I turn to get my frappe when the attendant calls my name.

“I wouldn’t say a huge jerk.” Vi smiles and gives her order to the clerk. “This is all new to you both. It’ll work out. I think a hot chocolate and a visit to her shop might go a long way.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh, I know so. She likes it with two shots of mint and extra whipped cream.”

The clerk hands over her coffee and as she turns to leave, she says, “You know Hudson, a woman likes the right amount of interest and flirtation, but she really likes honesty. Tell her how you feel. It will go a long way towards making you feel better.” She winks as she walks through the door.

I stand staring at the spot she vacates for a long moment. “I need a hot chocolate with two shots of mint, extra whipped cream.” I say to the attendant.

I have some work to do before that rehearsal if I’m going to let Ava know how I feel.

Chapter 27



Ava

“Morning,” Tia says as she walks through the door, “I’m surprised to see you here this early. I know you were here after we all left last night.”

“I couldn’t sleep. Too much going on in my head.”

“Too much thinking about someone?”

“Not just that. But mostly. I didn’t hear from him yesterday and Aaron wasn’t online last night either.” I sigh and drop the clippers I have been using.

“I bet he just had a long busy day like you.”

“It doesn’t feel that way and that doesn’t explain Aaron not being online. I guess maybe he got tired of waiting to meet me.”

“If he did, then you don’t want him. You gotta feel safe with someone before you meet. That’s like the number one rule of online dating.”

“I know you’re right. It’s just a letdown.”

“I can see that. Any messages this morning?”

“Not that I know of.” I look at my phone and see a voicemail from that number I didn’t recognize last night. I open the app and see from the transcript that the message is from Hudson. I quickly put the phone up to my ear to listen as a smile crosses my lips.

“Well, that’s a big change from two minutes ago,” Tia says as she drops a large bouquet of red roses on the worktop.

“It was a voicemail from Hudson from last night. I didn’t recognize the number.”

“Ah, so all that worry, and sleeplessness was for nothing.”

"I guess so. I feel stupid that I let this bother me so much. It makes me feel needy and insecure."

"That's why I don't want to get into the dating world again right away. I hate that cycle of thinking. I like to live in my confidence, not worry and wonder."

Jayden sticks his head through the door. "Tia, you have a phone call."

"I didn't even hear the phone ring," she says. "I can't imagine who would be calling me here." I watch as she answers the phone. "Hello, this is Tia."

"Oh, hi." I try not to listen, but her manner has me interested, "I'm not sure. It's very last minute." She puts her hand on her hip and shakes her head. "You should have called earlier. Yeah, uh huh, I hear ya. Next time, don't wait so late." She hangs up. "I cannot believe that man," she says as she walks over and picks up her shears.

I look at her and she ignores me. "What guy?" I ask when she won't satisfy my curiosity.

"That Jace."

"Jace, as in Hudson's friend, Jace?"

"Yup."

"What did he do?"

"He asked me to the wedding, like I would be so easily available."

"Well, you are, aren't you?"

"Uh, I have to work."

"I happen to know your boss and she could let you off."

"Not the point. He could have asked me several days ago instead of asking at the last minute. You know what I mean."

"So, you really told him no?!" I sigh and purse my lips. She looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

“You can’t intimidate me that easily.”

I smile at her. “You wanted to say yes, didn’t you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. Are you happy?”

“I am. Although, I wish you *had* said yes, we could have sat at a table with each other!”

“Ava Maria, we could have sat together anyway without the complication of men. I don’t need a man to go,” she mumbles as she enters the cooler for some baby’s breath. She continues mumbling.

“I could’ve gone, but I’d have to have a dress and do my nails and hair and makeup. It was easier not to mess with it,” she says as she plops into her chair and violently snips the end of some roses. “Why did Vi have to get married near Valentine’s. All this lovey dovey stuff is just gettin’ on my nerves.”

I try to stifle a giggle and that earns me a hard stare.

“You better not be laughing at me, girl, if you know what is good for you.” She throws a broken bud at my head. I burst out laughing and throw the bloom back at her.

“Tia and Jace,” I say in a sing-song voice that earns me a flick of water in the face. “You didn’t just flick water at me!”

“Oh, I did and you are lucky it wasn’t the whole bucket. Keep up with that sing-song thing.”

I scoop up a handful of water and flick it back at her then the water fight is on. I squeal as I run away from her, but she douses my shirt anyway. She splutters as I spray her with a mister bottle, and she goes back to the sink for a cup. She’s in the act of raising it over her head just as Nic walks in the door.

He takes in my wet shirt and spray bottle and her raised hand with the cup in it and backs out a bit. “Umm, Boss, you have a visitor.”

“A visitor?”

“Yes, someone named Hudson.”

“Hudson?” I drop the spray bottle and Tia lowers the cup. “How do I look?” I ask her.

“Like a wet poodle.” She gives me a wicked, serves-you-right smile. “You might want to dry off a bit or put on an apron.” I look down at my soaking wet shirt. Why do I always seem to be in this position around him?

“Nic, tell him I’ll be right there.” I say as I grab a towel and dry my shirt as much as I can. I put my apron over my clothes and finger comb my damp hair. “I guess you got your pay back.” I say to Tia who just busts out laughing.

“Knock him dead.” She smiles. “But not literally. I know how you two are.” I hear her deep throated laugh as I walk through the door.

Chapter 28



Hudson

Ava steps through the door with a bright smile on her face and I notice that her hair is wet. It seems rather odd to me because it's not hot so I don't think she is sweating.

"Heya, Hudson," she looks at me shyly and I notice Jayden gives me the evil eye from across the room. "I didn't expect to see you this morning."

"I brought you hot chocolate." I hold up the drink in my left hand.

"A hot chocolate?"

"With two shots of mint and extra whipped cream."

"How do you know how I like my hot chocolate?" she asks as she shoots a look towards Jayden and Nic who turn away acting busy.

"A little birdie told me." I smile again and hold the cup in her direction.

She hesitates for a moment like she is unsure if she should take it.

"This isn't going quite like I imagined it," I say so only she can hear. "Could we go somewhere a little more private?"

She runs her hand through her damp wavy hair and looks at Nic and Jayden again. I see her make a decision as she takes the cup from me and replaces it with her hand. The next thing I know she's hauling me through the door behind the counter.

We pass Tia who stops with a rose in the midair hovering over a vase as we pass. "Morning Hudson. Everything alright Ava?"

"Yep," Ava says as we march right past Tia and out the door to a part of the shop I have never seen before. She continues until

she's in the center of the large room which seems to be a warehouse.

She finally stops and turns to look at me with a really big smile. "Thanks for the cocoa. I'm sorry I missed your call last night. I don't have your number programmed into my phone," she says in a rush.

"I'm sorry I didn't text yesterday. I wasn't thinking about how busy you must be." I say in a rush that matches hers. She runs her hand through her hair again and my fingers itch to feel the damp curls along her brow. She stops with her hand in her hair, awareness of me watching her in her eyes.

I take a slow step forward afraid I might startle her, and she will bolt like a rabbit scared out of its den. I continue my slow steps as I breathe in her scent. Flowers, dirt, sweet lavender, and citrus meet my nose underscored by something that is uniquely Ava.

She draws in a slow deep breath and then seems to hold it as she moves a little closer to me. I brush my fingers along the soft damp hair laying against her forehead and it's like I strike a match to tinder.

The next thing I know, she throws her arms around my neck, pushes her hand into my hair and draws my lips to hers. She's all fire and flame and I'm momentarily startled into inaction.

Then she moves closer to me and angles her head to deepen the kiss and I'm swallowed up in her flames and heat. I've never had a kiss like this one and I just let it take me in by following her lead.

The kiss stops as quickly as it began, and I'm left reeling and trying to catch up. I rest my forehead on hers as I feel her breath fanning across my cheeks. We are both breathing hard, and I don't want to break the moment so I gently hold her until we come back down. She straightens and leans back to look up into my face.

"That was unexpected," she says.

“It was but in a very nice way.” I answer. “I think I will bring you hot chocolate every day.” That earns a giggle from her.

“I would like that very much,” she says with a twinkle in her eye and blush on her cheeks.

“How did you really know how I like my hot chocolate?”

“Vi.”

“Vi?”

“She was at the coffee shop this morning when I got a frappe. She saw I wasn’t having a good morning and assumed it was woman troubles.”

“Now why would she think that?” Ava asks.

“Oh, maybe because someone contacted her asking if I was a love ‘em and leave ‘em kind of guy.”

Ava’s mouth drops open and a blush spreads across her cheeks.

“She didn’t?”

“She did.”

“See if I talk to her again.” Ava responds.

“She did it because she cares. It brought me here.”

“Well, I might just forgive her then. Maybe. If you kiss me again.”

“I can sure do that.” I draw her closer for another kiss. Just then I hear “Sorry, Boss,” and Ava jumps back from me as I turn to find Nic at the door.

“I didn’t know you were back here,” he says as he turns to leave.

“No worries Nic,” Ava returns. “We were, umm... just finishing up back here. You don’t need to go.”

I feel a bit of disappointment flow through me at the lost kiss, but Ava takes my hand and pulls me out the side door of the building.

We walk to her truck, and she leans against the tailgate and pulls me in for a hug. I stand in the circle of her arms for a few

moments just relishing the closeness.

“I could stay like this all day, but I better get back in there,” she says, “I’m sorry I didn’t text last night.”

“It’s no big deal. I just missed talking to you yesterday. In person and online.”

“Online?” she asks warily.

“You know via text.” I say hastily covering my tracks. I am hesitant to mention the dating app. I’m afraid she is going to get upset and I don’t want the others to get involved and cause a scene at her shop.

“Oh yeah, I missed it too. I’ll be late tonight because of the wedding rehearsal.”

“I understand. I will be late too.” I want to surprise her at the rehearsal, so I don’t tell her I’ll see her there. I kiss her softly on the lips. “Have a good day.”

“You too. Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

“Thank you for the kisses,” I say as I back away from her.

Her cheeks turn really pink, but she says, “If you bring me hot chocolate tomorrow I will give you more.”

“You got a deal.” I wink and back into her truck mirror, “Ouch,” I say and rub my shoulder.

She giggles, “Careful there,” and opens the door to the shop and says, “See you later, H,” before she disappears inside.

I stroll down the alley to the street. I have to figure out how I’m going to ask her if she has an online dating profile before this thing goes any further.

Chapter 29



A^{va}

I walk into the room where Tia is, and she and Nic both go silent and look at me.

“What?” I say.

“You know what.” Tia replies.

“We weren’t doing anything.”

“Only because Nic stopped you.”

“Since when is kissing on the naughty list?” I look at each of them. “And it is my business.”

Nic mumbles, “Sorry Boss,” as I give him a withering stare.

“Don’t go getting mad at Nic. I badgered him to tell me about it and kissing isn’t naughty. I just didn’t know you were at the kissing-at-work stage yet.”

“It’s ok, Nic. Really,” I say, “And we haven’t gotten to talk much today, Tia.”

“Fair enough.” Tia says, “So you can tell me now.”

“Tell you what?” Jayden says as he walks through the door with an armload of tickets for us.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Tia says before I can answer. “I’ll take those tickets. Nic, can help you up front.” She says as she hands Nic the bouquet she just finished and gives him a go away look.

He is obviously relieved to get out of this conversation, and smiles as he says, “Sure thing, Tia.” He takes the arrangement and pushes Jayden back through the door.

I hear Jayden say, “What’s going on?” as he walks away.

Tia turns her full attention to me. “Now talk.”

“I kissed Hudson and was about to do it again when Nic walked in. Not much else to tell.” I feel my cheeks heat up as I think about the kiss.

“Must have been some kiss to make you turn red like that. When did you get to the casual kissing stage?”

“This morning, I guess. I mean he kissed me the other night after our date. Then I didn’t hear from him yesterday and he brought me hot chocolate and I took him into the back room and laid one on him.”

Tia’s mouth is hanging open by the time I finish. “Why are you looking at me like that? It’s not my first kiss, you know.”

“It is your first kiss at your place of business, and you initiated it. That’s why.”

“I know. It isn’t like me, but I like him and his kisses.”

Her smile is so big that I’m almost blinded by the glare bouncing off her pearly whites. “It’s about time, girl.”

“About time?”

“That you find someone you want to kiss even at work. It’s great! I’m excited for you,” she actually gets up and hugs me.

“Thanks,” I say into her hair, “but I don’t know if I’m ready for this level of intensity. I might get burned.”

She steps back and asks, “Why?” Everything just flows right out of me about yesterday and how hot the kiss was this morning and the other night at my place.

“It’s just going way too fast for my comfort.”

“Sometimes being uncomfortable is a good thing. I think it is this time.”

“I hope you are right. Or else we both might get burned.”

“Are you still talking to that Aaron guy online?”

“No, we didn’t message last night. I looked to see if he was online, but he wasn’t. I’m very confused about it all. I really like them both. But...” I trail off.

“But what?”

“Well, Hudson is here in the flesh and...”

“Are you going to say Aaron is virtual?”

“Yes, “I squeak, feeling bad even as it leaves my mouth.

“But he’s a real human,” Tia fires back. “I think maybe you owe it to yourself to meet him before you make any decisions about your relationship status.”

“I guess you’re right, but I’m afraid.”

“That he is a psycho or creep or something?”

“No.”

“Then what?” Tia asks.

“That I won’t be able to choose between him and Hudson and lose them both.”

“That is a hard place to be for sure.” Tia goes quiet. “But it will only get harder the longer you delay.”

I know. I guess I better bite the bullet and make the decision now instead of later when I will get really hurt and one of them might get hurt too.” I sigh as I plop down in my chair at the workbench. “I better move up my meeting with Aaron then.”

* * *

I finish applying lip gloss, putting the final touches on my look for the rehearsal dinner tonight. I don’t know why I bothered to dress up. Nobody I want to impress will be there, but I can’t let Vi down by being the ugly bridesmaid.

I pick up the little beaded bag that will hold my phone and more lip gloss and keys tonight. I notice a message icon on my phone before I stuff it in the bag.

Have a great evening, gorgeous!

It's from Hudson and brings a smile to my face. I snap a selfie, something I don't do often, and send it to him.

It would be better with you and cupcakes. :) I reply.

I'm not sure we should set you loose looking like that tonight. You will surely break some hearts. ;) Cupcakes, huh? Is that the term for it now?

I send back a laughing emoji and a heart.

Talk later. I have to run.

Fifteen minutes later I walk into the wedding venue. I'm blown away with how beautiful everything looks. The place is already decorated for the wedding except for all the flowers at my shop. We'll load those in just before the wedding, so they stay fresh the whole afternoon.

"Ava!" I'm greeted with squeals of delight as Cara and Kat throw their arms around me. "You look gorgeous tonight."

"Vi is back here." Di takes my hand and tugs me along. "Isn't this place incredible?"

"It looks like a castle from the outside, so I half expected it to be dark and drafty."

"I know but instead it's romantic and cozy," Gigi says.

We round the corner and I spot Vi near a window surrounded by all of the men in the wedding party. She draws them like butterflies to flowers. She's stunning in her calf-length white 1950's style cocktail dress, now perfectly tailored, with a black bow at her waist and black flowers in her hair.

"She's so beautiful," I whisper to the girls. "I wanna be her when I grow up."

We all laugh at the joke and just watch her for a moment before Cara says, "Look what the cat dragged in!" She elbows me and tries to point out someone, but then Vi spots us.

“Ava!” Vi says and pushes through the men to give me a big hug. “I’m so happy to see you. Let me introduce you to everyone.”

She makes her way through the small crowd as she introduces her in-laws, the preacher performing the ceremony, and the musicians. We finally make it to her parents, and I hug their necks.

Her momma says, “I just love your hair Ava and that dress makes your eyes sparkle gold.”

“Thank you, momma Lee.” I say and step back. “It’s so good to see you and you look stunning tonight. People are going to think you are Vi’s sister.” She laughs out loud. “You have always been my favorite,” she winks.

Just then the groomsmen shift, and I catch sight of a familiar profile. “Vi, why didn’t you tell me Hudson was a groomsman?”

“Cause I thought he would tell you.”

“He never mentioned it.” He sees me and smiles as he makes his way towards me. He looks amazing in his vest and tie. I stand very still waiting for him to get to me, so I don’t throw caution and dignity to the wind and throw myself at him.

“Ava,” he says when he’s a foot away.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were a groomsman?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“You succeeded. My night just got lots better.”

“Mine too,” he takes my hand gently. “Come meet the guys. I want to make them jealous.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me, and I giggle.

“They’re all married or engaged to my best friends, silly. They won’t get jealous.”

“But I have the best one of all on my arm tonight,” he says as he gently squeezes my hand and pulls me towards the circle of men.

“Let’s get this party going,” Vi calls out a few minutes after we join all of Hudson’s friends in the circle. “First we will have dinner and then do the fake walk down the aisle thing,” she says.

“I hope she doesn’t have seating arrangements with us apart,” I say as Hudson leads me towards the tables at the far end of the building.

“If she does, we’ll just move places so we can be together.”

“As if she has heard them, Vi says, “I have put each groomsman next to the bridal party member they will be walking down the aisle with.”

“She hasn’t told me who I will walk with.” I chew my lip nervously.

“I think we are paired up, if you look, we’re the only two single people in the room.”

“You’re right! I wonder if she had a little matchmaking in mind when she set this all up.”

“If she did, we beat her to it.” He smiles as he takes my hand and warmth spreads up my arm.

“Are we a match then?” I ask, leaning close so only he can hear.

“I think we make a perfect match, don’t we?” He bumps my shoulder with his and then tugs me along as we look for our empty seats.

“We seem to be a pretty good match so far, but the point is that my friend was trying to set us up.”

“Remind me to thank her later. Here we are.” He grins and my heart beats a little faster at how hot he looks when he smiles. He pulls my chair out for me and I can smell his cologne as he bends near my ear to say, “Just for the record, I’m glad Vi thinks we’re a good match and we get to sit together.

His hand brushes my upper arm as he moves away to sit next to me. Surely everyone can see the sparks his touch creates on my

shoulder. I look around and no one seems to have noticed us at all.

After we are settled, Di leans in close. "Is this the guy you spent the evening eating cupcakes with?"

"Yes," I reply, quietly because I don't want Hudson knowing I have been talking about him.

"I can see why you broke your kissing rule. He's hot in a nerdy guy kind of way."

"What do you mean, nerdy guy? He isn't the least bit nerdy."

"It was a compliment. Look around you, aren't we all a bunch of big nerds?"

As I look around the table, I realize she is right. My tribe is a bunch of nerdy people. That's just fine with me because I sure can go all out nerd over flowers and plants, and I love a good night of D&D or video games.

"You're right. How did I never realize that before," I laugh.

"Realize, what?" I feel Hudson's arm slide across the back of my chair and across my shoulders where those earlier sparks reignite and send zings of warmth spiraling down to my core.

"That we are all nerds," I reply. "I say that in the most complimentary way possible."

"I always knew I was a nerd," Hudson says, "I was told plenty of times in high school." He laughs.

"People in high school are idiots," Di says.

"It doesn't go away for some people," I laugh.

"True, their idiocy just doesn't impact our lives as often now."

"Unless they become politicians." Hudson chuckles and we all join in.

Just then, Bryce stands up and taps on his water glass with his spoon. "I have always wondered why glasses didn't break when

people did that. I know if I did it, I would be covered in water in no time," I say to Hudson.

"I would definitely break it if I did that, and you would be having to take your dress off."

I choke on the water I just took a sip of and start sputtering drawing the attention of everyone.

"You ok, back there, Ava?" Bryce asks.

"Yes," I wheeze out, "just swallowed wrong," I say as I go on coughing. "Sorry."

I look at Hudson who is as bright red as a tomato and he pounds my back. "I didn't mean that how it sounded," he says. "You would just be dripping from my broken glass. You know the spilled water. I'm gonna stop now," he says, his face reddening even further.

"It's ok," I say when I stop coughing. "I know what you mean." Bryce starts his speech.

Chapter 30



A^{va}

I watch Bryce as he gazes at Vi and talks of finding her and falling for her. He gets tears in his eyes and so does she. They are absolutely made for each other, a perfect match. The words echo in my head. Hudson just used those words for us. I wonder if he knows about my profile on the dating website. I look at him and his gaze isn't on Vi and Bryce but on me.

He is looking at me like I am a chocolate dessert he wants to devour, and I break out in a sweat because I am tempted to let him. He raises his eyebrows in question as I continue to stare at him. I shake my head indicating it's nothing, and fan myself with the napkin from beside my plate.

Bryce thanks everyone for being there. Then the food is brought out and I try not to shovel it into my mouth. It's delicious and I've had nothing to eat since early morning.

"I was so hungry," I say to Hudson.

"This food is amazing too. I thought it would be like rubber chicken."

"It usually is at these kinds of meals." I say. "I wonder if there will be chocolate for dessert."

"Or maybe cupcakes," he grins wickedly at me.

"Chocolate cupcakes," I reply, returning his devilish grin. This time he blushes as I am sure he is remembering those hot kisses we shared just a few nights ago.

"You're gonna be the death of me," he says as I reach up and wipe a drip of gravy from his chin. "I wanna kiss you right now."

"I want you too," I whisper back, wondering if we can escape and enjoy a few stolen kisses.

“We can’t,” he says, “We have no excuse or clear path out right now.”

I freeze with my spoon midway to my mouth, “Did you just read my mind?”

“Uhh, not unless you were trying to find a way to escape and go make out,” he says, turning bright red.

“Exactly.” I put my spoon down and fold my napkin in my lap. I can only think of kissing him now. *Why does he do this to me? I have never acted this way with a guy.* I scramble around in my brain looking for a way to get us out of here so we can go kiss. I vaguely remember seeing an empty room near the women’s bathroom on my way in.

“Follow my lead,” I say so only he can hear. I reach for my purse and open it acting like I am looking for something. “I forgot my phone in the car and I want to take some pictures,” I say so Di can hear. “I’m going to go get it.” I stand up.

Right on cue, Hudson stands up. “I’ll go with you since it is dark out there in that parking lot.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“You better hurry,” Di says. “Rehearsal will start soon. You don’t want us to come looking for you.”

I look at her for just a sec, wondering if she is reading my mind too. “I will.”

I grab Hudson’s hand and rush out of the room and down the hall.

“Where are we going?” he whispers when we exit the rehearsal dinner.

“Why are you whispering?” I ask.

“Cause it seems like the thing to do when you are on a secret mission.” He gives me a quirky smile.

I giggle, take his hand, and lead him down the hallway to the empty room I remember seeing.

“In here,” I say as we reach the opening to the small room. We slide inside and I close the door behind us.

“It’s very dark in here,” Hudson says, “I can’t see you.” I hear him fumbling around and wonder what he’s doing until the light from his phone nearly blinds me. “There you are,” he says. “Why are we in this closet?”

“So, I can kiss you,” I say as I grab him around the neck and pull him down to meet my lips. There is a hurried frenzy to my kiss, and I wonder how in the world I got to this point so fast with this man before I drown in the sensations buzzing along my skin, almost like when your hair stands on end just before lightning strikes close by.

I know Hudson feels the same heat as I do when he pulls me close and wraps his arms around my waist just above my hips. I feel his fingers splay across my spine as I slow the kiss.

Our lips begin a slow dance as we try to memorize the feel and texture and taste of each other. My hands slip into his hair, and he pulls me tighter.

Di’s parting words run through my mind before I get completely lost in the sensations rolling through me.

Almost as if he senses a change in me, Hudson pulls back from our kiss and rests his forehead against mine.

“Wow! I like your secret missions,” he smiles.

“I like your lips,” I smile back.

“Yours are pretty great too.” he kisses me softly again and then says, “How much longer do you think we can take before they come looking for us?”

“We’re probably about out of time,” I say as I run my fingers along the back of his scalp. He shivers and kisses me again, taking his time along my jaw and up to my ear before he leans back to look in my eyes, “Ava?” he asks, and I feel a tug at my back as he tries to pull his hand away.

“Mmmhm,” I say.

“I think the button on my sleeve is caught in the lace of your dress.”

That is not what I was expecting him to say, and it takes my kiss-fogged brain a moment to process what exactly he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can’t get the button on my cuff out of the lace on your dress. It’s stuck.”

“Let me see,” I say as I reach back and feel where his arm touches my back. It’s difficult to maneuver my hands but finally I feel where the button has gone into a tiny space in the lace of my dress. I work to release it but just can’t get it undone from the angle I am standing.

“Can you see what is happening if I turn around?” I ask.

“Maybe so,” he says.

I slowly spin out away from him and the pressure on my dress increases but the button holds tight. I can feel his hand still at my back as he bends down as close to my waist as he can to inspect the situation.

I feel time ticking quickly as he says, “I just don’t know how I am going to get it loose. I think you may have to take your dress off.”

“What? No, that isn’t an option.” My fingers fumble behind me trying to feel the tiny button. I struggle for a few more minutes with the help of Hudson before I concede that he may be right.

“Maybe if you take your shirt off, you can get it loose,” I say to him.

“I’m not sure that will help much but I will try to slide my arm out of my sleeve,” Hudson replies, and I feel him shifting and jiggling his arm around. Then he sighs in frustration, “It’s no use. I’m going to have to take my shirt off. Sorry,” he says. He starts undoing his buttons one-handed and I am trying not to stare at

his chest as he undoes them, but I would not have ever guessed that he would be so toned.

I mean, I know he has strong biceps, and I got a glimpse of his chest the night he upended the water pitcher on me. But right now, it is displayed in all its glory, muscles for miles. My face flames and so does the rest of me. I should look away, but I can't and I resist the temptation to spin back into the position I was in a few moments ago.

Suddenly he pulls his arm out of the sleeve that is stuck tight in my dress and I feel the weight of his shirt tugging at the back of my dress.

"Can you get a better look at what has happened?" I ask, hoping nobody comes looking for us right now.

"I think so," he says, "Let me see if I can find the light switch." I hear him fumbling around in the dark and suddenly a bright overhead light flares on and I try to shield my eyes.

"Turn around so I can get a good look at it," he says as he closes the distance between us and blocks the light that is currently burning my retinas.

I turn so my back is to him and the overhead light illuminates the problem.

I feel him working on the back of the dress and feel him prodding and pulling on the fabric. "It's no use," he says, "My fingers are too clumsy. I can't get it out. You are going to have to take off your dress."

"What?! There has to be another way."

"If there is I can't figure it out." he says as I feel the warmth from his head as he rests it on my back to get a better look. "I just cannot figure out how it got in there. The button seems larger than the holes in the lace."

I feel his fingers reach for my zipper at the same time the door opens, and he says, "Honestly, we are just going to have to take

your dress off for me to do it,” he says right next to my ear, sending goosebumps across my skin.

“What is going on here?” I hear Di ask. I go four hundred shades of red and wrap my arms across my chest even though I am fully dressed.

“It’s not what you are thinking,” Hudson says as he uses me for a shield.

“It looks like what I am thinking.”

“His button got stuck,” I add and that only makes things worse.

“Right,” Di says, “It’s a good thing his buttons got stuck or I might even be embarrassed right now.”

She shuts the door and stands in front of it so no one else can come in. We hear people moving down the hall and she waits until they have passed to speak.

“It looks like you lied to me about your phone so you could make out with Hudson. And it looks like it was about to get pretty steamy in here.”

“Yes and no,” I say.

She raises an eyebrow at me and gives me a disbelieving look.

Hudson says, “You are right. We lied about the phones so we could make out. But we weren’t about to get steamy. My button got caught in her lace.”

He spins me around to show her my dress with his shirt caught in it.

“I can’t get the button out with my clumsy hands. Maybe you can get it.”

Di walks briskly over to inspect my dress. “Serves you right for lying to your friends,” she says to me. “Hopefully you won’t have to take your dress off.”

I can feel my cheeks get hot, “I’m sorry, Di. I shouldn’t have lied to you. But I didn’t think I could just say- hey we are going to go

make out.”

“Most people would just control that desire until they could be alone,” Di says as she continues to work on my dress.

Her words sting but she’s right. Sometimes I have little impulse control. I try to avoid looking at Hudson who is standing with his arms crossed over his chest and looking like he feels as awkward as I do.

Di grumbles and I think she mutters a minor curse word and threatens to beat my dress before she says, “Got it!” and she flips the shirt away from my dress.

“Thank you, Di. I’m so glad I didn’t have to take my dress off.”

“Me too,” she says and then she turns to hand Hudson his shirt and grins. “I can see why you might have been in a hurry to get in here though.”

Hudson gets really red and asks, “Can I have my shirt back?”

She holds onto it for a moment as she looks from him to me. I can’t tell what she is thinking but Hudson must be over the suspense.

“If you are finished ogling me, I will take my shirt back now.”

“Did you say ogling?” she asks as she hands him the clothing.

“I did.”

“Who says that these days? That’s an old-fashioned word.”

“What would you call it then? Objectifying me?”

She turns red as she realizes that is what we were both just doing, “Point taken, sorry. You better get that on before they come looking for us. They were going out to take some pictures when I came in here.”

I watch as Hudson buttons his shirt and then tucks it in. I owe him an apology, but I want to wait until Di is gone.

“Di, can you give us a minute?”

She looks between us and realizes the awkwardness of the situation, “Sure, but if you’re not out in one minute, I am coming back in here and leaving the door open this time. Everyone will see you kissing then.”

She slips out and the silence continues while I work out an apology in my head.

“Hudson, I’m sorry I got us into this situation.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It wasn’t your fault. It was mine. Stupid button,” he finishes but he hasn’t looked at me. He is fiddling with the buttons at his cuff.

I close the gap and touch his jaw. He looks into my eyes. “I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have grabbed you and dragged you in here to make out.”

He looks awkward for a moment. “I’m not sorry we made out. It was great but I’m sorry about getting caught.” He gives me a big silly grin and we start laughing. Then he kisses me quickly and pushes open the door just as Di is about to knock.

He takes my hand, and we go in search of the rest of the wedding party before she can gripe at us again.

Chapter 31



Hudson

After what seems like an eternity of taking pictures and practicing the ceremony, we finally get to walk out of the event center alone. I take Ava's hand and we walk in companionable silence as we approach her truck.

She turns to me just as we reach the door of the truck and says, "I think it will be a beautiful wedding, don't you?" She seems subdued from earlier in the evening.

"I do think it will be a nice wedding. It's a great venue for sure, but I have to admit that I'll be glad when it's over. I'm afraid of tripping as we walk down the aisle and taking you down to the floor with me."

"That might be a possibility with our track record." She gives me a half grin.

"Do you have any plans tonight?"

"Unfortunately, I have to go back to the shop. With Valentine's only two days away and the wedding tomorrow, I have a few things to finish."

"Want some company?" I close the gap between us.

"I would love some company but..." she doesn't finish her sentence, instead she closes the distance and gives me a soft kiss, "you will be too big a distraction for me to get any work done at all."

I feel let down, but I understand. "How about lunch tomorrow then?"

"If you come to the shop and have it there with me, I can have lunch with you."

“It’s a date then,” I say and kiss her lightly when I want to do more. Her quietness makes me hesitant. “Is everything alright?” I ask.

“Yeah, It’s great. Why?” she replies.

“You seem quiet.”

“Oh, that’s because I am tired. All the excitement of the night coupled with long work hours has worn me out.”

“Sorry about the whole dress thing.” I say as I caress her hand with my thumb.

She starts laughing, “That was the best part of the night. I’m not upset about that at all. I just wish Di hadn’t caught us. She’ll be telling everyone before the night is over. Fortunately, she didn’t spill at the rehearsal as far as I can tell.”

“No one said anything to me. I imagine the guys will be texting me by morning. It seems nothing stays secret for long. I honestly thought you were going to have to take your dress off. I’m glad and maybe a tiny bit disappointed Di came along when she did,” I chuckle as she pretends to punch my shoulder.

“I’m scandalized, Hudson,” she says in an exaggerated southern accent, “You would have ruined my honor if she had caught us that way,” she flutters her eyelashes and pretends to be shocked.

“My dear Miss Ava, I would not for all the world have brought dishonor to you.” I bow and kiss the air above her knuckles playing my role. “I am a gentleman after all.”

She snorts, “A gentleman who wanted me to take my dress off.”

“I assure you that it was purely for practicalities. I was afraid that I would ruin your dress.”

“You certainly made a go of it,” she sniffs and raises her head disdainfully, but I see a bit of a smile at the corner of her mouth.

I make a show of looking at my nails and acting like I’m sorry before I say, “However, you were the one who wanted me shirtless so you could ogle my chest.”

She gasps and chokes, “Ogle your chest sir, why I never.”

“You did and so did Di.”

At that point she loses her battle to maintain her character. “And she better keep her eyes to herself. You are mine to ogle alone.”

“I am?”

“You are,” she declares and gives me a kiss that I feel all the way down to the tips of my shiny wedding loafers.

When she pulls back, I say, “I have to admit that I approve that statement.” I press her back to her truck and give her a kiss that I hope she feels to the tip of her lacy dress shoes. When I pull us out of the kiss, her eyes are soft and unfocused.

“See I told you that you would distract me,” she says, “that is a perfect example of why you cannot come to work with me tonight.” She runs her hand through her hair and pushes away from the truck. “As much as I don’t want to, I have to get back to the shop.”

I step back and open her door for her. She slides around the edge of the door and turns back to give me another soft kiss. “I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

“I look forward to it,” I say, “Night.” I push her door closed and step back.

She starts the engine, gives me a little wave, and drives away.

I watch her until she is out of sight. A sliver of anxiety passes through me as I contemplate telling her that I am Aaron. I try to make a plan as I walk to my car, but all the scenarios seem stupid. Maybe Jace can help me figure it out.

I make the hands-free call as I start my car. It takes about six rings before he answers. “I think I want a relationship with Ava, and I need to tell her I’m Aaron.”

“Hey man. I’m fine. Thanks for asking,” he says.

“Sorry. Hey man,” I say, “But I’m serious here. I need your help.”

“Grab some pizza and sodas and come on over. We’ll figure this out.”

* * *

I pace back and forth across the hardwood floors in Jace’s living room. He has a giant old house that we restored together.

“You keep that up and you will wear a groove in my floors. Sit down and eat.”

“I ate earlier.” I say as I plop down in a mission style rocker. I run my hands back and forth across the smooth flat armrest and start rocking.

“I think you should just take her out on the dance floor after the wedding and spill the beans.”

“Do you think that is the best place for that?” I ask doubtfully.

“About as good as any. And this way she won’t make a huge scene because there will be lots of people,” Jace responds.

“Oh heck! Do you think she will make a scene?” I ask as my stomach rolls and rumbles. I feel nauseated.

“I don’t know her well, but I doubt it. She might be surprised, but I bet she’ll laugh it off.”

“Maybe I should tell her that way. I just wish I had done it weeks ago,” I say as I put my face in my hands.

“I think it will be fine. I mean, you weren’t totally sure then,” Jace says as he grabs another piece of pizza. “You really don’t want a piece of this?” he asks as he gives the pizza a little shake in my direction. It reminds me of the blue man group shaking their Twinkie’s.

“I’m sure,” I groan, my stomach grumbling at me in protest at the thought of food. “She is gonna be mad at me. I just know it.”

“Why should she be mad at you when she’s doing the same thing with you as you are with her? What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.”

I give him what I think is a withering look. “Did you honestly just say that? What century are you from? That’s like a 1950’s saying.”

“Shut up,” he says as he takes another piece of pizza. “I’m just saying, you both are on Perfect Match talking to someone else,” He makes air quotes with his fingers. “You just happened to figure her out. You could just say, ‘Are you Maria the flower girl on Perfect Match?’”

“Maybe you’re right.” I feel my pulse slow a bit. “I’m not sure why I am so worked up about this.”

“Because you actually like this one.”

“Yeah, I do and I don’t want to mess it up.”

“You won’t. This one actually likes you too. It’s beyond me why but hey, different strokes for different folks.”

“Really? Again, with the 50’s man.”

He laughs, “It wasn’t bad as a decade goes.”

“Except for all of the male domination, ‘a woman should know her place’ stuff.” I grouse.

“Well, yeah there is that.”

“And then there’s...”

“I get it, but the sayings are good. So was the music!”

“I’ll give you that one.” I agree. “Alright, I will just talk to her at the wedding tomorrow and not make a big deal out of it.”

“Good plan. Now let’s watch a movie.”

“Ok. Maybe that will get my mind off it.” I sit back with a soda and try to relax and enjoy the movie.

* * *

I open the door to my house and toss my keys on the entry table. My stomach is still not happy with me, so I swig some Pepto and

flop on the couch. I never ate any pizza so that's not it. I just have a feeling that Ava will be mad at me and think I duped her.

I flip open the Perfect Match app and run my finger over her profile. I want to message her but I hesitate. She might ignore it, but she might answer back and I am not sure how I will take either of those results.

I decide to go for it. **Hey, what's up? I just got home from a long day.**

I wait for her response. I don't know if she has notifications for the app turned on or not. I go to the kitchen and make a cup of peppermint tea to see if it will help my stomach. I hear my phone buzz with a message alert and take my tea back to the couch so I can check it.

It is "Maria"/ Ava. **Hi yourself. I just got home from a long day too. I had a wedding rehearsal and then had to go back to work.**

Was the rehearsal fun? I wonder how she will answer that.

It was fun as far as wedding rehearsals go.

I feel a stab of disappointment before I remember that she is not going to tell "Aaron" that she had a blast kissing another man.

Just run of the mill rehearsal then? Nothing special?

I watch the three dots wiggle as she writes her message. They stay there for a long time, then disappear before coming back and then, **Just run of the mill. Nothing special happened. What were you up to today?**

Mostly just work stuff. I hung out and had pizza with a friend after work. We watched a movie.

I love movies. Which one did you watch?

Then we message back and forth forever about movies and books and so many things. I am so comfortable talking to her. I kinda feel like Cyrano and Christian rolled into one. When we're

together the chemistry is off the charts but not much talking goes on.

She messages me. **I would like to meet sooner than we agreed.**

I'm stunned for a moment then panicked, **Really? When?** I reply, knowing I want to meet her but also knowing she might get mad at me.

How about the day after Valentine's Day?

Interesting. Not on Valentine's Day. **Okay. Where?**

Fountain Square Park near the depot at the water fountain at one, she replies.

Okay. It's a date. She sends back a smiley face emoji. **How will I know it is you?**

I will be wearing a red beret, she answers. **How about you?**

I will have flowers and will be wearing a black suit with a purple tie.

Purple, huh?

Yes. Pink is so overdone.

She sends a laughing face emoji then we message for a while longer.

I better go, she messages me. **I have a lot of work to do before I get ready for the wedding tomorrow.**

I type, "See ya there," but I realize my mistake. I delete it then write. **I look forward to it. Sweet dreams.**

Sweet dreams, she responds with a blushing smiley face.

I suddenly want to throw away my phone. She is flirting with and talking to another guy after that amazing kiss we shared in the closet. It hurts but, on some level, I know that if the shoe was on the other foot, I would be doing the same thing to her.

If she knew I was Aaron and was making plans to see her as “Maria” she would be hurt too. I have gotten us into this mess, and I have to make a good plan to get us out without losing her. Of course, I do have the fact that I know it is her I am flirting with on my side.

I just have to get through the wedding without spilling the beans then I have to make sure that I have an awesome plan for when we meet. I shift gears into my work brain. I make plans and solve problems for a living. Surely, I can do this.

Chapter 32



A^{va}

I can't believe I just made plans to meet Aaron after that incredible kiss I shared with Hudson at the rehearsal. Why do I even want to meet Aaron now? I am pretty sure that I want to be in a relationship with Hudson.

But... I like Aaron. We talk about so many things and quite frankly, I have been too busy kissing Hudson to talk much. I feel my cheeks flush. He is so good at kissing. I am sure we could have some amazing conversations if my stupid brain could just switch off its kissing gene right now.

Tia says I owe it to myself to look at my options and decide which man I like better. I'm afraid that I can't decide because I like them both so much. My brain is too tired to make this decision and I'm going to look awful tomorrow if I don't get some sleep soon.

I have to be at the shop to help with all of the Valentine's orders at seven in the morning. Then I have to go get my hair and make-up and nails done for the wedding. Vi has booked us all in at the salon. After that we go to the wedding venue.

My crew will set everything up, so I am free for the ceremony. Then it's the reception. I can't wait to see Hudson in his wedding clothes.

I hope I can control myself and not get us into the same kind of situation we were in tonight. I smile remembering that steamy kiss and the whole shirt situation. I definitely do not regret it.

I am, however, glad that Di came in before my dress came off. It would have been way worse if she had come in after. Fortunately, she is the only one that knows about it.

I put my phone on the charger and drop into bed with all of these thoughts whirling through my head. It takes me a while to wind down and sleep.

I hear wind chimes. It sounds like they are really close by because they are so loud. They're annoying and I wish I could stop them. Wind chimes shouldn't be at a house on the ocean; it disturbs my ability to hear the waves.

They are even louder than before. They are so annoying, and I wish I could stop them. I curl my toes into the warm sand and reach for my fruity drink. The chimes sound louder, and I jerk awake.

I'm momentarily confused about where I am, then my wind chime alarm sounds at its highest level. I slap at the offending device until it stops. I fight the urge to snuggle deeper under the covers and push myself up in bed. I really do not want to get up. Why didn't I take the whole day off?

Because it wouldn't be fair to your employees to dump all the Valentine's work on them, my conscience yells at me.

I know. I know. I say out loud. I actually am dreading the whole day by the time I get dressed and take my soda to my truck. I just really want to be in my greenhouse tending my plant babies. Instead, I have to get all dolled up and stuffed into heels and a dress for hours. Even the thought of seeing Hudson doesn't help. It actually makes it worse.

"Good morning," Tia says a little too cheerfully for my taste as I push open the door to the shop.

"What's so good about it?" I ask grumpily.

She gives me an assessing look. "Looks like you got up on the wrong side of the bed today."

"I don't want to talk about my bed. It's a traitor."

"Your bed is a traitor? Why?" she asks me with a grin in her voice.

“It wouldn’t let me get comfortable last night. I didn’t sleep well.”

Your bed kept you from getting comfortable last night?”

“Yes, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” she says with a chuckle and turns back to the gorgeous arrangement of roses that she is working on.

I throw my stuff in a pile on my workbench and slide into the seat. I sit there for a few minutes and watch her. She seems super happy.

“Why are you all sunshine and rainbows this morning?”

“I told my parents about the baby last night. They are thrilled.”

My heart melts a little and I smile. “I am very happy for you Tia.”

“Yes, they offered to help when and where they can. They even talked about moving to town. I told them it wasn’t necessary, but momma is going to help me with the nursery.”

“That is wonderful,” I say.

“What gives with you this morning?” She asks.

“I moved the date up with Aaron.”

“What?” she squeals.

“You heard me, but I’m not sure why. I like Hudson and I don’t want to mess it up.”

“I can understand that,” she says as she snips a flower stem, “but you aren’t officially a couple yet and I know you like Aaron too.”

“I do. It is kinda nice to take the physical aspect out of it. He hasn’t even seen all of me,” I say as I look down at myself.

“All of you is beautiful and he will like all of you too. I mean, obviously Hudson does.”

“That’s the other thing. I like all of Hudson too. And I just want to kiss him all the time.” I tell her about the whole fiasco at the wedding rehearsal. She just laughs.

“That is fantastic. What a great story you will have to tell.”

“To whom? I have no one I want to tell that story to,” I say as my cheeks flame.

“You will one of these days, even if you aren’t with Hudson then.”

“And I really am over getting gussied up for all of these weddings. Please tell me that you aren’t getting married anytime soon. I need a break from weddings.”

“Nope. No wedding plans for me,” she smiles,” but baby shower plans will soon be a thing.” She pats her tummy softly. “Norbert here is going to come before we know it.”

I soften at the look on her face and the thought of a sweet little baby to hold. “I can’t wait to spoil ummm Norbert. Why Norbert?”

“You know the whole dragon egg and Hagrid thing from the books?”

“Ahh, I see.” I say with a chuckle. “Let’s hope that your little dragon doesn’t breathe fire.”

“Sometimes, I feel like my stomach is on fire. Heartburn has been a thing already.” She spins the vase she’s working on, and I take inventory of her face and the changes I already see there. I feel a tug of longing in my stomach. I can imagine a soft little baby of my own with wavy hair falling over its face.

It sends a shock to my system that I am thinking of babies that look like Hudson. I look up at the ceiling and take a breath. I just need to get to work to distract me from my men problems.

“How many work orders do we have this morning?”

“Fifty-five.”

“What?!!”

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

“It’s wonderful, but I’m going to be gone most of the day. I can’t do this to you. I know more will come in.”

“Oh yeah, these are just the online orders. Jayden has a huge stack up front too. It’s already a mad house and Nic is up there working. I can’t keep the shelves stocked.

“I’m glad I’ve got extra help coming today. I’ll go call a couple more people.”

“Good idea. We’re going to need it. I haven’t checked the online system since 5:30 this morning. I’m sure there are more orders, and it is early yet.”

I walk to the office as she starts humming a tune. I officially hate this day. I better get more caffeine.

Five hours later I throw my clippers on the bench and try to stretch the ache from my back. The workroom is full of employees, flowers line all of the shelves and are stacked so high I can’t see most of the people in the room, and I can hear the rumble of voices in the lobby out front. It’s the busiest Valentine’s Day I have ever had. We have over two hundred orders to fill. Even with six of us working all day, it is going to be hard to get it done.

“Hey,” I say as Nic comes in from the alley. “How’s it going?”

“It’s crazy. I have been all over town and so have the other two drivers you have working. I’ve never seen it like this. I wonder what is different this year?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe all the weddings we have done since fall.” I shrug. “I’m not complaining though.” I rub my sore hands.

“Me neither. What’s good for you, is good for me.” He smiles. I wonder how he can still be single. He is kind and funny and good looking in the earthy way some men have. He is tall and has a lumberjack build but I know he’s not one of those gym guys who lift weights for entertainment.

“Glad to help.” I laugh. “Why don’t you send Jayden out for deliveries and send Rosa up to counter duty, get your hands on some flowers?”

“That would be amazing. I will gladly stay in and let Jayden drive for a while,” he says as he disappears through the door to the lobby.

“I could use some lunch,” Tia says.

“I will order us all some.” I say as I stand up. “It’s my treat today since we can’t really get out of here to go to lunch. Is Mexican food alright with everyone?”

I hear a bunch of disconnected voices from piles of flowers say, “Yes,” “Please,” and “Sounds good.”

I call La Huerta, order a couple of their family meals, and send Jayden after them before he goes on delivery runs.

As I sit back down to work on another arrangement, I feel my phone buzz in my pocket.

Hey, gorgeous. I am looking forward to walking you down the aisle tonight. I can feel the corners of my mouth lift in a smile as I think of tonight and dancing in Hudson’s arms.

Hey good lookin’. I’m looking forward to tonight. Can’t wait to slow dance with you.

There’s no frilly lace on your dress is there? He adds a laughing face.

Not even a little. I return the laughing face emoji. **We can dance close with no worries.**

He returns a smiling face and heart and guilt swamps me and I remember that I have plans in two days to meet another man. I hide my face in shame. Why am I doing this to Hudson? I like him so much and he could be the one. I also like Aaron though and enjoy spending hours talking to him like I did last night. Just his words are attractive to me and it’s nice to not have all the confusion of kissing added to our relationship.

The back door slams open, and I jump. “Wooh, it is windy out there.” Jayden enters with his arms loaded down with take-out containers.

I clear a space on a worktable for him to deposit the food and Tia shuts the door. "Is it getting colder?" I ask Jayden as I think of the sleeveless black dress I will be wearing tonight.

"No, it's actually pretty warm, just very windy."

My phone buzzes and I see the last message from Hudson.

That is fantastic. See you later, beautiful. And I shove the phone into my pocket, trying to send my guilt with it.

"Ava, what time do you have to be at the salon?"

"At three. I better hurry with my lunch so I can get some more work done." I say as I grab plates and plasticware from the storage closet.

"Don't worry, the rest of us can take up the slack. After five all of us can work on arrangements," Tia says, as she loads her plate with tacos.

"What about deliveries?"

"I can do those until about eight," Jayden says, then I can come back and make arrangements until they're done.

"Tia, aren't you coming to the wedding?"

"I think I will sit this one out," she says. "I'm not much up for crowds right now. Nic and I can take the centerpieces out and get them on the tables. Then we'll come back here and finish up."

"As soon as the picture taking and all the cake and bouquet throwing nonsense is over, I'll slip away and come back to help."

"No, you won't. You enjoy the evening. We can manage."

"I don't think I will enjoy myself knowing you guys are back here working yourselves to death over my business."

"Hey, your business keeps paychecks in our pockets," Lauren, a seasonal employee, chimes in. "I'm glad to work all the hours I can right now."

"Thanks, Lauren. We couldn't do it without you."

“That’s settled then,” Tia adds. “Let’s eat.”

We take our plates back to the workbench we share. “What’s wrong with you today?” Tia asks quietly. “You seem unhappy, especially about going tonight.”

“I’m not sure other than I am confused and guilty over dancing with Hudson tonight and meeting Aaron in two days. I feel like a cheat.”

“Have you and Hudson had the define the relationship thing?”

“No, we have not had a DTR talk.”

“And you haven’t agreed to be exclusive?”

“No, but I’m not sure that applies here.”

“It does. You have just started seeing each other. You have had... what, three dates?”

“Two official dates. The rest have been like accidental meetups.”

“See. You aren’t even really dating yet. You’ve gone on a couple of dates.”

“But-”

“No, buts. He’s the first guy you have gone out with in a looong time.”

“Not that long.”

“A looong time, sweetheart. Give yourself the opportunity to see what is out there before you settle.”

“It seems pretty serious. I know I’d be hurt if I caught him going out with another girl.”

“Do you think he will be hurt if he knows?”

“I think he might be.”

“You could be honest with him and tell him you have a date in two days.”

I groan. “I probably should be shouldn’t I?”

“That is for you to decide. I don’t think you have to tell him because it’s just a casual meetup with Aaron. You have no strings attached to either guy right now. Just allow yourself to have some fun.”

“Maybe you’re right.” I sigh. “I just don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“You are a good person, and you will make the right call.” Tia says as she bites into another taco and gets a dreamy look on her face. “That is good, right there.” She points to the taco then drops her voice. “The baby likes that.”

I laugh. “You are so darn cute. I can’t wait to meet that baby of yours,” I whisper for her ears only.

Suddenly tears spring to her eyes and run down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Tia. Are you ok? I’m not sure what I said wrong.

“It’s just hormones. I cry at everything. I cried because there was a cute kitten video on my phone this morning. I cried over a daffodil in my garden. I cried because my milk at breakfast tasted so good,” she says, blubbering.

I hug her, as she sniffs and says, “I will be alright in a minute.” She puts her taco down, blows her nose and gives me a watery smile.

“That’ll teach me to compliment you.” I say and we both laugh as her tears begin to dry up.

“I never knew pregnancy was so volatile,” she says, so nobody else can hear. “My emotions are all over the place. I squished a whole muffin this morning because it made me mad.” She laughs. “I hope it calms down soon.”

“Hopefully, it will,” I say. “I’ve never been around pregnant women to know.”

“Me neither.” Tia says. “I joined a couple of social media groups, so I can get some info from other women. I also checked out some books.”

“I’d like to read up on it too, so I can be there for you.”

“Thanks, Ava. I can always count on you.” She finishes her taco, and we clear our trash.

“I’m happy to return the favor, bestie.” I say as I pick up my clippers. “Besides, I am excited to be an Auntie.”

“Good cause I’m going to need a sitter,” she laughs.

“It didn’t take long for that to come up,” I joke back. “If my love life blows up like I think it will when Hudson finds out I’m seeing someone else, I’ll have plenty of time to babysit.”

“Ava, it will all work out,” she says as she snips the stem on a long red rose.

“I hope you are right.” I watch her begin to create another masterpiece before I turn to my own order.

* * *

I feel fidgety as we arrive at the wedding venue. After being in the salon chair for the better part of two hours while my hair got styled and all my nails and makeup were done, I am ready to be free from the chaos for a few minutes.

“Vi, I’m going to check on the arrangements.” I say and slip out the door before she can stop me. She has our other friends to pamper her and help with the last-minute details of getting dressed.

I walk into the silent hall where the tables and chairs are set up. Our simple but stunning arrangements of black roses and red carnations have been added. And the center pieces for the gift and food tables are out of this world gorgeous. I can see Tia’s handiwork in those arrangements. They are elegant and every bit as gothic as Vi wanted.

I wouldn’t have thought that black roses, red carnations and baby’s breath could be turned into such gorgeous works of art, but they have been and as I look over the hall, I realize it is going to be breathtaking with the candlelight and soft music tonight.

The caterer enters with a load of plates in her hands. “It’s magical, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I say.

“The florist was a real artist. I have done hundreds of events, and these are the most unique arrangements I have seen,” she touches a soft petal after she sets her plate down.

I am suddenly shy as I say, “Thanks.”

“You did this?” she asks.

“My team and I did, yes.”

“Well, you should be proud. I’m Crissy, by the way.” She extends her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Crissy. I’m Ava.”

“Well, Ava, I think you are going to be very busy with weddings after this one.”

“I hope you’re right Crissy.”

I’m pretty sure I am right. Are you also in the wedding party?”

“I’m a bridesmaid.”

“I won’t keep you then. I know you are going to be wanted in a few minutes. It was nice to meet you.”

“You too.” I watch her walk away and think about her kind words. It’s nice to have someone recognize my work like that. I brush the centerpieces and straighten a few as I walk through the hall to the window overlooking the gardens. I take a few breaths to steel myself up for the next few hours and enjoy the peace of the moment.

Chapter 33



Hudson

I'm just walking past the event space when I catch a glimpse of movement. I step into the room to find Ava straightening centerpieces as she walks through the room. She's only making tiny adjustments but even I can see the difference they make to the overall look.

She is breathtaking in her black dress and heels. Her hair is simply styled, and its shortness accentuates her neck. I want to go to her and kiss the softness at her nape, but I hold back enjoying the opportunity to study her.

There seems to be an air of sadness or unrest about her that I haven't seen before, so I shrink back towards the door as she stands in the window framed by the fading sunset and gardens. I wonder what is on her mind as I try to make as little noise as possible.

I'm about to slip out the door to allow her some privacy when she turns and looks straight at me. A look of panic passes across her face before it is replaced by a smile. "Are you stalking me?"

"I was just passing when I saw you. You look lovely." We both stay where we are but a current flows between us. "Is it bad luck to see you before the ceremony?"

She laughs and it sends ripples of pleasure across my skin. "That's only for the bride and groom." She moves towards me and that breaks the spell that has held me in place.

We cross the wide expanse of the room and meet somewhere in the middle, only a few inches separating us. Electricity crackles as she takes in my wedding garb and reaches up to straighten my tie. I'm nearly undone by that small movement.

“You look lovely yourself, Hudson.” She chuckles. “See no lace to get caught in,” and she slowly spins around so I can see her dress.

My breath catches and I am mesmerized by the sway of her hips and her elegance. I feel tongue tied and can't really say anything. I just stand there dumbstruck.

She completes her turn and looks at me, “Are you ok?”

I continue to stare. She pokes me. “Hudson, are you alright?” She looks concerned.

I swallow hard trying to hold down the desire I have to take her hand and run from here to a place where I can kiss her. She puts her hand on my lapel and I grab it, “Uh yeah. I'm fine. I'm just thinking of kissing you.”

A wicked smile crosses her face, “My lipstick would smear all over your lips.”

“It's a risk I'm willing to take.”

She laughs and steps back just out of my reach, “Well I'm not. I spent way too long in the salon chair today. I already feel like a trussed-up pig in this outfit without having to undergo more makeup.”

I snort at the image she paints. “You don't look anything like a trussed-up pig.”

“I'm glad. I would hate to think my day had been a complete waste of time.”

“Completely worth what you went through. You will outshine Vi.” I take her hand and rub my finger across it. I can see her slight shiver at the contact.

“I hope I don't outshine her. She should be the center of attention.”

“I will only have eyes for you, though.” I continue to trace circles on the back of her hand with my thumb.

“I better go,” she says as I see the panic flash through her eyes again.

“Is everything alright?” I ask before I release her hand.

“Yes,” she hesitates for just a split second and then goes on, “I’m just stressed and worried over all the work I have at the shop.”

“I can help if you need it.”

“Can you arrange flowers?” She asks.

“No, I would make a mess of that, but I can do deliveries and take orders and clean up.”

“I might just take you up on that. Right now, I better get back to Vi.” She releases my hands and practically runs across the room to the door.

I watch her go as a sliver of fear snakes its way through my guts. Could she possibly know about my deception as Aaron or is she going to break up with me?

I jump as a hand clamps down on my shoulder. I whirl around and start to punch my attacker when I realize it is Jace.

“Whoa, bro. It’s just me.”

“Sorry. I went into defense mode for a second.” I say and straighten my suit.

“I could tell. The question is why?”

“You just startled me, that’s all.”

“And you went super ninja on me.”

“Yeah, it must be the James Bond clothes I am wearing.” I laugh.

“Everything good between you and Ava?”

“I think so, although she seems a little off today. She says it’s the stress of work.”

“I imagine it’s a busy time of year for her.”

“I wonder if it has to do with her conversation with “Aaron” last night and if she’s going to dump me.”

“You know something she doesn’t about that.”

“What?”

Jace just stares at me until I realize what he is saying, “Oh yeah duh. If she doesn’t hate me when she finds out, maybe it will all work out.”

“I hope so.” He pats my shoulder again. “Do you think we might be able to steal some of that delicious smelling bread?”

“You can try. I gotta find Bryce and go get ready to line up.”

“See ya later.” He smiles as he heads to the kitchen.

I shove down my nerves and go looking for Bryce.

Chapter 34



A^{va}

I slide into my seat next to Hudson and take a bite of the chocolate cake we just nabbed from the dessert table. I am a fanatic for chocolate cake and apparently, he is too. My panic from earlier has subsided in all of the excitement of the wedding and photos.

I've managed to relax and enjoy being on Hudson's arm all evening. I discovered he has massive biceps under those slim cut button up business shirts he wears. I was able to feel his nervousness as we walked down the aisle together earlier and for some reason that calmed me down. If someone that looks like him and has all that money can be nervous, then I am not so weird after all.

"Hudson Aaron Carlisle, you better get up and give me a hug." A slow southern drawl disturbs my reverie. I look up to a very tall, elegant woman gliding across the room towards us.

"Grandma," Hudson drops his fork and stands up to be engulfed into a citrusy floral scented hug by the woman. "I didn't see you earlier.

"That is because you were too busy looking at this beauty." I realize she has turned her eyes to me.

I automatically stand up from years of southern condition to show respect for your elders. I feel a blush creep up my cheeks as she takes in all of me.

"You are quite lovely my dear," she says as she extends her hand. I'm Maggie Carlisle, Hudson's grandmother."

"Thank you for the compliment. I'm Ava. It's a pleasure to meet you."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too. I understand you are the one who made that delightful arrangement I got for my wedding anniversary. And all of these for this evening too.” She gestures at the flowers around the room.

“Yes ma’am. I did have lots of help from my team with the wedding though.”

“Beautiful, talented, and humble. She is quite a catch, Hudson. You better hang onto her.”

It was Hudson’s turn to blush. “I plan to try, Gran, if you don’t scare her off first.”

“Nonsense. I think she’s made of tough stuff. Now come dance with me.”

She left no room for negotiating as she held out her arm. Hudson took it and said, “Save my seat.”

I watched as they made their way across the room to the dance floor, and he led her in a waltz. She was elegant, graceful and a good dancer. Everything that I wasn’t. I hoped by the time I was her age, I might be like that, but I was willing to bet her bedroom never had clothes everywhere, bras hanging from chairs and that she didn’t slump around her house wearing lounge pants and oversized stained t-shirts.

“Hiya, gorgeous.” I jumped and swung around with my fist up.

“Whoa, no need for fisticuffs.” Jace said with a twinkle in his eyes. “I got the same reaction from Hudson earlier.”

“You need to make some noise when you walk up,” I said a bit sheepishly. “You walk around like a ninja all the time?”

“Not that I am aware of. Maybe you were just lost deep in your thoughts.”

I sigh, “I was,” and I look towards Hudson and his grandma.

“She is an elegant lady. One of a kind actually. Are you worried she won’t like you?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“I’m not like her at all.”

“And there is a problem with that?”

“There is if that is what Hudson is looking for in a woman. I have dirt and plants on me most of the time. I’m certainly not stately and elegant.”

“I certainly hope Hudson isn’t looking for a woman like his gran. That would be weird.” He laughs.

I join him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Sounded like it to me, flower girl.”

I freeze at that name. Could Jace know? Surely not. Another thing clicks in my mind. Hudson’s grandma called him Hudson Aaron. Could it be? I shake my head dismissing both ideas when Jace asks, “Where is Tia tonight? I was hoping she would be here.”

“She is at the shop, where I should be.” I look at my watch. “I really should go now.”

“Hudson will be devastated if you don’t stay and dance with him. I could go keep Tia company.”

“She would kill me if I sent you over there. Do you even know anything about flowers?”

“I know a rose when I see one,” he laughs, “and I do know my way around a cash register and a broom handle.”

“You sound like Hudson.”

“Oh, you wound me.” He says as he places his hands dramatically over his chest and I can’t help but laugh.

“There’s nothing wrong with Hudson. It could’ve been taken as a complement.”

“But it wasn’t given as one. Let’s dance.” He grabs my hand and practically drags me towards the dance floor.

“Jace what- Jace,” I try swatting at his hands but realize it would make me look childish in front of all these people. I stand up straight and follow him.

He stops right next to Hudson and his grandmother and pulls me so close I can hardly breathe. Then suddenly he sends me spinning out to the end of his arm and whirls me back in. I’m dizzy and I slump into him for support. “What are you doing?” I hear Hudson hiss at him.”

“Dancing with the most beautiful woman here besides your grandmother.

“Thank you, dear.” I hear Hudson’s grandma say. “Although if you keep spinning her like that Jace, she may lose her dinner on you. She is not a top.”

“True. I will be more gentle next time.”

“There better not be a next time,” I say, just as I feel Jace pull away from me and Hudson trades places with him.

“Don’t spin my Gran either,” Hudson says menacingly.

“Oh, I can take care of myself,” Gran says and she laughs as she dances away with Jace.

“Thanks, I say. If he had spun me again, I would have barfed on him.”

“Maybe I should have left you to it then,” Hudson laughs.

“I’m glad you rescued me. I wanted to tell you something.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I’m going to need to leave so I can go to the shop since the wedding festivities are winding down.”

“Oh.” He looks deflated. “I had hoped we would have a few more dances before we had to leave.”

“You don’t have to leave. You should stay since your gran is here.”

“I think Pops can take care of her.” He points towards a tall, lanky man who is cutting in to rescue Jace from Gran.

“You look a lot like him in the face,” I say as I study the pair. “It’s easy to see where you get your height. “Are those your dad’s parents?”

“Yes, they are.” He seems to clam up when I talk about his family. “My mother’s father was pretty tall too, though I didn’t know him well. So, when should we go?” He smoothly changes the subject.

“I need to check with Vi to see if there is anything else she needs then I will be ready.”

“Ok, I will go talk to Bryce while you do that.” He leans close and kisses my forehead at the hairline and goosebumps break out along my bare flesh, I feel his fingers skate along the skin of my shoulder and down to my hand before he lets me go. “I’ll meet you in the hall in ten.”

“Alright,” I say, and we part ways to find our friends.

I find Vi, say my goodbyes and give all my friends hugs. I know they understand how busy I am right now, but I still feel bad leaving them behind.

I gather my things from the bride’s room and get back to the hall just as Hudson and Jace walk up. I feel a tug of fondness for these two guys who are willing to leave the fun to help us out.

“Ready?” Hudson asks.

“Yes, thanks. I appreciate your help.”

“We’re glad to spend the evening with you and Tia.” Jace smiles.

“You may not think that at two in the morning,” I say.

“Two?”

“Yep, it may take us that long.”

“I better stop for some supplies before I get to the shop then,” Jace says.

“Supplies?” I ask as we make our way out the door to the parking lot.

“Snacks and sodas,” he says, “We gotta have the right fuel to get through the night. I’ll meet you at the shop in thirty minutes or so,” he says. He walks off towards his car whistling.

“Is he always so positive?” I ask Hudson.

“Pretty much, unless you don’t feed him, or you interrupt his sleep. Then he turns into a gremlin.”

“I will keep that in mind.” I chuckle thinking of the movie from my childhood. “Is he safe to feed after midnight?”

“Hudson laughs, “I think so.”

“Good, we don’t need him rampaging through the streets.”

“On second thought we should play it safe and not feed him after midnight.” He laughs and swings my hand between us as we walk to my truck.

Just as we reach it, he pauses and swings me to him and pulls me close. He closes the distance between us and brushes my hair back with his free hand. He kisses me lightly on the lips at first then he intensifies the kiss as I relax into it.

We spend a few sweet moments enjoying the feel of each other’s lips and the closeness we are sharing before he pulls back. “I have been wanting to do that since the first time I saw you tonight.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t throw up on you.”

“What?!” he asks. “Was it that bad?”

I laugh at the horror on his face. “No silly, but I don’t do well with spinning.”

“That would have been pretty awkward.” Hudson laughs.

“It would have been straight up gross.” I laugh. I kiss him one more time and say, “See you at the shop in half an hour.”

“I look forward to it.”

“I just hope you don’t regret it.”

“I won’t,” he gives a wave as he walks away.

I sit and enjoy the view of him in his wedding finery. I really hope he doesn't regret it.

Chapter 35



Hudson

I park my car in front of Stop and Smell the Flowers as I see Jace open his car door. “Is it locked,” I call as I get out.

“Yeah. I wonder if there is a side entrance. I knocked a few times, but no one answered.”

“I think there is. Let’s go look.”

“Here take this,” he says and hands me two grocery bags and goes back to his car for a drink cooler.

“You certainly came prepared.”

“I didn’t know how many people might be here, so I got a bunch of stuff.”

“I don’t think there will be enough people to eat all of this.”

“Good, more for me then.”

“Are you safe to feed after midnight?” I ask him.

He punches my shoulder, “Of course I am. I’m not a gremlin.”

“I told Ava you weren’t.” I say as I wince.

“Thanks for having my back,” he pokes me in the same spot he just hit.

“What was that for?”

“Just to make you want to rub it more. I know you want to, and you can’t because of those bags you are carrying.”

“You can be such a jerk.”

“But I’m right.” He laughs as he disappears around the corner of the building.

I ask myself for the thousandth time, *why I am friends with him* as I shift the heavy bags of snacks to my other arm.

We get to the door, and he knocks. We wait for several minutes before it opens a crack and Jayden's head appears.

"What do *you* want?" He looks at us like we are gum on his shoe.

"We told Ava we would help." Jace says, ignoring his surliness, "She's expecting us."

He closes the door in our faces.

"Now there's a jerk." Jace says.

"What's his beef?" I ask.

"He's being territorial. He likes Ava or Tia... Maybe both."

"You think?"

"Yeah, I do," he says as the door opens all the way and the surly blonde lets us in.

"Thanks," we say.

"You're only getting in because she said I had to let you in. I'm watching you." He says and points two fingers towards his eyes then towards us.

"We are perfect gentlemen." Jace says.

"Right." Jayden says, "I just bet you are." He walks away towards a workbench.

"Hey," I hear coming from behind a pile of roses almost as high as my head then Tia pokes her head up over the top. "Thanks for coming," she says to me then gives Jace a once over. "You too, I guess," she says.

"Do you guys give all of your volunteers such a warm welcome?" Jace asks. "I even brought snacks." He holds up the drink cooler.

Ava pops up over the top of the flowers. "That's really nice of you Jace, isn't it Tia?" She walks over to us and takes the bags from

me. "Let me show you where to put those and give you some instructions."

"Thanks," I say as I follow her to a folding table covered in napkins, plates, and utensils. "Hey everyone, this is Hudson, and this is Jace." She points to us in turn. "They came to help out where they can."

Then she starts pointing out people. "You know Tia, Jayden and Nic." He says 'hey' to us. "And that is Margaret, Lauren, Hayley, Riley, and Noel." Each one of them says "hi" or waves as she points to them in turn. "I really appreciate your being here and I hope you're ready to work."

She hands us an apron and gloves. "The floors need to be swept, the trash emptied, and all of those arrangements need to be moved to the cooler boxes in the front of the shop." She points to a huge number of arrangements lining shelves on each wall of the room.

"How about we start with those?" I ask.

"Perfect, that way the blooms will not start opening because of all the warm bodies in here. I will be at my bench if you need anything." She says and gives me a warm smile and a peck on the cheek before she walks away.

"This is going to be fun," I hear Jace mumble.

"She did warn us." I smile at him. "She told us to come ready to work."

"Fair point." He says as he ties the apron around his waist and puts on the gloves. "The sooner we get started the sooner we finish, I guess," he says as I pull on my apron.

We work for the next ten minutes moving arrangements to the two deep cooler cases in the lobby. "Who knew these were so heavy?" Jace says.

"I know," I say as my biceps start burning. "I guess it's the water in them."

“And the glass vases. I’m glad Ava didn’t punch me when I startled her earlier tonight. I bet she has a mean right hook.”

“What do you mean?”

“At the reception, I came up to her when you went to dance with your Gran, and I spoke to her. I guess she was lost in thought because she jumped and almost punched me before she realized who I was.”

“See, I’m not the only one you sneak up on.” I say as I put the two vases, I’m carrying on the shelves in front of me.

“I don’t mean to sneak up. You’re just in your head too much.”

“I was tonight at least.” I back out of the cooler. “Was that the last of them?”

“Yep. I guess we need to empty trash next.”

“Good idea then we will have somewhere to put the stuff we sweep up.”

“Do you think we will even get to talk to them tonight?” Jace asks.

“I’m sure we will. They have to take a break at some point.”

We spend the next hour emptying trash and cleaning up the floor where they drop their stems as they clip them off.

Ava finally stretches. “I need caffeine.”

“Me too,” Lauren wiggles her fingers and rotates her wrists.

“Tia, you should take a break too. You have been working longer than anybody.”

“I will when I finish this,” she mumbles and surveys the stems in front of her. I can see why Ava hired her and trusts her so much. Her work is truly art, the arrangements seem to flow out of her somehow.

Ava walks over to me. “Want a soda?”

“I do right after I empty this dustpan.” I walk next to her on my way to the trash can and she gets a soda.

She is in her element here in her shop surrounded by flowers and greenery. Her cheeks are flushed, her hair is in disarray and her apron has rose leaves stuck to it. I have never been so attracted to anyone in my life.

“Like the view?” Jace says next to my ear, and I dump the dustpan on the floor.

“Dang it, Jace! Stop that.”

“I couldn’t pass up the chance to do it again.”

“I wish you would’ve. Now I have to sweep this stuff up again.”

“Not sorry,” he chuckles. “It’s fascinating to watch her and Tia at work though, isn’t it?”

“It is. They are real artists. I’m surprised at how quiet they all are when they’re working.”

“I know. I keep thinking I am too loud and will disturb them. I guess they are in a flow state though.”

“I’ve heard of it but never really seen so many people in a flow state before.”

“Me neither. Makes all the hard work worth it, almost.”

“Hey, there is some trash next to my bench that needs to be cleaned up, Jace,” Tia says, and we both jump. She walks off as I try to slow my heart rate.

“Not so funny now, is it?” I smirk at Jace who is rubbing his chest.

“Shut up,” he says and walks towards Tia’s bench. I laugh because he must have it bad for her to clean up like that when she tells him to.

“Thanks for your help,” Ava says next to me and like an idiot I jump for the fourth time that night.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s ok. I’m getting used to it by now. Jace has scared me twice tonight.”

“He got me earlier tonight too.”

“He thinks it’s so funny, but Tia just got him good. Payback is never fun.”

“She seems to have him doing her bidding too.”

“And he seems to be happy doing it.”

“Thanks for coming tonight. It means a lot to us even if Tia is acting a little cold.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

“I would,” she laughs, “I’d be snuggled up on my couch with hot cocoa and a book.”

“That sounds wonderful. I think I would join you.”

“Only if you are quiet while I read,” she raises an eyebrow at me.

“Most definitely. I’d have a book of my own. I might be tempted to rub your feet though.”

“Oh, the torture!” she says sarcastically. “Remind me why we aren’t doing that now.”

“You two behave yourselves.” Tia scolds as she walks by. “We’ll all be wanting a foot rub.”

I feel my face flame red and see it reflected in Ava’s look. “I’ll rub your feet anytime, Tia.”

“You just be quiet, Jace. I didn’t ask you.”

“Why’re you so mean to me? I just offered to give you a foot rub,” he says and follows her back to her bench.

“I just don’t trust you.”

“You wound me so!” He grabs his chest dramatically. “What have I done to earn your mistrust?”

“You exist,” Tia explains calmly then turns her back on him and forcefully snips a stem from a flower.

“Ouch.” I say. “That was harsh. Why does she dislike him?”

“I’m not sure it’s personal. I think she mistrusts all men right now. It’s complicated.”

“Oh. A personal thing then?”

“Yep, a very complicated personal thing. I’m not sure it will go away anytime soon. Not for months.” She looks a little uncomfortable at telling me.

“Wow! Someone must have hurt her pretty badly.”

“It’s complicated. We should dig into those snacks Jace brought and hand some out.”

“Good idea. Food might help the situation.”

“Can’t hurt,” she says as she begins digging in bags and laying out all the chips, candy, and sub sandwiches Jace brought. “There’s even a couple of salads and fruit in here,” she says with her head practically buried in one of the insulated bags. “He planned well. I’m impressed.”

“Jace knows food.”

“Yes, I do.”

I punch him on the shoulder this time as I jump. “Stop doing that! Maybe that’s why Tia doesn’t trust you.” I say and regret it as soon as it comes out.

“Bro. Not cool,” he says with sadness in his voice.

“Hey, Jace. Thanks for bringing all of this. It was very thoughtful,” Ava says, and I feel lower than a snail’s belly at that moment. “Don’t worry about Tia. It isn’t personal. She has a lot going on right now and men aren’t top of her list. Give her some time,” she says and lays a comforting hand on his arm.

I fall more in love with her at that moment. Wait a minute! The L word should not be lurking in my mind so often. I just met her a couple of weeks ago. It must be the place and time. All of these flowers, the wedding and Valentine’s Day tomorrow. Tomorrow? Should I ask her out I wonder.

“Earth to Hudson,” Jace says.

“What?” I ask.

“Ava just asked if you could help hand these out?”

“Uh sure,” I say and take a variety box of chips in one hand and a box of donuts in the other hand.

“You okay? You look a little pale.”

“Yeah. I just had a startling thought, but it will pass.”

“A Walter Mitty moment.” Jace said.

“Man! Nothing like that. I think we are even now.” I say and follow Ava as she circulates with the sandwiches and fruit.

I feel Jace staring at me, and I’m almost tempted to stick out my tongue but even I know it is juvenile. He just gets under my skin sometimes. I guess that is what best friends do.

Someone’s phone chimes and I hear “Good Grief! I need to turn these notifications off. They are making me nuts!”

“What app are they from, Lauren?”

The person I assume is Lauren says, “They’re from Perfect Match, a dating app.”

“My friend, Nicole, has that app. She likes it. Do you?”

“I do. It is pretty anonymous and very safe. I can date from home.”

I trip and nearly fall into Ava who has stopped dead still in front of me. “Sorry,” I say as I narrowly save the donuts.

“Tia set Ava up with an account on that app.”

“Ava, you have Perfect Match?” The woman I think is Hayley asks.

“Uhhh,” she looks desperately at Tia who saves her bacon, “I set her up a while back, but I’m not sure she has been on it.”

I glance behind me at Jace who has a wicked gleam in his eye that I know too well. I shake my head and mouth no at him, but he

ignores me, “Hudson is on there too.” I groan and duck my head.

“*You* are on Perfect Match?” Ava asks.

“Yeah, I am.” I admit, having no choice but to come clean.

“What’s your handle?” she asks suspiciously.

“I go by my middle name on there,” I say cautiously.

She thinks for a moment and then understanding dawns and I see it in her eyes. “Your grandmother called you Hudson Aaron. You go by Aaron on the app?”

I see Tia’s head pop up and her eyes bore into us waiting to see if the reaction is going to be happy or explosive. Ava seems to relax, and I see relief in her eyes.

“Yes, and you go by Maria the flower girl?” I ask, laying all my cards on the table.

“How do you know that?”

“I figured it out a while ago,” I admit quietly but I am still heard because the room full of people has gone completely silent. They seem to be holding their breath and waiting expectantly for something to happen, just like I am.

Ava’s face changes, I see hurt and confusion in her eyes and she says just as quietly. “Get out.”

“Ava, what?” I say in confusion. I thought she would be happy to know.

“Get out,” this time she points to the door. “Get out. I don’t want to see you right now.” She is trembling and her hand is shaking as she points to the door.

“Can we talk ab...”

She cuts me off before I get the question out.

“No, leave. Take Jace with you and leave.”

“Ava, No. Let me explain.”

Nic and Jayden and Tia are by her side in one swift motion. “She asked you to leave, man.” Nic says with steel in his voice. “You need to go.”

Tia takes my arm. “Come on, let’s go.” She steers me to the door, and I see Jace taking off his apron and gloves. “Give her some time.” Tia says so only I can hear. “She will come around. She cares for you.”

“I just wasn’t sure how to tell her.” I say and pull my arm away. “Just let me explain to her.”

“Not right now. Jace take him home,” she says and pushes me gently towards Jace, who is waiting next to the door. “Don’t come back until you hear from her or me,” Tia says as Jace opens the door for me.

I feel the cool night air hit me as I hear the door close behind me. “Sorry man. I didn’t mean to.”

I turn on him, “Yes you did. I saw it in your face. You were mad at me and you couldn’t help yourself.”

“I didn’t mean for it to backfire like this. I wouldn’t hurt you like that.”

“Sure,” I say, and I walk away from my best friend and the woman that I have fallen for.

Chapter 36



A^{va}

I am shaking uncontrollably as I watch the door close on Hudson. The room is deadly quiet and everyone's watching to see what I will do next. I'm not sure they understand what is going on.

I feel Nic stir behind me, "Are you ok, Boss?" This snaps me out of my daze. "I'm fine," I say, knowing I am lying to them and myself. "Let's just get back to work."

I look across the room to see Tia next to the door with a very worried look on her face. I shake my head no and walk back to my bench. The last thing I want to do is to make more arrangements for this stupid holiday about love. I don't want to be making bouquets for men to give to the women they love and vice versa.

I bury my head in my arms for just a moment to keep the tears at bay. I know no one can see me right now but I don't want them to get even a glimpse of the hurt I feel.

How could he have known and not said anything? I feel like a fool. He had known this whole time. I'm sure he and Jace were having a good laugh at my expense. I suddenly have to get out of this room before I explode.

I get up and calmly walk to the backroom like I am going to get a vase. I barely have the door closed when I feel the first tear fall, then they stream down my face as the flood gates open. I was such a fool, hoping to have my own valentine for once, thinking two guys might be interested in me. Weird, strange, plant-loving me.

I walk farther into the darkened room as my heart breaks and a flood of tears rolls down my cheeks to splatter onto my flower-

stained shirt.

“Ava?” I hear a voice break into the quiet of the dark room. “Are you in here honey?” It’s Tia. I don’t really want to answer but I don’t want her to worry.

“Over here,” I say, my voice breaking as I take in a gulp of air and a new wave of tears flows. “You can turn on the light if you need to.”

“It’s ok. I have my phone. Are you ok?”

“No,” I say, “I’m a fool and everyone just saw that.”

“Ah honey. Don’t say that. For what it’s worth none of them in there even understand what just happened.”

“But Hudson and Jace sure knew and have been having a good laugh at my expense I bet.”

“I wouldn’t take that bet,” Tia says. “Hudson seemed very upset when I walked him outside. He wanted to explain himself.”

“Oh, I don’t need to hear it. He knew he was talking to me but let me live without knowing it was him and thinking I was two-timing.” I pace back and forth. “Oh no! No! No! I *was* two-timing him, and he knew it. He knew what I was doing.” I cover my head and tears flow freely. I cannot believe this mess.

I want to shrivel up in a ball in a corner of the room. How did I get here? “I knew I should stay off of dating sites.” I say in a panic-stricken voice and I can feel my adrenaline rushing and my breath coming fast in what I recognize as a panic attack.

Then I feel a hand on my shoulder and hear the soft voice of Tia, “Come here, hon, it really is going to be ok.” She says as she takes me in a safe, warm hug that grounds me. As we stand there hugging, each carrying a burden of our own, my heart and breathing slow and my tears begin to dry up.

I am not sure how long we hug each other before she says, “That’s good. Now we can work on solutions.” She pauses and

then she says, “You sure are a hot body, girl. I’m all sweaty now.” That breaks the tension of the last few minutes, and we laugh.

I feel my breath shudder from all of the crying I had just been doing, my eyes hurt, and my nose was stopped up. “I must look awful, I say.”

Her phone lights up and she laughs, “If by awful you mean racoon eyes and red nose, then yeah you look pretty awful.”

“You are so good for my ego.” I say as I wipe my eyes trying to remove the mascara I had worn for the wedding.

“Why don’t you call it a night? I think we’re down to just a few more orders and you have had a long day already.”

“I’m not leaving while there is work to be done. This business is my responsibility after all. I’ll just go clean up in the bathroom and get back to work.”

“Are you sure?”

“I can handle it.”

“You are the one who probably needs to go put her feet up and rest.” I say.

“Nope, I’m good, and we are in this together. After tomorrow we can rest all we want.”

“What am I going to do about Hudson?”

“You have to figure out what you want to do first. It might not be all that bad in reality once the shock wears off.”

“Maybe you’re right. For now, I’m going to go to work. Hudson can just wait until I am ready to deal with him.”

“Alright, let’s go get this done then.”

Chapter 37



Hudson

“I don’t understand why she blew up and wouldn’t let me talk to her,” I say to Jace as I pace my living room. “She was the one who thought she was talking to and making dates with two different guys. *I* should be mad.”

“I think she was caught off guard and got embarrassed because everyone was there. If you give it time-”

“Give it time?! I don’t want to waste any more time. I am pretty sure I’m in love with her.” There, I said it, the big L word and it felt good.

“Wow!” Jace rubbed his hand across his forehead and then through his hair. “That’s a big announcement to just drop on me. Are you sure it is the L word?”

“Pretty sure,” I stop pacing and plop down in the chair closest to me. “I think about her all the time. I want to be with her all the time. I can’t seem to get enough of her. That is love, isn’t it?”

“Can you imagine life without her?”

“I can and it sucks man!”

“Then, yeah, I think you are in love. Although I am no expert since I can never claim to have been in love before. Could be a virus or infatuation I guess.”

I throw a pillow at him and hit him square in the face. “This is all your fault by the way.”

“My fault? Exactly how do you see it as my fault?”

“You signed me up for that app.”

“Uh, no, I didn’t sign you up. You did that yourself with advice from Gran.”

“And you convinced me it was a good idea if you remember.”

“I told you that I had had good experiences dating with it. I, however, didn’t sign you up. You did that all by your little lonesome.”

“Well now, you can help me fix it.”

“Have you tried calling her?”

“Yes, no answer.”

“Texting?”

“No answer.”

“Messaging her on the app?”

“She deleted her profile. So, I deleted mine.”

“You deleted your profile?”

“Yes, I only want Ava, so there is no point.”

“Ok, if, you are sure.”

“I used the L word, dude. I’m sure. White dress and wedding march sure.”

“Wait a minute! That is drastic, bro. Wedding bells. You can’t be serious.”

“Wedding bells serious.”

“Maybe it will pass after all of this Valentine’s Day nonsense.”

“I don’t think so. And that is beside the point since she isn’t talking to me right now and I need to at least get back to that point.”

“You need a grand gesture then.”

“What do you mean by a grand gesture?”

“You know like in the movies?”

“In the movies?”

“How are you so dense sometimes?”

“I am not dense. I shouldn’t even be talking to you. If you hadn’t brought up Perfect Match, then this blow up wouldn’t have happened like it did in the first place.”

Jace has the decency to look ashamed for once, “You are completely right there. I’m surprised you’re talking to me honestly. I messed up bad and I am sorry.”

“Help me get her back and we’ll call it even. I should have already talked to her about it before now. I was just scared to. So back to a grand gesture. Explain.”

“You know when the guy messes up a good thing and he does something hugely romantic to win back the girl?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

That is what you need. What are her favorite things? We can start there.”

“Flowers and plants are honestly her favorite things next to chocolate and coke zero.”

“Sounds like a good place to start. You might have to bring Tia in on it.”

“Really? She scares me.”

“Me too dude, but she is Ava’s best friend that we have access to.”

“Yeah, Vi is on her honeymoon by now or she might help. So, give me your ideas,” I say as I go to the desk and get a pen and paper.

An hour later and I have four pages of ideas that I have scratched through and one we think might just work. It will definitely require help from Tia if I want to do it right. “This looks good. Only one problem that I see.”

“What is that?”

“I don’t have Tia’s phone number.”

“That is a big problem. Do you think you could call the shop and ask for her?”

“Not tonight. I bet they are gone by now and it might be obvious.

“I will call during business hours tomorrow. Then it won’t seem so weird.”

“Good idea. I guess it’s too late to even go shopping tonight.”

“I think so. I will do that in the morning too.”

“I can help.”

“That would be good because I have never even shopped for some of this stuff. Maybe I should ask Gran’s advice.”

“Good idea. Let’s go over around breakfast and bend her ear.” Jace seems extra eager. I imagine thoughts of Gran’s biscuits and gravy are dancing through his head.

“Ok. We have a plan. I will see you around 8:30 in the morning.”

“Alright.” He says as he stands up and stretches. “I really am sorry, Hudson. I messed up big time.”

“It’s ok. Best friends mess up and forgive.” I give him a bro hug and he heads to the door. Just before he gets there he says, “Any chance your Gran will have biscuits and gravy in the morning?”

“I knew it! I knew you were thinking that!” I laugh. “I bet she will!”

“Great! See ya in the morning for Operation Win Ava Back,” he says as he slips out the door.

Chapter 38



A^{va}

I slip into the quiet shop. The smell of flowers and greenery hit my nose and I can feel the calming effect they have on my nerves. I didn't sleep much last night even though I was exhausted after working until well after one.

I finally gave up on sleep and came to work. I feel bad about how I treated Hudson. I'm embarrassed that I reacted the way I did. I felt guilt all the way to my toes when he revealed he was Aaron. I was acutely aware that it appeared I had been stepping out on him.

Then I felt stupid that I hadn't figured it out and he had, but none of that matters now that I pushed him away. I don't know what to do to get him back or if he will even want me. I'm too tired to figure out the solution or to answer these questions.

I'm at the shop to ease those pains and do the one thing I know I can do without thinking about Hudson. I slip on my apron and gather any tickets for orders that need to be filled. After yesterday's explosion of orders, I'm surprised to find so few. That's a good thing because it will allow us to create some make-and-take bouquets for walk-in customers.

I work for two hours before Tia shows up. I've done almost all of the orders that have come in and sip a coke zero and eat a twinkie, which I usually avoid because they aren't food, they are chemicals. But they were handy when I needed some sugar. They are left over from Jace's snack stash from the night before.

"Hey, Ava," Tia says as she walks through the side door. "How are you this morning? I can hear the fatigue in her voice.

"Shameful" I answer. "Want a snack cake?" I wiggle one in her direction.

“No, thanks, those things will kill you.” She eyes the one in my hand.

“But they give a sugar boost when you need one,” I say as I shove the last bite into my mouth hoping she won’t ask how long I have been here, but she doesn’t take the hint.

“When did you get here?” She surveys the room and ties her apron strings.

“I honestly don’t know. It has been a while now, maybe a couple of hours.”

“Ava! That means you were only home for about two hours!”

“I couldn’t sleep after last night and all the caffeine, so I gave up and came back.” I shrug as I sit at the table and begin a make-and- take bouquet. They usually range from just a few buds to a dozen stems.

“You are going to crash hard in a few hours.”

“I hope it’s after the work is done and then I can just be oblivious to this whole stupid holiday until tomorrow.” I knew I was being a bit dramatic but didn’t care.

“I take it that you are talking about the situation with Hudson.”

“No. I am not talking about Hudson at all, ever. I am talking about this holiday made up to sell flowers and candies. A holiday made up to guilt people into expressing their love or to feel desperately lonely if they don’t have a significant other.”

“This beautiful holiday celebrates love of all kinds: friendship, family, and soul love. And that makes you enough money that you hardly have to have any orders for the next month or two. Especially this year.” She says as she spreads daisies and pink carnations on her work top.

“Yeah, all that mumbo jumbo,” I say grumpily. I know the way I feel today has to do with Hudson because normally, I really love Valentine’s Day. It has to do with feeling truly alone after almost having my own funny valentine.

“All I’m gonna say to you, miss lonely hearts club of one, is that all you have to do is pick up the phone and arrange to meet him. It will take about two minutes to clear this all up. And you are not alone. We are here for you.” She disappears behind the pile of flowers in her hand and ignores me.

I stew in my own juices for a while then I realize that Tia is here early as well. “So why are you here already?” I ask.

“I had a dream about the baby that woke me up then I started thinking about Jace.”

“Jace?” I ask, surprised that she would admit to thinking about him.

“I cannot understand why he irritates the fire out of me all the time. He’s usually very kind and considerate.”

“And oh my, that man is hot. Those green eyes and biceps.” I tease.

“You are not helping, one bit. I think it is because he is so fine. No men have any right to look as good as he and Hudson do. Then to have money and be nice to boot. It just isn’t right, but I also get the feeling he has been a player most of his life. I feel like he is a cat sizing up his prey.” She violently snips the ends off of some baby’s breath to add to her arrangement.

“He did give off that vibe when we first met him. Although, I haven’t seen him with a woman this whole time. He was alone at the wedding the other night and he asked about you.”

“He was alone at the wedding? I can’t imagine that. When I turned him down, I figured he had other ladies lined up. Everyone knows being alone at a wedding says you are available.”

“But he left with us to come see you. He specifically asked if you would be here.”

“See he is angling, and it just gets under my skin. I don’t have time for angling men, right now. Besides, he doesn’t know about the baby. When he finds that out, he will be gone.”

“Maybe, but you might give him a chance.”

“I don’t think I want to give any man a chance right now. I just need to focus on my health and this little one.” She pats her stomach. I see her eyes go soft and a zap of longing hits me out of nowhere. I stamp that feeling down as quickly as it enters me. A baby is not what I need to think about right now. I don’t even have a prospect for a baby daddy. But a pair of clear gray eyes flits through my mind. *Stop it*, I practically yell inside myself. *Get to work!*

I hunker down in my hoodie and silence fills the room except for the occasional snip of the clippers. I am in the zone when I feel something hit my hoodie.

I jump and look around. “I have been saying your name for like two minutes,” Tia says.

“Sorry I was zoned out. What did you want?”

“I asked what you are going to do about Hudson?”

Chapter 39



Hudson

It's early Saturday and I'm not usually in my office, but today I need something to occupy my mind to keep it off of Ava and Valentine's Day. I really blew it somehow last night. I know I shouldn't have said anything to her in front of everyone but now I don't know what to do about it.

I thought going over columns of numbers and real estate plans would take my mind off of her but so far it isn't working too well. I have gone over the same number four times in the last few minutes and still don't understand them.

I stare at the phone. I have a plan in mind but it involves Tia and I don't know if she will be at the floral shop yet or not. I shrug deeper into my hoodie and try to concentrate on the numbers until a little more time passes.

I'm startled by the ringing phone. I debate over letting it go to voicemail but decide to answer it at the last second. "Hello," I say, figuring it is a telemarketer or Jace telling me he finally rolled out of bed to head to Gran's.

"Hudson," I hear a woman's voice and for a second, my heart leaps with the hope it is Ava but then it sinks back down as I recognize Tia. Tia! Maybe this could be good after all.

"Yep, Tia. How are you?"

"I'm fine," she says quietly, and I hear a car go by. "Listen, I want to talk to you about Ava. She feels bad about last night, but I think she is afraid to reach out."

"I was just thinking about calling you, but I didn't know if you would be at the shop already."

"You were?"

“Yes, I have a plan to win her back, but I will need your help.”

“Ok. Listen, meet me at The Grill in about twenty minutes. I am going to order some breakfast and we can talk.”

“Alright, I will see you there.” She hangs up. Hope flares in my heart and I call Jace. He’s part of the plan and needs to meet with us, although I am not sure Tia will be too happy about that.

“Hey,” He sounds groggy.

“Meet me for breakfast at The Grill in twenty minutes.” I say.

“What? I thought we were going to meet at Gran’s and get some biscuits?” He yawns.

“Change of plans. The Grill. Twenty minutes. Tia is meeting us.” I say and hang up. That will get him there. I grab my keys and shoot a quick text to Gran for a rain check.

Chapter 40



Ava

“Hey Boss, I’m going to get breakfast for us all,” Tia says as she slips out of her apron.

“From where?” I ask, focusing on the bud in front of me.

“The Grill. I already ordered. Be back in a little while,” she says and slides out the door before I can respond.

I drop the bud in my hand and turn towards the closed door. The way she left seemed odd to me. Maybe it was a pregnancy thing. I try to turn my attention back to the flowers but now I’m distracted by the thought of food.

The team has made coffee, and someone brought in a box of donuts but I want some protein. Maybe I should follow Tia to the Grill. I pick up my phone and call her.

“Yeah,” she answers a bit breathlessly.

“Hey, I can come and help with the order.”

“Oh no need.” I got it turned in already and took my car so I can carry it all back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep, I am. It’s a pretty big order so it might take a little bit,” she adds. “Gotta go so I can focus on driving.”

“Alright. See you soon.” I say and hang up. It still seems weird that she didn’t consult me about the food order. I decide to shrug it off and clean up our workspace which looks like a hurricane hit a flower farm.

I finish emptying the last dustpan and check my watch. Surely Tia will be back soon.

“Hey, Boss,” Jayden comes through the door to the front.

“Yeah?”

“Can you come help up here for a minute? It’s gotten busy.”

“Sure,” I take off my smudged apron. When I walk through the door, I realize that Tia called me Boss. She never does that, so I know something was off with that story about breakfast. I will find out what she is up to when she gets back.

When I see the lobby full of customers, I forget about Tia and get to work.

After I am done helping Jayden and the mass of customers clear out, I go back to the workroom to find Tia hard at work on an arrangement.

“Where’s breakfast?” I’m a bit grumpy that she didn’t come get me.

“Over next to the snacks from last night,” she says, nodding in the direction of the snack table. “It should all still be hot because they were super busy, and I wound up having to wait for the biscuits to get done.”

“Good. I am starved.” I snatch a plate and begin to fill it. I feel eyes resting on me and look up to see Tia watching me. “What?”

“I was just waiting for your customary thanks, but none came.”

I feel shame rush through me. “It was very kind of you to bring breakfast. I’m sorry I didn’t say so when I came in.”

“I am glad I could do it.” Tia returns to her work. “You looked swamped when I came in.”

“We were.” I bite into the pile of biscuits and gravy on my plate. I force myself not to let the moan escape my mouth on the first bite, but it does on the bite of potatoes I take next. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was. Thank you again.” I smile at Tia.

“You are welcome. Now maybe you won’t be so grumpy.”

“I’m sorry about that too.” I say and focus on eating my breakfast as I feel tears prick my eyes. The wedding, the holiday and my

breakup have all just worn me down. “I will be so glad to have tomorrow off. I’m going out to the greenhouses.”

“I thought you were taking the day off.” Tia looks confused.

“I am by digging my hands in the soil and planting. I can’t wait.” I feel calmer just thinking about it. I love the humidity and quiet of the greenhouses. It always allows me to think through problems.

“Would you mind if I come out and see the operation? I never really have.”

“I would love to show you around. I’ll meet you around 11, if that works for you.”

“That’s perfect. I can sleep in a bit.”

“If you get there before me, you can find an extra key under the rusty old watering can next to the greenhouse door. Just let yourself in.” I walk to the trash to throw my breakfast plate in.

“Great! It’s a date.” She smiles at me across the top of the roses she just finished adding to the vase in front of her.

Hours later, I lock the front door and turn the sign from open to closed. Jayden is sweeping and Nic is emptying trash cans as I go to the backroom. The rest of the team has cleaned up the work surfaces, swept the floor and are packing up to go home at last.

“And that’s a wrap,” I say, “Thanks for all of your hard work everyone. I never could have done this without you. I believe this is the busiest Valentine’s Day we have ever had.”

“I agree,” Tia says, “and you all are the most phenomenal team ever.”

“I agree, So I am treating anyone who wants to go with me to pizza for dinner at Manhattan’s.”

Nic and Jayden walk in as I say this and they both cheer, “Yeah!!”

Several others say they are going. “Great! I will call ahead and get them to save us a table for twenty minutes from now.”

While I get my phone, I hear them chatting and saying their goodbyes. By the time I am done, only Tia and Nic remain, and they are deep in conversation about something. “You guys ready?” I ask and they jump apart like I startled them.

“Umm, yeah,” Tia says looking at Nic, who gives a tiny nod of his head.

“Yep, boss, we will follow you.” I look from Tia to Nic because there seems to be an odd sort of tension between the two of them and they don’t meet my eyes right away. They can’t be crushing on each other; I would have noticed.

“Everything ok?” I ask.

“Yeah, Ava. I just told Nic about the baby. I figured it was only a matter of time before my bump was evident anyway.”

“Oh. That’s why you seem nervous.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it.” Tia smiles at me. “Let’s go eat.” She pats her belly and says, “This little one is hungry.” We all laugh as we make our way out of the store and lock up.

“For a minute I thought you were plotting something.” I say to them.

“Why in the world would you think that?” Tia asks. Even though she and Nic avoid looking at me.

“Just the way you jumped apart, when I spoke.”

“You just caught us off guard. Payback is painful.” Tia laughs as she heads to her car.

I watch her and Nic get in their cars and wonder what they are cooking up. I intend to find out over pizza.

Chapter 41



Hudson

“Did Tia tell you where the key is?” Jace asks me in the chill morning air as we park in front of the greenhouse on Ava’s property.

“She says it’s under a rusty old watering can next to the door.”

A few seconds later, Jace says, “There it is. Not a great hiding spot if you ask me.”

“I’m not sure anyone would look under that can.”

“It’s the first place an intruder would look. She needs a lock box with a digital code. I will talk to her about it later.”

“Not today,” I say to him.

“Okay, not today, but soon.” He bends over and picks up the watering can then unlocks the door and we walk in. Immediately the humidity and quiet wrap around me. “I can see what Ava loves about this place.”

“I bet it is nicer when there are plants in here,” Jace says, “but I can see the charm.” He walks down the aisle towards the center of the greenhouse where there is a wide place between the rows of planting beds. “This looks like the best place to set up.”

“I agree. Let’s unload the car.”

We meet Nic who has just driven up with the delivery van. “Hey, Tia sent me these flowers and some lights.

“Awesome!” I shake his hand. “I appreciate it.”

“Glad to help. Ava is really happy when she’s with you.”

“Thanks, man. I plan to do all I can to help her stay that way.”

“Great. I will bring in the flowers.”

After working for the better part of an hour, we put the finishing touches on the scene we have set. Party lights are strung up from one side of the greenhouse to the other, crisscrossing over a table set for two with white linens, roses, and china.

There are flower arrangements surrounding the table and I know that Tia must have worked hard all night to get them done. Soft music is playing and the sounds of water gurgling in a small fountain complete the romantic atmosphere.

“Do you think it will be enough?” I ask into the silence that has settled between us.

“I think it’s outstanding. We better go get the food if we’re going to beat her and Tia here,” Jace replies.

“I almost forgot the food.” I check my watch. “We better hustle.”

“I’ll lock the door and put the key back,” Nic says and Jace hands him the key.

“Thanks a million, man. We owe you.”

“I will keep that in mind.” He laughs as we walk away.

* * *

I straighten my shirt and my hands shake. It is almost time for Tia and Ava to arrive. Where should I stand?” I ask Jace. I try several positions in the building until we settle on a place next to the table.

“That will do. Do you hear a car?”

“I think so.” My voice comes out in a squeak.

“Did you just squeak?!” Jace looks like he’s choking back a laugh.

“I’m nervous.” I say pulling at my shirt which feels too tight.

“You are a grown man. Pull yourself together. Try not to be awkward. I will go see who it is.” He moves to the window at the front of the building. “It’s Tia and she is by herself,” he says over his shoulder to me.

“Come in,” He pushes the door open for her. I see her eyes move around the space taking it all in. I let out a sigh of relief when she smiles. “You guys did good. She is going to be stunned.”

“In a good way, I hope.” I laugh nervously and wipe my palms on my pants legs.

“In a very good way. She is just a couple of minutes out.”

I sigh and try to calm myself.

“Hudson, it is going to be alright. She regrets the way things went Friday night. It might take her a few minutes to thaw, but she will.”

“I am counting on it.”

“I hear a truck, I think,” Jace hurries to the window to peek out before whispering, “It’s her!”

I feel like I might puke.

I must look like it too because Tia says, “Pull yourself together,” and squeezes my hand before she walks to the door. “It’s showtime gentlemen.” She goes out the door. “Hey girl. This place is amazing.” I hear her say as the door closes.

I suck in a breath and calm myself, anxious to see how Ava reacts.

Chapter 42



Ava

“I’m glad you like it, Tia. Come on in and let me show you around.” I open the door and it takes a minute before my eyes adjust to the dim interior. I gasp. My greenhouse has been transformed into a French restaurant with music and flowers and patio lights.

“What is going on?” I turn to Tia, who shrugs and looks towards the table. I see Hudson for the first time. “What is *he* doing here?” I whisper.

“He wants to apologize,” Tia replies and pushes me gently forward.

Hudson looks frozen like a deer in headlights and Jace gives him a gentle shove which seems to break his paralysis. He walks slowly towards me until he is standing a couple of feet away.

“Ava.”

“Hudson.” It seems like it takes all the breath I have to get it out.

“Can we talk?” I hesitate for a beat too long, so he says, “Please, just for a minute.”

This time, I answer a little quicker, “Yes.”

“Can I show you to your table, Madam?” Jace appears with a bow.

I giggle, “Yes.”

“Follow me, please.” He takes me to the table and pulls out my chair.

Hudson sits down across from me and Jace continues, “Our menu today is chicken salad sandwiches, spinach and strawberry salad, and brownies. To start with we have a nice 2022 bubbly sparkling cider with peach.”

He pours two flutes of sparkling cider and uncovers the dishes. "I hope you enjoy your meal." He turns and walks to Tia's side, and they disappear through the door.

The room is suddenly so quiet I can hear the bubbles in the cider as they rise to the top of the glass. Hudson is staring at his hands, and I think he is as much at a loss as I am.

"I'm so sorry." I hear him say. "I shouldn't have just blurted it out in front of everyone like that the other night. I do such stupid things sometimes. Jace- well everyone says that I'm awkward."

"I'm sorry too. I wasn't trying to two-time you."

"What?" He finally looks at me. "Two-time me? I'm not sure what you are saying."

"Well, I was talking to Aaron after we went out almost every night. I didn't know he was you although looking back on it, I should have put two and two together like you did."

"Oh, that. Well, I admit at first, I got a bit upset because I knew you thought he was another guy. It hurt at first but then I forgot about it. I was just talking to Ava."

"I bet you thought it was funny. I bet you and Jace had a laugh at that."

"Never," he says. "I'd never laugh at your expense. Jace just told me to talk to you over and over. I should have listened to him."

"Yes, you should have, but I should have listened to Tia who told me I needed to make a decision. If I had broken it off with 'Aaron,'" I use air quotes when I say the name, "would you have told me then?"

"Yes, I had intended to show up at your house with flowers and chocolate cupcakes yesterday and tell you in person in private. I'm sorry I messed up."

"I'm sorry I overreacted. I felt embarrassed and ashamed." I feel my cheeks get pink.

"Will you forgive me?" he asks.

“If you’ll forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” he smiles and lays his hand palm up on the table.

I take it and say, “I agree. So, your middle name is Aaron?”

“Yep, and yours is Maria?” he smiles.

“It is and I hate it. People think it’s like the song. ‘Ave Maria.’”

“It somehow suits you though. Your name is almost as beautiful as you.”

“Thank you. Do you prefer Hudson or Aaron?”

“Hudson, but you can call me whichever you like.”

“I see plenty of Hudson Aaron’s in our future when you get under my skin.”

“Our future?”

“Yes, Hudson Aaron,” I say mischievously, “if you will be my Valentine?”

He stands up and pulls me to him, “I can’t think of anything that I would rather do than to be your Valentine, Ava Maria.”

“I can think of something I would rather be doing,” I say and pull him towards me. His elbow knocks over the bottle of sparkling cider but we ignore as we are lost in a long sweet kiss.

The End

To get a sneak peek at the next Pine Hollow Romance- Tia’s and Jace’s story sign up for my newsletter at <https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/t1v4s0>



About the Author

Caroline Siler lives in Arkansas in the country with her husband, Dennis. She teaches US History, because she loves the story of people and events. She loves to read a good book on rainy days, enjoys baking, hiking, traveling, and gathering around a table to hear and tell family stories. Caroline writes wholesome small town romances with sweet, Southern heat.

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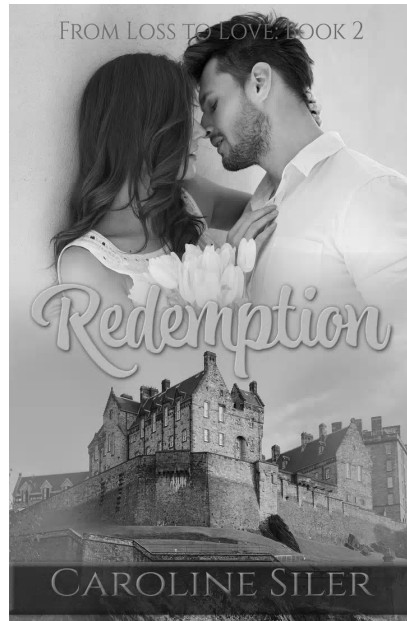
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