

A romantic couple embracing in a scenic autumn landscape. The man is on the left, wearing a white shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a purple top. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background features rolling hills with trees in vibrant autumn colors (yellows, oranges, reds) under a cloudy sky. The overall mood is warm and intimate.

MOLLY
SUMMERS

HUSBAND

for hire

SILVERBELL SECRETS BOOK ONE



Husband For Hire

Silverbell Falls Series

Book 1

Molly Summers

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Chapter 1

Olivia

It's eerily quiet. A silence that's not particularly welcome. Not when my mind races with intrusive thoughts.

The lawyer's office is a shell of neatly stacked paperwork and shelved books behind his oak desk. Behind us, an old grandfather clock ticks, counting every second we spend waiting for him to speak, filling the room with the only sound drumming in my ears. He's a lanky middle-aged character, with a sour discernment on life - if his scrunched up nose and narrowed eyes are anything to go by.

I know I'm only distracting myself by focusing on Mom's lawyer. His mannerisms, the way his eyes scan the contents of the file and the room.

The room I refuse to read.

It's bad enough that I arrived two hours before the burial ceremony. *Mom...*

Poor Mom has been gone for a week, and I chose the very last moment to pitch up here and watch her being laid to rest.

It wouldn't have mattered if I arrived on time. It's not like I'd given this place a chance to begin with.

"Firstly, I'd like to thank you all for being here today." Lawyer Sanders looks up and gives us each a nod.

Dad's the only one who nods back before the lawyer continues.

"Your mother, Mrs. Katherine Porter, had consulted with me a few months ago to change the contents of her will."

“Why?” Chloe, my youngest sister, frowns as she clutches her copy of the will between a clenched fist.

The energy in the room is dense with words unspoken. Words and insults that would be directed at me. I know that much.

Instinctively, I hang my head and pretend that I’m interested in paying attention to the reading. Just so that I don’t have to face Chloe or Willow’s scrutiny.

“I’ll get to that in a moment. As you know, your family home was a joint estate. Naturally, she has given her portion of the house to Mr. Porter.”

Dad nods again. He has his copy of the will tucked under one arm. He doesn’t look all that impressed.

In fact, my entire family seems indifferent. It’s to be expected. I fled from Silverbell Falls more than a decade ago.

In search of more than the deafening silence which often engulfs this small town.

My hometown. A destination I didn’t foresee in my future.

But it wasn’t Willow’s call to inform me that Mom had passed that forced me to come back.

It was my ex-husband stripping me of my financial stability and everything I knew. Life as it was had become a dissonant empty void out there. I had no choice but to move back home.

And face the music of my family’s cold treatment.

Can’t blame them.

Lawyer Sanders rambles on about Mom’s jewelry, her car, the other little fortunes she’s collected over the years. I hear my name a few times but I barely register what’s been allocated to me.

Gazing around, a breath lodges like a lump in my throat when I catch Chloe’s speculative eyes on me. My fall from grace hasn’t been met with sympathy.

And I only have myself to blame.

With my tail between my legs, I'd come back to the old town. Is it a fresh start I'm in search of? Redemption for neglecting my family all these years? Who knows?

I guess time will tell.

"... That leaves us with one last item. The inn."

There's a moment of haunting silence which passes. It's been there all along, looming over us like a dark cloud against Silverbell Falls' cheery sun.

Much like the callous cold shoulders I'd been receiving ever since I got here.

The lawyer clears his throat as if the uncomfortable silence had spread through his veins.

"Riverbend Inn, to be exact," he goes on, pushing his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

A chorus of simultaneous "What?!" is exclaimed. For the first time since my arrival, here's one thing we can all agree on.

We're all equally as shocked.

The lawyer gives a low chuckle as if he'd been anticipating our reaction. Dad's unfolding his arms and crossing them again, seemingly uncomfortable.

"The Riverbend Inn belongs—ahem—belonged to Mrs. Porter. Instead of sharing it equally amongst her children, as she had done with all of her possessions, she attached a condition to the ownership rights of the building."

"What kind of condition, Mr. Sanders?" Willow asks impatiently. I know she's impatient because she's tapping her foot uncontrollably on his posh floor.

"Whoever is to take ownership, has to be married."

That last word knocks me in the gut like a freight train coming full speed at me. What rotten luck.

I'd just gotten my divorce finalized a month ago.

Any and all traces of amusement slip away, leaving me with nothing but hopelessness.

So much for a fresh start. I could have had it if we were still in the process of our divorce settlement. We would have been married on paper.

Here's hoping one of my sisters is close to getting married...

Looking up, I realize that all eyes are on me. Frowns, like I'm the resident disappointment. I'd been deep in thought back there, and missed the part where Sanders announced two additional points.

One of us has to be married within a month of my mother's passing if none of us were married before then.

And if neither of us were married by then, the Riverbend Inn would be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

A shiver courses down my spine. But it's not unpleasant. It's one of those cool trickles of air that finds its way through your being when you're faced with possibilities.

That's what it feels like, ogling the Riverbend Inn.

Though rundown and a little rusty on the edges, the old place has potential. I must admit. The shiver blooms into anticipation, spreading through my fingertips with the need to pick up a sander and polish the wooden bars of the balcony.

"Mom owned this place?" Chloe raises a skeptical brow, biting the inside of her cheek while she gives the place a once-over.

She's not impressed. But it's something you'd expect from a singer with big dreams and an even bigger voice.

"According to Sanders, yeah," I reply, sizing up the place just as a visitor opens up a window on the second floor.

Okay, I must admit, it needs more than just a polish. I can literally hear the floorboards crying in agony from the fourth and last floor. And here we are, parked outside the inn on the gravel road leading up to the front desk.

It's a bittersweet feeling – Mom had kept this place a secret from us. Even from dad. But ever since her passing, we've been discovering that a lot isn't as it seems.

For starters, she wanted to be buried at Silverbell Falls. Our long line of maternal and paternal ancestors have been buried down in Cedar Oak.

She'd apparently been adamant on her deathbed... A dying wish to be laid to rest at the waterfall, far from those who came before us but closer to home.

Still, the questionable nature behind her choice of eternal resting place comes second to this.

The whole owning an inn near the river – now that was a shock to the system.

Still is, as my eyes rake up the sides of the chipped pillars. It's like one of those boathouses, enlarged five stories up and extending down rows that fit six rooms each.

It's beautiful, in its own, ancient and rustic way.

“Come on,” Willow waves us over, apparently annoyed by us gawking at the place when thunder rips through the air.

We all scurry in. None of us wants to get caught in the ensuing storm that's common in beach towns like this.

“You okay, Dad?” I ask when I notice him stalling near the door. Willow and Chloe have gone ahead to speak to the receptionist.

“I'm okay,” he says as he looks up at the staircase, eyes following each step as if mesmerized.

And there's a faint hint of sadness there.

“Mom probably had her reasons, Dad.” I touch his arm—an act of reassurance that feels foreign to both of us as he flinches.

“Oh, I don't doubt she did. It's just strange.”

Strange doesn't begin to cut it as my sisters join us in the foyer and the bell on the back of the door rings out. Another guest

arrives, shrugging his coat off to reveal a lengthy broad-shouldered back.

Dripping, he'd clearly been caught in the raging storm outside. My eyes flit down to his shoes—once polished but now covered in mud.

It screams 'money' even beneath the veil of what lies outside. So does his tailored slacks that go up for miles and miles and hug a pair of muscled thighs.

My breath catches in my throat until Willow pokes my wrist and jostles me back to reality.

“We have a month.”

“What for?” I ask, my train of thought having long changed tracks. It's heading down another set, where the shapely newcomer leans over the desk and addresses the receptionist.

I can't see his face. But what I have seen so far is enough to hold my attention.

An annoyed sigh pulls me back all the way, and Willow's rolling her eyes at me.

Right.

The marriage clause in Mom's will.

“We have a month to get this place back to its former glory.” The words leave my lips before I can reel them back in. Heat crawls along my cheeks when I realize my sisters and dad have heard what I just said.

But I'd seen it—pictures of what the place looked like before being weathered like this. A deep yearning calls me to restore it to what it once was.

And it might have everything to do with coming here for a fresh start. It's the clean slate I need.

Ignoring the confused looks I'm getting, I go on, “Think about it. It's technically ours.”

“No, it's not,” Chloe snorts. “None of us are married.”

She narrows her eyes at me accusingly. And I know what my crime is.

I left. Fled from Silverbell Falls to the city, and never looked back. Never visited. Left my sisters behind.

But I'm back now. And there's a gold mine right here just waiting for us.

We'll figure out how to cross the red tape when the time comes.

"Come on, Chloe," I beg, praying she'll see the vision too. "Forget about the clause, and just think for a moment about what we could do with this place."

I haven't realized that Dad's sauntered off toward the stairs until I hear a pair of steady feet coming closer. Turning to look up at the face of the man from earlier, I gasp.

Some people age like fine wine.

With a jawline sharper than the sharpest blade, and hair as dark as night to compliment his honeyed skin. And those eyes, breathtakingly intense as they stare right at me.

Right at me...

But not with the faintest hint that they're welcoming at all.

"Olivia Porter... I'll be damned." His voice oozes richer honey than his skin exudes. Even with that scornful undertone.

"Mason K—"

I don't have the liberty of going on to voice my surprise. He cuts me off, his lips curling into a snarl that's laced with venom.

"What are you doing here?" His eyes turn to sharp daggers as he glares at me. He cuts Willow off when she tries to interject. A dismissive hand held mid-air, and nothing more.

Not even a look.

No.

His eyes are fixed on me.

"We're just discussing—"

“Discussing your plans with this place?” He suddenly lifts his head and roars with laughter. “I hate to break it to you, Olivia. But you’re trespassing by being here.”

Chapter 2

Mason

“... just think for a moment about what we could do with this place.”

I whip around the moment I hear those words. Perhaps it's the voice that squeals excitedly which captures my attention.

Or, it's the cause of that excitement that irks me.

The Porters.

They shouldn't be here.

Fine, I admit that they have every right to be exactly where they are. It's not like there's a 'Right of Admission' hanging around here. But there should be.

I'll see to it that there is. Soon enough.

Strolling forward and purposely neglecting the conversation with Kendra, I tuck my hands into my pockets. Keep it cool, Mason.

It's not like you can't handle a trio of sisters still mourning the death of their mother.

Exhaling sharply, even I'm surprised by how callous my thoughts are. It takes me exactly five seconds to steel myself and fix my demeanor.

... And exactly two seconds to drop my guard entirely when my eyes land on her.

She hasn't changed much since high school. Lost the plumpness of her cheeks. Now they're more defined. Leaving room for the plumpness of her lips.

Jesus Christ... I have to remind myself to breathe when her eyes meet mine.

I can do this. There's literally nothing on Earth I can't do.

"Olivia Porter... I'll be damned." There we go. Nice and steady. It throws her off. I can see it in the way her brows knit tightly.

"Mason K—"

How dare she say my name? After what she did? Did she forget?

I sure have not.

Narrowing my eyes at her when the memories of the past come rushing back, I cut her off.

"What are you doing here?"

One of her sisters tries chirping in, but I'm not in the mood. Lifting a hand in the direction of the small squeak to stop it from going on, I glare at Olivia with all my might.

But there's something inside me that doesn't comply. I should be fuming. I should be spitting venom. Except, there's a softness in the hazel depths of her eyes that beg me to be kinder.

Then she speaks again, and I'm reminded of why I should be seething with rage.

It's that defensive tone that boils my blood.

I'd heard it before. Years ago.

"Discussing your plans with this place?" I scoff, having heard the short end of their conversation. It was no secret that the Riverbend Inn had great potential. An investor's dream.

But not the Porter family.

If only I could uncover who owns this dilapidated gold mine...

"I hate to break it to you, Olivia. But you're trespassing by being here."

"T—trespassing?" She frowns, immediately sifting through her bag. "We have every right to be here."

The frown's still there when she produces a sheet of paper and holds it up in my face. Annoyed, I snatch it and begin reading.

Perhaps this place was a part of her divorce settle—

What?!

“That’s right. This place belongs to my mother.”

Crap. I didn’t realize that I’d voiced my shock. Clearing my throat, I recompose myself and look up.

“Right... You expect me to believe this?” I flap the paper in the air.

“Willow! Chloe! Come on up here!”

We’re interrupted by Mr. Porter calling his younger daughters to the landing on the first floor. Then I see something I’m not expecting.

Olivia’s face drops with what appears to be sadness as her sisters make their way to the stairs.

A pang of guilt ruptures my heart. But it’s quickly repaired when I remember what’s in my hand.

Katherine Porter’s will. Not all of it. Just the part that claims she owns Riverbend Inn.

“I’ll take that back. Thank you.” Olivia grabs the sheet right out of my hand.

But not before sending a jolt of electric awareness rushing through me.

Shaking my head and shaking off those thoughts, my mind begins working. Calculating. Devising ways to let this go the way I need it to.

I always get what I want. Fate just proved it to me by handing me the owners of the inn on a golden platter. There’d been a mystery surrounding who owned the place for months.

And they’d walked right on my doorstep.

I wasn’t going to mess up this perfect opportunity.

“So you’re now the owner of Riverbend, huh?” I quiz, throwing up a brow.

Bottom lip quivering, Olivia stalls before she replies, “Y–Yes.”

Her hesitation doesn’t slip by me. I’m more invested than ever.

“Care to explain the little stammer?”

“Care to explain why you called us trespassers?” she challenges, crossing her arms over her chest.

Feisty, as always.

It’s no wonder she couldn’t stay married. He probably couldn’t keep up.

“I heard, through the grapevine, that this place was going up for sale.”

“Check your sources, Mr. King. They seem to be highly mistaken.”

“My sources?” I chuckle. “I am the source, baby.”

Olivia flinches at the sarcastic term of endearment. Why am I noticing these things? Like the way her pale cheeks betray her initial reaction and turn rosy...

Stop.

I need to focus.

“It’s not for sale,” Olivia replies bluntly. Avidly avoiding eye contact with me now, it seems I’ve hit a nerve.

Good.

“Not for long.” I act uninterested, leaning a shoulder on the closest wall while smoothly slipping my hands into my slack pockets.

The nifty trick doesn’t go unnoticed as I see her gaze flit over to me. I’ve just flipped on the charm switch, and it’s working.

I decide to run with it.

“So, when did you get back, Olive?”

Another round of hesitation. Another point to me.

“A w-week ago.” She tucks her hair behind one ear and stares at the floor.

Why is she doing that? How has she not changed since high school?

It's not like I care.

"It's been long, Olivia. We should catch up." I say this with the prospect of uncovering more information about the Riverbend Inn. It has absolutely nothing to do with Olivia being back in town. Single.

"Sure." She looks up, blinking slowly at the card I've taken out. Tentatively taking it, she reads it. Too intently. Too long.

I clear my throat and peel myself from the wall.

"See you around, Porter," I greet, not waiting for a reply. I need to come off as indifferent to the inn. Even if a part of me wishes to go back inside and mull over the many changes it needs.

All in good time...

"Finn, I need a favor." I call up my cousin as I head to my car. Calling in a favor that's long overdue.

"It's true. It does belong to Katherine."

"Did belong," I correct Finn. Snatching the glass from his coffee table, I make my way to the window overlooking the city.

A shiver courses down my spine, reminding me why I dislike the hustle and bustle of these places.

"There's a clause attached to the new ownership of the inn."

"Uh-huh?" Taking a sip of whiskey, I turn from the window and back at my cousin.

"A marriage clause," he reads off his computer screen. "At least one of the sisters needs to be married to have the title deeds transferred onto their name."

A marriage clause, huh? That would explain Olivia's unease surrounding the inn.

None of the sisters are married. In Olivia's case, not anymore.

A scornful chuckle ripples through my chest then.

I knew there was a reason why charming her came so naturally. Call it instinct, but I've never plotted a plan grander than this.

It's perfect!

I'm almost glad I made the drive to Clayton. Almost, because Finn is at the very bottom of my favorite-cousin-list.

"What about the clearance on Roan's land?"

Finn fixes me with a skeptical look. He's probably smelled the conniving intent in my question.

It's what he does best.

"We need the mayor's sign off for development," Finn sighs. "And we both know how difficult that is."

"Oh, I'm counting on it." I wink, chugging down the rest of my drink before setting the empty glass on his desk.

He doesn't look pleased. But it's not my scheming that spurs him into rushing forward with a cloth to polish the spot the base of the glass stained on his desk.

I take my sweet time going through whatever he has on the Porters while Finn fusses over his furniture. The Kings are a strange breed. No doubt.

As I'm waiting at his printer for a copy of Katherine Porter's will, he quirks a brow at me.

"Just what are you up to, Mason?"

"Nothing," I shrug. It's not like he has a leg to stand on, questioning my motives. He should know better than that, after what I did for him. "Just get me those files on the mansion."

"You really think you can swing it?"

"Of course, I can." I chuckle sardonically as I leave Finn's office.

I'm planning on killing two birds with one stone. The mansion is only a pawn in the bigger picture.

"It's perfect." I nod at the elderly woman.

Wrapping the stems with a white bow, she hands the bouquet of daffodils to my driver.

"Home, Sir?" Roger asks when we get to the car. Instead of climbing into the back, I fish the keys from his back pocket and swing it on my index.

"I'm heading home. You're gonna take this..." my eyes flicker to the flowers, "... And hand deliver it to Olivia Porter on Third Avenue."

Roger opens his mouth to counter the instruction, but I'm already opening the SUV. Blatantly ignoring any questioning.

Everyone knows what Olivia Porter did to me back in high school. A grave injustice, that's what it was.

So this is strange, even by my standards.

"Oh, and don't forget this." Reaching into my pocket, I get out the card I'd picked up from the gift store. Small enough to tuck between the petals. But it packs a punch, nonetheless.

Take a walk down memory lane with me. Lunch. Tomorrow. MK.

She'd know where to find me. If Olivia doesn't, she'd give me a call. I know she's kept my card, my number.

I watched the way her eyes roamed the card. Roamed me...

Enough of that.

I see to it that Roger hops into a cab and heads to Third Avenue before climbing into the SUV.

There's no doubt in my mind that she'll take the bait. If she's as desperate as I picked up at the inn, I know I have a lunch date tomorrow.

I could easily wait out the month deadline they have to acquire the title deeds. What are the chances any of them would marry before then?

That would leave the inn without an owner, ready to be auctioned to the highest bidder.

But where would the fun be in that?

This sounds more fun. The seduction of Olivia Porter, who once broke my heart and left it in shambles.

Is it revenge? Or is my desire to get my hands on the inn much stronger than morality?

Who knows?

After all, I'm killing two birds with one stone. Or a colony, in my case.

Chapter 3

Olivia

“Hi, can I help you?” A waiter asks when he notices me idling near the door.

The last time I’d been here, my family had occupied the table on the left. It was Mom’s birthday. Now my sister is a chef here.

She was always more sentimental than I could ever be. Perhaps I was, but I wouldn’t let it show lest it were a sign of weakness.

And I hate having weaknesses. It took a lot out of me to come back here with nothing. But I’ll never show what’s really in my heart.

To them, I’m a cold, unfeeling shell of a woman. And it can stay that way.

“I need to see Willow, please,” I tell the man whose name tag reads ‘Simon’. He frowns at me, nods toward the door behind the counter and goes off to tend to a table.

Clearly, I’m unrecognizable. Perhaps it’s the honey highlights in my chestnut hair that sets me apart from my sister. Willow is a blonde. And from the looks of things, it’s not known that her eldest sister is back in town.

“Rough morning?” I hear Chloe ask, her voice loud enough to drift past the frosted glass door leading into the kitchen.

Something stops me. Perhaps it’s all the shame and guilt of the past few days that keeps me cemented. But instead of heading inside, I wait it out.

I know Willow won't talk freely if I'm there. She's barely said much to me all week.

"You can say that," Willow sighs. "But not as rough as that guy out there."

"Who?"

"Leather jacket at table two. Detective Rivers."

Instinctively, my head whips around at the mention of the detective. Only because he's seated somewhere in the restaurant.

I spot him in one corner, fingers laced around a coffee mug that appears to be full to the brim.

"His girlfriend went missing a few weeks ago."

That explains why his coffee remains untouched.

"Anyway," Willow goes on, huffing a wrangled breath. "What's Olivia up to now?"

"I heard her calling some developers this morning. Asking for a quotation to get the pipes replaced."

"Oh, God!" Willow groans, and I swear she's probably rolling her eyes. "There's no hope for that place. I wish she'd just give it a break so we could cut our losses."

Losses? We haven't invested a cent in the place, yet she thinks investing our time is a loss.

I can't listen to any more, and push my way into the kitchen.

It must look like I stormed in, because they're both startled.

"Olivia—"

"Don't, Chloe." A pang of guilt squeezes my heart when I cut her off. No matter how icy cold their treatment has been, I can't shake off the feeling of immense guilt that consumes me.

I was the one who left. I was the one who never came back, not even to visit.

But I am the one who's going to save that inn. For all of our sakes.

“I’m sick and tired of this hostility towards me,” I sigh, unable to use vigor in my voice to portray anger. There isn’t any. Not even a spark.

Those strong walls I’d been keeping up come crashing down.

And sincerity remains.

“I’m not the enemy here, Willow. I know I left...” I throw my hands up in defeat, and they come crashing down on my thighs. “... But I’m here now. And God knows that I’ve been through hell and back. But—”

“You’re here now,” Willow interjects, and there’s a softness in her voice that compels me to finally look her way.

That gentleness is in her eyes too as she comes toward me, opening her arms.

“I’m sorry, Liv.” She wraps me in a warm embrace and it’s only when I wet a spot on her white jacket that I realize I’m shedding tears.

And for the first time in almost a decade, it feels like someone understands. Like I’m not crazy for the suffering I endured at the hands of a narcissistic manipulator.

“I never actively chose not to come back. I just c–couldn’t—”

“Shhh...” Willow smooths a palm down the back of my head. And another pair of arms encircles us.

It’s just the three of us again. Like it had been growing up. And it fuels my strength, my determination to fight for what’s rightfully ours.

The Riverbend Inn.

Both Willow and Chloe seem to sense it too. That inner need to protect what’s ours. Willow grabs a napkin from behind her on the counter and holds it out to me.

Wiping the tears crusted on my cheeks, I take a deep breath.

“Fate put Riverbend Inn in our paths,” I reveal what I truly believe deep down. It took me losing everything to realize that God has greater plans for me. For us.

“But in less than a month, it will be gone,” Chloe argues.

“It doesn’t mean we need to neglect it,” I suggest, my mind running over a couple of ideas that could save the place. There must be a way... “We can think of something. But we’re not gonna let the place fall into the wrong hands.”

“So what do you suggest, Liv?” Willow leans against her work counter and crosses her arms. She’s waiting for me to say something. To swoop in and save the day. Or the inn, in this case.

“You would have been our only hope, Liv,” Chloe sighs. “Willow’s too busy here at the restaurant, and I don’t care about getting married any time soon.”

“Life of a star...” Willow teases with a mock roll of her eyes.

When our eyes meet, we both burst out giggling.

Things feel oddly... normal again. As if the obstacle of time no longer exists. And then I remember one tiny detail from yesterday that I’d overlooked.

“Guys, I think I have a plan!” I burst out excitedly. My sisters stare at me expectantly, and when the excitement simmers down, I tell them all about my plan.

The plan shouldn’t be making me this nervous.

But I’m nail-bitingly anxious as I sit at the table and wait.

I should have pitched up late. I’m good at that. Yet here I am, ten minutes into waiting.

“Can I get you something to drink in the meantime?” The waiter checks in for the second time.

“Coffee. Decaf. And two portions of Buffalo wings. A side of potato wedges. Skin on.”

The order is delivered smoothly from behind the waiter. He’s as shocked as I am, except I recognize that voice.

Mason King.

And he hasn't forgotten. It's why I'm here, at the Downtown Diner. Famous for their wings. Famous for being the only long standing diner in quaint Silver Bells.

Memory lane it is, and that order he just placed? Exactly the same as our first date.

Great.

No, really.

This is great.

I should have been more grateful when the daffodils arrived home. I should have seen it clearly - the opportunity just waiting for me to get my hands on.

All I need to do is play into Mason's fantasies. He's clearly stuck in the past.

But I'm hauled back into the past the moment he steps into view. A few days worth of stubble now casts a shadow on his face. But the jawline's still as sharp as ever. Then there's the illegal appearance of his plump lips, the rosy buds contrasted between dark facial hairs.

Sublime.

It's too late when I realize I'm gawking. Not so much the past, but the present that captures my attention and holds it. Steals my breath with the intensity of his alluring looks.

And I'm enticed by how rough around the edges he is. No tie, and two buttons undone on his white shirt. His jacket opened, hands shoved into his pockets.

"Olive," he says calmly, snapping me from my daze.

I remember to close my mouth and take a breath while he takes a seat.

"A part of me thought you wouldn't accept my invitation..." he drawls, picking at the courtesy mints left on the center of the table.

My eyes become fixated on the way his hand works. Long, dexterous fingers toy with the paper-covered sweets, his veins working while my imagination runs wild.

I can't help but wonder what they'd look like if his sleeve was rolled up...

Get it together, Olivia!

"Ahem..." I clear my throat, thankful when the waiter serves our food.

My appetite is barely there. My gut churns with anticipation of why I'm really here.

"What is it, Olivia?" Mason raises a brow, leaning back and crossing his arms.

The words are on the tip of my tongue. Twisted because he's doing that thing where he clenches his jaw...

I'd given this some deep thought. This is the only way to get what I want. And who better to ask than someone from my past?

Someone who's keen enough to invite me for lunch. Someone who'd clearly been flirting with me when we first met at the inn.

My plan is seamless. And the bonus?

Mason King is a stunning man.

"I have a proposition," I blurt out, deciding to just go with it.

Mason chuckles. "I knew you wouldn't come here if you didn't have ulterior motives."

"And you don't?" I retort with a scoff. "We both know you're trying to get back at me for what happened in high school."

"What happened?" He shrugs nonchalantly.

"Oh, please, Mason. We're adults now."

"Exactly," he says as he suddenly leans in. Without warning. Barely giving me time to process the citrusy notes of his cologne.

Or am I stuck right there, inhaling the crisp scent as if it's a dessert I'm trying to taste?

No. Again, I remind myself to keep it together. Perhaps I was mistaken, and Mason King isn't out for revenge.

It could only be one thing. I can get exactly what I want from him.

"And as adults..." I go on. "... I think there's something we can do to help each other out."

He leans back again, intrigued by my words. "Help each other out? And how do you propose we do that?"

I'm not sure if I've lost his interest when he picks up his utensils and digs into his food. I have to give it to him - he probably has a healthy appetite that needs to be replenished.

His broad shoulders and bulging arms are dead giveaways. And again, it fuels my resolve. I'm making the right choice here.

"Let's get fake married."

Mason pauses, fork near his lips. His eyes sharpen as he stares at me, but he doesn't appear surprised at all.

"What's in it for me?" he asks.

"Name your price."

It amuses him. "Price? Baby, I'm a King. We have all the money in the world."

"Oh, come on. There must be something that not even money can buy."

He places his fork down and begins rubbing his chin. "Hm... Let's see..."

Mason contemplates for what feels like an eternity. Or maybe I'm just impatient until he finally nods his head.

"There is one thing," he says at last, cocking his head to one side. "Your uncle is the mayor of Silverbell Falls."

Narrowing my eyes, I can't quite make out where he's getting at with this. But I nod, and he continues.

“Then there is something you can do for me.”

“Is that a yes, Mr. King?”

“It’s a yes, future Mrs. King.”

Chapter 4

Mason

Pine Cove Park is bustling with activity the moment we step foot on the lawn. Kids playing about, the aroma of the barbeque wafting through the air, and adults mingling in groups.

It's the picture of serenity. Domestication coming full-circle for one weekend in a month. It's the perfect place for what we're about to do.

"Ready?" Olivia asks me.

I soon realize that I've never done this kind of thing before. Never married, I steered clear of public gatherings unless I needed to attend for work.

Olivia, on the other hand, seems eager enough to prep me. Like she's done this before. Stopping to adjust my collar, I'm staring down at her face while she's focused on making me presentable enough for the park.

"You're awfully excited about the cookout, aren't you?" I chuckle when she pats my shoulder to indicate she's done.

"Well, I remember coming here with my family when we were younger," she says with a smile that appears to hold pleasant memories with it. She strolls toward the park center, and I begin following her. I can sense there's more to this story.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she giggles, throwing a smile over her shoulder.

I swear my heart stops for that mere second when she flips me that smile, pure and honest.

“But I hated it,” she goes on, shaking her head. “I used to run away and hide up there.”

Olivia points at a treehouse.

“Cute. But I can’t imagine you hiding up there as an adult.”

“Of course not.” She shrugs. “As an adult, I ran away altogether.”

Her voice is flat, and gone is any trace of amusement from what she’d just said. I know she’s talking about how she left when she was only twenty-one.

It’s a day I definitely won’t forget.

The air is dense with a less pleasant memory. Not something we should be dwelling on right now. So I walk up to her, take her hand in mine, and lead her toward the gathering of Silverbell folks at the barbeque.

Luck always has a way of finding me. See, I always get what I want. Like the gorgeous jewel on my arm, whose only quest is to keep the Riverbend Inn in her name.

It came as a huge surprise when she suggested we marry for the sake of the condition imposed by her mother’s will. Little does she know that I already knew about it.

It was simply my ploy to charm her into marrying me so I’d acquire the inn. But I didn’t have to.

“You made it!”

Her youngest sister, Chloe, rushes to greet her. She nods her acknowledgment of me and drags Olivia toward the long rows of tables laid with disposable eating ware. Olivia tosses an apologetic half-smile at me before turning to greet her family.

Specifically the mayor’s entourage. As usual, the man himself isn’t around. Olivia hugs her cousin, Hudson. And for a quick second, our eyes meet across the park.

God, I thought this would be easier. It’s been less than a week, and I can’t shake off the feeling that this actually feels *right*.

Gone are the years serving as distance between us. This is how things would be if she’d said ‘yes’ to being my date to prom.

Instead of—

“Mason!”

A slap on my back jostles me from the brisk walk down memory lane.

Shocked when I see him, I exclaim, “Alex!”, before pulling him into a hug. Alex was my best friend in high school until he left the small town to pursue his dreams in the city.

Much like Olivia.

“It’s great to see you, man,” he titters. “It’s been too long.”

Way too long. And somewhere along the way, we’d lost contact. “What brings you to Silverbell Falls?”

Alex goes on to tell me about his life since he left his hometown. And how his sick aunt brought him back here.

“So, you and Porter, huh?” He quizzes as we both watch her rounding another corner of the table and greeting more people.

“Yeah,” I admit.

“How did that happen?”

“She lost her mother, came back, and we hit it off again.” Why does it feel like I’m not lying?

“So you forgot what she did to you in the past?” Alex scoffs.

Olivia searches the park until she finds me, stops, and holds my gaze for a few seconds. It’s been happening so often that even I’m starting to believe that we’re really a couple.

Shivering into myself, I bring to mind how she’d publicly humiliated me in our high school corridor. All I did was ask her to prom, and what did I get?

Her announcing that my family was a bunch of pigs and that she’d rather jump off a cliff than go with me.

Okay, I do admit that my family does have a track record for being mud-bound human beings. But personally, I’d never done anything to her or her family.

Except now, a tiny voice inside my head reminds me.

Then her eyes find me again, and gone is the need for revenge.

“We all grow up eventually,” I remind him. “And we grow from our mistakes.”

“As long as you’re happy, my friend,” Alex smiles.

I nod at him while keeping my gaze fixed on Olivia. She’s heading to the barbeque, and the way her hair billows out in the wind does something to me.

It’s like my heart is being squeezed inside my chest to remind me that she’s the most beautiful girl in town. Just like she was the most beautiful girl in high school.

“Excuse me,” I tell Alex before walking off. I’ve got my eyes on Olivia only, heading right to her. She’s carrying a tray of bread rolls, probably about to serve them to the tables.

“Hi,” she smiles when she sees me.

“Hi,” I reply as I take the tray from her hands. Something feels too natural about the way she grabs another tray and we both head to the tables.

We haven’t stopped staring at each other. Even when we set the trays down.

It isn’t until a little girl comes tugging at her dress that she looks away. She crouches to reach the girl’s height.

The little girl passes her a ball and points out to the field where a group of kids wave. With a giggle, Olivia throws the ball through the air toward the other kids. Then she pats the little girl’s head.

“You throw so good!” The little girl beams.

“Why don’t you find me after lunch and I’ll teach you how to throw a good ball?”

The little girl nods fervently before running off toward her friends.

And leaves me realizing that there’s a lot I don’t know about Olivia.

“You don’t have any of your own...” I comment as we watch the girl skip away. Her friends cheer her on, but between Olivia and I, there’s that dense feeling of tension rising once again.

Oh no.

I should not have brought that up.

Feeling like a recluse for being so careless, I touch her arm, which yields her.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned—”

“It’s okay, Mason.” She turns to look at me, but her eyes betray the words that leave her mouth.

She’s anything but okay. And I notice the hint of sadness lurking in the depths of her hazel eyes, brightening them but not in a way I would have liked to be responsible for.

“Olivia...” I stare deep into her eyes, and it’s as if her very soul reaches out and speaks of her sadness. Without thinking, my fingers close around her arms, and I’m pulling her closer.

I lift my hands and cup her face, adamant that she sees the apology written in my eyes. And by the way she gazes at me, allowing my heart to do a flip, I can tell that she’s seen my sincerity.

“I truly am sorry.” I feel like I need to repeat those words. This time, they feel stronger. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t—” She shakes her head with vigor. “You didn’t —”

“Shhh...” I coo softly, my eyes dropping to her lips which she purses.

Something about those lips, round and luscious, entices me.

And again, I’m not thinking when I pull her face toward me and crush my lips to hers.

Around us, there are cheers and applause. Whistling and hoots from the residents of Silverbell Falls.

Though this is what we wanted - to convince everyone that we're a real couple - I too become one of those being fooled.

Because I believe it. For a hot second – or maybe more - I'm immersed in the kiss that my heart feels foolish enough to believe that this is real.

But there's no other way to describe it. There's no way that this isn't real. Her lips cannot be this soft if this isn't real. Her breathless sigh cannot sound so exquisite to my ears if she doesn't feel it too. And the taste of cherries cannot be as tasty if I wasn't paying this much attention.

With her arms wound around my neck, I reluctantly abandon the kiss only to give us time to catch our breaths. Her cheeks are a bright shade of pink, the blush spreading all the way to her ears.

Taking a quick look around only so that I don't lose myself in her eyes again, I begin chuckling. We've managed to draw a crowd of spectators.

And it reminds me that it was the plan all along.

“Think we convinced them?” I ask, looking back at her.

She flips me a smile, then gently pulls away from my arms.

“Nice timing,” she says blankly, and I'm not quite sure what to make of it. She steps out of my embrace and searches the field.

“Excuse me.” She smiles again, but it's bleak. “I'm going to help Willow with the barbeque.”

Before I have the chance to question why she looks the way I'm feeling, she goes off. I'm left to wonder if I was imagining things.

But not for long.

“Son!” I hear my father call me from behind. I turn just in time to see him heading over.

“Dad.” I nod curtly when he comes to stand next to me. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he scans the park and chuckles to himself. It's a low rumble from deep in his chest.

“How are things looking with the Porters?”

“It’s going as planned.” As soon as I say the words, I feel instant regret. It’s not really going as planned. Not when I haven’t fully wrapped my head around that kiss.

“As I saw with my own eyes.” He waits for me to look up before throwing me a wink. “Quite convincing, if I must say so myself. The Porter girl seems to be buying it.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, gulping when he isn’t looking.

That’s just the problem. She’s buying it. And so am I.

I’m so used to selling stuff – developmental areas and luxurious homes – and for the first time in my life, I’m out of my comfort zone.

I need to un-sell this notion that Olivia and I are a couple. That she might actually mean something to me.

And my only remedy is that I haven’t invested a single cent into this fake relationship. It can’t be that hard to not get attached.

Chapter 5

Olivia

“Seemed pretty convincing to me,” Willow snorts as she secures her white chef’s hat on her head. “It must have been good.”

It’s the first day of the week after the weekend of the local cookout. My sisters are convinced that I now have somehow developed feelings for Mason King.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Will. We have appearances to uphold. I wasn’t thinking about anything else but to make it look believable.”

Crap. That came out too quickly. As if I’m trying to cover something up.

“Hm.” She glares at me with squared eyes. An incredulous look reminiscent of the one Mom used to give us when we hid simple truths.

“Willow...” I complain, but my sister holds her beliefs in high regard. It’s difficult to change her mind once she’s made it up.

Great!

As if I wasn’t suffering in silence with my own pesky thoughts.

“Jesus, Liv, relax a little.” Willow’s brows knit with genuine concern. She takes her attention off putting her gloves on and turns to me, grabbing me by the shoulders. “Are you feeling alright?”

She begins pressing the back of her hand on my cheek. Like she’s checking for a fever. Like she’s... Mocking me?

“Willow Porter,” I enunciate each syllable through gritted teeth. “Get your hands off me.”

She throws her hands off me, heeding my stern voice but giggling nonetheless. Our playful banter always consisted of this. I swear she would have been an actress if she wasn’t a chef.

“Thank you,” I breathe a sigh of relief, only to be startled when my cell phone rings unexpectedly.

It’s my fake boyfriend.

“Speak of the devil,” Willow jests, gathering her equipment for the chef’s special for the day.

“And the devil he is,” I throw back before answering his call.

He sure is the devil. That toe-curling, gut-fluttering kiss from the weekend should never have happened.

Or do I have myself to blame for my reaction?

“What’s up?” he asks over the line. He sounds too calm to be someone as affected as I am by the kiss.

I must be imagining things.

“Nothing much. I’m at the restaurant with Willow.”

“Good,” he says tersely. “Come out of the kitchen.”

Ending the call abruptly, I stare blankly out ahead of me. Did Mason King come all the way to the edge of town to see me?

It’s not like we had a prior arrangement. Our fake ‘dates’ were to take place in public places.

Right. This restaurant *is* a public place. Inwardly, I want to slap my forehead for letting my thoughts run amok.

“Earth to Olivia.” Willow snaps her fingers in front of my face, pulling me from the daze I’d been in.

“Huh?”

“Where did you go just now?” She frowns.

“More like where I need to go.” Even my voice is unsteady. I take a quick look down at my clothes and breathe a sigh of

relief.

If there's any good reason why we need to show our faces here, at least I look decent enough.

Without giving Willow an explanation, I head out of the kitchen to find Mason behind the front counter. He's speaking to the waiter, one arm casually resting on the countertop.

Wow...

He looks like he walked out of a magazine - one of those catalogs for suited men. A fine specimen of a man, made complete when he sees me and offers out his hand.

"Olive." He winks, and my heart does a flip.

He's not allowed to have this much hold on me.

So to distract myself, I take a look around. The Monday evening masses are nowhere to be seen.

Frowning, I hesitantly place my hand in his.

"What's going on?" I whisper, still looking around.

"Nothing. I heard the chef's special is sirloin and fritters." He shrugs, leading me to a table the waiter is waiting to serve at.

"You didn't hear it from me." Allowing myself to delight in watching *the* Mason King pull out my chair in an act of chivalry, I take my seat and wait for him to do the same.

He takes the liberty - yet again - of placing our orders.

"So..." He takes a deep breath and leans back. "... How have you been?"

We'd just seen each other on Saturday. One day wasn't going to kill us. He's acting like we haven't seen each other in weeks.

Still, I entertain whatever is going on for the sake of appearances, replying casually before leaning over the table and whispering, "What's going on? Are we being watched?"

The corners of his mouth lift with humor, but he doesn't make a sound. Instead, he whispers back, "Nothing's wrong, and no one's watching us. Just act casual, okay?"

My frown deepens, feeling like a permanent fixture on my face when I lean back. Something's up, but he clearly doesn't want to let me in on the secret.

"Have you been to the inn recently?" he asks over a sip of champagne.

I lift my glass and swirl the golden liquid inside, watching as it waves around. It reminds me of the ripples on the river's surface when I threw a pebble across it yesterday.

"I was there just yesterday," I admit, excitement bubbling in my core. "I had to have a proper look at the place. And I think I know what needs to be done."

"Uh-huh?" Mason goes on to cut into his steak, paying close attention to his plate.

"Yeah." I pick my cutlery up, but can't get to my meal. There's something brewing deep inside me - a passion I thought I'd left behind in the big city. "We obviously need to sand down everything on the outside. Floors, balconies. It needs a fresh coat of varnish."

"Hmmm..." Mason chews on his food, and I'm not sure if he's replying to me or savoring the taste of the steak.

Either way, I go on. "I'd like to keep the outside the way it is. It's natural, and considering the surroundings, it fits perfectly into the setting. But there's a ton of work to be done on the inside."

"Sure."

That's all I get? After opening up about my plans for the inn?

Okay. This is definitely a fake date. I peer around the restaurant, but all I see is a couple in the far west corner.

They have their backs to us. There's no way they can be watching.

Unless I'm reading too deeply into this. But his lack of interest is quite disappointing if I do admit it.

I choose to remain silent about my plans for the inn for the rest of the night. Mason doesn't seem to mind. Actually, I'm

starting to wonder if he just wanted to try Willow's special under false pretenses of meeting up with me.

Whatever it is, I'm just glad the night is over when Simon clears our table. Thank God Willow hasn't come out to rub the kiss in my face again.

She'd have been disappointed to find that tonight is the complete opposite of Saturday morning.

Mason gets off his seat, pats his lips, and throws the napkin back down. His cocky head tilt as he holds out his hand comes as a surprise.

"Let's go for a walk."

It's not a request. Now I'm definitely suspicious.

There must be someone lurking in the shadows, watching us for any slip-up.

I have to be extra cautious. The last thing I need is Lawyer Sanders snooping around and uncovering that my relationship with Mason is fake.

As it is, we're planning on getting officially married by the end of next week. It's only a week short of the deadline on the condition for ownership.

That throws up red flags on its own.

"Where are we going?" I ask when we step out onto the curb. The restaurant is situated on the long road leading to Cedar Oak Mountain. But at this time of the night, the peak is just a silhouette against the darkness.

"Nowhere in particular," he muses. He chuckles when I eye him suspiciously.

"You're not about to murder me and scatter my bones all across Cedar Mountain, are you?"

His hand flies to his chest and his jaw drops. "What makes you think I won't throw you in the river behind Riverbend?"

"Okay, fair point. That would be more fitting."

We burst out laughing together, and it's only when we round the corner that I realize we'd been strolling down the sidewalk.

It's awfully quiet, but like most places in Silverbell Falls, it's an ordinary night. Nothing out of the norm, and the tranquility is a breath of fresh air. A stark contrast to city life.

He gestures toward the food truck up ahead. "Tacos?"

Gosh! Along with the mention of tacos comes the memories of late nights partying at the base of the mountain with friends. We'd always sneak in some time for tacos on our way back home.

Despite the darkness, Mason seems to notice the smile that creeps up my face. He rushes off toward the truck just as the vendor closes the first window.

"Hold up!" He yells out, getting there just in time to stop the vendor from shutting the next window. "One more order for the night?"

"For you, Sir, anytime."

I get there just in time to see the vendor wink at Mason before turning to prep our order. I'm forced to reflect on the past for a moment. I really must have been wrong about him.

He's actually liked around town. Unlike his father, and all the other Kings, Mason isn't a scheming bag of dirt.

If he could become any more attractive in my eyes, he just did.

"What are you thinking about?" He cocks his head to one side and regards me as I take the first bite of my taco.

Deflecting his question, I close my eyes and savor the Mexican goodness swimming in my tastebuds.

"I forgot how good these were," I say with a mouthful.

It's only when there's no reply, that I look up to find Mason watching me keenly. I'm conscious of his eyes, and stop chewing altogether.

That's when he reaches out and wipes the pad of his thumb across the left corner of my mouth. His finger lingers there. So does his gaze.

Goosebumps begin to pebble the flesh of my arms. Gulping hard, I swallow whatever's in my mouth while I fight to hold his eyes with mine.

My heart is racing too quickly to be considered healthy. This fake date suddenly feels too real.

Mason has become a breath of fresh air in terms of the men in my life. And truthfully, I don't know how to deal with it.

Pulse racing even when he finally removes his hand, I remind myself to breathe. To keep it together. I can't afford to get attached.

"Taco sauce," he jeers as he lifts his finger to show me.

I'm pretty sure I'm close to passing out with the amount of heat that's surfaced on my face.

Luckily he dives right into his taco, seemingly oblivious to the effect he just had on me. Mentally swatting on the thoughts taking residence in my head, I follow him out to the gravel road.

"What do you say we get married sooner?" he asks out of nowhere.

His suggestion stops me in my tracks.

"Sooner?"

"Yeah," he shrugs, swallowing his bite. "There's no need for us to wait until next weekend. You have brilliant plans for the inn, and the sooner you can begin with the renovations, the better."

He's actually... thoughtful. Something I didn't consider back at the restaurant. He was processing. Finding a solution to help me out.

"You're right," I relent, smiling from ear to ear. "Let's do this."

Chapter 6

Mason

The local Silverbell Falls court isn't a grand affair.

That's exactly what it is - a court.

Anything and everything that has to do with the law in our quaint little town goes through this place.

Family matters, oath stamps, the acquisition of development rights...

And now, a wedding.

Mine.

I never imagined I'd be getting married at the court. In fact, I'd never pictured myself ever getting married for that matter.

And here I am, fixing my tie as we wait outside the officer's door.

"Psst..." Olivia calls my attention to her.

And goddammit! She's a literal goddess in her ivory dress, fitting her like a second skin.

“Hm?” I mutter, my mind elsewhere.

“Don’t be so nervous.”

I didn’t realize I was jittery until she pointed it out. I clear my throat and tug on the lapels of my jacket.

Play it cool, Mason. Play it cool.

“I’m not nervous,” I snort.

“I’ve been through this before, Mason.” Olivia giggles. “I know what wedding nerves look like.”

“It’s not a re— ow!” I’m startled when someone prods me in the ribs from behind. One glance back, and I see Willow scowling at me.

A death glare.

A reminder that out of the four of us present here, only three know why we’re really here.

“Don’t sweat it, man.” Ryder pats my shoulder with reassurance. “This is the most important day of your life. Embrace it. Enjoy it.”

It's ironic that he says that, considering he manages the Riverbend Inn.

But that's not why he's here. Not just because we needed a witness close to home who'd attest to this marriage being real. But because he's one of my closest friends too.

It's why I had my hopes up for the inn in the first place. I'd heard way too much from him - the place's deepest secrets.

Now here I am, marrying a Porter sister to gain access to that money pot.

But it doesn't fuel my determination the way I thought it would.

"Come on in."

As soon as we're given the go-ahead from inside, I grab Olivia's hand and lead her inside.

Surprisingly eager, aren't we, Mason? I think to myself.

But it doesn't matter much when we begin reciting our vows with Ryder recording the whole thing.

"... for better or worse... until death do us part."

"I do," the officiant recites.

“I do,” I repeat with pride filling my chest.

I know I should be feeling smug. I did it – married the Porter who’d bring me one step closer to getting my hands on the inn.

But here I am, beaming like a fool at the woman standing in front of me.

It’s all a part of the act. Remember, there’s a camera...

“You may now kiss the bride.”

Our only audience is the officer, Willow and Ryder. The small affair is for the sake of appearances, the camera capturing the moment between the happy, super in love couple.

But the kiss doesn’t feel like an act. Again, I’m lost to her lips for a brief moment before she draws away.

“Nicely done,” Olivia cheers me with a whisper as we wait for Ryder and Willow to sign as witnesses.

Our hands linked, from the outside you’d swear we’re a jubilant couple who’d just tied the knot.

A shot-gun wedding because we couldn’t live apart any longer.

That’s the story we’re sticking with.

“Coming from someone with experience, that’s the highest compliment I could imagine getting,” I tease.

Olivia’s jaw widens. “Shut up!” She pokes my chest.

I don’t know what takes over me, but I grab her finger and stare deeply into her eyes.

“Make me.”

A smirk curls my lips when I notice her gulp. Olivia snatches her finger back and turns away sheepishly.

I feel smug for eliciting the desired effect. I’m a quick learner, and one thing I’ve learned is how Olivia ticks.

“Congratulations, you two lovebirds!” Willow squeals as she holds out two copies of our marriage certificate.

I throw a quick glance at Olivia as I reach for my copy. Without checking the contents, I fold it and stuff it into my inner jacket pocket.

“Congrats, buddy,” Ryder praises with a pat on my arm.

“Thanks, bro.” I look over at Olivia and offer my hand. “Ready to go, Mrs. King?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me…” Olivia gasps when we reach the restaurant Willow works at.

From the sidewalk, a white carpet is laid out that leads to the entrance.

The doorway of said entrance is decorated with elegant silver helium balloons that create an arch. Beyond that lies a pathway leading inside, with potted flowers as decor.

Chuffed by her reaction, I hold out my arm. Once she’s slid her arm through mine, I lead her down the carpet and into the gathering.

“Consider it my wedding gift to you,” I chuckle only loud enough for her ears.

As we enter the restaurant, a gentle melody welcomes us, courtesy of one of Chloe’s friends who knows his way around a piano.

Olivia’s eyelids flutter as she lifts her eyes to mine. She’s blushing again.

“I could have settled for flowers,” she remarks with a roll of her eyes.

Cute, I think as I point at the array of flowers making up the pathway.

“Think I got that covered already.” I wink and watch her flushed cheeks deepen their shade.

“Still...” she leans in closer and whispers. I notice her eyes flickering around the dining area of the restaurant. Feel her shiver into me. “... You could have given me some warning.”

She really means that. I can tell by the worried lines on her face, her quivering bottom lip.

Olivia isn't doing well with having to face a crowd.

Understandable. She's been married before. Recently divorced. Fake relationship.

Damn...

A bout of guilt suddenly erupts in my chest, and I stop halfway down the aisle.

The dimmed down lights make our guests appear like silhouettes in the restaurant. Hidden. And it's just Olivia's face that glows when I turn to her.

Naturally I cup her face, staring deep into her eyes. Softened by the sadness that must be consuming her, she averts her gaze.

“Look at me, Olive,” I gently cajole, thumb caressing the apple of her cheek.

When she finally looks up into my face, my breath catches in my throat.

Jesus. It’s not that deep. We’re doing this for the sake of appearances, right?

But then why the sudden and crazily intense desire to kiss her?
To assure her that things are going to be okay?

Whatever. The reason for this is pointless. All I know is that when I press my lips to hers, she sighs.

And she’s visibly calmer when we make our way down the rest of the aisle.

“Aunt Clara,” I greet with a nod and a forced smile when the petite woman appears out of nowhere.

I’d secretly arranged a small, intimate reception along with Olivia’s sisters’ help.

It was only meant for close family.

But like anything that happens in Silverbells Falls, it’s become a public affair.

My father's cousin is anything but close.

"Hello, Mason dear," she purs, eyes flicking between me and Olivia. "Wow!" She looks up at me with shock contorting her face. "Your bride is a Porter."

"Olivia Porter." Olivia offers her hand to Aunt Clara. "Well, Olivia King now," she giggles. "Nice to meet you."

Pride swells my chest when she corrects her name.

As if it matters...

Aunt Clara tentatively shakes Olivia's hand. There's a bitter look of contempt on her face, and it finally gets voiced when she says, "Very strange to get married as quickly as you did," she scoffs, retrieving her hand and folding her arms. "And in a court, to top it all. Wouldn't you have preferred a perfect white wedding?"

"Olivia is a humble woman, Aunt Clara," I interject. "A fancy affair wasn't in the cards for her."

To my surprise, Olivia twists herself toward me, placing her hand on my chest. She's looking at me coyly, through her lashes.

"In any case, Mason surprised me with a reception." She bats her eyelids at me. "What more could a girl ask for?"

A long moment passes as we gaze into each other's eyes. My hand slips to the small of her back to keep her pinned to my side.

Again, we forget that we're in a crowd. Unless this is Olivia using a defined set of acting skills. Perhaps this is all an act.

But it feels too real.

Aunt Clara mutters something unintelligible and saunters off. Tearing my gaze from Olivia brings about its own wave of awkwardness.

The rest of the evening passes smoothly. We're situated at a private table, but I haven't removed my arm from where it rests on the back of her chair.

Every now and then, my hand ghosts across her arm. Or I'd glance over at her and shower her with heart eyes.

It's all part of the act.

When the night finally draws to a close, I lean in and whisper to her, "It's time for our honeymoon."

"A motel? Really, Mason?"

Arms folded, she scans the place scornfully.

“Were you expecting something fancier?” I toss over my shoulder as I grab the keys off the counter and lift our overnight bag off the floor. “You know our options are slender when it comes to Silverbell.”

Olivia chuckles. “It’s not the place that worries me—”

“Oh, I can assure you, it’s nothing like that. But there are eyes everywhere. Perks of a small town.”

She nods her agreement. If there’s anyone who knows the truth in that, it’s Olivia.

When she finally decides to join me, I call the lift. It takes us up to the third floor.

It would have been more fitting to spend the night at the inn. It’s something I had considered, but the place is in utter disarray.

I can’t imagine us spending our first night as a married couple in a dilapidated quarry.

Not that I have anything but sleep in mind.

We both deserve the rest. This fake relationship has been a full-time job trying to maintain.

“Here, let me,” Olivia offers, taking the key from my fingers and unlocking the room door.

As soon as she flings the door open, she stops and gasps.

“What’s the matter?” I frown as I take a peek over her head. Then I see what’s got her in a panic.

“Th-there’s only one bed...” her voice drifts off as if it’s being carried away by some imaginary wind.

Chuckling, I shimmy past her and drop the bag on the only bed in the room.

She gulps as she steps inside, carefully closing the door behind her. I have to hold myself from laughing aloud.

When Olivia begins unpacking our bag, she sets my pair of clothes on one corner of the bed.

There’s a palpable tension in the air as she takes a little too long unpacking her clothes.

But this isn’t that kind of honeymoon.

“Olive...”

She shrieks as if I’d pulled her to me. I clearly snapped her out of her daze by calling her.

“Y-yeah?”

I lift my clothes from the bed and tuck them under my arm.

“You can have the bed. I’ll take the couch.”

Chapter 7

Olivia

Hands on my hips, I'm now looking at my inn.

Our inn. The Riverbend Inn. It now legally belongs to us, and there's a bubble of excitement welling up inside me.

As agreed, my two sisters and I will be equally dealt a portion of the earnings from the place. Just as we'll share the workload when it comes to renovations.

"Oh my God, you guys!" Chloe squeals, rushing between Willow and I and throwing an arm around each of our shoulders. She pulls us in closer.

"This is so exciting!"

"I never thought I'd live to hear those words leave your mouth," Willow quips.

I giggle. "I didn't think you'd really quit the restaurant, Will."

Willow blows a breath through her lips, stepping forward just as the contractors arrive.

"We have our work cut out for us," Willow says as she turns back to face us. "Besides, this gives me the freedom of running the kitchen the way I want to."

Rules...

We never really did well with them. Us Porters were never created to fit in boxes. We always thought outside of them.

A week was all it took for Sanders to get my name on the title deeds. It took Willow only two days after my wedding to

decide she'd quit the restaurant and become a full-time chef at the Riverbend Inn.

Chloe has allocated time from her life of stardom to head the entertainment side of things. It was a given when she heard that we're planning on reopening the ballroom.

The contractors begin filing into the inn, lugging their equipment with them.

"Come on." I wave my sisters over to follow me. "We need to show them what to do."

The first order of business? The kitchen.

"Morning, ladies," Ryder Green greets us from the doorway to his office. "You're here earlier than I expected."

"We're starting with the kitchen." I huff a breath through my lips. There's a lot to be done, only because the restaurant has been neglected.

"It's a damn shame Manny isn't around to witness this," Ryder sighs. "He loved that place."

"We'll be sure to honor him, Ryder." Willow nods.

Manny was the old chef at the Riverbend Inn restaurant. After his passing, no one really cared to reopen the place.

But that meant it had fallen into complete decay. The whole restaurant has an eerie sense of emptiness about it.

But Willow stares at me expectantly.

I guess it's in my hands to brighten the place up and breathe life into it.

"We'll start with the kitchen. New granite tops, a redo of all the built-ins, and definitely a new stove," I hand out instructions as I walk around the place. The renovators take notes of all the things I want done.

I turn to Willow then. "Willow, you'll choose a stove. And an assistant."

"Got it," she nods and pulls out her cell phone.

I smile, knowing she's probably already on the ball to arrange her side of things when she makes a call. I look around, scanning every nook and cranny for something I might have missed.

Then I see it. The curled-up corner of the kitchen wallpaper. Apart from it pulling off the wall, there's grease stains near the stove area. And the once-silver patterns have now faded to a dull gray.

That won't do, I think as I march forward. Grabbing the corner, I rip the wallpaper off.

Behind me, Willow gasps.

"What are you doing, Liv?!" she exclaims through the sound of paper being ripped to shreds.

Ignoring her momentarily, I'm hastily tearing every inch I can. The wooden wall behind it has blotches of the glue used to stick the wallpaper.

It's anything but pretty.

"Tiles," I snap my fingers and hand out another instruction. "We'll tile the kitchen walls. In fact..." I look down at the floor. "... We'll tile the entire kitchen from top to bottom. This may be a riverside inn in a small town, but if the restaurant is going to work, we'll need health inspectors doing a regular check-in."

"Agreed." Willow joins me in tearing the rest of the wallpaper out. "If we're doing this, we need to do it properly."

"And that means getting our hands dirty," I smirk as I rip more wallpaper off.

A few days have passed and the crushing of stones outside indicates that our delivery has arrived.

"I'll check on it," Hudson offers.

Nodding, I get off my knees and dust the spots that I've soiled. Sanding floors was never going to be an easy feat. But it's definitely going to be worthwhile when I imagine the newly polished floorboards in the theater.

It's a small area, but it's enough to host at least a hundred and fifty guests. The stage has already been installed and the curtains are ready to be hung.

Oddly enough, Chloe has been getting her hands dirty. She's cleaning windows right now, balancing on a foot stool and scrubbing glass as if her life depends on it.

"The piano is here!" Hudson announces, drawing our attention to him.

There's a crashing sound that alerts me, and I turn to see that Chloe is lifting herself off the floor. The stool is on its side, the rag a few feet away.

"I'm okay!" she reassures me and rushes off to point the delivery guys to the right spot to set the piano down.

I can't help but giggle at her eagerness. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that Chloe, with her perfectly polished nails and even sharper voice would be doing the simplest of tasks.

In fact, I never would have imagined that this whole venture would get our family here, together. Even Hudson, our cousin, has been helping out ever since he heard about our plans.

Just then, Dad comes in with brown bags.

"Gosh, is that the time?" I mutter to myself, checking my wristwatch and noting that it's already lunchtime. Dad's been coming around religiously every day to bring us meals while we work on the inn.

"So, how's that husband of yours?" Dad asks as we sit around a table in the restaurant's dining area and have our lunch. It's buffalo wings from the diner.

If I wasn't already thinking about Mason, Dad just made sure of it.

“He’s fine,” I sigh, inwardly pining. And denying the fact that I may be missing the man since he’s left. “He’s on his way back from his business meeting.”

“So, what’s it like living with him?” Willow raises a sneaky brow.

I’m tempted to kick her shin under the table.

“I wouldn’t know,” I admit, throwing daggers her way.

It’s not as if it’s a lie. We’d barely seen each other with him flitting around to handle business. Real estate is no easy job. And interior design has been cumbersome on its own.

I’ve hardly had a moment to rest. Between fixing up the inn to going home and scrubbing the day’s work layered on my skin, I haven’t had time to unwind.

Not that I’ve been banking on unwinding. Not with Mason. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

It was his idea to move into his apartment on the outskirts of town. It would be more believable if we lived together.

Understandable.

What’s not quite understandable is my sudden excitement when I see Mason’s name on the caller ID.

“Ooh... Speak of the devil...” Chloe whistles.

Daggers get aimed at her as I lift my cell phone and answer.

“What’s up,” he says in that cool, casual drawl that always does something to me. “Are you at the inn?”

“Yeah, we’re having lunch now.”

“Dinner plans?”

“Uhm...” I give it some thought, but really, I don’t have any plans. “Not really. Why?”

I bite my bottom lip when I ask that question. Why does it matter, anyway?

Why does a part of me flicker with hope that he’ll ask me to dinner?

And when he does, my heart does a silly little flip. And I'm blurting "Sure, no problem. See you there." too quickly when he gives me a time and place.

There aren't many options when it comes to fine dining in Silverbell Falls. Except for the Riviera. And with only an hour to clear myself of the day's work and get dressed, I haven't really gone all out.

As I enter the restaurant, I'm greeted by a waiter who immediately shows me to Mason's table. I can't help but wonder what he told the staff about me for them to instantly recognize that I'm Mrs. King.

Unless news travels around to every corner of the small town. And I'm just reading way too deeply into it.

"Well, hello there," Mason greets as he gets up and offers out a hand.

Noticing his eyes raking in my dress appreciatively, I feel heat crawling up my cheeks.

It's just a black full-length dress. Nothing fancy. No extravagant show of cleavage or thigh-slit high enough to be deemed sexy.

But the man is practically drooling as he leads me to my seat.

"So, how are the renovations coming along?" He sounds genuinely interested as he takes a seat and pours me wine.

A quick frown skitters across my face. The first time we ever spoke about my plans for the inn, he didn't sound interested at all.

"The kitchen is almost complete," I tell him. "We're onto the theater now, and Chloe's piano arrived today."

"Fantastic," he cheers. "I can't wait to see the shows you have planned there."

“It’s gonna be great. Chloe’s really amazing, and I think she’s finally found her calling. If scrubbing windows is part of it,” I giggle.

Mason’s chuckle simmers down when the waiter comes back to take our order. When he’s gone, Mason rises from his seat.

“Would you excuse me? Need to use the men’s room.”

“Of course,” I say, lifting my purse onto my lap. While he’s gone, I can steal away to the ladies’ room.

As I stare at my reflection, puckering my lips to touch up my lipstick, I giggle to myself. How absurd! Here I am dolling myself up for a man who’s in a fake marriage with me.

It shouldn’t matter what I look like. Yet it does. I haven’t stopped thinking about the kiss on our wedding day.

Or the one before that at the park.

And he’s asked me to dinner tonight. There must be a good reason for that.

Shaking my head as I tuck my lipstick back into my purse, I’m about to leave the ladies’ room when I hear Mason’s voice.

I wouldn’t have frozen in the spot if I didn’t pick up on how heated his voice is. He’s grating his words, sounding angrier than I’ve ever heard him.

“I have it all under control,” he says. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Then why is it taking so long?”

Curious about who the other male voice is, I open the door just a crack.

It’s Mason’s dad, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. Frowning, I hide behind the door, hoping they haven’t seen me.

“Just have patience, Dad. It’s all going according to plan.”

“I want those title deeds in my hands. You have a week.”

With that, Mr. King marches off. Mason huffs and runs a hand through his hair, clearly agitated.

I can't help but wonder what's got him so worked up. What title deeds is Mr. King so adamant to get?

And what plan is Mason devising?

Chapter 8

Mason

“What was that all about?”

I spin in the direction of Olivia’s voice, startled by her sudden appearance. To my relief, someone steps out of the men’s room, giving me time to process all that’s happened.

“What are you talking about?” I act coy.

Olivia frowns, narrowing her eyes suspiciously at me. “Your father was fighting with you.” She peeps across my shoulder, brows raising. “He’s still here.”

“Uhm... Yeah, it’s nothing. Just a property he wants me to close a deal on.” I don’t know how much of our conversation she heard. I just pray she didn’t hear him mention the inn.

“Okay.” That’s all I get before she walks away.

I follow her back to our table, but there’s a tension in the air that can be cut with a knife. As I take my seat, I notice that she’s still standing. Silence stretches for what feels like an eternity as the waiter serves our food.

He glances at Olivia, frowns, but walks away when he senses the tension.

“What’s wrong?” I press, hoping I’d get more out of her. If she heard what we were talking about, we’re done for. I am done for.

Olivia takes a deep breath. “I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“It’s not about the mansion if that’s what you mean.”

“Hm.” She’s narrowing her eyes at me again.

“Come on, Olive. Don’t you trust me?”

She hangs her head and shakes it. I hate that I couldn’t convince her. I hate that I’m lying to her in the first place.

None of which was a part of the plan.

“That’s just the thing, Mason…” Olivia looks up, but she isn’t looking at me. She’s staring past my left shoulder, and it takes every ounce of strength not to look back and see what’s more interesting to look at than me.

“... I don’t trust you. Not right now.”

“There really is nothing to worry about.” There. Another lie. But it’s all I can offer her when I haven’t figured out what to do myself.

On one hand, there’s my family who insist on selling the inn to developers. Then there’s Olivia, who my conscience won’t allow me to keep lying to.

“Know what?” Olivia lifts her bag onto her shoulder. “I’m not hungry anymore. I’m leaving.”

“Olive, wait—”

The few seconds it takes me to get off my chair is all it takes for Olivia to reach the restaurant exit.

A string of curses escapes me as I run a hand through my hair. Plopping back down, I gulp the amber contents of my glass and sigh.

Not one, but two confrontations in one night. Dad’s convinced that I can smuggle the rights of the inn from under Olivia’s nose now.

It’s too soon.

I pour another glass of wine, chug it down like a beer, and leave some bills on the table. My appetite has just ceased to exist.

“Yo, Mason!” Ryder greets me at the entrance. He pauses, taking in the lack of a suit and crisp white shirt. “Surprised to see you here.”

“Yeah...” I rub my nape, feeling wildly out of place. I shouldn’t, since this place belongs to my wife. But since renovations began, I haven’t stepped foot here. “I promised Olivia I’d help out as soon as possible.”

“They’re on the first floor.”

Olivia hadn’t mentioned that they’d be starting with the rooms. Actually, she hasn’t spoken to me since last night. And was gone before I’d woken up.

“Excuse me!”

I have to squeeze myself against the wall when a pair of men come carrying a sealed bed. They take it into the first room, where I see Olivia and Hudson knocking nails on the wall above a window.

“Hey guys,” I announce my arrival, stepping around some boxes and empty paint cans.

“Hey, Mason!” Hudson greets back, “You finally made it.”

“Yeah. Didn’t know you guys were busy with the rooms.”

Olivia looks up, throws me a wary half-smile, and replies, “Hudson has been on a roll.” She winks at her cousin, and he gets a wider smile than I did.

“I guess interior design runs in the family,” Hudson chuckles.

Again, I feel out of place. Shoving my hands into the pockets of my sweatpants, I clear my throat.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Sure,” Hudson replies. “Wanna go through the old office with Liv?”

“I—erm—I’m helping you with this.” She frowns.

Hudson reaches over and snatches the drill out of Olivia's hand. "And I can manage here on my own."

Olivia huffs as she climbs down the ladder, filling me with dread. So, she doesn't trust me.

But that's no reason for me to get despondent, I decide as I straighten up and follow her to the old office.

When Hudson said 'old', he sure meant it. As soon as Olivia unlocks the door, we're greeted by a cloud of dust. Shielding my face with an arm, I flick the light switch, to no avail.

"Light's busted," I announce, heading inside to check if there's any other option. There's none, and the bulb from the ceiling light lies on the floor, shattered to pieces.

"I'll go see if Ryder has a replacement," Olivia says when she spots the broken bulb.

Grabbing her arm, I stop her from leaving. There's a fleeting spark of electricity rushing through me when I touch her. Her soft flesh beneath my fingertips reminds me of our first kiss at the park...

Now's not the time, I chastise myself and let go just as quickly as I caught her.

"It's fine. I'll get it."

My mind's racing with thoughts on how to appease her. Plotting ways and devising plans that could get her to trust me again.

Why it's important, I still don't know. I'm still mulling over it when I get back.

She doesn't say a word to me while I replace the bulb. But something about doing the simplest task fills my chest with pride.

Surely she'd appreciate something like this. As soon as light fills the room, coated in dust as thick as a blanket, I get another idea.

"What's the plan for this room?" I try breaking the ice. Honestly, I can't picture anything feasible happening here. The

old office is down at the west end of the ground floor corridor, while the new one is on the east. That's close to the main entrance of the inn.

"I'm turning it into an office for my interior designing," she answers bluntly without taking her attention off rummaging through the drawers of the old desk.

"Oh, so you're planning on opening your business here in Silverbell Falls?"

Olivia shrugs. "If this old place is anything to go by, then this town is in dire need of some revamping all around." She looks up at last, leaning over the worn-out desk. "Help me, will you?"

I spring into action as soon as she asks, rounding the desk to get to her aid.

Woah... Relax... I think as I clear my throat and put on my best aloof straight face.

She's trying to get the last drawer open. My hand brushes her knuckles as I take over and I notice her shivering into herself.

God... This tension is too much for me to handle. And this drawer is as tough as nails and doesn't budge.

Looking around, I spot a knife I use to chisel the drawer open.

"Thanks," Olivia says flatly as she crouches and starts unpacking the drawer. It's the only one filled with a load of files and books.

Nothing I do seems to get through to her. I pace the room in search of something else I can do to help her out here.

A new layer of paint, I decide as my fingers graze the wall behind the desk, picking up dust. Maybe the small square window on the left could be turned into a floor-to-ceiling sliding door, with a balcony overlooking the river...

"What?" Olivia breathes as she reads from one of the hardcover books.

Momentarily fixated on the way she doesn't seem to mind getting dirt on her sleeve while she holds the book between her

hands, I'm snapped out of my daze when she looks up at me, face ashen as if she's seen a ghost.

"What's wrong?" I quiz, stepping around the desk.

She twists and shows me the book, open to somewhere in the middle.

"Look..." She points to an entry. It seems to be the inn register. Except, it's dated back almost sixty years ago.

"Damn. I knew this place was old. But why's the register still here?"

"No, Mason." Olivia taps on the spot she's pointing at. "Look at the name."

"Hm..." I take a closer look at the name 'Annalise White' under check-ins. Repeating the name, I frown. "Isn't that your grandmother?"

"Yes," Olivia confirms, flipping a couple of pages and running her finger down one. "Her name's here too. But it says she checked in alone. Not with granddad."

"It's not really out of the ordinary," I suggest, thinking nothing of it. "Maybe she stayed here to get away from her marriage a little bit."

Olivia doesn't take the hint I'm throwing, shaking her head as she flips through more pages. "I don't know. It seems odd to me. There's an entry with her name at least once a month for six months."

"Why don't you ask your grandfather about it?" I suggest.

Olivia shakes her head and shuts the book, a puff of smoke coming between us. "Maybe it's nothing. But I'm taking this with me." She tucks the book under one arm and walks toward the door.

"Are we done here?" I ask, following her out of the office. Only when she turns to close the door behind us, do I notice that she's miles away. Deep in thought.

She's so lost in what's bothering her, she doesn't tell me where we're off to next. But I'm following her, not wanting to make

things worse by asking too many questions.

I'm already in the dog box, that much I know. I can only hope that she tasks me with something big enough to impress her.

Maybe if I grab a paintbrush and varnish can and help Willow out downstairs...

But we're already climbing the stairs to the third floor. Curious, I have to ask, "Working on more rooms here?"

Olivia nods, then suddenly stops before turning into the corridor. She grabs my arm and pulls me back. A smile creeps on my lips when I think she's about to kiss me.

"What's he doing here?" She frowns and takes two steps back and peeps into the first room.

I'm reminded about why I shouldn't be longing for her lips as I take a look over her head into the room she's staring into.

Room 56's door is ajar, and there's a man searching through the drawers of the dressing table. He seems frantic, almost panicking as he throws open every drawer.

"Who is it?" I whisper into Olivia's ear.

"It's Detective Rivers," she whispers back.

"Is he not staying here?"

She shakes her head. "This is the room his girlfriend stayed in." Olivia pauses, watching the detective snoop around in the bathroom. "Before she went missing."

Chapter 9

Olivia

Ever since last night, I've been heavily annoyed. Sure, Mason's been on his best behavior, trying to help me out around the inn.

But that doesn't help to douse my suspicions.

And this damned drawer won't budge!

"Help me, will you?" I relent and ask him for help.

As I watch him rush to my help, I can't help but feel bad for doubting him. He's always ready to help out where he can. It's the reason why we're married in the first place.

It was to help me acquire ownership of this inn.

The apology hangs on the tip of my tongue as I watch him chisel open the drawer and leave it for me to inspect. There's a bunch of files and books - ancient relics that have as much history as the building itself.

As I page through a register book with crisp, brittle pages, something catches my eye.

The name "White" sticks out.

Annalise White to be specific. My maternal grandmother.

And her name is on every page, under every month.

What?

I don't realize I've said that out loud until Mason is beside me, asking me what's wrong.

Showing him the book, I point to one entry. "Look..."

Mason doesn't seem to catch what I'm pointing at. "Damn. I knew this place was old. But why's the register still here?"

"No, Mason." I point at the spot again. "Look at the name."

"Hm... Annalise White? Isn't that your grandmother?"

"Yes." I flip the page. "Her name's here too. But it says she checked in alone. Not with granddad."

A little more investigation brings up her name a few more times. Six months, to be specific. And every single time, she checked in alone.

I close the book and tuck it under my arm. Something is strange about it. And why is it the only register from so far back that remains here?

Mind hanging on this little mystery discovered in the old office, I decide to go check out the third floor. We'd delegated a floor each between my sisters, Hudson, and me.

Mason follows quietly behind me, not uttering a word. There's a part of me that wants to clear the air between us, but then there's a part that's fixated on the register and grandma's check-ins here.

I'm so deep in thought, I almost miss the first door standing ajar. It's not until I hear the tiniest squeal of old furniture that I realize it isn't empty.

No one should be up here.

Quickly catching Mason's arm to reel him back, I peep through the open door, wondering aloud what he's doing here.

"Who is it?" Mason asks from behind.

"It's Detective Rivers."

"Is he not staying here?"

I shake my head. I don't need to check the engraved tag on the front of the door to know which room this is. Or why Detective Ethan Rivers is here. "This is the room his girlfriend stayed in..." I stay quiet as he enters the bathroom. "... Before she went missing."

There's no way Detective Ethan Rivers is booked in at the Riverbend Inn. We've closed the place while renovations are being conducted.

Yet here he is, snooping around in his girlfriend's old room.

According to Ryder, the police had already given the place a sweep when Brianna first went missing. All leads had turned up cold, and the poor detective must be going insane with all the dead-ends he's facing.

"Brianna Morgan, right?" Mason asks behind me. Even though he whispers, the sharp detective hears his voice and snaps his head in our direction.

Or maybe he heard his girlfriend's name. It would explain why he's charging toward us as if we're the trespassers here.

"Woah. Hold it right there, big guy." Mason plants himself between me and the frantic detective, holding up a hand. "What are you doing here?"

Ethan stops, shoulders drooping when he probably remembers that he shouldn't be here. Not without a warrant. And it would have been run through me.

"I'm sorry," he says remorsefully. Blowing a breath, he glances over his shoulder and back to us. "I was just looking for... something."

Suddenly I get an idea. Detective Rivers can be a solid ally.

Ever since getting my hands on this book, I've been giving it some thought. I need to get to the bottom of why Grandma Annalise had been checking into the old Riverbend for months. Alone.

Then there's the question that's been plaguing my thoughts since the day at the lawyer's office.

Why did Mom keep her ownership of the Riverbend Inn a secret? Not even Dad knew about its existence.

There's some mystery behind it all. First Mom, then Grandma.

If I can get Rivers on my side, I can at least crack the code of the mystery behind Grandma's regular check-ins here.

“What was it you were looking for?” I ask, hand tightening around the register with anticipation. Something tells me he’s the key to uncovering the answers I need.

Ethan gulps, staring warily at me. “I–I don’t know.” He walks back into the room, allowing Mason and me to step in.

Mason frowns at me warily, shaking his head so slightly that I barely catch it. But he’s trying to warn me against offering my help.

But that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

“What have you found so far?” I gently close the door behind us.

Ethan sighs, long and despondently. “Nothing except for a note that brought her here to Silverbell Falls in the first place.”

“What note?”

The detective reaches into a hidden pocket in his jacket and holds out the note for us to see. It reads, “Everything you’re looking for is in Silverbell Falls.”

“Was she looking for something?” I look up from the note.

He nods his head, taking the note back. “Her mother. She’s never met her. Doesn’t even have a name.”

“What about birth records?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve tried. But she was close to finding the answers, and then she–she–” He gulps, unable to say the rest.

“Let me help you find something in this place.” I lay the book down on the bed, dusting my palms on my t-shirt. Mason is frowning at me, but with a gentle nod, I coerce him to do the same.

He tried to protect me back there. My heart warms at the thought, but I say nothing as we set out about the room trying to find some clue that will lead us to Brianna Morgan.

But searching high and low proves fruitless. Every cupboard thrown apart, every drawer opened... All I know is that this place still needs a lot of damage control.

Mason is pacing the floor when he stops out of nowhere.

“Olive... Look at this...”

I turn to him just in time to see him squatting down, pointing at the floor.

“What is it?” Ethan pops his head out from the bathroom.

“It’s loose.” Mason raps his fingers on a single floorboard, then looks up at me.

I nod for him to check it, and he lifts the wooden floorboard out of its place. He reaches for his phone, turns on his flashlight and looks underneath the floor.

“There’s something in there.”

Looking in further, I see what Mason is talking about. There’s an envelope of some sort, nestled snugly amongst the ancient dust beneath the floors.

I reach in and pull it out, dusting it off on my knee. It’s not brittle and old like the pages of the register.

“Well... What is it?” Ethan asks impatiently.

Mason pulls out a pocket knife and offers a hand to help me up before taking the envelope. He slides the blade through the seal and passes the envelope back to me.

“It’s title deeds.” I frown, skimming the front page of the papers I’d just taken out of the envelope. “Title deeds to a piece of land here in Silverbell.”

“What?” Mason quizzes, coming to stand beside me as he reads the page too.

Ethan does the same, eyes wide as he reads the deeds. .

“It’s in my family’s name,” I go on, reading the name from the second page where someone had signed at the bottom. As if to make sure my eyes aren’t deceiving me, I check again.

Sure enough, the name ‘Porter’ is printed there.

“Why is there a copy of the title deeds hidden in the floor?” Mason thinks out loud. He’s kneeling on the floor, double-checking if there’s anything else hidden inside there.

“It’s not even there long,” I observe, checking the envelope. Dust had only just settled on it. But there’s not a single stain on it to indicate that it’s been there for a long time. “But the question is... Who put it in there and why here?”

“I think Brianna hid them there,” Ethan suggests, staring at the floor and rubbing his chin.

“Why would she hide it there? And how did she have this?” It’s starting to feel like an interrogation.

Ethan shrugs. “All I know is that she was on her way to the deeds office before she went missing,” he says sadly. “Maybe it was for this.”

“There’s something we found in the old office that’s strange too.”

I show Ethan the register from decades ago.

“It could be nothing...”

“Or it could be something, detective. I didn’t even know that we owned land. Then this...” I point at the registry. “And who knows where the rest of the registry books are. Maybe there’s more...”

He remains silent for quite some time before nodding his head.

“Tell you what... I’ll help you find more of the registers. And we’ll figure out why Brianna hid the title deeds in here. But...” he holds up a finger. “... You have to promise to give me full access to the newer records of the inn. Specifically, two months ago.”

“Of course!” I agree. “We’ll help you any way we can, Detective.”

Just then, a ringing cell phone cuts through the silence spread across the room. I look up from the register to see Mason staring at his screen with a disdainful look furrowing his brows.

“Excuse me,” he says before storming out of the room.

The loud thud of the door when he shuts it makes me flinch. This doesn’t go past the detective, who frowns at me.

“What was that all about?”

Shrugging, there’s little explanation I can offer. “I—I don’t know.”

Ethan walks up to the door and gently opens it again.

“Hm... Strange.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” I say quickly, realizing the detective would be the sharpest eye in the room to pick up on strange behavior.

So I wasn’t imagining things. Mason is hiding something from me.

“He’s been acting weird since last night,” I think out loud, staring at the door, waiting for him to come through.

I don’t know what it is I hope to find if I see him coming through that door. Reassurance? Putting my doubts to rest?

Instead, I’m offered a deal when Ethan sticks his hand out.

“I’ll help you figure this thing out with your mother and grandmother, if you help me find Brianna.”

I place my hand in his and give it a curt shake.

“Deal.” Glancing over my shoulder, I can hear Mason coming back up the stairs. I turn to the detective with conviction in my voice. “Keep an eye out for my husband. I don’t trust him anymore.”

Chapter 10

Mason

“Well, won’t you give us the pleasure of having dinner with your parents?”

“Not tonight, Mom,” I say with reluctant remorse. I’m not really sorry about not spending more time with them.

Both Mom and Dad have been on my back ever since the marriage. Not because they’d never imagined their son marrying to gain access to his wife’s property.

But because I’ve apparently been taking too long to take it under my name.

“It’s not a question, Mason,” she sternly says. “You haven’t been to visit us since long before your wedding. Is it a crime for a mother to wish to see her son?”

A pang of guilt nestles somewhere deep inside my heart. So deep, that it’s almost lost to the unfathomable part of me.

But I’m growing soft. I know that much. Guilt compels me to accept my mother’s invitation to dinner despite my better judgment.

“Thanks, Olivia.” The detective, Ethan Rivers, shakes Olivia’s hand.

Shakes it and holds it a little longer than can be considered appropriate.

Not on my—

“Goodbye, Detective.” Olivia slips her hand out from Ethan’s just as I’m about to charge forward and—

And what, Mason? Punch the guy? He'd probably have you in cuffs before your fist made impact...

Jeez. Was that jealousy I just felt? Regardless, I force a smile on my face as he leaves us in Room 56.

"What was he thanking you for?" I ask as Olivia turns and kicks the loose floorboard back into place.

"We've come to an agreement," she tells me as she lifts the register from the bed along with the envelope containing the title deeds. She tucks both under her arm and turns to me, giving me a huge grin. "He's going to help us uncover the mystery behind these..." She taps the book. "And he gets access to all the inn's records."

I raise a skeptical brow. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" I've seen enough crime documentaries to know that the first suspect is usually the partner. The boyfriend, husband, lover.

Ethan Rivers might be a detective. But that would only make it easier for him to cover his tracks.

"Jeez, Mason..." She then pats my shoulder. "It sounds like you have trust issues."

Olivia giggles as she makes to leave. As she walks past me, her arm brushes against mine. The contact is so minute, but it's enough to draw goosebumps to the surface of my skin. I'm forced to turn as if a gust of wind came along and blew me in her direction.

"Olivia..." I breathe, her name rolling off my tongue with a sweetness I can't understand.

The silky tresses of her hair sway as she turns, sending along a whiff of roses that fills my lungs. Probably her shampoo, but it smells like the essence of her.

"What?"

Her blunt reply snaps me from my daze, pulls me from the rose bushes, and pricks me like a thorn.

For a moment there, I thought I was in the clear. But by the looks of it, I was never in the clear, to begin with.

“Nothing.” I shrug, averting my gaze so she wouldn’t see the disappointment in my eyes. Not from rejection. But from not getting to the question in the first place.

I was going to ask her to accompany me to dinner with my parents. But as I watch her saunter off, down the hall where she meets up with Willow, I know she’s better off with her family than with mine.

Cautiously following her to her sister, I overhear them speaking about the detective.

“His girlfriend is still missing,” Olivia tells Willow.

“Damn.” Willow grimaces. “It’s been what? A month? Two?”

“It’s too long.” Olivia shakes her head.

“What do you have there?” Willow points at the book and envelope.

“Oh, I’ll show you guys tonight. Are we still on for dinner at Dad’s?”

Willow nods, then notices me approaching. She perks up when she sees me and gives me a courteous smile. “Will you join us for dinner too, Mason?”

“Oh, uh...” I rub my nape and sheepishly take the last few steps toward them. Stalling for time, I guess.

“Mason’s busy,” Olivia cuts in. “He won’t make it.”

Nice. I’m in the dog box again.

Willow and Olivia discuss something about the kitchen, and when her sister leaves to go back down, Olivia turns to me.

The cynical smile on her face says volumes. She doesn’t trust me at all. I need to do something to fix this, and quickly.

“My family knows about the fake marriage, so there’s no need to pretend around them,” she says coldly, betraying the smile on her face.

“It’s fine, Olive.” I shrug nonchalantly. But deep down, I’m troubled by the whole thing. I would have gone to dinner with

her if she wasn't so keen on putting distance between us. "I'm having dinner at my parents' tonight."

"Oh." The smile slips off her face. Is that disappointment I sense? "In any case, there's nothing left here for you to do. We have it covered."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course." Her smile returns and she pats my shoulder again. "See you around, Mason."

With that, she turns and leaves, leaving me confused. Just what do I need to do to get her to trust me again? Just so that I can break her trust soon...

"Has the mansion been transferred to our name?" Dad asks.

We haven't been served dinner yet. If the tables were turned, I'd have been sentenced to death for talking shop at the dinner table.

Frowning, I allow a moment of silence to pass. In it, the ticking of the dining room clock gets louder. Counting down every second of my stalling.

"Already done. The new title deeds were delivered this morning."

"Good." He smiles, nods, then glances at Mom. "What about the Riverbend?"

Sighing heavily, I tip my glass to my lips and savor the sharp taste of grapes. Though I'd prefer to drown in much richer liquor right now, I'm trying to remain decent.

Dad clears his throat when I stall again. I know that look on his face - that stern, business look.

"I'm working on it," I lie.

"You have a few days left, Son. If you can't do this—"

Mentally, I drown out the rest of his voice. I know how the saying goes: “If you can’t do this, are you even a King?”

It’s the same story every single time. I must have heard that phrase the day I was born. I can just picture it. Mom giving birth to me while Dad’s questioning why I was taking so long to get out. “If you can’t do this...”. It feels like I’ve been hearing it for the past thirty-seven years of my life.

You’d swear we’re royalty. Except we’re not. Just a wealthy family from the small town of Silverbell Falls. A loving mother and doting father, and a perfect heir. Not.

“I’ll get it done, Dad,” I promise, though my mind feels conflicted enough not to give me the full desire I need to take the Riverbend Inn under our name. It would be easy. Just a few calls and we’re good to go.

But the matter of lifting the phone to make those calls seems daunting.

Dinner is served and Mom and Dad discuss the charity ball this coming weekend.

“You’ll attend with Olivia, won’t you, Mason?” Mom asks.

I look up from my plate, utensils hovering in the air just like my indecisiveness. “Olivia?”

“Yes, dear. She is your wife.” Mom leans over the table and gives me a wink. “Even if it’s just for the community. You’ll attend as newlyweds.”

Like being saved by the bell, the telephone in Dad’s study rings. The butler comes over to inform him about it. But with the silence we always find ourselves in, he heard it from the dining room.

“Will you excuse me?” Dad asks Mom as he pats his lips with a napkin.

She smiles and nods at him, watches him leave the table, then turns back to me.

“I heard you were helping out with the renovations at the inn today.”

“Yes, Mom.” There’s something about the mention of the renovations that gets me excited. Even though Olivia had insisted I go home, I’d stayed to help out with the theater.

It sure is coming along well. The burgundy stage drapes have been put up. The seats have been replaced. And Chloe’s already arranging for the sound equipment to be delivered.

I pictured it then as I’m envisioning it now - Olivia and I somewhere in the crowd, watching her sister take the stage. Would it be a date? Or would we be there just to show face and act like a married couple for Silverbell Falls’ benefit?

I prefer the former...

“What a shame...”

“What is?” Frowning, I realize I must have drifted into my thoughts again and missed what she said.

“This whole renovation endeavor. Soon, the place will be sold, and everything they’ve done will be a waste.”

Something inside me shifts, and I don’t feel the need to hold back anymore. “What if it’s not a waste, Mom? What if they’re actually doing something good there?”

“Good?” Mom laughs cynically. “Please! The only good that can come out of that place is if it gets sold to someone who’ll turn it into a shopping mall. As planned.”

Clenching my fists under the table, I try to keep my anger at bay. They’re so hellbent on the mall, they refuse to accept that maybe the Porter sisters will thrive with the inn.

“Why don’t you visit the inn, Mom? See for yourself what changes have been made. Maybe it’ll change your perspective.”

“Oh, I don’t need to change my mind, Mason.” Mom sips on her wine. “You need to remember why you’re doing this. And don’t think we don’t know about that prospective buyer you turned down.” Mom looks square at me, her lips pressed in a line. “There is another buyer available. And you will call him.”

Olivia isn't around when I get home. Kicking off my shoes, I pad to the kitchen in search of something to drown in.

I can't convince my parents to change their minds. And there's no way I can convince Olivia to give up the inn. She's so passionate about it, I'd hate to bring up something unimaginable.

But I can't swindle the inn from her like this. *What does that make me? Where does that leave me?*

Grabbing the whiskey decanter from the cupboard I pour myself a glass and chug down every last drop. I pour another and repeat, then pour a third and take it with me to the living room.

At least my liquor keeps me company while I wrestle with my conflicting thoughts. Firstly, I need to get my parents off my back.

Secondly, I need to get Olivia to trust me again. Something about her lack of trust fills me with dread.

My head's already whirling when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. My vision's hazy when I read her name on my screen.

"What's up?" I try acting normal. Not like I'm drunk.

Olivia clears her throat and speaks formally. Maybe she's sensed my current condition...

"We're meeting up tomorrow with Detective Rivers to discuss what we found today. Would you like to join us?"

Sighing, I remember that I now have a meeting tomorrow. "Sorry, Olive, I won't—"

Before I can finish, Olivia cuts in, "That's fine, Mason. I understand."

"Olive, I—"

The line goes dead and adds to the silence spread around me. Hanging my head, I'm left with my own thoughts once again.

Until one of them hits me out of my drunken stupor. Grabbing my phone and searching through my contact list, I rub my face as if wiping the effects of the whiskey away.

There is still something I can do to win her trust again.

Chapter II

Olivia

“Why are we doing this here?” Willow asks, taking a wary look around the basement of our parents’ home.

An eerie chill sets in just as I join her in scanning our surroundings. Somewhere in the shadows, water drips on the floor.

Better tell Dad about that... It must be a leak.

Chloe comes down the concrete stairs, balancing a tray with three glasses of orange juice. Watching her brings back fond memories of our childhood - back when we’d hide out here to get away from guests.

And all the chores Mom would have us do while they entertained their guests.

“Good. Chloe’s here.” I take a deep breath before dumping the contents of the duffel bag out on the table. The hardcover register slides out first, then the envelope containing the title deeds.

“What is this?” Chloe asks with a frown. Of my two sisters, only Willow knows a little about what it is. She’d found me leaving Room 56 this morning.

“This...” I say as I pull the registry toward me. “... Is the inn’s old registry. It’s from almost sixty years ago.”

“Damn,” Chloe whistles. “Where did you find it?”

“In the old office I’ll be using,” I say as I turn the page. I’d folded in the corner at the top to keep the page open.

“Grandma’s name is in here. Shows she checked in at Riverbend once a week for six months in a row.”

“What?!” Chloe and Willow exclaim in unison.

Pressing my finger to my lips, I scowl at them to keep quiet.

“Dad’s gonna hear us.”

“Maybe he can help,” Willow suggests. “Maybe he knows something we don’t.”

I shake my head, lifting the envelope this time. “I don’t think we should ask Dad anything for now.” I slip the deeds out and show them to my sisters. “We found this in the missing woman’s old room.”

“That Morgan girl?” Chloe snaps her fingers while she frowns. “Brianna Morgan, right?”

I nod. “We’re still trying to figure out why she had this with her. Her boyfriend, the detective, said she was visiting the deeds office the day she went missing.”

Willow looks up curiously. “This has the Porter name on it.” It’s almost as if she’s asking a question.

“Yes,” I confirm, but the words printed on there is enough proof. “Some land was in Dad’s family’s name. But it doesn’t have an address. Just coordinates that don’t pick up on the latest mapping systems.”

“Why did the missing woman have this?” Chloe asks, leaning in to closer inspect the title deeds.

“I have no idea. But that’s what we need to find out.”

“Do you think it’s related?” Willow looks at me.

I shrug. “I don’t know. My guess is that the title deeds are for the inn, and somehow that has something to do with Mom being the owner.”

Chloe sits back and folds her arms. “So how does Grandma fit into all of this?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” I take my cell phone out, smirking. “And I have a new friend who’s willing to help out.”

I huff a frustrated sigh as we enter the local library. Not even the cool air from the air conditioner that hits my cheeks is enough to cool me down.

After getting turned down last night, I was foolish enough to text him this morning. What do I get?

A simple, “See you later.” as if this isn’t important to me.

Why am I surprised? I shouldn’t have any expectations for the man. He’s not my husband - not in the true sense.

“You alright?” Ethan asks, holding the door open for us.

“Yeah.” I nod, following Willow in just as my ringtone bleats through the entrance.

Wincing, I hang my head and step back out. “Just a sec,” I inform them and take Chloe’s call. “Chloe?”

“Hey, Liv. We have a bit of a problem here.”

Rolling my eyes, I mutter to the skies how ungrateful I am for never catching a break. “Don’t tell me what it is. We just got to the library.”

Chloe sighs on the other end of the line, apologizes, and assures me that she’ll handle it. I can’t even imagine what the problem is. Actually, I don’t want to.

I join Ethan and Willow at the reception where Ethan shows the lady his badge. With eyes widening behind the lenses of her thick spectacles, she hops off her chair and shows us to an office.

“What was that all about?” I ask when the receptionist leaves us alone. The office is empty save for a computer that’s old enough to be in a retirement home.

“The locals know we mean business when we come sniffing around.” Ethan grins. “Just show them a badge, and you’d swear everyone’s a suspect.”

Willow takes the only seat in front of the computer. She sticks her hand out and waves her fingers.

“The deeds, please.”

Taking them out of my purse, I hand them over to her. She starts typing on the keyboard’s sticky keys, the tap-tapping echoing around the vast empty room.

She pulls up a few archived articles from decades ago. As she scrolls through them, the Porter name comes up and I tell her to stop.

“There. Malcolm Porter Inherits Land From His Father,” I read the headline of an old newspaper front page.

Willow clicks on the picture, bringing up the article.

Skimming through the contents of the article, there’s nothing worthy of note. Except that our great-grandfather Malcolm inherited a piece of land on the outskirts of Silverbell Falls.

On the east end of town.

Frowning, I glance over at Ethan. “How did your girlfriend get her hands on the title deeds?”

He blinks as if the dim light of the computer screen gnaws at his vision. “She found it when she was looking for her mother.” He sighs. “I don’t know what it has to do with her mother, though.”

From the little we’ve spoken, I can tell that the detective is going out of his mind searching for Brianna. There’s no point in asking him if there’s anything else he’s not telling us.

It’s clear that the title deeds have something to do with Brianna. He knows as much about it as we do.

“Where was Brianna before she went missing?” I ask.

“Brianna was on her way to the deeds office when she went missing. Whoever is behind her disappearance has something to do with this piece of land.”

“But she didn’t take it with her. She hid it.” I frown. “Don’t you know someone at the deeds office? Maybe she spoke to someone first.”

Ethan shakes his head. "I've been investigating the deeds office. But I have to be careful of who I speak to." He turns to me, holding up a finger. "Your husband is in real estate, Mrs. King."

Hearing him call me that sparks a wave of anger I didn't even know I possessed. Clicking my tongue and rolling my eyes, I turn back to the computer screen. "I'm not asking him for help."

Is this what Mason knows, and hiding from me? After all, he probably knows everyone at the deeds office. All the Kings do. He deals in property, after all.

It's the only thought on my mind while Willow scrolls through more articles. Nothing important comes up, so she prints the article about Malcolm Porter and we head back to the inn.

"No!" I exclaim, hand flying up to my mouth. It's like a horror scene right before my eyes.

Like most buildings here in Silverbell Falls, the Riverbend Inn has an underground cellar. It would have been an ordinary basement, but the wooden shelves are stacked with bottles that are probably as old as this place.

Only now, the entire floor is drowning in at least three inches of water.

"What happened?" I gasp, kicking off my shoes and cautiously stepping into the water. It's practically raining in the left corner, and I find the source of the problem.

A broken ceiling board hangs loosely from its corner. Water pours in from the roof.

"I tried telling you, Liv!" Chloe yells from behind. "There's a burst pipe in room three."

"Cut the water!" Mentally rolling my eyes, I see Chloe rush back out to get someone to cut the water.

Ethan, probably fearing my current mood, turns away and finds a chair to climb up with. He grabs the loose ceiling board and attempts to shove it back in place.

To no avail. It cracks in two pieces and breaks off entirely.

Of course. I'm fuming. First, the bathtub in one of the rooms cracked when they changed pipes and had to be replaced.

Now, this.

"It's pointless, Ethan," I sigh, inspecting the damage. "We'll have to replace it in any case."

"Renovations, huh?" he chuckles lightheartedly, but I'm in no mood to join him. Seeing this, he steps off the chair, water rippling where he stands.

"What now?" he asks.

Blowing a breath through my lips, I shrug. "This just means more work. I wasn't planning on fixing the cellar."

Ethan grins at me. "At least the booze isn't spoiled."

Letting my anger subside momentarily, I chuckle as I walk up to one shelf. I lift a bottle from the rack and hold it up to show him. "Woodbridge." I look back at the shelf. "Wouldn't want any of this to go to waste."

One by one, I begin tucking bottles under my arm.

"Let me help you with that," he offers and does the same.

With the way I'm feeling, I have a good mind to pop open a bottle and down its contents.

Until something behind the shelf catches my eye. Tilting my head to one side, I try taking a closer look. But I have to put the bottles down and really take a good look.

"Do you see that?" I ask Ethan, pointing at what appears to be a hole in the wall. It's sealed with a square piece of wood that doesn't match the rest of the wall, nails holding it in place on each corner.

"Yeah. What is that?"

I shrug. "I have no idea."

“Here,” Ethan says when he grabs the edge of the shelf. “It’s loose. Help me move it.”

I grab the other end and we pull the shelf forward. Ethan shimmies behind it and uses a pocket tool to unhinge the lid.

It pops open with ease, and I get around to the back to check what it is. Sure enough, it’s a hole in the wall. But it isn’t empty.

There’s a rolled-up white sheet inside.

“Blueprints?” Ethan quizzes when I open the sheet up. Sure enough, it’s blueprints. But it’s not specific to what it’s for.

It’s dated back almost forty years ago. The Riverbend has been suffering decay for much longer.

“Someone drew up a whole new plan for this place...?” I think out loud.

“Are you sure it’s for the inn?” Ethan offers.

Nodding my head, I tell him why I don’t think it’s possible. “Look at this.” I point at the layout. “The Riverbend Inn is just as the name suggests. It’s on a bend. This doesn’t have a road behind it.”

“But in front of it, if this is the main entrance.”

“Exactly,” I agree. “We need to get someone to check these. Someone who can pull up information on local properties.”

“Your husband’s in real estate, might I remind you, Mrs. King,” Ethan jokes, holding out the blueprints for me. “Maybe he can take a look.”

Even though it’s a joke, Ethan reminds me about something. My husband, albeit fake, is into real estate. If there’s anyone who could get information, even about Brianna’s disappearance, it’s him.

Then again, I still don’t trust him. And have suspicions about what he’s keeping from me.

“You take them,” I tell Ethan as I roll the blueprints up and pass them to him. There are answers I need, and tonight, I’m going to get them.

And those answers lie with my fake husband.

Chapter 12

Mason

“Perfect,” I say, ogling the delivery. Made just a few minutes ago, I tuck it back into the box and slip it under my desk.

Sighing, I contemplate if I should get back to work. There’s no point, and I check the time just to assure myself that the day’s over.

Finally, I can stop with this pretense.

Mom’s buyer was a bust. I’d made sure of that. He hadn’t even left my office for a viewing of the inn. I wasn’t prepared to take him there, and determinedly put him off investing in it. Instead, he’s now the new investor in the mansion we acquired from this marriage.

Ah, this marriage... This fake marriage.

Doesn’t feel so fake when my heart does a little flip the moment I hear the front door open up and listen to the sound of Olivia’s footsteps down the hall. Suddenly giddy, I rise from my chair and await her arrival when I hear her nearing my study.

“Olive...” I breathe the second she steps in. The whole scene in front of me dramatizes, her throwing the door open and bursting in, cheeks flushed from her haste to greet me. Even with her hair in a messy bun, the bottoms of her jeans rolled up almost to her knees, and her t-shirt creased from God-knows-what, she’s a sight to behold.

“We need to talk.” Her clipped tone sends me tumbling back to reality. Fake wife, fake life. In this reality, she isn’t pleased to

see me.

And it sends me crashing back to my chair once again.

“What’s up?” I ask coolly, hoping she doesn’t catch the disappointment in my voice. I do my best to give her my most charming, business-like smile that’s sure to give away nothing.

But mentally, I’m raking her body with my eyes. Imagining...

“I know you’re hiding something from me, Mason.” She steps further into the room, arms on either side of her and her fists clenched. “I want to know what it is.”

Oh, no. I can’t help but wonder if the cat’s out of the bag. Has she heard something? Stumbled on some information that would hinder my plans for the inn?

My parents’ plans, I remind myself. I refuse to feel like the culprit here. And I’m not about to let her know that I have anything to do with trying to sell the inn.

“Hiding something?” I lie, and it physically pains me, turning into a lump in my throat. When she isn’t looking, I swallow that lump and maintain my composure.

“Yes, Mason.” Her nostrils flare as she drags the spare chair out from the opposite side of my desk. Her movements are stiff as she takes a seat, her spine ramrod straight when she sits.

“I overheard your conversation with your father that night,” she reminds me bluntly. “And yesterday at the inn...” She narrows her eyes at me, and it feels like I’ve been pierced in the chest. “... What was that all about?”

Frowning, I tilt my head and try to recall what happened.

Ah, yes. My mother had called about dinner.

“Difficult client.” Another lie. I refuse to let her know that they’re giving me a hard time. That’ll just pose its own set of questions. “We had some trouble with a transfer, and he was threatening to pull out.”

Damn... When did lying get so easy that it sounds like the truth even to my own ears?

Olivia opens her mouth to say something but presses it into a line. Her scowl disintegrates too, like she's contemplating something.

I use the moment of hesitation to bring out the box from under my desk. Lifting it onto my desk, I slide it across to her.

"What's this?" Her frown returns, but thankfully, her attention goes from the interrogation to the box set before her.

"It's a gift." I lift the lid. "I realized we haven't exchanged actual gifts for the wedding. So consider this mine to you."

Her brows lift in surprise as she unfolds the dress from inside the box. She stands as the dress cascades to full length, and I'm picturing how perfect she'll look in it.

"It's... It's beautiful," she marvels, holding the gown against her chest. Her hazel eyes glint with a glow telling of her appreciation.

"Do you like it?" I ask cautiously, hoping she doesn't bring up what I'm hiding again.

She doesn't. And I don't doubt that she will again. Olivia looks up and smiles at me, filling my heart with warmth as if it was her arms embracing me.

"I love it!" she squeals, palm roving the neckline of the gown. She looks up at me, a flicker of regret passing her eyes. "I didn't get you anything."

Standing up, I round the desk and lean against the edge closest to her. I have to fight the urge to reach out and cup her cheek, assure her that there's no greater gift than her trusting me.

I gulp down on that lump forming in my throat again. "You don't have to give me anything. Except for being my date to my parents' charity dinner this Saturday."

Her bottom lip quivers with hesitation. Now, I'm fighting to reach out and stroke her lip to stillness.

"D-date?"

"Well, we'd have to attend as newlyweds," I remind her. "But yes, a date."

She gulps, eyes flitting to the dress and back up at me. She gives me a sheepish smile, nodding slightly. “Of course...”

Lifting my arm out, a wave of relief washes over me as soon as Olivia slips her arm there. I’d been reluctant to attend the dinner, with my overbearing parents giving me no room to breathe in terms of this inn debacle.

But as soon as my eyes meet the soft hazel depths of hers, there’s a feeling of intense warmth spreading through me. Softening the tension which almost rose like bile in my throat when I stepped onto the curb.

Now, it’s gone. And I smile at her with all the satisfaction I feel.

The gown is a perfect fit, the bodice fitting her like a second skin while the skirt ruffles out from her luscious hips. The burgundy shade really brings out her eyes and compliments the creamy tone of her skin.

Olivia catches me staring and giggles into her palm.

“What’s the matter?” I ask with a low chuckle.

“Nothing.” She shakes her head, the loose tresses of her hair flowing across her shoulders. “You have good taste, Mr. King.”

A smirk curls my lips. “Considering I married you, I would have to agree.”

Her cheeks almost match the color of her gown as she looks straight ahead and takes a deep breath. She tenses beside me, but my own nerves of steel are enough to lead us through the entrance of the local hall.

Round tables make up the floor of the hall, and Silverbell Falls locals take up the seating. It’s like our arrival conjures up an energy that draws all eyes to the entrance.

And all eyes are on my wife.

Glancing at her, I can see why she's drawn all attention to her. The gown, imported from a designer in Italy, is one of a kind.

But so is the woman who wears it.

It's not the sparkling Swarovski crystals around the neckline that intrigue me. But it's her eyes I'm fixated on as she turns to glance at me. We should be heading in. Not standing here, soaking up the mesmerization of the town hall.

I can't help it. Something comes over me the moment her eyes meet mine, and I turn to her and cradle her cheek with my hand. Her soft skin is smooth beneath my palm, and as I dip my head and press my lips to hers, they're even softer.

Our lips gently mold together, and I feel her sigh and relax closer to me. Her palm goes flat on my chest, resting on my heart as she allows me the liberty of her lips.

When we draw back, she stares at me with the most exuberant glow in her hazel eyes. I notice her lipstick has smudged, and reach up to wipe it with the pad of my thumb.

Olivia hasn't stopped staring at me. Her eyes flicker from my face to my lips, and she tucks her bottom lip between her teeth.

It's my undoing. Or close to it, if we weren't in the company of others.

"Come on. We haven't even taken our seats," I muse, smirking.

She takes a moment to regather her thoughts before clearing her throat and walking beside me to our table. I keep my hand on the small of her back when I notice that she hasn't lost the attention of the guests.

The kiss lingers on my lips through the evening, more potent than the five-course meal served. Dad gives a speech as a show of thanks to his guests while Mom accompanies him on the stage.

"Thank you all for attending tonight." Dad claps and the hall follows in applause. "The center stage..." He points to the

center of the hall where a clearing opens up. "... Is open if anyone would like to enjoy the live band."

Mom and Dad leave the stage to another round of applause. The live band begins playing, and a few couples leave their tables to make use of the center stage.

I turn to Olivia, who's patting her lips clean. "Would you like to dance?"

Her eyes fly up over the napkin, brows knitting. "You know how to dance?"

"It can't be that difficult," I jest as I offer out a hand. She slips hers into it and I lead her onto the dancefloor.

As Olivia's palm rests on my shoulder, one hand placed in mine, I can't help but wonder if this is what it would have been like.

Prom.

Suddenly, she isn't the woman I know now, with a fiery attitude and steel will.

She's that young, vibrant high schooler who captured my attention and captivated me all those years ago. This suddenly feels like a do-over. A re-writing of history that should have begun when I asked her out to prom.

But then I remember that we're married now. Something I never would have done unless—

Unless I truly did care about her.

All the lies, the deceit, means nothing anymore. I drop my eyes to hers, and in them, I find the answer I've been searching for.

I care about Olivia Porter. And I'm not afraid to admit it to myself anymore.

And with that, I seal my decision with a soft kiss on her lips. She doesn't protest, just sighs against the kiss and melts into my arms.

"What was that for?" she asks, taking a look around us.

I lean in and whisper in her ear, “I just wanted to make sure that the town knows we’re married.”

Chuckling, I hold her close as we sway to the music. Everyone is too occupied in their own little bubbles to care about us “pretending” to be newlyweds.

But she doesn’t need to know that I just wanted to feel her lips against mine again.

As the night draws to a close, I head over to my parents’ table to greet them. I hadn’t done that all night, staying by Olivia’s side every second.

“Dad,” I greet curtly and hug his shoulders. He winds his arm around mine, keeping me pinned to the spot.

“I see you’re getting carried away with that Porter girl,” he grates at my ear. “Don’t forget you have a job, Mason. The inn comes into our portfolio, remember?”

He releases me abruptly, and I swerve as I straighten up again. Dad’s smile is sardonic as he nods once.

I nod back, but he maintains his glare. A shiver travels down my spine as I search for an escape.

Crap. Am I really wearing my heart on my sleeve? Or does it show in my eyes, which refuse to be taken off Olivia as she strolls through the art gallery, looking like the finest work of art herself?

Chapter 13

Olivia

“No, no!” I belt out as I rush across the lawn, waving a hand for the gardener to stop. He’d almost trimmed too much of the beautyberry bush, and I just about lost my mind.

As of late, I’ve been close to losing my mind. A lot. Granddad’s agreed to host the launch of the renovated event spaces at the Riverbend Inn.

“Don’t cut too much of it.” I snatch the clippers from the man and point to the exact spot he needs to trim. “Here. This bush is too gorgeous to cut too much away.”

“Got it, ma’am.” The gardener offers to take the clippers back, his head hanging.

Sighing, I tentatively pass the tool back to him and offer an apology. “Sorry. My head’s a mess. Please continue.”

“It sure is a mess,” Willow remarks from behind. “What’s gotten into you?”

I grimace as I join her on the porch. With her hand on her hip and the other shielding her face, she whistles. “It’s taking shape, Liv. I don’t know why you’re snapping at everyone.”

“I didn’t mean to snap at him,” I say sorrowfully. “It’s just that this whole thing came so suddenly. The inside isn’t done yet.”

“So? This partnership is huge! Gotta give it to Ryder for thinking out of the box.”

“Who would have thought, huh?” I chuckle as I look around the garden.

The moment we heard Ryder's suggestion, I agreed. Turning the Riverbend Inn's garden into a wedding venue sounded perfect.

Or maybe I've grown soft to the idea of marriage altogether. Regardless, it was Chloe's bright idea to invite the whole town for a formal launch. And the moment Granddad caught wind of the news, he offered to be the guest speaker.

Having the mayor launch the inn's public area as a wedding venue will be good for business. Well, ex-mayor, since Uncle Edward took over.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Willow asks.

A shiver travels down my spine as I think about it. Another public event will mean that Mason and I have to show up as a married couple. And there's more opportunity for rather intimate public displays of affection.

I'll just keep telling myself that it's to maintain a front. To pretend that we're married for the sake of appearances.

Even if my heart doesn't agree.

The sound of tires crushing the gravel path jolts me from the conversation I'm having with the librarian. To my disappointment, it's a blue SUV that pulls up.

Not Mason's red convertible.

"Excuse me," I tell the librarian and offer her a smile before drifting away from the gathering.

Huffing, I get my cell out and check for any texts. Fingers wrap tighter around the tiny rectangular device.

He's not here. And he promised—

"Hi."

A breath of warm air fans my earlobe, sending a delightful shiver down my spine. I can't stop myself from smiling. And

when I feel his hands settling on my waist, I'm sent over the rails.

I do the unthinkable.

Spinning around, I fling my arms around his neck. There's a sense of calm that washes over me. Just like every other time we'd been in public spaces.

"Oh," he chuckles. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Suddenly I'm reminded that this isn't something normal for us and I quickly pull away. Grimacing as I look away, I try shielding my face with the veil of my hair.

"That's no way to greet your husband, Mrs. King," Mason says lowly before my cheek is cupped by a smooth palm.

Nestling into his touch, I can't help but allow myself to feel soothed. Against my better judgment, but he does this so well - what comes next.

Our breaths mingle in the cool spring air before our lips meet. The kiss is more urgent than I remember it, and my mind fades into bliss.

There's an intense urge to sneak my tongue between his lips, but the moment is lost when someone clears their throat behind me.

"Sorry, lovebirds," Ryder muses, throwing a wink at Mason. "I hate to break up this reunion, but our special guest has arrived."

"Sp-special guest?" I mumble, mind still fuzzy from all the tingling of that kiss.

"Yeah." Ryder frowns, obviously confused by my lack of comprehension. "Anna Bradford, the wedding planner."

"Oh!" My hand flies up to my forehead. "Right. Where is she?"

"She's at the altar."

"Will you excuse me?" I ask Mason.

“Wedding planner, you say?” He perks up, one brow lifting. To my surprise, he slips his hand between mine and leads the way. “I’d like to meet her too.”

My feet refuse to move. My mind starts racing with thoughts of having an actual wedding with Mason. Something out here, in the picturesque garden of the Riverbend Inn where we’d say our vows and—

Oh my God. What has gotten into me?

Snapping out of it, I realize we’re still holding hands and Mason stares at me expectantly.

“Well?” He cocks his head to one side, and it takes everything in me not to fling myself into his arms again.

Get it together, Olivia. I chastise myself as I nod and follow him to the altar.

The setup is a last-minute thing we threw together. The podium at the altar was just an old shelf that Hudson fixed together. Surprisingly, it’s not that shabby.

As we approach Ryder and the wedding planner, Anna, I see them laughing together. Smiling when we get there, Anna clears her throat and nudges him.

His laughter fades into a lighthearted chuckle.

“Olivia... Mason... This is Anna Bradford. She’s new to the town and she’s—”

“Quite capable of introducing herself,” Anna interjects playfully, and Ryder goes beet red.

I shake her outstretched hand, my other hand still clasped between Mason’s. He greets her too and steps back.

“Lovely to meet you, Anna. We only ever spoke on the phone.”

“I’m really glad I came out here today. You have a beautiful venue here, Olivia. I can’t wait to host my clients at the inn.”

“How about you plan a proper wedding for these two?” Ryder gestures to us with a nod. “They were married at the court.”

“Oh, dear!” Anna’s hand flies to her chest and her brows furrow with sadness. “That won’t do.”

“It was a—”

“An impromptu thing,” Mason cuts in. “Let’s see what you can do with a wedding, and we might plan one with you.”

Is he— Is he serious? Glancing at him with shock dropping my jaw, I have no time to ask him if he is.

Not that I’d have the guts to do that.

But Granddad takes the stage and taps the mic, calling the attention of the townspeople with the thrum that echoes through the speakers.

I can’t ignore the fact that Mason has his hand linked with mine while my grandfather addresses our guests.

“... To celebrate the launch of the wedding venue you see before you today, I’d like to call on my granddaughters. Olivia, Willow, Chloe, please join me.”

I slip my hand from Mason’s and head toward the stage. It feels like the spotlight is on me when I glance over my shoulder and see Mason clapping for us.

As I climb the stage and take position behind the mic, he’s cheering the loudest. Or maybe that’s just my imagination running wild. But he places his fingers between his lips and whistles.

And it’s only for me. His eyes are only on me.

Taking a deep breath, I wrap my fingers around the mic and draw it closer. Granddad is way taller than I am, so I have to adjust the height of the mic. But really, I’m stalling for time because I’m nervous.

“Thank you for coming out here today,” I address our guests. “As you all know, the Riverbend Inn is undergoing renovations. But in the meantime, we’ve decided to open our doors – or garden...” I pause when the crowd laughs. “... As a wedding venue. And we have a dedicated wedding planner to join us on this quest.”

I wave to Anna and continue speaking, “Anna Bradford, all the way from Los Angeles.”

The crowd cheers again. Willow finally takes over and informs our guests that snacks will come around, complimentary of the new kitchen.

With shaking knees, I descend the side stairs of the stage. Mason offers out his hand, and I’m not even sure when he’d got there.

But I gladly take his hand.

Still, I’m walking on jellied legs and trip over my own feet. Just when I think I’m going to tumble to the ground and make a complete fool of myself, Mason nimbly catches me in his arms.

“Careful, ma’am,” he teases as he helps me back to my feet.

“Thank you,” I mumble as I straighten out the front of my dress.

“Is something wrong?”

“I don’t do well with public speaking,” I admit.

Mason snorts as he follows the crowd to the food table. “You did in high school.”

I’m about to retort when his long strides carry him further away. Pressing my lips into a firm line, I scoff and grab a side plate.

Mason seems to be avoiding me while he stacks his plate. He catches me glaring, but finds it amusing as he wears that self-satisfied smirk I’ve come to be annoyed with.

Actually, he looks really good when he does that. But that’s not something I’ll vocalize.

With my plate full of the delicious snacks Willow made, I take a seat with my family at a table. Mason soon joins, taking the time to greet each of my family members.

Chloe leans in, her mouth full of a bite of croissant. “Where’s Will? These pastries are amazing!”

“Hm...” I wonder. “Where is she?” Turning in my chair, I spot Willow speaking to a man. I can’t see his face, but whoever he is, he’s making her blush.

Nudging Chloe with my elbow, I make eyes at Willow. “There she is.”

Chloe gasps. “Ohmygod!” she mumbles through a mouthful. “Do you know who that is?!”

“Who?”

“Elijah Sinclair.”

My eyes go wide at the mention of that name. I’d last seen him so long ago, just before leaving town.

Chloe swallows and then fully turns in her chair. “Yoo-hoo!” she sings out, waving at Willow when she finally looks over.

She says something to Elijah and hurries to our table.

“Sorry,” she says shyly as she tucks her hair behind her ear.

“Hm... I don’t think you’re really sorry,” I tease. Willow throws a glare my way, but her cheeks are a bright shade of pink.

“Hey, Grandma...” Chloe says between bites.

“Yes, dear?” Grandma turns and smiles warmly at her youngest granddaughter. Truth be told, our grandparents have always favored the youngest.

“You know, we found an old registry here at the inn,” Willow continues.

“Uh-huh?”

“Noticed your name in there a couple of times. How was the Riverbend Inn back then? Bet it didn’t have a piano in the theater.”

Grandma and Granddad exchange glances, and I can’t quite read what their silence means. She turns back to Chloe and smiles again, but I’m interrupted before I can question why Granddad never checked in with his name.

I excuse myself and take the call a couple of feet from our table. It's Ethan.

"Yeah?"

"Can you meet me at the station?" he asks hurriedly. "I have a lead on those blueprints."

"I'll be there in a few," I tell him, adrenaline rushing to the fore. I don't have time to question Grandma about the inn.

But that's a mystery that'll have to wait for another time.

"I have to go," I whisper to Mason when I go back to my seat. Chloe and Grandma are deep in conversation, and I only hope my sister squeezes something out of her.

"Where? Right now?" Mason twists in his chair.

"Yeah." I look around, making sure no one can hear me when I whisper, "He's found a lead on Brianna's disappearance."

"I'm coming with you."

I shake my head. "I'll let you know if I need you."

As I speed off toward the police station, I can't shake off the feeling that we're very close to finding the truth. And finding Brianna.

Chapter 14

Mason

“I’ll let you know if I need you,” Olivia says before taking a look around the table. Everyone else is caught up in their own conversations and doesn’t seem to notice her taking her leave.

I’ll let you know if I need you.

I hang on to those words as if they’re a lifeline while I watch Olivia walk swiftly to her car parked in the lot. She speeds away, but not even the crushing of tires on the gravel road alerts anyone of her absence.

Unless I’m thinking too deeply about it. Unless I’m the only one paying close attention to her every move.

“Mr. King?”

My attention is taken to a female voice calling me from behind. It’s Anna Bradford, the wedding planner from earlier.

“Ms. Bradford?” I’m about to stand up, but she waves dismissively and takes Olivia’s seat instead.

“Where’s your wife?”

“She’s—er—off running some errands. Is there anything I can help with?”

From my periphery, I catch Ryder out near the bushes, talking to an elderly man. He’s watching Anna, staring at the back of her head, his knuckles paling around his beer bottle.

Is that... Jealousy?

Deciding to have some fun, I sling my arm across the backrest of the chair Anna sits on.

“So...” She lifts up a spiral-spine book onto the table, opening up to the first page. It’s a catalog for wedding decor, and to my surprise, my interest is actually piqued. “... I wanted her to take a look at our options. We have our first client ready to book the venue in the Summer.”

“Wow,” I genuinely marvel. “That’s fantastic news.”

“It is.” Anna pouts, betraying her words. “Except, the couple remains undecided on their choice of layout.”

“Ah... So you wanted Olivia’s input?”

“Well, duh!” She rolls her eyes. “Have you seen what she’s done with this place? It’s not even complete, but I’m ready to move in. Permanently.”

“What’s this about moving in permanently?” Ryder appears out of nowhere, standing behind us. He slugs a drink of his beer, eyeing me suspiciously.

I have to hold back the urge to laugh.

“Oh, I was just telling Mr. King how lovely the inn is. The Porter family has done a splendid job.”

“That’s—”

“Ohmygod!” Chloe notices Anna next to her and claps with excitement, cutting Ryder off. She doesn’t even notice he’s there when she pulls Anna’s catalog to her. “I’ve been dying to see these!”

Anna whistles. “The wedding fever catching you too, honey?”

“Me?” Chloe shakes her head fervently and shivers. “No, of course not! I— I just wanna see what kind of weddings we’ll be hosting.”

“You know...” Anna tilts her head to one side. “... I’m also a matchmaker if you’re keen.”

“Nooo.” Chloe shakes her head again, flipping through the pages of the catalog. “I’m good.”

“Yo, bud.” Ryder pats my shoulder. “Wanna get drinks later?”

I leave my seat to get a beer but then decide against it when Ryder makes the offer. It's been a while since he and I hung out. And God knows I need to let loose for once.

"Sure, buddy. The Bravo?"

He nods. "Meet you there at nine."

"You're late," Ryder grunts when I finally join him at the bar.

Quickly shrugging off my jacket and pulling out a chair, I grab the whiskey that's already been poured.

"Thanks. Cheers." I hold my glass out and watch him reluctantly lift his own. We clink glasses before I take a huge sip and savor the burning feeling coursing down my throat.

"So, what's up?" Ryder asks as he calls the bartender over with a wave.

Groaning, I skim the rim of my glass and stare into the amber liquid. Hoping that it's enough to douse the flames of my frustration.

"Had a last-minute meeting," I divulge with irritation laced in my voice.

It doesn't go unnoticed.

"On a Saturday evening? That can't be good," Ryder remarks. The bartender comes over and Ryder orders a refill.

I chug down the rest of my drink and pass the glass to the bartender.

"It is what it is," I offer with a shrug. "Anyway, how are things with you?"

"Eh... I'm good. What happened to Olivia today? She left early."

"Yeah," I say, taking another sip. "She had some things to take care of."

I'm not even sure how she is right now. Sighing discontentedly, I recall her last words to me. It serves as a consolation.

"Ah, I see. Anna hung around a lil longer waiting for her."

"At the inn?" I ask, turning my head to face him. He's wearing a smile I haven't seen since our team won the football match back in high school.

"Yeah," he replies, ears turning red.

"Oh, I know that look," I chuckle. "You're into the wedding planner slash matchmaker."

"No, I'm not," he lies. I can see right through him.

Unlike me, he's never been a good liar.

"Oh, yes you are."

"The way you're totally into Olivia?" Ryder poses, raising a brow curiously at me. "The infamous Mason King finally gets hitched. Call it true love, or whatever."

Turning away, I take a huge sip and stare at the back of the bar. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's actually quite inspiring," he goes on. "To see two people rekindle an old flame."

"You mean high school?" I snort. "That was hardly a flame. More of a one-sided thing."

"You know she was upset for a reason back then, right?"

I shake my head. "She hasn't, to this day, given me a reason for it."

"I overheard her talking about it to Willow in passing. Your father wanted to tear down the street her family lived on."

My eyes shoot up in horror. "What?!"

Ryder frowns, setting his glass down with a loud thud. "Didn't you know?"

"No." I shake my head, rubbing my face with my hand and even sobering up a little. "I had no idea."

“Well, she heard about it and lost her mind back then. Your dad was trying to get them to sell their house, but Mr. and Mrs. Porter flat out refused.”

“Hence the public humiliation,” I mutter, thinking back to high school.

We’d just finished a game, and I’d sent a letter to Olivia’s class for her. I thought the simple gesture would be sweet. Until I saw her marching toward our team in the gym corridor.

“How dare you?!” She’d spat, flinging the letter in my face.

“What’s wrong, Olivia?” I was so confused, I thought my frown would become a permanent fixture on my face.

She was glaring at me as if I’d done the most heinous of crimes by sending her that letter.

“I won’t go to prom with you, Mason King.”

“Why?” I needed answers. I thought girls liked romantic things like letters.

“Because I’m not an idiot!” she threw back.

She spun and marched away, leaving me to face the mockery of my teammates.

“So that’s what she meant when she said she’s not an idiot...” I say with realization dawning upon me. “She thought I was trying to butter her up so her father would agree to sell the house...”

Taking a deep breath, I look up and call the bartender over. “Refill, please.”

“She feels bad about it,” Ryder reveals. “Heard her say as much.”

Bad?

I feel like I’m the worst scum on Earth right now. History is repeating itself, but I can’t allow it to happen any longer.

“It’s always my father,” I groan after a sip from my third glass for tonight. “I’m tired, Ry. Tired of being my father’s lapdog.”

Ryder pats my back, offering what little comfort he can. “Sorry, bud. I can’t say that I know the feeling.”

“You wouldn’t want to,” I sigh, long and heavily. A knot winds around my chest, and I wish it would sever my blood flow.

I’m so deep in thought, wondering how on Earth I can please both my parents and Olivia without messing things up, that I don’t hear my cell phone ringing. Not until Ryder slides it under my nose.

“Speak of the devil...” I mumble as I read Dad’s name on the screen. Not in the mood to be chastised for taking too long with selling the inn, I turn the screen toward the table.

“Not answering?” Ryder asks.

“Nah.” Shaking my head, I down the last bit of my drink. “He can go one night without getting me to do his dirty work.”

Ryder says nothing as I wave the bartender over with a flailing wrist. I’m way too inebriated to get up. Let alone leave the bar at all.

“I think it’s enough for tonight,” Ryder poses when I’m on my third refill. Never been a heavy drinker. And if there’s anyone who knows this, it’s him.

“Hello, boys...” a female voice drawls beside me.

It’s a task turning, but when I do eventually, I see the blonde leaning over the counter, twirling her hair around a manicured finger.

She gasps when she sees me. Clearly faking it, but it wouldn’t have fazed me even if it was real. Leaning over further, she pushes out her cleavage right under my nose.

It’s probably the Italian suit, I tell myself. She’s probably one of those people out here sniffing money like a bee to a pollinated field.

“Hello, handsome,” she purrs. “Mind if I join you for a drink?”

At any other time, I would have entertained the idea of sharing a drink with a beautiful woman. Even if it was money she was after. No one really cares about status when it comes to one-night-stands.

But there's not even a second of hesitation when I lift my left hand and nod to my finger.

"Sorry, lady. I'm married," I tell her bluntly.

My declaration wipes the smile off her face. I turn before seeing her leave, going for my whiskey glass again.

Beside me, Ryder whistles low enough for just our ears. "A dedicated husband, huh?" he mocks.

"I wish," I mutter in return, groaning when a beep signals a text message on my phone.

It must be Dad again.

Ryder takes the liberty of lifting my phone. He nudges my shoulder and sticks the phone in front of my face.

"Just forget it..."

"No." He nudges me again. "It's your wife."

Straightening up, I grab my phone from him and blink to adjust my vision. Sure enough, there's a text from Olivia.

"She said she'll let me know if she needs me." My chest swells with pride when I say those words out loud. When I look up, I notice Ryder staring at me like I've gone crazy.

Maybe I am. Maybe it's the liquor in my system that fuels my insanity. But with haste, I unlock the screen and check the text message.

"I think we just figured out where Brianna is."

Muttering curses under my breath, I'm rubbing my face as if it will help sober me up.

"What's wrong?" Ryder asks.

"Remember the missing girl?"

"Brianna Morgan? Yeah, she was staying at the inn."

“They might have found her,” I say, tucking my phone into my pocket. I get to my feet, but I’m unsteady and stumble a bit. Ryder catches my arm and plants me back on the bar stool.

“Woah, buddy. Not so fast,” he warns. “Something’s really bothering you tonight. But if Olivia needs you—”

“I have to go.”

“You have to get it together.” Ryder holds me steady by the shoulders and looks at me with determination. “Let’s get you sobered up. Then you can go to Olivia.”

“B-but she n-needs me,” I protest.

“She needs you in a better state than this.”

She needs me... Those are the only words that matter, lingering on my tongue, more potent than the alcohol. Even as Ryder helps me out of the bar and into the passenger seat of my car, all I can think about is that Olivia needs me.

My father doesn’t.

Chapter 15

Olivia

Navigating the streets of Silverbell Falls, I'm going as fast as I can. The urgency in Ethan's voice tells me that he's closer to finding Brianna than ever before.

It's the only reason he's helping us, investigating all the clues we've been finding. Ever since we found those title deeds at the inn - title deeds with our family name - he's been working hard to uncover all these mysteries we've been stumbling on.

I hit the brakes, pushing my car to an abrupt halt before hopping out. Not bothering to lock my doors, I remember I'm at the police station.

"Detective Rivers' office?" I ask the first officer I see when I enter the station. He sizes me up with a frown, but senses the seriousness and points down the corridor.

"Second door on the left."

"Thanks."

His name is engraved on a metal plate stuck to the top of his door. I knock twice and enter without waiting to be invited in.

"I'm here," I say as I shut the door behind me. He's leaning over his desk with his back to me, palms resting on the edges.

"I think I know this place."

"What place?" I ask, joining him at the desk. He's in deep thought, eyes roving every inch of the blueprints.

"Look..." He points at the bottom of the sheet of paper. "I had an architect friend of mine have a look at this. And he

confirmed that these are trees.”

I lean closer to inspect the dots he’s pointing at. The sketch of a building is surrounded by those tiny dots in a lighter shade of blue.

“Trees?” I frown. “But that could be anywhere.”

“Except, it’s somewhere in the woods down by the valley.”

“How do you know?”

Ethan points along a squiggly blue line mapping the top of the building. “This is a river.”

My eyes shoot open as realization dawns on me. “Cedar River?”

“That’s my guess.” Ethan huffs a wrangled breath and rounds the desk. He flops onto his chair, so hard that the wheels squeal under his weight.

“What were these blueprints doing at the inn?” I ask, frowning at the sheet as if my answers lie there.

“I have no idea.” Ethan shrugs, yanking on a drawer under his desk. He takes out a pack of cigarettes and offers it to me. “Smoke?”

I decline with a shake of my head. “I don’t smoke. I didn’t know you did,” I say, frowning.

“Not before all of this.” He gestures around the desk at all the things we’d gathered over the past couple of days. The title deeds, the blueprints, the registry...

Somehow everything seems to be tied together. How? I’m not sure yet. But there’s one thing he’s managed to uncover.

I’m suddenly struck with a thought that even the detective hasn’t managed to find.

“Ethan... What if she’s there?”

His eyes widen and he throws his cigarette into the ash bucket. “Brianna?”

“It just sounds too... Coincidental, right? We don’t know who the blueprints belong to, and we don’t know why they were at

the inn. But what if it's all tied together?"

Ethan begins snapping his fingers. "And the title deeds... Maybe it's for a piece of land in the woods." He pokes his finger at the blueprints. "And here are the blueprints for said land."

Ethan hastily picks up his gun, badge, and car keys. He's put the dots together, and if there's any chance Brianna is there, he's going to take it.

"I'm calling my sisters," I yell at him as we rush down the corridor. He only nods, and I call Willow to tell her to meet us at the ingress of the Cedar Woods.

"East entrance?" I ask Ethan, who only nods again.

"East side," I confirm with Willow.

"See you there," she says and hangs up.

"What are you doing?" Ethan asks when he sees me pausing outside the car.

With my fingers tapping quickly on the screen, I type out a message to Mason. The adrenaline bubbles through my veins, and I have to tell him. Something inside me feels a pull toward him.

And no longer doubting him, I feel the need to bring him in on this.

"I'm sending my husband a text."

"I think we just figured out where Brianna is."

Tucking my phone into my back pocket, I hurry into the passenger seat. The car is already idling, and as soon as I shut the door, he steps on the gas.

We're speeding through town, following the coastline toward Cedar Oak.

"I thought you didn't trust your husband..." Ethan laments as he changes gears.

"Things change."

He only grunts in response. His eyes are fixed on the road ahead of us. Concentrating. His mind is probably racing at a million miles per hour.

Ethan's out of the car as soon as we get to the entrance of the woods. The roar of another engine approaching tells me that my sisters are here.

"Wait, Ethan!" I call out when I notice him jogging up ahead. He doesn't have a flashlight and is willing to brave the dark forest without one.

Throwing the car door open again, I rummage through his glove compartment and find what I'm looking for. I pop my head out and toss the flashlight through the air.

He catches it nimbly and nods. "Thanks!"

Ethan still doesn't wait. He disappears down the pathway leading toward the mountain range. I can only rely on memory and what little I remember of the blueprints to find the spot he's headed to.

"Liv!" Willow climbs out of her car and rushes to me. Chloe is on her heels, and I start toward the woods.

"Come one! We think Brianna is in here!"

Each of us has our phone torches lighting up our path up ahead. We don't need to tread far when the sound of snapping wood and metal crashing rings out.

My feet carry me faster than I've been known to run. The shape of an old building becomes clearer in the dark. Just a silhouette out here, but I see Ethan kicking in the door.

He steps back and uses his full force to drive his shoulder into the door. A few more attempts, and it finally caves.

We're greeted by a cloud of dust and wood particles floating in the air.

Ethan points the flashlight into the building. It appears to be an old hall of some type. A church, maybe. If the altar and stage were set up for a priest on a Sunday morning.

“What is this place?” Chloe takes the words right out of my mouth. Coughing as we enter, she does it more dramatically.

“It looks like a church or something,” Willow offers.

“I had the same thought.” I look around using my flashlight. The high windows are covered with tattered sheets. The rows of benches creating aisles have been suffering decay, some lying off their legs, cracked and moldy. Stepping through the debris of what can only be decades of neglect, we reach the stage when we spot something that catches our eyes.

“Brianna?!” Ethan exclaims, rushing up the stairs toward the bundle on the floor.

The missing woman who we just found lies on a battered mattress. No covers or blankets, just metal springs poking out from the top. Her hands are tied, duct tape covering her mouth.

And she only barely stirs when he gets to her.

Ethan throws the flashlight to the ground and kneels in front of her. Dragging the duct tape from her lips, she mutters something incomprehensible. She struggles to open her eyes. But the moment Ethan scoops her into his arms, we hear her call his name.

“Shh... I’m right here, Bri. Right here.” There’s relief in his voice, but worry still lingers. That worry is evident in his eyes when he lifts her up and cradles her in his arms and turns to us.

Brows knitted in worry and eyes glossed over with tears unshed, Ethan looks at me.

“We need to get her to the hospital. Now!”

Ethan rushes past us and runs out the main door. My sisters and I exchange shocked looks before following him out into the woods.

Trees zip by in a flash of dark brown and moss green as we head to the cars. When we approach, I bolt by Ethan and make for the driver’s side.

“Keys!” I call out from over the hood.

He rummages through his pockets with one hand, still holding Brianna in his arms, then slides the car keys over the roof. I catch it and hop in, waiting for him to carry Brianna into the back seat.

With her head resting on his lap, Ethan urges, "Hurry, Olivia."
And I'm speeding across town again.

"Where are you?" Mason asks over the phone.

"We're at the hospital. We're—" The line suddenly goes dead, the long beep ringing through my ears. Ignoring the need to call back, I re-enter the room Brianna's being kept in.

"How is she doing?" I ask Ethan, who sits beside the bed clutching Brianna's free hand. She'd been given a bunch of medication through the IV in her other arm. Starved and dehydrated, Brianna's in bad shape.

"She'll be okay," he assures as he watches her sleeping face. Lifting a hand to her face, he sweeps a few stray hairs from her forehead. He lifts her hand, kisses her knuckles and gently puts it down before getting up. "Whoever did this is gonna pay."

Witnessing the determination in his eyes, I don't doubt it. But seeing it firsthand - love in its purest form - touches my own heart.

I wouldn't have guessed that the detective had a soft side to him. But the look in his eyes when he found the woman he loves... Now that's true love.

"Where are you going?" I ask in confusion when Ethan abruptly heads to the door.

"Gonna find out who's behind this," he huffs and storms out of the room.

I check to see that Brianna is asleep and quietly make my way out. Willow and Chloe have gone down to the cafeteria to get us coffee, and Ethan is nowhere in sight.

Sighing and stretching my arms over my head, I spot a set of benches down the corridor and decide to take a seat. I'm just about to take the first step toward it when I hear my name echo down the hall.

And I turn to see Mason rushing down the hallway toward me.

He doesn't say anything or give me a chance to question why he's here. He crushes his lips to mine, startling me. With my eyes open and my lips locked with his, I take a look around.

The hallway is empty. Is he really doing this here? Acting?

But unlike before, the kiss is desperate, urgently fighting for something. His hands cradle my cheeks, pulling me closer and deepening the kiss. I can't resist melting, my body molding to his.

And then I see what he was wrestling for when he breaks the kiss and cups my face in both hands.

"You had me worried," he breathes with something that almost sounds like... Relief?

I search his face, finally meeting his eyes where I see them softened at the corners. Glossy as if he's holding back tears.

Just like Ethan's had been when he found Brianna...

"I was—"

Mason suddenly folds me into a tight embrace. "I saw police cars outside and thought the worst. I'm just glad you're okay."

I can't fight the feeling inside any longer. Sighing, I let myself feel warmed by his immaculate strength as he holds me.

When we finally pull apart - reluctantly on my side - he stares into my eyes. "I'm sorry. My battery died and all I heard you saying was that you were at the hospital," he says frantically.

This time, it's my hands that cup his face. "I'm fine, okay?"

Mason breathes a sigh of relief and slides one arm across my shoulders, drawing me into his side. Calmer now, he plants a kiss on my forehead.

And that's all I need to know that he really cares. My heart does a little skip in my chest, as a reminder that I can't deny what I feel forever.

Chapter 16

Mason

Walking around with a clipboard, I watch Olivia sneak the tip of her pencil between her teeth.

She's highly concentrated, ticking off tasks from a list she compiled back when renovations first began.

"Kitchen tiles... Check." She marks it on the list. "Stove and oven... Check."

Entranced by her focus and attention to detail, I cross my arms and lean against the doorframe. Around us, the rest of her family members flit around the kitchen, putting the finishing touches together.

But the movement and noise around us fade to the back. My eyes feel glued to Olivia, watching only her moves. Listening only to her voice as she talks to herself.

"... Trash chute... Check." She ticks it off her list. "Hmmm?" Her head snaps from left to right, and I can see that something is up.

Peeling myself from the doorframe, I stroll toward her. "What's wrong? Missing something?"

Olivia turns to me, hazel eyes shimmering with what looks like appreciation. She must have not noticed that I'd been following her around. Or that I'd been paying close attention to her.

Her lips lift in a warm smile, and I'm tempted to kiss them. Tempted to thread my fingers through her hair and bring her lips to mine...

“It sure feels like I’m missing something,” she admits, shyly looking down at the page on the clipboard. She must have caught the way I’m staring.

But I’m not going to hide it anymore.

“Here,” I say as I reach out for the list. Purposely brushing my fingers against hers, I notice her little intake of breath, a gasp she refuses to let me hear. “Let me go over the list with you, and you can decide if you’ve missed anything.”

We go through the list, double-checking every task we’re supposed to have done. We’re only in the kitchen, and the pages stacked under this one have more tasks listed for the rest of the inn.

“It’s all ticked off,” I assure her as I pass the clipboard back. “Wanna go see the rest of the place?”

“The rooms?”

I nod and Olivia calls out to her sister, “We’re gonna check the rooms!”

Willow gives her a thumbs up, then suddenly loses the smile on her face. She lifts a hand in the air in a gesture for us to stop.

“Wait, Liv!” She rushes out from behind the counter toward us.

“What is it, Willow?”

Willow pants as if she just sprinted a mile. “Room fifty-six hasn’t been painted yet.”

“Why n—” When the realization sets in, Olivia mouths an “Oh.” “The contractors have already left. What are we going to do?”

Seeing the worry on her face tugs at my heartstrings. A bright idea pops into my head then.

“We could paint it. Yeah.” I look up at Willow. “Is there any paint left? Rollers and brushes?”

“In the basement,” she confirms. “You’ll find everything there.”

We check the room upstairs, mentally listing everything we need. I leave Olivia there, in room fifty-six, to bring up all the painting supplies.

“Thanks for this,” she says as she rolls up her sleeves.

“For what?” I playfully frown as I dip the roller into the tray of paint. “Painting? Are you kidding me? I love painting!”

Olivia giggles as she picks up a brush.

A comfortable silence wraps its warm embrace around us as we breathe new life into room fifty-six. With the earthy tones of mahogany for the walls and ash for the side skirts, there’s a warmth in the room that outshines the initial gloom.

A part of that darkness was the heaviness from Brianna’s disappearance which hung over the Riverbend like a dark cloud. With that cloud lifted, it seems everything is falling into place around here.

The sound of a chainsaw out front bursts through the silence, popping the little bubble I’d been finding solace in.

“What’s going on?” I make my way to the window, my roller brush in one hand like I’m holding a trident.

“Oh,” Olivia giggles. “It’s Hudson. He has this bright idea to change the reception area.”

“Ah, okay.” My eyes finally land on Hudson in the back garden, sawing through a tree trunk with nimble skill. “Seems to know what he’s doing.”

“Yeah, he’s got it covered. Hudson is really good with wood. Did you see what he did with the altar for the wedding venue launch? Wow!” Olivia shrills.

“Yeah. Wow... it’s a shame he’s forced into politics.” I shake my head and go back to the tray, rolling the sponge in and picking up more paint.

“A damn shame.” She clicks her tongue and goes back to painting, crouching at the tin. “But some parents are like that, I guess. Imposing.” I see her shiver when she says the word, and I know there must be a story behind it.

But I have a story of my own. Don't I know about imposing parents... All too well, it's actually scary to hear her say that.

From the outside, it's so easy to take pity on others who suffer the same plight as me. I guess we're all in the same boat - playing to the tunes of our fathers and slapping a smile on our faces like it doesn't bother us.

But deep down, I know this is what I should be doing. What I've always wanted to do, as I roll another layer of paint on the wall.

To be hands-on, not stuck behind the desk in some lonely office. From the get-go, when I first walked into the inn on Dad's instructions to seize it, there's been this itch in the tips of my fingers. A longing to breathe life into a place with more history in it than our history books ever taught us.

"I'm empty," Olivia announces, holding the can bottom-side up. She grunts and sets the can back down before throwing her paintbrush inside. The handle hits the metal tin with a clink, echoing her irritation.

Taking a look around the room, I notice that only the front side skirt isn't complete. It's not a train smash, I decide, as I crouch on the floor beside her.

"There is enough mahogany to cover that," I offer.

Olivia pouts. "It won't match the other rooms."

"It doesn't have to." I take the brush for the tin, clean the bristles in some turpentine, then dip it into the tray. With effortless strokes, the side skirts begin to match the walls on opposite sides.

Olivia stands in the center of the room, observing me quietly.

"See? Not so bad," I say as I take a step back and inspect my work. I point at the front wall. "It actually looks better now, don't you think? Once the shelf and tv stand goes up, it'll give the illusion of a bigger space."

Tilting her head to one side, Olivia contemplates this with a frown. Her frown slowly melts, and her brows lift.

“That actually makes sense.” She turns to me with wonder in her eyes. “I didn’t think you knew so much about interior decor. And I’m supposed to be the professional.”

Chuckling, I bend to lift the roller to continue with the walls. “Maybe you didn’t give me a chance.”

When I stand up, Olivia’s standing right in front of me. Surprised and taken aback, my fingers loosen around the roller handle and it stumbles out of my hand.

She’s within reach, all I have to do is dip my head closer to meet her lips. But for a moment, I’m starstruck by the glow in her hazel eyes.

“Maybe I didn’t know you wanted a chance,” she whispers, the warmth of her breath fanning my lips and sending warmth racing through me.

Taking an unnecessary step forward, I keep her eyes prisoner as I say, “Do you want me to spell it out for you?”

I catch the slight nod of her head before her eyelids flutter and she closes her eyes. Her lips part when she exhales, and her head tilts for me.

“Ahem...” Someone clears their throat, jolting us from the daze of an almost-kiss. We break apart as if we’re two kids whose parents just caught them.

It’s Willow with flour dust covering most of her apron. She looks puzzled when she says, “Er— Snacks are ready. We’re meeting outside.”

“Be th-there in a sec,” Olivia’s voice cracks as she rubs a hand through her hair.

Willow’s frown remains as she leaves. Suddenly, the air is thick with awkward tension, so I decide to carry on painting for a while, giving Olivia a chance to leave first.

“Anything I can help with?” I hear Ethan’s voice before seeing him out front.

“Yeah, grab that log.” Hudson points at a varnished piece.
“Take it to reception.”

Ethan lifts the log onto his shoulder and winces. He’s clearly worse for wear, and I wait at the main door to have a word with him.

“What’s up, detective? You alright?” I frown, surprised that he’s out here giving the team a hand at the inn.

With his girlfriend still in hospital, it seems odd that he’s here.

“Yeah, I’m good.” The dark circles rimming his eyes betray his words.

“How’s Brianna doing?”

He looks up at the mention of her name and suddenly doesn’t look so frail. “She’s getting much better.” He smiles, but his face contorts under the strain of the log. “Let me get this inside.”

“Yeah, sure.” I step out of the way and head down the porch to where everyone is gathered in the garden.

The lilting sound of laughter fills the air with a sense of ‘home’. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but I no longer feel out of place here at the Riverbend Inn.

Strange...

When my mind was set on taking over, I felt like a misfit. Now that I don’t want to deny my heart anymore, I’ve opened up to the idea of dropping my guard.

“Want one?” Olivia approaches with a spare beer.

Gladly taking it, I’m about to take a sip when she turns to leave.

“Olive...”

She stops, freezes momentarily, then turns. “Yeah?”

“About earlier—” I groan when my phone rings for the millionth time that afternoon. “Excuse me.”

I take my phone out and begrudgingly hit ‘decline’. It’s Dad again, and I’m in no mood to fight.

“Sorry about that.” I continue. “As I was saying— For God’s sake!” I exclaim when it rings in my hand.

Olivia giggles. “Why don’t you just take the call? It seems important.”

“Trust me, it’s not.”

I turn my phone off entirely and shove it back into my pocket.

Straightening up, I notice that Olivia is closer now. She must have sensed where it was going earlier. And I can’t resist wanting it just as badly.

“About earlier...” I say again, this time my voice an octave lower.

“What about earlier?” She bats her eyelids at me, and I’m just about to reach for her face when she pulls back.

Olivia sniffs the air, her brows furrowing. “Do you smell that?” She scrunches her nose and takes a deep breath.

Just then, heavy footsteps emerge from the entrance of the inn.

“Guys!” Ethan yells out with urgency in his voice. “There’s a fire at the back!”

The laughter fades and is quickly replaced by startled cries in the garden. I’m the first to reach the front entrance, rushing out behind Ethan as he shows us to the fire.

Wasting no time, I grab the fire extinguisher on my way to the back entrance. Prepared for whatever chaos lies ahead, I’m aiming the hose out in front of me.

A skewed line of flames travels from the woods and up toward the inn. Pumping the hose, I douse the fire just before it touches the wooden staircase at the back.

“A fire?!” Olivia exclaims from inside the inn. “How?”

I follow the line down to where the fire began. There’s nothing in the area to indicate that this is a natural occurrence.

Extinguishing the last flame, I scan the woods for any sign that someone is still lurking. Ethan scouts the area too, obviously suspecting foul play too.

The Porter sisters run down toward us, following the ashen path left by the fire on the lawn.

“Someone started the fire out here,” I grunt in anger.

“They’re trying to sabotage us before the opening,” Olivia realizes as her fists curl at her sides.

Chapter 17

Olivia

Ever since the fire two weeks ago, we've been on high alert here at the inn. With the final touches in place, we're almost ready to launch the grand opening.

Mentally, not so much. I've seen it from Willow and Chloe too - the dread they wear each morning when we meet up outside.

We wear that caution like metal armor when we begin our day. But there's only so much we can do, so much we can keep our eyes on. So we're hiring guards from the local security company to keep a lookout on all sides of the building.

"Perfect, thanks, Mr. Davis." I offer out a hand. He shakes it, sealing the deal we'd already made when I signed the contract.

"A pleasure, Ms. Porter," he smiles.

"It's Mrs. King," I correct him politely. As soon as the words leave my mouth, it throws me off. Since when did I start wearing that name like a badge of honor?

Though his eyes flit to the name set in a mural behind me, he accepts it with a kind nod and makes to leave.

'Porter Scene' - the name of my company back in Los Angeles, when it stemmed from humble beginnings. Way before my ex-husband decided that he'd leave his job as a small-time accountant and become a partner in the business.

Of course, we changed the name of the business to something more suitable to his tastes. And God knows what else he was doing, using that name to launder money and skip taxes.

Sighing, I glance at the custom-made art piece bearing my company name on the wall. In a week, we'll open the inn officially, and Porter Scene will finally be back in business.

"Liv..." Willow's voice carries into the room before she knocks.

"Come in," I say and gesture to the chair.

My sister comes inside, and I notice her glancing over her shoulder every now and then. Timidly, she takes a seat as if there's a bomb hidden underneath.

"Relax, Will," I assure her, passing her the inn's copy of the contract with the security company. "We officially have two guards posted outside as of today."

Willow breathes a heavy sigh of relief as she checks the contract. "Thank God. Now the question is... Can we afford this?"

"We will." I have to maintain a positive outlook. We've put so much into the inn, I can only pray that we reap the benefits soon. "Once the inn is officially open, we can—"

"Sorry to interrupt." Ryder apologizes from the door. "But we have our first guest, apparently."

"First guest?" I frown, though pleasantly surprised. "Really? We're not even open for business."

"Yeah. He's adamant that he wants to spend the night here. Says he traveled from far," Ryder reveals. "What do you want me to do?"

"Well..." I turn to Willow. "... If he's going to be our first official guest, he needs a warm welcome."

Willow catches my drift and immediately gets up. I follow the two of them down the corridor to reception, stopping dead in my tracks when I see who the guest is.

Roger Barkley.

My ex-husband.

Willow instantly turns and places her hands on my shoulders, her brows quivering with concern.

I can feel my bottom lip trembling with anxiety. Keeping my eyes fixed on Willow's face seems to calm me substantially.

"You don't have to go out there," she assures me. "I'll take care of it."

Taking a deep breath, I shake my head. "No, it's fine. I'll be fine."

"Sure?"

"Yes." Another deep breath and I steal my spine. "There's nothing he can do to hurt me anymore."

Absolutely nothing... I think as I walk down the rest of the corridor. Forcing a smile on my lips, I have the sudden urge to gag when I see him this close.

God... If there's anything in this world that I truly despise, it's him.

"I'll be damned," Roger roars with a sinister laugh. "If it isn't my dear wife."

"Ex-wife," I enunciate with firmness. I stand in front of the reception desk, leaning one elbow on the edge. "So, you're the guest who's adamant to stay the night?"

A gut-wrenching smirk curls his lips. It looks like he's aged another ten years in the span of six months. Or maybe he's just more unattractive than ever in my eyes.

"That's no way to greet your guests, Olivia darling," he says in a condescending manner. "I'm a paying customer."

Mentally rolling my eyes, I turn to Willow and tell her, "Book Mr. Barkley into one of our rooms. He can choose which floor he wants."

"I'll take the third and fourth floors," he says. "Nothing like those views of the ocean"

"You want both floors?" I ask with irritation.

"Of course, I do, Olivia darling. Why do you think I came all the way here?"

Puzzled, I turn to him and say, "I don't understand."

“Maybe this will help you understand.” Roger reaches into the inner pocket of his suit jacket, producing a folded page. He unfolds it and smooths out the creases with his palm before sliding it over to me.

Scanning the page, I realize it’s our old marriage certificate.

“What?” I still don’t understand what’s going on. “Why did you bring this here?”

“Because, my dear Olivia, I’m here for what’s mine.”

“Yours?” I scoff.

“This place,” he gestures around with his arms. “I get half of everything you own, remember?”

“What?!” Sinking out of pure frustration and all the negative emotions he brings out in me, I round the reception desk. A pair of hands catch me as I drop to the chair. “We’re divorced, Roger. You can’t have anything.”

“Oh, but I can,” he smirks.

I feel sick to the core when Willow whispers in my ear, “Do the guards have instructions to shoot crazy ex-husbands too?”

I want to laugh. I want to cry. An array of emotions has me silently glaring at the man who made my life a living hell for years. Why now, when things only just started to fall in place for me?

Everything around me fades. Willow’s voice as she speaks to someone - I don’t even know who. The reception area of the inn with its majestic earthly interior design starts swirling into a black mass as Roger stands there and turns into the devil himself.

“Take your time, Olivia,” he says, eyes glinting with a hint of malice as he takes back the marriage certificate. “Let me know when you’re ready to sign it over.”

Roger strolls away and lounges in the waiting area.

“He’s not serious, is he?” Willow asks.

Glancing over the counter, I see him take out his phone and casually type away with a self-satisfied smirk. Knowing him,

he's probably forged some kind of document he'll use as a weapon against me. Something that nullifies our divorce.

"He's serious, alright," I finally speak, turning to her. "What am I gonna do? I can't jeopardize this for us."

"You aren't going to do anything," Willow assures me. "I called Mason, and he promised to fix this."

"You did what?!" I exclaim. "Why did you call him?" Suddenly, the thought of having my ex-husband and current husband in the same room doesn't sit right with me.

"It's okay, Liv. He's in real estate. If there's anyone who can thwart Roger's plan, it's him."

I'm restless while we wait for Mason, Roger's presence unnerving as the air grows with tension. A dark cloud hangs over me, while he, on the other hand, seems chilled about the whole situation.

I'm almost sure he's bribed his way into getting our divorce retracted.

A car pulls up outside, followed by another. Hope flickers inside my chest when Mason walks in, followed by two suited men. He doesn't look left or right, just straight ahead at me as he nears the desk.

"Are you alright?" There's genuine concern in his voice, prompting me to get up and go to him. My arms fly around him, cheek pressed to his chest as I search for his heartbeat.

There's a sense of calm that washes over me, but it's stolen when Roger breaks through the moment.

"Who is he?"

Mason, with his arm around my shoulders, turns toward the man. "I'm her husband."

Roger frowns. "No, you're not," he scoffs. "I am, and—"

"You're here to claim your share of the inn?" Mason nods at the two men in suits, and they come forward.

"Here's a copy of your divorce settlement," one of the men says as he produces a paper he holds out for Roger. "Mrs.

King doesn't owe you anything."

Roger eyes the man suspiciously. "And who are you?"

"I'm Marlon Gray, and this is my associate, Donald Carter. I'm an attorney."

Roger's face contorts as he snatches the page from Marlon. "This can't be right." He shakes his head.

"It is. And if you're not sure, you're more than welcome to accompany us to the court to consult with a judge."

He stalls for a moment, looking at both lawyers before handing back the divorce settlement with an angry huff. "That won't be necessary." He turns to me. "This isn't over, Olivia."

"Yes it is, Roger," Mason bites back. "And if I ever see you at the inn again, my wife and I will be forced to get a restraining order against you."

Roger grunts as he storms out of the inn. Relief comes fully when I hear his car pull away and Mason squeezes my shoulders.

With my hand hanging midair, I hesitate to knock on Mason's bedroom door. Shortly after Roger left the inn, he had to leave too. I barely got a chance to thank him, and told myself I'd do it as soon as I got home.

But standing outside his door, I can't make up my mind. He knows I'm thankful, so why this intense need to thank him again?

Dropping my hand, I'm about to flee when the door opens.

"Olivia?"

Feeling ashamed for being caught in the hallway about to run away, I drop my head.

"Sorry. I wanted to speak to you."

"Please..." He steps aside. "Come in."

Walking timidly into the room, I link my fingers together and quickly take a look around. Just like everything in Mason's life, his bedroom is a pristine white with nothing out of place.

He's always got it together, just like today when he saved me from Roger. And it's something I like about him.

"What's up?" he asks as he walks to his bed. He flops down and unbuttons his collar.

Pretending not to notice the way his Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows, I keep my eyes on the lamp on his bedside table. "I wanted to say thanks for today. You really saved me back there."

"You already said thanks, Olive."

"Yeah, but I needed to say it properly again. When my head was clearer."

"It's no problem at all." He smiles. "I'll do whatever I can for you."

"Why?" I ask, frowning.

"Because..." he sighs. "... I care about you, Olivia."

"I care about you too, Mason," I say without thinking. But I'm glad the words have left my lips when he gets up and moves closer.

"You do?" There's confusion on his face as his brows knit.

Taking a step closer, I nod. "I do."

Mason takes a deep breath before closing the distance between us. His face is only a mere inch from mine as my heart races with anticipation. Dropping my gaze to his lips, which part when he exhales, I realize something...

This is no act. There's no one around. Whatever happens next is real.

Chapter 18

Mason

Her eyelids flutter like the wings of a butterfly, Perhaps it's my own metamorphosis I'm watching, a shift in me that sees her for all the beauty she is.

I've only ever heard of it - that moment when you know your heart is ready to open up. I feel it, my walls dropping the guard I've been keeping up for years.

I should have known that when I first saw her again, it would lead to this. Perhaps deep down, I always knew. The vendetta against her was never seeking revenge. It was this exact moment when she'd come to me, just as I feel myself gravitating toward her.

Reaching out, my hands settle on her supple hips, drawing her closer and closing that frustrating distance between us. Our breaths mingle in the air, and I savor it on my tongue the way one would swirl expensive wine when tasting it.

Our eyes meet and it feels like time has stood still. Or maybe time doesn't exist at all in that moment. They say that the soul has no concept of time. And I never truly believed it until now.

Our souls collide when our lips meet. She sighs, her body molding to mine as her guard drops too. It's the most natural thing in the world for me to lead her to my bed. She doesn't resist, and my heart does a somersault, not just a little flip inside my chest.

The air is charged with all the emotions between us. The intense presence of desire as she licks her lips when she lays down.

“Is this okay?” I ask when I lay down next to her. Cupping her cheek, she nestles further into my touch.

“Yes,” she whispers, and it’s all I need to give into what my heart and soul craves the most.

The morning sun kisses my cheek, and a smile warms my face as I allow myself to wake. The presence of her body pressed to mine makes me realize that it wasn’t all a dream.

Turning my face to plant a kiss on her forehead, she begins to stir.

“Good morning,” I whisper, and that’s all it takes to wake her completely.

And to my surprise, her body stiffens. I can feel the exact moment when her walls go back up, tough and steely, and her mind recoils.

Like last night was a nightmare for her, instead of a dream come true like it was for me.

“Er– Morning,” she says tersely, and as my heart drops to the soles of my feet, I slide my arm out from under her, sit up and act again.

I have to. We’ve been thriving off acting around everyone, and ourselves. Only last night, we’d given in to carnal instinct and I thought that we’d never have to act again.

But here we are. Olivia, picking up her clothes from the floor, shielding her body with one corner of the sheet. I turn away, focusing on the single ray of sunlight slipping through the slit of the curtain. To give her privacy. To allow her to process.

Olivia isn’t totally unfeeling to what happened, I realize when she says, “About last night–”

But she breaks off like she doesn’t want to talk about it. And I understand. I have to. I’m not a bastard who’ll walk away from this like the many one-night-stands I’ve encountered. Neither am I a bastard who will push her to accept it.

I hear the whisper of her t-shirt as she slips it over her chest. The silence is so vast and empty, I can hear her mere breath. There's a part of me that wants to reach back and pull her back to bed, make her remember the sweet love we made last night.

And how much it meant to me.

But my own walls are going up again. And with the last bit of my sanity that remains intact, I say, "Don't worry, Olive. It won't happen again."

"Sure," is all I get as a reply before I hear her footsteps depart my bedroom. The door closes with a soft thud, and I'm left to pick up the pieces of my heart that feel strewn on the floor.

"This is unacceptable!" Dad yells, a palm banging his desk and making me flinch.

Today's been rough, I'll admit. Wrestling with my emotions, having to deal with work. And the cherry on the top of this icy cake was my father calling me into his office to interrogate me about the inn.

"I can't just pounce on the selling of the inn without it becoming suspicious," I lie. A lie because I've been holding off all this time. I don't want to do any pouncing at all. But he doesn't need to know that.

"So what then?" Dad grates. "What's your grand plan, Mason?"

"We'll wait for the official opening of the inn. Give it a few weeks, and when it fails to bring in any income, I'll suggest we sell the place."

"And what if it doesn't fail?" he asks. "It doesn't sound like a plan to me."

"I'll think of something," I offer with a shrug.

"A fire," he suggests bluntly. "Cause a fire again, and let them lose more than they'll stand to gain if they hold onto the place."

Right. Another fire that'll look like the one that freaked them out. It's a perfect plan, if I was going down that route. But it unsettles me, gives me shivers as I think about it.

I'm not a bastard.

Just then, my cell phone vibrates in my pocket. I haven't agreed to Dad's plan, but he doesn't press for an answer. For all he cares, I'll do whatever he wants.

"Excuse me."

He nods, and I look down at my phone to see Olivia's name on the screen. A flicker of hope ignites in my chest. We haven't spoken since this morning, and she was gone by the time I left my room in search of her.

"Olivia?"

"Hi, Mason," she greets formally. "I was wondering if you could hold the fort at the inn this evening? My sisters and I want to visit Brianna at the hospital."

"Of course. How is Brianna doing?"

"We just heard that she's doing much better. She'll be out soon."

"That's great." I notice my father's face contorting with discomfort, but I ignore it. I no longer care how he feels about the way I am with Olivia. Act or no act, I get to decide the details about my personal life.

"Wanna grab lunch? At the diner?" I offer, anxiety tugging at the seams of my already depleted hope. It's a reach, I know that much. After what happened this morning - or rather, what didn't happen with the words unspoken - I'm not sure if she'll agree.

I have to try, nonetheless.

And to my pleasant surprise, she replies, "Yeah, sure. I'll meet you there."

Ending the call, I feel the heaviness of my father's eyes boring into me. I look up to find him glowering, sitting so still he appears like a frozen statue.

“Dad?”

“Brianna? As in, Brianna Morgan?”

“Yes.” I nod, frowning as I try reading his expression. But it’s so blank, there’s nothing there to read. “Why?”

“I don’t want you getting mixed up in anything to do with her,” he practically growls.

“I’m not getting involved in anything. We helped her boyfriend find her, that’s all.”

His eyes narrow. “So you were involved? I want you to stay out of it.”

I’m so confused. “Stay out of what?”

“The investigation into who was behind it,” he says sternly. “I don’t want you getting tangled in that mess.”

Mess? What mess? And how much does my father know?

“Okay, Dad,” I agree. There’s something he’s not telling me.

Fidgeting with the sugar sachet caddy, I’m tapping my foot uncontrollably under the table. Patience is a virtue - one that I don’t have right now.

I’d reached the diner early, looking for a way to escape my thoughts. It was much heavier at the office, wondering what Dad is hiding from me.

I just needed to get away. Just needed to speak to someone I can trust. And right now, Olivia is that person.

Even if she can’t trust me fully. I haven’t been entirely honest. But I plan to be...

The bell behind the door rings as she enters. I know it’s Olivia even without looking. There’s a warmth that comes through with her, and I sense it, allowing it to wrap me in its warm embrace.

“Hi,” she smiles, glowing as her cheeks fill with soft color. She’s shy, her mind probably drifting to last night. Just as mine is.

“Hi. I ordered the usual, if that’s okay.”

She nods, sheepishly tucking her hair behind her ear as she takes a seat.

There’s gnawing silence that follows as we wait for our order. Before long, our lunch is served and we both dig in as if we’ve been starving ourselves the whole day.

My guess is that her appetite is as non-existent as mine was this morning. I noticed the lack of a bowl in the dish rack. She’d probably forgone her usual breakfast cereal in her rush to leave the apartment.

“How are things at the inn?” I ask in an attempt to break the ice.

She swallows the bite in her mouth, but doesn’t look up at me. “We’re almost ready to open up.”

I am, I have to admit. Ready to open up. It’s something I’d been wrestling with ever since this morning. And I’d finally come to my decision as soon as I arrived at the diner.

A walk down memory lane. This was the place we had our first unofficial date. And things would have been official if there wasn’t a misunderstanding all those years ago.

We haven’t spoken about it. And now feels like the right time to do it.

“You seem content here,” I lament. “Why did you leave Silverbell Falls in the first place?”

Olivia takes a deep breath, picks up her napkin and dabs her lips. “I was searching for something.” She shrugs. “I don’t know what, but I couldn’t find it here.”

“Did you find it out there?”

She finally looks up and shakes her head. There’s a deep sadness etched in her eyes, and I have to fight the urge to reach for her hand on the table.

“I didn’t. And now I’m back.”

“Have you found it now?”

She hesitates, looking away. “Maybe.”

I don’t feel the need to bring up the past. I already got my answers, even if she won’t admit it. She was looking for what I was looking for my whole life and didn’t even know I wanted.

And she’s right here, sitting across me with a smudge of spicy sauce on the corner of her mouth.

I can’t hold back any longer and lean across the table, wiping the sauce with my thumb. Her eyes flit to mine, and there’s a sparkle there which gives me hope that I’m not pushing my luck.

Leaning back in my seat, I maintain eye contact with her and notice that she doesn’t look away. She’s searching for something in my eyes - assurance, maybe.

And I’m ready to give it to her.

“Olive...” My voice drops low enough for her ears only. “I know I said it won’t happen again, but I’d be lying to myself.”

“Mason—” she begins, but I stop her with a gentle shake of my head.

“Listen to me, please. It’s not what you might think it is,” I admit. “I don’t think our marriage needs to be fake anymore. I’m ready for a real relationship with you, Olive.”

Chapter 19

Olivia

“I don’t think our marriage needs to be fake anymore. I’m ready for a real relationship with you, Olive.”

I think I’ve just stopped breathing. My mind’s gone blank. Those words knock around, metallically ringing as if my brain is just an empty vessel.

I never thought I’d hear those words. Subconsciously, I was hoping for them. But now that it’s here, it’s too surreal to accept as true.

“Why?” The question slips out. “With me?”

“Well...” He smiles. “... Firstly, you are my wife on paper. And secondly, I told you I care about you, Olivia. I don’t see any harm in us giving this a shot.”

“B-but–” Stammering, I take a deep breath to regain my thought process. “But I thought you married me for your own reasons. I did too, just to get the inn on our name.”

“So?” He shrugs. “You can’t deny that there is something here...” He gestures with a finger between us. “... Between us.”

I gulp, hard. I can’t deny it. But I have to, just to protect my own heart.

Roger’s sudden appearance made me realize one thing - I’d been damaged by the vile hands of a crazed man. Emphasis on the ‘man’ part. And I wasn’t ready to open my heart to another. I wasn’t anticipating it when I got back to Silverbell Falls.

But there's something different about Mason. Even after what I did...

What I did...

"I thought you'd hold it against me forever..." I whisper, biting my inner cheek as I fight the urge to look up at his face. I catch his slight intake of breath and wait the few seconds it takes for him to speak.

He sighs, compelling me to finally look up. A small smile flits across his lips, almost as if he's reassuring me of his reply before it comes.

"I don't hold it against you, Olive. You didn't know any better, and neither did I."

Brows knitting to a frown, my head tilts to one side as I regard him, mulling over that last part. "You didn't know?"

"Of course not," he defends, but in a soft tone that's genuine. "When I asked you to prom, I had no idea about my father's plans. It had absolutely nothing to do with it."

"So..." I shudder from the shiver coursing down my spine. "You didn't ask me because you were trying to get to my dad?"

Mason reaches across the table, lifting my hand in his. He watches keenly as he strokes his thumb across my knuckles. I realize quickly that I haven't flinched from the touch. Mentally, I haven't recoiled. Soon, the walls I'd been holding up melt with the heat of his fingers as they hold mine.

This was it - the last thing that was keeping my walls intact. Guilt. That buildup of it over the years, planted when I yelled at him in the corridor of our high school building.

In hindsight, I can see how wrong I was.

"I liked you back then, Olivia. I really, really liked you," he admits, sighing heavily. His fingers tighten around my hand as if he's the one who needs reassurance now. "And I think. No. I believe that I never truly moved on."

"Y-you d-didn't?" I stammer, a lump lodged in my throat. Had I done more damage than I ever thought was possible?

Just because he was the captain of the football team - a damn fine specimen of a young man back then - it didn't mean he was unbreakable. Even now, come to think of it, he lives in his father's shadow...

And perhaps I was the one who put him there when I blamed him for doing his father's bidding.

I gasp when the realization hits me.

"I was never married, Olive. You stole my heart back then, and it was waiting for you to find it again."

Our eyes lock, my heart pounding in my chest, threatening to burst out from my ribcage. Turning my hand, our fingers link, and time stands still. Just as it did last night.

A feeling I've been trying to ignore all day.

But the lingering gloom of my past relationship refuses to leave me, hanging over me like a dark cloud. In my moment of weakness, and vulnerability from encountering Roger yesterday, I'd fallen into the throes of passion last night.

A place I'd promised myself I'd never be in again. Yet, I'd made a mistake.

Snapping from the spell he'd put me under, I abruptly remove my hand from his. I lift my bag from the chair and with trembling fingers, sling it over my shoulder.

There's disappointment on his face. Clearly written there in the way his eyes soften at the corners and his bottom lip tenses.

"I'm sorry about the past, Mason," I apologize hastily. "But I'm not ready for this to be real."

I spend the rest of the day daydreaming. The night visit slot at the hospital is in an hour, and I have some time to kill.

Working on my first project under Porter Scene, I'm trying to figure out how to rearrange the kitchen of a client's house.

Trying and failing dismally. Nothing makes sense. Granite tops. Kitchen units.

It's all just falling flat.

I can't shake off the feeling of regret. Instead of fleeing the diner, I should have stayed and talked it out.

Too much of a coward, I guess. For weeks, I'd been denying what I truly feel. Wandering if he felt the same. Afraid that he didn't.

And now that he admitted it, what do I do?

I run as fast as lightning.

I'm about to lift my head from this daze and check the sketch when Chloe walks in.

"Time to go," she says with a quick nod. "Mason is on his way here."

"He called you?" I frown, checking my phone to see if there are any missed calls. There's none. He didn't try calling me.

Probably upset that I didn't admit to reciprocating his feelings.

"No, he called the front desk."

"Oh." Oh! He must be feeling awkward, and tried the front like a gamble. If I'd pick up or not...

Not my luck, I guess. Not his, either.

"I'll be out in a few," I tell her as I gather my folder and pencil. Shoving them into the top drawer, I pick up my personal things and make my way out.

The drive to the hospital suddenly fills me with excitement. For the first time ever, we'll be meeting Brianna Morgan - the missing woman who we helped Ethan find.

She'd been unconscious for a week, regaining her strength and overcoming the starvation and dehydration she'd suffered in that old building.

Now that she's awake, we decided that we needed to visit her. I'm particularly interested in finding out why she had those Porter deeds hidden in the floor. Why was she investigating it?

Come to think of it, we don't know much about Brianna. Is she a reporter, who was investigating too deep into a case she shouldn't have been snooping around in.

It would explain why her boyfriend is a detective...

Chloe knocks on the door to her ward, and opens it up when we hear Ethan say, "Come in.". He's perched on the edge of her bed, feeding her soup with a spoon.

"Hi," he greets with a smile. "Great to see you guys here."

Brianna sticks her head out from the side, brows slightly furrowed into a frown. She looks awfully familiar, but that could just be that I've seen her before.

She looks much healthier than when we found her in the old building. Her skin, brighter and healthier, glows beneath the bright overhead light. Her lips are no longer chapped - lips which Ethan kiss before he gets up.

It's too sweet. Too warm and fuzzy for my liking. I'm trying to drift away from all the romantic stuff...

Ethan sets the bowl on the rolling table, then rolls it to the corner of the room. "I'll give you ladies a moment."

"Hi," Brianna says as she adjusts her pillow. She's having trouble, so Willow offers her a hand. "Thanks."

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"The real question is, who are you?"

She's feisty, I'll give her that much.

"Sorry Brianna, I should've said. These are my sisters, Olivia and Chloe. I think you saw Chloe perform once?" Willow answers motioning to myself and Chloe.

"Oh!" she giggles. "*You're* the sisters who helped find me!"

"Yes," Ethan says just before leaving the room.

Once he's gone, I turn back to Brianna, but not before spotting an old photograph on her nightstand. Something tells me to look. And I drift closer mechanically, my hand reaching for it.

That's strange, I think, as I recognize my mother in it.

“Why do you have a picture of my mother with you?”

“That’s your mother?” Brianna asks with a frown, instantly lifting herself to her elbows. “The man with her is my father.”

“Your father?” Chloe peeks over my shoulder to get a look at the photograph. “Was he a friend of hers?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

At Brianna’s words, I stare at the man who has his arm slung around Mom’s shoulders. She’s so young, her smile vibrant as she stands there.

“What are you trying to figure out?” I ask.

“I don’t know who my mother is,” she says with a heavy sigh, dropping her head back to the pillow. “I only know that she’s a Silverbell Falls native, and I think her name starts with a K.”

“Katherine?” All three of us blurt out loud in unison.

“Our mother’s name was Katherine,” I gasp. “Tell me something, Brianna,” I say when a thought suddenly comes to mind. “How did you get your hands and those title deeds?”

“The one under the floorboards?” Brianna pauses and goes on when she sees us nodding. “I found it in the attic of the inn. Along with cryptic letters from my dad about me. It wasn’t addressed to anyone by name. I suspect it was the owner of either the inn or the title deeds.”

Shock fills me as I look down and stare at the photograph in my hands.

“The owner of the inn...” I whisper. “The owner of the inn was our mother,” I say loud enough for all to hear.

“You don’t think...” Willow grabs the photograph from my hands, probably sharing the same thought as I did.

“You might be right,” Ethan says from the doorway. I didn’t even realize he was there, listening. “I’ve given it some thought. Connected the dots. But there’s no real proof.”

“So we’ll find it!” Chloe exclaims. Her face is pale, the color drained just as I feel mine is.

“No,” Brianna interjects, lifting herself to an upright position. “It’s too dangerous.” She gestures to herself. “Look what happened to me. If there’s any chance that you’re my sisters, I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Brianna is right,” Ethan sighs. “Whoever did this to her covered their tracks really well. They’re dangerous people, and until I find out who did this, you three can’t take any risks.”

I look around at my sisters- all three of them if Brianna is our missing sister - and know that we have to keep ourselves safe.

I just hope we can confirm that Brianna is our long lost sister somehow.

Chapter 20

Mason

I've replayed the scene over and over again in my head. Olivia's eyes as they shone brightly. Something had sparkled there. But just as quickly as they ignited, they fizzled into empty orbs void of life.

She realized something just as quickly as I revealed my feelings to her.

The past couple of days have been a quest to avoid an awkward situation. Throwing myself into work, I've been in my office more than I'm home.

"Excuse me, Mr. King," Diane, my secretary, calls after knocking on my door. "Your ten o' clock is here."

Checking the time on my wristwatch, I note that the client is right on time. I've always appreciated timeliness, and I'm glad to have the distraction anyway.

Grabbing my keys and wallet from my desk, I make my way into the waiting area of our floor to meet Mr. Matthews.

"Mason King?" He sounds surprised when he lifts himself off the couch. An elderly man - probably in his late sixties - staggers to his feet with recognition in his eyes.

"Yes." I return his warm smile, offering out a hand in greeting.

He shakes my hand then places his other hand above mine. "You don't remember me, do you, kiddo?"

Frowning, I pay closer attention to the man's face. His blue eyes twinkle with boyish mischief despite his age. Take away

the soft wrinkles and the gray hairs on his head and in his beard, I soon recall the man.

“Uncle Amos?” I titter, going for a hug instead. “It’s you?”

The older man chuckles as he playfully slaps my back. “Of course, it’s me, Son! It’s so good to see you all grown up.”

I pull back only to stare at the man’s face with wonder. Amos Matthews was our neighbor back when I was a little kid. An all-round man, a Jack-of-all-trades. He moved away by the time I reached high school.

“So you’re interested in the diner?”

“I made it out in the big leagues,” he gloats with a smirk. “Not just a handyman anymore. I’m planning on retiring with the missus with a running business under our wing.”

If there’s anyone I would have wanted to sell the diner to, it’s him. He follows me out and we head to the diner where we’re to meet with the owner.

“... As you can see, it’s on prime land. It’s the only diner for miles, and was established in—” A hand on my shoulder stops me. Amos shakes his head and clicks his tongue as he takes a step forward on the pavement. We’re standing outside, regarding the exterior of the diner.

“You’re really starting to sound like your old man,” he chuckles. “A robot, if you ask me.”

Laughing nervously, I try letting loose around him. “I’m sorry. It’s part of the business.”

“Oh, I know. And I know all about this place. There’s no need to run me through the formalities.”

There’s something which still irks me, and I feel the need to bring it up. “What do you mean by ‘a robot’?”

“That flat tone of voice,” he says with a dismissive wave. “Like you don’t have any passion for what you do.”

Shamefacedly staring at my shoes, I recall all the times I’d spent helping Amos as a young boy. He’d often let me accompany him to his projects, riding around in his blue van

packed with tools. We'd spend the weekend painting, fixing pipes and redoing cupboards. That's when I first discovered my inkling toward that kind of thing.

"Maybe I don't," I admit. "But being an only child means I gotta stick with the family business."

"Does it?" he snorts. "What happened to your dreams, my boy?"

"You remember?"

"Damn right I do," Amos snickers as he begins walking up to the diner's entrance. "I might be old..." he taps his temple. "But this right here is still intact."

"I don't doubt it."

"But you doubt yourself." He takes a deep breath, and turns in my direction. "I'm not quite sure of this place, boy."

"Why not?"

"It's lovely and all... but your father mentioned an inn—"

"No, not the inn," I cut in quickly.

Amos raises a brow at my obvious defensiveness. "Why not?"

"It's not for sale. My father is mistaken."

It didn't take much to convince Amos to settle for the diner. He seemed suspicious at first about my deflection of the Riverbend Inn.

But with a little persuasion, he was sold on the diner.

It's a bit maddening - this back and forth between my father's need to get the inn sold under the King name, and my need to protect it from exactly that.

As soon as I get back into my office, I flop onto the couch in the corner and sigh heavily.

My love for getting my hands dirty stems from those weekends spent with Uncle Amos. Having no children

themselves, he and Mrs. Matthews had always taken kindly to me.

And now that I think about it, the couple were more like my parents back in the day. With Mom and Dad it was only ever about the real estate agency. Nothing else mattered. Not even my own dreams and ambitions.

Feeling the need to get this sudden heaviness off my chest, I call up my best friend. I'm free for the rest of the day, with only some admin to do, which I could easily hand over to Diane to do.

Ryder comes knocking on my door just as my eyelids were beginning to close. The heaviness of everything is a weight I can't bear anymore, and as soon as he comes in, I fling my legs off the side of the couch.

"Jesus, were you sleeping on the job? I know there's perks to being the boss' son, but isn't this taking it too far?" He taunts as he shows me a brown bag and pulls out the visitor's chair from behind my desk.

"This is a perk?" I lift my brows in mock surprise.

"Yeah, count yourself lucky, bud. The sisters would have my butt if the thought even crossed my mind."

Chuckling, I point at the bag he'd left on my desk. "Lunch?"

"Club sandwiches, courtesy of Willow Porter." He grabs the bag onto his lap and passes me a paper-wrapped sandwich.

It seems my eagerness to eat is just limited to seeing what's inside the wrap. Though the hunger pangs felt real enough a second ago, it's my thoughts that have consumed my appetite.

"What's that look?" Ryder asks with a mouthful. I'm suddenly envious of his enjoyment. Willow makes a killer club.

Sighing as I fold the wrapper back around the corner, I look up to find him staring at me expectantly.

"It's Olivia..."

Ryder whistles. "Trouble in paradise?"

"That's just the thing, man. There is no paradise."

Ryder is about to take another bite when he stops. “You’re getting a divorce?”

I shake my head. “There was never a marriage to begin with.”

The sandwich goes down onto his lap as his eyes go wide. “What?! I was right there, dude. I signed as a witness on your marriage certificate.”

“Yeah, but Olivia and I entered into an agreement. The marriage was just a part of that agreement.”

“What agreement?”

“Well, she needed to be married in order to get the deeds of the inn in her name. And I needed something too. Actually, my father did.”

Ryder lifts one speculative brow. “And what was that?”

I’m embarrassed about what I’m about to say next, and stare at the uneaten sandwich. “We needed Mayor White to sign off on a development plan. But it was only a decoy,” I explain. “Ultimately, he wanted to sell the inn.”

“So let me get this straight...” I can almost see the way his mind is reeling trying to process it all. “... Olivia needed a favor, and you did too. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that she doesn’t know that I planned on selling Riverbend.”

“Ah, I see. So you lied to her.” Ryder goes back to munching on his food.

“You make it sound like it’s simple.”

“Isn’t it?” he shrugs. “All you’ve gotta do is tell her the truth. If it’s bothering you that much, just don’t sell the place.”

“And have my father on my neck for the rest of my existence? No, thanks.”

“So that’s the problem here?”

Frustrated, I get up and start pacing the office floor, running a hand through my hair. “I can’t disappoint either of them, Ry. I just can’t.”

“So let me get this straight...” His mouth is full again. “You entered into a fake marriage with Olivia as a means to an end for both of you.”

“Yeah, and she’ll hate me forever if she knows I lied.”

“And that’s a problem because—” His voice drifts off as he lifts his head. “Oh... You’ve fallen for her, haven’t you?”

“Again, yes. I don’t think I ever did get over her.”

Ryder blows out a long breath, crumpling his empty wrapper into a ball the size of a golf ball. “Are you sure about this?”

“As sure as I was the night we slept together.”

Ryder grimaces. “That does complicate things.”

“Does it?” I stop my pacing to ask. “I don’t want it to be complicated anymore.”

“It doesn’t have to be, Mason. Just come clean to her, and drop the idea of selling the place.”

I begin pacing again, shoulders feeling heavier than ever. “That’s the part I can’t do.”

“Why not? If you care about Olivia, then you know what you need to do.”

“But my father—”

“Cut the crap, Mason,” Ryder says sternly, getting off the chair and grabbing my shoulders. I think he’s about to shake me back to my senses, but he just holds me firmly. “You and I both know that this was never what you wanted.”

He releases my shoulders and gestures around the office space. “To be cooped up in a boring old office? That’s not the Mason I knew. And you’ve been doing it for... what?... fifteen years?”

I nod to confirm that just as the realization hits me. I’d been wasting the last fifteen years of my life doing something I’ve never loved.

“You’re not like them, bud,” Ryder continues. “I saw you at the inn, helping out.” He prods my chest with a fingertip.

“That’s the real you.”

“So what do I do about my family?” I ask softly, not sure if there’s a way out of this mess.

“You follow your heart,” he declares. “Be it for your personal life, or business. What matters is that you allow yourself to be happy. Your parents need to understand that.”

“Do you think Olivia would ever forgive me for lying to her?”

Ryder shrugs. “That’s entirely up to the way you play your cards from now on.”

Our conversation is interrupted when my phone buzzes on my desk. Ryder glances over his shoulder and then turns to pick it up. He holds it out to me and says, “This is your sign.”

Reading Olivia’s name on the screen, I know what he means. I need to play my cards right, and everything that happens, everything that’s said, matters from now on.

“Hey, Olive.”

“Hey, Mason. I was wondering if you could do me a favor...”

Here’s my chance. “Of course. Anything.”

“My dad called us over, and we have to leave the inn. He says it has to do with the past, so we might get the answers we’re looking for. But there’s a burst pipe in room twenty-two—”

“Say no more,” I declare boldly. “I’ll be there soon.”

As soon as the call ends, I give Ryder a wink. I’ll follow my heart, just like he said I should. By getting my hands dirty, and by impressing Olivia.

“And?” he asks.

“I’ll be killing two birds with one stone. It’s just my father I need to work on.”

Chapter 21

Olivia

“What are you doing?” I ask Willow, who can’t seem to stop buzzing around the kitchen. There are ingredients all over the counters - an open bag of flour, an empty oil bottle, and the rich smell of fresh bread in the oven.

“Grab that knife for me, will ya?” She points at a set of knives on a wooden stand in the corner.

I pick out the first one and hand it to her, but she clicks her tongue and rushes to the oven with her mittens.

“Not that one, silly. A bread knife.”

“You could have been more specific.” I giggle as I replace it and get out the serrated knife. “You made bread?”

“Yeah...” she says as she sets down the tray on the counter. Seeds embellish the crispy top of the bread. It’s like nothing I’ve ever smelled before.

My tummy growls in response, reminding me that I skipped breakfast this morning. I’ve been avoiding Mason like the plague ever since that day at lunch. Although I don’t consider him anything but sweet and kind and courteous and...

Oh no... My mind is drifting again. The list goes on and on. But if I spend too much time dwelling on all of his good traits, I’ll just find myself falling.

As if you’re not there already... The tiny voice in my head reminds me. Pushing it aside, I focus on what Willow is doing.

She slices the bread perfectly, then stacks each slice full of meat slices, cheese, salad and condiments.

“Looks good,” I compliment, my belly literally roaring with hunger now.

Just then, Ryder enters the kitchen.

“I need to go out for a bit. Mason called me to his office.”

I spring into action, grabbing paper to pack two of Willow’s sandwiches. Sensing their eyes boring into my neck, I look up sheepishly.

“What?” I shrug, passing the brown bag to Ryder. “It’s almost lunchtime. They need to eat.”

“Yeah, sure...” Willow rolls her eyes and shares a laugh with Ryder.

Blushing, I look down as I tuck my hair behind my ear. Willow doesn’t miss much.

“Since when are you the doting wife?”

“I don’t know?” A shiver passes through me as I give it some thought. It’s not something I felt compelled to do. It just came... naturally.

“Come on, sis...” Willow teases as she cuts through more bread. “Has the fake marriage become real?”

“That’s what he wants...” I mutter quietly, gulping when Willow drops the knife on the chopping board.

“Are you serious? He wants to be in a real relationship?”

“Yeah...” It feels like fire burns my face.

“Don’t tell me you... You did, didn’t you?”

I can’t control the way my cheeks flush. It’s a dead giveaway to the night we’d spent in his bedroom. A night I tried so very hard to forget.

She gasps. “I knew it!”

“Knew what?”

“That it would be no good running into an old flame.” She sighs and picks up the bread knife again. “The past always has a way of creeping back in.”

“Mason and I don’t have a past, Will. It was a misunderstanding, and we started from scratch.”

“And now you’re in love...” she whistles, earning herself a playful slap on the arm.

“Guys! Guys!” Chloe comes rushing in, eyes glossed over with tears as she panics.

“What’s wrong?!” I exclaim when I notice how worried she is.

“It’s the theater!” she cries. “It’s a mess!”

Willow and I rush out, chasing after Chloe as she runs to the theater. A puddle of water glistens at the entrance, and I quickly take a look around for any other signs of damage.

Luckily, there’s nothing. Only the small puddle that builds up from a leak in the ceiling just above the main door.

“Burst pipe?” I suggest, both relief and frustration overwhelming me. The former because there’s no real damage done. The latter because this is the fifth burst pipe since we’ve been here.

Chloe is still panicking, shoving between Willow and I and coming back with a mop. It’s probably going to snow today, since I’ve never seen her wield a mop in her life.

“Oh no...” Willow shakes her head, hands resting on her hips as if we’re about to get a scolding. She looks so much like Mom, I almost feel like I’m a child standing in front of their mother.

“... Ryder’s left already. How are we going to fix the burst pipe?”

“We need to call him back,” I say as I pull out my cell phone. “I can get Mason to help him out.”

Unlocking my cell phone, I see a text from Dad. I’d been so caught up in my own mind, I hadn’t heard the alert.

You need to come home. Bring your sisters. There’s some stuff of your mother’s that you need to see.

“We need to go to Dad,” I inform my sisters. “He’s found some of Mom’s stuff, and I have a feeling it’ll answer all our

questions.”

We’re all in agreement, Chloe quickly loses interest in cleaning up as she leaves the mop behind the door. I give Mason a call to ask him to help out with the burst pipe.

“Did he say anything else?” Willow asks when Dad has us gathered in the living room.

Toying with a corner of the tablecloth covering the coffee table - one my mother knitted from scratch - my mind wanders to all the unanswered questions we’ve stumbled on over the past few months.

The biggest question that hangs - could Brianna be our sister?

Dad comes through the door carrying a black trunk box. He sets it down on the coffee table.

“These are your mother’s things,” he announces as he lifts the lid and sets it aside.

My sisters and I automatically move closer, peeking into the box at the many envelopes and photo albums stored inside. I lift one envelope up, turn it and read Willow’s name signed in calligraphic letters.

“Will...” I say softly as I pass her the envelope. “This is for you.”

I reach back in and shuffle through the others until I find one for Chloe and one for me. There’s one for Dad too - and he must have been expecting it because he hasn’t sat down yet.

We’re all sitting there with an envelope in our hands, watching our father get into the single-seater with a slight groan. Life sure has taken its toll on him, I think remorsefully. But the man looks good for his age.

“Where did you find this, Dad?” Willow asks the question that’s on all our minds.

“It was in her closet when I finally decided to clear it out,” he says with sadness in his voice. He looks down at the envelope with the name ‘Luke’ signed on it and sighs. “I guess it was just waiting to be discovered.”

Dad leads the way in opening up his envelope to pull out a letter spanning three pages when he unfolds it. My heart grows heavy as I take mine out, the silence in the room hauntingly dense as I begin reading...

My dearest Olivia...

Taking a deep breath, my eyes flicker around the room where everyone has their heads in their own letters. Something feels so personal about what I hold in my hands. And I continue reading.

There’s something you must know. For as long as you knew, you were my first born.

You grew up as the eldest in our family. But I think you always knew, deep down, that it wasn’t the case. The pressure, the responsibility you held on your shoulders... I know that’s why you went away. And I do believe that I caused it for what I did.

A pang of guilt ruptures my heart, a lump forming in my throat as anticipation builds up.

I should have told you that you had an older sister. Her name is Brianna Halloran, born to me and a man I loved dearly, Jesse Halloran. A fisherman I fell in love with while working on renovations at the Riverbend Inn.

There it is - the truth. I look up to find my sisters both staring at me. We’ve all learned the truth at the same point in our letters. Taking a deep breath to calm that lump in my throat, I go on.

I hope that when this letter finds you, you’ll have discovered that I am the owner of the inn. Purchased as a testament to my love for Jesse, it was a secret that even your father doesn’t know about. Just know that I had my reasons for keeping things secret.

Brianna was a sweet little baby when I held her in my arms for the last time. When you were born, you reminded me so much

of her.

And I'm truly sorry for the expectations I might have set on you because of this. I wish that all my children could have grown up together, as one family. But sometimes life has other plans.

When you find her, please give her my love. And the letter enclosed in this envelope. I know this is a responsibility I'm tasking you with, but I promise it'll be the last time.

I love you, my Livvie.

With all my love,

Mom.

I don't even realize I'm crying until a single teardrop falls on the letter just below her signature. Like an acceptance of the truth, a stamp of approval.

Suddenly, two pairs of arms wrap around me and what were silent tears becomes full-on sobbing as I clutch the letter to my chest.

I hadn't cried this much when she was being laid to rest. But Mom was right - I always sensed that something was amiss.

And I'd come back to Silverbell Falls to find out what it is.

My sisters hold me close as I weep my heart out, their soft cries joining mine as we find closure with this truth.

When we pull apart, I sniff and smile at them.

"She is our sister," I confirm, and they nod at me.

Dad looks up, his eyes red and glossed over with tears he hasn't shed. He folds his letter, reminding me that another one lies in my envelope.

Willow sees to Dad, while my heart still feels heavy. Brianna will know the truth soon enough. But there's one thing left for me to do.

Tucking my letter back into the envelope, Chloe holds out a small note for me to see.

If I played my cards right, our baby should be coming home soon. - J.

“It’s from Jesse, isn’t it?”

Chloe nods. “This explains Brianna’s note... Everything you need to find—”

“Is in Silverbell Falls...” I finish for her. “I need to go, Chloe.”

“Where are you going?” she asks with a frown.

“To acknowledge what I’d come back to find.”

Getting up, I tuck the envelope into my bag and go over to my father. I give him a big hug, a kiss at the top of his head, and leave.

Just as Brianna came to Silverbell Falls in search of her mother, I came here to find something too.

A new start in life, which I had found at the Riverbend Inn. And in the heart of a man who helped me find my passion again.

Bringing the car to a stop, I run out with a smile plastered on my face. I’m finally ready to drop my defenses and open my heart to love again.

The leak was from the first floor, I remember as I climb the staircase, taking two at a time to reach the landing. With my heart pounding in my chest, I find the door to the room with the burst pipe open.

I open my mouth to speak, to say his name, to call out to him. But I stop myself, freezing just outside the room when I hear Arthur King say, “You’re wasting your time, Mason. This place is a dump. We stand a better chance if we tear it down.”

My heart slips to the very soles of my feet. Fiery with rage as they propel me forward.

Chapter 22

Mason

“What’s up?” Ryder asks, confused by my declaration of killing two birds with one stone.

I return to the couch, pick up my uneaten sandwich, and bite. I need to replenish the fuel I’d been losing all this time - wrestling with my conflicting emotions and entering self-sabotage.

Jeez... This club sandwich is really good, I muse internally while taking another bite. And this is what I mean by self-sabotage - losing out on life’s simpler pleasures.

“There’s a burst pipe at the inn. The girls need to go to their dad, so Liv asked me to help out.”

Ryder chuckles as he takes a seat. “Yet here you are, lurching as if we don’t have somewhere to be.”

Appreciating the food with a nondescript hum, I swallow before replying, “I haven’t had breakfast, man. This whole thing with my father has been taking both my sleep and my appetite.”

“You found the latter,” he remarks with a grin.

“Now I’ve just gotta figure out how to break the news to my father. He’s not gonna take it lightly, I can guarantee that.”

“Just tell it like it is, Mason. You’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Except the King real estate agency empire...” I muse, lips curling with disdain. Ryder joins me in laughing.

Out of nowhere, my office door comes crashing in, spurring me to my feet in a defensive pose. But I'm not about to get ambushed. Maybe just robbed of my sanity when I see my father come marching in.

"Speak of the devil..." Ryder murmurs beside me. If this were any ordinary situation, I would have taken offense to that remark. But I don't. Not anymore.

It seems we're both hauled into the past, back when we were kids. Ryder stands ramrod straight beside me, hands behind his back. The scene is almost identical to a day we'd run away and helped Amos instead of accompanying Dad to a meeting. But even back then, meetings with other snarly, gray-suited men with forced smiles who rode on greed weren't exciting. It was only when we got back, rushed out from the back of Amos' van and stole back into my house, that we got caught.

And boy, oh, boy! Were we in for a terrible scolding.

I know what I'm in trouble for this time. And this time, I'm on my own. Dad doesn't even acknowledge Ryder when he enters the room. He glares at me, holding up a piece of paper which he flings at my face.

"What is this?"

I catch the page just in time before it smacks me in my face. I don't need to read it to know what it is. But I look down at it nonetheless. Cowering, hiding from what I know I should be doing.

"It's an offer to purchase," I say with a casual shrug.

"An offer that's been rejected... By you." Dad's tone is cold, sending a shiver down my spine.

"The offer was way too low," I lie. I'm still not quite ready to deal with him. There's a burst pipe calling my name. The need to be a hero in Olivia's eyes. This can wait.

Dad huffs. "I sure as hell hope that's the case." He lifts a finger and points it at my face. "You'll be sorry if it's not."

Dad turns with that threat hanging over my head like a dark cloud. Raging and thundering and threatening to take what

little happiness I might have found. He storms out, grunting when Ryder calls out, “Goodbye, Mr. King!”

“Phew...” Ryder breathes as his steeliness melts and he’s back to himself. I, on the other hand, haven’t quite returned to myself. That was the perfect opportunity to tell my father how I really felt about selling the inn. But I missed that chance, and now I feel like I’m back at square one.

“Let’s go,” I tell Ryder with a tap on his shoulder and a heavy sigh escaping my lips. The half-eaten sandwich remains on my desk as we leave.

“Get me a wrench,” I give Ryder the instruction as I shrug off my jacket and toss it onto the bathroom floor. It could get ruined for all I care, but it’s restrictive in its almost too-perfect fit. I’ll never get under there while wearing it.

I get onto my knees, the water pooled under the sink soaking through my pants as I grab the pipe where it burst. Muttering a curse, I notice that it’s unsalvageable even with a bit of cutting. The rubber pipe isn’t long enough to reach the metal one.

Ryder comes rushing back with the wrench, holding it out to me. Shaking my head, I yank on the rubber pipe and use the edge of the basin to get back onto my feet.

“We need a replacement,” I tell him as I hold out the pipe to him.

He takes it and inspects it, then shakes his head. “We don’t have these stocked downstairs. I’ll have to get one from the hardware store.”

Ryder leaves to buy a new pipe, leaving me to clean up the mess from earlier. A disaster, if you ask me. But I’m not really complaining about getting my hands dirty.

A part of me wants to get my phone out and give Olivia a call. Under the pretense of suggesting they change all the pipes from top to bottom of the inn. But really, I want to ask if she’s

okay. Hear what it is they discovered at her dad's place. What answers they found.

A set of footsteps echoing from the hallway prompts me to leave the mop behind the door. I stick my hand out expectantly, frowning when it remains empty even after Ryder enters the room.

When I turn with a frown, I realize it isn't Ryder. Instead, it's my dad.

"What are you doing here?"

He looks around the bathroom with disgust contorting his face. "I could ask you the same thing."

"I'm helping out." I turn away, grabbing the mop back as a distraction.

"What's the point?" he chuckles. "Soon, you'll sell this place and none of this will matter."

"It matters right now, Dad," I mutter as I mop the floor. Using my foot to roll the bucket closer, I stick the mop in.

"You're wasting your time, Mason. This place is a dump. We stand a better chance of tearing it down."

Sighing heavily, I'm about to tell my father what a bad idea that is. They're so close to opening up the Riverbend Inn, I can't trample on Olivia's dreams. Besides that, I don't want to. I have no desire to see this place crumble to the ground and watch a mall being erected to fulfill someone's greed.

But I don't get to it. Just as I turn, a pair of pounding footsteps thunder across the room. Olivia comes to an abrupt halt just at the doorway of the bathroom, looking manic as her fists curl at her sides.

"Tear what down?!" she demands, burning rage flickering in her eyes as she glares at me and then at my father.

"Why, the inn, of course," Dad says coolly.

"And what makes you think I'll ever let you tear it down?!" she yells, eyes filling with tears as her anger becomes uncontrollable. I want to reach out and fold her into my arms,

tell her that none of it will happen. That I won't allow it to happen.

But I'm frozen, my feet unmoving as if the leaked water turned to ice, keeping me there. Unmoving, I witness the death glare she fixes on my father.

"The fact that you married my son, of course."

Her icy glare turns to confusion as her brows furrow. She looks at me for a split second, so quick that I wouldn't have caught it if I wasn't paying close attention to her reaction.

I open my mouth to interject, to say something that will save my butt. But nothing comes out. My throat feels constricted by guilt, by the lies.

"What do you mean?" she finally asks my father.

His body shakes with the intensity of his amusement as he chuckles. "He only married you to get the King's name on those title deeds."

"N-no... He married me for the mayor's signature on the mansion. Tha—that's why he agreed to this."

Dad takes a step forward and places his hand on Olivia's shoulder. She stares at his face, searching for answers, and she doesn't even flinch from his touch.

She believes him... My mind alerts me, panic setting in. But seeing the shock twist her pretty features renders me incapable of reacting.

This is exactly what I didn't want. What I'd been afraid of all along. It's like my worst nightmare is unfolding before my eyes. And there's nothing I can do to prevent it.

"The plan was always to tear this place down, my dear," Dad tells her in a condescending tone. "It's just a matter of finding the right investor, and this place is going to be a booming mall."

Olivia begins shaking her head slowly, until her eyes meet mine across my father's shoulder.

"Is this true?" She gulps. "You lied to me?"

“I can explain—”

“Explain?!” She steps out from behind my father and marches toward me. “What are you going to explain, Mason? How you lied to me and used me for your own gain?”

“Olive—”

I’m cut off by the sting of her palm connecting with my cheek. It burns, sending my hand flying up to the place of impact. The sound of the slap rings in my ears, and as I look up, I see fury burning in her teary eyes.

“Don’t. Ever. Call. Me. That. Again,” she bites venomously as she backs away. She turns to leave, and storms out of the room.

Regaining my senses, I’m about to rush out after her when I stop. Running would only mean that I’m running away. From my dad and something I should have done long ago.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to face him, steeling my spine and lifting my chin in defiance.

“I’m sick and tired of the lies, Dad,” I say firmly, shaking my head. “It’s enough now. I’m done.”

“Done with what?” he asks, but it isn’t confusion I notice on his face. It’s something else - something I’d never seen before and can’t quite make sense of.

“I’m done with the business. I’m done doing your dirty work and having to suffer the consequences.” I point out behind me. “Everything is ruined now... She hates me. But what would you care?” I scoff. “You’ve never cared about me.”

There’s a weight that lifts from my shoulders as the things I’ve always wanted to say see the light. Panting as if I’m out of breath, I’m shocked when Dad puts his hands on my shoulders.

“See? Was it so hard, Son?”

My vision blurs as I frown. “What?”

Dad chuckles, patting one shoulder. “I always knew you were different, Mason. But you held onto this belief that you needed

to fill my shoes.”

My eyes widen as I stare at my father in utter disbelief. “I had to.”

“No.” He shakes his head, looking sternly at me. “You thought you had to because you’re our only child. And our expectations of you were unfair, I do admit. But you needed to realize it for yourself.”

A long moment of silence passes as I process all of this. It was me - always me. I couldn’t see past trying to make my parents proud, that I kept my own happiness bottled in a jar inside me.

It’s what I thought they wanted. Even if they didn’t say it outright. In hindsight, it was my own actions that rippled into their expectations of me.

I was never wrong for following my heart. And now my heart just rushed out the door.

“Sh-she hates me,” I gulp, eyes clouding with tears.

“And where does that leave your marriage?”

“It’s over...” I shiver.

“It’s only over if you want it to be, Son.”

I know Dad is right, but I can’t shake off the feeling that it’s done for this time.

Chapter 23

Olivia

I'm running...

Running again as I did back in Los Angeles, from a narcissist who sucked me dry of everything, even my sanity.

And here I am, running again, on feet that no longer feel like my own. What have I done to deserve this a second time around?

"Goddammit!" I curse when the keys fall from my trembling fingers. I don't have the energy to bend but force myself in my quest to get away.

Breathing a sigh of relief when I'm safely in the confines of my car, that relief is short-lived. Only because I feel the need to put as much distance as I can between Mason and me.

Kicking my car into gear, I reverse and then speed down the gravel path. The weight of the tires crushing stones in their wake fuels this anger inside me with a need to break something with my hands.

My knuckles pale from how tightly I'm gripping the steering wheel, and I can only imagine what I must look like. But in fear of spooking myself into an accident, I keep my eyes on the road ahead. I can feel tears streaming down my face, my lips dry and chapping already. And it's enough to make me realize that history just repeated itself.

Am I going too fast? Too slow? I'm not sure. A honk behind me pulls me from the dark recesses of my own mind. And it forces me to look in my rearview mirror.

It's not so much myself I see, but what I'm leaving behind. The Riverbend Inn grows smaller in the distance, but its presence remains in the background and refuses to disappear no matter how much further I go.

Until I reach the traffic light closer to the town center and have to turn left to get to Mason's apartment.

Rolling into the parking bay, my limbs feel robotic as I slam the door and trudge toward the lifts.

When the lift doors part, I scan the corridor as if expecting Mason to pop out of nowhere. I'm too furious to face him right now. God knows what I'd do.

My fingers are still unsteady as I unlock the door to our apartment. *His* apartment, I remind myself with a disdainful grunt.

Good thing it is, as I kick it all the way in. A small flicker of satisfaction sparks and fizzles out just as quickly. This is all my own fault for getting in too deep.

With that painful realization, I drag my feet around the apartment and gather my things. Here I was half expecting that I'd turn the whole place around. Break every glass, throw his favorite aged, expensive bourbon down the sink.

But my energy is depleted. Completely wasted away by the fact that, for a second time in my life, I allowed a man to use me. Maybe I am the problem, I think as I pack my bags in my room. Stuffing my clothes from the closet into bags, not caring to pack them properly.

Sniffing back tears as a result of my own misgivings, and my misfortune with men, I gather my bags and lug them out of Mason's apartment. All it takes is one glance over my shoulder to see his bedroom door, and I'm keeling over and sobbing like my heart is lodged in my throat.

That's the night I'd given myself to him. The night I'd truly opened my heart to him and given my body as an extension of that connection. And the next day, he'd proposed that we consider this a real relationship.

Was that a lie too? Was it all a lie? Were his eyes so accustomed to lying that it wasn't love I'd seen sparkling in them?

Get it together, Olivia. The tiny voice in my head reminds me. It's always been there to get me out of the rut, and it's there now to give me courage.

So what if he used you? So what if this is the second time it's happened to you? Surely there must be a parallel universe where this twisted fate doesn't exist.

Lifting my chin and straightening up, I pull my things into the lift. A few deep breaths and I remember that I'm stronger than this. I was strong enough to leave Roger. Strong enough to face Silverbell Falls after leaving her behind. And now, I can be strong enough to walk away from Mason.

Except, it's becoming increasingly difficult to breathe as a sort of panic sets in.

"Get it together, Olivia!" I chastise myself audibly as one bag opens up and my clothes spill out just before I can get it into my trunk.

Not caring to fix the bag, I throw my things into the trunk. How I manage the rest of the motions - getting into my car and driving all the way to Dad's - I don't know.

The relief that flows over me when I enter his driveway is enough to get me into the house. With feet made of lead, I push the door open and enter with my head hanging.

Dad's living room is crowded, and I just faintly recognize my sisters and Ethan sitting around. I lift my hand to greet, but it falls limply to my side as I head for the stairs.

"Liv?"

The voice that calls out to me is unrecognizable in my current state. Without looking back, I say, "I'm fine." A lie, but it's enough to keep anyone from pestering me.

Days have gone by, and I'm not doing any better. Curling into myself on my small single bed, I've mentally crawled into a hole.

I haven't even been counting the days. For all I know, it's only been one. Time sort of stands still when you're not paying attention.

Okay, I have to admit, this is the second time someone's come in and left food on the nightstand. A quick inhale of the air tells me it's porridge. It was steak a few hours ago. So it's morning, and I don't know what happened to the night.

Whoever has been doting on me, clears their throat and says my name. With all the twisting and turning in restlessness last night, I'm in no mood for small talk.

"Go away!" I protest, dragging the pillow over my head. Or hiding under it. Cowering. Feeling ashamed for letting a man trample me again.

"Come on, Liv." It's Willow. I should have guessed it was her. Just like Mom, she wouldn't dare let us go through heartbreak without filling our tummies. "You can't do this to yourself."

"Like hell I can't," I contest, grabbing the pillow back when she attempts to remove it.

But with my energy completely drained, having skipped last night's meal, I'm no match for her. All it takes is a firm tug and I'm exposed.

"I told you to go away." I roll over, dropping my arms on either side of me in defeat. I try blowing away a strand of hair that lays across my face, and fail. My breath turns into a rugged gruff when Willow helps me out.

"I'm not going anywhere," she says as she sits on the edge of my bed.

Defiantly turning my face, I notice the things I brought back from Mason's stacked in a corner of my room.

So it wasn't a dream. Or a nightmare. It really did happen. I was used. Again. And allowed myself to fall for the wrong man.

“Don’t do that, Liv...”

“Do what?”

“Lose yourself in your thoughts.”

Frowning when it feels like she’s seeing right through me, I finally turn my face.

“I saw you do that the day we were in the lawyer’s office. It’s not healthy.”

My frown deepens. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I protest half-heartedly.

Willow reaches out and takes my hand, then folds it onto her lap. There’s a sense of ease, of comfort that radiates from her. Much like Mom had the power to wield. “You should know that you don’t have to face anything alone.”

A long moment of silence passes as I process what she’s said. For as long as I can remember, I’d been doing exactly that.

“I’ve always had to deal with things alone,” I admit glumly. “M-my marriage...”

“No one ever held it against you for leaving, Livvie.”

God, she sounds just like Mom. It’s actually... Warming.

“... You held it against yourself,” she goes on. “But we were always here for you.”

I look up and meet her eyes, only to find honesty in them. In hindsight, it was my own shame and guilt that made me feel hostility when I first arrived back in Silverbell Falls.

It was unfair of me to project what I felt internally to those around me. Willow is right. They were always here.

As I struggle to sit up, Willow helps me. A helping hand, which was there all along. I just failed to see it.

Now that I know better, I’m overcome with love that has me flinging my arms around her. The tears that roll down my cheeks aren’t painful - they’re tears of realization and immense love.

This is what I came back to Silverbell Falls for. It wasn't Mason or the inn I was in search of. It was finding myself and reconnecting with my family.

"Hey..." Willow pulls back and wipes the tears from my face. "It's going to be okay."

Nodding, I see Chloe and Brianna walk carefully into the room.

"How long were you guys out there?" I ask, sensing that they'd been there all along. Brianna takes a seat beside me and slides her arm around my shoulders. Drawing me closer, she plants a kiss on the top of my head.

"We were here all along, Olivia," she says. "Because we want to be."

Smiling shyly, I stare into the hazel eyes of my bigger sister. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

Quickly realizing that this is the first time I've seen her since the discovery, I sniff back my tears and quickly wipe my face. "How are you holding up?" I ask Brianna, who grins from ear to ear.

"I've never been better!" she jeers, throwing a look around. Chloe comes closer and we form a circle with our arms linked. "I found what I've been looking for all my life."

"Sisters," I say with a smile. It resonates with me because that's exactly what I'd come back searching for.

We hold each other for a little longer. The sense of ease lingers in the air, but there's still one question that remains...

My fake marriage was all a lie, a way for the Kings to manipulate us into getting their hands on the inn.

"Did you guys hear what happened?" I ask.

Chloe is the first to nod. "Ryder called me to tell us what happened."

"The Kings wanted to sell the inn..." Willow laments, sadness in her voice.

That same sadness falls around the room, shadowing the warmth we'd just discovered in each other. I can't bear to let this get to us in this way.

"I won't let our inheritance fall into the King's grubby paws," I say aloud, thinking back to all the times I trusted a King.

He definitely didn't deserve my trust. He didn't deserve me. And the Kings don't deserve to take charge of the inn.

This is what both Brianna and I came to Silverbell Falls for. Looking around the room, I see the faces of the people who put their blood, sweat, and tears into resurrecting the Riverbend Inn.

They won't take it from us.

"What are you gonna do, Liv?" Willow asks, probably sensing that I'm deep in my thoughts again. But that's why she reminds me of Mom - her ability to get me out of the dark is what makes her stand out.

Taking a deep breath and steeling my resolve, I climb off the bed in search of clean clothes. It's time I got myself out of this mess of my own making.

"I'm gonna get a divorce."

And just like the first time, I feel liberated by my decision. The only difference this time is that I have my family's full support.

Chapter 24

Mason

“Hey, handsome...”

“I’m not interested.” Lifting my hand to show my ring, it’s like the silver band is meant to swat at flies.

When she’s sauntered off, I put my hand down and stare at my wedding band as if it’ll magically come alive and dance before my eyes. Or maybe, if I prayed hard enough, it’ll manifest Olivia in front of my eyes.

Okay, I admit... I’m a little too drunk to be having any thoughts. That’s why I’ve been drowning myself in liquor at the bar counter.

But it doesn’t seem to be helping much. Maybe a little more will do the trick...

“Refill,” I tell the bartender, who gets a complimentary burp from me as I slide the glass over. He slides it back with more alcohol, and at this point, I’ve lost count.

I probably look as bad as I feel. My pants feel awfully tight after being drenched in the murky water from the burst pipe. My white shirt isn’t spotless anymore - dirt and grime form blotches around the sleeves and down the front.

But who cares? Maybe the woman who was trying to talk me up. Maybe it wasn’t the wedding band that chased her away. Maybe—

Ugh! It’s not like it matters...

“You say something, buddy?”

I must have mumbled in my state and not realized. I also must have not realized that Ryder had joined me at the bar. He takes a seat on a stool but doesn't order anything. Faintly, I hear him tell the bartender that he's good.

"Rough night?"

"Hm..." I offer, a cold shiver running down my spine. My mind races, but it's not like I want to think about anything, let alone speak about it. Mentally, I place a lid on everything that happened today. In fact, on everything, as I order another refill.

"You left the inn before I got back." Ryder chuckles. "Had to fix that burst pipe on my own."

"Sorry," I offer with a shrug.

"Willow came by to ask what happened. Olivia went back to her dad's."

Just as I suspected, she's left. Not that I was expecting her to stay at my place. I could have gone after her, could have begged her not to leave. But it's pointless. I don't deserve her anyway.

"What happened, bud?"

He's trying to squeeze the truth out of me. Another slug of my drink, and I don't care to hide it any longer. For so long, I'd been riding on lies. Lies are what got me to this point where Olivia has left me.

Turning to my best friend, I set the glass down on the counter and open my eyes as wide as I can. He's just a hazy picture, almost like a figment of my imagination. Or maybe that's what I'm hoping for. That all of this is just a bad dream. "She doesn't need me anymore..."

Ryder scrunches his nose and shields it with the back of his hand. There's remorse only in his eyes. "We gotta get you back home."

"Nah-uh." I shake my head and feel a dizzy spell come over me. Still, I'm adamant to get so inebriated that I don't remember a thing. With a wave, I call the bartender over, but

Ryder slides my glass away and takes out a few notes that he leaves on the counter.

I want to protest. I want to remain just where I am when a pair of hands lift me from the stool. But all I manage is some unintelligible murmuring as Ryder drags me to my feet and out the door.

Moaning and groaning as I wake, the ringing bell in the distance of my hearing grows louder. I lift my head and roll my neck around my shoulders, realizing that I'd been sleeping on the couch.

It takes every ounce of strength in me to peel myself from the couch. My body feels like it isn't my own as I drag my feet across the living room and answer the door.

“Hi. Mason King?” A delivery guy with a shoulder bag asks.

When I nod, he reaches into his bag and passes me a sealed envelope. Frowning because I hadn't been expecting a delivery of paperwork, I take it and close the door behind him.

It's no wonder I wasn't expecting this, I soon realize when I open the envelope. I glance at my wristwatch, checking to see that it's afternoon already.

Olivia would be at the inn now.

Last night I didn't have the courage to act on this. But the serving of divorce papers fuels my need to make amends. With that fire burning inside me, I speed down the streets of Silverbell Falls until I reach the inn.

I'm running in, not bothering that I'm still in yesterday's clothes. I look like a mess, feel like a mess. But I won't give up.

There's no one around in reception, so I head to the kitchen. Knowing the sisters, they're probably in there watching Willow create something delicious.

But when I get there, it's just Willow, wielding a knife as she chops up some butternut squash.

"Where's Olivia?" I ask as I enter the kitchen. She drops the knife on the cutting board and turns to face me.

There's a fire in her eyes, rage that glimmers and reminds me of the look in Olivia's eyes when she slapped me. Instinctively recoiling, I turn my face away and wince.

"If you're gonna slap me, please give me a warning."

"Slap you?" She snorts. "I want to kill you, Mason King. But first, I need to know what you're doing here. You have some balls, after what you did."

Jeez.... They're all feisty in their own way. Eyes flitting to the chopping board, I'm relieved to see that the knife still lays there.

She's not going to kill me yet. Gulping as I reach for the folded divorce paper in my top pocket, I hold it out to Willow with a trembling hand.

"I don't need to see that," she says, folding her arms. "I already know that Liv wants a divorce."

"I can't let that happen," I declare, folding the paper again. "I don't want a divorce."

Willow tilts her head to one side, amusement on her face when she says, "Still determined to tear the inn down, huh? Well, I've got news—"

"No." I shake my head, lifting my hands in a show of surrender. "It's nothing like that. My father's agreed to back off."

She narrows her eyes at me, clearly suspicious. "So why wouldn't you want a divorce? The fake marriage served its purpose, didn't it?"

Taking a deep breath, I decide to not drag this out any longer. "I'm in love with Olivia, okay? I messed up by lying to her, but when I told her that I wanted us to be in a real relationship, I meant it."

“It’s too late, Mason.” Willow sighs, dropping her guard and going back to the counter. She picks up the knife and resumes chopping. “She’s too angry to see you, let alone give you another chance.”

“Come on, Willow. There must be something I can do.”

“There is.” A voice comes from behind.

Turning, I frown when I see the woman I’ve only ever seen a picture of. The once-missing woman, who Olivia helped find, walks into the kitchen with Chloe in tow.

A flicker of hope rises in my chest as I take a peek behind them, half-expecting Olivia to walk in. But she doesn’t, and her absence douses that hope and replaces it with disappointment.

Except, all isn’t lost when I remember what Brianna said.

“What can I do?”

Brianna reaches into her bag and produces a paper. She holds it out but keeps her hand steady on it. “You meant what you said about Olivia? You love her?”

“Meant every word.”

“We’re stumped for funds.” She finally passes me the paper, which I soon realize is a quotation.

“You’re gonna let him fund it?” Chloe asks.

Brianna shrugs. “Only if he wants to. It’ll make up for what he did to Olivia and us.”

Inspecting the quotation and reading what each individual item is, I put the pieces of the puzzle together and slowly nod my head. A smile forms on my lips, and I look up to find Brianna waiting for an answer.

“Done. I’ll even do you one better. I’ll put it together myself.”

I'm no chef, I realize as I watch Willow go about her business in the kitchen. Seared steaks cooked to perfection with rosemary-roasted potatoes are on the menu for tonight. But there's no way I'd ever get them to look as appetizing as this, plated with some extravagant condiments decorating the plates.

"You owe me big time for this, Mason," Willow huffs as she rushes about the kitchen. "Bottle opener?"

"Already on the table," I tell her, bemused by how she's running around. "Why do you look nervous?"

"Because..." She pauses. "If Olivia still wants a divorce and finds out we had a hand in this, we're all dead meat."

"No pun intended, huh?" I chuckle, but Willow rolls her eyes as she checks the time on the wall clock. "Quick," she nods at the plates. "You can take these out. She should be here any second now."

"Got it!" I grab the two plates with dinner and hurry out to the front entrance. Just in time, I hear tires rolling over the pebble stones of the driveway.

From the front entrance, Willow, Chloe, and Brianna offer me encouragement with a thumbs up before disappearing inside the inn. I smile, thinking back to the past three days. Between keeping Olivia away from the inn, to helping set up tonight, the sisters have been angels in allowing me to floor Olivia.

I have hope that I will, only because of their help. If there wasn't hope, they wouldn't have allowed me to step foot here.

Olivia's shadow appears at the front gate, and I make my way forward to meet her. When she sees me, she freezes.

"Mason? What are you doing here?" she asks with a frown.

Offering out a hand, I put on my best smile. She hesitates, peeks over my shoulder, and finds the table we'd set outside. The candle flames sparkle in her eyes, prompting her to finally slip her hand in mine.

"What's going on?" she asks as I lead her to the table.

“Please...” I pull out her chair and wait. “Take a seat and hear me out.”

She takes a deep breath before sitting down. Rounding the table, I take my seat and lift the wine from the table.

“May I?”

She nods and lifts her glass, holding it out. I pour her wine, then fill my own glass, searching for the words I’d rehearsed over and over again.

“I’d like to apologize for lying to you.”

She sips her wine, but I catch her faint nod. Her expression is hard to read, and I suspect it has to do with her not wanting to get hurt again.

So I change the subject. For now.

“Please...” I gesture to her plate. “Go ahead. We don’t want it getting cold.”

She says nothing as she lifts her fork and knife and cuts into her steak. There’s an awkward silence hanging in the air while we eat our meal, but it seems we’re both hungry enough to let it pass.

When we’re done, Olivia lifts the napkin to her lips. “Willow cooked, didn’t she?”

“She did,” I concede. “I needed some help to impress you.”

“Impress me?” Olivia lifts a speculative brow. “Why would you want to impress me?”

Sighing, I set my napkin down and search her face to meet her eyes. “I’m in love with you, Olivia.”

She blinks as if she can’t believe it, lips parting as if she’s about to say something. But she doesn’t. All she does is stare at me in disbelief.

“There’s something you need to see.” I get to my feet and stroll toward the covered mass in the center of the garden. Pulling on the sheet, I reveal what is undeniably my best work.

A round water fixture stands in the center of the garden. Taking a few steps back, I realize Olivia has come forward. I take the remote from my pocket, hit the power switch, and watch as the water feature lights up and throws water upwards.

“It’s beautiful...” she marvels as she watches the waterfall rise and fall.

I turn toward her, staring at the soft planes of her face when I say in awe, “The most beautiful in my eyes.”

Olivia catches me staring and blushes deeply. At that moment, we gravitate toward each other as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. Her hands glide up my arms and settle around my neck while my hands find purchase on her waist.

Staring deeply into the hazel depths of her eyes, I tell her how I’d built the water feature from scratch, in honor of her late mother. Her eyes fill with tears, but the sadness has long gone.

“It’s perfect,” she says appreciatively. “I love it.”

“And I love you...”

A stray tear slips from her eye and rolls down her cheek. Wiping it away, I feel her nestle closer into my touch as I cradle her cheek.

“I love you too, Mason,” she whispers, and it’s all the encouragement I needed to capture her lips in a soft kiss.

Chapter 25

Olivia

Stirring in my sleep, my lips curl into a smile when a peppering of kisses warm my collarbones.

“Mason...” I groan, realizing what day it is when my alarm rings on my nightstand. It’s going to be a long day, but if I could help it, I would stay right here in bed with him.

“Hm?” he drawls before embarking on showering my shoulder with more kisses. I have to mentally drag myself out of this euphoric feeling and into reality where we have an important day.

“We have to go,” I protest with a giggle. Opening my eyes, I’m met with the heady, darkened orbs of his.

It’s so tempting just to stay here, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have to drag myself out of bed. With a groan, Mason flings himself on the bed.

“We’re gonna be late, honey,” I giggle as I slip on my gown and place a kiss on his forehead.

“Five more minutes wouldn’t have made a difference.” He pouts as he finally gets up.

“Yeah, sure.” I roll my eyes playfully. “That’s what you said yesterday, and I was late for a meeting with a client.”

“They won’t notice if you’re a little late,” he chuckles, stopping to kiss my cheek. “I’ll allow the exception only for today.”

Blushing, I follow my husband into the bathroom where we shower together. He’s dressed long before I am and leaves the

room while I do my makeup, hair, and get into my dress.

A specially-imported floral print stunner fits me like a glove. The exquisite fabric whispers against my skin as if keeping a secret with my body. I'm beaming from ear to ear as I do a little twirl in front of the full-length mirror.

Mason sure has fine taste. Even if he's more inclined to get his hands dirty every so often, he cleans up real nice. And that's what I love about him.

He's preparing breakfast when I enter the kitchen, but my heels click against the tiles and draw his attention to me.

He whistles as he rakes his eyes from my head to my toes. "Gorgeous," he breathes, fully in awe as his glimmering eyes meet mine.

"Thanks to you," I titter as I take a seat at the island table. He brings a tray filled with an array of breakfast tapas to the table and sets it down.

"You'd look great in just about anything, Olive."

Giggling, I reach for a bowl when out of nowhere, my tummy twists. No longer feeling like I'm worthy of that statement, I begin to wonder where the sudden shift came from.

Ignoring it, I pick fruit instead and feel a little better as we make our way to the inn.

"Nervous?" Mason asks as he rounds the hood of his car and takes my hand. Leading me toward the main entrance, he stops and turns to face me, palms resting on my shoulders.

"Jesus, Olive." He frowns. "You look pale."

"I'm fine." I take a deep breath, wiping a thin layer of sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. I didn't even feel myself breaking out into a sweat. "I'm not really nervous. Brianna's in charge of speaking today."

"Hm..." he laments, seemingly unconvinced as he takes my hand and leads me all the way.

There's no longer a need to act in front of a crowd, but Mason can't keep his hands off me as we mingle with the guests.

Today marks a new beginning, and the residents of Silverbell Falls have gathered in the garden for the opening.

My sisters have spread around, chatting with guests and prospective visitors, some of which aren't even from the area. The hours eventually lead up to Dad addressing the guests.

It's a casual affair, unlike the launch of the wedding venue with Anna Bradford. Today, there isn't a stage, and Dad holds a mic while standing beside the water feature.

"Respected guests..." Dad begins, drawing everyone's attention to him. We'd given him the honor of speaking at the launch. He deserves that much since he'd been kept in the dark for so long.

Not that I blame Mom. She had her reasons for keeping secrets - even Dad agreed with that. But seeing him standing beside Mom's memorial fixture where only her name stands engraved on a metal plate, is hard.

The lump in my throat only ceases to grow when Mason gives my hand a gentle squeeze.

"... It's a great honor to be standing before you today. For as long as I can remember, the Riverbend Inn was a sad, old, dilapidated building with no hope of coming out of the darkness. But thanks to my daughters, this town now has something to look forward to."

A round of applause goes through the crowd, and Mason smiles at me, encouraging me to go forward. I join my sisters around the water feature, and Willow and Brianna take my hands.

"Let's hear it from the girls who made this possible." Dad hands the mic to Brianna, who clears her throat before she begins speaking.

"The Riverbend Inn..." she spares a glance at the building. "... is a testament of love," Brianna echoes the words our mother used in her letter to us. "And that love has grown through the Porter sisters." She glances at each of us, her smile gentle and warm.

The rest of the town doesn't know that Brianna is our sister, and she pointedly leaves out that fact as she praises us for a job well done. There are still a few unanswered questions, and whoever abducted her remains at large.

"The Riverbend Inn is now officially open!" Brianna jeers, and the crowd cheers along. "Please enjoy the complimentary snacks prepared by our resident chef, Willow Porter."

The crowd disperses, leaving us to share a hug between us sisters. Dad joins in too, and his warmth is so immense, neither of us feels the absence of Mom.

Mason is waiting for me on the opposite side of the water feature. Carrying two plates, he nods for me to follow him back to the table.

He'd filled both plates with all the hearty goodness Willow prepared. From crackers with cream cheese and olives to quartered sandwich triangles, my tummy rumbles with anticipation.

But as soon as we sit down and I take my first bite of a meatloaf sandwich, bile rises to the top of my throat. The acidic taste threatens to force the food back out, and I quickly mumble to be excused.

"Are you okay?" Mason asks with a frown as he watches me get out of my chair.

Holding a hand in front of my mouth, I nod and bolt for the inn's downstairs bathroom.

"Where are you, babe?" Mason asks through the phone.

Flinging it onto my lap, I stick my key into the ignition. "I'm on my way," I reply and cut the call abruptly.

To celebrate the opening, we've decided to have lunch at the inn - just us sisters, along with Mason, Ethan, and Ryder.

And I'm running late. Using the excuse that I'd pick up the food, I made a quick dash to the convenience store on my way

back.

“Order for the Porters,” I say to the cashier at the diner. Willow finally decided to give herself a break from the kitchen, so lunch is buffalo wings from the diner Mason and I often visit.

“Here you go.” The cashier smiles at me as she hands me the bag. I greet the new owner, Mr. Matthews, before heading out.

Rushing through town, I arrive at the inn exactly five minutes later than I promised. Ethan’s car is already parked in the lot, and if there’s anyone who would’ve been late, it would’ve been him.

He’s been working tirelessly to find the perpetrators behind Brianna’s kidnapping. One of the reasons why we’re meeting today is that reason - he called to let us know that he found something.

With that growing anticipation, I make my way into the dining area where our group occupies a long dining table.

“Hey, guys!” I say cheerfully as I set the bag on the table. Chloe grabs it first and starts setting out the food.

Taking my seat beside Mason, he reaches over and kisses my cheek. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I smile, turning to Ethan. I know my husband can read me a little too well, and I don’t want him to figure out that my growing anticipation has to do with anything other than the case.

“What did you want to tell us?”

Ethan clears his throat, taking Brianna’s hand from the table and holding it on his lap. They exchange knowing glances, then he turns back and replies, “I have a lead. It seems that the same people who took Brianna were involved in cutting the brakes of my father’s van.”

Too shocked to say anything, I stare at him with my mouth agape. Every new discovery seems to be tying things together - things we’d never expect to be linked.

“Do you think that’s why Mom was forced to give you up?”
Chloe asks Brianna, who nods.

“We think so. But we still don’t have a solid reason.”

Ethan lifts Brianna’s hand and kisses it. “We’ll get to the bottom of this. I promise.”

That little bubble of excitement still grows in the pit of my belly. It makes it almost impossible to eat, and Mason notices. He knows how much I love these buffalo wings...

“Baby...” he leans in and whispers. “...Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, inspecting the bone of one wing, and deciding on the spot to get my own answers. I grab my bag and toss it over my shoulder, offer Mason a smile, and say, “Excuse me. I’ll be back in a sec.”

My feet carry me into an almost jog to the bathroom. Once there, I smile sneakily as I take out the box from my bag.

And I’m caught red-handed when all three of my sisters burst through the door.

“What’s that?” Chloe interrogates me when I hide the box behind my back.

Willow grabs my arm too quickly and snatches the box from my hand. “A pregnancy test?!” she exclaims, eyes shooting wide.

“Shhh!” I scold. “Not so loud.”

“Well?” Brianna folds her arms and leans against the wall. “Are you gonna take it or not?”

“We thought you were weird,” Willow giggles as she hands me the test kit back.

Sheepishly taking it, I feel my cheeks heat up. “I’m sorry. I just needed to be sure first before saying anything.”

“Well, don’t keep us hanging in suspense any longer!” Chloe pushes into a stall. “I’m dying to know!”

I feel so awkward about peeing on the stick when a nail drop can be heard through the silence that follows. I replace the cap and leave the stall.

“Five minutes,” I announce, leaving the test by the sink. We wait out the five minutes, which seem to stretch for eternity as Brianna times it on her phone. Finally, the timer runs out and beeps, and I grab the tube from inside the foil.

Holding it up, I blink in disbelief. Two pink lines indicate a positive, for the first time in my life.

“I’m pregnant...” I murmur and immediately, three pairs of arms embrace me. Tears of joy flow from my eyes as my sisters share in my joy.

“This is fantastic!” Chloe sings. “We’re gonna be aunties!”

Willow pulls back and cups my cheek. “I’m so happy for you, Livvie.” She smiles warmly, and it feels like Mom herself is congratulating me. “I’ve always wanted to be a mom, and I can only imagine how happy you are.”

I sigh, feeling relief washing over me. “Roger and I couldn’t get pregnant... That’s one of the reasons—”

“Shhh...” Brianna takes my hand. “That doesn’t matter now. He was the problem, and now you have your second chance.”

Her smile is infectious, lifting my own lips into a smile. “I need to tell him.”

My sisters all nod, and I’m left to lead the way back to our table. The sharp-eyed detective is the first to notice that something’s off.

“Why do you ladies look so giddy?” he asks with a raised brow.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to Mason and gesture for him to come closer.

“Yeah, baby?”

I lean closer to his ear and whisper, “I’m pregnant.”

He pulls back, staring at me with wide eyes that glow with excitement. “Really?”

I nod, and he immediately pulls me onto his lap with strong arms that embrace me.

“I couldn’t be any happier...” he says while he kisses every inch of my face.

I couldn’t either, I think as I cradle his face and kiss him full on the lips. Melting into him, I realize that I’ve found everything I’d been looking for, right here in Silverbell Falls.

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