

I SAID
WHAT
I SAID



Heather
Mickstyn



a sweet romantic comedy

I SAID
WHAT
I SAID

A HEART SISTERS ROMANCE



Heather Mickstyn

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To Nicola's Books

*As a ten-year-old I used the free birthday book coupon you sent me to buy
Ella Enchanted. I've been in love with romance books ever since.*

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When Harvey Met Kristen

(A PREQUEL)

KRISTEN

“John, he’s too young.” My mom’s stern voice travels up from the kitchen as I head out my room and down the hall. “And far too inexperienced.”

I pause halfway down the stairs as I notice my younger sister Felicity crouched on the landing.

“What’s going on?” I ask her, and she whirls around in surprise, almost losing her balance.

“Shh!” She puts a finger to her lips. “I don’t want them to know I’m listening.”

“What are you listening to?” I squat down next to her, curiosity getting the best of me.

“Mom’s upset with Dad because he hired some hot guy to be the new head bartender,” she explains.

“A hot head bartender?” I echo, intrigued. “You’ve seen him?”

“Nope.” Felicity shakes her head.

“Then how do you know he’s hot?” I pause. “Please tell me our mother didn’t phrase his description that way.”

Felicity purses her lips against a smile. “Not mom.”

I gape at her implication. “Dad?”

Felicity giggles softly, then deepens her voice as she quotes our dad. “He’s a very personable, good looking young fellow, Paula. I told you that I read in my restaurant magazine that customers buy more drinks from attractive bartenders.”

I laugh too. Dad is really into this new magazine he found for restaurant owners. A couple of weeks ago he told Mom it

was about time they got a website, then proceeded to design his own. It featured a unique bright orange background, aquamarine-colored cursive font, and a picture of our town-renowned bacon burger that he enlarged so much it appears pixelated. He told us that his magazine said it was important for your website to showcase your food. The month before that, after reading an article about improving the sourcing of your food, he asked Mom if she thought they should switch to free-range french fries.

Obviously, some of the things he's reading are getting lost in translation.

"Just give him a try," my dad is saying as we tune back into their conversation. "It's not as if we can't let him go if it doesn't work out."

"I think you mean *you* can let him go if it doesn't work out," my mom retorts. "You know I hate firing people."

"Fine, then," he relents. "If the kid doesn't work out, I will personally fire him. Okay?"

"And hire someone old enough that it's not suspicious that they can make thirteen different cocktails from memory." I can picture my mom shaking her head in disapproval at the thought of underage drinking.

"Hey, I thought that was impressive," my dad says in hot bartender guy's defense.

"Of course you did," my mom says wryly. "I hope you at least reminded him of our number one rule."

Felicity and I exchange a glance. We both know the stupid number one rule. Although I've always been more bothered by it than her.

"Of course I did, honey," my dad exclaims. "And he assured me that we have nothing to worry about. He's not looking to date anyone right now. He's just here for the summer, saving money so he can head to Nashville and launch his music career."

"Pbfft," my mom dismisses his words. "He'd better keep his guitar or vocal talent or whatever it is he does away from

Kristen. You know she has a weakness for musicians.”

Next to me Felicity snorts. I shoot her a look of irritation. I do not have a weakness for musicians! Honestly, I date one guy in a garage band, and my family treats me like I’m some sort of groupie.

I’m done listening to this conversation.

“I’m leaving,” I tell Felicity as I stand up. She hops up too.

“Yeah, same.” She sighs. “I have a history paper to write. Unlike some people I’m not already on summer break.”

“Too bad, so sad.” I pat her on the head before turning to go.

“Hey, hold on!” Felicity grabs my arm. “Wait here,” she instructs. “I have something for you.” With that she dashes back up the stairs, leaving me tapping my foot on the landing and checking my watch. I wasted too much time listening to my parents’ conversation. I really do need to get moving or I’ll miss everything. I grab my phone and reread the text message I got this morning from Doctor Valent.

Just heard-Suzy is lying down. It’s go time! Heading over now.

His text came in ten minutes ago. Based on my research that means I maybe have forty-five minutes before I miss everything. If Felicity isn’t back in sixty seconds I’m-

“Whew, good.” Felicity reappears on the stairs, a stack of books in hand. “You waited.” She hurries down the stairs toward me, holding out the books. “Can you return these for me?” she asks. “They were all due last week, and I already have like thirty dollars in fines. The librarian said she’s going to cut up my card if I keep racking up fines like this.”

“Sorry, Felicity,” I look at my watch again, “I have somewhere to be. Why can’t you do it?”

“I told you, I have this history paper I have to finish. Plus, this afternoon Alex and I have our annual bike ride from Mistle Berry to Mauve Hill.”

Alex. There's the reason Felicity doesn't care about my parents no dating our daughters rule. She's hopelessly crushing on her best friend. Not that she'd ever admit it.

"When do you and Alex *not* have some weird annual best friends' tradition to celebrate?" I ask with a roll of my eyes. "Why can't you just take the books on your bike ride and return them?"

"Because," she ignores my dig, "it's way out of the way." She pushes the books toward me. "Whereas you are going to pass directly by the library on your way to the farm."

"How do you know I'm going to the farm?" I cross my arms over my chest, blocking her book shoving.

"Duh," it's her turn to roll her eyes at me, "you've basically been living there the last few days. Plus you've got your whole overall get-up on." She takes one hand off her stack of books to gesture up and down my frame. "Where else would you be headed looking like that?"

"My overalls are cute," I retort. "And practical. What would you wear to a lamb birthing-your prom dress?"

"I would never go to a lamb birthing," Felicity retorts.

"Felicity!" I gape. "How can you say that? We're talking about baby sheep. Little fluffy adorable lambs! How could you not want to experience that?"

"I don't know. I must be crazy," she says dryly. Again she shoves the books at me. "Please, Kristen. Pretty, pretty please! It'll take you two minutes. You could've done it in the time we've spent arguing about you doing it."

"Fine," I say with a sigh, taking the books. "I'll just do it on my way home."

"Ooh," Felicity sucks in a breath.

"What?"

"It's just I sort of told Stephanie at the library that I'd have them back to her by ten o'clock."

"What? Why?"

“I don’t know!” she cries. “I panicked. She was going on with me about being more responsible with my books, and then she said if I didn’t return them by two o’clock she was going to send my account to the collections agency, and I just got swept up in the drama and announced that I’d do her one better and have them back to her by ten.” She takes a breath before adding theatrically, “And then she laughed, Kristen. She laughed! I have to prove her wrong.”

“And yet, you’re not the one who’s going to prove her wrong. I am.”

“So you’ll do it?”

I sigh. “Okay, fine.” She starts to cheer, but I cut her off. “But you owe me one no questions asked favor.”

Felicity’s lips turn down in a pout. “Really, Kristen? What happened to doing things for your sister out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Overdone and overrated.” I hold up the stack of books. “So what do you say? Do you agree you owe me a no questions asked favor if I do this for you? Or are you going to lose face in front of Stephanie at the library?”

“Ugh, fine!” Felicity throws up her hands. “Yes, I owe you one no questions asked favor if you return my library books before ten o’clock.” She flounces off, muttering to herself.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Lis,” I call after her, then hurry out the door. I have a farm to get to.

Any update?

I type out the text as I park my car in front of the library ten minutes later and hurry toward the front doors. Doctor Valent lives further from the O’Neil’s farm, so he’s probably just getting there now. Suzy the sheep has been showing signs that she’s about to give birth all week, and I’ve been hanging out at the farm a lot as a result, not wanting to miss the birth. After a

pregnant ewe lies down, her lamb is usually born in about an hour. Per Doctor Valent's text, Suzy laid down twenty minutes ago. The farm is only another ten minutes away, so for as hard a time as I gave Felicity about this pit stop errand, I should be good on time. I never would have agreed to do this if I thought I wouldn't be.

Inside the library my confidence dwindles. Why is there such a long line to the book return? There are seven people standing there waiting to drop their books in the slot. I crane my neck, trying to figure out what the hold-up is, stifling a groan when I see that the person at the front of the line has about a hundred books and is putting them through the slot one at a time.

Felicity may think it was petty of me to demand a no questions asked favor in return for me taking two minutes out of my day, but if I miss this lamb birthing one no questions asked favor will not be enough.

She'll have to find another pregnant sheep to make it up to me.

Don't think I won't make her.

I study the person in front of me. It's an older gentleman with a half-full book cart. I tap him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir?"

He turns to look at me, and I almost swallow my question when I see his surly expression, but I have lambs to get to so I forge on.

"Hello, I'm sorry to ask this, but I'm in a bit of a hurry. I wondered if you would be willing to return my books for me? I'd be willing to give you," I rummage in my purse, pulling out a crumpled bill from my tips last night, "five dollars for your trouble."

"Is this some sort of internet scam?" the man asks.

"What? No," I hurry to assure him, graciously choosing not to point out that most, dare I say all, internet scams take place *on the actual internet*.

“I just need a favor.”

“A favor? Humph.” He grunts and shakes his head. “I’m not some naive old dog you can bamboozle into giving you my life savings, young lady. So go back to Nigeria and tell your prince I said he can shove his five dollars where the sun don’t shine.”

Give me a break.

At least this interaction confirms my decision to go into a career working with animals instead of people. I’m half-tempted to tell this guy he’s right, and I now somehow know all of his passwords and will be siccing the full force of Nigeria’s cyber terrorism network on him. I refrain from doing so, only because if this guy calls the cops on me I definitely won’t get to see Suzy give birth.

“Listen,” I decide to appeal to any animal-loving side that this man might have, “let’s start over. Have you ever seen a lamb being born? Sounds amazing right? Like something you wouldn’t want to miss?” His face isn’t softening, time to get to the point. “Well I have the opportunity to witness that very thing in thirty minutes or less. Which is why I’m asking you to do me this small favor and return my books for me? What do you say?” I hold out the books. “Will you support this future veterinarian?”

He knocks the books out of my hands.

Really? I bend down to pick them up and my hands run into someone else’s hands.

“Hear let me help you, Doc,” a deep male says, and I lift my gaze to see Cary Grant helping me pick up Felicity’s library books!

Wait, no. Not Cary Grant. Obviously. Cary Grant is British, this guy doesn’t have an accent.

Not to mention Cary Grant is dead. There’s also that.

“Thank you,” I squeak as he passes me the books. We stand back up, and I remember with a jolt of horror that I have a bandanna tied around my hair, no make-up on my face, and I am wearing my stupid farm overalls! No matter what I said to

Felicity about them being cute, my overalls are by no means what I would choose to wear while meeting a Cary Grant look-alike for the first time.

“Happy to help, Doc.” He bends down to pick up a guitar case he must’ve set down to help me.

“Doc?” I ask.

He smiles. “You said you’re a vet right?”

“Studying to be.”

“That makes you Doc, Doc.” He smiles, and I want to dive into the dimple that just appeared on his chin.

I grin, adjusting my grip on the stack of books. “Okay then, Picky.”

“Picky?”

“Yeah,” I tap the end of his guitar case, “you know, like a guitar pick.”

He laughs. “Maybe you should leave the nicknames to me, Doc.”

I laugh too. “Hey, usually I know people’s actual names before I give them a nickname.”

“Fair enough.” He holds out a hand. “I’m Harvey.”

“Kristen.” Balancing my books in the crook of my arm I take his hand, not even a little surprised when his touch sends a thrill through me. Hello, he looks like a young Cary Grant! Obviously I’m attracted to him. The only thing I’m not sure about is whether or not he felt anything.

I know I’m wearing a farm girl outfit, but maybe he’s into that sort of thing. Small-town farm girl meets big city musician.

I’d watch that Hallmark movie.

“Nice to meet you, Kristen.” Harvey doesn’t drop my hand right away, but I’m not complaining. I am totally here for this sexy handshake thing we’ve got going on. I’ve never been attracted to someone’s hands before, but his are just right.

Large enough to make my own look small and dainty. Warm but not sweaty. I can feel the calluses on his fingertips, likely from his guitar playing, and the contrast between his rough skin and the softness of my palm somehow makes me feel feminine and alluring.

“Likewise, Harvey,” I say, channeling my best confident romcom heroine voice. I’m Reese Witherspoon, Kate Hudson, and Sandra Bullock all rolled into one. And maybe some Audrey Hepburn too, seeing as Harvey is Cary Grant reincarnated.

“Excuse me, are you two in line?” A brusque voice interrupts what I’m calling our library meet cute, and I realize with a start that the patron with a hundred books to return finally finished. The line is moving. Lamb birthing here we come! Maybe I’ll ask Harvey if he wants to come. Then we can tell our future kids that we fell in love while cuddling fluffy little lambs.

“Uh, yes, I’m in line,” I tell the woman standing behind us as I drop Harvey’s hand and move forward.

“Not me,” Harvey says to the woman I now recognize as the thief of my happily ever after. Seriously, thanks to her, Harvey is walking away! I have to do something! Be my own hero! Create my own happiness! Pick your corny motivational poster saying, I need to do that!

“Harvey!” I cry, and he turns back, a question written on his face.

“Yeah?” he asks, when I don’t say anything more. Shoot. I didn’t think past saying his name. I was sort of hoping he’d say, ‘Kristen’ with equal fervor then run back over and sweep me up for a kiss. This is what I get for falling asleep to a TBS romcom movie marathon. Who knew unrealistic romantic scenarios could infiltrate your subconscious while you were sleeping? Hey, that was one of the movies!

Gosh I love Sandra Bullock.

“Kristen?” Harvey says my name, but it’s curiosity, not passion in his tone. Right. Think, think, think. How can I make

him stay? How do I usually get people to do things for me?

“Can I interest you in a no questions asked favor?” I blurt.

Harvey cocks his head. “A what?”

“A no questions asked favor,” I repeat, my confidence growing.

“A no questions asked favor?” He takes a step back toward me.

“Yup.” I nod. “It’s a favor I’ll do for you without asking any questions. For instance, once back in high school my sister owed me a no questions asked favor, so she had to distract the office secretary so I could sneak into her office and get someone’s locker combination.”

“Whose locker combination?” he asks.

“No questions,” I reply, shaking my finger at him. Harvey chuckles.

“Okay, I can see why a favor like that might come in handy,” he says as I move forward one more person in line. “But why would you give me this free no questions asked favor?”

“Oh it’s not free,” I hurry to correct him. “These favors are never free. No, I’d be giving you this favor in exchange for you doing something for me right now.”

“Let me guess, this favor you need has something to do with why that guy knocked your books out of your hand when you asked him to support a future veterinarian?”

“Yes, actually.” I nod. “I asked him to return my books for me, and he said no.”

“He didn’t want your no questions asked favor?”

“No, he didn’t want my five bucks. I don’t offer my no questions asked favors to just anyone, Harvey. This is a special opportunity for you.”

Harvey laughs again. “Do I get to ask why you need someone to return your library books?”

“Of course you can ask; returning my books is just a regular favor,” I explain with a wink. “I need someone to return my books so I can get to a lamb birthing. If I don’t hurry I’ll miss it, and this line is taking forever to move.”

“A lamb birthing?” he echoes, and suddenly I wish I’d told him no questions. Are there really no men out there who can appreciate the lure of baby sheep? Maybe I need to move to a country where shepherding is still a thing.

“Hey look, the line’s moving,” I say, even though it’s not. On the contrary, the person at the front isn’t even putting any of their books in.

“Bin’s full,” I hear someone call from the front of the line. “We need a librarian.”

Harvey grins. “Guess you still need that favor if you’re going to make it to that lamb birthing, huh?”

“I’m not weird,” I claim. “Lots of people like baby farm animals.”

“Sure,” he agrees. “Mary, for example.”

“Mary?” I can’t keep a note of disappointment out of my voice. Of course he has a girlfriend. A girlfriend named Mary who also likes baby farm animals and nabbed the only guy who doesn’t find that strange.

“Yeah, you know, Mary,” he elaborates. “Mary had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow,” he sings.

You know, I’m finding out a lot about myself today. For instance, apparently I have a thing for men with large hands who sing nursery rhymes in their hot baritone voices.

“Oh right,” I laugh with relief. “That Mary. Of course I know her. I was insanely jealous of her as a child.”

“Jealous of her?” Harvey is intrigued. “Why?”

“Duh,” I say, and even though people are still staring from Harvey’s solo, I can’t resist singing the answer, “She had a little lamb who followed her to school one day.” I laugh. “She got a lamb, meanwhile I wasn’t even allowed to have a pet dog.” Harvey is staring at me again, and I blush under his

scrutiny. “Sorry, I like to sing.” I shrug. “Although,” I backtrack, “you started it, Mr. Baritone.”

“Mr. Baritone?” He grins. “Look at that, Doc, you’re already getting better at nicknames.” He leans forward, and I catch a whiff of cedar and pine. My new favorite scent. “By the way, never apologize for singing. I loved it.” He bends down and unsnaps his guitar case, rummaging around inside for something. “Actually, I loved it so much that I’m going to stand in line for you, Doc, so you can go to your lamb birthing.” His hand reappears holding a guitar pick and a sharpie. “But first I’m cashing in on that no questions asked favor you offered me.” He’s scribbling something on the guitar pick, and I’m starting to get a little nervous. I only offered him that favor a few minutes ago, and he already has something in mind? That can’t be good. It means he already had something that he needed done. Perhaps some deep-seated grudge he needs me to rectify.

Or maybe I gave him ideas with my whole locker combination anecdote. I bet he’s writing down GPS coordinates or a bank box number, and now he’s going to demand I steal something for him. If *Ocean’s Eleven* taught me anything, it’s that the hot ones are always criminals.

How do I tell him I’m not willing to break the law and still get to him to ask me out? Not that I want to date a criminal, but I can change him. Women do that, right?

“Listen,” I say hastily, “I should tell you that I’m going to be applying for vet school in the fall, and they do a background check so I really need to stay on the right side of the law.”

There. That was good. The old *my mom would kill me if she found out* excuse. Only this time it’s vet school that would kill me.

“The right side of the law?” Harvey’s hand freezes around his sharpie as he raises an amused brow my way. “Well that’s no fun. Here I was hoping you’d rob a bank with me.” He laughs as my eyes widen. “Joking, Doc.”

I let out a relieved breath. “I knew that,” I say with false bravado. “I was joking too. Obviously I knew you weren’t going to ask me to do anything illegal.”

“Uh-huh.” Harvey caps his sharpie, and holds out the guitar pick. “This is my phone number,” he tells me as I accept it from him. “If I stand in line for you, I want you to call me after you finish snuggling your newborn lamb.” He snaps his guitar case shut again. “I’d love to see you again.”

Oh my rapidly beating heart!

“Okay, yeah,” I try to sound casual, like my imagination hasn’t started planning our wedding on the beach. At sunset. With orchids in my bouquet. “I’ll call you.”

“Great.” Harvey reaches out and takes the stack of books from me, the back of his hand brushing the inside of my forearm and sending tingles shooting through my body. “You’d better go,” he says. “I’ve got this covered.”

I nod, my earlier fervor to witness Suzy birthing her babies seems to have dissipated in Harvey’s presence. I can’t just hang out here now that I’ve made such a big deal though, so I turn and hurry out of the library.

My phone dings, and I glance down at the screen to see a text from Dr. Valent. I’m too late. Suzy had her lambs.

My gaze goes to the library where I know Harvey is still standing in line for me, then I look at the guitar pick in my hand. I missed the lambing, the thing I’ve spent this whole week looking forward to.

Which is why the huge smile I can’t seem to erase from my face doesn’t make any sense.

I guess my family was right-I do have a thing for musicians.

HARVEY

Who knew libraries could be so much fun? I adjust my grip on the stack of books I just took for Kristen, a smile playing on my lips as I relive our encounter. The rational side of me keeps interrupting my reminiscence though, reminding me that I'm only here in Mistle Berry for a few months. I'm really not looking to get attached to anyone. I just need to make some money working at the bar, then I can head to Nashville and take my shot at making it in the music industry. Dating a vivacious, gorgeous, blonde who wears overalls is not part of my summer plans.

And yet I just can't bring myself to regret giving her my phone number.

"Excuse me?" A woman in glasses and a cardigan approaches me. "Are you who I just heard singing 'Mary Had A Little Lamb?'" She points to the wall with the book return slot carved into it. "I was behind that wall trying to clear the book return bin, so I can't be sure, but given your guitar I figured it must be you."

For the first time I notice the librarian badge clipped to her blazer.

"Oh, uh, yeah, Stephanie," I read her name off the badge, "that was me. Sorry, I know we're in a library, I'll be quieter."

"No, no," Stephanie laughs. "That's not why I sought you out. On the contrary, I was hoping to hear you play more. We're actually looking for someone to lead our weekly children's song and story time. I wondered if you'd be interested?"

A children's song and story time? I can feel my lips forming a no before my brain has even fully processed the request.

“Before you say no,” Stephanie puts up a hand, “you should know that I think I could get Kristen to do it with you.”

“You know Kristen?”

“Of course, I know Kristen. She’s Felicity’s sister, and Felicity is one of our biggest supporters. I’m pretty sure all the money she makes waitressing ends up going toward paying her late fees.” She laughs and taps the stack of books in my hand. “I assume those are hers.”

“Uh, Kristen gave them to me. I’m not sure if they’re Felicity’s or not.”

“Oh they are,” Stephanie assures me, taking another look at them. “She’s the Shakespeare and classics lover in the family. Now what do you say? Will you consider it?” She gives me a knowing look. “I don’t make a habit of eavesdropping, but I could hear the flirty banter between the two of you even through that wall.” Again she points to the wall behind us. “As I said, storytime is only once a week, and you’d get thirty dollars for that one hour of work.”

I study her for a beat, considering. Thirty dollars for one hour is pretty good. Plus, I had planned on coming to the library fairly regularly anyway. They’ve got some soundproof study rooms on the second floor I’d planned to use for some practice. That’s where I was headed before I stopped to help Kristen pick up her books. Or rather her sister’s books, I guess. If I’m going to be here anyway, why not make some extra cash?

And yeah, I’m not complaining about the idea of spending an hour a week with Kristen. I just met her, and I’m already wondering when I’ll get to see her again.

“What do you say?” Stephanie prompts. The line shifts. It’s moving quickly now that the bin has been emptied. I move forward, and Stephanie follows alongside me.

“Yeah, okay,” I shrug. “I can do it. I mean, assuming it doesn’t conflict with my other job, but I’m guessing a children’s storytime won’t be in the evening.”

“It’s scheduled to be on Wednesday mornings at ten,” Stephanie supplies. “Does that work?”

“Yeah. I don’t start at Holly Johnny’s until four.”

“Holly Johnny’s?” Stephanie’s chin dips down in surprise. “You work with Kristen?”

“She works there?” I say in pleased surprise. This day keeps getting better and better.

“Of course,” Stephanie laughs. “She and Felicity both waitress there. It is their parents’ restaurant, after all.”

My heart sinks. Kristen is John’s daughter? A clear echo of his warning to me during my interview yesterday blares in my mind. *The number one rule we have for our employees is that they’re not allowed to date our daughters. Will that be a problem?*

A string of all the cuss words that I try not to say runs through my brain in quick succession.

Kristen is John’s daughter? Seriously?

“You okay?” Stephanie asks me. “Did I say something to upset you?”

“No, uh, I just didn’t realize Kristen was John’s daughter.” We’ve reached the book return now, and I insert the books one by one into the slot. I’ve got no choice, I’ll just have to stay away from her. I can’t lose my job at the bar. I need the money, and I’ve spent the last week applying for jobs. The one at Holly Johnny’s offered the best pay by far. Not many places will take a young inexperienced guy like me and make him head bartender.

“Well she is,” Stephanie confirms. “Such a nice family they are too. Now how about you give me your preferred method of contact, and I’ll be in touch about storytime.”

“Oh, right.” First thing to go will have to be the storytime I just agreed to. I can’t be spending additional time with Kristen if I’m trying to stay away from her. It’d be like putting a box of cigarettes in front of someone who’s trying to quit. Will-

power only goes so far. “You know, Stephanie, I’m actually not sure-”

“Harvey!” A voice that has become wonderfully familiar in the last fifteen minutes pulls my gaze over my shoulder, where I see Kristen hurrying toward me, her cheeks flushed prettily with pleasure.

“Kristen?” My uncooperative body immediately responds to her presence, filling with warmth. “What happened to the lamb birthing?”

“I missed it,” she says matter-of-factly. “Which is a bummer, yes, but then I realized that just because I missed the birth doesn’t mean I have to miss hanging out with two newborn lambs. So I was going to head to the farm, but then I thought I’d come back in and see if maybe you want to come with me?” Her eyes flit to Stephanie. “Oh, hi, Stephanie.”

Stephanie smiles and waves hello.

Kristen looks back at me, then back at Stephanie. “Or are you busy?” She takes a step away from me, and her implication is clear. She thinks I was hitting on Stephanie, after I just gave her my number. Ouch.

“Oh no, no,” I hurry to assure her, even though maybe I should just let her assume that. If she thinks I’m a womanizer, she won’t want to date me, and that would be good. Since I really want to date her.

And I cannot date her.

“I was just asking Harvey here if he’d be interested in leading a children’s song and storytime here at the library,” Stephanie cuts in. “He was a bit hard to convince, but then I told him I thought I could get you to do it with him, and he started singing a different tune.”

Gee, thanks, Stephanie. I’ll be sure to tell John all about your role in pushing his daughter and I together.

“Really?” Kristen smiles at me. “A children’s song and storytime, huh? I like it.”

This is the part where I back out.

Why isn't my mouth doing what I'm instructing it to do?

Probably because it's too focused on her mouth. John said I couldn't date his daughter. He didn't say I couldn't kiss her.

Everybody loves a loophole.

"Harvey?" Kristen's smile wavers. "Are you okay? Your face is kind of pale." She steps closer, peering up at me in concern. Before I can reply, Kristen reaches across the space between us and puts her hand on my forehead, as if feeling for a fever. Her touch sends my pulse skittering. I want to pull her hand down and press it against my lips. *Keep it together, man!* Am I really going to kiss her hand? What am I? Some sort of nineteenth century duke? "Hmm," she says, frowning slightly. "You do feel slightly flushed."

You think?

"Stephanie," Kristen turns to the librarian, "can we get back to you about the songs and storytime? I think Harvey and I need to talk about it."

The way Kristen so casually referred to us as a 'we' makes me smile. Dang it, I want to be a 'we' with her. I don't believe in love at first sight, but you can bet I now believe in being really attracted to someone and wanting to take them out on lots of dates at first sight.

"Okay," Stephanie agrees. "Felicity has my number, Kristen. Call me when you've made your decision. Sooner rather than later, please. If you two can't do it, I'll have to keep looking for someone else to run it."

"Sounds good," Kristen agrees, and Stephanie finally leaves us alone. "Are you okay, Harvey?" Kristen repeats her earlier question. "You really do look queasy. Listen," she goes on quickly, "if this is about the songs and storytime thing, we don't have to do it. If you're having second thoughts about me calling you or whatever, I'm a big girl, I can totally handle it. Although, you should know, I don't usually wear overalls. And I know this bandanna isn't my best look, but usually I really like my hair. Not that attraction between two people comes down to only looks. Obviously, there's the personality side of

things too. Unfortunately, you've gotten a pretty good preview of my personality, so if that's where the attraction is lacking, I'm not sure what to do about it. I really thought we were jiving earlier, but maybe it was all one-sided. Or maybe your good looks confused me. I mean, I don't know if you've looked in the mirror lately, but you are really hot. Probably too hot to consider a girl with a bandanna in her hair." She yanks the offending bandana off her head, and her blonde waves tumble free around her face.

Maybe a recovering smoker could resist a sealed box of cigarettes, but Kristen just took one out of the package, lit it up, and offered it to me.

And I want a hit.

"Anyway, I'll see myself out," she adds, turning to go.

"Kristen, wait." I reach out and grab her elbow, holding her in place. She turns her wide green eyes on me. "Do you know who I am?" I ask, my voice oddly raspy.

"You're Harvey," she says, looking at me like I'm crazy.

"No," I say. "I mean yes, I am Harvey, but I meant..." I release her arm and rake a frustrated hand through my hair. "I'm your parents' new head bartender, Kristen."

Understanding dawns on her face.

"Of course you're the new head bartender," she groans. "How did I not figure that out? You totally fit the description," she adds this last bit under her breath.

"I didn't know until just a few minutes ago that you were John's daughter," I tell her, my shoulders slumping. "I never would've given you my number if I had known. I mean your dad, he told me the rule. I wasn't trying to go behind his back."

Kristen's chin lifts in challenge as she steps closer, holding my gaze. "Between you and me, I've always thought that was a stupid rule."

"Kristen." Her words are like sneaky little vines, twisting around me until I'm rooted in place.

I'm not fighting it though. On the contrary-I just threw out my imaginary garden shears.

"Harvey," Kristen mimics my tone.

"I could get fired."

"I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Your parents-"

"Don't get to make decisions for their twenty-year-old daughter."

I suck in a breath, she makes a good point.

"How about this?" Kristen slides her hands into the oversized pockets of her overalls. "We haven't even worked a shift together yet, so without Stephanie's interference you wouldn't even know that I'm off-limits. So let's pretend you're still just Harvey, the cute guy who gave me his phone number on a guitar pick, and I'm just Kristen, the girl with the irresistible personality who wants to take you to go cuddle a couple of newborn lambs." She blinks up at me, her long lashes sweeping hypnotically over her cheek bones. "What do you say, Harvey?"

She should be a lawyer, not a veterinarian. Or what's a career that combines them both? Some sort of animal advocate or one of those people on TV who urge you to go adopt a pet from the shelter.

I know I'd buy a dog from her.

I take a deep breath, knowing I'm already too forgone with this woman to even think about saying no.

"Let me be clear, Kristen," I say, reaching over and tugging a strap on her overalls. "It's not just your personality I find irresistible. It's pretty much everything about you, these overalls included." I grin as a blush colors her cheeks. "Now let's go snuggle some lambs."

Chapter 1

(Eight Years Ago)

Harvey

I step as softly as I can across the rundown shag carpet covering the living room floor of the two-bedroom apartment I share with Derek Alden, a fellow aspiring musician. It's hard to be quiet with my arms so overloaded, but Derek cannot see me like this. Not tonight. Not after everything that's happened this week. He and I can have it out in the morning, after I've gotten some sleep. At least, I hope I'll get some sleep. From what I've heard of others in my situation, sleep is never a guarantee.

On the plus side, it's 11pm on a Thursday night, so the chances are good Derek is out playing a gig or partying at a bar. Then again, as of 9:18 this morning, I can no longer afford to take chances. Not when I've got Allison to think about.

In the pitch blackness my foot almost collides with the leg of our coffee table. I side-step it just in time and, instead of steel against my socked foot, feel the now familiar squelch of bird poop under my toes. That's right. Bird poop. Did I mention Derek has a bird?

A bird he failed to mention in his ad looking for a roommate.

But it turns out beggars really can't be choosers. And seeing as my last gig was at a coffee shop where more than one person asked me to play more softly so they could hear their companions talk, it's live here with Derek or try and claim a bunk at the local homeless shelter.

Allison lets out a soft sigh, and I peer down at her sleeping form. Am I really going to let her live in a place where she can step in bird poop at any moment? Well, not step, since she can't even walk. Maybe roll, then? A place

where she can roll in bird poop at any moment? That's actually worse.

My gaze travels to the window, and I allow myself one beat to stare out at the Nashville skyline. The AT&T building stares back at me, dwarfing its neighbors. Still, even if I can't make the particular buildings out, I know all too well how many bars and nightclubs fill the rest of that downtown real estate. Bars waiting for me to play in them. Bars waiting for me to be discovered in.

Or that was what was supposed to happen anyway. I've been here three months now, and so far my biggest gig was that coffee shop. The bartending I've been doing on the nights I'm not playing is the only thing keeping me with a roof over my head.

I let go of my suitcase handle and use my free hand to slide my disgusting sock off. My life is starting to feel like this stupid sock. Holey, misshapen, and covered in bird poop. And that last part clearly isn't even metaphorical.

If only the quarter needed to run a wash cycle in our community laundry room could fix my life as quickly as it would this sock. Not that I even have a quarter to spare. I just spent all of the tip money I've earned working behind the bar on the gas money needed to drive to and from Michigan.

Well, gas and diapers.

Genius that I am, I left the box of diapers from my sister Abby's house in the lawyer's office, not realizing my mistake until I'd crossed the border into Ohio, and my nose was assaulted with the smell of a stinky diaper from the backseat.

Why is it, by the way, that while adults use regular old toilet paper, babies need wipes? Because wipes are another thing not in my budget right now. So yeah, I guess Allison may have to deal with the irritation caused by cheap 1-ply toilet paper just like the rest of us broke folks.

I continue my trek across the living room, leaving my dirty sock behind to clean up after I've deposited Allison in my room for the night. I still have to go back to the parking lot

and grab the pack'n'play I took from Abby and Jeremiah's place. Am I allowed to just leave Allison alone in our third floor apartment while I do that? How the heck am I going to unpack anything ever, if I have to lug her around everywhere I go?

Apparently babies and big-city apartment living don't mix very well. Which once again makes me wonder what the heck Abby and Jeremiah were thinking leaving me custody of Allison. What. The. Dang. Heck.

I'm a 21-year-old college drop-out, trying to break into the country music scene, and for some insane reason they thought I was the one who should raise their only daughter.

Then again, I bet they didn't think their only daughter would be left parentless at just four months old. Something my irate mother had attempted to point out to the lawyer when he informed everyone of the particulars of Abby and Jeremiah's will earlier today.

She'll fight me for custody, that's for sure. The question is, do I even want to beat her?

My mom has a beautiful home complete with five bedrooms, a garage, and first floor laundry, which, you guessed it, doesn't require quarters. She can afford diapers, wipes, *and* 2-ply toilet paper. And she could probably have someone deliver and set-up a crib in the time it'll take me to figure out how a pack'n'play even works.

But she also comes with my stepfather, Carter. The man who kicked me out of their house when I told them I'd decided to drop-out of college to pursue music as a career. The man who shouts at neighbor kids and used to make us eat dinner in silence. The man who starts almost every sentence with the words, "Let me tell you why you're wrong."

I wish I were exaggerating. But my mom married him when Abby was a junior in high school and I was a freshman, and neither of us have been right since.

That man will kill this little girl's spirit before she hits two.

I kick the door of my 8X10 bedroom open with my foot and set Allison's carseat down with a grunt. Miraculously she stays asleep. I sink down onto my bed and rub my hands over my face.

What am I going to do now? Can I really stay here in Nashville with a baby? But where else am I going to go? Certainly not anywhere near my mom's house in Illinois. So where? Back to Michigan?

Kristen's face slides into my mind, the mere memory of her smile making my heart pick up speed. So beautiful. My arms ache with the emptiness of not holding her between them.

I shake my head. Kristen and I are over. I'm not going back to Mistle Berry, or even Mauve Hill, the neighboring town where Abby and Jeremiah lived.

Lived. The past tense of the word guts me, and I choke down a sob. My sister is gone. Forever. One drunk driver took her away from me. And now Allison is all that's left of her.

Resolution sets in, pulling my shoulders up and cutting off my tears. I have to do right by this little girl. I never thought I would be someone who could sacrifice their own happiness for someone else, but at this moment I know that's what I've got to do.

I can't go back to Michigan, but I can't stay here. I'll just have to pick somewhere new.

"Yo, Harvey!" Derek's booming voice ricochets around our small apartment, and I wince, my hand automatically going to the carseat handle and rocking it back and forth, like I used to see Abby do when I lived with them this past summer.

Allison's eyes fly open, but as they meet mine they glaze over and snap shut once more. I let out the breath I'd been holding, then hurry out of my room to take care of Derek.

"Derek, hey, man," I say casually as I enter the living room, blinking against the sudden brightness of the room. Oh, great. I groan internally. He's got each arm slung around a woman.

“You’re back.” Derek grins. “I got you something to help with your grief.” He pushes the woman under his left arm forward.

Classy guy, that Derek.

“Uh, Derek-” I immediately start to protest, because even when I don’t have a sleeping four-month-old in my room, I’m really not the kind of guy who sleeps with random women.

“This is Lemon,” Derek slurs, ignoring me. “Like the fruit,” he adds unnecessarily. “L-I-lemon,” he repeats her name, rolling his tongue around. Clearly he’s had a few.

“I’m from Mississippi,” Lemon trills, blinking long lashes up at me. “We like our fruit names.”

“Listen, Lemon,” I begin, then pause. Mississippi. The state name trips a circuit in my brain, and a slow smile spreads across my face. Unfortunately, Lemon takes this as encouragement.

“You want to show me your room, boy cow?” she purrs, petting my shoulder. Boy cow? Guessing she’s a few drinks in too, then.

“Uh, Lemon,” I attempt to sound tactful as I push her hand off my shoulder, but she’s not even listening to me.

“Boy cow!” she squeals, then bursts into a fit of giggles. “Viv,” she addresses her friend, “I called him a boy cow! I meant cowboy,” she tells me with an eye roll and a slap to the forehead. “I hear you’re a musician too, *cowboy*,” she emphasizes her correction.

Allison chooses that moment to start wailing. And while most people might say that’s just how babies are, waking up because they’re hungry or cold or wet, I take it as a sign that she’s got my back the same way I’ve got hers.

“What was that?” Derek’s hands fall to his sides, and both women whirl to face the bedroom.

“Eww.” Viv’s mouth forms an o. “Is that a baby?”

“You have a baby?” Lemon is aghast. She whirls on Derek. “You didn’t tell me your friend had a baby? I’m so not

a single dad kind of girl. No way.” She tosses her hair and stalks toward the door. “C’mon, Viv,” she calls. Viv gives a horrified-looking Derek a shrug, then follows Lemon out of the apartment, leaving me alone to face Derek’s long string of expletives.

“Don’t worry,” I say when Derek has finally finished letting me have it. “Allison and I aren’t staying. We’ll be gone in the morning.”

“Good.” Derek slouches against the couch, a flicker of remorse crossing his features. “I mean, I don’t want to put you out on the streets or anything, but I can’t live with a baby, man.”

“Nah, don’t worry.” I throw him a bone. Derek isn’t a bad guy. Outside of his tendency to bring random women home for hook-ups, he’s basically me three days ago. A guy trying to make his dreams come true while living in a city that likes to chew up dreams and spit them out. “I’ve got somewhere to go.”

“Really? Where?”

I think back to a night not too long ago. Sitting in the bed of my truck, a blanket spread out under us as Kristen and I stared up at the sky, grabbing a last hour together before her family left for their vacation. *I wish you could come with us to Mississippi*, she’d whispered against my chest. *The stars down there are the brightest I’ve ever seen. My uncle would like you*, she’d added with a laugh, *he likes anyone who drives a truck*.

“Harvey,” Derek repeats, “where are you going to go?”

I refocus on Derek’s face. “We’re heading down south,” I tell him.

“South?” Derek’s forehead wrinkles. “What like to Franklin? Dude, you won’t be able to pay rent there.”

“No. We’re not staying in Tennessee.” I swallow. “Allison and I are going to Mississippi.”

Chapter 2

(Present Day)

KRISTEN

Whoever designed the drop-off system at Stonefield Elementary school clearly hates people who have only been live-in nannies responsible for taking the kids to school for four days. And yes, I realize that's an oddly specific type of hatred, but it's also the only reasonable explanation for my current situation.

"We're late, Kristen," Lily, the older of my two charges, whines.

"What? How are we late?" I scan the parking lot with a growing sense of panic.

"I think it's prolly cause we left late," Camden replies around a mouthful of the waffles I stuffed into his hands on the way out the door. I bite back a sarcastic response because now that I'm a nanny I'm supposed to like kids.

"No, no, no!" I moan as I circle around the lane used for drop-off. Unlike the last three days it's empty, the staff who usually work drop-off nowhere in sight. I glance at the clock. "This is the same time we've been getting here all week," I insist.

"Yeah, but it's sunny today," Lily points out.

"Thank you, my tiny backseat meteorologist, for that helpful tidbit." I know, I know. That was absolutely me being sarcastic. But honestly, I can only hold in the cutting retorts for so long.

"The drop-off line is always shorter when it's sunny," Lily expounds with an eye roll I can't help but admire, "because more people walk. When it rains all the people drive so the line takes longer."

We're late because it's not raining outside? You have GOT to be kidding me.

"Okay." I take a breath, trying to stay calm. This isn't that big a deal. So they're late one time. What's Clarice going to do, fire me? If she didn't fire me after she came home to find me in her bedroom closet, I think I'm basically tenured.

Although I did tell her that the kids and I were playing hide and seek. Which was true.

Originally.

I just hid really well and they never found me. So then they got bored and went to play Legos while I read Clarice's *People* magazine by the light of my phone. Lucky for me Clarice agreed that Sandra Bullock wore it better.

The point is-

Okay, I don't remember the point I was trying to make.

Was it that I hope I look as good as Sandra Bullock does when I'm in my fifties?

Because I do hope that.

I should really start working out.

"Kristen, what are you doing?" Lily's question pulls me out of my reverie, and I focus back on the kids.

"Dropping you guys off, of course," I say in my best Maria von Trapp voice (a.k.a., weirdly cheerful given the unfortunate circumstances.)

"We can't go inside alone," Lily gasps, and Camden nods earnestly in agreement.

"And why not?"

"You have to sign us in!" Lily insists. "When you're late you have to be signed in!"

"I'm sure that's not true." Yikes, my Maria voice is faltering.

"It *is* true!" Camden is quick to back up his sister. They're both staring at me with wide, beseeching eyes. Unfortunately

for them, I'm a former veterinarian, so I'm used to resisting puppy dog eyes.

"Guys, I'm not going inside. Look at me!" I sweep a hand over my body, wincing at the very thought of getting out of the car dressed like this.

"Fine." Lily settles back against her seat with a thud. "Then I'm not going to school."

"Yeah, me neither!" Camden copies his sister's movements.

Okay. Now what do I do? Excuse me, Regis Philbin are you there? Because I'd like to phone a friend. Her name? Maria von Trapp. Yes, that Maria von Trapp. Tell her I need a song for getting kids out of the car.

The car doors are alive with the sound of- no, that's crap.

"Okay, okay," I hiss, glancing around the parking lot. No signs of human life. Maybe I can make a mad dash and no one will see me. I'll just be that fluffy red blur the secretary saw out her window and assumed was a flock of cardinals.

I flip my visor down, and oh good, my hair looks like it's been attacked by a flock of cardinals. If I take a picture, I'll be able to corroborate the secretary's story should it be called into question.

Or I could just take my bathrobe off. I peer under the fleecy material, then immediately nix that idea. Bathrobe is better than a tank top and no bra.

That's right, I wore my pajamas and a bathrobe to school dropoff.

Don't judge me.

I have only been a nanny for three weeks.

And I've only been a *live-in* nanny for four days.

These other people, the ones who got their kids to school on time while also wearing daytime clothes, have been training for years for this shtick. Years! They went through all of those icky sleepless nights and early mornings with their

kids, and it obviously fully prepared them for the chaos of school mornings. I, on the other hand, have spent the last two years working at a veterinarian's office that opened at 9:30. It's unfair to expect me to just be able to hop into 'get myself and two kids out of the house with snacks, lunches and homework stashed in their backpacks, breakfast in their stomachs, and hair brushed by 7:40' mode. Something had to give.

And that something was me getting dressed before heading out.

And let me tell you, before today that was working just fine.

"Do you have a sweatshirt or something I could borrow?" I ask Lily. She's eight, so even if she is hiding a sweatshirt it'll be tight and short—like a crop top. For once I'm totally on board with the trend.

"I have one!" Camden crows, unzipping his backpack then nailing me in the head with his bright green Hulk sweatshirt. I hold up the tiny sweatshirt. Yeah, not going to happen. I'll bust a seam on this thing.

"Thanks, buddy," I tell Camden.

"That's not going to fit you," Lily supplies.

Everybody clap, because that's another sarcastic response I just swallowed back.

"Okay." I toss the sweatshirt on the passenger seat and set my shoulders. I just need to get this done. It's not that big of a deal. I bet Maria von Trapp often brought the children to breakfast with the captain while wearing her bathrobe.

Maybe I should pick a different nanny to emulate.

Fran Drescher, I choose you.

Or maybe I could drive home and change, then bring the kids back. They're already late, who cares if they're later?

"Ahhh, this is so boring!" Lily cries. Next thing I know she's out of the car and zooming across the parking lot, Camden bursting out of the car after her. For a second I think

I've won. They're going inside alone! My bathrobe and I will remain safely unseen! Then Lily runs straight into a stop sign.

I'm out of my seat and across the parking lot in a flash, scooping her up off the ground and into my lap. "Oh my gosh, Lil, are you okay?"

Lily stares at me with dazed eyes for a second, then bursts into tears. Behind me Camden is exclaiming about how cool that was, and how he saw some guy do that same thing on YouTube.

It takes a good five minutes for me to get everyone calmed down. We finally stand up, and make our way around the corner to the front of the school.

You've come this far, I tell myself as I fight the urge to run back into the car and hide. Hold your head up high and rock that bathrobe! Be Regina George and make bathrobes the new t-shirt with holes in the boobs.

At least we're not the only late ones. Up ahead of us I spot a little girl walking hand in hand with her dad.

Of course, unlike me her dad is dressed in clothes appropriate for the daytime.

And he fills out those faded blue jeans quite nicely. Not that I notice. He's someone's dad after all.

The man turns to look down at his daughter, and ice floods all 60,000 miles of my blood vessels.

No.

No.

Nooooo!

I try to blink away the image in front of me, but nobody disappears.

This is not possible. How could he be here? In Mississippi! I just saw him in Mistle Berry three weeks ago. Didn't I? I mean, it was dark and I didn't actually speak to him, but it was definitely his truck I saw in the parking lot of my parents' restaurant Christmas night.

Wasn't it?

Oh my *gosh!*

I left Michigan. Left my job. My family. My friends. All because I thought he'd come back.

Oh Lord in heaven, tell me I did not move 800 miles away from home for no reason.

"Kristen." Lily tugs my hand, and I realize I've stopped walking. This realization does not, however, prompt me to resume walking. At least not forwards.

Yup, that's right folks, I'm walking backwards in my bright red bathrobe with my hair going every which way when Harvey, the guy who ripped out my heart eight years ago, turns around and spots me.

Kill me now.

And make it quick.

As I'm fantasizing about walking straight into the light, something even more awful happens. Harvey turns back around and walks into the building.

Wait. What? Okay, now I'm mad. I stop my bathrobe moonwalk and surge forward, the kids hustling along in my wake.

He thinks he can just break my heart, then reappear in my hometown on Christmas Day so that I have to take drastic measures and move, then show up again in the place I moved to and then... *just ignore me!* I don't think so, Harv-

The door swings open again, cutting off my inner tirade, and I take a quick step back to avoid getting hit as he steps back outside and peers down at me, recognition dawning.

"Oh wow, Kristen, it is you," he exclaims while I stare stupidly up at him.

There he is. Two feet away from me. Harvey. For a second I forget I hate him as I take in his familiar handsome face. My eyes peruse over his thick mocha-colored hair, his hazel eyes, the golden caramel color of his skin. The man is

like a walking box of chocolates, and I am here for all the flavors.

Wait, no. I shake my head. Focus on your anger, Kristen.

“Allie!” This from Lily who skips through the door to link arms with Harvey’s daughter. Presumably.

Two thoughts collide in my mind as I stare at them. Lily is eight-years-old. This Allie girl is clearly her friend, so is she eight too? And if she’s eight then-

“You cheated on me?” I gasp.

“What? No!” Harvey’s head jerks back like I’ve hit him.

“Oh really?” I snap, moving in closer so the kids won’t hear me. “So, what, you’re going to tell me she’s mine? Pretty sure I’d remember something as traumatic as giving birth!” I wince as I say it, forcing myself to stuff down unwelcome emotions attempting to surface from where I’ve buried them.

“Not if you were unconscious for six months after a fall during a mountain hike, and I had to take the baby while you rehabilitated yourself,” Harvey shoots back, and dang it if I don’t gasp in momentary horror before realizing that he’s obviously messing with me. We never even had sex. Not to mention, the idea of me going on a hike in the mountains is so laughable it could be the subject of a stand-up comedy routine.

“Not. Funny,” I scowl through gritted teeth. Harvey just smirks. His eyes dip down over my body, reminding me that I am still wearing a bathrobe. Before he can say anything about it though, the door to the main office swings open.

“Latecomers,” an older woman with coiffed hair sniffs disapprovingly. “Don’t dilly-dally then. Sign the students in so they can get to class.” She ushers the kids forward then pauses when she spots Harvey. I watch in disbelief as she turns her angry frown upside down. “Oh, Harvey, dear, I didn’t see it was you.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Logan.” Harvey nods to her with a smile. “Looking lovely as usual.”

Suck up.

“Oh,” she waves her hand at him, fluffing her hair, “you’re just flattering an old lady.”

“Flattery is not my style, Mrs. Logan. You know that.”

She beams. I gag. Mrs. Logan’s gaze slides my way, and her smile disappears.

“I don’t know you,” she informs me.

“I’m Kristin Heart,” I supply, forcing a smile. “Their new nanny.” I gesture to Camden and Lily.

“Well alright then.” She addresses the kids, “You two, head to class, please. Your nanny will sign you in.” The kids obey, and Mrs. Logan shoos me over to a tiny table with a sign-in page clipped to it.

“Harvey, the copier is jammed again,” I hear her say as I’m scribbling down the kids’ names. “Could you come take a look?”

He’s heading into the office to do so as I duck out of the school a minute later. I make a mad dash to my car so that I can hyperventilate in private.

Harvey is here in Mississippi. He’s not in Mistle Berry like I thought. This is so bad. How did this happen?

And what the actual heck is he doing here? Besides parenting and fixing copy machines, I mean.

My breathing is coming out in short shallow bursts.

I have royally screwed my life up.

I need a new plan.

Something to get rid of Harvey once and for all.

But first, I look disdainfully down at my robe, I’m going to go home and make myself look fabulous before school pick-up.

After all, I can’t have Harvey’s parting image of me be of me in my tatty old red bathrobe.

Not because I care what he thinks of me. I don’t.

But if I did care it would only be because I-

Oh forget it.

I totally care what Harvey thinks of me.

And no one could be more disappointed about that than
me.

Chapter 3

HARVEY

Their new nanny. Kristen's words play on repeat in my mind as I pull a wad of crumpled paper out of the school's copy machine.

She's the Wilder kids' new nanny? I knew her sister had quit the position, but hadn't heard who they'd found to replace her. It didn't even occur to me that Kristen might have taken the post. Mostly because Kristen is basically the last person I could ever picture being a nanny. Actually that's not true. If I pictured it, it would look exactly like the scene I saw today. Meaning a total disaster.

Admittedly a cute disaster though. I smile to myself. Yeah, Kristen Heart really manages to put the hot in hot mess.

Who knew I was a bathrobe guy?

"Oh thank you, Harvey," Mrs. Logan trills, her pungent floral scent overpowering the air inside the office. Mrs. Logan is equal parts grumpy and sweet, generally depending on two things-whether or not she likes you and whether or not her arthritis is flaring up. Coming off of three days of rain, she's not in the best mood.

Luckily she likes me.

I think this is mostly because I give her something to talk about. *Such a tragic story he has*, I've heard her whisper to more than one Stonefield parent.

Don't get me wrong, I miss Abby and Jeremiah on a regular basis, but lately I've been feeling like the most tragic part of my life is the empty four feet of space on the other side of my king bed.

I'm lonely.

And yet with an eight-year-old around, I simultaneously feel as if I'm never alone.

Parenting is weird that way.

“Happy to help, Mrs. Logan,” I tell the secretary as I hit start on the machine to run a test copy.

“You’ll be at the PTA meeting tonight, won’t you?” she asks as I toss the successfully copied sheet of paper into the recycling bin.

“I will,” I confirm with a nod.

“Oh good, because they need all the help they can get for the upcoming play.”

I repress a sigh. I’m one-hundred percent aware that they *need all the help they can get*. Turns out when you possess basic carpentry skills and people have knowledge of those skills, you become like a solitary antelope in the Sahara desert—easy prey. I’ve been asked by Mrs. Logan, the school principal, our PTA president, and half a dozen other parents if I would be willing to help them build the set. They even used Allie to get to me. She came home from school last week and asked if I would build her a playhouse. When I pointed out that she already had a playhouse in the backyard, she said, “No, I mean one at school. My teacher said we need one. Will you build it? Please?”

And that was that. My future determined by an eight-year-old’s use of one magic word—please.

It’s the same reason we have a pet hamster.

“I can’t be there myself,” Mrs. Logan carries on. “My arthritis is so bad in the evenings, it just isn’t possible. That’s why it’s so good that we have strong, able-bodied individuals like yourself to help.” She gives me a thwack on my bicep, then scurries off to her desk to resume the game of Solitaire pulled up on her computer screen.

I evacuate the school building before any other well-meaning staff members can rope me into anything, then jog to my truck. Thanks to my copier pitstop I’m running late to the garage, and if Virgil or Clay arrive before I do, they’ll probably end up breaking the new coffee machine I got last week. Virgil has been going on with me about how it has too

many buttons and that it's a darn shame he needs his reading glasses just to start his morning coffee. And yesterday I walked into the lobby to find Clay dumping coffee grounds into the water dispenser.

Keurigs have been around for years, but apparently they're too new-fangled for my employees.

Shoulda kept the ancient Black and Decker coffee maker and just dealt with the burnt acidic taste of the coffee it produced. I tell ya, you try to do a nice thing.

As I hit the main road my mind drifts again to Kristen. Kristen. I can't believe she's here in Southaven after all of these years. And only three weeks after my stupid, impromptu, prompted by a moment of weakness detour to Mistle Berry.

The two can't be related though. I made sure no one saw me that night. Seriously, I sat like a creeper with my lights off in the vacant parking lot of her parents' restaurant letting memories of the two of us drift through my brain like leaves falling off a tree in autumn. Beautiful to observe, but a pain in the butt to bag up and get rid of.

For eight years I'd stuffed down the memories of our relationship, but as I sat in my truck, Allie asleep in the backseat, my guard had slipped. I haven't been able to put it back up since.

And now she's here in Southaven, turning my memories into present day reality.

Her uncle is going to kill me when he finds out about the history between the two of us. Possibly not my best life choice to hide that from him these past eight years. When Allie and I arrived in Southaven on the verge of being penniless, I'd been so desperate for a job that paid more than fast food wages, that I'd headed straight for Big Rob's Automotive Repair hoping my connection with Rob's family would incline him to take a chance on me.

Only when I'd arrived I'd been greeted not by Rob, but by his wife, Gloria, who, despite never having any kids of her own, is the most baby crazy person I've ever met.

“Hello, I’m Harvey Barrett,” I told her as I offered her my hand, waiting for her to show some glimmer of recognition at the sound of my name. But she didn’t. She simply smiled and waited for me to continue. That’s when I realized Kristen must not have told her aunt and uncle about me.

Two weeks before I took off, Kristen and her family came down to Mississippi to visit Rob and Gloria. We’d been together for almost four months at that point, and I’d been crazy about her. Crazy enough that we were talking about getting married someday. And she hadn’t even mentioned me to her favorite aunt and uncle. Yeah, it had stung. It had stung bad.

“I’m a self-taught mechanic, and I’m looking for work,” I finally managed to string a second sentence together. I’d been about to tell Gloria how I’d spent the summer working for her in-laws, when she’d abruptly stood up from her desk and hurried around to squeal at Allie.

As soon as she found out the circumstances behind my guardianship of Allie, Gloria offered me a job. Then she informed me that she’d be watching Allie for me while I was at work.

So I decided to keep my mouth shut about Kristen. Things had ended badly between us, so if Gloria was willing to give me a job without me using my connection to her family, maybe it was for the best.

I admit that when I originally chose to start a new life here in Southaven, the self-destructive part of me hoped to run into Kristen. I figured when she came to visit her family we could, I don’t know...talk. Or something. Once I decided to hide the truth from her aunt and uncle though, that plan got nixed. Instead I’ve made myself scarce whenever Rob mentioned his sister and her family coming to visit. Heck, Allie and I barely saw them these last few months, since Kristen’s sister was living with them up until a few weeks ago. Against all odds, I’ve somehow managed to keep both Kristen and her relatives from discovering the truth.

Which really was better for everyone. Because the truth is, Kristen would not have been happy to find me working for her uncle. And she definitely would not have wanted to talk to me. Why would she? I'm just the jerk who promised her forever, then took off a week later.

Besides, I have a kid. Kristen is not a kid person. Or at least she claims not to be. The fact that she's now a nanny does make me wonder if that may have changed.

Let's pretend that's not hope I just felt rising inside me. Her being a nanny now doesn't change our rocky past, and if I start daydreaming about a life with Kristen, one where she happily steps into the mother role in Allie's life and the wife role in mine, filling that empty space next to me every night....

Screech. I slam on my brakes as I almost rear-end a car sitting at a red light.

What is wrong with me? It's been eight years, man-pull yourself together!

I am not this guy. The one completely wrapped up in some woman, losing my head, my concentration, my desire to be anywhere but with her.

At least I'm not that guy anymore.

For four months eight years ago, I was.

Somehow I make it to work without running into anything. I even beat Virgil and Clay to the coffee machine, setting it to brew enough for all of us before making my way to my computer to check our schedule for the day.

I need to let Kristen go, I decide with an overly aggressive push of the computer's power button. I can't start obsessing over her just because I saw her for five minutes this morning. I ended things for a reason. Two reasons actually. And although one of those reasons doesn't matter anymore, the other one very much still applies.

The day before I left, Kristen told me she doesn't want to have kids.

And I have a kid.

So my fantasy, the one where she's the wife and mother Allie and I have been waiting for, is only that-an improbable, basically impossible lapse in judgment.

Rationally I know this.

Which is why I really can't explain the way my heart leaps in my chest when I read the customer name listed by an oil change appointment later today.

Kristin Heart.

Gina, the woman who replaced Gloria as our receptionist after Rob sold me the place, put an asterisk by her name. I read the print with a growing sense of panic.

**Rob's niece. He called to say he'll be coming in to do the oil change for free.*

Rob and Kirsten are both going to be here today?

The jig is about to be up, because how the dang heck am I supposed to make myself scarce at my own repair shop?

Chapter 4

KRISTEN

After a shower and the successful relocation of my robe back to its designated wall hook, I'm feeling much more ready for the day. Amazing what a pair of good blue jeans can do for your mood. That and a cup of coffee.

I bustle around the Wilders' house, checking items off the to-do list Clarice left me. Turns out that since the kids are at school all day I'm more of a nanny/housekeeper.

And also the new neighborhood vet.

That's right. On top of unloading the dishwasher, starting a load of the kids' laundry, and vacuuming the living room, I also have Chelsea Waterstein from across the street bringing her poodle over at 10:30 because he's been peeing all over her house, and Vera Oakman from three houses down bringing her cat over because he's been lethargic lately.

Poor Vera. This is the third time she's brought Stanley to see me, and every time I tell her the same thing. He's an old cat whose days are numbered. But she refuses to accept this. She seems to be under the impression that there's some medicine or magical supplement I can give Stanley to turn him back into the active kitty he once was.

Dear Vera, if I had a supplement that could do that, I definitely wouldn't be nannying in Southaven, Mississippi. I'd be living on a yacht off the coast of Bora Bora, with curtains made out of money just because I didn't know what to do with all my cash.

I'll have to keep my appointment with her quick today though, since I've got to head over to the car shop for an oil change. My Uncle Rob retired last year and sold his shop to one of his employees, but he still pops into the shop from time to time to help out. He agreed to meet me there at noon today for a freebie.

A freebie I'll gladly take given the pay cut I took moving here.

Yup. Good thing I'm making three quarters to the dollar I once made all to get away from Harvey. Who lives here.

My mom always told me my impetuosity was going to bite me in the butt one day.

Well how's this for an impetuous new plan? Get Clarice to fire me then head back to Mistle Berry with my tail between my legs and beg my former boss Dr. Valence to hire me back even though I took off on him with no warning.

Or I can probably find someone else to hire me, right? Originally, when I made this move, I'd planned on the nannying thing being a brief sabbatical. My sister Felicity needed someone to take over for her so she could accept a teaching position she was offered back in Michigan (and more importantly, live in the same state as her new boyfriend). I basically forced her to let me take the job because I thought Harvey had moved back to Michigan, and I didn't want to be anywhere near that heartbreaker. Once I'd finished out the remainder of her contract, I figured I could easily go back to being a vet, only I'd be looking for a job here in Mississippi. Of course now that by some sad twist of fate it turns out that Harvey lives here, I can basically look for a vet job anywhere but here. The further from Southaven the better.

"You don't have to go back home, butchya can't stay here," I sing as I press the start button on the laundry machine. I've discovered that singing while I clean makes the work feel more glamorous. Like if you take away the Shout stain remover and the scent of detergent, I basically have the same job as Taylor Swift.

"Kristen, you home?" Chelsea's voice drifts through the house, and I hurry out of the laundry room and toward the front door. Chelsea is standing in the foyer with her poodle, Wilson, and her toddler, Holly.

"Hey, Chelsea." I greet her with a smile, immediately gravitating to Wilson for some ear scratches.

“Hey, girl.” Chelsea drops Wilson’s leash and bends to help Holly take her shoes off. “Hope it’s okay we let ourselves in. You know how Wilson gets about that statue Clarice has out front. He was going bananas.”

“Of course it’s fine,” I assure her like this is my house and not just the place I’m living for the next month while Ferris Wilder is on a business trip in China. “Hi, Holly, how are you?” I add dutifully, because I’ve observed over the years that parents like it when you talk to their kids. I once got a five-star review on Yelp because the woman said I was so good with both her dog AND her son. Literally the only thing I’d said to the kid was, “What’s your dog’s name, buddy?”

He’d been the one who’d gone on for a good ten minutes about how his dog Izzy could roll over *and* sit. Neither of which he was able to demonstrate.

“I have a lollipop,” Holly says instead of answering my question. Or maybe that does answer my question. Presumably if she has a lollipop she’s doing pretty well. If someone asked me how I was doing right now, I’d probably just grunt out the word *okay*, like I do ninety-seven percent of the time, then we’d both move on with our day. What if I tried answering that question with verbs and nouns instead of one lousy, nondescript adjective?

“Yes, you do have a lollipop,” Chelsea says to her daughter. “Please make sure you give the stick to mommy when you finish.” She turns to me. “How are you this morning, Kristen?”

I don’t know Chelsea very well. We’re friendly acquaintances who bonded over her dog and the fact that Lily likes to play mom with Holly. Should I take a chance and give Holly’s method a try anyway? Not like I have anyone else to talk about this with right now. These days whenever I call my sister Felicity, I can hear her boyfriend Alex in the background waiting for me to hang up so he can get back to kissing her. That’s right I can hear the waiting. Don’t question my auditory system.

“Kristen? Did you hear me? How are you?” Chelsea repeats with a concerned frown.

“I ran into my ex today while wearing a bathrobe,” I blurt out. Oh geez. Why did I say that? Chelsea is a happily married mom who lives in a two-million dollar house and is always fashionably on point. She’s soft-spoken and calm and completely put-together. She doesn’t want to hear about the sorry state of my love-

“You’re kidding me?” she gasps, grabbing my hands. “Tell me everything! What does your bathrobe look like? Is it an old lady one or like, cute? Oh gosh, I hope you weren’t naked underneath. Can you imagine?” She gives me a pointed look. “Although maybe he wouldn’t be your ex anymore if you had been.” She pauses. “Wait, were you?”

I gape at her in shock of my own. I’ve never heard her talk so much.

“No,” I finally reply. “But I didn’t have a bra on.” I shrug. “He still didn’t want to get back together though.”

Another moment of silence.

Then we both burst into laughter.

We laugh for so long, Holly finishes her lollipop, and Wilson starts pawing at the door to go outside.

“Okay, okay, I better take him out,” Chelsea sighs. “I don’t want him peeing all over Clarice’s entry mat.”

“I should take him,” I say, grabbing the urine test kit I set out earlier. “I need to get his sample.”

“Bathrobes and urine test kits,” Chelsea laughs. “I think those are the makings of an epic friendship.”

I pause with my foot halfway in my shoe. Friendship. I shouldn’t be making friends here in Southaven. Not when I’ve just decided I need to go back home ASAP.

And yet, having a friend here sounds really nice.

Chelsea doesn’t notice my reaction, too busy swiping at Holly’s sticky face with a wet wipe. For the briefest of seconds

I indulge the wicked monster inside me, imagining myself tickling a little two-year-old's chin as I scrub away lollipop residue. Quick as I blink I stuff that away. Sticky children. So not my thing.

I hurry to take Wilson outside so he can take care of his business, and I can escape the rush of uncomfortable emotions assaulting me.

Wilson does in fact have a UTI, so I call in an order for an antibiotic for him. As soon as I get off the phone Chelsea hands me a cup of coffee.

"I made this while you were outside with Wilson," she tells me. "Now spill the deets. Where on earth did you see your ex while wearing that fluffy, red monstrosity you call a robe?"

"I saw him at school drop-" I start, then stop. "Wait, how do you know what my bathrobe looks like?"

Chelsea shrugs. "I went into your bedroom," she says without embarrassment. "Okay, so you were at school drop-off? That must mean your ex is a dad?" She cocks her head. "Or wait, is he a manny?"

"A manny?" I decide to let the bedroom thing slide. Not like I've never snooped around someone's house before.

"You know," she brackets the words with her hands, "male nanny-manny."

"Oh." My hand freezes with my mug halfway to my lips. Is that what Harvey is? A manny? I think back over our interaction earlier. Harvey hadn't actually said that Allie was his daughter. I'd just assumed. What if he is her nanny? Err, *manny?*

"You don't know?" Chelsea correctly interprets my silence. "Interesting." She sips her own coffee, her eyes darting over to check on Holly before snapping back to me. "Next question-is he single?"

Coffee sloshes out of my mug as my whole body flinches. Why had it not occurred to me before this moment that Harvey

might not be single? Hello, he has a kid! Producing a human is generally a two person job.

Chelsea raises an eyebrow. “Well that answers my most important question. Do you still like him?” She grins wickedly, as she supplies her own answer. “Yes, you do.”

I avoid her gaze, hopping up to grab some paper towel to clean my spill.

“So what happened with you two, anyway?” Chelsea asks, tugging the paper towel out of my hand and wiping the counter for me.

“Oh you know, same old story.” I fight to keep my voice light. “Girl meets guy. Girl falls in love with guy. Guy promises girl forever. Guy leaves girl with a broken heart.”

“Jerk,” Chelsea says loyally.

“Yeah,” I reply hollowly.

“I have an idea,” Chelsea announces. “I’m going to find you a replacement for this ex of yours. What did you say his name was again?”

“I don’t think I did say. It’s Harvey, Harvey Barrett.”

“Harvey Barrett, hmm.” She taps her chin. “Name sounds familiar, but I can’t think why.” She shakes her head, refocusing. “Not important. My husband has a lot of single friends.” She frowns. “Well, not a lot, but at least two. And one of the single guys is really cute. They’re both part of Owen’s monthly poker group, which actually meets at our house tonight. Oh plus, I think Owen invited some new guy from the basketball league he just joined to come tonight. Maybe he’s single. Then you’ll have three guys to choose from!” She claps her hands. “It’s perfect! You can come and just take your pick!”

“Is that how dating works in your world?” I say with a snort. “You just arrive on scene and pick a guy to take you out?”

“Okay,” she relents, “I may be simplifying the process, but honestly, it’s poker night, Kristen. You’ll be the only

female in attendance. Not counting Holly and me, of course. But Holly will be sleeping, and I'm off the market. Even if you weren't gorgeous your odds of being hit on would be pretty good. Wear something other than a bathrobe and you'll have yourself a date for this weekend. It's the perfect way to distract yourself from Harvey."

"I don't know, Chelsea," I say reluctantly. "I'm not sure I'm looking to date right now. I'm not sure how long I'll even be here in Mississippi."

"Okay first off, nobody said anything about jumping into a long-term relationship! This would just be some fun. And secondly, what do you mean you don't know how long you'll be staying in Mississippi?" she pouts. "We've only just become friends! You can't leave now."

I don't know what to say to this, so I distract her by giving in to her request. "Fine, I'll come to poker night, but it will have to be after the kids are in bed. Clarice has been staying late at the office all this week."

"Oh, yay!" Chelsea claps her hands again. Holly runs over to join us, clapping too.

The doorbell rings, and I hop up. "Shoot, that's probably Vera with her cat."

"Oh, okay." Chelsea stands too, depositing her mug in the sink before turning to scoop up Holly. "We'll be on our way then, but I'll see you tonight!" She squeals this last bit, and I can't help but smile. I'll let her do her happy dance now since she'll be disappointed later when I turn down any date requests I might get. It's nothing against these poker guys. I just don't date much. It's not worth it to put in the time with a guy only to have to drop the hammer later. I decided long ago to wait until I'm forty to find my life partner. At that age he won't expect me to produce an heir for him, so we can both go into the relationship knowing where things stand.

I walk Chelsea and her brood to the door, then proceed to sit with Vera for a good thirty minutes listening while she laments the geriatric state of her cat. I don't have the heart to

kick her out when she's so clearly lonely, so I shoot my uncle a text letting him know I'm running late.

When Vera finally leaves I hurry out to my car, typing out another text to let him know I'm on my way as I go.

His answering text comes in as I'm starting my engine.

Sorry, honey. Something came up, and I can't make it today. I'll let the new owner know you're coming though, and he'll fix you right up.

Major bummer. I haven't seen my uncle since I moved in with the Wilders at the beginning of this week, so I was looking forward to playing catch up.

Oh well.

Maybe the new owner is cute, and I can invite him to come to poker night with me.

Not that I want to date him or anything, but it would get Chelsea off my back about replacing Harvey.

I'm fine on my own. I don't need to replace Harvey.

I just need to get away from him.

Chapter 5

HARVEY

“Harvey,” Gina hollers my name from reception, and I bite back a sigh. She’s already paged me twice, and I’ve ignored it. It’s past noon, which is when Kristen was scheduled to arrive, and I’ve been successfully hiding out in my office since ten to twelve. Unfortunately, Gina seems bent on forcing me to leave my cave.

“What’s up, Gina?” I whisper-shout, peeking only my head around the corner.

“Rob called for you,” she replies, giving me a weird look. “What are you doing, Harvey? Why are you talking like that?”

“Uh, I strained my voice,” I lie. “Rob called for me? I thought he was coming in.”

“That’s why he called,” Gina explains. “He wanted you to know he can’t make it in after all.” Behind the door I pump my fist in relief-I’m saved! “He wants you to do his niece’s oil change.” My fist falls.

“Sorry, what?”

“He wants you to do his niece’s oil change!” Gina repeats more loudly.

“Uh, no can do. I’m busy,” I say quickly. “I’ll have Virgil or Clay do it.”

“He asked for you,” Gina replies coolly. “Anyway, both of them just took off for lunch. Said they were going to Fenz’s.”

Fenz’s? Fenz’s is where Rob always used to take us for lunch when he was feeling generous or the shop was slow. We don’t go there without Rob. But why would Rob take them to lunch when he’s supposed to be doing an oil change for Kristen?

“They went to Fenz’s?” I repeat to Gina.

“That’s what they said.” She shrugs. “Weird since that’s where Rob likes to go.” Gina grins. “You know boss, I think maybe he’s trying to set you up with his niece.”

Set me up? With Kristen? I’d laugh at the irony of this if things weren’t shaping into such a disaster.

“I’m sure it’s not like that,” I tell Gina. “Besides, is his niece even coming? It’s quarter past twelve. She’s late.”

In retrospect *I* should’ve gone out to lunch. I could’ve avoided this whole thing. But no, I couldn’t have done that. As much as I was fooling myself into thinking I could avoid Rob today, I knew it was only a matter of time before he’d come hunting for me. Whenever Rob comes into the shop these days we catch up. He’d be hurt if I took off when he was scheduled to be here.

“Don’t get your boxers in a twist,” Gina chides. “I bet that’s her now.” She points out to the parking lot where sure enough a silver Honda Civic is pulling into the lot. Even from this distance I recognize the honey blonde flash of hair I see through the window.

“Frick,” I mutter under my breath, earning myself a reproving glare from Gina. We both watch as Kristen emerges from her car. I don’t know why Gina is staring, but I can’t seem to tear my gaze away. One of her long denim clad legs appears first, and my traitorous eyes travel up it, my mouth drying as the rest of her emerges. Dang, she’s pretty.

Her hair has gotten longer, I note, as she tosses it over one shoulder and loops her purse over the other. I wonder if it’s as soft as it used to be.

“Uh, Harvey,” Gina’s amused voice breaks into my thoughts, “maybe you should close your mouth before she comes inside.”

Shoot. My jaw snaps shut as my cheeks flame red. I whirl away from the window.

“Just check the woman in, Gina,” I bite out. “I’ll be in the garage waiting.”

Finally, a solid plan. I'll just hide in the garage, and Kristen will never have to know I'm the one who did her oil change. Perfect.

So why aren't my feet moving? I'm Winnie the Pooh and Kristen is a pot of honey. I saw her, I wanted her, and now I'm stuck in Rabbit's doorway with my butt on the line.

"Uh-huh, look at you going to the garage," Gina comments dryly. Then she cackles, clearly enjoying the drama unfolding before her.

Before I can reply the bell over the door rings, signaling Kristen's entry into the shop. She blinks a few times adjusting to the shift in brightness, then her eyes find me, and she backpedals out of the shop so fast she loses a shoe, Cinderella style.

(Sidenote: first I'm making Winnie the Pooh references, now Cinderella. I don't care if Allie is only eight, this weekend we're watching a Marvel movie.)

She doesn't seem to notice her missing shoe though, as she stands outside the front door, looking up at the shop's name painted on the building in big blue letters. I didn't change the name when I bought the place from her uncle. It's still Big Rob's Car Repair. Kristen stands there reading the name for so long, that I know instinctively when she comes back in she'll be ready to fling some mud my way.

Sure enough, she comes stomping back in, somehow managing to grab her shoe and slip it back on all while staring daggers at me the whole time.

"So help me, Harvey, this better be some kind of messed up, totally missed the mark prank, because if you open that smug mouth of yours and tell me you work for my uncle, I will find wherever you parked your precious truck, and I will key both doors." She raises her left hand, revealing a threatening set of car keys. And a bare ring finger.

Not that I care.

"I don't," I say with a shrug.

"What?" she snaps.

“I don’t work for your uncle,” I elaborate. “I used to, but now I own the place.”

Her eyes get so big I’m worried she’ll pop a blood vessel. She whirls on Gina.

“He’s lying, right? Or I’m dreaming.” Her eyes light with relief. “Yes, obviously I’m dreaming,” she mutters to herself. “I must’ve fallen asleep after Vera left.”

“Uh,” Gina looks even more amused now, “he’s not lying.”

There go those green eyes of hers again. Wide as saucers. “No!” she moans, looking at me once more. “Why would you buy my uncle’s place?”

“Do you often dream about me?” I ask with a smirk instead of answering her question. My words are gasoline on the fire she’s been building against me. She storms across the office, poking me hard in the chest as she shouts at me.

“Give it back!” she cries. “Give it back to him right now, you big lug!”

It’s clear she thinks she’s intimidating me, and if I found cute intimidating she absolutely would be, but as it is I’m just busy trying not to pull her against me so we can cuddle.

Yeah, I know I’m a guy. I still like cuddling. Who do you think is to blame for that? That’s right, this sexy, spitfire jabbing at me, that’s who.

“I’m not going to give your uncle his shop back,” I tell her as I slide my hand around her wrist, forcing her to stop pecking my chest. Not that I minded too much, but it’s hard to focus with her touching me over and over again. Although holding her soft, slender wrist isn’t helping my focus much either. Plus, she smells so good. Like wildflowers and sunshine. I drop her hand and take two steps back, evacuating Kristen’s sphere of influence. “So do you want me to do this oil change or not?” I add gruffly.

Kristen narrows her eyes at me. “Not,” she retorts, whipping out her cell phone and taking her angry fingers out on it instead of me. “I’m going to call my uncle right now, and

get this whole thing straightened out.” She scowls at her phone. “That is too my password!” she snaps at it. I had forgotten how she talks to inanimate objects all the time.

“Why don’t we not call your uncle.” I reach up and snag the phone from her hand. Predictably she does not like this.

“Hey! Give that back!” She jumps to try and get it from me, but I’ve got almost a foot on her, making her efforts futile.

“I’ll trade you the phone for your car keys,” I offer. “Then while I’m changing your oil, you can call your uncle and rant at him all you want.”

I know that five minutes ago I didn’t want to go anywhere near this woman’s oil pan, but now I figure that if I’m busy tinkering under her car, I won’t have to witness Rob’s good opinion of me getting flushed down the toilet.

“Oh you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Kristen stops jumping to glare at me once more. “What, you think changing my oil will make up for what you did eight years ago? A lifetime of free oil changes wouldn’t be enough, Harvey.” She flushes. “Not that I’m not over you,” she adds hurriedly. “I am.” Kristen tosses her hair. “*So* completely over you. I was just exaggerating to emphasize your past jerkiness.” She puts one hand on her hip. “Why are you smiling? Stop it!”

“I’m not smiling.” I quickly rearrange my features into a frown. “Glad to hear you’re over me.” *Three times*, I think gleefully. If she’d said it only once, or even twice, maybe I’d believe her, but saying it a third time was taking it too far. Hyperbole to hide the truth. She’s not over me. At least not completely.

And I can work with that.

Wait. No. I’m not working with anything. I can’t be with someone who won’t want Allie too. Besides, Kristen is right. Not even a lifetime of free oil changes could make up for the way I bailed on her.

This thought sobers me right up.

“I promise that me changing your oil is not an attempt to get back in your good graces,” I tell Kristen. “Your uncle

asked me to do it, so I'm going to do it."

Kristen raises an eyebrow. "Oh gosh, well excuse me for getting in your way then." She tosses her keys my way, and I catch them on reflex. "I didn't realize that you'd become someone who keeps their promises."

Ouch. Good dig. I feel my face flush with the truth of her slight. I broke a lot of promises eight years ago. A lot.

My arm falls back to my side, and I place the phone in her waiting hand. I hold it there for a few seconds, letting my eyes search hers as a thousand variations of the apology I owe her shuffle through my mind. But when I open my mouth all that comes out is, "Back in a jiff."

Then I hustle out the door to her car, and drive away; the moment eerily reminiscent of the way I left her eight years ago.

Chapter 6

KRISTEN

“I suppose the jig is up,” my uncle’s familiar baritone voice is laced with satisfaction as he answers my call. I’m eight-years-old again, sitting criss-cross applesauce on the rug and watching in amazement as Uncle Rob pulls foot after foot of colorful silk from a top hat. I clap my hands thinking he’s magic. But then Felicity hops up, yanks the hat from his hand, and shakes it hard. A false bottom falls out. It wasn’t magic. Just an illusion. I suppose the jig is up, he’d said with a wink back then, and I’d laughed. Disappointed but excited to know the secret.

This time I don’t laugh.

“What do you mean the jig is up?” I say in semi-hysteria. I start pacing the length of sidewalk in front of the shop, unable to stay still. “You mean the jig where you sold your shop to my ex-boyfriend? Is that the jig you’re referring to being up?” This is absolutely the most I’ve ever said the word jig. I’m starting to sound like Will Smith circa 1997. Na-na, na, na, na-na-na.

“Sweetie, please don’t be mad.” The satisfaction is gone from his voice. Now he sounds worried. “It’s not as if we meant for any of this to happen, but when your young man showed up eight years ago with a baby in tow, your aunt couldn’t bear to turn them away.”

I choose to ignore the part of that sentence where he called Harvey my young man, mostly because I’m busy processing everything else he just said. “A baby? You mean Allie?”

“Yes, of course Allie. Have you met her? She’s the sweetest thing. Reminds me of you as a little girl.”

Ouch. Harvey has a baby with some other woman and the baby reminds my uncle of me? Talk about a knife to the heart.

“So Harvey isn’t Allie’s nanny?” I ask just to make sure I’m not jumping to conclusions.

“Her nanny?” Uncle Rob asks in bewilderment. “I don’t know what that is, but unless it’s slang for uncle, no he’s not her nanny.”

Wait, Harvey is Allie’s uncle? So that means Allie... is Allison, Abby and Jeremiah’s daughter. Full stop. I no longer want to be part of this conversation. Not when I’m starting to put pieces of the puzzle together, and the finished product will almost certainly threaten my bad opinion of Harvey. I want to go back to my blissful state of oblivion. Too bad my uncle isn’t on the same page. Instead he just keeps tossing me more puzzle pieces.

“I’ve wondered how much you knew over the years,” he goes on. “I figured not much given the lack of any communication between the two of you. Then again, you told us that summer that you’d met his pregnant sister Abby quite a few times, so I couldn’t completely rule out you knowing the situation.”

Cold seeps through me. The situation. If Harvey raised Allison then-

“What happened to Abby?” I breathe, my chest already aching in anticipation of his answer.

“She and her husband were killed in a car accident,” Uncle Rob says gruffly. “Their will appointed Harvey as Allie’s legal guardian. Harvey’s mom tried to take him to court over it, but thanks in large part to his steady income from working for me and your aunt’s free babysitting, he was able to retain full custody.”

“Aunt Gloria has been babysitting Harvey’s niece all of these years? And nobody told me?”

“Oh honey,” Uncle Rob sighs, “it was so complicated. At first we were just trying to protect you. We thought we’d help Harvey get back on his feet, and then they’d be on their way.” Another sigh. “But then we went ahead and fell in love with the knuckleheads. Harvey, he’s become like a son to me and

Allie like a granddaughter.” He says this gently, knowing how hard it will be for me to hear this.

At some point during this conversation I stopped pacing. My legs feel wobblier than a square of jello, so I sink to the ground, leaning my head against the brick building and staring up at the fathomless blue sky.

“Kristen, sweetie. You still there?” Uncle Rob asks. “I know this is a lot to process, and I know it was a bit underhanded forcing you two together today, but your aunt, well, she’s probably been hitting the romance novels a bit too hard lately.” I can picture him scratching his head the way he does when he’s uncomfortable. “Y’all never would’ve agreed to see each other if we hadn’t orchestrated something. And your aunt, well I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I think she’s fixin’ to get you two back together.”

“Ya think?” I reply dryly. “I’ll call her next,” I mutter, “because she better start unfixin’ to get us back together.”

“It’s been quite a hoot these last eight years watching Harvey try to avoid you,” Uncle Rob continues as if I haven’t spoken. “I reckon that man is afraid of you, Kristen.”

“Please.” I huff out a disbelieving breath, picturing Harvey dangling my phone over my head ten minutes ago. “He’s not afraid of me.”

“Maybe not physically afraid of you, but emotionally...” he trails off. When did my Uncle Rob turn into such a relationship expert? Usually we talk about one of three things: trucks, football, or what we had for breakfast. Uncle Rob and I really like our breakfast food.

We sit in silence for a minute. I’m not sure what else to say. My mind is still spinning, my feelings still hurt, and yet, some annoying part of me can’t help but understand why they helped Harvey. He had to face solo parenting a baby at 21-years-old. I can’t even imagine.

My free hand slides over my stomach, and a fresh wave of pain washes over me. More like I can’t let myself imagine.

“I’m glad you helped him, Uncle Rob,” I whisper, “but I have to go now.”

I hang up the phone, gulping for the air I suddenly can’t seem to get. My heartbeat pounds in my ears. My palms are sweaty. My brain screams anxious words. Distantly I hear my phone ringing. Probably my uncle, worried about me, but I can’t answer his call. Can’t even speak. I try to focus on my breathing, on the rise and fall of my chest, but my breaths are so erratic and shallow that it only makes things worse. My vision is rimmed in black. I need...I need...

“Kristen? Kristen, are you okay?” Out of nowhere Harvey appears, squatting down in front of me, his concern evident even in my uneven state. I stare at him through wide-panicked eyes, barely managing to shake my head no.

Positioning himself next to me, he pulls me against his chest, cocooning me in his arms. I should protest, but I’m not strong enough to pull away. I can hear his heartbeat against my ear, strong and steady, and, unlike my own, his chest moves rhythmically up and down, lulling me out of my panic and into a relaxed state.

“Kristen?” Harvey says again. “What can I do?”

I don’t answer, so he just keeps holding me. After a minute, he starts rubbing circles around my back. It’s exactly what I need in this moment, which has to be the reason my body lets out a sigh of contentment. As soon as the sigh is out, my relaxation turns to mortification, and I jerk away, color staining my cheeks.

“Th-thank you,” I stammer out, avoiding his gaze. “I appreciate the help, but you can go now.”

Harvey doesn’t move. “Does that happen often?” he asks gently.

“What? Me sighing when someone gives me a back rub?” I chirp hastily. “Absolutely. That was not you specific.”

I wince-why can’t I stop overcompensating around him? Obviously that’s not what he was asking me about, so why didn’t I just pretend like the sigh never happened? Nope, I just

had to make sure he knew it wasn't about him. Which means he now knows it absolutely *was* about him. Dang it!

"I was talking about the panic attack," Harvey says wryly. "Believe me, I remember all of the things that make you sigh."

A swirl of heat courses through me, but I quickly flush it out. He is wicked. A twenty-first century rake.

So not my type.

"Sorry," Harvey quickly apologizes. "That was inappropriate given the circumstance." He clears his throat. "Can I get you a bottled water? Or what do you usually do after a panic attack? You need some waffles? I could go get you some."

It's not lost on me that he's remembered my favorite food, but I refuse to be swayed by the offer of my favorite carbohydrates and a few moments of his arms around me.

"I don't usually have panic attacks," I inform him, tugging self-consciously at my shirt just to have something to do with my hands. "That's only the second one I've ever had."

"When was the first?" Harvey asks.

I don't answer, just look away from him again.

"Oh right," he says softly, correctly deducing that the only other panic attack I've had was on the day he left. Of course what he doesn't know is that my panic attack back then wasn't just about him leaving. Just like this one isn't just about him being back.

But the other reason is my secret. And it's one I don't make a habit of telling people. Not even my parents and sister know.

"Kristen-" Harvey starts, but I cut him off, hopping to my feet.

"Is my car finished, then?"

Harvey shuts his eyes for a second, but then he too gets to his feet.

"Uh, almost. I just have to check all of your fluid levels."

“Okay, so what’re you doing out here if you’re not finished?” The words come out sharper than I intended. He is giving me a free oil change, and he did just help me through a panic attack. What I should’ve said, is thank you.

But saying thank you wouldn’t help protect my heart.

“Your uncle called and told me to check on you,” Harvey explains, not rising to my confrontational tone. Just the opposite actually-he sounds sympathetic. Like he feels sorry for me. “Listen, I didn’t come to your aunt and uncle eight years ago to mess up your life. I-”

“Don’t need to know, Harvey,” I raise a hand, interrupting him again. “So don’t worry about it. I promise I’ll be gone soon, and we can both move on with our very separate lives.” I don’t wait for a response, just swivel on my converse heels and march back inside.

Chapter 7

KRISTEN

“I’m not going to fire you for getting the kids to school late, Kristen,” Clarice says with a laugh and a sip of wine. “Ferris doesn’t get back from China for another three weeks, and I can’t very well handle life and the kids on my own.” She slides the bottle of wine she just poured from back into the wine rack then moves away from the kitchen island, heading toward the living room. I trail behind her, attempting to piece together some other sort of argument in favor of her firing me.

“Okay, sure,” I begin, “but you should know that the truth is I don’t even like kids. I know when you agreed to let me be Felicity’s replacement I told you that I loved kids, but I was lying. I don’t. I find kids sticky and snotty and generally annoying.” I put a hand on my hip as she settles herself on the couch and stares up at me. “Do you really want someone like that watching your beloved children?”

“Kristen,” Clarice’s voice is tired, “stop being ridiculous. I know you don’t really hate kids. Camden and Lily adore you. Now what’s this really about? Because Ferris and I felt we were quite gracious with your sister when she decided not to come back, but we can’t just be running through nannies like this left and right. The kids need stability. So, unless you can give me some life or death reason why I should fire you, or allow you out of the six month contract you signed, then I suggest you wrap up this conversation so I can watch *Dancing with the Stars*.”

I tap my foot against the rug, debating what else to say. Somehow I doubt she’ll agree that my situation with Harvey is a life or death matter. I glance at my watch. It’s already 8:30, and I told Chelsea I’d be over at her house at 8. But of course, getting Camden and Lily settled for the night took longer than I’d hoped. Not to mention Clarice only got home ten minutes ago. Not like I could just leave the kids home alone. As if on

cue, my phone goes off with a text from Chelsea asking where I am.

I heave a sigh, deciding to drop the please fire me or let me quit thing for now. I'll have to take a different approach to the Harvey thing. Surely I can just avoid him. Today was the first time I've seen him, and I've been in Southaven for almost a month. And okay, I've only been taking the kids to school in the morning for four days, but if the kids and I can be on time in the morning, then we'll make it through the car loop drop-off, and I won't have to see him. Problem solved.

My phone goes off again, but I ignore it, assuming it's Chelsea demanding I get my butt over there.

"Okay, well, I can see that we're at an impasse." I tell Clarice, "So, I'll drop it for now." I sigh again, but she's hardly listening to me, her eyes glued to Gleb Savchenko. "I'm heading across the street to the Waterstein's house."

She waves me off with the hand not holding her wine.

"Oh, Kristen," she calls as I head out, "I forgot to tell you, there was a PTA meeting at the school tonight, and my friend signed me up to help with the school play. I'll forward you the email with the info on what needs to be done, but the first meeting is tomorrow right after drop-off. Should be quick though, so you'll still have plenty of time to grocery shop and such."

If I weren't already grown up, I'd be imagining a life where when I grow up I'm rich. Rich enough to pretend that I'm doing things when actually I'm just paying someone to do them for me.

"Okay," I swallow down my irritation, and paste on a smile. For all her diva ways, I really do like Clarice. Plus, I may have taken a pay cut to come here, but she and Ferris do pay me really well for this line of work. "I'll be there."

As I cross the street to Chelsea's house I silently bemoan this new challenge to my plan to get the kids to school on time. Now I'll have to get myself all fixed up and ready for the

day tomorrow too. No more bathrobes and pajamas at school drop-off for me. Not that I'd take that risk anyhow.

It'll be fine though. I can rearrange my morning schedule. "The moment I wake up," I sing to myself, "I'll go straight for my make-up. Then, I'll say a little prayer for me."

My phone buzzes yet again as I reach Chelsea's front door. I stop singing my rendition of "I Say a Little Prayer" and ring her doorbell. Then I pull my phone out of my pocket to text her to calm down-I'm here, but my fingers never make it to the keyboard. Instead all of the color drains from my face as I read her latest text, knowing instinctively who the 'he' is that she's referring to.

He's here!!! Oh gosh, he's really cute, Kristen. Why didn't you say how cute he was? You should definitely still come.

I unlock my phone to read her previous texts, and my heart plummets into my stomach.

Oh cheese on a cracker! I just realized why your ex's name sounded so familiar. He's the guy from Owen's basketball league! The one coming tonight!

My eyes move down to the text after that.

Maybe you shouldn't come tonight. Although he's not here yet, so maybe he won't show. Although you're not here either, and you promised to come! Look at the two of you both late to school this morning and now late to poker night. You're either a perfect match or should never be together.

Maybe I shouldn't come tonight? Phew! She gave me an out, and I am going to take it!

I start to back-up, but I already rang the bell when I first arrived, so before I've even reached the edge of their massive front porch, their door swings open.

"Kristen!" Chelsea squeaks. "You came! I didn't think you would!"

I hold my finger to my lips attempting to shush her. "No, I didn't come. I was never here. Bye!" I whisper-rap.

My protestations are futile, because a second later Harvey rounds the corner, the sight of him freezing me in place. It's my last chance to run, and yet I'm just standing here drinking in the sight of him in his dark wash jeans and gray Henley.

"Oh, Chelsea, hey," he says, not having spotted me yet, "I think I took a wrong turn. I'm looking for the bathroom..." Harvey trails off as he finally catches sight of me.

Shoot! I'm a deer in headlights, frozen in indecision and unable to see my way out.

"Kristen, what are you doing here?" Harvey asks.

"She's here to play poker, silly," Chelsea answers for me. "Wait," she adds innocently, "do you two know each other? Oh that's perfect! I'll have Owen scotch over, and you two can sit next to each other."

I glare at Chelsea, but she ignores me, still busy exclaiming about what a coincidence it is that we know each other.

"You know," I finally get a word in, "I actually think I should head home. I have an early day tomorrow."

"Head home? You just got here!" Chelsea exclaims, grabbing my arm. "Don't go!"

"Yeah, don't go, Kristen." Harvey slides his hands into his pockets, the move accentuating his muscles even in his long-sleeved shirt. I force my gaze up to his face, annoyed to find him smirking knowingly at him.

"You have a stain on your sleeve," I lie stupidly.

"No, I don't." Harvey doesn't even check.

"I don't see one either, Kristen," Chelsea pipes up unhelpfully.

"If you're worried I'll take all your money tonight, I understand," Harvey goes on. "I know how you hate to lose."

I bristle at both the suggestion that I'm going to lose and his cocky misconception that he knows me.

"You don't know me," I say stiffly. "I'm great at losing."

“If you say so,” Harvey’s smirk widens, and I realize what I just said.

With a huff, I march into the house, gettin’ all up in his face. Well, more like gettin’ all up in his pectoral muscles, because why is he SO TALL?

“You think you’re so smart, wise guy,” I demand. “Joke’s on you, because *I’m* staying. And I’m going to Lindsey Lohan your butt.”

I know he’ll get my *Parent Trap* reference because I made him watch it with me twice while we were dating. I don’t care that it’s for tweens, that movie is awesome.

“So you’re saying that you’re going to beat me in the last hand so that I have to go skinny dipping in that pond this sub calls a water feature, then you’re going to steal all my clothes while I’m in the water, so I have to walk back to my car without any clothes on?” Harvey grins as my cheeks tinge pink. He leans in close for the kill. “Gee, Kristen, if you wanted to see me naked that badly all you had to do was ask.”

I am going to murder this man. And then I’m going to throw his body in that dang pond. I let out a loud angry gasp and stomp past him to the dining room, his laughter following me down the hall.

I’ll show him. Bring on whatever cute single guys are here, because this girl is getting asked out tonight!

Chapter 8

HARVEY

I'm still chuckling to myself as I finish up in the bathroom a few minutes later. Laughing is easier than trying to unpack what I was thinking when I told her to stay. Clearly I have a self-destructive streak.

The look on her face when I threw her *Parent Trap* dig back in her face was totally worth it though. Allie and I just watched that movie a few weeks ago, so the plot lines were fresh in my mind. I chuckle again as I round the corner into the dining room, but my laughter dies on my lips as I take in the scene before me.

Kristen has not chosen to take the empty seat next to mine, but instead appears to have managed to make everyone move down a chair so that she could sit next to this guy Phil. A guy I thought seemed pretty decent when I met him ten minutes ago, but that I now see is clearly a wolf in sheep's clothing.

They paused the game while I went to the bathroom, so there are multiple side pockets of conversation going on, but I only see theirs. Kristen has one hand on Phil's forearm, her head tilted back as she laughs at something he just said. My eyes stick on the curve of her slender neck for a second, then snap back to Phil who is clearly eating up her attention. The guy's practically drooling. I should toss him a napkin.

Or punch him.

"Hey, Harvey's back," Owen booms as he catches sight of me. "Let's get this game moving again. Kristen, you know how to play Texas HoldEm'?"

"Absolutely, I do." Kristen finally removes her hand from Phil's arm, swiveling to face Owen and pasting a sunny smile on her face. Her eyes look extra green tonight, and there's a strand of hair falling across her face that my fingers are itching

to brush back. Instead I sit down, simultaneously pleased and annoyed that I'm directly across from her. Sure, I get to stare at her and blame it on her being directly in my line of sight. But if she's going to flirt with Phil all night, I may be relieving the babysitter early.

Owen deals the cards out, but I barely register my queen and seven of diamonds, because across from me Kristen leans over to whisper something to Phil, who chuckles and nods.

"No table talk," I snap, and everyone looks over at me in surprise. Kristen raises one eyebrow, her amusement evident. Right. I gotta reign this jealousy monster in. "Sorry," I say quickly. "Who's it to again?"

Charlie, the guy sitting to Owen's left, folds. The betting continues around the table with two more guys folding, and then it's Phil's turn. He raises the pot a dollar. Kristen calls. Darren, the guy on Kristen's left calls. One more fold, and it's to me. I'm not about to fold to Mr. Drool over there, so I call too. Owen folds, then turns up the three community cards.

Two more diamonds pop up, leaving me one away from a flush. They're low cards though, so if a fifth diamond isn't overturned next round I'll have nothing but a queen high.

We go around the circle again starting with Phil, who slides two dollar chips into the pot. It's Kristen's turn now, and she chews her lower lip, debating. My eyes glaze over for a second watching her white teeth work the plush pink skin, then she raises her gaze to place her bet and finds me staring. I cough and look away, but I hear the satisfaction in her voice as she calls Phil's bet.

Dang. What is wrong with me? I had the upper hand going into this game, but she's gone and slid the rug out from under my feet.

The betting moves onto Darren. "I fold," he announces, sliding his cards to the center and sitting back, arms folded across his chest in disappointment. My turn.

I start to fold too, since the odds of another diamond turning over are so low, but as I lower my hand to the table I

hear Phil tell Kristen, “Looks like it’s just you and me, gorgeous.”

Gorgeous? Sleazeball. I pick my cards back up and slide two of my dollar chips into the middle. “I call,” I say with an edge to my voice that I’m not proud of.

“Alright, we got three in,” Owen announces. “Final card.” He flips over the last community card. “Ace of diamonds.”

Yes! I mentally celebrate while maintaining my poker face for the rest of the table.

“To you, Phil.” Owen settles back in his chair. Phil taps his cards once, twice, thoughtful. “I fold,” he decides, surprising me.

Kristen’s eyes are darting back and forth between the ace and her hand. I can read her like a book. The ace doesn’t help her, and I’d bet my truck that if I looked under the table right now, her foot would be tapping nervously against the floor.

“You need help?” Phil asks, and every head turns to them in surprise. “C’mon guys,” Phil protests. “She’s new here. Just trying to be nice.” He turns back to Kristen. “There’s a list of hand rankings in the chip box, you want me to get it for you?”

I can’t help it, I snort. Phil looks over at me. “You got a problem, man?” he asks.

“No problem.” I hold up a hand in surrender. “Just you should know, Kristen’s been playing poker since she was about yea high,” I move my hand to my side. “Her problem isn’t knowing which hands are higher than others.” “Oh really?” Kristen levels me with an icy stare. “What is my problem then, Harvey?”

“Do you two know each other?” Phil asks, but we both ignore him. I should be trying to make friends with these guys, seeing as I’m new here, but somehow I’ve stopped caring about making a good first impression.

“Your problem, Ms. Heart,” I reply, “is that you don’t have a good hand.”

Kristen's mouth drops open for the briefest of seconds before popping back up. "Funny," she quips, "I didn't know you had x-ray vision, Harvey. Do the police know about you? I bet they could use you on the force." She makes an exaggerated surprised face. "Oh wait, they probably won't want to have to deal with what are really just your delusions." She slides a bunch of chips into the middle without even counting them. "I raise," she announces. "Your move, big shot." Her posture is full of challenge and attitude, and I'd like to take my phone out and snap a picture so I can look at how cute she is whenever I want to.

"What'd you raise him?" Darren asks. Kristen flushes slightly, hurrying to count the chips she shoved to the middle.

"Six dollars and seventy-five cents," she proclaims.

I stare at her pile of chips as I fiddle around with my own chips, debating whether or not to call her bluff. Buy-in was twenty bucks, so counting the dollar blind we all put in, if I do call her then one of us will lose almost half our chips.

And I'm pretty positive it's her. I look up to find her eyes on me, daring me to make a move.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Kristen?" Phil asks.

"Pretty sure, Phil," she says tightly, not breaking eye contact with me.

"It's just," Phil leans in to whisper something to her, but his voice carries across the table, "it kind of seems like you're trying to buy the hand, and while that might sometimes work, Harvey already said he thinks you're bluffing. He's going to call you, and then you'll be out half your chips."

A muscle in Kristen's jaw twitches, and I feel like Gloria's instant pot when she hits the quick release button as all of the pressure in my chest evaporates. She doesn't like this guy, she probably finds him just as smarmy as I do. She's just flirting with him to get to me.

And dang it, it worked.

"Phil," Kristen says, her voice dripping with false sweetness, "thanks, but I've got this under control."

Only she doesn't. Because smarmy as Phil may be, both Kristen and I know he's right. I've got a flush, whereas I'm guessing Kristen was banking on something like a full house and now has two pair at best. Which means I'm going to beat her hand and take half her chips.

I should definitely call.

I mean, I could pay the babysitter for an extra hour with the money from just this hand.

I should call.

My fingers play with the chips, as I fight the nice guy instincts rising inside me. Am I really going to fold just so she doesn't lose face after all the smack talk she's been doing? What kind of man would that make me?

A sucker.

A whipped sucker.

"I fold," I say, setting my cards down and finally tearing my gaze away from Kristen. Is there a doctor at this table? Preferably one who has access to an MRI machine? Because clearly I need my head examined.

"You fold?" Phil is aghast. "Wow, guess I was wrong, Kristen."

Kristen lets out a low whistle. "I guess so, Phil." She reaches for the pot, pulling all of the chips toward her. "Don't take it too hard though, Phil." She smirks across the table at me. "I just have experience with Harvey, so I know how much he likes to walk away."

Yup, I'm a whipped sucker all right. Which wouldn't be so bad, if the woman that had me wrapped around her finger didn't hate me.

Chapter 9

KRISTEN

“Go, go, go!” I scream at the toaster the next morning, but it remains immobile on the counter, the bread inside still trapped in its metal clutches. I eye the clock on the wall with growing alarm. We need to leave in eight minutes and neither the kids or I have eaten breakfast. I pull the handle on the toaster, popping the bread up early and slapping a slice on each of their plates next to their piles of scrambled eggs. Why do people eat eggs and toast anyway? What’s wrong with a little eggs and slightly warmed bread?

“Kristen, I can’t find my library book!” Lily comes skating into the kitchen, one of the braids I just finished five minutes ago already out of her hair. I stifle a groan of frustration. It’s going to take me another three minutes that we *do not have* to redo it. Honestly, girls should get a later start time to school, seeing as their hair usually requires more than a quick comb and a dab of gel to look presentable. Why is that not covered under title IX?

“I saw your book under the coffee table in the living room,” I tell her. “I’ll grab it. You just eat. Camden!” I call as I hurry to the living room. “Breakfast! Let’s go!”

Seven minutes later we’re out the door, my chest heaving like I just ran a marathon. I zoom across town, urging along all of the traffic lights, until we finally turn into Stonefield’s parking lot.

“Whoo!” I let out a cry of victory as I see there’s still a full circle of cars lined up for drop-off. Heck, there are even a few cars that pull in behind us! We are winning today’s drop-off!

I turn to beam at the kids, and, shoot!

“Lily! Your hair!” I exclaim. I never redid her other braid! I glance ahead of us. Five more cars until us. Okay, we

can do this.

“What?” Lily grabs at her loose hair, and her eyes widen. “My hair!” she echoes.

“Ha-ha!” Camden points. “You look funny!”

“What, no she doesn’t!” I say quickly as Lily’s lower lips starts to quiver. “Come here, I’ll fix it.” I gesture her forward.

“I can’t unbuckle!” Lily is horrified. “We’re driving! Look at the sign!” She points to one of the many signs lining the car loop. This one reads SAFETY FIRST-STAY BUCKLED UP UNTIL YOUR TURN!

Stupid safety first. I could give you a list of things we wouldn’t have if everyone always picked safety first. Anything that goes airborne for starters.

“Lily, it’s fine. I’m giving you permission to unbuckle.”

“No.” Lily shakes her head.

“Okay, fine.” I shrug as I move forward in line. “No biggie. Just take your other braid out then.”

“No!” she exclaims even louder. “Yesterday Allie and I decided we’d both wear braids today. If I don’t wear braids, she’ll be sad!”

I stifle a retort. Look at Harvey causing me problems even when he’s not here. At least I took a bunch of his money last night.

Only three cars in front of us now.

“Okay, well maybe you and Allie can start a new trend,” I suggest. “Your one braided pigtail trend will sweep the nation.”

Lily studies me. “You really think so?”

Camden snorts.

“Sure.” I shoot him a warning look. “In fact, I think your trend is so cool, I’m going to do my hair that way too.” I quickly start braiding half my hair. Lily grins.

Just two cars in front of us now. I fasten the braid.

“See?” I move my head back and forth, modeling the look.

Lily’s grin fades. “No offense, Kristen, but it looks weird.” Next to her Camden nods. “You’re still really pretty though,” she adds diplomatically.

“We’re next, Lily,” I sigh as we move up again. “So either go with your hair that way or unbuckle and let me do your hair.”

Lily’s face turns into the sad face emoji, eyes shut, corners of her lips turned all the way down.

“Okay, fine,” I sigh. “How about I come back there and do your other braid really quickly.” The car in front of us is taking awhile anyway. I can speed braid.

Lily starts to protest about the safety of me unbuckling, but I ignore her, putting the car in park and maneuvering my way to the backseat. She stops protesting as I quickly divide her loose hair into three sections and start braiding. The car behind us honks.

“It’s our turn to go,” Camden announces.

“Okay, okay,” I say around the ponytail holder in my mouth. “Almost done.” I snatch the elastic and start to put it around the end of her braid.

The car behind us honks again. Frantically I back up into the front seat, lifting my foot over the center console as I stretch my arms out to do another loop around. Okay, just one more loop-don’t want the braid falling out again.

“Done!” I cry just as someone raps on the window. I look over my shoulder, an apology on my lips, and my eyes meet Harvey’s surprised gaze. His lips quirk into a smile, and one eyebrow pops up as he takes in my position-one foot on the front seat, my hands each gripping the edge of the two front seats, and my butt in the window.

That’s right. Yesterday he saw me arrive in a bathrobe, and today he saw me arriving with my butt in the air.

Not to mention my totally on trend one braided pigtail hairdo.

#winning

Quickly I scramble the rest of the way into the front seat, and roll down my window.

“Can I help you?” I say primly.

“You’re holding up the line,” he tells me like I wasn’t already aware.

“And parents aren’t supposed to get out of the car during drop-off,” I retort, referencing another helpful car loop sign that says DRIVERS PLEASE REMAIN IN VEHICLES.

Harvey doesn’t even blink. “I’m not in the car loop,” he informs me. “I already walked Allie inside. Now I’m just a concerned pedestrian headed back to his car.” He waves to the car behind him as they honk again. “I’d move if I were you,” he tells me. “That’s Ramona Evans behind you. Her husband is a lawyer. She’s probably taking your license plate down so she can figure out how to sue you for obstruction of the car loop.”

I glare at him, then roll up my window without responding. I pull forward and send the kids out on their way.

New plan, I decide as I pull out of the car loop. Since Clarice won’t fire me and I can’t quit without being in breach of contract, I’m going to go to this drama meeting, befriend all of the parents, then form an I Hate Harvey club that would make Ross Gellar and whatever the name of Brad Pitt’s guest character on *Friends* was proud.

I grab a vacant parking spot and head inside. Mrs. Logan greets me with a frown.

“Late again? I can’t imagine your employers will be impressed when they see all of these tardies on the childrens’ report cards.”

“Oh, no,” I hurry to explain. “I already dropped off Lily and Camden.” Which is why they’re not with me, I add silently. “I’m here for the drama meeting.”

“Oh.” Her frown only deepens. “Well, in that case,” she glances at the clock on her computer screen, “you’re early.”

“Early? I was told to come right after drop-off.”

“Correct, but the designated drop-off period ends in ten minutes,” she explains. “For safety reasons we don’t allow parent volunteers to come in until fifteen minutes after the final bell to allow any tardy students to enter the building without confusion.”

“Oh, okay.” I’m not sure what to do now. “Sorry to be early,” I add, because she’s looking expectantly at me. I want to ask her if she too sees the irony of the situation, but she doesn’t seem like someone who laughs.

“It’s fine, dear. I’ll see you in a few minutes. Bye now.”

Oh. She wants me to leave the school. Crazy thy name is Mrs. Logan.

“Okay,” I say yet again. “I guess I’ll see you in ten minutes then.”

“Sounds lovely, dear. I’m looking forward for it.”

Sarcastic responses swallowed, I head back out to my car to stew.

I’m playing the drums on my steering wheel and singing along to a Walker Hayes’ song when I spot them. Harvey and a perky blonde woman headed across the parking lot toward me. Well, not toward me specifically, but they’re on track to pass right by my car on their way to wherever they’re headed.

I quickly lower the volume on my radio and slide down in my seat. One Harvey interaction is more than enough for a day.

As they get closer I hear the woman laugh, and I can’t help but peek out at them.

Shoot. She’s really pretty. Why is she so pretty? And who is she?

His girlfriend? He’s not married. I saw his bare left ring finger last night at poker when he finally won a pot.

Not that I was looking.

I mean, you have to look at things that are right in front of your eyes. You just do. Ask any optometrist.

“Oh Harvey, stop. You’re going to give me laugh lines!” I hear the woman exclaim. They’re right outside my car now, so I busy myself scrolling aimlessly through my phone, hoping they’ll walk right past.

No such luck. For the second time that day Harvey stops to rap on my window.

“Hey, Doc, you know pickup isn’t until 3:15, right?” he quips as soon as I roll the window down. He leans down into the car, resting his forearms on my window ledge in a way that I find annoyingly attractive. It’s the car version of the classic casual lean against the doorway. “Or are you just here hoping to see me?” He winks.

I roll my eyes, ignoring the circuit of pleasure that just ran through me at his use of his old nickname for me.

“My name is Kristen,” I correct him. “Though I applaud your interest in meeting with a doctor. You clearly have psychological needs.”

Harvey barks a laugh, unoffended by my slight. “Funny, Doc.”

“Who said I was trying to be funny?” I reply smoothly.

“Harvey, we better get inside or we’ll be late.” The blonde speaks from behind him, looking annoyed.

“Oh sorry.” Harvey doesn’t move from my window, doesn’t even look in her direction. “I’ll catch up to you, Mandy.”

Through my windshield I watch her debate how to handle this clearly unwelcome dismissal. Finally she sighs and starts across the parking lot.

Do I hold back a victorious smile? No. That was just a lip twitch. I probably drank too much coffee this morning.

“Harvey, why are you still in my window?” I ask him to deflect from my unwelcome jubilation.

“Because you and I are having a conversation,” he says with a shrug. “Plus, I’m trying to figure something out.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

Harvey cocks his head, studying me thoughtfully. “Whether I like your braided hair or your loose hair better.” He reaches over and tugs the end of my braid as my face flames. “It’s a toss up.”

His hand lingers for a second against my shoulder. I should push it away.

But I don’t.

And before I can get my head back on straight, he moves it himself and vanishes from my window without even saying good-bye.

It takes a full minute for my heart to slow back to its normal rate, and I spend every one of those sixty seconds berating myself for letting Harvey flirt with me.

Then I yank out my one braided pigtail and head back inside.

Chapter 10

HARVEY

“There you are!” Mandy’s chirpy voice greets me as I step into the music room, and I repress a sigh. Mandy is a really nice person. She really is.

But shoot, she’s annoying.

If I had known that she was directing the school play, even Allie’s pretty pleases wouldn’t have been enough to bring me on board. But I only found out at the PTA meeting last night, and by then it was too late.

At least my Kristen sighting in the parking lot helped me evade Mandy’s clutches for a little while. That’s the real reason I stopped at Kristen’s car. Not like I wanted to see her or chat with her or hear her breath hitch when I leaned in close to tug her braid.

“I saved you a seat right up front, Harvey,” Mandy trills, cutting off my brain’s replay. “And we’re still waiting for one more volunteer.” She peers down at her clipboard. “A Clarice Wilder.” She looks around at the handful of parents scattered around the room. “Anyone know her?”

Clarice Wilder is helping out? I picture Kristen waiting in the parking lot and realize what this must mean just as Kristen comes hurrying into the room.

Aw man, she fixed her hair. My fingers tingle, remembering the feel of it. I can now verify that her hair is just as soft as I remember it being.

“Sorry, I’m la-” her apology dies on her lips as her gaze lands on me.

“Late,” Mandy finishes for her, chipper attitude gone. “Yes, you are late.” She clucks her tongue in disapproval. “Clarice is it?”

“Uh, no,” Kristen yanks her eyes off me to focus on Mandy. “I’m Kristen Heart. Clarice’s proxy.” She does a little wave which Mandy does not return. A guy sitting in the back row does though. He quickly lowers his hand when Mandy glares at him.

“A proxy?” Mandy does not look pleased. She huffs as if no one before has ever been as inconvenienced as her at this moment. “Fine. Just take a seat then.” She points to the almost empty back row of seats. Waving guy offers the seat next to him.

Which I gladly take.

He gives me a confused look, but I just smile. “Harvey,” I say, sticking out my hand.

“Ross.” He accepts my hand.

“Harvey,” Mandy protests indignantly, gesturing pointedly to the open chair up front.

“Oh right.” I play dumb. “Well, I’ll just stay put. I’m already here, and I know you want to get this meeting started.”

“I’ll sit there,” Kristen offers, shooting me a scathing look as she strides past me toward the front row. I just settle back in my chair, satisfied with how all of this turned out. I’m not within striking distance of Mandy’s unwelcome feminine wiles, and Kristen isn’t sitting next to this Ross guy.

Mandy’s nostrils flare as Kristen sits down, but she pulls herself together to address the room.

“Alright then, welcome to the first official meeting for the volunteers helping with our school’s upcoming rendition of *The Lion King*. I, of course, am Mandy Gibbons, the music teacher here at Stonefield, and I’ll be directing the musical. Many of you signed up for your support roles at the PTA meeting last night, but if you haven’t yet, don’t worry, there are plenty of open positions left.”

“Yeah,” Ross mutters, “like crew leader and costume manager. No thanks. I’ll stick to helping with set design.”

“Set design?” I rotate my shoulders toward him. “I’m working that too.”

“Nice.” Ross gives me a nod. “Please tell me you actually know how to use a drill and a circular saw, because the guy I worked with last year almost drilled a hole in the stage.”

“Yeah, I heard that story,” I say with a low chuckle.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Mandy pauses her spiel to reprimand us, “if you could please keep the side conversations to a minimum, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure thing.” Ross nods as I give Mandy a thumbs up.

Mandy goes on talking, running through important dates and her expectations for volunteers. I glance at my phone and see it’s already after nine. I told the guys at the shop I’d be in late today, but this meeting is taking forever.

And honestly, so far it seems like it all could’ve just been communicated in an email. I stifle a yawn, shifting in my seat so I don’t doze off.

In my semi-comatose state my eyes wander over to Kristen. Ever the good student, she’s busy taking notes in one of the floral notebooks she always carries around. Her oversized purse rests at her feet.

You know, I bet I could name every item inside that purse.

The notebook she’s writing in came from her purse, obviously. There’s got to be a magazine in there too. Kristen always loved tabloids.

Then the basics—a couple of pens, a tissue pack, her wallet and keys.

I smile to myself. There’s probably a tin of Altoids in the zippered pocket. Not the typical peppermint flavor, but the less common arctic strawberry. She used to go through a tin of those a week.

My mouth starts to water remembering how she tasted like those strawberry mints when we kissed. Sweet and-

I shake my head, fighting away those particular memories.

A new memory surfaces in their place as I carry on with my what's in Kristen's purse game. Kristen always used to carry around a guitar pick in her purse. One I gave her after the first time she saw me perform. My gut twists with longing and regret. I bet that guitar pick is long gone. Decomposing at the bottom of a landfill somewhere.

"Alright then," Mandy claps us all to attention, "I know you all have places to be, and," she eyes the clock on the wall, "I've got twenty-four third graders coming for class in eight minutes, so let's just get people signed up for the remaining jobs, and then you all can be on your way." Mandy retrieves a clipboard off the top of her piano. "Who can I put down for costumes? I need two people."

Gertie Stockman, mother of one of Allie's friends, and a woman that I recognize from some of Allie's class parties over the years but don't know by name both raise their hands.

"Great, names please?"

Mandy moves down the list, filling spots for co-crew leader, program designer, and advertising chair. Kristen keeps raising her hand to volunteer, but Mandy ignores her.

"Wow, I am thrilled at the level of enthusiasm you all are showing!" Mandy lowers her clipboard to beam at all of us. "We've filled every position!"

Kristen's hand pops up once more. "Excuse me?" she says, when Mandy still doesn't acknowledge her.

"Oh." Mandy's mouth dips around the syllable. "Yes, did you have a question?"

"I haven't been assigned a job," Kristen explains. "Do you not need me to help?"

Mandy's eyes narrow. "Are you trying to get out of helping?" she accuses. "Because we need team players here only."

“Yes, I showed up to this meeting, took diligent notes while you spoke, and raised my hand to volunteer for every position you named, because I’m trying to get out of helping.” Kristen’s voice drips with sarcasm. I manage to stifle a snort, but next to me Ross isn’t so lucky. His bark of laughter fills the silence that followed Kristen’s pronouncement, and Mandy immediately turns her glare his way.

“Something funny, Ross?” she demands.

“Nope. Just clearing my throat.” He makes a hacking noise to demonstrate.

Mandy looks unconvinced, but just shakes her head and addresses Kristen once more. “Fine, Miss Fart was it?”

This time Ross turns his laugh into a cough. I, on the other hand, am starting to get a little mad about the way Mandy is treating Kristen.

“It’s Heart actually,” Kristen replies smoothly, “but you can just call me Kristen.”

The corner of my mouth curves up into a smirk. Kristen is no shrinking violet.

“Right. Kristen. I think I do have a job left for you.” Mandy taps her pen against her clipboard. “Snacks.”

“Snacks?” Kristen echoes.

“Snacks,” Mandy confirms. “With rehearsals being right after school, the kids are sure to be hungry. And while initially we’d planned on having parents send snacks with their individual child, we have enough of a budget to provide them ourselves.”

“Oh. Okay.” Kristen sounds as if she’s waiting to hear the catch. “Great. I can do snacks. Are you thinking something like Goldfish?”

Mandy lets out a high-pitched laugh. “Goldfish! No, no, no. Too many kids with gluten allergies, Kirsten. No, you’ll have to pick something else. Nothing dairy either, of course. And, oh there’s that student with the citrus allergy. Plus we don’t want anything too messy or that has any yucky dyes.”

Mandy frowns. “You know, I’ll just email you a list of all the allergies and dietary restrictions. That should make things easier.” She beams around at the room. “Alright then, I think we’re done here. I’ll see everyone at our first rehearsal next week.” She swivels around and heads for her desk.

The other parents all start to file out of the room, but Kristen stays put. I can see her foot tapping along on the floor the way it does when she’s worked up or nervous.

“Is it just me,” Ross leans over to ask me, “or does Mandy have it in for that Kristen woman?”

“Not just you.” I wonder if I can find a reason to stay and watch the stand-off I sense is about to take place. Abruptly Kristen stands up and marches over to Mandy.

“Thanks again, Mandy.” Her voice carries across the room, sickly sweet. “I’m really looking forward to my role as snack coordinator.” She gives Mandy one last smile, then strides out of the room.

I grin after her, then turn back to Ross. “But my money is on Kristen coming out on top.”

Chapter 11

KRISTEN

“A soy allergy!” I read aloud off the Excel spreadsheet Mandy sent me. “That’s a thing?”

“Oh yeah, a big one.” Chelsea looks up from where she’s perched on the couch, filing her nails. “Zoey Deschanel is allergic to it.”

“Really?” I lean forward in interest. “I thought she was just allergic to eggs and wheat.” I eye my spreadsheet. “Same as Samantha Brieskie, the girl playing Nala.”

“I dunno.” Chelsea resumes her nail filing. “That’s just what I read somewhere.”

I sigh. “Well maybe Zoey Deschanel can give me some snack ideas then. You think she’ll respond if I DM her on Instagram?” I joke.

Chelsea laughs. I groan.

“The kicker is, Mandy asked that I get everyone the same snack to avoid any drama or disappointment among the students. So it’s not like I can get the five kids with tree nut allergies some individual bags of pretzels and the two kids with gluten sensitivities some Veggie Straws. Nope, it all has to be the same.”

“How about fruit?” Chelsea suggests.

“Yeah, maybe. As long as it’s not of the citrus variety, a choking hazard like grapes, or,” I peer at the list, “whole apples. Apparently quite a few of the kids don’t have front teeth.”

Chelsea snorts.

“I don’t know why this woman hates me,” I mutter.

“I do.” Chelsea sets her nail file down again. “You said earlier that she has a crush on Harvey.” She shrugs. “And Harvey has a crush on you, so therefore she hates you. It’s basically middle school all over again.”

“Harvey does not have a crush on me,” I insist. “He left me eight years ago, remember?”

“Whatever.” Chelsea rolls her eyes, bending down to pick up a stray Duplo from the set Holly is busy playing with. “Owen said Harvey couldn’t stop staring at you last night, and that he’s pretty sure he threw a few hands for you. The man likes you, Kristen.” She settles back against the couch cushions. “And with a smile like the one he has, I think you should give him a chance.”

I ignore the flurry of excitement that just erupted like a blizzard in my stomach as I reply. “And I think I should write Mandy a strongly worded email letting her know Harvey is all hers. I don’t want him.”

Chelsea heaves a sigh. “You are no fun.”

“And yet you’re here hanging out with me on a Friday afternoon.”

“Yes, well, your conversational skills are far more advanced than Holly’s,” Chelsea retorts with a toss of her hair. “Although you are talking a lot about snacks today, which is usually her go-to topic of conversation.”

“Ha! In that case maybe she should plan the snacks for this play.”

My phone rings, interrupting our conversation. It’s not a number I know, but the 662 area code makes me worried it’s someone from the school, so I pick up.

“Hello, this is Kristen.”

“Kristen, hi, Ross Peterson here. I’m a parent from Stonefield. I was at the drama meeting this morning.”

“Oh, uh, hi, Ross. What can I do for you?”

“Well, here’s the thing. My ex-wife runs an allergy-friendly bakery here in town, and when I mentioned to her

about the snack dilemma we're having she volunteered to provide snacks."

"Really?" I sit up straighter, shocked by this sudden solution to my problems.

"Really," Ross laughs. "Of course there is a small catch."

"Name it," I declare, "because honestly nothing could be worse than having to go to the grocery store with Mandy's allergy spreadsheet in hand."

"Fair point," Ross chuckles, before dropping his hammer. "Colleen wants the volunteer hours."

"What do you mean?"

"Every Stonefield parent is required to put in a certain number of volunteer hours annually," he explains. "If Colleen is going to provide the snacks, she wants the volunteer hours."

"Oh." My chest deflates. No wonder Clarice had someone sign her (read: me) up to help. She was fulfilling a volunteer requirement. If I back out she won't be pleased. Still, she said herself that she's not going to fire me. But what if she docks my pay or something? Should I risk it?

"Hey, listen, based on your silence I'm guessing that's not what you wanted to hear. So how about this? I could use some more help on set design. It's just me and one other parent doing it, and we've got a lot to do. Do you have any building experience?"

Building experience? A memory filters through a crack in the I Hate Harvey wall I erected in my brain after he left. *"Measure twice, cut once," Harvey tells me, as he stands over the miter saw in my dad's workshop.*

"Shhh!" I giggle as he lowers the saw and slices the wood into two pieces. "Someone is going to hear us."

"Let them come. I think it's time we tell them about us," Harvey says with a shrug. "I'm not messing around with you, Doc."

I chew my lower lip, his beautiful words luring me into a false sense of security. We've been secretly dating for three

weeks, and I wasn't messing around with him either. But my parents...they wouldn't be happy to find out that I was dating an employee. Not when they tell every male employee under the age of forty to stay away from my sister and me. Harvey could lose his job, and if he loses his job I'm worried he'll leave town. Harvey wants to be a musician, and Michigan is just a pit stop for him on his way to Nashville.

"Hey, listen, we don't have to decide tonight," Harvey backtracks. "Let's just fix this desk for now." He grins. "Even if I am sad to put it back together after I had so much fun breaking it with you."

I grin back, relief and desire swirling through me. That kiss, the one that had ended with him lifting me up onto the flimsy old IKEA desk in the office at the restaurant- which had promptly given out under our weight, had hands down been the best kiss of my life. Although I've basically said that after every kiss with Harvey.

"You know, I guess there's no rush to get to work, since it is the middle of the night and all," I say, stepping closer to Harvey. "We've got plenty of time to fix the desk."

Harvey's answering smile lights a fire inside me. He steps forward too, pulling me towards him until we crash together.

"Uh, Kristen, you still there?" Ross asks, tearing me out of my reverie.

"Sorry, yes, I'm still here. And yes," I clear my throat. "I know my way around basic tools. I helped build a desk once."

"Great! So you'll help out with set design?"

"Sure," I agree. "I can do that."

"Okay, then. I'll see you Monday at rehearsal."

Chapter 12

KRISTEN

In retrospect I should've known. He's been everywhere else I turn up lately, so why did I not guess that Harvey would be the other parent working set design?

There he is on the other side of the auditorium, bent over a sketch, a tool belt slung around his waist. What is it about a man in a tool belt that is so hot? It's not like any of the tools those belts hold are that impressive. Some screwdrivers, a measuring tape, a hammer. What do I think a man in a tool belt is going to do for me? Hang a picture?

He hasn't seen me yet, and I'm half-tempted to make my excuses to Ross, who was kind enough to greet me at the door and identify the bane of my existence as our third team member, then leave and find another way to knock out the Wilders' volunteer hours.

"Kristen?" Camden tugs my hand, and I remember why I can't duck out of this. When Camden found out that I'd be helping with set design he begged me to let him help instead of being part of the ensemble like the rest of the kindergarten and first grade participants. And I agreed. If I back out now, he'll be crushed. "When do I get to hammer something?" he asks me. "And can I get one of those cool tool belts like that guy?" He points to Harvey.

"No hammering for the kids," Ross tells him with a ruffle of his hair. Camden's shoulders sink.

"Don't worry," I bend to whisper in his ear, "I think we can find some top-secret hammering for you to do."

A smile lights his face, and a sharp, unwelcome pang of longing strikes me. I thrust it away, but can't seem to erase the dull ache it left behind. This is why I've spent the last eight years avoiding kids. Why I've let people come to the

conclusion that I don't even like kids. Why I've told myself that I don't like kids.

Avoidance is my heart's armor.

Obviously there are some chinks in my armor though, since I'm currently in a room full of kids and the guy I moved halfway across the country to avoid is now striding across the room toward me.

Where does one go to repair imaginary armor? Disney World?

Nah, that place has even more kids than here, not to mention all the princesses ending up with their Prince Charmings. Harvey is no Prince Charming. No, if Harvey were a Disney character he'd be Hans from *Frozen*. All cute and smooth and debonair when you first meet him, even singing duets with you about how the two of you are meant to be, but then the first chance he gets he betrays you.

"Hey, Kristen," Harvey greets me.

"Hello, Harvey," I reply coldly, keeping my eyes on his face so that darn tool belt doesn't distract me.

"I heard you traded snack duty to help us with set design."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know you were on set design when I made that trade," I inform him, pulling the sides of my olive-colored cardigan tightly around myself like it's the armor I've been searching for.

"Really?" Harvey's eyebrows shoot up. "You didn't think the guy who spent a summer teaching you how to use all of your dad's tools would be working in the one area of this whole play that involves carpentry?" He leans forward, sending a whiff of his cedar and pine soap my way. Whatever, Hans probably smelled good too. Not going to sway me. "What committee did you think I'd be on then, Doc?" he asks, his eyes glittering with suggestion. "Choreography for 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight?'"

I set my jaw. "I figured you'd be working wherever Mandy was working," I say sweetly. "I know how much she

likes you.”

Harvey steps back with a snort. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

I’m saved from having to converse any longer with Harvey by the arrival of Ross’ ex-wife, Colleen, with the snacks. All around us kids swarm excitedly toward her. Mandy appears, zeroing in on Harvey and I with a displeased expression.

“Who is that passing out snacks, Kristy?” she demands.

“It’s Kristen,” I correct, “and that’s Colleen, owner of Let’s All Eat Bakery. She volunteered to take on the challenging task of snacks for rehearsals. Ross Peterson was supposed to send you an email.”

Mandy crosses her arms, tapping one foot rapidly on the carpeted floor. “I must’ve missed it,” she finally says. “But if Colleen is doing snacks, then what are you doing here? It would seem your services are no longer needed.”

“Oh, well, Ross also said they needed help with set design,” I explain. “So I’m here to do that.”

Mandy’s eyes narrow. “Ross is not in charge of this play,” she informs me. “I think two grown men can put together a set portraying the African Sahara without help from you.”

“Um-” I begin.

“Mandy,” Harvey cuts in, “c’mon. You never turn away volunteers. Many hands make light work, right?”

Mandy’s gaze turns to him, and her countenance softens. “I suppose,” she relents. “Does this mean you’ll reconsider my request then, Harvey?” she adds. “Because before you said you’d be too busy with set design to do it, but now that you’ll have an extra set of hands, you should have some extra time.”

A muscle ticks in Harvey’s jaw and curiosity shifts my posture in his direction. What request did she make? And why does that request have Harvey looking so tense and uncomfortable.

“We could really use your musical talents, Harvey.” Mandy reaches over to squeeze his forearm. I fist my own

hands to keep one of them from shooting out and swatting hers away from Harvey. She can touch Harvey all she wants. She can marry him for all I care. Honestly, I hope the two of them are happy together. And hey, I even have a twenty percent off coupon to Bed, Bath, and Beyond I'll use to buy their wedding gift.

"You know I don't play anymore, Mandy," Harvey says.

"That's what you said," Mandy whines, "but I've seen the YouTube videos of you performing, Harvey. You're wasting your talent not playing."

"I'll think about it, okay?" Harvey says in a way that suggests he won't actually think about it at all, but Mandy doesn't push it.

"Okay, that's all I ask. That you at least consider it." She sighs, turning her gaze back on me. "I suppose you can help with set design, Kristy." With that, she turns and hurries over to Colleen, helping her pass out snacks to the rambunctious group of kids fighting for their turn.

Harvey and I are left alone, the weight of what I just heard settling over me like fog clouding the morning air. He clears his throat, then turns as if to go.

"You don't play anymore?" The question comes out without my consent. Harvey whips his head back around, and as our eyes meet I try to make sense of everything contained in his hazel irises.

Harvey shakes his head. "Not anymore," he confirms.

"But why?" Again my mouth is operating without my permission.

Harvey is silent for a minute. Finally he rakes a hand through his hair. "Because," one shoulder rises in a shrug, "playing is just a reminder of everything I've lost."

This time when he turns to go I don't stop him. My heart is beating erratically in my chest, and I'm pretty sure any armor that I had left just fell to the battleground, leaving me completely exposed. Not to mention weaponless.

He's not talking about you, I tell myself sternly. Obviously he means his music career, which he must've had to give up on when he took on the responsibility of parenting Allie.

My heart won't listen to reason though. So my armor remains on the ground.

And I must be a masochist, because suddenly I'm desperate for Harvey to come back over here and kiss me the way he used to.

"Kristen, you ready to get to work?" Ross' question pulls my gaze off Harvey, and I force myself to focus on him instead.

"Sure thing," I say with a shaky smile. "Let's go build a desert backdrop."

Chapter 13

HARVEY

Idiot. My fingers are itching to grab the hammer out of my tool belt and just start hammering something. Anything.

Playing is just a reminder of everything I've lost.

Why would I say that to her?

Because I'm an idiot. That's why.

And okay, maybe because it's true and because staring at her with her hair pulled up into some sort of ballerina bun and her green eyes finally lit with something other than anger, weakened my resolve to stay away from her. I don't want to stay away from her.

I can recover from that though. I have to. For Allie's sake.

Besides, it's not like I told her everything. I kept things pretty high level. She probably thinks I meant my sister or my music career. Not her.

"Hey man," Ross arrives in my periphery, clapping me on the shoulder, "ready to get to work?"

"Yeah, just taking a look at these plans for Pride Rock." I gesture to the sketch on the table in front of us.

"Great." Ross rubs his hand together. "Listen, before we get started on all of this, I wanted to check with you about something."

"Oh, yeah?" I straighten, something in his tone putting me on alert. "What's up?"

"You and Kristen," he hedges. "You two know each other?"

"Uh, yeah." I rub one hand along the back of my neck, as I consider what else to say about that. "We used to date," I

finally add.

“Really?” Ross scratches his chin. “Who broke up with who?”

My gaze skirts over to Kristen, the image of her face when I told her I was leaving burned into my brain. She’s bent over, talking to the Wilder boy. He’s gesticulating wildly with his hands, and she’s nodding along, clearly invested in what he’s saying.

“Why do you ask?” I say to Ross, a little annoyed with his prodding.

“Hey, sorry.” Ross holds up his hands in surrender, evidently able to hear my irritation. “Not trying to pry. I just figured if you broke up with her you wouldn’t mind me asking her out.”

A chill runs through my body, and my urge to go hammer something intensifies.

“You okay, man?” Ross eyes me with concern.

“I’m fine,” I try to assure him, but I sound like his namesake from *Friends* when he finds out Joey and Rachel kissed. So not fine.

“You gotta thing for her still?” Ross gives me a knowing look, and I squeeze the handle of the hammer sticking out of my tool belt, reminding myself that soon I’ll be pounding nails into wood.

“Alright then,” Ross says in response to my silence. “Well I hope this won’t make working together harder.” He claps me on the shoulder. “May the best man win.”

I force myself not to glare at his retreating figure. He makes a beeline for Kristen, and rather than staying to watch I stalk out of the auditorium.

I make my way to a deserted hallway before sinking to the ground.

I can’t pursue Kristen. I can’t. I have Allie to think about.

The image of Kristen talking to that little boy pops into my head like a devil on my shoulder. What if she's changed her mind about kids? How could I find out without actually asking?

This is all so stupid. Even if she has changed her mind and would accept Allie as part of her life, she's never going to accept me back into her life. She hates me.

So, I guess I should move aside and let Ross try and win her over.

Yes, that's what I should do.

On an unrelated note, I really don't like Ross.

Chapter 14

KRISTEN

“Come over for dinner tomorrow night?” Aunt Gloria insists, five minutes into our phone conversation the next morning. Just like my mom up in Michigan with her southern accent, even after all of my Aunt Gloria’s years in America, her Italian accent still marks her speech. It somehow always makes her requests sound like things you absolutely must do lest you bring shame upon the family. “You can bring the kids if you need to,” she continues. “I would love to see them. You know, Felicity used to bring them by from time to time. Did Camden ever master tying his shoelaces? Your uncle was working on that with him when they were here before Christmas.” I can hear her knitting needles going in the background, and the noise makes me wonder what else she’s trying to stitch together. Or should I say, *who* she’s trying to stitch together?

“Aunt Gloria, you better not be inviting me over as some misguided attempt at matchmaking again,” I warn. “I told you, Harvey and I are not going to happen.”

“Kristen!” she exclaims, her knitting needles coming to a stop. “I promise, this dinner has no such ulterior motive. I simply want to see my niece, who recently moved into town, and yet I haven’t seen head nor tail of her in the last week and a half.”

“Okay,” I relent, her guilt-trip fully working on me. Plus, I really would love to see my aunt and uncle. Even if I am still miffed about the last eight years of deception.

“Thank you for your enthusiasm,” Aunt Gloria comments dryly.

I laugh. “Sorry, it’s just after what happened at the garage last week, I’m a bit cautious when it comes to you and Uncle Rob. I mean, what if you have some other ex of mine coming to dinner?”

“Oh, honey, we would never try and set you up with another man!” Aunt Gloria is aghast. “We couldn’t do that to Harvey.”

“I’m pretty sure Harvey wouldn’t care if you set me up with some other guy, seeing as he’s the one who broke up with me in the first place,” I point out.

“Pbfft,” she dismisses this. “He was a confused and scared kid back then. He’s much more mature and stable now.” Her knitting needles pick back up, click-clacking even more furiously. “That man needs a woman like you in his life, and he knows it. Not to mention, Allie needs a mother.”

Her words are like a punch to the gut, knocking all of the air out of me. “I’m not mother material, Aunt Gloria,” I say lightly. Or at least I meant to say it lightly. My voice cracks a little on the last syllable.

“Oh balderdash! Where you ever got such a nonsensical idea is beyond me, cara mia.”

I bite back the truth. A phone call is no time to blurt out something you’ve hidden for eight years. Anyway, I’m in no rush to have another panic attack. Better to just stuff all of this down, and move on.

“You know, I should go,” I tell my aunt. “I have a long list of things to get done before I have to pick up the kids from school.”

“Spoken like a true mother figure,” she quips.

“Nope,” I disagree vehemently. “Not a mother. Just a nanny. A *paid* nanny.”

“Mr. Rob!” Camden crows as soon as we’re in the door the next night. “Look at what I can do! I can tie my shoe!” Camden surges forward, ready to demonstrate his new skill, only to trip over the shoelaces he untied on the way here in preparation for his demonstration. “Oof,” he exhales as his face meets the carpet, but then a second later he’s back up and headed to my uncle.

My hands, which had risen in horror as he fell, relax back at my sides. Over Camden's head, Uncle Rob gives me a knowing smile. Honestly, what is it with my aunt and uncle lately? Me being worried about Camden's wellbeing isn't some sign that I'm mother material. It's just common decency.

"Oh, my lovely Lily is here! Come give me a hug, bella!" Aunt Gloria appears, an apron tied around her waist and a wooden spoon in one hand. "And there's my champion Camden, caro mio!"

Both kids dash over to her, and she envelopes them in a hug. For not having any kids of her own, Aunt Gloria sure knows how to win them over. Not for the first time I wonder why she and my uncle never had kids.

"Who wants to help me layer the lasagna?" she asks them, and they both roar with excitement before charging for the kitchen. "Wash your hands, my little chefs!" Aunt Gloria calls after them. She gives me an apologetic face. "Sorry, I just gave away your job."

I laugh. Felicity and I spent many a visit here helping Aunt Gloria layer the lasagna. "I guess it's okay," I say with an overdramatic sigh. "As long as I still get first pick of the garlic bread."

Aunt Gloria laughs too. There's a loud clatter from the kitchen, so I start to head that way, but she shoos me back.

"Don't worry, honey, I've got the kids. You just sit down and relax for a hot minute." She bustles off, leaving me alone with Uncle Rob. We haven't spoken since that disastrous phone call last week, although he did send me a long apology email (he doesn't text much) that expanded on all of the reasons they'd lied to me the last eight years. Essentially they all boiled down to one fact though-they love Harvey like a son and Allie like a granddaughter. Blech. Whatever happened to family loyalty? I am their *actual* niece after all-no like needed.

Still, I'd replied with a concise email that stated that I forgive him and Aunt Gloria. Which is sort of true. It's true enough anyway. Upon finishing his email did I imagine replying with some scathing words about betrayal and never

being able to trust them again? Maybe. But honestly, I'd rather not fight. That's why I'm here tonight. To bury the hatchet and move on.

In that vein, I take a seat on the armchair across the room and offer him the smallest of smiles.

"So," Uncle Rob clears his throat, "you catch the game this weekend?"

I don't have to ask which game, there are only two teams my uncle cares about: Ole Miss, whose season is done, and The New Orleans Saints.

"Only the last quarter," I tell him. "I was supposed to have the afternoon off, but Camden had a soccer game at the same time as Lily had her horseback riding lesson, so Clarice asked if I'd take Lily."

"I see." Uncle Rob studies me for a second, then clears his throat again. "And was that hard for you?"

Hard for me? I'm taken aback by the question. How did he know that it was hard? That being there had reminded me of the summer I'd spent as a counselor at horse camp for elementary students. Of course that had been back before I swore off children.

"I mean being around the animals?" Uncle Rob clarifies in response to my silence. "I figured you must miss working with them."

Oh. That's what he meant. Not the kid thing. The knot of tension in my chest unravels.

"Oh, right," I let out a shaky laugh. "Actually that part wasn't hard. I got to spend some time with the horse Lily rode, and I've basically turned into the neighborhood vet over at the Wilders' house, so I'm getting my animal fix on a regular basis."

"The neighborhood vet, eh?" Uncle Rob chuckles. "I like it. You always have taken good care of our Otis." Otis, their thirteen-year-old hound dog, is the sweetest dog you'll ever meet. Unfortunately he's mostly deaf by now, so I don't think

he's even noticed our arrival. He's snoring away at Uncle Rob's feet.

"Course, I gotta ask," he goes on. "What did you mean when you said that part wasn't hard? Was there a different part that was hard?"

Shoot. Why did I phrase it that way?

"Uh, the car ride," I lie quickly. "Lots of dirt roads. Tough in a sedan. Bumpity, bump, bump," I ramble stupidly.

"Gloria, you here?" My head whirls around as the front door flies open, and Harvey steps inside, closely followed by Allie, who's dressed in a leotard and tutu.

I want this armchair to open up and swallow me whole. Why is he here? Why is he always where I am?

And why is he just allowed to walk in without knocking? People should knock! It's polite.

And it allows anyone who may want to make their escape to do so.

"Hey, Harvey, what are you doing here?" Uncle Rob stands up to greet him. Even Otis finally makes a move, slowly getting to his feet and ambling over to Allie who proceeds to give him a kiss on his head and exclaim over how cute he is. Otis' tail starts wagging away in response, and he licks her right across her face.

"I need Gloria's help with something," Harvey explains.

He still hasn't caught sight of me. I do not want to see him, not after that weird explosion of feelings in my stomach after rehearsal Monday. What if I have more kissing urges? For a second I debate whether or not it would be weird if I opened that window and shimmied out of it.

I'd come back for the kids.

But then my aunt appears and her eyes immediately go to me, widening in shock. "I did not do this, Kristen," she cries, exposing my presence to Harvey, whose complexion darkens in what I think is embarrassment as he locates me sitting on

the couch. Although what he has to be embarrassed about I'm not sure.

Oh gosh, unless he's embarrassed for me. Do I have something on my face? Is this a Janet Jackson nip slip situation? I glance down over myself and sigh in relief. Everything is tucked in. No stains. For once I'm even happy with the way I look in front of this man. I've got on my favorite jean jacket over a black and white tee all paired with black leggings. Sure, anything is a step up from a bathrobe, but even objectively speaking I think I look pretty cute.

"Did you invite Harvey over too?" my uncle asks, and Aunt Gloria shakes her head vehemently.

"Of course not!" she exclaims, eyes shooting over to me. "Not that I'm not thrilled to see you," she adds hastily, looking back over at Harvey and Allie. "You know you're always welcome here. Come give me a hug, both of you! Allie Cat, are you on your way to ballet, cara mia?"

"Tonight is my dress rehearsal," she tells Aunt Gloria.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot your rehearsal was tonight!" She gives Allie another squeeze. "Your grandpa and I are so excited to see you perform tomorrow night."

Grandpa? Well not altogether surprising to hear that's what Allie calls my uncle, it stings a little. What does Harvey call him? Dad?

"If you forgot I had my dress rehearsal then how come you didn't invite us to dinner?" Allie asks, tucking a loose curl from her bun behind her ear.

"Oh well," my aunt flounders, her eyes once again skittering my way.

"You know what, Allie," Harvey cuts in, "I think they were just having some time with their niece here." He gestures to me, and I offer a little wave and a smile. I'm not a monster, after all. Just because I don't like her uncle doesn't mean I can't be civil to her.

"Lily's nanny is Grandma and Grandpa's niece?" Allie cocks her head in confusion. "Does that mean I'm related to

Lily?”

“Uh, no, Miss Moo.” Harvey claps his hands together, moving the conversation along. “Anyway, Gloria, do you have a few minutes? I need help with something.”

“Sure thing, sweetie. What can I do for you?”

Before Harvey can answer, Allie pipes up. “I need to do makeup for my dress rehearsal but daddy doesn’t know how to do makeup. He crushed the mascara wand and when he tried to put my lipstick on he colored outside the lines.” She moves a finger around the outside of her lips, and I hold back a laugh. I am going to steadfastly ignore the adorable image of Harvey trying to do her makeup that just popped into my head. I bet it actually wasn’t cute at all. He probably kept swearing in frustration. I bet he scared her with his colorful language.

No, I know that’s not true. Harvey isn’t much of a swearer. Plus, he’s great with kids. The summer we were dating we helped run a children’s song and story hour at the library . The kids loved Mr. Harvey, as they called him, and his silly songs.

“Hey, I think the mascara wand was faulty,” Harvey says, making Aunt Gloria laugh. Harvey’s cheeks are red again though, and I realize this is what he’s embarrassed about. Asking for help with Allie’s make-up.

Which is a ridiculous thing to be embarrassed about, if you ask me. I mean, how sweet is it that he even tried to do it on his own?

Well, maybe not sweet. But at least not completely awful like so many other things he does.

“I’m sure it was just a faulty wand,” Aunt Gloria appeases him, “but I’m happy to help even so. Allie Cat, why don’t you head to my bathroom and we’ll get started on you in just a second.” She looks at Harvey. “How much time do we have before you have to leave?”

Harvey eyes his watch. “If we don’t want to be late, I’d say fifteen minutes. Twenty at the most.” He hesitates. “Will that be enough time?”

“To do an eight-year-olds make-up? I think so,” Aunt Gloria assures him.

“Ms. Gloria!” Lily’s worried voice travels from the kitchen. “We need you!”

Aunt Gloria and I both hurry for the kitchen, her telling Harvey she’ll see to Allie in just a minute. We round the corner to the kitchen to find sauce all over the floor and splattered across her white cupboards. Aunt Gloria’s face pales, but she doesn’t shout, just starts issuing directions like some kind of drill sergeant.

“Lily, grab the whole roll of paper towel. Camden pick up that pot off the ground and put it in the sink. Kristen,” I step forward, ready to help, “go help Allie with her make-up,” she finishes.

“What?” I blanch. “Aunt Gloria, I really think you should-”

“I need to deal with this mess,” she interrupts. “Now stop arguing and go.” She ushers me away, ignoring my protestations.

My feet drag down the hallway to the master bath. I’m about to go help a little girl who, for all intents and purposes, is Harvey’s daughter. How do I feel about this?

Torn. More torn than a head of lettuce made into a salad.

“You’re going to do great, Miss Moo.” Harvey’s voice travels down the hall, and I freeze just outside the door, realizing I’m about to walk in on what sounds like a private moment between Harvey and Allie.

“But what if I make a mistake or trip and fall?” Allie’s voice is tiny and unsure.

“You trip or fall?” Harvey is incredulous. “Not going to happen.”

“But what if it does?” Allie insists.

“If it does, no worries. I’ll be sitting in the front row ready to hop up on stage and give you a hand back up.” He

pauses. “Then I’ll trip on my way back to my seat to take the heat off you. I can do a really good face plant.”

Allie giggles, and my heart squeezes in my chest. Unable to resist taking a peek, I slide my head around the doorpost, and a yearning so deep it threatens to drown me floods over my body. Allie is standing in front of the mirror, and Harvey is behind her sliding bobby pins into her hair to keep the loose strands in place. As I watch he slides the last one in place, then whirls her around to pull her into a hug.

Unbidden tears spark my eyes, and I backstep quickly before I give myself away by bursting into loud sobs. Only I back right up into Uncle Rob, who catches me by the shoulders with an oomf.

“Woah, there Kristen,” he booms. “I think you’re going the wrong way. Your aunt sent me to make sure things were going okay. She’s still knee-deep in sauce cleanup.”

Harvey appears in the bathroom door. “Oh, hey, Rob. Kristen.” He clears his throat, back to looking embarrassed. So weird. “Where’s Gloria?”

“There was a sauce explosion in the kitchen,” Uncle Rob explains. “So she sent us in her place.” He gives a self-deprecating chuckle. “Well, she sent Kristen in her place. I’m just here in the role of supervisor.”

“You’re going to do Allie’s make-up?” Harvey’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and I bristle.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, no. Of course not,” he backtracks. “C’mon in.” He sweeps his hand out to the side.

Uncle Rob and I both walk into the bathroom, and the space instantly feels crowded with the four of us in here. There’s no way I can maintain any sort of distance from Harvey in this tiny space, and I can’t be expected to just ignore that weird magnetic pull his body seems to have over mine when he’s so close to me. I take a few deep breaths, but this only results in me inhaling his scent. I’m like one of those

Twilight vampires, my mouth watering as the cedar and pine hits my nose.

“Wow, it’s a bit crowded in here,” Uncle Rob comments with a scratch of his chin. “Harvey, I think maybe you and I should evacuate the premises, leave the girls to do their thing.”

Harvey eyes Allie. “That okay, Miss Moo?”

Allie looks up at me with wide curious eyes, and I do my best not to look scary. I guess I pass her test, because she turns to Harvey, and nods, slipping her hand into mine. “Miss Kristen and I will be fine, Daddy.”

I’m frozen, trying not to let myself soak in the sweetness of a little girl’s hand in mine. I don’t like kids. Her hand is probably full of germs from not washing her hands sufficiently. I should focus on that.

Harvey swallows, his gaze locked on our intersected hands. Uncle Rob nudges him with an elbow. “Harvey?”

Harvey starts to attention. “Right. Let’s go, then.” He follows my uncle out the door, leaving me alone with Allie, who lets go of my hand to stare up at me.

“You’re really pretty,” she announces. “I think that must be why my daddy was staring at you so much at rehearsal on Monday.”

A blush colors my cheeks as a frisson of delight curls through my stomach. Harvey was staring at me at play practice?

Not that I care.

“What do you mean staring?” I hear myself ask despite my best intentions. “Staring like glowering?” I demonstrate the expression, eyes squinting angrily, mouth in a straight line, eyebrows lowered. “Or staring like-” I prop my mouth open and fan myself.

“Hmm, more like the second one,” Allie pronounces. “That’s good, right? That means he wants to marry you?”

“Uh,” I titter uncomfortably. “Marry me? I don’t think so. We’re not even dating.”

“So?” Allie shrugs. “Cinderella didn’t date Prince Charming. They just danced once then got married. And Snow White’s prince just kissed her, and then they got married.” She drops her head to the side. “Hey, I think my daddy should kiss you, and then you can get married!”

Heat flushes my skin, as I force out another uncomfortable laugh. “And I think maybe you should stop getting your ideas about how romance works from Disney movies.”

“Where else would I get them?”

“Oh.” I scramble. “I don’t know...*Pride and Prejudice* is a good option. Although you’re probably not old enough for that. So, maybe,” I search my brain and come up empty. “The Bible?” I suggest, because that seems like a good default book suggestion.

“The Bible. Okay.” Allie nods, then beams. “I’ve already read some of that. If I read the rest, then can you marry my daddy?”

Okay, clearly this conversation has gotten away from me! Time to reel it back in.

“So, your make-up.” I clap my hands once. “Let’s get started.”

Allie sighs, but nods. I pick up the wand of mascara Harvey brought, cringing when I unscrew it and see it is in fact quite crushed.

“Let’s start with blush,” I say, picking that up instead. I dab the brush with the pink powder and start sweeping it across her cheeks. “So how long have you been dancing?” I ask Allie as I work.

“This is my first dance class,” she tells me. “I want to be an actress when I grow up, and I read in this bio-gra-phy,” she spaces out the syllables of the word, trying to make sure she says it right, “about Shirley Temple,” she pauses. “Do you know who that is?”

“I do,” I say with a smile. “She’s my Aunt Gloria’s favorite actress.”

“She’s the one who gave me the biography!” This time she mispronounces the word in her excitement. “And we’ve watched all her movies! I love her!” she gushes, hands clasped together. “But she started taking dance lessons when she was only three,” she finishes her earlier point, sticking up three fingers demonstratively. “So, I’m already five years behind.” Her lips dip, but then pop back up. “But my daddy said I can catch up.”

“Of course you can,” I agree, finishing her cheeks with a flourish.

“Can I tell you something?” Allie’s face turns serious as I pick up the lipstick.

“Of course.” I pause with my hand around the tube, sensing she’s about to divulge something that she’ll want my full attention for. “What’s up?”

“My daddy,” she says, eyes wide, “isn’t my actual daddy.” My heart breaks in two. I knew this already, of course, but hearing her little voice say it takes my emotions to the next level. “My actual daddy was killed in a car accident when I was a baby. My mommy too.” Allie sighs, her face sad.

I put the lipstick down and meet her eyes. “Can I tell you something?” I ask, and she nods. “I knew your mommy and daddy.”

“You did?” Her eyes get even wider.

“I did.” I nod. “And they were the best kind of people. I only met them a few times, but each time they were warm and welcoming and kind.” I smile at her. “And they were so excited about being pregnant with you.”

“You knew my mommy when she was pregnant with me?” Allie’s voice is full of awe. “So we’ve kind of met too!”

“Actually,” I admit, “we’ve met for real too. I held you when you were only a few weeks old.” Pain twists in my stomach at the memory of that day. Allie had been born just over a week before our family’s summer trip to Mississippi, but thanks to a summer cold, I hadn’t met her until after our trip, when she was almost three weeks old. That morning I’d

found out the news about my own future, or rather my lack of a future, as a mother. *“The reason for your heavy and painful periods is that you have endometriosis....I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but given the severity of your scarring, it’s unlikely you’ll be able to have children.”*

Holding Allie, I’d still been numb from the shock. She’d laid there, content in my arms, her lips bubbling away with baby drool—so perfectly precious. And I’d barely been able to look at her without tears springing to my eyes.

“Wow,” Allie breathes. “That’s so cool that you held me.”

“Yeah.” I force a smile, stuffing away those long-stored memories. “Pretty cool.” I pull the cap off the lipstick tube, and roll it up a smidge. “Pucker a little for me.” I demonstrate, and she hurries to mimic me. I smooth the red wax over her lips. When I’ve finished I turn her around to face the mirror. “What do you think?”

“Wow!” She turns her head from side to side, admiring. “I look so pretty!”

“You don’t need makeup to be pretty, Allie,” I tell her, “but it is fun to dress yourself up a little.”

She nods, still examining her reflection with pride. As she turns her head a bobby pin falls out of her hair, a curl springing loose in its wake.

“Hey, you want me to redo your hair too?” I ask.

“Would you do that, really? My daddy tries so hard, but he can never make it look the way it’s supposed to.” She points to my hair. “Your hair was in the perfect ballerina bun at play rehearsal. Can you do that to mine?”

I grin. “Absolutely.” Allie turns back to the mirror, and I start pulling out the rest of the bobby pins and the elastics around her bun.

“Can I ask you something else?” Allie asks as her hair falls free over her shoulders.

“Sure you can. Is it which Disney Princess I like best? Because the answer is definitely Rapunzel.”

Allie grins. “I like her too! But actually I wanted to ask you,” she chews her lip, “if you knew my parents does that mean you knew my daddy then too? And if so how come I’ve never met you before?”

My fingers freeze in her hair. “Well,” I say carefully, “I did know your daddy back then, but then he moved away and we lost touch. As for why you and I haven’t met, well it’s kind of for the same reason. Up until a few weeks ago, I lived all the way in Michigan, so it would’ve been hard for us to meet.”

“Michigan!” Allie exclaims. “That’s where I was born. We went there when I was on Christmas break, because I wanted to see where my parents lived. We stayed at a water park there. It was so fun!”

My pupils flare. I knew that was Harvey’s truck I saw! But of course, they were just passing through Mistle Berry on their way to Mauve Hill and Splash World. Although that doesn’t actually make sense geographically, since Mistle Berry is north of Mauve Hill. They would’ve had to make a special trip to go to Mistle Berry. But why would Harvey do that?

“That sounds fun,” I tell Allie. “Did you go anywhere else on your trip?”

“We went and saw my grandparents in Chicago, but we only stayed for one day. Then on Christmas we saw my other grandma in Mauve Hill, but she has something where she doesn’t know who we are. So we didn’t stay very long at her nursing home. We left her a present though.”

“Oh I’m so sorry to hear that about your grandma.”

“Yeah.” Allie sighs. “It was sad. But after my daddy took me to get hot chocolate, and then we drove around and looked at Christmas lights until I fell asleep.” Her mouth twitches, and she glances around the room as if to check for anyone listening. “There was one more place we went,” she whispers once she’s determined the room is clear.

Instantly I’m on alert. “Oh, yeah? Where?”

“My daddy stopped at this restaurant,” she’s still whispering. “And then we just sat in the parking lot for like

forever. He didn't know I was awake. At first he was singing some song I've never heard about being with someone everywhere or something, but then," she swallows. By now I'm not even pretending to be doing her hair. I'm just listening, eyes locked on her in the mirror. "Then he started crying," she whispers so softly that I only catch it because I see her lips form the words in her reflection. "I've never seen my daddy cry like that," she says earnestly. "It scared me."

I'm a shaken up can of Coke, ready to spray the unsuspecting person who pops the tab with sticky liquid-or in my case questions and emotions too numerous for me to make sense of them all. That's right, you think pop is hard to get out of your hair? Wait till I hit you with my emotional baggage.

Only Allie is still staring at me in the mirror, her expression full of worry and uncertainty. So I'm going to have to get all my bubbling emotions under control and focus on her. Luckily I'm an expert at avoiding emotions, so I pretend I didn't just find out Harvey was singing our song and crying in the parking lot of my parents' restaurant and focus on Allie.

"You know, honey," I say softly, "even grown-ups cry sometimes. We have things that make us sad too. It doesn't mean you need to be scared. And you know, most of the time grown-ups like the same stuff as kids when they're sad-a hug or even someone to just be with them."

Allie studies my reflection for a minute, then nods solemnly.

"Do you want to talk more about it?" I ask. "Or should I keep doing your hair?"

"You should keep doing my hair," Allie decides. "And Miss Kristen," she adds as I nod and start gathering strands of her hair again, "thank you."

"Anytime, honey," I tell her. Which is ridiculous. Why am I offering to be easily accessible to a little girl with connections to everything I've been trying to avoid the last eight years? I should take it back. Or at least give her a very specific set of office hours.

But then she beams at me in the mirror, and I know I won't take it back. I may be setting myself up for pain and heartbreak, but as I slide the last bobby pin in place and survey Allie's happy glow, I can't help but feel a glow of happiness of my own.

Anyway, I'll just stock up on waffles and whipped cream. That way I'll be prepared when the heartbreak comes.

Chapter 15

HARVEY

The morning after our encounter with Kristen and the kids, Kristen is all Allie can talk about. Which is not great, since she's also all I can think about. How am I supposed to stay away from her when I'm basically getting double-teamed by her very existence?

You'd think I'd get some reprieve at work, but nope. Gloria chooses today to come in and have lunch with me, so we can, you guessed it, talk about Kristen.

"It's obvious to me that there's still so much chemistry there," she says as she passes me the container of leftover lasagna she brought for me. "So I just don't understand why the two of you didn't work out. Clearly I couldn't ask you when you showed up here eight years ago. Meanwhile Kristen refused to talk to any of us about the whole thing. You were like that Bruno fellow from *Encanto*, our family doesn't talk about Harvey."

I wince, guilt turning Gloria's usually epic lasagna sour in my mouth. Leaving Kristen eight years ago was one of the hardest things I've ever done, and I've spent almost every day since wondering if I made the right decision. But at least I was the one who chose to leave. Kristen was the one that got left behind. And I did that to her. The guy who, only days before, had been talking to her about our future together. Would we have a dog or a cat? Would we live in Mistle Berry or Mauve Hill? How many kids would we have?

And then I just up and ended things.

It was a huge jerk move.

"It was my fault," I tell Gloria now. "And I'm not surprised Kristen's having a hard time forgiving me. I am surprised she hasn't moved on though." Am I fishing for

information on Kristen's dating habits? Yes, I am. I shouldn't be, but I am.

"I think we all are." Gloria sets her fork down with a sigh. "At first she threw herself into her schoolwork. Becoming a vet is a long and arduous process, you know. We all thought she was simply choosing to focus on her career for a season, but then she graduated and got a job right there in Mistle Berry, and she still didn't seem interested in dating anyone." Gloria throws up her hands in exasperation, but for some reason my lasagna just got its deliciousness back.

"She hasn't dated anyone?" I clarify. My dating history is pretty much the same, given that I've been busy solo parenting. I've gone out on the occasional date, but my heart was never really in it.

"Not that we know of," Gloria replies. "Felicity told me she gets asked out, but that she always says no. Apparently," she adds, "if she's clicking with a guy sometimes she'll give him her number and tell him to call her if he's still single when she's forty. We can't figure out what that's about. You two don't have some sort of weird pact do you? Like where you're going to marry each other if you're both still single when you're forty?"

"If we had that pact, why would she be telling people to call her when she's forty?"

"Because," Gloria rolls her eyes, "she's so mad at you, she doesn't want to marry you anymore."

"But then she'd be dating now to avoid that outcome."

"True." Gloria frowns. "Well I have no idea then."

"Me either."

"So you're saying you'll ask her out and see what happens?"

"I have no idea how you got that from what I just said."

"You asked if she was dating anyone, which implies you're interested," Gloria replies with satisfaction.

"I asked if she *had* dated anyone."

“That’s not what I heard.” We stare at each other across my desk until she finally blinks and sits forward with a laugh. “You can’t blame me for trying, Harvey. I love you both so much. The idea of the two of you together,” she puts her fingers to her lips and pulls them away with a smack, “magic.”

“It would never work between us, Gloria.” I can’t indulge her fantasies. “Mostly because I have Allie to think about.”

“And don’t you think Allie would love to have a mother?” Gloria counters.

“Not one who’s not interested in being her mother.”

Gloria recoils as if she’s been slapped. “Bite your tongue, Harvey. How could you say such a thing?”

Her reaction takes me by surprise. “I’m just restating Kristen’s own words,” I defend myself.

“Kristen told you she didn’t have any interest in being Allie’s mother?”

“Not Allie specifically,” I amend, “but she told me she doesn’t want kids, and Allie is a kid, so you can see how I drew my conclusion.”

Gloria’s face has gone pale. “When did she tell you this?” she demands to know.

“Eight years ago.” I don’t look at her as I answer, knowing she’ll figure out what my timeline means. Sure enough she gasps, then starts muttering rapidly in Italian. I’d be alarmed if she didn’t do this a lot. Although usually it’s after Rob has done something she doesn’t like.

Which, now that I think about it, must mean I’ve done something she doesn’t like.

“Don’t worry,” Gloria finally switches back to English as she stands up and grabs her purse, “I will take care of this, caro mio.” She gives me a stern look, then marches out the door.

“Gloria!” I stand up to follow her, but before I’ve made it out the door Gina appears in the doorway.

“Sorry, boss,” she says without any trace of apology in her voice. “Gloria doesn’t want to be followed.” She plants herself firmly in the doorway, blocking my path. I could move her, sure, but I’m not someone who goes around pushing their employees out of the way.

“It’s fine.” I raise my hands up and back away. “I know where she lives. I’ll catch her later.”

“I know you’re trying to trick me into moving,” Gina says smugly. “You think if you act like you’re not going to chase her, I’ll move.” She adjusts her position, tightening her grip on the door frame. “But you’re wrong.”

“You do know I’m your boss, not her.”

“That’s what you think, boss man.” Gina smirks. “Oh there’s her car engine.” She moves out of the way. “You’re free to go.” The bell signaling the arrival of a customer dings. “Of course you really should get back to work.” She smiles like a cat with a mouse, then traipses back to her desk.

I inhale deeply, then head out to the garage to pick up where I left off on a customer’s truck. What’s Gloria really going to do anyway?

Sure, she’s a force of nature and not someone to be reckoned with, but even she can’t turn back time.

Chapter 16

KRISTEN

“Kristen, oh thank goodness you picked up!” My aunt’s harried voice blares through my phone, and instantly I’m on alert.

“Aunt Gloria, is everything okay?”

“Are you busy right now?” she asks, her voice still breathy and erratic.

“Not if you need me,” I say, shutting the dishwasher and already heading toward the door.

“I do!” Aunt Gloria sighs in relief. “You see I’ve picked up Allie from school for a girls’ afternoon only your Uncle Rob just called and would you believe he’s stranded on the highway with a flat tire! And the silly man never replaced his spare from the last time this happened, so he has to wait for a tow truck. Of course the tow truck said they won’t be there for a couple of hours, and he hasn’t had lunch yet. You know how he gets when he’s hungry. He puts the angry in hangry.”

“You need me to go get him and feed him?” I ask wryly.

“Oh.” Aunt Gloria is silent for a few seconds. “No, no, no. I’ll go,” she finally says, her voice oddly high-pitched. “He asked me to come, because...” She clears her throat. “He misses me.”

“He...misses you,” I repeat slowly. “Didn’t he just see you a few hours ago?”

“His tire blew out on the highway, Kristen!” she cries semi-hysterically. “After a near-death experience like that, of course he would want to see his wife. Hug the ones you love and all of that. Men have needs you know, Kristen.” She still sounds flustered, and quite suddenly I understand what she’s getting at, and oh my word! I cut her off before her next words

are about some fantasy she and Uncle Rob have about a romantic tryst on the side of the road.

“Okay, I get the picture!” I exclaim. “So what do you need me to do?”

“Take Allie on her girls’ day, of course,” Aunt Gloria’s voice is back to normal. “Don’t worry you’ll be back in plenty of time to pick Camden and Lily up from school. Unless Allie has a hard time making a decision, but I don’t foresee that being a problem.”

“A decision about what? Where are we going? Are you sure Harvey is okay with me taking his daughter out?”

“I’ll text you the address.” Aunt Gloria ignores my other questions. “Just get on over to the school. We’re waiting for you in the parking lot.”

With that she hangs up. I stand there in the Wilders’ mud room for a minute, trying to figure out what just happened. A text comes through jolting me back into action, and I peer down at it as I head out to my car.

The address isn’t familiar to me, but when I enter into my directions app I see it’s some sort of farm. Why am I taking Allie to a farm for a girls’ day? Not that I mind. I love farms. And I love farm animals even more.

But going to a farm isn’t exactly a spa day.

Aunt Gloria sends me another text to hurry up, so I do just that, wondering as I pull out of the neighborhood why I’m agreeing to do this in the first place.

Half-an-hour later Allie and I are pulling up to a giant red barn, a flock of chickens serving as our welcoming committee. On one side of the barn a flat fenced in stretch of land houses a herd of cows, and on the other a wide planting field lays dormant for the winter. A sense of peace overtakes me at the scene before me, and a sigh escapes my lips.

“Wow!” Allie exclaims excitedly. “Cows! And chickens!” She bursts out of the car, laughing as a chicken takes off after her. I step out of the car too, smiling as I watch her.

After such an emotional conversation earlier this week, I wasn't sure what we'd talk about on the car ride. I shouldn't have worried. Allie spent the entire nineteen minute trip talking my ear off about Harvey.

Did I know, she'd asked me, that she and her daddy make blueberry pancakes every Saturday morning? And did I know that he lets her flip said pancakes?

Oh, and did I know that her daddy always lets her pick the pizza toppings on pizza night and that most of the time he lets her pick the movie for their Friday night movie nights. Although this last time he made her watch *Guardians of the Galaxy*, because he said he needed a break from princess movies.

And did I know that her daddy always sends her a rose at school on Valentine's Day and puts a box of chocolates under her pillow.

Did I know all of this? No, I did not. But I do now.

The whole car ride felt like I was sitting in on a pitch for why I should want Harvey to be my daddy.

I just heard how that sounded. Scratch that thought from the record.

“Miss Kristen, look!” Allie calls, and I turn my head to see she's now holding a chicken.

“Careful little miss, that one pecks.” A gravelly voice pulls our attention toward the barn where we see an older woman with frizzy graying hair coming toward us, a smile on her face. “You must be Gloria's granddaughter,” she adds as she reaches Allie and plucks the chicken out of her arms. “Try this one instead,” she tells her, bending down to scoop up a different chicken. “This one is Marsala, and she's much friendlier than Nugget there.”

Allie takes the chicken eagerly. “Hi, Marsala,” she coos to it.

Chicken Marsala and Chicken Nugget. Nice.

“And you’re Gloria’s niece,” the woman says, turning to me. I nod.

“Yes, I’m Kristen Heart, and this is Allie-” I hesitate, realizing I don’t know Allie’s last name. Did she keep her parents’ last name of Parker or did she take Harvey’s last name? What’s the protocol in their type of situation?

“Allie Parker-Barrett,” Allie supplies for me. “It used to be just Allie Parker, but then my daddy and I both changed our last names so we could match.”

He changed his last name to match hers? Thank goodness we’re on a farm right now. No one will think anything of the giant puddle my heart just melted into.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Allie Parker-Barrett.” She smiles kindly. “And you as well, Kristen. I’m Chessa Mae Hastings. My husband Jay and I own this farm. Would you like to take a look around or just head straight for the puppies?”

“Puppies!” Allie trills, jumping up and down. Puppies? We’re here for a puppy? I’m completely shocked. Dumbfounded.

And okay- excited! Puppies!

“Puppies it is then,” Chessa Mae says with a laugh. “Follow me.” She turns and starts back for the barn.

“Wait,” I call after her, and she looks back at me expectantly. “We’re here to look at puppies?” I clarify.

“Yes, of course.” She frowns, a crease of confusion taking over her forehead. “And to take one home. Didn’t you know that?”

“I did not.” I look down at Allie. “But you clearly did.”

She nods, her smile as wide as her face. “Grandma told me when she picked me up from school.”

“So this is all fine with your daddy?”

Allie shrugs. “Grandma said he’d be fine with it because you’re a vet so you can come over all of the time and help us with the puppy.”

My eyes narrow. Why does this feel like entrapment?

Did Uncle Rob even have a flat tire?

“Can we go look now?” Allie begs.

“Yes, indeed!” Chessa Mae laughs, and resumes her walk to the barn, Allie following in her wake. I’m left to stew alone. Until I hear Allie’s squeal of delight. Then I can’t resist anymore. I mean there are puppies in that barn! I only have so much willpower.

The scene I walk in on is so adorable it could be on the front of a dog calendar. Seven balls of golden fluff are climbing into Allie’s lap, vying for her attention. One yips and starts tackling the puppy next to it. Another one slides off her knee and back onto the ground before yawning and curling into a ball at her side.

“Sleeping in the middle of all this excitement,” I say, pointing to the puppy. “I’d take that one.”

Chessa Mae chuckles. “That one we named Kleenex. And this one here,” she scoops up the puppy that tackled his puppy sibling, “is Moose. Then we’ve got their brother Norbert over there.” She points to a puppy busy chewing on the cuff of Allie’s pants. “No, Norbert,” she scolds, bending down to pull him off before he makes a hole. “And their sisters are,” she pats them each on the head as she names them off, “Jo, Beth, Meg, and Amy.” She shakes her head. “I named the girls, my husband named the boys. And obviously, you’re welcome to change the name of the one you take home.”

I laugh. “I like the name Kleenex, but you can’t beat those literary names. My sister is an English teacher, and she would love your choices.”

Chessa Mae grins. “Thank you, dear. Now, why don’t you get down there with the puppies. I can tell you want to.”

She’s not wrong. I’m dying to snuggle all the puppies. But am I really going to be such a willing participant in my

aunt's schemes?

One of the puppies, pretty sure it's the one named Beth, wanders over to me, and starts climbing on top of my shoe.

Oh forget it! I surrender!

I bend down and lift her onto my lap, my puppy voice emerging automatically as I tell her what a cutie-patootie she is.

Allie and I take our time petting and getting to know each puppy, but soon they all get tired and wander back toward their mom, who's been watching us stoically this whole time. All of them, that is, except Kleenex. He woke up from his little nap, and is now reveling in Allie's undivided attention.

"Well," Chessa Mae comments, "they say the puppy often picks the owner. It certainly seems like that applies here."

"Is that true?" I ask Allie. "Is this the puppy you want?"

Allie beams and nods, holding Kleenex against her chest. "Daddy is going to love you so much!" she tells Kleenex.

I'm not so sure about that given the fact that I'm pretty sure he doesn't even know he's getting a dog today. Luckily that's Aunt Gloria's problem-not mine.

Or at least it should be her problem. As we settle ourselves back in my car, Kleenex cuddled into Allie's lap in the backseat, I get another text from her.

Won't make it back before school gets out. Do you mind hanging out with Allie until I get back? You can take Camden and Lily to Harvey's house to play. They'll love the puppy. And don't worry. Harvey won't be there.

Do I mind? I resist the urge to throw my phone across the car. What sort of game is she playing?

Obviously I can't just drop Allie off to stay home alone, so there is no 'do you mind', there's only a 'you have no other choice'. As if she can read my thoughts, another text arrives.

If it's a problem you can always drop her off at the garage.

Typing bubbles appear before her third text arrives.

But obviously, Harvey will be there.

This time I do throw my phone, it lands on the passenger seat without any sort of satisfying impact, which is good since Allie is in the backseat. Thankfully, she doesn't seem to have noticed my outburst, she's too enamored with her new puppy.

“Okay, Allie,” I say, catching her eye in the rearview mirror, “you want to show off your new puppy to Camden and Lily?”

Chapter 17

HARVEY

The afternoon passes without any other word from Gloria, so by the time I lock up the garage and head home for the night, I've relaxed considerably. Maybe this time she was all talk. I'll find out in a few minutes, since she's watching Allie at our house. I shoot her a text that I'm on my way home, but she doesn't answer. Unusual, given that normally when she watches Allie after school she sends me pictures of what they're doing, a text with what she's planning to make for dinner, and updates about what meals she's added to my freezer for me to cook for future dinners.

I know, she absolutely spoils us. So I should probably just step aside and let her do whatever meddling in my life she wants to do, right?

My kind thoughts about Gloria vanish when I pull up to the house and see a gray Honda Civic in my driveway instead of Gloria's blue Ford F150.

Why is Kristen at my house?

And WHY am I imagining what it would be like to come home everyday to her here, taking over my space in the best way?

I park on the curb, since she's blocking the garage, and attempt to focus on how annoying that is, rather than the anticipation fizzing around inside my stomach. I like parking in the garage. Mississippi may not get a lot of snow, but it still gets relatively cold here. If my car is in the garage, Allie and I can mostly avoid the morning chill. It's only a one-car garage, I might add. So I can kick my Kristen living here fantasies to the curb, because if she moved in, one of us would have to park outside of the garage. And it sure as heck wouldn't be me.

I open the front door and hear laughter coming from the kitchen. More specifically, I hear Kristen's laughter, closely followed by Allie's.

I take it all back. She can have the garage. Heck, she can have whatever she wants. The recliner, priority use of the bathroom in the morning, her preferred side of the bed. I just want to hear that sound everyday.

No. I shake this away. For Kristen to move in here, we'd have to get married. And people don't marry people they hate. And they definitely don't marry people who have kids they don't want. Unless they plan to send them away to boarding school, like in *The Parent Trap*.

Geez, another *Parent Trap* reference! Get it together, man! You watched a Marvel movie this weekend. Where are your *Guardians of the Galaxy* references?

A new sound hits my ears, and I freeze. Was that...a dog?

I surge toward the kitchen, not even taking off my shoes in my urgency to investigate that sound. I round the corner and yup, it's a dog. More specifically it's a puppy, a golden retriever puppy.

My eyes widen as I take in Allie, Camden, and Lily passing around what has to be the world's smallest tennis ball as the puppy frantically chases it. Then my gaze moves over to Kristen, who hasn't seen me yet, because she's on her hands and knees cleaning something up off the floor. One guess what it is.

Yup.

Dog urine.

Great.

Listen, I like dogs as much as the next person. What I don't like? Having things sprung on me before I can properly prepare for them.

And also dog urine on my kitchen floor. I'm having bird poop flashbacks.

“Daddy!” Allie catches sight of me and abandons the game of keep away to zoom over to me for a hug. “Look what we got today?” she exclaims as she wraps her arms around me. “Isn’t he adorable? His name used to be Kleenex, but I think I’m going to name him Dave. I’ve never met a dog named Dave before, so I think it’s a good choice. How about you?” She’s speaking so rapidly, that I know she’s worried about my reaction to this dog.

As she should be. Unfortunately, I have two other children staring at me, and Kristen has stopped wiping up pee to look at me as well. So rather than instantly telling her the dog has to go back where it came from, I choose my words carefully.

“Dave sounds like a great name for a dog, honey. Where did Dave come from?” There. That was pretty good. No gaskets were blown in the delivery of those words.

“He came from a magical farm full of chickens and cows and puppies,” Allie waxes poetic. “Miss Kristen took me there and helped me pick him out.”

“Wait? What?” My head jerks over to where she’s still on her knees, pee-soaked paper towel in hand.

“Woah, woah, woah!” Kristen holds up a hand, then grimaces as she too realizes she’s holding something with pee all over it. She hurries to stand and throw it away, then heads for the sink, still talking. “This was not my idea.”

“And yet you took her,” I begin, my voice rising as she starts lathering soap on her hands. I pause, remembering the kids. “Hey,” I look down at the three of them, “why don’t you three take, uh, Dave out into the backyard to play.”

Camden and Lily quickly agree, but Allie looks up at me with wide eyes. “Daddy, are you mad?” she asks.

All of the tension eases out of my shoulders. Yes. I am definitely mad. But Allie is just a kid. Somebody told her she could get a puppy, so she did. It’s not really fair to be mad at her.

I should just be mad at Kristen.

“No, Miss Moo, I’m not mad.” I indicate the backyard with a bob of my head. “But I do need you to take the puppy outside, okay?”

She nods, scoops up Dave, and heads into the backyard.

“Oh good,” Kristen chirps as soon as she’s gone, “you’re not mad. I thought you would be, but you’re not. So that’s good. I’ll just get Camden and Lily, and we’ll be on our way.” She finishes drying her hands and makes to walk past me. I’m not sure why I do what I do next, but it happens. Like an eight-year-old reflex that just resurrected itself.

I reach out to stop her from leaving. My arms circle themselves around her waist and pull her back toward me. We both freeze as her back collides with my chest, and I forget all about Kleenex or Dave or whatever. My fingers are resting lightly on her waist and the feel of her curves makes my heart pick up speed. Aware of her back pressed into my chest, I flex like I’m a high school jock trying to impress the head cheerleader.

In response she jerks away and whirls to face me, her face flushed.

Yup, I have lost all of my game. I blame parenting for that. Too many weekends spent on diaper duty will suck all of the moves right out of you.

“Excuse me,” she huffs.

“You’re excused,” I reply cheekily, making her eyes flash.

“You can’t just come in here and manhandle me.” Kristen gesticulates wildly.

“Manhandle you? Really?” I breathe out a laugh. “I’ve handled fine china with less care.”

“You’ve handled fine china?” she snorts, taking a step toward me.

“Gloria uses it at every holiday meal.” My feet respond to her by taking a step of their own.

“Don’t tell me things about my aunt that I already know.” Her hands go to her hips, and my traitorous eyes follow them there, lingering for a beat before snapping back to her face.

“Do you have a list I can reference somewhere? Or should I just assume you already know everything about her?” I take another step closer, lured in by a strand of hair that’s come loose from her ponytail.

“The latter,” she says evenly. “Although, before last week I didn’t know the kind of company she keeps, “ she sniffs, moving infinitesimally closer.

“Ouch,” I feign offense. “You know, you used to like being in my company.” I answer her tiny step by taking two of my own.

“I was 20 then. My brain wasn’t fully developed.” Her breath catches on the last word, as I break our step pattern and pull myself up directly in front of her.

Her eyes rise to meet mine. I could heat the whole house with the charged air circulating between us. I want to kiss her. I want to kiss her until we both forget about all of the things keeping us apart and there’s only the two of us. I lift my hand and slowly sweep that soft honey-colored strand of hair off her face, letting my fingers graze her jawline as I take my time lowering my hand back to my side. I hear her breath hitch, and any control of the situation that I thought I had vanishes. I reach out and tug her the rest of the way toward me by the hem of her shirt. Then I stop, needing her to tell me this is okay.

A second later her hands circle my neck. It’s all the encouragement I need.

I bend down, propelled by my erratic pulse, and-

“Yoo-hoo! Where is everyone?” Gloria’s voice interrupts the moment, and we spring apart before we can complete the kiss. Neither of us looks at the other as Gloria arrives in the kitchen a second later, but as her shrewd gaze takes in the scene I can tell she knows she interrupted something.

Too bad it wasn't an actual something. Just an almost something.

An almost something I'll be thinking about for a long time. Inadvertently my eyes skip over to Kristen's lips, and I swallow hard.

"Oh my," Gloria sounds pleased as punch. "What do we have here? The two of you alone in the kitchen? My, my, my."

"Aunt Gloria, c'mon. It's not what you think. The kids just went outside with the puppy." Kristen's voice is strained, full of uncertainty. I feel a twinge of guilt. How could I have been about to kiss her when I have no intention of getting involved with her?

I was a jerk then, and I'm an even bigger jerk now.

"The puppy!" Gloria crows. "Everything went smoothly at the farm then? I called Chessa Mae and told her you'd be bringing Allie."

"Yes, she was expecting us."

"Oh good. Chessa Mae is such a lovely woman."

"She seemed very nice," Kristen agrees. "Did things work out with the tow truck?"

"Tow truck?" Gloria queries, then her face reddens. "Oh yes, the tow truck. Yes, they eventually arrived and towed his car."

"Rob got his car towed?" I cut in, my mind trying to work out what exactly happened this afternoon. "Where to? It's not at the shop."

"Oh." For a second she looks stumped, but then she brightens. "To our house of course. He can change the tire there himself. Anyway, I'm so glad you like the puppy, Harvey, and that you're not upset I pulled Allie out of school this afternoon."

"Who said I like the puppy?" I start to grumble, then pause as the second half of her sentence sinks in. "You pulled Allie out of school?"

“For a girls’ day,” Gloria says like this makes it all okay. “Of course, then I had the snafu with Rob’s car, but luckily Kristen here was willing to swoop in and save the day.”

I take Gloria’s measure as I compile this new information with the facts I’ve already gathered. So basically I tell her Kristen doesn’t want to be Allie’s mother, so she pulls Allie out of school under the pretense of having a girls’ afternoon, then fakes Rob getting a flat tire, all so that Kristen will have to take Allie on the girls’ afternoon instead so that they can bond.

Dang. She’s good. Here I thought she was all talk earlier; meanwhile she managed to put together the perfect crime in one afternoon. I underestimated her.

I only wish I could figure out how the puppy plays into all of this.

“Well we should go,” Kristen announces. “I still have to make dinner, and Lily needs to finish her math homework. Good luck with Dave.” She turns to head outside and grab the Wilders, but Gloria stops her.

“Don’t be silly, Kristen. I’ve got a chicken and broccoli casserole for you in the car, you can take it home, bake it for twenty minutes, and you’ll be good to go. You need to stay and do an exam on the puppy.”

Ah. There it is. The puppy piece.

“Do an exam?” Kristen repeats incredulously. “Aunt Gloria, I don’t have anything to do an exam with. My stethoscope and otoscope are both at home, and well I could probably find a way to collect a fecal sample, I don’t have any labs to send it to down here. Anyway, Chessa Mae sent a certificate of health home with Dave. He’s good to go until his next round of shots in a couple of weeks.”

Gloria frowns. “Nonsense. Surely puppies need to be monitored more than that. Why when Otis was a puppy, I swear we were at the vet every week.”

“If I remember correctly that was because of his chicken allergy. He kept getting sick.”

Gloria's frown deepens. "Hmm. Well let's hope Dave doesn't have the same problem."

Why am I now worried she's going to do something to induce vomiting in Dave? How far is she going to take this thing?

Somehow Kristen manages to extract herself and the kids from my house, leaving Gloria and I alone to talk as Allie takes Dave to her room to, as she informs us, teach him how to sit.

"You got me a puppy to force Kristen and I together?" I demand as soon as Allie is out of earshot.

"Nooo," Gloria stretches out the word, bustling around me to preheat my oven. "I got you a puppy because I was trying to force Kristen and Allie together." She opens my freezer and pulls out a disposable 8x8 pan marked baked shells. "The fact that that means you and Kristen will also be seeing more of each other is just gravy."

"Gloria," I groan in frustration, "I can't handle a puppy right now."

"Which is why you need to ask Kristen to help you. Animals are her weakness, Harvey. All you need to do is exploit that weakness. Make a big deal about the poor puppy being home alone all day, and suddenly she'll be asking for a key to your house so she can keep the puppy company during the day. Then she'll get attached to it and to you and Allie by default. The two of you will be married by spring."

I gape at her. "Does eHarmony know about you? Because I think you could really mess with their algorithm."

"Oh honey," she pats me on the cheek, "don't be silly. Love doesn't require an algorithm, it's basic chemistry."

"Yeah well, when you mess up basic chemistry, things end up exploding."

"Oh, don't you worry your handsome little face, Harvey." Gloria grins. "I'm counting on some sparks flying." She slides the baked shells into the oven and shuts the oven door with a satisfied bang.

Chapter 18

KRISTEN

Here's the thing. I was a vet for two years, spent the four years before that in vet school, and the three and a half years before that in pre-vet school. Animals have basically been my life for almost a decade. You can't exactly turn that type of thing off.

Which is the only reason I've been spending so much time the last few days wondering how things are going for Harvey and Allie with Dave.

Maybe I should just show up with my doctor's bag and give Dave a quick check-up. After all, golden retrievers are prone to hip dysplasia.

It's Sunday, and I have the afternoon off today, since Clarice is taking the kids to the Memphis Zoo after Lily's horseback riding lesson.

My plan for my kid free time is to head over to the YMCA and go for a swim. My aunt recommended it when I asked her about the best gyms in the area. I totally meant it when I said last week that I'm going to start working out more. Sandra Bullock body here we come.

Plus if I'm swimming I can think about my almost kiss with Harvey, and no one will notice my flushed skin. Not that I've been thinking about it; thinking about it would just condone my poor decision making skills.

But if I were to pick a place to think about it, underwater would be my first choice.

Thankfully I'm able to snag the last remaining open lap lane at the pool, and I quickly dive in. As soon as I'm beneath the water, I give in and allow myself to really analyze the fact that if my aunt hadn't interrupted us, Harvey and I would've kissed. Kissed! How could I have almost kissed the guy who broke up with me simply because he wanted to pursue his

musical career without me holding him back. The guy who one week asked what I thought about a winter wedding, then the next said he was going to Nashville and it wasn't going to work out between us. How could I have forgotten about eight years of hurt in one single moment?

I blame his stupid face.

It's entirely too handsome.

Like stupid handsome.

I reach the wall and do a flip turn to swim back. The real question is what do I want to do going forward? The lure of puppy snuggles is hard to resist, but if I'm going to completely lose my head around Harvey I might have to. New plan-stop liking dogs. That's right. I don't even like those furry enthusiastic creatures anymore. Dogs? Cute? I don't think so.

A kickboard appears in the water in front of me, signaling that someone wants to join my lane. I don't stop, just hold my hand up out of the water in a thumbs up and circle around to start another lap.

I pass the other swimmer on my way back to the starting wall, noticing that it's a guy. A fast guy. What did he jump into my lane for? I'm not a fast swimmer, he'll pass me in no time. And then he'll pass me again, and then again. And it'll be super awkward. Doesn't he know you're supposed to share lanes with people who go your same speed?

Sure enough he laps me on the next length. When he laps me again a length later, annoyance puts an extra spurt in my kick. This guy thinks he's so fast. Well, I'd be that fast too if I had the kind of broad shoulders he has. And his height certainly isn't hurting him.

If he passes me again I'm going to grab his ankle and make him tow me along with him. Then we'll see how fast he goes.

He passes me again.

I don't grab his ankle though, but only because I don't want to get kicked out of the Y. Instead whenever I feel him coming up behind me I veer into his path just to mess with

him. The fourth time I do this he bumps into me, his head ramming into my side and knocking the breath out of me. I swallow a lungful of water, and have to stop swimming to cough it back out.

The guy stops too, and as I stand there coughing like a crazy person, I realize in horror that the guy is Harvey! Harvey! I've been sharing a lane with *Harvey*! My eyes go down to his bare abdomen, and I start coughing all over again.

What is even happening?

"Kristen! Are you okay?" Harvey asks in alarm. "I'm sorry I ran into you, I wasn't expecting you to veer like that."

I don't say anything. I just keep coughing. This is an unacceptable variation on the afternoon I had planned. I was supposed to be able to swim my laps and talk myself out of wanting to kiss Harvey in peace! But now Harvey is here, invading my underwater haven, and my resolve to not kiss him is weakening.

I mean, we're in a pool. I've never kissed Harvey in a pool before. Obviously there are too many people around to kiss him in this pool though. Phew. Saved by the presence of witnesses.

Although...we could kiss underwater, and then nobody would see.

"Kristen? Are you okay?" Harvey asks again. "Your face is all flushed."

Yikes. Reel yourself in, you trollop.

"What are you doing here?" I spit out.

"Swimming laps," he says. "Same as you. Allie and I come here every Sunday afternoon because she has her swim lesson. I swim laps and she works on her freestyle technique."

Well isn't that domestic and sweet?

"Since when do you swim laps?" I demand rather than acknowledging the cuteness of their little weekly tradition out loud.

“Since when do *you* swim laps?” he counters.

“Since New Year’s Day three years ago,” I reply, insinuating that I do this all of the time rather than extremely sporadically and always in conjunction with a goal or resolution I’ve made to workout more.

“Wow,” Harvey’s brow lifts, “how funny that we both took up swimming laps.”

“Funny. And yet I’m not laughing.”

Harvey snorts. “You know,” his voice lowers, “I thought after what happened a few days ago we might’ve gotten past the hostile part of our relationship.”

“I think you mean what almost happened,” I reply primly, as if I was the one who stopped it and not my aunt’s unexpected arrival.

“Oh,” his voice drops even lower, “I wasn’t talking about the kiss.” Why did my eyes go to his mouth when he said kiss? Did he notice? Oh goodness! That stuff Jesus said about plucking your eyes out if they cause you to sin is suddenly starting to make a lot of sense. “I was talking about how I’ve chosen to let my anger go even though you got me a puppy I didn’t want,” Harvey goes on.

“I think you mean how my aunt got you a puppy you didn’t want,” I retort.

“And yet,” he mimics my earlier phrasing, “you were the one who brought it into my house.” He’s wearing an infuriatingly cocky expression as he says this, and I want to press pause on this whole encounter so I can call Chelsea and lament how unfair it is that men can look good in swim caps. I can’t even fit all of my hair in a swim cap. Which is why my hair is currently soaking wet and plastered to my neck. So not hot.

“Have you ever tried standing in Gloria’s way when she wants something to happen?” I challenge, and his cocky expression turns oddly pensive.

“Only once,” he finally admits.

“And how’d that go for you?”

He studies me for a few beats, then says, “I think I might be ready to step out of her way.”

His eyes find mine, and I get lost in their hazel depths as I try to decipher the meaning of his words. Surely, he doesn’t mean what I think he means. He can’t mean that he’s decided to get on board with Aunt Gloria’s matchmaking scheme. He can’t mean that.

Can he?

And if he does mean that, how am I going to respond?

“Hey, are you guys actually going to swim or just stand there talking?” A middle-aged guy in a Speedo interrupts before I can draw any formal conclusions about Harvey’s statement. “Because I’m waiting for a lane to use,” the guy adds when neither of us respond right away.

Harvey eyes the clock on the wall. “I’m still swimming, but you’re welcome to join us.” He adjusts his swim cap, giving me an up close and personal flash of his biceps. Then he winks at me and takes off swimming, leaving me standing there trying to figure out why I feel so flushed while standing in 78 degree water.

“How about you?” Speedo guy calls as he lowers himself in. “You swimming or not?”

I come out of my Harvey-induced daze and head toward the wall. “I’m all done,” I say a bit hoarsely. “Have a good swim.”

I climb out of the pool, slip my flip-flops on, and pad over to the towel racks. What I need is a nice relaxing soak in the hot tub. I grab a towel and head that way. Excited to find the hot tub empty, I sink into the piping hot water with a contented sigh. This is relaxation. Leaning my head back against the side of the tub, I close my eyes and imagine I’m off on some tropical island and any minute a cabana waiter is going to bring me some amazing beverage. Something pink with a fruit garnish.

Instead my eyes pop open as a rowdy group of teenage boys descends on the hot tub, no fruity drinks in sight. Two minutes ago I was alone, soaking in bubbles, and now I'm surrounded by the makings of a future frat house. Ugh. So much for relaxation. Maybe I'll head back to the Wilders' house and soak in one of their seven bathtubs.

I stand up to move toward the stairs, but more teenagers appear, blocking my exit. The hot tub is situated in the corner of the natatorium, enclosed by walls on all but one side, meaning there's only one way in and out. And now it's blocked by a couple of teenage linebackers, which means I'm standing in the middle of the hot tub like an idiot. Worse, the area I was just sitting in has now been claimed. We are absolutely above capacity in this thing, and with all of the extra bodies I have nowhere to go.

Somebody call the CIA because I need an extraction team.

"Excuse me," I say loudly to the kid closest to me, but he either doesn't hear me or is choosing to ignore me. "Can I just get by you?" I try again with another guy, but he's too busy throwing a football across the hot tub to some other guy. Who brings a football into a hot tub?

The ball sails over my head again, and I stifle a groan of frustration. Maybe if I steal their ball I'll be able to get their attention. The next time it goes over my head I reach up to try and snag it, but I'm not tall enough.

"Woah, monkey in the middle!" one of them calls.

"No, no, no!" I cry, waving my hands like an air traffic controller. "I'm not playing monkey in the middle. I just want to get out of this hot tub." The ball flies over me again.

Am I on mute or something?

Enough is enough. I'm going to have to part the teenage sea. I step forward, gingerly poking the shortest kid in the shoulder. "Excuse me, can I get by?"

"Monkey in the middle!" he shouts back at me as the ball lands in his hands.

Oh screw it. I'm getting that stupid ball, and then I'm going to pop it. I lunge for the kid, slightly gratified when panic lights his eyes, but he still manages to throw the ball outside of my wingspan. I whirl around, prepared to intercept the next throw, but the guy with the ball decides to taunt me, laughing as he moves the ball back and forth between his hands.

I put my hands on my hips and stare him down. "Give me the ball, you punk," I say like I'm some big shot bully on the playground and not an adult who got tricked into playing keep away. He doesn't even flinch, just pulls his arm back, preparing to throw it way over my head. Only at the last second he catches sight of something over my head and his arm falters causing the ball to take a much lower arc. This is my shot. I move backwards, ready to box out whoever the intended recipient is, then lunge for the ball, catching it triumphantly before I lose my balance and stumble back into the waiting arms of...Harvey.

"Having fun?" he asks wryly. He's taken off his swim cap and water droplets glisten in his brown waves. Mirth shines in his eyes.

"This is not what it looks like."

"Looks like you're playing keep away with half the high school football team."

Okay, I guess it is what it looks like.

"I was just trying to get out of the hot tub," I explain defensively.

"Uh-huh." He looks down at me with amusement, and I realize with a jolt that I'm still hanging out in his arms, settled against his chest like a bird in its nest for the night. Its very solid, hard nest. What is this thing made out of rocks? "Why don't you boys get out of here," Harvey raises his voice, "before I tell your coach you were in the hot tub instead of the weight room."

He's said the magic words. The whole group makes a mad dash for the exit, which we are unfortunately blocking. In

one swift movement Harvey lifts me up and scoots us both out of the way. He deposits me along the back wall, and instantly I miss my nest.

A few seconds later it's just the two of us alone in the hot tub, and I've moved on from a game of keep away with a ball to a game of keep away with my heart. Because what just happened is the perfect example of one of the things that first attracted me to Harvey-his confidence and general ability to be in control of any situation.

One of the first nights Harvey and I worked together at the restaurant, a belligerent, drunk customer got upset when I cut him off. All the way across the restaurant, from behind the bar, Harvey noticed the altercation, and before the guy could even finish cussing me out, Harvey was at the table, standing between us and taking the full force of the guy's anger on himself. After the drunk guy finished his tirade, Harvey calmly, but with steel in his voice, told him he could either call himself an Uber or Harvey would be calling him a more expensive ride with the boys in blue.

Needless to say the guy had opted for calling himself an Uber. Then when his Uber arrived, Harvey escorted him off the premises. One of the other waitresses told me she heard him tell the guy that if he ever saw him even looking my way again he'd give him a headache worse than the one his hangover was going to cause.

And now here we are alone in a hot tub together, and he's once again shown himself to be completely capable of handling any situation that comes his way.

I, on the other hand, feel completely incapable of doing anything other than staring at Harvey.

"Only you would get stuck in a hot tub with a bunch of teenagers playing monkey in the middle," Harvey comments with a shake of his head.

"They came out of nowhere! It was like some sort of ambush!"

Harvey just laughs, and for some reason I laugh too. Surprise widens his eyes at the sound, and a pleased smile pops onto his face. In response a frisson of pleasure runs down my spine. This moment feels so comfortable, like the light and easy time we spent together that magical summer. Only now there's an annoying voice in my head warning me that this is an illusion.

"I've got to go get Allie from her class," Harvey says, his voice tinged with what I think is regret.

"Okay." I nod. "Thanks for your help," I add lamely. "Even if I did have things under control."

Harvey laughs again. "Right." He moves toward the stairs, waving one hand as he ascends them. "See you at rehearsal tomorrow, Doc."

I count to ten after he's left, then lower my chin into the water to hide my smile.

Chapter 19

HARVEY

That's right. I've decided I'm no longer going to stand in Gloria's way. She understands the obstacles, and she thinks Kristen and I can still end up together, well, let's make it happen. Allie takes my hand as we exit the Y twenty minutes later, my mind still busy replaying everything that just took place between Kristen and me.

She laughed. For the first time in eight years, I made her laugh. It was all I could do to make myself leave that hot tub to collect Allie. I just wanted to stay with her until I could make her laugh again.

Back at home, Allie takes Dave out to the backyard to play, and I pick up my cell phone to call Gloria.

"Okay, you win, Gloria. I'm in."

"It's about dang time!" Gloria's smile travels through the phone line.

"But Allie is part of the deal," I say before she can get too excited. "She has to want both of us."

"And she will," Gloria replies promptly. "Just leave it to me. I got her to go to your gym today, didn't I?"

"*You* did that? How?"

"I have my ways."

"You're a little scary, Gloria," I say with a laugh.

"And don't you forget that," she quips. "Now I heard from Allie that the two of you are working together on the set for the play at her school. Is that true? And if so, what are you doing to make that experience romantic?"

“You expect me to make hammering pieces of wood together romantic?” Even as I say this a flashback of all the nights spent working in Kristen’s dad’s woodshop plays like a video montage in my mind. Yeah, it can be done.

“Harvey, watch a romantic comedy for Pete’s sake,” Gloria says impatiently. “Anything can be romantic when you’re in love. Why that’s the only logical explanation for why Angelina Jolie and that ex-husband of hers thought it was romantic to wear vials of each other’s blood around their necks. That’s not romantic. It’s just gross. But they were in love, and it messed up their good judgment.”

“So what are you thinking? You want me to attach myself to her with a nail?”

“I know you’re joking, but that’s not a bad idea. Do you think you could somehow hammer a nail through both your shirt sleeves?”

“No, Gloria,” I say flatly.

“Well fine, we’ll just have to think of something else. Could you offer to show her how to use a hammer?”

Been there, done that. Clearly 21-year-old me had more game than 29-year-old me.

“Seeing as she was hammering stuff with Ross last week, I don’t think she’s going to be asking for my help.”

“Who’s Ross?” Gloria demands.

“Just another parent working on the set with us.” I hesitate, but then add, “He plans on asking Kristen out.”

Gloria sucks in a breath. “And I’m only hearing about him now?” Suddenly I hear knitting needles clicking in the background, a sure sign she’s worked up. “Alright, well don’t worry about Ross. I’ll take care of him.”

“You’ll take care of him?” I repeat incredulously. “You make it sound like you’re going to put out a hit on him.”

All I hear in response are her knitting needles.

“Gloria.”

“Don’t lose your shirt, Harvey. I’m obviously not going to have the man killed. I’m a Christian woman, you know. We have a commandment about that.” Her knitting comes to an abrupt halt. “I’d better go, honey. Rob is in the kitchen trying to make soup and for unknown reasons he can never find the can opener. I can hear him unloading drawers in search of it as we speak.”

With that she hangs up. I guess I’ll have to wait until tomorrow to find out what “I’ll take care of him” means.

Apparently taking care of him means pretending to be a very demanding new client who needs Ross to show her a whole list of houses she’s considering purchasing. I get a text from Ross right as I’m heading to the school letting me know he’s gotten caught up with house showings and won’t be able to make it to rehearsal today.

So I guess it’s just me and Kristen building Pride Rock and the Sahara backdrop today. Well us and Camden. Last week he appointed himself head of screw and nail retrieval, and in keeping with that, he’s already stationed by the blueprint of the set, counting out a box of nails.

I make my way over to him, grinning when I catch sight of his tool belt. He was a big admirer of mine last week, I’m glad to see he was able to get one of his own.

“Nice tool belt,” I greet him, and he grins up at me.

“Thanks! Kristen got it for me!”

“Very cool.” I scan the room. “Speaking of which, where is Kristen?”

“She’s over there, helping Allie with her lines.” I follow his pointing finger across the auditorium to see Kristen sitting on a theater chair, legs curled up under her as she listens to Allie talking animatedly. Warmth glows in my chest.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Camden, striding across the room towards my girls. And okay, sure that thought was a bit

presumptuous, but as Gloria would say, speak your truth into existence. Or maybe that was Gloria quoting Oprah. Sometimes it's hard to know with her.

I'm ten feet away, busy contemplating my opening line, when my brain registers something it didn't from across the room. Yes, Kristen is actively listening to Allie, smiling and offering words of advice as Allie reads the part of Sarabi, but she's also got one arm wrapped around her stomach and there's a wanness to her complexion that suggests she's not well.

My steps falter as I realize what's going on. Even after all of these years I recognize the signs. She's on her period.

The first time Kristen had her period during our relationship was when we still hadn't told anyone we were dating. So when Kristen didn't show up for work and her sister told me she was sick, I figured I'd be a good secret boyfriend and surprise her by sneaking out during my break to bring her some chicken noodle soup. After all, her whole family was at the restaurant working. If I drove quickly, we'd have approximately eight minutes of alone time.

When I got to her house she didn't answer the door. Figuring she was asleep or not up for walking around I located their hidden key inside a flower pot and let myself inside. Following the soft sounds of the TV, I made my way to the living room where I found Kristen curled up in a ball on the couch. Concern melted away any plans I had of stealing a few kisses on the couch. She was really sick. Then I noticed the heating pad flush against her stomach and the bottle of Aleve sitting by a cup of water on the coffee table. Next to all of that was a pile of crumpled up York Peppermint Pattie wrappers.

Even an idiot could figure out what was going on. And an idiot I turned out to be, because after I pieced it all together I laughed. I like to think it was partially a laugh of relief. She wasn't that sick after all. She was just on her period. But if I'm completely honest the laugh was also partly about her staying home from work because she was on her period. It had seemed a bit melodramatic to 21-year-old me.

At the sound of my laughter, Kristen's body tensed, and her head lifted off the pillow to stare at me.

"You okay there, soldier?" I moved toward her proffering the soup. "I brought you soup, although it looks like I should've brought chocolate."

She didn't laugh, didn't even crack a smile. My own smile faded as I took in her pale face and agonized eyes.

"Harvey," she lifted a self-conscious hand up to her hair, "what are you doing here?"

"Felicity said you were sick, so I thought I'd swing by to see if you needed anything."

"Oh." Her hand settled back over her heating pad, tugging it closer. Silence stretched between us.

"So," I finally ventured awkwardly, "Mother Nature got you down?"

"Mother Nature?" Kristen echoed in confusion.

"Err, that's wrong, isn't it? What's the correct euphemism again?" I bumbled like an idiot. "Aunt Red or no, is it your unwelcome aunt?"

"You can just say period, Harvey." Kristen sank back against her pillow.

"Right. There's the word I was looking for." I set the soup down on the coffee table then positioned myself at her feet. "Hey, your family's at the restaurant," I told her with a gleam in my eye, and I've still got like twelve minutes before I need to be back from my break. You wanna make out?"

Out of nowhere tears sparked Kristen's eyes.

"Sorry, did I say the wrong thing?" I quickly backtracked.

"Harvey," her voice was hoarse, "can you please just leave?"

"Leave? Why?"

"Don't you get it?" she cried. "I hate that my boyfriend is seeing me like this." Her face flushed. "I mean, not boyfriend."

I know we haven't discussed being exclusive." She swiped away tears, adorably flustered. "I just. Whatever. I don't want you seeing me like this. My periods are horrible, Harvey, horrible. The pain is so intense the first couple of days I can barely walk. So laugh all you want that I'm eating chocolate and popping Aleve like it's candy, but you have no idea the kind of pain I'm in right now." She shifted in her seat then, and a moan so pitiful it made me want to cry for her, escaped her lips.

"Kristen, hey," I hopped off the couch and kneeled in front of her, "I'll be your boyfriend if you'll be my girlfriend." A glimmer of a smile appeared through her tears, so I pressed on. "I'm sorry. I was an idiot. I should never have laughed." I reached up and cupped her cheek in one palm. "But as your boyfriend, let me just say that if you're in pain, I want to help you. So you lay here and pop your Aleve, and as soon as my shift is done at the restaurant I'll find an excuse to swing by and drop off chocolate reinforcements."

Remembering all of that as I cross the auditorium to her, I feel a swell of compassion. All of these years later and she's still dealing with this? Back then she'd decided to go see a specialist about her periods. For two years she'd dealt with her cycle getting progressively worse, and her mom had finally said enough was enough, they had to figure out what was behind this. I never did hear what she found out. She saw the specialist shortly after she got back from Mississippi, and I guess I left before she found anything out.

Clearly they didn't solve her problem. She's sitting there white as a sheet.

"Hey, Kristen, Allie Cat," I greet both of them. "How are you lovely ladies doing this afternoon?"

Allie grins and runs over to hug me, but Kristen only gives me a little half wave. Her eyes have that same agonized look I remember from that first time, and I'd actually go so far as to say I miss the anger and hostility that's usually contained in those pretty green irises when she sees me these days. I'd rather she be angry than in pain.

“Hey, Allie Cat,” I give her one last squeeze, “why don’t you go get a snack. I think I saw Ms. Leonard walking in with the food a minute ago.”

“Okay,” Allie chirps, hurrying off down the aisle toward the snack table.

I take a seat next to Kristen and say in a low voice, “Hey, shouldn’t you be in bed or something? You don’t look so good.”

Kristen winces. “Is it that obvious? I’m not sick or anything,” she adds hurriedly. “It’s just...” she trails off uncertainly.

“Your period,” I finish for her, and surprise marks her features.

“How’d you know?”

“Hard to forget watching someone you love deal with this kind of pain.” She holds my gaze after I say this, and I can tell she’s trying to make sense of my words. I’m over here doing the same thing, because I just used the present tense of the word love. And I’m realizing with growing certainty that that wasn’t a mistake.

I don’t think I ever stopped loving Kristen Heart. I thought I would when I left. Thought that there was no way a four month relationship, no matter how perfect and amazing, would mark me for life.

But it did.

I’m here to tell you it absolutely freaking did.

Our gazes are still locked, and I won’t be the one to look away first, not after the revelation I just had. Walking into this auditorium today, I’d hoped that with Gloria’s help I could convince Kristen to forgive me and give me (and Allie) another chance. Sitting here now, I know that I won’t settle for any other outcome.

“Are you having a staring contest?” Camden pops up next to us, and Kristen finally looks away. “Mr. Harvey, you won!” Camden exclaims excitedly, holding his hand up for a high-

five. “Better luck next time, Kristen,” he adds politely. “Boy, I can’t believe you beat her, Mr. Harvey! She always beats me at staring contests. And Lily too. One time we were in line at the grocery store and I challenged her to a staring contest and she unpacked the cart and bagged everything without breaking eye contact with me.” He shakes his head in wonder. “It was epic.” He laughs at the memory, and I see Kristen smile too. And there’s the mystery I’ve never quite been able to solve about her. Kristen likes kids. Or at least it’s always seemed that way to me.

She’d led the charge on the children’s song and storytime program we’d run that summer at the library. And I know for a fact she spent a couple of summers volunteering at a horse camp for elementary-aged kids. Plus, whenever a family with young kids came into the restaurant she found a way to sneak them free ice cream. And she’d looked so right holding newborn Allie in her arms the day she met her at my sister’s house.

So yeah, her announcement that she didn’t want kids of her own had definitely come out of the blue. Maybe that’s why I took it so hard. Because part of the reason I fell in love with Kristen was because I could see her as the mother of my children.

And okay, maybe I’ve always wondered if she was lying that day. If she just told me she didn’t want kids because she couldn’t see me as the father of her children. After all, since my dad passed away when I was four, it’s not like I had anyone in my life growing up to show me how to be a good dad. What if Kristen recognized that gaping hole too?

Having her here in Southaven, watching me parent Allie, has definitely resurfaced that particular fear. The other night when I couldn’t even do Allie’s makeup, I felt sure she was judging me as a parent and finding me lacking. Being a single dad thrown into parenting out of nowhere, I often feel like I’m falling short as a parent. I’m trying to do a job designed for two people, and most of the time that means I’m failing in one way or another. What if it’s only my shortcomings that Kristen sees?

“Sounds like she is pretty good at staring contests,” I tell Camden, pushing away these negative thoughts. “I think she would’ve beat me too except she’s not feeling that great. Which is why I think maybe you and I should work on the set ourselves today. What do you think?” I lift my hammer out of my tool belt. “I’ll let you use the hammer.”

“Oh yeah!” Camden exclaims excitedly. He turns dutifully to Kristen. “Is that okay, Kristen?”

“Of course, Cam,” she assures him. Camden steps closer to her.

“Are you sick?” he asks her, concern wrinkling his brow. “Because I can give you a back rub at home. My mom always gives me a back rub when I’m sick.”

Woah, get in line, buddy. If anyone is going to give her a back rub it’s me.

“Honey, that’s so sweet.” Kristen squeezes his hand. “I just may take you up on that.”

“Okay.” Camden leans in for a hug, then turns to me. “I’ll be waiting by the nails, Mr. Harvey.” With that he skips away.

“You going to be okay?” I ask Kristen.

She nods. “Although I can’t stay here. Mandy will find me and dock me volunteer hours.”

“Okay, so I’ll carry you over to where Camden and I are working, and make it look like you’re working too.”

Kristen lets out a disbelieving laugh. “You’re not carrying me across this auditorium, Harvey.”

I shrug. “Not like I haven’t carried you before.” Her cheeks tinge cotton candy pink, and my stomach answers by swooping like I’m on a carnival ride. Dang, I want to kiss her.

“I’ll just walk,” Kristen says, moving gingerly to get to her feet. “You don’t make it this many years dealing with this without learning how to cope with the pain. Funny how employers who aren’t your parents don’t care about your level ten period pain. They still expect you to show up to work.”

“Well don’t worry, because I’m calling in Gloria as a nanny substitute. She and I can come help with the kids until their mom gets home from work.” Her face contorts in pain as she falls into step beside me, and I stick my hands in my tool belt, grabbing a hammer and screwdriver to try and keep myself from reaching over and scooping her up. She said no to me carrying her, and I’ve got to respect that.

Or do I? What’s she going to do, pummel me in the chest? Start screaming and make a scene?

“Hey, new plan,” I say, my voice coming out weirdly frantic. “How about Camden and I come to you?”

Kristen shoots me a bemused look. “You’re going to work on the set directly in front of the stage where Mandy is going to be rehearsing with the kids? Do you have a death wish?” She purses her lips on the last word, and I can tell she’s biting back a moan of pain.

This is like torture.

“Didn’t they give you medicine or something to help with the pain?” I ask. “You saw a specialist, what did they say?”

Kristen’s face turns hard. “I’m sorry,” her voice is razor-sharp, “I didn’t realize you were someone I told my private medical information to.”

I wince. I guess I deserved that. “Sorry,” I rush out, “it’s just hard watching you like this.”

Kristen’s expression doesn’t soften. “I’m fine,” she says, but her voice shakes. “Okay? Like I said, I’ve dealt with this for ten years now. I’m,” she looks at the clock on the wall, “thirty-seven minutes away from my next dose of Aleve, which will take the edge off the pain. Okay?” She doesn’t wait for my answer, just shuffles forward, and I shut my eyes so I don’t have to see her pain.

Chapter 20

KRISTEN

“Can we go see Dave?” Lily asks me as she gets into the car after school on Friday. “Allie asked if we could come. She said she taught Dave how to sit, and she wants to show me.”

I wrinkle my nose, unsure how to answer this request. On the one hand, I want to see Dave sit! But on the other, it means I’ll have to see Harvey. And what if he starts pressing me for more answers about my endometriosis? I don’t talk to people about my endometriosis, and I certainly don’t talk to ex-boyfriends who broke my heart about my endometriosis. People always think they have the solution to my problem. They have this one friend who got on birth control and it fixed them, or this other who had a laparoscopy and their symptoms went away. And I have to just smile and nod along like I haven’t tried both of those things already.

Anyway, it’s all good. Most of the time I can stay positive about my condition. After all, I’m lucky. I really only deal with pain during my cycle. And I don’t have a husband, so the whole you’re almost definitely infertile thing is no big deal.

No big deal.

If I say it enough, it’ll be true, right?

“Kristen, can we go?” Lily asks again.

“Yeah, can we?” Camden begs.

“Allie said Mrs. Gloria will be there,” Lily adds. “She’s watching her after school today while her daddy is at work. We could see her too!”

Aunt Gloria will be there instead of Harvey. “Okay, sure,” I tell the kids. “We can go over there after we’ve dropped off your school stuff and you’ve cleaned your rooms. But don’t

forget your mom has a work dinner tonight, so we have a very important pizza and movie night planned that we'll have to leave for? Okay?"

"Okay!" they shout happily.

Dave is even cuter than I remember. Allie happily shows us how he can sit, and how she's working on teaching him to stay.

Spoiler-that's not going too well.

"You know, Allie," Aunt Gloria says when the three kids have had their fill of making Dave sit, "I bet Camden and Lily would really enjoy taking Dave for a walk. What do you think?"

"Yeah!" Camden shouts. "Let's take Dave for a walk. Can I hold the leash?"

"Oh me too!" Lily bounces up off the floor. "Can I hold the leash too?"

"I think everyone can have a turn," Aunt Gloria answers diplomatically. "Let's all go get our shoes on."

The five of us head to the front door, Dave padding along behind us, eager to be part of whatever journey we are setting out on.

Just as we're about to head out, Gloria puts a hand to her chest. "Oh silly me! Allie, I forgot you have your piano lesson at 4:45." She looks at the watch on her wrist. "That's only five minutes from now, so you won't be able to go on the walk after all."

"My piano lesson?" Allie asks, looking confused.

"Yes, the one I reminded you about when I picked you up from school, remember?" Aunt Gloria laughs.

"Oh yeah, right." Allie nods vigorously. "Duh. How could I forget about my piano lesson." She looks at me. "It's on Zoom."

“Allie has a piano lesson on Zoom?” I clarify, because they’re both being so weird. They nod in unison. “Well the kids and I can just go home now then.”

“Oh no, no. Don’t be silly. They’re excited to walk Dave. You go ahead and take them.” She freezes. “Although I’m not very good with technology. Maybe you should stay and help her get logged on, and I can take the kids on a walk with Dave.”

“Um. Okay,” I say slowly. “I guess that works. We do need to leave by 5:15 though,” I hastily add, wanting to give myself a buffer of time before Harvey is expected home at 5:30.

“Of course,” Aunt Gloria agrees. “We’ll be back by then.”

“Great. Do you have the log on information somewhere?”

“Oh yes.” She pulls her phone out of her pocket. “I’ll send it to you.”

Allie leads me back inside. Harvey’s house is a ranch, and I’ve only been on the kitchen and living room side of it. But now Allie is leading me toward the other side of the house. The bedroom side. And I feel like Belle going into the forbidden West Wing of the Beast’s castle. Surely this isn’t allowed. Surely Harvey is going to appear at any moment and send me away.

But nope. Allie takes me down the hallway like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“This is my room,” she tells me, swinging the door open and flashing the light on and off. “I’ll show it to you after my lesson,” she informs me. “And over here,” she dashes across the hall to another door, “is my daddy’s room. Do you want to see?”

Yes. “Uh, no, that’s okay,” I lie. “Maybe later. You have a piano lesson to get to after all.”

“Okay.” Allie shrugs like I didn’t just make the ultimate sacrifice. My eyes are burning with the desire to see the inside of Harvey’s bedroom. Which is so stupid. It’s not like I could

snoop around it with Allie here with me. Plus-I don't even like Harvey. So why would I want to see his room?

"Piano is in here." Allie tugs me the rest of the way down the hall, opening a third door and flipping on the light. I follow her in and see an old wood piano sitting against the far wall. There's a worn leather armchair in the corner, but other than that and the piano the room is empty. "We don't use this room much," Allie informs me, marching over to the closet and pulling the doors open to reveal a stack of bins. "Mostly for storage. And my piano lessons," she adds quickly, before hurrying over to the piano. The very dusty piano, I now notice. Which is weird. You'd think they'd dust something they're using for lessons on a regular basis.

"Okay, so how do you usually do this?" I ask following her to the piano. "Do you use a computer or an iPad or what?"

Allie blinks over the keys at me. "Just a phone," she finally says.

"A phone," I repeat incredulously. "Isn't it a bit challenging to see the instructor and their piano on such a small screen?"

More blinking, then, "I have really good eyesight."

"Okayyy," I say slowly. "Let's see if Aunt Gloria texted me the Zoom link then." I pull out my phone and sure enough there's a message from her with a link. Oh and shoot! It's 4:47. We're two minutes late. I hurry and click the link, then set the phone on top of the piano book stand.

Please wait for the host to start this meeting.

Oh. I guess we're not the only late ones. "Alright, looks like your teacher isn't on yet, so I guess we'll just wait." I settle myself on the bench next to her. "How long have you been taking piano lessons?" I ask her.

"Not very long," she replies. "I can't even play anything yet," she adds. "Like if you asked me to, I couldn't."

"Um. Okay." I give her the side eye. "Why are you acting so funny?"

“I’m not acting funny,” Allie says at a helium-level squeak.

“Uh-huh.” I look back at my phone. Still no host.

“I wonder if my teacher forgot,” Allie says with a sigh. “She’s never late like this.” She turns to face me. “Hey, do you know how to play piano? Could you teach me?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how to play the piano, but if you have a recorder somewhere I could teach you a rousing rendition of Hot Cross Buns.”

Allie giggles. “Hot Cross Buns? What’s that?”

“You know,” I pitch my voice, singing, “hot cross buns, hot cross buns, one a penny, two a penny, hot cross buns.”

Allie giggles. “That’s a silly song.”

“You know it really is,” I agree. “Why would you buy one hot cross bun for a penny when you could get two for the same price?”

She giggles again. “You’re funny,” she tells me. “And you have a really pretty singing voice.”

“Why thank you,” I say, flattered. “You should hear my sister sing. Her voice is even better than mine.”

“Really?” Her eyes are two saucers. “Can you teach me to sing like that? I really want to get a bigger part in the school musical next year, and if you taught me how to sing I bet I could.”

“I don’t know, Allie.” I eye the phone. Still no piano teacher. “I’m not a trained vocal coach.”

“Oh, okay.” Her shoulders slump, and I must be a total push-over, because the next thing I know I’m back to channeling my inner Maria von Trapp.

“Of course, anyone can sing,” I chirp conspiratorially, bumping my shoulder against hers. “You just have to start at the beginning.” Unfortunately we’re in a musty office and not a gorgeous green meadow in Austria, but I can still make this work. I hit a key on the piano. I may not know how to play any

songs, but I can at least rock a basic scale. “Singing begins with Do-Re-Mi.” I play the notes as I sing them. “Sing with me,” I tell Allie, and she joins her voice to mine, both of us singing, “Do-Re-Mi.”

I’m not proud of what happens next. My only defense is that once you start singing a song from *The Sound of Music* it’s hard to stop. Which is why I take off singing through the whole scale, belting out the lyrics about female deer and tea that you drink with jam and bread and So, Do, La and the whole shabang. I mean I’m doing the children’s parts too. This is a one woman show, people.

A one woman show for which the Beast of the West Wing finally makes an appearance. Yup, I’m hitting that final Do note when a sound from behind me draws my attention to where Harvey is standing, leaning casually against the doorframe, a smile playing along his lips.

Oh. My. Word. How long has he been standing there? And why is his work shirt unbuttoned like that? Excuse me, who asked you to show me your muscle tee? I get it, Harvey. You fix cars and you’ve got the pecs to prove it. I’m a nanny, and I’ve got the snot stains on my shirt to prove it. You don’t see me drawing attention to that.

“Hey there, Maria,” Harvey quips. “How’s the convent treating you these days?”

“Funny.” I clear my throat (and tear my gaze away from his chest). I push myself up off the bench and grab for my phone. “Just doing a bit of a voice lesson since Allie’s piano teacher never showed,” I say briskly. “So don’t let them try and charge you or anything.”

“Her piano teacher?” Harvey frowns in confusion. “What piano-”

“Daddy!” Allie hurtles herself across the room at him. He lowers his arms just in time to catch her and sweep her up in a hug.

“Hey, Miss Moo.” He plants a kiss on her cheek, and I explain to my own cheeks that they are wrong and do not want

similar treatment.

Then I tell my lips the same thing.

Neither of them listen.

I need a new set of hormones. Preferably ones that don't find men with oil stains on their shirts hot. I mean, what even is that?

Although, I may have to acknowledge the fact that I have never before been attracted to a mechanic.

It might just be a Harvey thing. He's like my green eggs and ham. I would take him in a tool belt. I would take him wearing felt. I will take him in his muscle tee. And in blue jeans. And in a tree.

Okay, that last one didn't make sense. Why would Harvey be in a tree? My brain is obviously as scrambled as Dr. Seuss' green eggs.

"Daddy, did you know Miss Kristen could sing so pretty?" Allie asks earnestly. "She's amazing!"

Harvey's eyes find mine as he answers. "I did know, actually. I've heard her sing a time or two. Not too many solos though. I mostly remember her singing duets."

A shiver runs down my spine, memories of the two of us sitting in the bed of his truck, his guitar propped on his lap as he sings to me, hit me hard, leaving hunger in their wake. I miss that. Miss him. How can I still miss someone I haven't had in eight years?

"Duets? That's like when two people sing together, right?" Allie asks, and Harvey nods. "So who were you singing duets with, Miss Kristen?" She whirls to face me, taking me aback.

I don't know why I tell the truth. Maybe it's because he said the other day that he doesn't play anymore, and no matter how mad I am at him for leaving, that still makes me sad. What a waste of God-given talent.

"I sang with your daddy, actually," I tell her, not looking at Harvey as I divulge this. Allie's jaw drops.

“You two sang together?” She’s so excited she’s practically vibrating. “Can I hear you do a duet?”

“Um, I don’t know if-” I begin as Harvey starts shaking his head no.

“Please, Daddy,” Allie begs, taking his hand. His head cuts off mid-nod.

“One song,” he relents, looking over at me before adding, “If it’s okay with Miss Kristen.” Allie turns her beseeching eyes my way. Why do I get the feeling I’m being challenged here? Like if I say no, he wins. But if I say yes, he also wins.

I don’t like those odds.

“Please, Miss Kristen.” Allie clasps her hands together.

“Okay.” I give in too, but not before I’ve come up with a challenge of my own. “As long as your dad will play his guitar.” I smirk across the room at him, awaiting his decision.

Harvey doesn’t even blink. “It’s not tuned.”

“We can wait for you to tune it, right, Allie? What does that take you, sixty seconds?”

“Daddy, you have a guitar?” Allie can’t handle the overload of new information being thrown at her. She’s a fish out of water, opening and shutting her mouth as she attempts to figure out what new atmosphere she’s just been reeled into.

Harvey doesn’t answer her. His gaze has locked onto mine, and I’m having flashbacks to rehearsal on Monday when he used the present tense of love so casually. I’m sure it was a mistake. A slip of tongue, but in that moment I was dying to ask if he was suggesting that he still loved me. Thankfully I have since put that line of thinking to rest. Harvey and I loved each other once. But not anymore. Nope-nope-nope.

Nope.

“Okay,” Harvey finally says, sliding his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Let’s do this.” He pivots and heads down the hallway. Allie jumps up and down like a jackrabbit.

“Yay! This is so exciting!” She zooms out of the room after Harvey, leaving me here to figure out what I’ve just gotten myself into. This is fine. I can sing a song with Harvey without losing my head. People sing duets all of the time without getting romantically involved. Of course, when they are romantically involved the songs are so much better. Kane Brown and Katelyn Brown, I’m looking at you.

Anyway, my green eggs and ham rhyme didn’t say anything about taking Harvey with a guitar strapped on, so I should be good.

Harvey appears back in the doorway with his guitar slung across his back, and my stomach flip-flops.

I would take him wearing black. I would take him with a guitar across his back.

Darn it.

“You ready?” he asks. I nod, not trusting my mouth to form actual words. Allie plops herself down on the floor, and Harvey takes a seat on the piano bench. Not wanting to sit right next to him in my frazzled state, I opt for the armchair. Only it’s clear this armchair is not actually meant to be sat on, because when I sit down I sink so low my body forms a V. Allie giggles as I push myself out of the chair’s clutches.

“You can sit next to me,” Harvey offers, scooching down the bench to make room for me. Right. Isn’t this just lovely? Me next to guitar-wearing Harvey. About to sing a duet.

I’m not sure if this is a nightmare or a daydream.

I perch myself on the very edge of the bench, then move slightly in, since my butt immediately protests the lack of seat support. Thankfully, even with my entire butt on the bench, I’m still able to maintain a good foot between myself and Harvey. So I’m completely fine. Totally in control of all the things happening in the air and in my body.

That’s not heat I feel radiating between our legs, it’s the magnetic pole of my leg repelling the magnetic pole of his leg. Basic science.

Harvey strums his guitar, and the sound triggers a sensation of contentment, the illusion of a perfect moment like so many of the ones we used to share. I shake it away and focus on Allie's smiling face watching us instead. That's the safest thing. Remember there's a child in the room, Kristen.

Three notes in, I already know what song we're singing, and I do not think he is funny. Even so, as he finishes his opening line I can't stop my mouth from responding with Sandra Dee's answering line about summer loving.

A smile plays on Harvey's lips as he continues the song, but I will not crack. I am Sandra Dee after she's discovered Danny is a playboy of the highest order, and I am holding my head high and waiting for that preppy blonde guy to show up and ask me out instead. Good-bye summer loving! Good-bye summer nights!

Harvey does both the guys and the girls *tell me more* lines when we get to the third stanza, but I'm still more stoic than the King's Guard. He's not super cute and endearing. I'll tell you that much.

Allie's head is bouncing between us as we sing about swimming and cramps and nearly drowning, and I am still laser-focused on her. No need to look at the man behind the guitar.

Harvey's knee bumps mine as we make it past the shoo bop bop stanza, and a jolt of electricity runs through me. I break my resolution not to look his way to find him staring straight at me. I stumble over the next stanza, but his voice doesn't falter. At least not until we get to the part about the weather turning cold. He breaks my gaze then, and it's like a burst of that cold we're singing about hits me.

Because just like Danny in the movie, Harvey broke his true love vow, ripping our summer love at the seams.

We finish the song, totally nailing the somber ending, but Allie, completely unaware of the shift in mood, starts cheering wildly.

“You were amazing!” she hoots. “Daddy, you have the most prettiest boy voice!”

Harvey lets out a nervous chuckle. “Thanks, Miss Moo.”

There’s a beat of tense silence between us, but then Aunt Gloria and the kids appear in the doorway. Whoops. I sort of forgot about them. That’s me. The world’s greatest nanny.

“There you all are!” Aunt Gloria beams. “Harvey,” she exclaims, “you got your guitar out!” Harvey looks a little sheepish, but nods. She grins at him, then turns to Allie. “Allie, honey, I told Camden and Lily we could make popcorn balls for the movie tonight. Do you want to help?”

“Aunt Gloria,” I say quickly, getting to my feet, “we actually have plans tonight, so I don’t think we can stay to make popcorn balls.”

“Plans?” Aunt Gloria says the word like it’s gum on the bottom of her shoe. “What plans?”

“Pizza and movie night!” Camden and Lily shout in unison before I can make up fake better plans.

“Well that’s perfect!” Aunt Gloria exclaims. “Those are our plans too. So we can just all do it together.”

“No, Aunt Gloria,” I start to protest, but Camden and Lily don’t let me get further than that.

“Oh yes, can we please stay!” Lily begs.

“Please, please, please, please, please!” Camden stretches his neck to its longest height, shaking his chin with each please.

“No,” I say flatly.

“Why won’t you stay, Miss Kristen?” Allie asks, a worry crease appearing on her forehead. I bite back a groan of frustration. I cannot get roped into having a movie night with Harvey by a bunch of kids. I don’t even like kids, remember?

“At least let them stay to make popcorn balls,” Aunt Gloria suggests, tightening the strings of the apron she’s already donned. “I already got all of the supplies out, and I

need the extra hands. Besides, your uncle and I are leaving for our annual winter cruise tomorrow, it would be nice to spend some extra time with you before we go.”

“Fine, we’ll stay to make popcorn balls,” I relent, and the kids all cheer. “But then we’re leaving!” I finish, but they’re already gone, dashing down the hall to the kitchen.

“Whoops, better stop them before they eat all of the caramel!” Aunt Gloria trills, setting off after them. I start to go too, but Harvey calls my name, stopping me.

I look over my shoulder at him, one hand on the doorframe.

“Sorry about what just happened,” he says with an apologetic twist of his lips.

“What do you mean?” I play it off like I wasn’t bothered, like singing together about a summer relationship coming to an abrupt end didn’t make me feel like I’d thrown my heart right back into the burning building it had only just escaped from.

“I thought that song would be more fun,” he tries to explain. “I forgot about the ending,” he adds.

“Whatever, Harvey. You don’t have to explain.” I start to leave again, but this time it’s the strum of his guitar that halts me in place. I don’t turn around, I just freeze in place as his voice, his beautiful voice fills the space.

He chose our song this time. Not a duet. Just him. The song he used to play and sing to me. It’s upbeat, not the usual slow ballad that marks so many couples’ relationships, but it always felt like the perfect musical representation of our relationship. A couple wanting to be together all of the time, everywhere.

Now listening to him sing the words, I can feel myself once again being pulled back to the actual summer nights we spent together, not the dramatized ones from a *Grease* song.

He hits the word, baby, and I grip the doorframe harder, willing myself not to turn around. If I turn around I’ll absolutely forget why I’m so mad at Harvey. I’ll just be

twenty-year-old me again, ready to settle myself in his lap and tell him I want to be everywhere with him too.

Thanks a lot, Fleetwood Mac.

His guitar stops playing, but his voice carries on singing. I tense, realizing he's approaching me. I should move, go join Aunt Gloria and the kids in the kitchen, but my hand is stuck to the door, rooting me in place.

"Kristen," he stops singing to say my name, "please turn around."

I shake my head, and a second later his hands are on my shoulders turning me to face him without my consent.

Harvey looks down at me, and the depth of emotion contained in his brown eyes makes me shudder. "Do you know," he says in a low voice, "that I haven't enjoyed playing guitar like that since the day I walked away from you. That every time I played in Nashville felt empty and joyless without you there."

I swallow hard. "Then why did you leave?"

He searches my face before answering. "Because I was confused. Confused and," his eyes dip to my mouth, "so stupid."

It's not the complete answer. I can feel him holding back. And yet, in this moment it's enough.

"You were *really* stupid," I counter, and a slow smile spreads across his face as he inches closer.

"The stupidest man that ever walked the planet," he agrees, threading his hands around my back and pulling me toward him.

Resistance is futile. I'm too wrapped up in the feel of being in his arms again to allow logic to have any airtime.

I slide my hands up his shoulders, looping my arms around his neck and running one finger through the ends of his hair. Harvey groans, then lifts me a few inches off the ground and walks backward into the office, kicking the door shut with

his foot. “Gloria is not going to interrupt us this time,” he says by way of explanation. And then, *finally*, he kisses me.

Chapter 21

HARVEY

How did I ever walk away from this woman? That's the thought running through my mind as I pull Kristen more tightly against myself to deepen our kiss. This kiss is more than just the culmination of eight years of repressed passion, although there's a lot of that too. This kiss brings me an overwhelming sense of completeness. Like I've finally found the rest of my family.

Since I was a kid, I only ever had my mom and Abby. Then my mom remarried and rather than her new husband feeling like a father to me, it felt like he stole my only remaining parent, transforming her into a shell of who she'd once been. Which meant it became just me and Abby. Eventually Abby added a husband to the mix, then Allie too. Our family grew with those additions, and I had plans of making Kristen part of the new family we were building. Plans I ruined by walking away. Then three months later Abby and Jeremiah were killed, and I found myself a father, my main family narrowed down to one four-month-old little girl.

And yes, Gloria and Rob have become like family to us. Surrogate grandparents to Allie and the closest thing I have to parents. But not until this moment and this kiss, had I realized that my heart never stopped thinking of Kristen as my family, my safe place.

A soft sigh escapes from Kristen, and I forget about the deeper meaning of the kiss as a rush of heat consumes me.

Then, because a closed door really doesn't serve as enough of a barrier when there are three kids in the house, the door swings open, and Kristen and I spring apart as Camden appears.

We're both breathing hard and looking as guilty as the guy just spotted holding the smoking gun, but miraculously Camden doesn't seem phased. He's too focused on the wriggly puppy in his hand.

"Kirsten, Mrs. Gloria said Dave needs to be kept out of the kitchen. He keeps trying to grab the hem of her apron and tug it off her."

"Oh, sure." Kristen's voice is breathy and flustered, and I feel a glimmer of pride that I did that to her. She steps forward to take Dave, who plants a wet kiss on her lips with his puppy tongue. Excuse me, Dave those lips are mine.

"Camden!" Gloria pops into the room, looking hassled. "Oh honey, I meant for you to put him in his kennel, not bother these two." She shoots us an apologetic look, then widens her eyes as she takes in our appearance.

Wait, can she tell that we were kissing? How? I look over at Kristen, and okay, her cheeks are flushed and her pink lips are swollen.

Dang, she's pretty. I wonder if Gloria would be willing to take the kids out to get the pizza, so we can pick up where we left off.

"Well, well, well," Gloria crosses her hands across her chest with a look of smug satisfaction, "what do we have here?"

"What do you mean?" Kristen says with a nervous chuckle. Yeah, she's not fooling anyone.

"Camden," Gloria looks down at him, "go back to the kitchen and help the girls finish the popcorn balls." Camden, still unaware that anything is amiss, nods and hurries off, leaving Kristen and me to face Gloria's interrogation. She studies us, arms still crossed, one finger tapping her arm as she levels us with her bad cop face. I half expect her to go over and turn up the thermostat in the hopes of sweating the truth out of us.

I'm not worried though, I am guilty as charged and looking for a life sentence with my partner in crime.

“So,” she starts to pace slowly back and forth in front of us, “I leave you two alone for ten minutes, and you can’t keep your hands to yourself. Move over Emma Woodhouse, there’s a new matchmaker in town.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about, but if I knew this Emma Woodhouse, I’d tell her the same thing. Move over for Gloria Heart.

“Aunt Gloria,” Kristen speaks, “it’s not like that. I mean, we just kissed. Not like we’re back together again.”

Just kissed? I’m offended to hear that description. More importantly, we’re not back together?

“Hold on one minute,” I start, but Gloria holds up a hand, silencing me.

“Alright then, my work isn’t finished after all. No problem. I never shy away from a challenge.” She tightens the strings of her apron. “Now then, Kristen, what do you and the kids want on your pizza?”

“Aunt Gloria, we’re not staying for pizza. I told you, we need to go.”

“Pepperoni then?” Gloria ignores her. “Harvey, Allie, and I like to get pineapple too, but we can skip that if you think Camden and Lily won’t like that.”

“Aunt Gloria,” Kristen tries again, but Gloria isn’t having it.

“If you insist on being this difficult, Kristen,” she puts her hands on her hips, “then you leave me no choice, but to force you to stay.”

“Force me?” Kristen lets out an incredulous breath. “What are you going to do? Lock me in this office?”

“No, although I may have to add that idea to my matchmaking portfolio.” She seems to get lost in thought for a second, but then shakes her head, refocusing. “Kristen, you owe me one of your famous no questions asked favors,” Gloria says, playing her trump card as calmly as if she’s simply stating the weather. “And for my favor I’m asking you to stay

for pizza and movie night,” she points to me, “and to sit by Harvey during the movie.”

Kristen’s eyes go wide and her jaw tightens. She’s lost. She has to stay. Even I know it. Kristen is the queen of using no questions asked favors as currency, and this time it’s come back to bite her in the butt. At some point she must’ve needed Gloria to do her a favor, so she offered her a no questions asked favor in return. And the thing about no questions asked favors, is that you have to do them. And you can’t ask questions. I really liked no questions asked favors when the two of us were dating. I cashed in some pretty good favors.

Do I feel a little depressed that even after the kiss we just shared, she needs Gloria to cash in a no questions asked favor to get her to stay?

Let’s just say if I had a bottle of Prozac lying around, I’d be popping one right about now.

“Two years I’ve been saving that favor,” Gloria says smugly. “Totally worth it.” She wiggles her shoulders to the beat of whatever victory song is playing in her head. “Don’t worry, dear,” she adds. “I’m sure Harvey will let you pick the movie.”

Yeah, I let her pick the movie.

How could I not when Allie spent all of dinner waxing poetic about Kristen singing “Do-Re-Mi” during their impromptu voice lesson? How could I not when I spent all of dinner watching her patiently remove all of the pepperoni off Camden’s pizza when he all of the sudden decided he wanted cheese pizza, then listen intently to Lily as she described the equestrian routine she was working on at her horseback riding lessons, and then laugh with Allie about something Dave did earlier. All dinner long she was like the center of our little universe, and I was like Pluto. A giant ball of rock and water ice that no one really knows what to do with. The on-again off-again of planets.

Yup, that's me.

So I let her pick the movie like somehow that would win her over. Like it might make me a planet in her orbit once again.

Honestly if she would just look my way that would be something, but she seems bent on forgetting that I'm even here. Until we sit down for the movie that is. That's when Hurricane Gloria arrives.

"Why don't you two sit right here." She pats the back of my double sofa with her free hand. Her other hand is occupied helping her arm support the weight of an oversized fluffy blanket that I can verify did not come from my house. The sight of that blanket has me wondering if Gloria planned this whole evening out. Like she read some romance novel where the couple fell in love while cuddled under a magical blanket and thought to herself, hey I have just the blanket to pull that scene off.

Scary.

"I've got this nice blanket for you too," she adds, setting the faux fur monstrosity over the back of the couch. "Sit, sit." She pats the couch, and I quickly obey. Kristen moves more slowly, finally settling herself flush against the arm of the couch, leaving as much room between us as is possible on a couch made for two.

"I think I'll be fine without the blanket," she informs Gloria.

"Maybe you will be, but Harvey runs cold," Gloria replies, lifting the blanket and parachuting it over us. It's so big, that even with the space between us it still covers both our laps. I shoot Gloria a warning look. It's not that I don't appreciate her efforts, but c'mon. *Harvey runs cold?* How about we don't call my manhood into question. I can keep myself and Kristen plenty warm, thank you very much.

The kids are already settled on a pile of blankets set up like sleeping bags, chowing down on popcorn balls.

“Can we start the movie now?” Camden asks, giving everyone a shot of his chewed up popcorn.

“Dude, don’t talk with your mouth full,” Kristen and I say in unison. Everybody laughs. Even Kristen. She finally looks my way as our laughter blends, and that’s when I see it. Fear. She’s still afraid.

And why would she not be? I promised her everything and then walked away once before. Did I really think playing her our song and one amazing kiss would be enough to undo all the damage?

Alright then, I can work with this. I can prove myself. As Hercules sang in that movie Allie and I watched last month, *I can go the distance*.

With that thought I sling my arm across the back of the couch and scooch ever so slightly towards her.

Step one of going the distance-be consistent in my pursuit of her. Let her know that I’m not only interested in her in the middle of a couple of charged up physical moments, I’m interested in her for all the moments in between too. Moments like this one. Watching *The Sound of Music* with her aunt, my daughter, and her two charges only a few feet away. Sure we’re enjoying a scenic aerial view of Austria right now, but in a minute we’ll be inside a convent. Not exactly romantic, even with Gloria’s blanket and assigned seating in play.

Oh yup. There’s Reverend Mother now. I inch closer to Kristen. Guess what, Kristen, I don’t need Fleetwood Mac or John Travolta and Olivia Newton John singing to make me want to kiss you. I want to kiss you even with a bunch of nuns singing hymns in the background.

Kristen must notice my movement because she throws off the blanket and shrinks even closer to the edge of the couch. Not exactly a promising response.

Maybe I need a new game plan. A way to show her I care about her outside of wanting to kiss her. I’m not sure how to do that while watching a movie though. It’s not like we can have some deep conversation. Plus, it’s really distracting

sharing a couch with her. I'm using most of my mental energy to stop myself from pulling her against me and tucking her head onto my shoulder.

I may just have to watch this movie and bide my time. I'm sure Gloria has a whole host of special Harvey and Kristen interactions up her sleeve. I can wait.

I don't think I have any other choice.

Then something miraculous happens. Or maybe I should say something *glorious* happens, because I'm guessing Gloria had something to do with the fact that my house is slowly turning into a freezer.

"It's cold in here, Daddy," Allie whines with a shiver as Maria meets the captain's children on screen.

"Just pile on another blanket," Gloria chirps, appearing over the kids armed and ready with a stack of blankets.

"Can I have one too, Aunt Gloria?" Kristen asks, and I turn my neck to see her rubbing her arms against the chill, but still ignoring the blanket tossed aside between us.

"Don't be silly, cara mia," Gloria tsks. "The kids need all of these. Besides you have the warmest blanket in the house right there, and you're not even using it."

I can see Kristen debating what to do next. She knows as well as I do that we've turned into the stars of Gloria's made for real life romantic comedy, but she's also clearly freezing.

Decisions, decisions.

Slowly she picks up the blanket and tucks herself back under it. She thinks she's all good, since we're still not touching, but guess what. Gloria isn't the only one who's seen a romcom before. Time to make another move.

I tug the blanket further onto myself, gathering it up in my lap. Unprepared for this, Kristen doesn't grab her end fast enough, so it comes sliding right off her lap.

"Hey," she hisses, "give me my half of the blanket."

"Come and get it," I whisper-challenge.

Fire sparks in her green eyes, but anger won't keep her warm for long.

She reaches for the blanket, but again I'm too quick for her, yanking it out of her reach just in time. Having leaned over with only her upper body, Kristen is off-kilter and consequently can't stop her forward progress, so a second later she falls straight into my lap, elbowing me in the stomach in her attempts to not face plant into my crotch.

Even Gloria couldn't orchestrate a moment like this.

I oomph at the impact of her elbow, she shrieks in embarrassment, and all three kids whirl around to shush us. Thank God it's dark in here because none of them seem to notice Kristen's awkward positioning in my lap.

She rights herself, and even in the darkness I can see her blush.

I lean over and whisper, "I was really hoping for the less violent kind of cuddling." A laugh escapes her lips, and though she suppresses it quickly I feel a thrill of victory.

"Daddy, can I sit with you?" Allie appears in front of us.

"Uh, sure." Regretfully I slide away from Kristen and make room for Allie. She climbs up next to me, settling herself against my side under the blanket. I give her a squeeze and she giggles sweetly. I love this little girl even if she is interrupting my attempts at winning Kristen over.

"Kristen," Allie tugs her hand, "come sit by me."

Hold up. I watch in shock as Kristen moves to be closer to Allie and closer to me by extension. We're not cuddling by any means, after all there's an eight-year-old between us, but she's close enough to me now that as I lift my arm up to rest it on the back of the couch, the tips of my fingers brush her shoulder. And she shivers at the contact.

"I need to go to the bathroom," Allie announces abruptly. She gets to her feet then looks down at Kristen. "Save my seat?"

Kristen gives her a bemused look, then gives me a pointed look as she answers. “Don’t worry I won’t let your dad take your seat.”

Allie shakes her head, bending in close to whisper, “You need to save it from Camden and Lily, because I bet they want to snuggle too. So you have to move over to save my spot.” She straightens and looks at Kristen expectantly. Kristen stares at her for a beat, but then moves herself into Allie’s spot. Right next to me.

Would you look at that, in a matter of minutes Allie accomplished what I’ve been trying to accomplish for the last thirty minutes. I’ve got myself a tiny wing-woman.

Kristen’s whole body is tense next to mine, so I say the only thing I can think of to make her relax. “You come here often?”

It works. She laughs. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

I shrug, then speak in a low voice no one else can hear, “If by ridiculous you mean I’m ridiculously excited to have you this close to me again, then, yeah, I know that.”

Kristen’s breath hitches. “Stop flirting with me, Harvey,” she warns.

“I’m not flirting,” I claim. “This is just how I talk when you’re the person I’m talking to.”

“Uh-huh,” Kristen crosses her arms across her chest, but I don’t miss the way she has to fight to keep a smile off her face.

“Okay, fine,” I relent. “You don’t want me to flirt, I’ll ask you a serious question then.”

“Or we could just watch the movie.”

“Nah, I’ve seen it before.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Hey, if you’ve changed your mind and want to snuggle, I’ll happily shut up and watch the movie with you.”

Kristen studies me, purposefully letting her gaze linger on my shoulders and chest like she's actually considering my offer. "Fine," she smirks, "What's your question?"

"How come you're here in Southaven nannying?" I ask, ignoring her attempt at a dig. She can pretend all she wants, but she wouldn't have kissed me earlier if she wasn't attracted to me at least a little. "What happened to the whole vet thing?" I elaborate.

She frowns.

"Let me guess, suddenly you want to cuddle after all."

Kristen narrows her eyes at me. "Nice try, Fabio, but who says I have to do either of those things. I don't have to answer your question, and I don't have to cuddle with you. I can just sit here."

"True," I concede. "But then I'll just keep asking you questions or," I bump my knee against hers, "keep finding ways to initiate physical contact until you finally give in and put your pretty little head on my shoulder."

"That's quite a game plan you've got there, Coach. I don't know how I'll resist the magnetic qualities of your knees." Her voice is full of sarcasm, but I'm not bothered, because first off, her flushed cheeks are giving me total confidence in the magnetic qualities of my knees, and second she just called me Fabio and Coach in the span of about sixty seconds. I hand out nicknames like it's my job, but with Kristen you have to earn the honor.

Guess I just did.

"Coach, huh?" I quirk my brow. "I'm flattered you want me to start calling the plays, Doc." I pretend to measure the space between us with my hands. "Given the short yardage to the first down, I'm thinking quarterback sneak." I lean in. "And I fully plan on making it through your defensive line, Coach."

Kristen's eyes widen, and her breath catches. "I thought you were the coach," she whispers.

I shrug. “If you want to be in charge, I can be flexible.” Then I put my money where my mouth is and go for those last few yards. Bending forward I lift her legs and set them on top of mine so that her calves rest on top of my shins. Then I sling my arm over her shoulders and settle my hand on her arm, rubbing my thumb lightly across the cotton fabric of her shirt.

She stiffens, but makes no move to pull away from me.

First down.

“Relax, Doc,” I whisper in her ear.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” she informs me primly. “I’m just saving Allie’s seat.”

“Okay,” I agree, but now I’m the one who can’t hide my smile.

Because Allie got back a long time ago. She’s sitting on the blanket pile with Camden and Lily, clearly not planning on reclaiming her seat.

And even better, under the blanket Kristen shifts, angling her body against my side, and settling her hand on my chest.

Somebody blow the whistle, because that right there is a touchdown.

Chapter 22

KRISTEN

I wake up the next morning with regret heavy on my heart. How could I have sang with Harvey? Snuggled with him? *Kissed him!*

Stupid. Stupid. STUPID!

He can say all of the things and make me feel all of the sparks, but all roads lead to a dead end when it comes to Harvey and me. He may want me now, but once he finds out the truth about my broken body, he'll vanish from my life again.

A few months after Harvey left, I started dating this guy who lived in the same on-campus apartment building as me-Nico Stein. After the trauma of my relationship with Harvey, I didn't want any scrutiny, so I didn't tell anyone I was seeing him. Nico was a great guy. He was cute and funny and smart. At first I was a little closed off with him, still hurting from Harvey, but then one night we went out and he told me how as a kid he'd been diagnosed with lupus. He'd been so raw and vulnerable as he opened up about the difficulties and hardships he'd faced as a result, that I'd found my own deep dark secret slipping out. *I have endometriosis. It's unlikely I'll ever be able to have kids.*

He dropped me so fast you'd have thought I was a hot potato.

The thing is, it wasn't Nico's rejection that wrecked me, it was what Nico's rejection confirmed-I'm broken.

So yeah, as we've established, I don't date. Mr. Right, I'll see you when I'm past the age of regular child-bearing years.

Harvey won't be available when I do hit that age, I can almost guarantee that. Sure, he isn't seeing anyone now, but

with Allie getting older I'm sure dating is coming back onto his radar. And I know for a fact that he wants kids. Once upon a time he had our life together all planned out, and it involved at least three kids, maybe even four. If I tell him the truth about myself, he'll drop me like a hot potato too.

Of course, Harvey already knows I don't want kids, so I'm not sure why he's pursuing me. Unless he thinks I've changed my mind. After all, I'm nannying. Nannies like kids.

Well that's it then. I'll just have to make sure he knows my opinion hasn't changed. I still don't want kids. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

After he hears that, we'll both go on to live our separate lives. He'll marry some beautiful woman, and they'll have all of those beautiful children he wants, and I'll just adopt a couple of cats and drown my sorrows in a plate of whipped cream laden waffles.

Yay for having a plan.

My phone rings. I don't feel like conversing with anyone right now, but even though I tell it to go away, my phone just keeps ringing. The third time whoever it is calls I break down and look at the screen.

"Hey, Felicity," I try not to let my voice sound as miserable as I feel, but she barely even hears my greeting, too busy shouting excitedly.

"I'm engaged!" she screams in my ear. "I'm getting married! I'm going to be a bride, Kristen! As in, here comes the bride! The blushing bride! The bride is always right! That's me! A bride." She's full-on singing now. "Her I come, all dressed in white!"

A laugh breaks through my somber mood. "Wow, Felicity, that's amazing! Congratulations to you and your groom."

I hear Alex chuckling in the background, then the sound of kissing in the background. Lovely.

"Felicity," I cut in, "still here."

“Oh right, sorry,” Felicity sing-songs.

“So, how’d he do the proposal?” I ask.

“Oh my goodness, it was perfect. Like something right out of a movie,” Felicity gushes. “I came over to his place this morning for our annual tradition of making Valentine’s Day cards for the local children’s hospital. We were sitting there, cutting out hearts from construction paper and gluing doilies on paper and whatnot, when Alex offered me a bowl of conversation hearts, which, as you know, are the only non-chocolate candy I like.”

“Of course, I know this,” I confirm. “The lure of candy you can read is too great a temptation for you to resist.”

“Exactly,” Felicity laughs. “So I pick one up and read it, and it says ‘Marry Me’, but, of course, I don’t think anything of it. That’s a normal saying on a conversation heart, after all. But then I pick up another one, and it says the same thing, which I think is a little weird, but still probable. Only then I pick up a third one, and it says the same thing.” She pauses dramatically. “When I pick up the fourth heart and it also says ‘Marry Me’ I finally catch on that something is going on, so I look over at Alex only to see him down on one knee in front of me holding up one of the Valentines he’d been working on, and it says-”

“Marry me,” we finish in unison, and Felicity giggles. “And, duh, I said yes right away!”

“That is so perfect,” I agree as she sighs happily. “I’m so happy for you both. Congratulations, Alex!” I call, assuming he’s still glued to my sister’s side.

“Thanks, Kristen,” he calls back. “Looking forward to being your brother-in-law.”

“As you should be.”

Felicity and Alex both chuckle.

“Mom and Dad want to throw us an engagement party. You can come up for that right? Aunt Gloria and Uncle Rob will probably come too, so you three could carpool,” Felicity continues to chatter excitedly. “We’re doing everything kind of

fast, because when you've been secretly in love with each other for over a decade and then you finally figure out that you're in love with each other, it feels right to race down the aisle. We haven't booked anything yet, obviously, but we're thinking a spring wedding."

"A spring wedding sounds amazing," I agree. "And, of course I'll come up for the engagement party. Although Ferris doesn't get home from his business trip for another week. There's no way Clarice will let me go before he gets back. Can you wait that long?"

"For my big sister! Of course!" Felicity declares. "Or should I say my maid of honor?" She squeals, and I laugh again even though a sense of melancholy is settling over my chest. I'm happy for Felicity and Alex, I really am, but their engagement coupled with my own depressing thoughts about the idea of Harvey marrying someone else acts like a bright yellow highlighter streaked across my loneliness.

"I am going to throw you the best bachelorette party," I tell her, rather than dwelling on my inner Eeyore. "And an epic bridal shower."

"Maybe Mom will let you give out no questions asked favors as door prizes," Felicity teases.

"Your guests should be so lucky," I quip.

"Speaking of such favors, I know I still owe you one, so if there's someone you want to add to Alex's side of the bridal party, speak now or forever hold your peace."

"Hey now, that sounds like Alex doing me a favor, not you."

"But we are about to be one," Felicity defends herself, "so it counts. He'd agree with me if he were still here, but he just went to make us some coffee."

I laugh. "Either way, I'm not going to waste a no questions asked favor on picking a groomsman. I have bigger plans for you, Felicity."

"We'll talk about how creepy that sounded later," Felicity replies. "For now, can I just tell you how disappointed I am in

your response? There's no one you want to be in our bridal party so you can sit next to him during dinner and enjoy his company and, I don't know, maybe convince him to play the song for our first dance?"

Dread pools in my stomach. I can tell exactly what she's getting at, and I do not like it. "You know about Harvey," I sigh.

"Yes!" Felicity cries indignantly. "No thanks to you, I might add! How could you not tell your very own sister that the man you moved down to Mississippi to get away from, lives in flipping Mississippi!"

"Who told you?" I demand. "Aunt Gloria, I assume."

"Don't avoid my question, missy," Felicity says in her best teacher voice. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I sigh again. Why didn't I tell her? Maybe because it makes me look stupid? Or maybe because of what's happening right now. She's doing the same thing as Aunt Gloria-trying to push Harvey and I together. And I knew she would do that. Because Felicity and Alex love Harvey. Out of respect for my feelings, neither of them talk about missing him, but I'm not stupid. You don't just spend a whole summer talking about how great someone is, to then just move on and never think about him again. They'd be ecstatic if the two of us got back together. Too bad. Not going to happen.

In fact, I'm thinking about writing a sequel to Taylor Swift's "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together". It'll open with the line, *just because we kissed doesn't mean we are ever, ever getting back together. Like ever.*

Play that on your guitar, Harvey.

"Kristen?" Felicity presses. "What are you not saying?"

"Felicity," I push back, "don't you have other people to call with the news?"

"Don't try and use my wedding to distract me from your romantic plight?" Felicity exclaims. "Oh, did you hear what I just said? My wedding! Mine! Ha, still can't get over that."

“It’s super exciting,” I agree. “Do you know what your colors are going to be?”

“I’m thinking blue and-” she cuts herself off. “Hey! Nice try,” she snaps. “You almost had me, Kristen. Almost. Now spill. What’s going on with you and Harvey?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “Yes, he lives down here, which is an unfortunate truth I’m dealing with. Turns out he was only in Michigan for the holidays.”

“And Aunt Gloria and Uncle Rob have apparently been hiding him and his daughter from us for eight years,” Felicity cuts in. “That had to blow your mind. Were you so mad at them? Or are you secretly thrilled to be in the same zip code as him again? Oh, I’m sure you are. I mean, Aunt Gloria said Harvey wants to get back together with you, which means you have *all* the power! Make him work for it, Kristen. I can send you a couple of book recommendations that will give you some good ideas on what you should have him do to win you back. Just say the word.”

Felicity is clearly in a manic mood, high off her engagement, and ready to talk, talk, talk. That suits me just fine. It’s not like I’m going to tell Felicity why I absolutely cannot get back together with Harvey, so the more talking she does the better.

“You know who you guys are sort of like? Ross and Rachel. He screws up, and tries to win her back, but she’s not having it. Still, eventually they ended up together, didn’t they? I think you two will too. Assuming you want to? Do you want to?” She finally breaks off, and instantly I wish she’d keep rambling.

“No,” I say quickly, but I sound about as convincing as a teenager telling his parents he’s never in his life seen that bag of marijuana they just found under his pillow. Yeah, sure buddy. Ya grounded.

“Kristen,” Felicity whines, not buying it, “what are you not saying?”

“Felicity,” I whine back, “don’t you need to go make-out with your fiancé or something?”

“I demand you make me a list,” Felicity announces, ignoring me.

“A list?”

“Yes, I want you to make me a list of what Harvey would need to do to win you back, and then I’ll secretly text it to Aunt Gloria and she in turn will give it to Harvey.”

“Wow, that sounds super secret,” I say sarcastically.

“I’ll start your list.” Again she ignores me. “Keep looking like Cary Grant seems like a good one. Does he still look like Cary Grant? I’m sure he does, so that one probably doesn’t need to be on there. I think sing to you should be though, obviously. Write that one down.”

“I’m not writing anything down, Felicity.” *And he already sang to me*, I add silently. *And yeah, he totally still looks like Cary Grant.*

“And you probably want him to say how stupid he was to leave you. Maybe write that one in all capitals.”

“Still not writing anything down.” *And he already did that too.*

“That’s okay,” Felicity says, “Alex is back. I’ll make him write the list for me. Alex, can you get pen and paper?”

“Felicity!” I cry. “Stop! Seriously! Harvey can sing me a song and tell me he was stupid to leave me, heck he could even find some amazing way to demonstrate that he’ll never leave me again, and I still wouldn’t get back together with him.”

There’s silence on the other end.

“But why?” she finally asks.

“He has a kid, Lis,” I whisper. “And I bet he wants more kids. You know that’s not part of my life plan.”

“Oh.” There’s a heavy silence between us. Felicity and I have talked this subject to death over the years. For a long time neither she or my mom could fully comprehend how I

could not want kids. Only in recent years did they finally drop it, and acknowledge that I just wasn't a kid person.

That's right, I fooled them all.

And everyone in the family thinks Felicity is the actress.

"I'm sorry," Felicity adds. "I guess I thought you might have changed your mind with the whole nannying thing. Aunt Gloria said Camden and Lily love you."

"Well Annie said she loved Miss Hannigan. Doesn't mean she meant it."

"Oh my word," I can practically hear Felicity's eye roll. "Yeah, and I'm sure you get drunk on the job and make them scrub the floors and strip the sheets while singing songs about better tomorrows."

"As a matter of fact they do strip their own sheets," I retort loftily. "It's on the sticker chore chart I made them."

"You made them a sticker chore chart?" Felicity is shocked.

"I mean, I guess made is a strong word. I printed it out anyway."

"You printed it out? From where? Oh my gosh! Do you have..." She trails off, her voice suddenly sounding more distant, and I realize she's put me on speaker. "You do! I knew it!" she cries after a beat of silence. "Kristen Anne Heart, you have a Camden and Lily board on Pinterest! I knew you liked kids somewhere deep down! I knew it!" she crows. "I knew it!"

I'm silent.

Stewing.

Caught.

"It's just a Pinterest board, Felicity," I counter lamely. "I wouldn't read into it. I also have a workout board, and you know I only workout sporadically."

"This chore chart is adorable." Felicity seems to be stuck in ignore me mode. "And awww, look at this Valentine's Day

unicorn craft and Don't Eat Pete! Love that game.”

“Get off my Pinterest, Felicity,” I groan, but it’s useless. She’s gone down a rabbit hole, never to be heard from again. “I’m hanging up now, Felicity,” I inform her. “Goodbye.”

I hang up and let my phone drop onto the bed. It’s Saturday, and I have the whole day off. I’m heading back to the pool and hoping to work off some of this stress. I figure, if Harvey and Allie go in Sundays for her lesson, the chances are slim they’ll be there this morning, right?

And I promise I’m not hoping for that slim chance to happen.

Really, I’m not.

Chapter 23

HARVEY

Do I take Allie to the gym on Saturday morning in the hopes of running into Kristen? Maybe. Fine, yes.

I heard her mention to Gloria that she had the day off today, so I figured she might head back to the pool. And even if she doesn't show up, at least I'll have gotten a workout in.

And it's that fact that I'm trying to remind myself of when I finish my workout and she hasn't shown up. No need to be disappointed. I got a great workout in. My limbic system is unconvinced.

I head to grab Allie from the gym childcare, and she greets me with an expectant smile.

"My turn?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

"You said last time that the next time we came to the gym you'd take me swimming after you did your laps," she elaborates. "It's next time."

"Oh." I definitely forgot I made that promise. "I don't know, Allie. We have a lot to do today." Like try and figure out how else I can accidentally on purpose run into Kristen. Does that make me sound stalkerish? Maybe. But I think I made some real headway with Kristen last night, and I don't want to lose my momentum. I bet she woke up this morning full of regret, which means I need to see her so that I can remind her that what she should be feeling is happiness, satisfaction, pleased-any antonym of regret works really.

"You promised," Allie insists.

"We don't even have your swimsuit," I point out.

“I’m wearing it under my clothes,” Allie replies proudly, pulling the shoulder of her shirt to the side to show off her swimsuit strap. Wow. Sneaky.

“I already showered.” I try that angle.

“You’re supposed to shower before you get in the pool,” she retorts. “It says on the pool rules sign.”

Touché, my little lawyer, touché.

“Alright, fine,” I give in. “Since I did promise.” I’ll just have to figure out how to stalk Kristen later.

Wait, not stalk.

Geez.

I meant, a way to have a serendipitous encounter with her later.

Allie and I trek back to the pool, me donning my wet swimsuit in a stall in the family locker room, and her singing songs from *The Sound of Music* happily to herself.

“I want to swim in the deep end today, is that okay?” she asks as we step out onto the pool deck.

“Yeah, sure.” I redirect my thoughts, trying to focus on my daughter instead of my growing desire to see Kristen. Where is she? What is she doing right now?

Not important. I am swimming with Allie.

“Can we invite Kristen over today?” Allie asks as she slides into the pool, completely messing up my ten seconds ago resolution to not think about Kristen. “I heard her tell Grandma that she has the day off today. So I bet she would like to come see us and Dave.”

“I’m sure she has other things she needs to do on her day off.”

“Like what?” Allie treads water as she stares inquisitively at me.

I wish I knew.

“Grocery shopping?” I suggest lamely.

“We can feed her,” Allie suggests. “Grandma left us enchiladas in the freezer. Or we can make our famous macaroni and cheese for her!”

“We do make good mac and cheese,” I agree. “But I’m just not sure she’ll want to come over.”

Allie swims to the wall, studying me. “Why not? She loves us, doesn’t she?”

Her words gut me. Not only because I want them to be true, but because I suddenly realize how attached Allie is getting to Kristen. It’s not just my heart on the line here. Is it selfish of me to pursue her anyway? If it is, then logically I should never date. Or at least never introduce women to Allie. I could date without getting her involved in the process

The thought fills me with emptiness. I don’t want to date anyone besides Kristen.

I guess I’m at an impasse.

“Hey, I thought we came here to swim.” I swim out to the middle of the pool, using the water to avoid answering her question.

Thankfully Allie drops the subject. She challenges me to multiple races across the pool, then shows me how she can do a somersault in the water and touch the bottom of the pool with her toes. Then she starts reciting her lines from *The Lion King* for me, insisting that I play Mufasa and then Scar to her Sarabi.

After twenty minutes or so she’s all finished in the deep end, so we get out to head over to the wading pool.

That’s when I see her. Kristen. She’s here. My whole body comes to life. Then I notice she’s talking to some guy, and my legs start moving of their own accord. Next thing I know I’m back in the pool, standing next her in the lap lane she and Mr. Pool Guy are chatting in.

“Kristen, hey baby.” Hey baby? Why did I say that? I sound like some weirdo hitting on her at a bar or, I don’t know, someone on reality TV.

Or Gwen Stefani in her No Doubt days.

Kristen turns surprised eyes on me. “Harvey?” Inexplicably her cheeks flush. What does she have to be embarrassed about? I’m the one currently being fueled by jealousy.

Hey, baby?

Strike those words from the record.

“Who’s your friend?” I carry on with my awkwardness, this time upping the crazy factor by sliding my arm around her waist.

I’m a possessed man.

In need of an exorcist.

Man, she feels good under my arm though.

“I’m Greg,” Mr. Pool Guy says. “I didn’t mean to get in the middle of anything,” he adds. “I was just telling your, uh, girlfriend here that her breaststroke kick is something special.”

Smarmy is the word that comes to mind with this guy. Mr. Smarmy Pool Guy.

“I’m not his-” Kristen starts to correct him, but I hurry to interrupt.

“I think all of her is something special,” I tell Mr. SPG. Kristen snorts. Yeah, it was pretty cheesy.

He looks back and forth between us. “Right. Well, I’m going to finish my laps. Nice to meet you, Kristen.” He doesn’t offer the same compliment to me. Just dives back under the water, emerging partway down the lane mid-freestyle.

“Really, Harvey?” Kristen starts to chastise me, but Allie interrupts, jumping in the pool next to us.

“Miss Kristen! You’re here!” She launches herself into Kristen’s arms, knocking her aside. I’m not super happy about the break in contact, but I do feel a sense of satisfaction that it was Allie who tore us apart, not Kristen. “Now you can spend the day with us, right? We can go ice skating! Unless you need

to go grocery shopping,” she adds with a glance in my direction. “We could do that too. I told Daddy we could feed you though, so you don’t have to go shopping.”

Kristen looks down at her with a bemused smile. “I actually went grocery shopping yesterday.”

“Yay! That means we can skip straight to ice skating!” Allie releases her and does a little spin in the water.

“Slow down, Michelle Kwan.” I grab her right before she’s about to tumble under. “Who said anything about ice skating?”

“Me,” she replies, looking confused. “Didn’t you hear me just now?”

Kristen and I both laugh.

“I meant what adult said anything about ice skating,” I clarify.

“Oh.” Her shoulders sag.

Kristen bends down to speak into Allie’s ear. “Sounds like your dad’s afraid to go ice skating.” She straightens, a smirk on her pretty face.

Allie giggles.

“Afraid?” I parrot. “I don’t think so, Doc.” I cross my arms across my chest, not missing the way her eyes flick to my biceps. It’s just the ego boost I need to extend my own challenge. “Pretty sure I could skate circles around you, Kristen Heart.”

A smile plays on her lips, but she manages to keep it in check.

“By circles I assume you mean flailing arm circles.” She demonstrates the motion, pretending to be losing her balance on ice.

“Funny,” I reply as Allie dissolves into giggles.

“I thought so.” Kristen’s eyes sparkle with playful mirth, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in a long time.

I lean in close. She smells like a perfect summer day spent at the pool. “You going to put your money where your mouth is, Heart?”

“Dust off your skates, Parker-Barrett, and I’ll see you at the rink,” she answers.

Chapter 24

KRISTEN

I know, I know, *I know!* Riding to a nearby ice skating rink with Harvey and Allie is a horrible idea! It completely goes against all my resolutions to stay away from Harvey. I should just jump out of the car right now. I think I could totally do one of those cool spin roll out things they always do in the spy movies. I may bruise my butt, but it's better than breaking my heart.

Harvey looks over at me from the driver's side with a smile, and I stay where I'm at.

I'm such a sucker. Although, I'd like to see any red-blooded female say no to going ice skating with a man who three minutes prior had his arm wrapped around you as he pulled his whole this woman is mine caveman routine.

I know, I know. I'm no man's possession, but show me a woman who doesn't swoon a little over a guy acting jealous for her, and I'll say that's a nice picture of Mother Theresa you have there.

Sidenote-can a woman be red-blooded? After what just happened at the pool, I say yes.

"Do you always ride in silence?" I ask Allie, angling my head in her direction to try and free myself from Harvey's forcefield.

"Sometimes we listen to audiobooks," she replies. "Do you want to listen to one? We just started *Ramona the Pest*. It's really good!"

"That's fun," I say, reaching for the dial on the dashboard. "But I meant something more like the radio." I press the on button and the car fills with the voices of sports broadcasters. I shoot Harvey a look. "Really? You make your eight-year-old

listen to talk radio?” I click my tongue reprovably at him. “This won’t do. Allie, get ready to sing.” I switch the dial to FM and fiddle with the stations until I reach one that’s the number two preset in my own car-sixties and seventies music.

“Here we go!” I trill as “Build Me Up, Buttercup” blares through the speakers. “The Foundations!” I start singing along, shimmying my shoulders to make Allie giggle.

When the refrain starts up again she tries to sing along too, actually managing to remember a few of the lines. We belt out the lyrics together, and I’m about to call Harvey out for not joining us when he opens his mouth and starts singing. Our three voices fill the car, drowning out The Foundations entirely. Harvey grins over at me, then places his hand palm up on top of the center console. As we close out the song, I accept his invitation and slide my hand into his.

The moment is so perfectly sweet that I want to go bake cookies and mark them as made with this moment.

“Again! Again!” Allie cries and we spend the remainder of the car ride performing our own little concert.

At the rink we get our skates on and head to the ice. Allie immediately zooms to the center where there are five or six skaters working on spins and jumps.

“Wow!” I exclaim as she throws herself into the mix, lifting one leg like a flamingo and easing herself forward. It’s not flawless by any means, but she’s going for it anyway. “She’s quite a skater.”

“Abby loved to skate,” Harvey tells me as set off around the rink. “So I wanted her to have that connection with her mom, you know? We come here a couple of times a month and just skate.”

Not for the first time I’m struck by the immense weight Harvey has had to carry as Allie’s uncle turned father. I’m silent for a few beats, trying to figure out how to express that to him while still maintaining some emotional distance between us.

“So you never did tell me how you ended up here in Southaven,” Harvey changes the subject before I can get up the courage to compliment him on his parenting.

“That’s right I didn’t,” I say a little flippantly, hoping he’ll take the hint and drop it.

He doesn’t.

“Did something happen with Doctor Valent?”

“Doctor Valent? How do you know I was working for Doctor Valent?” I’m taken aback that he even remembers that name after all of this time, but then I catch sight of the flush creeping up his neck and realization dawns.

“Have you been spying on me, Harvey?” I can’t keep a note of delight out of my voice. I’ll have to dissect why exactly the fact that Harvey has been keeping tabs on me all of these years delights me at a later time. Surely there’s some 800 number I can call for therapy, right?

“Spying? No.” His voice cracks like an adolescent male, and I can’t hide my smile.

“You totally have!”

“Doing a couple of Google searches does not constitute as spying.”

“Uh-huh. You spiiieeed on me. Because you miissed me.” I am Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality* when she finds out Benjamin Bratt’s character wants to date her, singing my little taunts with absolute pleasure. “You wish you could kiiiiss me.” I stop singing abruptly, my song having gone too far. “Sorry, I mean-”

Harvey rotates on his skates, gliding backwards now as he looks down at me. “Absolutely I want to kiss you.” Gone is his flush. Gone is his prepubescent squeak. And the confidence and smolder in its place makes my stomach dip and my skin heat. How is it possible to be overheating on an ice rink?

“Kristen,” my name comes out as a soft growl from his lips, and if I don’t take evasive action I am going to once again

be sucked into the vortex that is his mouth pressed against mine.

“I quit my job to come nanny the Wilders,” I say quickly, severing the sexy ties between us. “Felicity needed someone to replace her so she could take a teaching job in Mistle Berry.”

Harvey takes a second to switch gears as he registers my words. I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows hard. I wish it didn’t make me feel so heady to know that I affect him the same way he affects me.

“That seems a little generous of you,” he comments with obvious skepticism that this is the full story. “Don’t tell me she cashed in that big of a no questions asked favor.” He resumes skating by my side as he waits for my answer.

“No, no.” I let out an awkward laugh. “The reverse actually,” I mutter under my breath without thinking.

“Wait a minute.” Harvey is appalled. “You’re saying you used a no questions asked favor to get Felicity to let you move down here. Why would you do that?”

“It’s complicated,” I say vaguely, absolutely not willing to admit the truth.

“Oh, I see. I guess I’m not the only one who’s been spying around here.” He nudges me teasingly with his arm. “You did a Google search for my whereabouts and just had to move down here to be by me again.”

“You’re so funny,” I say sarcastically. “But no.”

“That’s the story I’m sticking to unless you want to tell me the actual reason,” Harvey says smugly. “It’s a real ego boost knowing you couldn’t stay away.”

I know he’s goading me. And I’m super irritated that it’s working.

“Actually, Johnny Bravo, I was trying to get away from you by moving down here.” The confession is out before I can think better of it.

“Get away from me? What?” The joking tone is gone from his voice. This conversation just got real.

“I saw you outside my parents’ bar on Christmas,” I admit, not looking at him, unsure why I’m even telling him all of this. “I assumed you’d decided to move back, and, well, I didn’t want to see you.”

“So you left Michigan and fled to the place I actually live.”

“Believe me, the irony is not lost on me.” I sigh. “And also Allie already mentioned to me that you went to Michigan to see her grandma for the holiday, so there’s no explanation needed on your end.” I leave out how she also told me about seeing him cry while singing our song. That’s a magical little tidbit I’ve been saving should I ever need a thought to keep me warm. “So, yup. There’s the truth. I made a big assumption, and you know what they say about people who assume.” I end my story with false cheer and a little laugh.

“Wow. I’m really sorry.” Harvey surprises me with an apology. “I never thought you’d see me. And I definitely didn’t think you’d care if you did, not after what I did to you.” He sighs heavily. “And I hope you won’t be mad at me for saying this, but man am I glad you made the assumption that you did. I’m sorry it cost you a job you love, but having you back in my life has been amazing. Even if you do still kind of hate me,” he adds with a twist of his lips.

“I don’t *hate* you,” I reluctantly confess. “I wish I did, but I don’t.” Our gazes clash and the moment feels like a turning point in this new relationship we’ve been forging.

“Daddy.” Allie appears in front of us. “Can I have a turn skating with Miss Kristen?”

“Uh,” Harvey scrapes a hand over his face, putting himself back in dad mode, “sure.” His eyes meet mine. “Just one lap though, then I want her back.”

I don’t miss the double meaning of his words, and it makes my heart beat double time in my chest. I barely hear a word Allie says to me as she tugs me around the rink. But when she drops me back off with Harvey, she surprises me by wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug.

“Thanks for skating with me, Miss Kristen,” she chirps. “I’m so glad we’re best friends.”

“Oh me too, honey.” I squeeze her back, ignoring the pang in my chest. She skates happily back to the middle of the rink, executing a perfect little horizontal leg lift when she arrives.

“Oh man,” Harvey quips, his eyes on Allie too, “she told me *I* was her best friend.”

I laugh. “Guess you just got dethroned. Don’t take it too hard though.” I reach up and pat him on the shoulder. “You’ll always be her daddy.”

“That’s right, and I couldn’t ask for a better title.”

I watch him watch her for a second.

“Harvey,” my throat goes a little dry as I once again attempt to deliver this compliment, “I don’t know if I’ve said this, but, well...I think you’re doing an amazing job with Allie. I can’t imagine how hard losing your sister and Jeremiah must’ve been, then becoming a parent to a newborn on top of that...” I trail off, losing my voice as unwelcome tears threaten to escape my eyes.

Harvey’s skates slow to a stop. “Thank you, Kristen. It was really hard.” I look up at him, noting the vulnerability shadowing his features. “But I can honestly say that Allie is one of the best things to ever happen to me.” His voice turns soft and tender. He takes my hand, and some distant part of my brain recommends I pull away, but I only tighten my grip. I swivel on my own skates, so we’re facing each other, hands linked. “Can I tell you something though?” he asks, his gaze locking onto mine.

I nod, still mute.

“You’re on that list too.”

“List?” I find my voice.

“The list of the best things to ever happen to me.” His thumb traces hypnotic circles on the space between my thumb and forefinger. “I should never have left you. I broke promises

I made to you about our future. I was a jerk, and words can't express how sorry I am for hurting you."

Harvey has gone hazy, his outline blurred by the tears lining my eyes. Memories assault me as he talks. *"I'm sorry, Kristen, but I have to do this. I have to go to Nashville and see if I can make this music thing work."*

My panicked voice as I refused to let him go. "I thought you were going to try and do that here in Michigan. That these days just as many people get discovered on YouTube as they do at bars in Nashville. That's what you said. That you'd decided to try that route until I finished undergrad. Then if that didn't work out, we'd go to Tennessee together. Me in vet school, you taking the country music scene by storm." My voice broke as he looked at me with regret, his head shaking his contradiction of my words. "You said you wanted to marry me," I accused him, my voice pathetically desperate.

But all he said back was another apology. An apology that would never be able to fix the wounds he'd slashed across my hearts. An apology that I could never accept.

I watched him drive away in his truck and all of the air left my lungs. Panic struck me like wildfire. With no time to prepare I simply had to feel the pain of the raging heat, unable to ignore the largest flame as it seared my soul, insisting that Harvey was leaving because deep down he sensed my brokenness and could no longer love me because of it.

Harvey reaches up with his free hand and wipes a tear away with his thumb. "And I also need to apologize because I lied to you that day," he whispers.

His words freeze my tears. I feel as if I'm in the precipice of discovering the answer to an eight year mystery-why did he just suddenly change his mind about our plan? Why had I suddenly not been enough to make him stay? Had he simply fallen out of love with me as quickly as we'd fallen in love with each other?

"What do you mean?" I whisper back.

Harvey swallows. “I didn’t leave because I wanted to pursue my music in Nashville.” He runs a hand through his hair nervously. “I mean, yeah, I guess that was part of it, but you were always more important than music to me. I would’ve waited for you in a heartbeat if it hadn’t been for the other reason I left.”

“Why did you leave then?” I can’t keep a trace of bitterness out of my voice. He winces but sets his shoulders, clearly committed to getting his words out.

My heartbeat races in my ears, my whole body keying up for this confession. He’s going to say something about how he always suspected there was something wrong with me. After all, he witnessed my periods. It was probably too much for a 21-year-old guy to deal with. He needed to distance himself from my sick self.

“The real reason I left was because you said you didn’t want kids, and I knew that I definitely wanted kids. After losing my dad at such a young age and then losing my mom to my stepdad, having a family of my own someday was something I craved deeply, something I felt I needed. I was crazy in love with you though, and you didn’t want the same thing. So I had to make a choice. I knew if I didn’t leave then it would only get harder to go,” Harvey says the words with measured pacing, as if purposefully trying not to rush them out. And like his rhythmic delivery, each word distinctly strikes me—jab, jab, punch.

His expression is pained as he waits for my reaction. What is my reaction? I can’t make sense of all of the feelings popping up inside me. Basically my emotions are like a game of whack-a-mole; every time I think I’ve got one nailed down, another one springs up in its place. Anger. Hurt. Sadness. Clarity. Inadequacy. Relief.

Relief? This last one shocks me. Why do I feel relieved?

“And I recognize that I should’ve told you this back then,” he goes on as I continue to stare blankly at him, “and my only pathetic excuse is that I was young and stupid. I was embarrassed that I wanted kids when my girlfriend didn’t. It

seemed like a lame and unmasculine thing to admit. So I went with the music thing.”

He didn't leave because he thought there was something wrong with me. He didn't leave because he stopped loving me. I recognize with increasing clarity that these two new realities are why I feel relieved. I hadn't been some silly woman who didn't realize the man she was crazy about no longer loved her. He had still loved me. It just hadn't been enough to make him stay.

This last thought sobers me up. If I hadn't been enough then, why would I be enough now? Why would he choose me this time around?

“But this time around,” Harvey continues, “I want to do things right. I want to communicate with you the way I should've back then.” He takes my other hand, linking us together completely. “Because I want to be with you, Kristen. I still love you. I don't think I ever stopped. But I have Allie now, which means the choice is yours, not mine. Eight years ago you told me you didn't want kids, so I walked away. Now I'm coming to you with a kid and asking if you'll forgive me for my idiocy back then and consider giving us a chance—the three of us, I mean. Allie, you, and me.”

I stare blankly at our clasped hands, unable to formulate a reply. Can I forgive him? What would I have done in his shoes? Before my diagnosis I'd been looking forward to being a mom someday. I'd wanted the house, the kids, the dogs...all the things twenty-one-year-old Harvey had painted a picture of our future together having. Those had once been my dreams too. If the situation had been reversed, if Harvey had been the one to say he didn't want kids when I did, what would I have done?

I think I'd have walked away too.

So where does that leave us now? Just this morning I told Felicity I could never be with Harvey again. Was I really now contemplating trying a relationship with him again?

“I forgive you,” I say slowly, “but, Harvey, I need some time to consider whether or not I'm ready to get back in a

relationship with you.”

His face falls, and I almost take it back, almost agree to give us a try again, but then Allie calls to us to watch her, and the moment passes.

We both pivot, our postures tense, to watch as Allie skates backwards across the ice. That familiar longing fills me at the sight. The empty spot in my heart that periodically cries out for a child to hold, grows three sizes like I’m the Grinch of infertile women.

And that’s why I can’t be with Harvey. Allie is amazing. I love spending time with her. But I can’t be her mom. After my OBGYN delivered the news about the damage scar tissue had done to my uterus, he mentioned adoption to me. I spent the hours after my visit driving around Mistle Berry, thinking about whether or not I could ever see myself adopting a child. Eventually I’d come to the conclusion that I couldn’t. Adopting a child would force me to confront and deal with my own inability to bare children. Adoption would advertise to the world that I’d been given a body that couldn’t do what women’s bodies were designed to do. Besides, what if my body was broken because it knew I wouldn’t be a good mother?

Maybe I was being selfish, not being open to adoption... and yet, shutting myself off completely to the idea of ever being a mom in any capacity was the only way I’d found to cope with the pain. Pretend you’re not sad, put a brave smile on, and eventually you’ll be fine, right?

Agreeing to date Harvey meant agreeing to be open to the idea of potentially being Allie’s mom one day. And how could I be her mom when it would mean living everyday watching her and wondering what a child of my own would’ve been like? That wouldn’t be fair to her. See, I’m already failing at motherhood and I haven’t even started yet.

“Miss Kristen?” Allie skates over to us with worry creased across her forehead. “Are you okay?” Her question makes me take notice of the tears silently streaming down my cheeks. I’ve cried more since having Harvey back in my life

than I have in most of my life. That's not good. I can't be letting my guard down like this.

"I'm fine," I lie, swiping away the tears. "The cold is just making my eyes water." And leak. "Listen, I think I need to get home."

Her face falls, reminding me of her dad standing next to me. I eye Harvey, who's looking at me with a mixture of sadness and concern.

I set my shoulders. I just need to get through the next fifteen minutes, then I can go home and eat waffles while reading a romcom.

"Will you take me back to my car at the gym, Harvey?"

Harvey nods and the three of us skate off the ice. Allie doesn't complain, obviously sensing the change in mood. I feel like Michelle Williams' character in *The Greatest Showman* as she watches her husband leave, like the only real way to deal with my emotions would be to burst into a melancholy song, the lyrics speaking the language of my broken heart. It's either that or I dissolve into great, big body-wracking sobs.

The drive back to the gym is heavy with silence. When I thank Harvey for the ride, I can't meet his eyes. I offer Allie the best fake smile I can muster, and tell her I'll see her at play practice Monday. Then I hurry to my car and turn the radio all the way up as I drive home, attempting to sing along to the peppy music playing in an effort to keep my tears at bay.

In the end, I just alternate between sobbing and singing.

Taylor Swift's 22 has never seen this level of despair.

Chapter 25

HARVEY

“Daddy, is everything okay with you and Miss Kristen?” Allie asks me tentatively as we pull out of the gym parking lot.

I don’t answer her at first, too busy sorting through my jumbled thoughts. How did things go wrong so quickly?

I forgive you, but, Harvey, I need some time to consider whether or not I’m ready to get back in a relationship with you.”

I can give her time. I was going to say that, but then Allie asked us to watch her and the next thing I knew Kristen was crying in the middle of the ice rink. Not exactly a positive indication of where she’s at.

Still. I should’ve told her at some point in the last twenty minutes that I am willing to wait for her. I’ll wait for you. How hard is that to say?

“Daddy?” Allie shouts from the backseat, and I startle out of my thoughts.

“Sorry, Allie Cat,” I say quickly. “Everything is fine between us. We’re just figuring out some grown-up issues, okay? Nothing for you to worry about.”

Her face in my rearview mirror looks unconvinced, and silence descends on us once more. Selfishly I wish Gloria and Rob hadn’t left this morning for their cruise. I’d love to see if they’d take Allie for a couple of hours so I could go see Kristen and talk this out the rest of the way. Then again, I sort of doubt she’d talk to me. I should probably just let her have her space while she sorts through whatever it is she needs to sort through.

I sigh as I pull out into the middle of an intersection, my left blinker beeping in the background of our silence as I wait for a gap in the oncoming traffic to make my turn.

Out of nowhere a truck flies through the intersection swerving wildly out of its lane, heading straight for us. Before I can react metal strikes metal and the world goes black.

Chapter 26

KRISTEN

“Kristen? Oh there you are!” Clarice flies through my bedroom door, looking flustered and upset. “I’ve been calling you and-” she breaks off, taking in the whipped cream stained plate on my nightstand, my fluffy bathrobe, and my puffy red cheeks. That’s right, the romcom and waffles weren’t enough to stop my tears. “Oh you already know.” Her hand goes to her heart. “I’m so sorry. The kids said the two of you are friends. What can I do? Do you need to go to the hospital or something?”

I sit up straighter as ice floods my brain. Hospital? Who’s in the hospital?

“I can give you tomorrow off too,” Clarice continues. “You work so hard for us. I should be able to find another parent to take Camden to his soccer game.”

“Clarice,” my voice comes out hoarse and rusty, whether from all my crying or my angsty state I can’t say, “what are you talking about? What happened?”

She freezes, then pulls her head back slightly to take me in. “Oh, I thought you knew.” She gestures to my swollen face. “Harvey Parker-Barrett got in a car accident. He’s at Baptist Memorial.”

I’m up off my feet before she’s even finished talking, zooming past her to the door without bothering to even take off my bathrobe. “I have to go,” I call back to her.

I’m in my car and out of the driveway before I realize I don’t know how to get to the hospital. I yank out my phone for directions and do a double take at the number of messages on it. Apparently I had the ringer on silent. Clarice called me a bunch of times, but it’s the sight of repeated calls from two

unknown numbers that draw my attention most. What if it's the hospital somehow?

I set the directions on my phone, then play the first unknown number's voicemail over my bluetooth as I drive.

"Hi, Kristen," a frantic voice says. "This is Gina from the garage. I'm the receptionist there. We met when you brought your car in. Anyway, not important. I'm at Baptist Memorial," her voice breaks before she gathers herself to go on. "Harvey and Allie were in a car accident."

Allie was in the car too? Of course she was. Where else would she have been? My panic doubles, making my foot press down harder on the gas pedal. I need to be at the hospital!

"The doctors think Allie is fine," Gina goes on. I breathe out a sigh of relief. "She's got some cuts and bruises, and she's having a CT scan now to check for internal bleeding just to be safe. Poor girl had to be sedated, she's been hysterical since she arrived. Screaming for Harvey." Another sob comes through the line, and I fight a sob of my own, trying to force myself to focus on driving and Gina's next words. "But he can't come to her, Kristen. He's in a coma. They're not sure when, or if, he'll wake up."

Thank God I just arrived at a red light, because as her words sink in my vision goes black around the edges. Harvey is in a coma. They don't know when or if he'll wake up. Everything is cold and dark and bleak and hopeless.

They're wrong.

He has to wake up.

I will shake him away if I have to.

I will set a hundred alarm clocks in his hospital room.

I will fast and pray and don sackcloth until he wakes up.

I will go full-on Disney prince on him and bestow true love's kiss.

This last ridiculous thought clears my vision. True love's kiss? Did I really mean that?

Yes.

I love Harvey.

Of course I do.

I don't think I ever stopped loving him. That's why I've stayed mad at him for eight years. Holding a grudge against him meant not having to deal with the pain of losing the love of my life.

Only now I might be too late. I might actually lose the love of my life before I've even had the chance to tell him I still love him.

No. I shake this negativity away. Harvey is going to be fine. Like I said, I will wake him up by any means necessary.

Drowning in these thoughts I miss the rest of Gina's message. I replay it, desperate for whatever other information she has.

It turns out the head of neurology at the hospital knows Uncle Rob and Aunt Gloria from church. He had a nurse call the cruise line and eventually they got ahold of them. Within minutes of that Aunt Gloria had made the cruise ship turn around and return her and my uncle to the port. Still, with the travel time back to the port and then having to book a last minute flight home, they likely won't be able to get back to Mississippi until tomorrow. So Aunt Gloria tried calling me, which explains the other string of messages from an unknown number. She must've been calling from the cruise phone. Her cell phone never gets service at sea. When I hadn't answered she'd called Gina and that's how Gina had ended up at the hospital, calling me, and advocating through Gloria for Allie.

I make it to the hospital just as Gina's lengthy message finishes, somehow snagging a third row parking spot before getting out and sprinting across the lot.

"ICU please," I huff at the receptionist, who, clearly used to hysterical people, doesn't even look up from her Sudoku puzzle as she directs me to the bank of elevators down the hall.

I spot Gina as soon as I step off the elevator and hurry over to her.

“Where is he? Where’s Allie?”

“Allie is still back getting her scans done. Harvey is in room seven, but the receptionist over there told me no visitors.”

I don’t stay after the word seven, ignoring her warning as I spot a nurse exiting the doors guarding the patient rooms. She’s busy jotting notes on a clipboard and doesn’t notice me slipping through the doors behind her. By some miracle the receptionist, busy on the phone, doesn’t notice me either, so I hurry down the hall before someone wises up.

I can hear the beeping of the heart monitor as I round the corner into room seven, and the pulsing sound seems insanely slow compared to my own rapidly beating heart.

There he is. And although I know I’d be dead if this really happened, as I catch sight of him it feels as if my own heart stops beating at all.

His face is pale, his eyes closed. A deep cut runs along his right shoulder, shiny and red from the stitches they must’ve sewn in. A deep purple bruise covers almost his entire left bicep. Machines beep all around him, and his inner right elbow has an IV inserted into it.

A weird moan escapes my body. I’m frozen in place wanting to run to him, but not wanting to see him like this.

“Harvey,” I whisper, finally shuffling forward, not stopping until my hand meets his. His hand feels surprisingly warm in mine. I half expect his eyes to shoot open and for him to say something sappy and romantic like, “I always knew you’d come” or his signature line, “You come here often?”

But his eyes stay shut.

“Harvey,” I say again, “if you can hear me, please come back to me.”

Nothing. I close my eyes, fighting my rising panic.

“WHERE’S MY DADDY?” A familiar child’s voice breaks through my anxious state and my feet move toward the noise on autopilot. *Allie*. “I WANT MY DADDY!”

I hurry down the hall, bursting into a room full of nurses and doctors all gathered around Allie, trying to calm her down.

“The sedatives shouldn’t have worn off yet,” I hear a nurse say to the doctor.

“Where’s my daddy?” Allie moans.

Nobody has noticed my arrival yet, but I can’t get to Allie with them all standing around her bed and blocking my path.

“Allie!” I say her name loudly, and every set of eyes in the room turns to me.

“Ma’am,” a harried looking nurse steps toward me, “you can’t be in here.” She indicates the door. “Please leave.”

“Kristen!” Allie’s frantic utterance of my name, makes the nurse pause.

“Allie, I’m right here.” I squeeze past the disgruntled nurse and into the spot she just vacated, right next to Allie. “Oh, honey, are you okay?” I reach up and frame her face with my palms, looking her over. Outside of some scratches across her cheeks and a bruise that runs from the top of her forehead into her hairline, she looks okay. Her blue eyes fill with tears as she shakes her head in answer to my question.

“Someone hit our car,” she sobs. “And no one will tell me where Daddy is.”

“Ma’am,” the same nurse tries again, “you can’t be in here. You’re not an authorized visitor.”

“Rosa,” the doctor addresses the nurse, “just hold on a minute. Clearly the girl knows this woman.”

“I’m a friend of the family,” I tell the doctor. “Please, let me stay.”

“You can’t go!” Allie cries. “Please don’t leave me!”

“Don’t worry, honey, they’ll have to call security to get me out of here.”

There’s a moment of silence as the nurses and the doctor exchange looks.

“Fine,” my original deporter relents. “You can stay.”

“Thank you.” I put a hand to my heart in appreciation before turning back to Allie. “Come here, sweetie.” I scooch onto the bed and pull her against my side. She settles against me like we’ve done this a million times. I wait for the familiar pang of longing, the wave of sadness that I’ll never have a child of my own.

But it doesn’t come.

Instead I only feel fierce protectiveness for the little girl in my arms.

No, more than just protectiveness. I love her. She fits right into the empty space that’s been in my heart since that doctor told me it was unlikely I’d ever have children of my own. Tears fill my eyes, but their tears of gratitude for this unexpected gift. I bend down and kiss the top of her head and she sighs against me, snuggling even closer.

“Do you have the results of her CT scan?” I ask the doctor as I stroke Allie’s back.

“I’m afraid we can’t give you her medical results.” That’s Rosa again. “You’re not on her medical release form.”

“Who are you planning on giving her medical results to then?” I ask, unable to keep my irritation out of my voice. I get hospitals need to have these rules in place, but hello? Doesn’t this woman know that as soon as that man across the hall wakes up I’m going to make things official between us, and then, first thing first, I’m going to get him to add me to Allie’s freaking medical release form?

Rosa opens and closes her mouth, unable to come up with an answer.

My phone rings, and I snatch it up. It’s Aunt Gloria. “Aunt Gloria!” I exclaim into the phone.

“Cara mia, Grazie Dio you picked up! Did you get my messages? Did Gina get a hold of you?”

“Yes, yes. I’m here at the hospital. I’m with Allie.”

“Allie!” Her voice breaks. “Can I talk to her?”

I put the phone on speaker. “It’s Grandma, honey,” I tell Allie. Allie looks at the phone, but doesn’t pull away from me, so I simply hold the phone near her so she can hear Aunt Gloria.

“Allie, cocca, it’s Grandma.”

“Hi, Grandma,” Allie whimpers.

“Cocca, we just got back to the port. Your grandpa is booking us a flight back to you now, okay? We’ll be home soon.”

“Grandma,” Allie whispers, “no one will tell me where my daddy is.”

“Cara mia,” Aunt Gloria’s voice breaks again. “He’s with the doctors, okay? They’re taking good care of him. You just worry about taking care of yourself, okay, cara mia?”

“I miss Daddy.” Allie’s lower lip wobbles, and I tighten my grip on her.

“I know, cocca, I know. He’ll be back to you soon, I’m sure. He can’t stay away from his Allie Cat for long, you know?”

Allie nods. “Okay,” she says softly, before burying her head in my chest once more.

“Aunt Gloria,” I put the phone back up to my ear, “they won’t tell me any of Allie’s medical information. Is there anything you can do? Are you on her medical release form?”

“Give me to the doctor,” she replies. My gaze swivels to the doctor, still standing there with his clipboard, Rosa at his side. The other two nurses cleared out now that Allie has calmed down some.

“My aunt wants to talk to you,” I tell the doctor.

He steps forward and accepts the phone from my hands. I can hear Aunt Gloria speaking rapidly into the phone and watch with some satisfaction as the doctor’s eyes get big. If I had to guess she just played her I know the governor card (she doesn’t really...she stood in line at a Starbucks behind him once when he was running for the position) or her ‘I will call

your wife and tell her that her husband is refusing to help an old lady' card.

“Ma’am,” the doctor says when Aunt Gloria finally stops monologuing, “you do know you’re on Allison Parker-Barrett’s medical release form, don’t you? There’s no need to contact my wife. I’ll give you the information.”

I bite back a smile.

Five minutes later Aunt Gloria informs me that Allie has no signs of internal bleeding, but that they want to keep her overnight for observation.

“Then what?” I ask, adjusting the blanket so that it covers more of Allie’s tiny frame. There must’ve still been some traces of the sedative in her system, because she’s fallen asleep against me. “Who are they going to release her to, Aunt Gloria? Harvey’s...” I can’t finish the sentence.

“I’m not sure,” she says. “Hopefully your uncle and I will be back by then.” She sucks in a breath. “If Davina shows up before we do, don’t let her take Allie. Of course I had to call her and tell her what happened, but I don’t want her and that husband of hers taking care of Allie right now. Carter will only make things harder for Allie. The last thing she needs is to endure his emotional abuse while trying to recover.”

Davina is Harvey’s mom, Carter is his stepdad. I’ve never met either of them, but I’ve heard enough about them to know I agree with my aunt.

“I won’t let her go with them,” I promise. I pause before broaching my next question. “Is there any way you can pull some strings with that doctor you know? The head of neurology, I mean, and get him to keep me updated on Harvey’s condition?”

Thankfully Aunt Gloria doesn’t inquire about the motivation behind my request. “Of course, cara mia. I’ll call him next.”

We hang up, and I settle back against the hospital bed, trying not to disturb Allie’s slumber. Somehow, despite having

been through a car accident, and having been put in a hospital gown, she has a golden dog hair on her cheek. Dave!

I quickly call Gina, and she agrees to go get the puppy and take him back to her house.

With that taken care of, there's nothing left for me to do but wait.

My adrenaline has vanished, allowing all of my anxious thoughts to get a foothold in my brain once more. So I do the only thing I can think to do, the thing I should've done a long time ago-I fold my hands and raise my gaze to Heaven, praying for Harvey to wake up.

Chapter 27

KRISTEN

I wake up with a crick in my neck, breath that could stop a vampire, and an intense need to use the bathroom. Allie is still asleep, so I carefully extract myself and head to the in-room bathroom.

When I emerge a few minutes later, there's a woman I don't know speaking in hushed tones to a nurse. Based on her age, her elegant bun, and her wrinkle-free pantsuit, I'm guessing this woman is Davina.

Both she and the nurse startle at the sight of me, neither of them having realized I was in here.

"Who are you?" the woman I think is Davina demands. "And what is she doing in my granddaughter's room?" This she addresses to the nurse.

"I don't know," the nurse eyes me uncertainly. "We just had a shift change, so I'm new to this patient."

"I'm Kristen." I give them a little wave, keeping my distance due to the breath thing.

"Kristen," Davina repeats. "What are you doing in my granddaughter's hospital room?" She gives me a once over, starting at my slippered feet and working her way up. "And why are you wearing a bathrobe?"

"Oh, this?" I tug the tie around my waist self-consciously. That's twice this year I've been caught outside my residence wearing a bathrobe. It's really turning out to be a banner year of fashion for me. "Well the thing is, I was wearing this when I got the call about the accident, and I was in such a panic that I didn't think to change. Just drove over here as fast as my little Civic would carry me."

Davina blinks at me for a few seconds. “You didn’t answer my first question,” she finally says. “What are you doing in Allison’s hospital room? I was told family only in here. Isn’t that right young lady?” she barks at the nurse.

“Yes, that’s right,” the nurse says nervously. “Are you family?” she asks me.

“Of course she’s not family!” Davina hisses. “Don’t you think I would know her if she were family?”

“Of course,” the nurse agrees quickly. “Of course you would. Well then,” the nurse turns to me, “I’ll have to ask you to leave?”

And that’s when I go full Sandra Bullock in *While You Were Sleeping* on them.

“I am family,” I lie. “Harvey and I are getting married.”

See what I did there? Not exactly a lie. Just like Sandra Bullock didn’t exactly lie when she said she was going to marry Peter. She meant that was her life plan, a goal she was trying to achieve by demurely handing him his subway token everyday. Marrying Harvey recently became my life plan, a goal I’m trying to achieve by proving I can be a mother to his child.

Honestly, I feel like my plan is way better than hers.

“You’re what?” Davina sputters.

“Getting married,” I say with more confidence. I mean, I actually know Harvey. I’m light-years ahead of Sandra Bullock’s Lucy character.

“There’s no way my son is marrying a woman who comes out in public in her bathrobe.”

“It is becoming a bad habit of mine,” I reply dryly. “But somehow he manages to see past that flaw.”

Davina narrows her eyes. “If you’re Harvey’s fiancée, where’s your engagement ring?”

“At the jeweler’s being resized.” Wow, I am nailing this lie. I hold up my bare left hand. “I have unusually wide

knuckles.”

Her nose wrinkles as if this is the least desirable trait she’d ever want in a daughter-in-law.

“Well, Kristen,” she sniffs, “I’m sorry for my suspicion, but I’ve simply never heard of you. Not to mention my emotions are running a bit high right now.” For a second I see the briefest crack in her facade, a glimpse of the woman who lost her husband, then married a nightmare of a man, then lost her daughter and son-in-law in one fell swoop. The woman who is now facing the possibility of losing her last remaining child. I open my mouth, ready to say something that might help build a bridge between us, but then her face assumes its usual pinched nose expression, and the moment passes as she speaks again.

“Harvey’s fiancée or not, I’d like you to leave. My husband will be back soon with the discharge paperwork for Allison, then we’ll be taking her back to our hotel to rest.”

“You’re not taking Allie to a hotel.” The words come out sounding more horrified than I intend, and Davina bristles.

“That’s where we’re staying while we’re here, so of course she’ll be staying there too. I suppose we could consider going to Harvey’s house, but my husband won’t like that idea very much.”

“The hotel was only part of the problem,” I clarify. “I plan on taking Allie home when she gets discharged. That’s what I’ve been asked to do by her other grandparents.” That’s a stretch of what my aunt actually said, but I know she’d support me if she were here.

Davina shakes her head. “Her other grandparents? Now I know you’re lying. My late son-in-law’s father passed away years ago, and his mother is in a home with Alzheimer’s.”

“I meant Rob and Gloria McCallum.”

Davina’s nostrils flare. “Rob and Gloria McCallum are not her grandparents.”

Before I can reply, Allie stirs from the bed and both of us rush over as her eyes pop open.

“Nana?” she says groggily as her eyes find Davina. “What are you doing here? Where am I?” She pauses, and I see the moment the memory of what happened yesterday hits her. Allie’s eyes go wide then fill with tears as she searches the room. She locates me and utters only one word.

“Daddy?”

I take her hand. “He’s still working on getting back to you, honey.”

“But is he going to be okay?”

I lean in close, wrapping her in my arms, but before I can answer Davina pipes up.

“Quite frankly, Allison, we don’t know. The doctor I spoke with said it can be very difficult to predict whether or not someone will wake up from a coma. I think we need to prepare ourselves for a long few days or even weeks of not knowing. You need to be brave, Allison. No more crying. Tears never helped anything. So stop carrying on.”

Yup. This woman cannot take Allie home. No dang way.

I’m about to tell Davina just what I think of her admonishment when Allie defends herself.

“Nana, Jesus cried,” she says softly. “If he cried then I think I can cry too.” Davina gapes at her, but Allie isn’t finished. “I know he cried because I’ve been reading my Bible a lot. Kristen told me that’s what I should do to get a better understanding of love, since I’m too young to read *Pride and Prejudice*. She said she would marry Daddy if I read the whole thing.”

I did not actually agree to that, but I’m so touched that she was trying to read such a lengthy tome all to get me to marry her dad that I don’t point this out. Not to mention the fact that I am currently playing fake fiancée to her dad, and her words help support my lie. Ironic given the ninth commandment.

“I’m not finished yet,” Allie goes on, “because it’s really, really long, and I skipped a lot of parts, but if someone brings me a Bible I’ll read it now. And I’ll finish it,” her voice is

getting increasingly frantic. “I’ll finish it, and then Daddy will have to wake up because he can’t marry you if he’s sleeping-” she breaks off into big shuddery sobs, and I slide onto the bed and take her in my arms, whispering soothing words to her as I rub her back.

I don’t know how long we stay that way for, but when I finally look up Davina has sunk into a nearby chair and is staring out the window with a pensive expression. The nurse is still here too. She’s standing near the foot of the bed just watching us, tears streaming down her face.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I try not to get emotional working in the ICU, but some days are harder than others.” She swipes away her tears and hurries over. “I do need to take Allie’s vitals though, so they can proceed with her discharge paperwork.”

“Oh, okay.” I ease Allie into a sitting position. “You hear that, Allie, honey, the nurse needs to listen to your heart and lungs and then maybe we can go home.”

Allie looks up at me. “Go home? With you?”

“If they’ll let me take you, yes.” Out of the corner of my eye I see Davina whip her head back to face us, but she doesn’t immediately protest.

“Knock, knock,” a voice at the door interrupts our conversation, and we both turn to see a doctor standing there with a smile on his face. “Hi, there, Allie, I’m Doctor Ambrose, and I’m head of neurology here. I’m also friends with your grandparents,” from her seat I hear Davina tsk in displeasure at his use of the word grandparents to describe Gloria and Rob, “who tell me that you love dogs.” He whips a hand from behind his back to reveal a stuffed animal golden retriever. “So I thought you might enjoy this.” He passes the toy over to Allie who grabs it with delight, squeezing it against her chest.

“Thank you, Doctor Ambrose,” she says. “Is my daddy going to be okay?”

“I’m taking good care of him, Allie. I promise.” His eyes flit to mine. “In fact, I do have some good news on that front. When the nurse switched the light on this morning he flinched.” Doctor Ambrose beams. “That’s an excellent sign for someone in a coma. An excellent sign.”

I clutch the bedsheets, trying not to get ahead of myself. “Does that mean he’s going to wake up soon?” I ask breathlessly.

“These things aren’t always easy to predict,” Dr. Ambrose says, “but I’d venture to say that it is a very strong indicator that he will wake eventually. Few patients who have descended into a permanent vegetative state would have that kind of response, as it requires a certain level of brain function.”

I let out the breath I’ve been holding, a smile blooming on my face like I’m the tallest sunflower in the field and the sun is shining just for me. Harvey is going to wake up. I knew it.

“Of course, I can’t guarantee anything,” Dr. Ambrose adds hastily, “but Rob and Gloria insisted that if I had any hope to share I should share it. Now what I need from you all,” he looks between Allie, Davina, and me, “is to make sure when you stop by to see him that you talk to him, okay? I know it may feel silly talking to someone whose eyes are closed, but it’s good for coma patients to hear the voices of their loved ones.”

“I can go see him?” Allie immediately starts to wiggle out of bed.

“Hold on there, Allie,” Dr. Ambrose says with a chuckle. “We have to get you discharged before you can go over there.” He eyes Davina and me. “One of you ladies is welcome to go now though.”

I can feel the longing to go see him in every nerve of my body, but can I really leave Allie all alone with Davina? What if she takes her while I’m gone?

I peek over at Davina to find her watching me. “Why don’t you go ahead,” she says, fiddling with the pearls around her neck and avoiding meeting my eyes. I glance down at Allie, hesitating. “I’m not going to leave with her while you’re with Harvey, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Davina sniffs. Finally she raises her eyes to mine. “Go see my son,” she whispers. “Bring him back to me.”

For the second time I see the ghost of the woman she was before tragedy wrecked her.

“Allie, is it okay with you if I go?”

She nods. “I’ll be okay.”

I lock eyes with her, fighting the urge to tell her to scream if Davina tries to leave with her by attempting to communicate this message telepathically instead. Then I decide that’s not good enough and bend down to hug her so I can whisper this warning instead.

Davina seems genuine, but quicksand looks like a harmless stretch of sand before you step onto it and it sucks you down.

Message delivered to Allie, I head down the hallway to Harvey’s room, my palms tingling with nervous energy. What am I going to say to Harvey? It’s a lot of pressure trying to come up with words good enough to pull someone out of a coma.

There are so many big topics I have to cover with Harvey-our fake engagement, how I’ve now met his lovely mother, the fact that my uterus has more scars than Mad-Eye-Moody.

Somehow these don’t seem like topics that would inspire him to walk away from the light.

All of these anxious thoughts fly out of my brain when I enter the room and see Harvey again. My heart squeezes in my chest, and I run over to him, slipping my hand into his and whispering his name like it’s a lifeline thrown into the current threatening to sweep me under.

I lower myself into the chair next to his bed, scooching it forward until my knees are flush against the metal frame. Then I just sit there, hand in his, begging him over and over to come back to me.

Chapter 28

KRISTEN

In the end it's not Allie screaming that alerts me to the need to get back to her—it's a loud angry voice in the hallway demanding to know why he came all the way down here if they were just going to let some random woman take Allie home instead of watching her themselves.

I get up from my seat and peer into the hallway to see Davina engaged in a tense discussion with a man who must be her husband, Harvey's stepfather Carter.

"She's not a random woman, Carter," Davina fires back. "She's Harvey's fiancée, which means she's going to be Allison's stepmother."

It occurs to me that if I can hear them, Allie probably can too. I hope she doesn't blow my cover, or worse, think it's actually true. Call me Lucy, because I've got some 'splainin to do.

"And yet we've never heard of her. This is typical Harvey behavior," Carter seethes. "Inconsiderate and selfish."

I'm about to step out in the hallway and defend him when Davina surprises me by doing it first.

"That's my son who is in a coma that you're talking about, Carter." She sets her shoulders and her voice stiffens. "Am I upset that he chose to keep such an important aspect of his life hidden from me? Of course, but he is still my son whose life is in jeopardy. So I ask that we both save the reprimands until after he's woken up."

I swear I could be watching an episode of *Gilmore Girls* right now, that's how much Davina reminds me of Emily Gilmore.

“Alright, fine,” Carter relents. “Let’s go back to the hotel then. I’ve got work to do.”

“I just need to go speak to Harvey.”

“You’re going to speak to a man in a coma?”

“The doctor said it might help.”

Carter nods, clearly a guy who puts a lot of stock in authority figures. “Well okay then. I’ll wait in the lobby. Tell him I said he’s old enough to pay for his own dang wedding.” Except he didn’t say dang.

Davina doesn’t reply, she simply nods and heads down the hall toward me. I duck back into the room, scurrying back to my chair just as she walks in.

“Krista, could you give me a moment with my son please.”

I nod, deciding to table the fact that my name is Kristen for a later date. Honestly, if she thinks my name is Krista it might be for the best. Then when Harvey wakes up and blows the cover on my fiancée story, Davina will go tell all her friends about some crazy woman named Krista who made up being engaged to her hot son and the whole thing will never be traced back to me.

Of course ideally, Harvey will wake up and propose on the spot, turning my lie into a truth, but it’s best to be prepared for either outcome.

I leave Davina alone with Harvey and head back to Allie’s room. I find a deck of cards in the nightstand by her bed, so she and I spend the next thirty minutes playing Go Fish. Finally the nurse comes in with her discharge papers, informing me that thanks to a phone call from my aunt, Doctor Ambrose signed off on me taking Allie home.

“I’m really going home with you?” Allie asks. “Like back to Lily’s house?”

This gives me pause. I’d been so focused on being the one to take Allie home from the hospital that I hadn’t thought about which home I’d be bringing her to.

“Good question,” I tell Allie, stalling as I think this question through. “What makes the most sense? Let’s talk logistics. There are clothes to think about. And beds. Your bed is at your house. Then again, my bed is at the Wilders’ house.” I don’t even know what I’m saying right now, but Allie seems to be tracking. She hops right in with the solution most obvious to an eight-year-old with no romantic experience.

“You can sleep in my daddy’s bed.”

“Sleep in your daddy’s bed,” I repeat dreamily as a curl of pleasure swirls through me. Why is that such an enthralling idea? Obviously he wouldn’t be in the bed, but I bet his sheets smell like him. And the idea of my head laying on his pillow and his blanket wrapped around me...

“Miss Kristen, why is your face all red?” Allie’s voice cuts into my daydreams, but I’m saved from answering by the sudden ringing of my phone. I hurry to grab it from my bag, but by the time I locate it the ringing has stopped, and I see I have a whole string of missed calls. The one I missed just now was from Felicity. There are also three calls from my Aunt Gloria, plus one from Clarice. Before I can listen to any of the voicemails a text arrives from Felicity.

Hey, Aunt Gloria called and told me what happened. Kristen, I’m so sorry! I’m coming to Mississippi. Aunt Gloria said their flight got rerouted because of a medical emergency on board. They’re stuck in Georgia. I’ll watch the kids until Harvey is out of the hospital so you can stay with Allie. I called Clarice and worked it all out.

Another text arrives just as I finish reading the first.

I’m praying for Harvey. Don’t worry about anything else- I’ve got everything under control. Just take care of Harvey and Allie. Love you.

Then one last text.

P.S. I knew you still liked him.

A strangled laugh escapes through the tears that had sparked in my eyes as I read her first two texts.

“Is everything okay?” Allie asks me, pulling my attention back to her. I offer her a watery smile.

“Looks like we will be heading to your house after all,” I tell her.

Harvey’s pillow, here I come.

Oh gosh. What is wrong with me? How can I find out if this sudden obsession with Harvey’s pillow is weird?

Google?

Or what’s that search engine that supposedly doesn’t track your internet activities?

Because “*is it weird that I want to sniff my ex-boyfriend turned fake fiancé’s pillow while he’s in a coma*” doesn’t seem like a search I want any other humans or even computer robots to know about.

Chapter 29

KRISTEN

After a visit to see her dad, Allie and I leave the hospital and head back to her house. She's quiet on the ride there, and I can tell seeing her dad like that has really affected her. As it would any child, I'm sure.

I debate asking her if she heard her grandparents talking about anything weird, i.e. my fake engagement to her dad, but since she hasn't mentioned it, I decide not to either. Instead I go the safer route and talk about her beloved pets.

"Hey, Gina texted me that she'll bring Dave back this afternoon, and she said she fed your hamster too. I didn't even know you had a hamster. You'll have to introduce me."

Allie's lips raise in the faintest of smiles. "Barkley is a pretty cool hamster," she says. "He likes to run around the house in his exercise ball, but only daddy can get him in there." Her voice breaks, and I reach across the center console to take her hand.

"Allie, he's going to wake up. I know it."

She nods, swiping away the tears drifting down her cheeks with her free hand.

I say a silent prayer that I'm right. Harvey has to wake up. He just has to.

Allie and I pass the day playing board games, snuggling Dave and Barkley, and watching another of my favorite musicals, *Annie*. We eat cereal for dinner, and she drifts off at the table, clearly still tired out from everything that's happened. I carry her to bed, then head back to the kitchen to clean up.

I wish desperately that I could go visit Harvey while she's sleeping. Being here in his house, surrounded by his things makes his absence all the more noticeable.

After I've cleared our cereal bowls, I walk aimlessly around, touching random objects that remind me of him. His coffee mug sitting on the counter. The picture of him and Allie displayed in a frame that looks as if Allie made it. The blanket we sat under when we watched *The Sound of Music* the other night.

I reach the door to his bedroom and pause outside it. The suspenseful music from *Beauty and the Beast* plays in my mind, but I ignore it and push the door the rest of the way open.

Given the buildup it's a surprisingly anticlimactic moment. A king-sized IKEA bed takes up most of the room, along with the coordinating nightstand and dresser. It's all very minimalistic and, okay fine, a bit boring. Vanilla in both color and feel. Then I spot the picture hanging up on the wall above the dresser, and I'm back to being Belle in the West Wing, inexplicably drawn to that enchanted rose. Only my feet are pulling me closer to this blown-up photo of Harvey's truck set against the backdrop of a star-filled night sky.

A photo I took.

I'd meant to take a selfie of the two of us, but we'd been laughing so much I'd accidentally flipped the camera and ended up with this beautiful photo of our special spot. The spot we'd often sneak out to after finishing a shift at the bar, the silence of the late hour making it seem like we were the only two people in the world.

My fingers trace the outline of his truck, remembering all of those nights we spent sitting in the bed of it. Sometimes talking, sometimes staring up at the fathomless night sky, sometimes kissing. Harvey would bring his guitar and play songs he was working on for me. I'd bring whatever summertime concoction Felicity had come up with for us to try.

Whatever we did, it was always just the two of us in that tucked away spot on the edge of town.

And that's the image he falls asleep to every night. An image that surely reminds him of me.

My heart is beating in my chest like an uneven load in the washing machine-so fast and loud you worry the thing is about to explode.

What if I'm wrong though? Maybe this picture doesn't mean he's fallen asleep thinking of me every night for the last eight years. It's only a picture after all. I'm not even in it. I just took it.

And I don't care that Elton from *Clueless* thought the fact that Cher took that photo of him and Tai made it worth hanging up in his locker. That part of the movie never made sense to me. Yes, I get the parallel to *Emma*, but in reality men don't hang up pictures of other women to remind themselves of the woman they truly want. So maybe this picture isn't about me, maybe it's about his truck.

He is kind of obsessed with the thing.

I gasp. I never heard how his truck fared in the accident. He'll be crushed if his truck is, well, crushed.

I sink onto Harvey's bed, still lost in these thoughts. The weight of this day, of this whole weekend really, hits me and a yawn pops out. Maybe I'll just lay down for a quick second.

Before making my move, I look around as if someone might pop out of the closet and announce that they see what I'm about to do. When nobody does, I start slowly inching myself further up the bed, tugging down the covers as I go, still peering all around. Of course there's nobody in the house but Allie and me, so I make it all the way to the top of the bed, and slide my feet under the covers, without interruption.

Just like that I'm in Harvey's bed.

I smile like I'm a little kid who managed to sneak a cookie before dinner without their parents noticing.

Don't judge me.

I'm under a lot of pressure right now. My fake fiancé is in a coma for goodness sake! A coma!

Plus this bed smells just like Harvey. I bend down and sniff his pillow like the nutcase I am, then lay my head on it with a sigh. My gaze travels to that picture hanging on the wall. I've got a perfect view of it from this angle, and my eyes trace the stars across the dark night sky, an unexpected peace settling over me.

Call me Goldilocks because the next thing I know, I'm asleep.

Chapter 30

KRISTEN

I wake up with someone else's hand on my face. I stifle a scream as I realize it's Allie's. She must've snuck into my bed at some point last night.

Well, not my bed. Harvey's bed. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Ms. Fake Fiancée.

I carefully remove Allie's hand, kissing her softly on the forehead as I ease her off of me. The sudden sense of someone's eyes on me makes me whip my head around, and I gasp in surprise as I take in Gloria standing in the doorway, hand to her heart watching us. Tears glisten in her brown eyes, and I'm instantly self-conscious at her discovery of me here in Harvey's bed.

This is worse than Google knowing.

"Oh, did I wake you?" Gloria whispers, swiping at her tears. "I'm sorry, cara mia."

"No, no. You didn't wake me." I scramble out of the bed, noting as I do that I could really use a shower. Or at the very least a change of clothes. "I'm so glad you're here. What time is it? Where's Uncle Rob? Have you seen Harvey? Any news from the hospital?" I'm rapid-firing questions at her like doing so will save me from an inquisition of my own.

"It's almost nine. Your uncle took Dave for a walk. We saw Harvey before we came here. Nothing new to report. You should shower, I'll make coffee." She turns to go, and for a second I think I've managed to avoid the interrogation I was expecting, but then she looks back over her shoulder and adds, "We'll talk when you get out."

“I know how this must look to you,” I say to my aunt twenty minutes later as I walk into the kitchen wearing a pair of Harvey’s sweats rolled at both the waist and the ankles to accommodate our size difference. “But you can’t expect a person to sleep on a couch when there’s a perfectly good empty bed available. And,” I gesture to the sweats and t-shirt, “I don’t have any other clothes with me besides the ones I’ve been wearing for almost two days. Borrowing something of Harvey’s was my only option.”

Aunt Gloria looks at me over her cup of coffee, pursing her lips against the knowing smile I can tell is trying to break free. “Felicity dropped by a suitcase of your things this morning,” she informs me. “It’s in the entryway.”

“Oh. Great.” I hope she doesn’t hear the note of false cheer in my voice. Or notice the way my shoulders just sank. She’ll read into those things and think that I’m disappointed to have my own clothes here. Which I’m not. That would be ridiculous. “Well, I’ll just go change then.”

The thing is Harvey’s sweats are super comfortable. That’s all it is.

Anyway, hopefully Felicity also packed me some curl cream, because otherwise Harvey will wake up to find himself fake engaged to the before version of Gracie Hart in *Miss Congeniality*.

“No, no, don’t rush off.” Aunt Gloria pats the empty chair next to her. “You can change after we talk.”

Right. The talk. Yay.

I sink into the chair, and she slides a cup of coffee over to me.

“So, you finally realized you’re still in love with Harvey.” It’s a statement not a question, so I don’t even try to deny it. “Have you told him?”

I shake my head.

“Well,” she spreads her arms, “what are you waiting for?”

I let out a strangled laugh. “He’s in a coma, Aunt Gloria. Doesn’t exactly seem like the right time.”

“I disagree,” she says adamantly. “This seems like precisely the right time to me. Doctor Ambrose said he’s had more than one coma patient emerge from their coma able to recount certain things that they heard while they were unconscious. Maybe your confession of love is exactly what Harvey needs to hear so he can wake up.”

I stare at her with tear-filled, unblinking eyes, trying to figure out how to articulate all of the thoughts crowding my brain.

“What if me loving him isn’t enough to make him stay?” I finally whisper.

“Oh, honey,” Aunt Gloria reaches out and puts her hand on top of mine, “you can’t hold the rash actions of a scared 21-year-old against him forever. Harvey wants to be with you. The only thing that held him back from pursuing you when you first arrived in Mississippi was his fear that you wouldn’t want Allie. And given how you’ve stepped up to the plate to take care of her while he’s been in the hospital, his fears are clearly unfounded.” She means for her words to be comforting, but instead they turn my veins to ice. Because I still have to tell him I can’t have children, and that’s the real reason I’m worried about him leaving me again.

“Kristen, cara mia, what’s wrong? You don’t believe me?” Her brow knits with concern. “Is this about your silly notion that you aren’t mother material? Because that’s nonsense. Utter nonsense. I’ve seen you with Allie, and it’s clear she adores you.”

My secret, the one I’ve only ever told to that one random boyfriend, is like a large wall between us, making it impossible to communicate with one another until I knock it down.

But I’m not sure I can knock it down, not when I’ve let that wall stand between me and the world for so long.

“Kristen?” Aunt Gloria prompts. “What is it you’re not saying to me right now?”

I still don’t answer her, can barely even see her through the tears running down my face. My hands betray my confidence by going to my stomach and clutching it tightly. How many times have I gripped my midsection, berating the muscles inside of it for the pain and loss they’ve caused me? A hundred times, probably more.

But never with a witness.

Aunt Gloria sucks in a breath. “You can’t have children,” she says, and again, it’s not a question, so I just sit there as my wall crumbles down, now as broken and useless as I am. “I should’ve figured that out,” she mutters to herself. “I should’ve known.”

“How would you know?” I finally speak, my voice shaky. “Nobody knows. Not even Felicity or my parents.” I close my eyes as I say this last one. “Harvey definitely doesn’t know.”

Aunt Gloria squeezes my hand. “Yes, but none of them should be able to recognize a shadow of grief identical to their own.”

It takes a second for me to make sense of her words. “Wait, you...you can’t have children either?”

Aunt Gloria nods. “Apparently I have an inhospitable womb. Something your uncle and I found out after years and years of trying to conceive.” She pulls her hand off mine, anxiously fiddling with her wedding ring as she continues her story. “We got married a little later in life, you know. I was already 33. By the time we started trying for kids I was almost 36. We thought it was our age giving us trouble, but after almost three years of trying we finally decided to have some tests done. It was devastating finding out we’d likely never be able to have children of our own.” Aunt Gloria’s voice thickens.

“We talked about adopting, of course, but for a while my grief was too all-consuming to even consider it. We were both over forty at this point, and we did eventually decide to look

into adoption, but honestly after researching the process neither one of us knew if we could handle all of the waiting and not knowing and uncertainty of it. Not after so many years of our marriage had already been consumed by those things as we tried to get pregnant. So instead we threw ourselves into being the best aunt and uncle to you and your sister and to my sister's kids in Nashville too. We started volunteering in the children's ministry at church and tutoring through some local nonprofit organizations. It was all very fulfilling, but," she clears her throat, "it wasn't until eight years ago that we were truly able to set our grief aside." She's crying too now, but keeps talking.

"Kristen, it's a heavy burden we carry, not being able to have children, but in the midst of that sorrow I've discovered that sometimes the best children are the ones who simply walk into our lives and ask us to be their mothers." Aunt Gloria puts a hand to her heart, and I know she's talking about Harvey. The child she didn't receive until he was an adult, but who has turned her into a mother nonetheless. And Allie too, the granddaughter she's helped raise. "So don't let what you know you'll never have prevent you from accepting the gift right in front of you."

Her words are like poetry written to my barren soul, beautiful and sweet, lilting and lovely, but then, as the silence stretches between us, melancholy settles over me as all my old insecurities come flooding back in their wake.

"Aunt Gloria," I say carefully, "I would love nothing more than to be Allie's mom, but what if Harvey doesn't want me after I tell him the truth? He wants more kids, and I can't give him that. What if just me isn't enough for him? What if he wants more than I can give him?" I swallow hard. "He told me right before the accident that the kids thing is why he left me eight years ago. And unfortunately I can't change the fact that I can't give that to him. I love him, Aunt Gloria, I do. But I'm completely terrified that he won't love me after I tell him the truth."

I feel raw and vulnerable and so exposed. If she tells me it will all be okay and that of course Harvey will still love me,

I will never believe another word she says, because she just can't guarantee that. No one but Harvey can assuage my fears. And he's the one I'm the most terrified to share them with.

"I don't know how Harvey will respond," Aunt Gloria admits. "I know that man loves you though, and love deserves the truth. Don't write him off before you've even given him the chance to love you, mess and all. Besides," she adds, "you're much younger than your uncle and I were when we found out. If you were up for it, adoption could be a wonderful option for you."

I stare blankly at her, considering her words. I've been so staunchly against adoption for so many years that I've stopped even considering it as a viable alternative. But if my heart has opened up and made room for Allie, maybe I can handle adoption. Maybe it won't highlight my brokenness.

Maybe it would be amazing.

"Kristen, honey, did I upset you?"

"No, no." I shake my head, blinking rapidly against fresh tears. "Maybe you're right. Maybe adoption could be an option."

For the first time in a long time I feel a stirring of hope.

There's a commotion at the back door, and a second later I hear Allie and my uncle talking.

"Your uncle took Allie to get donuts while you were in the shower. Sounds like they're back." Aunt Gloria stands, giving my hand one last squeeze. "What do you say we head to the hospital? You can practice telling Harvey the truth while he's unconscious. It'll be cathartic." She sets her shoulders. "Plus then I can have a chance to give him my two cents on that matter. Where's he going to find a woman better than you?" She harrumphs. "Nowhere, that's where."

I dry my eyes and stand too.

They say practice makes perfect.

So maybe I'll practice telling him a few times.

Just to be safe.

Chapter 31

KRISTEN

“Harvey, there’s something I need to tell you.” There, that was a good solid start. Of course it’s also the fourth start I’ve had. Good thing I agreed to do this whole practice thing, because I keep getting interrupted. The first time it was by a nurse coming to adjust one of his IV hook-ups. Then someone from the cafeteria came to deliver his lunch. They quickly realized they were in the wrong room, since, you know, coma patients don’t usually order lunch. The third time I started to tell him, I decided I better hit the bathroom first. Nervous bladder and whatnot.

Now here I am, ready to get this practice session over with.

You’d think it would be easier to tell him given his state of unconsciousness, but the lack of facial expression is really throwing me. I mean, I’m about to bare my soul and the only response I’m going to get is the steady beeping of his heart monitor.

I guess that’s the point though. I know it’s safe to tell him because he’s not going to reply anyway.

Maybe if I don’t look at him, that will help. I turn my seat around so that I’m staring at the wall instead.

Okay, yes, this is better.

Here goes nothing.

“I can’t have babies,” I rush out. The wall says nothing back, so I continue. “I have endometriosis, which is the reason for my painful periods. Basically it means that there’s tissue growing outside my uterus and scarring it. And my scarring is so severe it makes pregnancy extremely unlikely. Plus on the off chance that I do get pregnant it comes with an increased

risk for miscarriage and other pregnancy complications like delivering before fetal viability. I found all of this out right before you left eight years ago. That's why I lied and told you that I didn't want kids, because that was easier than telling you I was broken." I'm talking so fast that even if he were awake he might not be able to keep up. Somehow I'm not crying. Maybe because I'm all out of tears after my confession session this morning.

Or maybe it's because I've finally found my path to motherhood. It's Harvey and his beautiful daughter Allie. The child who walked into my life and asked me to be her mother. I just hope when Harvey wakes up he still feels the same way about me that he said he did at the ice rink.

"And I know this is a lot to lay on you, especially given your current state of unconsciousness, but don't worry I plan to repeat this whole conversation after you're awake. Then we can figure out what this means for the two of us, because I definitely want there to be an us." I let out a nervous laugh. "Oh, right, I also wanted to tell you that I love you. I should've opened with that. Duh." I palm my forehead. "Luckily this is just a practice round." I chew my lip. "So let's start over then."

I turn my chair back, ready to look at him now that I've said the hardest things to say. I inhale deeply then burst out, "Harvey, I love you, and I want to be with you. Someday I want to marry you and be Allie's mom and move into your house and fall asleep looking at that picture on your bedroom wall of our special spot just like I did last night." I suck in a breath.

"That's a little embarrassing saying all of that out loud. I mean I don't even know if you've thought about marrying me, so clearly I'm being presumptuous. And I suppose I didn't have to admit to you that I slept in your bed last night. Not like you'd ever know. In my defense I was watching Allie, so your bed was the only sleeping option available." I sit back in my chair, completely lost in this one-sided conversation.

"Did I like sleeping in your bed? Fine, I'll admit it. I loved it. Your pillow smells really good. Probably because you

smell really good. All manly and, and...sexy. I guess sexy isn't technically a smell, but I don't care. I stand by what I said. You smell sexy. Also, I love this five o'clock shadow thing you've got going on right now. When you wake up you should consider doing the scruffy look on the regular." I reach over and run a finger across said scruff, a sigh escaping me. "This would totally burn my cheek if we kissed. And it would totally be worth it."

I start to pull my hand back when a sudden movement turns my sigh into a scream. Harvey's hand reaches up and his fingers encircle my wrist, holding me in place.

My eyes hurry to his face, thinking he's woken up, but no, his eyes are still closed. Was his hand grabbing my wrist some sort of reflex? What is going on?

Abruptly his eyes pop open, landing on me. "Did you mean all of that?" His voice is raspy and dry from disuse.

"Harvey!" I squeak. "You're awake! Oh my gosh! You're awake!" I'm blubbering like an idiot. At some point I must've stood up because I'm on my feet, my hands touching his face, his shoulders, his face again, all to make sure this is really happening.

"Okay, okay," Harvey chuckles, then winces, the movement hurting him.

"Are you okay?" I cry. "What hurts? Should I get a nurse?" I reach for the call button, but Harvey catches my wrist again.

"No nurse," he says firmly. "Not yet."

I freeze, all of my adrenaline rushing to that one point of connection between us. I shiver, then burst into tears, flinging myself at him like some sort of hysterical barnacle.

Harvey lets out an oomph, but when I start to pull away, worried I've hurt him, his arms slide up around me holding me in place.

"You're not going anywhere, Doc," he murmurs into my hair, making my stomach swoop.

He's awake. Harvey is awake! I'm so happy I could fly, make a patronus, and supply the entire population of Monstropolis with electricity for a lifetime. I ease myself the rest of the way onto the bed, burrowing my face into his neck and inhaling deeply.

"Careful, if I've been out for a while I may not smell as sexy as you've grown accustomed to."

Oh.

My.

Gosh!!!!

Instantly I stiffen. He heard me! How much did he hear? Obviously the last part where I was going on about his sexy smell and his scruff. But did he hear anything else?

Oh my goodness, this is all Aunt Gloria's fault. Practice telling him the truth, she'd told me. And I just listened to her like she was Dear Abby or something.

Does he know I slept in his bed and want to marry him?

What is wrong with me? How could I just say things like that out loud?

Thank God I didn't mention our fake engagement.

I push myself out of Harvey's arms and stand awkwardly by his bed, heart thudding in my ears as my brain replays all of the embarrassing things I just confessed to him.

"Kristen," Harvey says slowly, "don't freak out on me."

"I'm not freaking out," I say in a voice so high I'm surprised the mirror over the sink in the corner doesn't crack. "But I think you should know that you were in a coma for almost two days, and that you may have had some weird dreams during that time. Dreams about me, even. Dreams where I said things." I shrug. "And also you're probably hungry. I should get you some food. There's a Chick-Fil-A in the cafeteria. You still like their sandwiches, right?" I turn to go, but don't make it two steps before Harvey speaks, halting me in place.

“So you’re saying I was dreaming when I heard you say you love me?”

I turn slowly to face him again. “That depends,” I say softly. “Would that be a good dream or a bad dream?”

Harvey’s eyes lock onto mine. “That would be the best dream I’ve ever had.”

The room around us seems to disappear, like my brain has gone into portrait mode and can only focus on Harvey. A small voice is telling me to ask if he heard the other thing...the thing that could break us again, but I’m too happy that he’s awake and saying romantic things to me. So I stuff that voice down, lifting my chin defiantly against its warnings.

“I said what I said, Harvey,” my voice holds teasing challenge. “Now what are you going to do about it?”

His answering smile is like a lighthouse on the darkest of nights beckoning me home.

“I’m going to ask you to get back over here so we can try out that whole scruffy kiss thing you were so interested in.”

A bubbly laugh escapes me, then I don’t hesitate a moment longer, hurrying across the room to him. I tuck myself against him, then raise my mouth to his. As our lips meet, Harvey groans and pulls me closer, sinking his hands into my hair. The scruff of his five o’clock shadow scrapes against my chin just as I’d anticipated, making me smile against him. He feels the turn of my lips and a chuckle rumbles through him, moving through my own body thanks to our nearness.

“You like that, huh?” he asks, turning his cheek to rub it against mine and making me squeal. His hands capture my face and bring my mouth back to his.

This time there’s no laughter, only the delicious feeling of being entirely swept away in someone else. Time is gone. This room is gone. There’s only Harvey and his arms around me.

“Oh! Oh my, I’m so sorry!” A female voice breaks into our kiss, and reluctantly I pull away, turning to see an embarrassed looking nurse in the doorway. “The alarm for your heart rate monitor was going off, Mr. Parker-Barrett,” she

adds in explanation. She gives us an appraising look. “Of course I can see why now.” Her hands go to her hips as she smirks at us. “Looks like this time around Snow White woke up Prince Charming.”

Chapter 32

HARVEY

By the time the neurologist finishes all of his tests, I'm exhausted, but eager to see Allie, Gloria, and Rob. And yeah, also pathetically desperate to have Kristen with me again.

As soon as the nurse alerted Doctor Ambrose that I'd woken up, they swept me away for an MRI and sent her to the waiting room. I missed her immediately.

Sitting inside that claustrophobic imaging machine had given me plenty of time to relive our kiss, and to say that I want to do it again, would be an understatement. Like saying Arizona is hot in the summer. Everyone knows it's scorching.

And my need to kiss Kristen again is also scorching.

But first I really need to see Allie, hug her, and assure her that I'm okay. I can't even imagine how traumatic this experience has to have been for her, especially after losing her parents to a car accident. Plus, although the doctors and nurses said she came out of the accident with just some scratches and bruises, I need to see her for myself to know for sure.

Almost as soon as I'm back in my room, Allie comes barreling in, launching herself across the room at me and screaming my name. "Daddy!"

"Allie Cat." I squeeze her tightly against myself, cherishing the blessing that is this little girl.

"I'm so glad you woke up! Miss Kristen said you would, and the doctor who gave me a stuffed animal said you would, but I was still so scared!" She's talking fast, whimpering into my chest, but I just hold her, rubbing circles on her back and telling her over and over again that I'm so glad she's okay.

From the corner of the room Rob clears his throat, and I look up to see him and Gloria staring at us with tears in their eyes.

“Well c’mon then, join us,” I say with a laugh, and they both surge forward, the four of us like a tangled ball of yarn as our arms overlap and fingers intertwine in a giant group hug.

We pull apart all laughing, then Gloria pushes her way forward to embrace me in a hug just for her. “Oh, Harvey,” she says, squeezing me tightly, “don’t you dare scare me like that ever again.” She doesn’t let me go for a full minute, and gratitude for her swells inside me. Allie and I, we’d be lost without her and Rob.

“Where’s Kristen?” I ask her as she releases me. Before she can answer me, a new voice speaks.

“Harvey.” I look over Gloria’s shoulder to see my mom in the doorway, hands clasped in front of her, darting disapproving glances between Gloria and me.

“Mom?” I can’t keep a note of surprise out of my voice. She’s never been down to Mississippi before. Allie and I have only ever gone up to Illinois to see them.

“Carter is here too,” she replies a bit stiffly, “but your fiancée is out there refusing to let him come in.”

“My what?” I start to say, but Gloria speaks over me.

“Fiancée?” she exclaims. “Harvey, you asked Kristen to marry you?” She claps her hands together enthusiastically, and next to her Allie squeals her excitement, bouncing on her toes as she and Gloria hug.

I sit there confused and unsure how to proceed. Does Kristen think I asked her to marry me? I certainly heard her say she *wanted* to marry me. Or at least I think I did. Everything was a little hazy when I woke up.

When my eyes popped open the first time, I saw Kristen with her back to me. I opened my mouth to say something, feeling fuzzy and disorientated as I tried to figure out where I was and what had happened. But then my ears caught up to my eyes, and I realized Kristen was talking about her feelings for

me. So I shut right up so I could listen. Then I closed my eyes again because even in my groggy state I knew I was hearing words she wouldn't be saying if she knew I was awake.

Had I somehow missed a proposal in the midst of all that? Had she somehow misinterpreted my words to her before our kiss to be a proposal? Or did she think she'd proposed to me during her speech and that my kiss meant I'd agreed?

I feel unreasonably disappointed. Not that Kristen and I are somehow engaged, but that I didn't get to do the proposal. Or if I did, that I don't remember it.

My head spins as I try to work through all of this. Gloria is still squealing excitedly with Allie, and Rob suddenly enters my vision field, telling me how happy he is to see me paired off with his niece.

The only person who doesn't look happy in the room is my mother.

I focus in on her straight-mouthed, tight expression and annoyance crowds out my confusion. Maybe I'm not sure how exactly I ended up engaged to Kristen, but would it kill my own mother to congratulate her son on his impending nuptials?

"Yeah, I'm really happy about our engagement too," I tell Rob while looking pointedly at my mom, hoping she'll get the hint to, I don't know, smile or something.

No such luck.

"You really ought to have told me," she says stiffly. "I am your mother after all, and I'd never even heard of Krista before yesterday."

"It's Kristen, Nana," Allie pipes up.

"The difference is negligible," my mom replies. "Now then, Harvey, I'd like to stay, but this room is overcrowded and obviously my husband isn't welcome, so, seeing as you're awake now, we'll be heading back to our hotel."

"Your hotel? You're staying in Southaven?"

"Just until you're out of the hospital." She elongates her neck like a ruffled swan, and I feel some of my annoyance

dissipate. As much as I'd love to have my old mother back, the one who used to sing while she made breakfast and meet me at the bus stop to walk home with me after school, I know that part of her is gone, stolen from me by tragedy and a narcissistic new husband. Still, I know she must've had to put her foot down to get Carter to agree to stay here. She's making an effort the only way she knows how.

"Then I hope you'll come back and see me again," I tell her, and the smallest of smiles ghosts her features as she nods. She strides over to the bed, gives me the briefest of hugs before hurrying out the door.

I let out a long, slow breath. My chest is tight, and I can feel a headache coming on. I really need to see Kristen.

As if on cue, she walks in a second later, stealing my breath as I'm hit once again with the force of how beautiful she is. Now that I've held her in my arms, had my hands in those wild but soft curls, it's all I can do not to rip off all of these monitors that I'm still attached to and go capture her lips with mine again.

We've got company though, not to mention I should probably try and sort out our whole surprise engagement first.

"Wow," she says as she stops next to Gloria, "Harvey, your stepfather is a special soul. Do you know he wanted to come in here and read you the riot act about getting in an accident in the middle of a busy season at work?" she exclaims indignantly. Kristen rubs the back of her neck, and for the first time I notice how agitated and unsure she looks. A scowl twists across my lips. What did he say to her? She shouldn't have to defend me against Carter. On the contrary, I should be protecting her from him.

"Yeah, sorry about him." I reach my hand out for hers, and she steps forward to slide her fingers into mine. No ring, I can't help but notice. What kind of proposal doesn't include a ring? "Thanks for keeping him out there, but just so you know, I'm pretty used to him by now. I'd rather he give me a hard time than you."

For some reason this makes her flush. She shuts her eyes tightly then sets her shoulders. “Harvey, I think there’s something I should tell you. It’s kind of embarrassing actually.” She darts a glance toward Rob, Gloria, and Allie. “Actually, maybe I’ll wait. We’re celebrating right now.” She smiles at Allie. “We should order dinner or a cake or something, don’t you think, Allie?”

Allie skips over, sliding her arms around Kristen’s waist. “Yes! A cake! And it should say, just married, in giant red letters.”

Just married? Now we’re skipping the proposal *and* the wedding?

“Just married?” Kristen lets out a high squeaky laugh.

Gloria laughs too, “I think she means, going to be married. Or maybe it could say, just engaged or bride to be.” She sneaks up behind Kristen and engulfs her in a hug. “I can’t believe you kept that a secret in the waiting room! How did Davina find out? You’re going to have to make that up to me, young lady. Favorite aunts should really be told these things first.”

Kristen’s flush is growing darker and darker. Her large eyes seek out mine practically screaming her panic. My instinct to always protect her takes over, and I address the room. “Hey, I think Kristen and I need a minute to talk. Can we have the room?”

Gloria looks like she’s about to protest, but Rob puts an arm around both her and Allie and steers them toward the door. “We’ll go work on that cake,” he says over his shoulder as they exit.

Now it’s just Kristen and me alone at last. She looks down at me with those gorgeous green eyes of hers. She’s chewing her lower lip anxiously, and that combined with the way her curls are hanging loosely around her face distracts me from whatever it was we needed to talk about.

“Come here,” I tell her, unable to keep it from sounding like a command. She doesn’t seem to mind though, because a

second later she's right where I want her-sitting next to me. Although there's still too much space between us. A whole foot at least.

I loop my hands around her waist, tugging her closer. At first she lets me do it, but then at the last second she puts her hand on my chest, holding us apart.

"We should talk," she murmurs without any real conviction.

"Kristen, I almost died in a car accident, and it's made me realize that the fact that I've only kissed you twice in the last eight years is despicable. I need to change that stat fast." I tuck one of her wayward curls behind her ear, letting my hand linger along her jawline.

"I guess we can always talk later," she relents, then she slides her hand up my chest to my shoulder. This time when I tug her to me I don't meet any resistance.

I let one hand rest on the small of her back, and the other cups the back of her head bringing her lips to mine.

And just like that my kiss count goes to three.

Chapter 33

KRISTEN

Today I have learned two things about myself.

One, I am a horrible human being.

And two, my lips have been wasting their time talking these last eight years when what they were clearly made to do is kiss Harvey.

Really, I can't be blamed for my lack of fortitude and truthfulness with Harvey. I mean, he was the one who was all, *come here and we can talk later*. What's a woman to do when a man gets all growly and commanding like that?

Telling him I'm barren would've really killed the mood. As would have admitting my fake engagement story.

Now here we are all snuggled up in a hospital bed that shouldn't be comfortable, but with Harvey's chest under my head is one of the coziest places I've ever been. His arm is wrapped loosely around me and we're both basking in the afterglow of the kisses we've shared.

I'm more than a little surprised that Rob, Gloria, and Allie haven't reappeared to check on us, and am now using the fact that they're likely to pop in at any moment as an excuse to not start the conversations I've been dreading.

I know. Like I said, I'm a horrible person. And I know this is all going to end with my heart broken again. So I'm milking these last few minutes before Harvey discovers the truth, then tries to figure out how to let me down gently. Because despite how I've made him out in my head these past few years, he really is a nice guy. The best kind of man. And after I tell him he'll probably hug me and say that he's so sorry, then he'll tell me he wishes me the best but that we can't be together anymore. Blah, blah, blah. Then I'll have to slink

back to the Wilders' house, resume nannying, and pick back up with my 'call me when I'm forty' single scene plan.

Talk about depressing.

Underneath my head Harvey inhales deeply. "Dang you smell good, Doc," he says into my hair. "Guess that makes two of us."

I swat him playfully, allowing the comfort of his arms to chase away my fears.

For now anyway.

Chapter 34

HARVEY

If I weren't in a hospital bed recovering from a coma I'd call this moment perfect. I've got Kristen in my arms and that makes me the luckiest man to walk this earth.

Still, I can't seem to shake the niggling feeling that this is all going to disappear. That Kristen herself is going to disappear.

It doesn't make sense to feel this way given that in her mind we're engaged, and yet I can't stop myself from holding her more tightly against me as if this will keep her from going anywhere.

"Harvey," she gasps with a laugh, "too tight. Can't breathe."

I loosen my hold immediately. "Sorry." I lower one hand and pat her playfully on the butt, which actually makes me feel a bit better.

She giggles and stretches her neck to plant a kiss on my jawline. I capture her chin with my finger and tilt her lips the rest of the way up to mine.

I've lost track of the number of kisses we've shared now, but it's safe to say my kisses per year stat is on an upward trajectory. Now it's my job to keep it that way.

"Are you hungry?" I ask her when our kiss ends, and she's settled herself back on my chest. "We could order some dinner, or how long do you think we have before Allie and Gloria come back with that personalized cake?" I mean it as a joke, but instantly she stiffens.

"Yeah, we should talk about that cake business, huh?" she says nervously. "I bet you have some questions about our, uh,

engagement.”

This piques my interest. Why does she think I’ll have questions? Is it possible that this is all a big misunderstanding?

“Yeah, actually,” I clear my throat. “I’ll start with the most obvious-when did I propose exactly? Before, during, or after the coma?”

A snort escapes Kristen’s body, and a second later she’s shaking with hysterical laughter against me. “Oh my gosh, Harvey,” she gasps between laughs. “I’m so sorry. I swear I’m not crazy. I know we’re not engaged. And I should’ve corrected everyone, but they were all so excited, and I was embarrassed. It’s all a mistake. A misunderstanding really.”

“Okayyy,” I say slowly, unnerved by the level of disappointment I’m currently feeling. You’d think I’d wanted to be engaged to Kristen. “So what-my mom assumed you were my fiancée and you just went along with it?”

“I wouldn’t say she assumed so much as I led her to believe that I was, then never corrected her…” she trails off, sitting up to look at me. “I needed her to let me take Allie home,” she elaborates. “Your mom wanted to take her back to their hotel, and I just didn’t think staying with your super-charming stepfather would be the best option for Allie given the circumstances. I thought she belonged at her own home with someone who loves her.” She drags in a long breath. “So there you go. That’s the story behind our fake engagement. I absolutely understand if you’re mad at me for lying and getting us into this mess we now have to get out of, but please know my intentions were honorable.” She looks up at me earnestly. “And also, that your stepfather will not be helping fund our fake wedding.”

When I don’t immediately laugh at her attempt at humor her lips dip down in a worried frown. “I really am sorry,” she adds. “And I can be the one to tell everyone, if that’s what you’re worried about. I feel absolutely awful that Allie got dragged into my lie. I hope she won’t be too disappointed. My aunt and uncle will understand, I’m sure. And frankly, I think your mom will be relieved to find out the truth.” She’s

rambling nervously, and my heart swells in my chest watching her, a feeling of sureness and rightness settling over me. She went above and beyond for my daughter these last few days. She even said she loves her, and wasn't her acceptance of Allie the main barrier between us? Eight years ago I had plans to marry this woman, so what's different now? I still love her, and she still loves me.

I say let's do this thing.

"Kristen." I hold up a hand and her mouth comes to an abrupt stop. "I'm not mad at you."

"You're not?" She sounds skeptical.

"How could I be mad at you for looking out for the best interests of my daughter?"

"That's a good point actually," she's quick to agree, and I laugh.

"And I don't need you to tell anyone the truth."

"Really? Are you sure? I hate for you to have to do it." Despite her words, her eyes look hopeful. It's a burden she'd be happy to cast off.

"Actually I was sort of thinking neither one of us had to tell anyone."

"What? You want to keep lying about being engaged?" Kristen's brow furrows in adorable confusion. Here's hoping what I'm about to say doesn't completely scare her away.

"No." I meet her eyes. "I was thinking more like we could make our engagement real."

Kristen's cheeks tint pink. "Make our engagement real?" she repeats breathily.

"I'm not saying we need to get married tomorrow or something. Obviously we haven't even been back together for a whole day, so that would be rushing things." It's my turn to ramble nervously. "But since we decided we want to date, what if we date like the heroines in those Jane Austen books you and your sister like so much? Dating with the intent to marry. What's that called, courtship? I'd like to court you,

Kristen. Then marry you at the end of that period of time, however long it needs to be.” I break off, wondering if I’m about to get laughed at.

Kristen’s eyes search mine as she considers my words, and I swear it’s the longest minute of my life waiting for her to answer.

“You know I really do love Jane Austen,” she finally says. “The movies more than the books, but the courtship thing still applies.” She grins. “Harvey, I’d happily star in a Jane Austen-esque romance with you. I’ve always thought that you looked like Cary Grant, have I ever told you that? Anyway, he would’ve been an excellent casting choice for any of Jane Austen’s leading men. Picture him and Audrey Hepburn, sharing that final kiss before the fade to black, and you’ll see my vision. Wait, no not Audrey Hepburn because I’m blonde and she’s brunette. Maybe Grace Kelly?”

“Kristen,” I cut her off, “is that a yes?”

She comes out of her imaginary role as casting director for a regency romance and nods, smiling brightly at me. “Let’s stay engaged, Mr. Fake Fiancé.”

A relieved laugh bursts out of me. I grab her by the thighs and scooch her to me. “I think you mean, Mr. Fiancé,” I correct. “No fake needed, Ms. Fiancée.”

“Ah,” she holds up a finger. “Soon to be *Mrs.* Fiancée.”

I take her hand and trace the circumference of her ring finger. “I actually like Mrs. Parker-Barrett better.”

She grins. “Me too.”

Chapter 35

KRISTEN

We've already been over the fact that I'm a horrible person, right? Doesn't matter, the point really needs to be revisited.

I am a *horrible* person.

How could I have agreed to stay engaged to Harvey? I'm like a crazy masochist who also likes to bring other people down with them.

My aunt and uncle and Allie came back a bit ago, and I'm in the little bathroom attached to Harvey's room, splashing water on my face to try and stop the tears that appeared a few seconds ago when Allie hugged me and said she couldn't wait for me to be her mom.

I have to tell Harvey the truth. I just need to find my courage. I think it might be off gallivanting around Oz with the Cowardly Lion's.

He's going to hate me. Or never trust me again.

Why didn't I just tell him from the get go? But no, I just had to confess my love to him and kiss him and agree to marry him someday.

The hole I've dug for myself is so deep I think I'm about to hit China.

But oh, when Allie called me mom it felt like receiving the present you've been begging for all year on Christmas morning. The present you'd been told they don't even make anymore.

"Suck it up," I whisper to my reflection in the tiny mirror. "Your grandma was a devout Catholic, so channel your roots and confess the truth. Bless me Father for I have sinned and whatnot."

And hoo boy have I sinned.

Chapter 36

HARVEY

“I’m so happy you two lovebirds have worked everything out,” Gloria says to me as she busies herself fluffing my pillows. It’s just me and her in my room right now. Kristen is in the bathroom, and Rob and Allie went on a hunt for silverware for the cake they actually did bring back. They chose to write *Celebrating the Parker-Barretts-Soon to be a Family of Three* on it, and I’m not going to lie—reading those words brought tears to my eyes.

“Me too.” I lean forward as she whacks one of my pillows forcefully. Her efforts go unrewarded. The pillow is still flat as a strip of tundra. “I guess Allie and I will officially be part of your family now.”

“Oh, pa-shaw,” Gloria waves this off. “Don’t talk nonsense, Harvey. You know you and Allie have been part of our family since the day you walked into reception and asked me for a job.”

My heart squeezes in my chest. I did know that, but it’s nice to hear her say it all the same. “I don’t say this enough, but I really love you, Gloria,” I tell her, and she bends down to hug me.

“I really love you too, Harvey, caro mio.” She plants a kiss on my cheek then stands to appraise me. “You’d better save a dance for me at that wedding of yours.”

“Pretty sure a mother-son dance is standard,” I say lightly. Gloria beams at me, then once again I find myself wrapped up in one of her hugs. She’s muttering quickly in Italian, and though I can’t understand the words, I recognize the elation in her tone.

“I will be so proud to dance with such a fine young man,” she tells me, switching back to English. “Though I hope you’ll do a dance with Davina as well.”

“Of course,” I agree. My mom might be difficult and she might be married to a man who could serve as inspiration for a Marvel villain, but she’s still the woman who birthed me and fed and clothed me for the first eighteen years of my life. So she gets a dance, at least assuming she wants one.

“Good.” Gloria pats my cheek. “Now tell me how long do the two of you plan to wait after you get married to think about adoption, because as I told Kristen earlier, it can be quite a lengthy process, and Rob and I would love to be grandparents again.”

“Adoption?” I ask in surprise. “You mean her adopting Allie?”

“Oh yes, that too, of course.” She frowns, looking confused. “But I was actually talking about another child.”

“Another child?” I repeat just as the door to the bathroom swings open, and Kristen steps out. “Why would we adopt another child?” My attention settles on Kristen. She’s frozen in the doorway, her eyes darting between me and Gloria, her face growing whiter and whiter.

Something is surfacing, a hazy memory pushing through. Words she spoke just as I was coming to, but that I didn’t remember hearing until now. Phrases pop out at me like word bubbles in my brain.

Can’t have babies.

Endometriosis.

That’s why I lied and told you that I didn’t want kids.

Kristen can’t have kids. It was never that she didn’t want them. She can’t have them.

“You can’t have children?” I address her in a voice that sounds far away even to my own ears.

“Harvey, I’m so sorry!” Kristen seems to come out of her frozen state, surging towards me with her hands clasped to her

chest. “I should’ve told you. I was going to tell you. I swear I was going to. It’s just we were in this little bubble of happiness, you know? I didn’t want to pop it with my sadness.”

Kristen stops just shy of my bed, clearly unsure whether or not to touch me. My mind reels with this new information.

“You lied to me eight years ago?” I clarify, because I’m still not sure I can trust my coma memories. “When you said you didn’t want kids, I mean. That was a lie?”

Kristen nods slowly. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Maybe I should go,” Gloria speaks for the first time, and both of us turn to see her backing out of the room. “I’m sorry to have interfered. I thought you’d told him, Kristen. We talked about telling him, and then you two announced your engagement, so I assumed you had...” She shakes her head. “Not important. I’m going to go help Rob and Allie find silverware. You two should talk.” She vanishes out the door, once again leaving Kristen and me alone.

This time around there’s no passion drawing us together. Instead there’s hurt and confusion pushing us apart. On the one hand I want to take her in my arms and comfort her. She can’t have children, and that is obviously a very hard reality she’s been living with for eight years.

But on the other hand, I’m mad. I proposed to her and she said yes. You don’t just agree to marry someone without telling them you can’t have children.

Then again, she has made it clear in the past that she doesn’t want children. I did know that going into the proposal. But I also thought that given her new attitude toward Allie, she might’ve changed her mind.

“Harvey?” Kristen says my name tentatively, pulling me from my dour thoughts. “Do you want me to go?”

Go? The word turns my stomach sour.

“No,” I say firmly. “No more leaving for either of us. No more half-finished conversations. We’re going to sort this

out.” Despite my bold statements I feel lost at sea, uncertain how to proceed.

“Okay.” Kristen crosses her arms across herself like a protective shield, and I fight the urge to back down on this conversation. I hate seeing the inadequacy she feels on display like this, but we have to talk about this if we’re going to move forward. “How about I go first,” she says, stepping back and putting too much distance between us for my liking. “No hard feelings this time, okay? I get it. You want kids, and I can’t give you that. I’m deeply sorry that I agreed to marry you under false pretenses like that, and I hope it won’t tarnish your memory of me too much.” She takes another step back, like she’s already planning her getaway. “I’d say we should still be friends, but honestly I’m not sure I can handle that. I really don’t want to have to watch you have babies with Mandy after you marry her instead of me-” she breaks off sobbing, and just like that all my anger disappears.

“Marry Mandy? Are you crazy?” I swing my legs off the bed and stand up, deciding to ignore the doctor’s orders that I take things easy and don’t try to walk on my own. That was all precautionary anyway. I’ll be fine. I’ve been walking on my own my whole life without incident. I think I can make it a couple of feet.

“Harvey!” Aware of the doctor’s instructions, Kristen immediately stops crying and hurries back to steady me. Her touch does more than steady my balance, it steadies my heart.

“I’m okay,” I tell her, though my legs do feel a little wobbly under me.

“You’re not supposed to walk around without assistance,” Kristen protests, sliding her tiny frame under my arm like she could actually keep me standing if I started to fall. If I fall we’re both going down, but I like having her where she is, so I focus really hard on keeping my balance. My legs feel stronger now, the shake gone from them.

“I’m good. I promise,” I tell her. “That is, I’m good as long as you stay right where you are, here with me,” I add.

Abruptly Kristen stops fussing. “What are you saying, Harvey?”

“I’m saying I still want to marry you someday.”

“You do?” she breathes. “Why?”

“Why?” I can’t stop a bark of laughter. “Do you really not know? You’re it for me, Kristen. You make me laugh, you challenge me to be a better man, you bring music to my life, you’re amazing with Allie.” I look down at her, capturing her gaze with mine. “And you’re so beautiful.” She blushes at the compliment. It only makes her prettier. “I’ve been waiting eight years to have you back in my life, and now here you are. I’m not letting you go again. I told you before, walking away from you was a mistake. Yeah, I’ve always wanted to have more kids one day, but getting you back after all of these years without you has made me realize that I want you more than I want more kids.”

“You’re just saying that,” she insists. “You’ll change your mind someday, and I’ll be the pesky old woman on the other side of the bed who kept you from having the family of your dreams.”

“What are you doing on the other side of the bed in this scenario?” I quip. “You should be on the same side, being the little spoon to my big spoon.”

Kristen’s lips twitch, but she doesn’t crack. “Harvey, I’m serious. You’re just swept up in the moment. You need to really think about what a future with me means giving up. You left me once before because of the kids thing. I don’t want us to continue in this relationship only for you to up and change your mind when reality sinks in.”

“Kristen,” I rake a frustrated hand through my hair, “what do I need to do to prove to you that I’m here to stay? That I want you forever?”

Kristen is silent for a minute. It terrifies me more than anything she could say, because I can practically see her deciding to leave. It’s in the set of her jaw and the sadness in her eyes.

“Don’t go, Kristen,” I beg her, but she doesn’t listen. She slides out from under me, giving me an apologetic grimace.

“I have to, Harvey. I’m sorry. So, so sorry. I never should’ve let things go this far with us. It was so selfish of me.” She shuts her eyes as she strikes the final blow to our relationship. “I’ll always love you, Harvey, but that’s why I need to leave you. You deserve someone who can give you what you want.”

With that she turns on her heels and rushes out the door. I start to go after her, but my vision gets hazy from the sudden movement, and I have to sit down in a nearby chair. Before I can make another move, a nurse comes bustling in, exclaiming when she sees me out of bed.

“You’re recovering from a coma, young man!” she chastises me. “You need to take it easy.”

I have no choice but to let her lead me back to the bed. I’m not giving up this easily though. I’ll figure out a way to get Kristen back.

I have to.

Chapter 37

KRISTEN

“Hit me,” I tell Felicity half an hour later. She turns the can of whipped cream upside down and squeezes some into my mouth.

“You ready to talk yet?” she asks me as she sets the can back down. Out of my reach. She told me I couldn’t be trusted to wield the can on my own given my delicate state.

Since when do little sisters get to decide how much whipped cream their big sisters can handle?

“Kristen, seriously. You’re scaring me. You show up here looking like you’ve been crying for a year straight and then refuse to tell me anything.” She eyes the clock on the wall. “And I’ve tried to be patient, but I have to leave to get Camden and Lily in like twenty minutes, so my patience has a time limit. Tell me what happened. Please?”

“I have hurt so many people,” I say dully. “I suck.” I make a grab for the whipped cream, but she swipes it away from me.

“You can have this when you tell me more details,” she says. “Who have you hurt?”

“Who haven’t I hurt?” I cry. “Harvey and Allie obviously. But Uncle Rob and Aunt Gloria too. They were so excited for us, and now Aunt Gloria won’t get to help plan the wedding.”

“Wedding? What wedding? My wedding?”

“No,” I sob, “mine and Harvey’s.” This time when I lunge for the whipped cream she’s too slow. I press the nozzle for a full five seconds, turning my chin into a mess of whipped cream and tears.

Super hot.

Not.

“Harvey asked you to marry him?” Felicity is aghast. “And you said no?”

I shake my head, and she gasps.

“You said yes?”

I nod. “But then I took it back because I can’t have babies, and no matter what Harvey says about that not mattering, of course it matters! A man like that deserves to have beautiful babies that look just like him, you know?” I swipe at the sticky whipped cream with the sleeve of my shirt. I’m completely disgusting, and I don’t even care.

Felicity is staring at me with wide eyes and a hand to her horrified mouth. I’ve become an object of pity to her, and it sickens me.

“Kristen,” she whispers, “why didn’t you tell me?”

I don’t answer her, and she doesn’t press the matter, just abandons her seat across the table to sit next to me instead. She pulls me into a hug, and I sob into her shoulder wishing whipped cream could actually solve all of my problems.

The repeated ringing of the doorbell interrupts my cryfest, and with a sigh Felicity lets go of me.

“Let me go see who that is,” she tells me. Some stupid part of me wants it to be Harvey. But he’s in the hospital, essentially bedridden. There’s no way it’s him.

I’m right. It’s not Harvey. Instead I’m taken aback to see our uncle walk into the room behind Felicity.

“Uncle Rob, what are you doing here?” I swipe self-consciously at my face, all too aware of how red and blotchy it must be. No need for him to take a report of this back to Harvey.

“I was hoping to have a word with you,” he says gruffly. “Felicity, would you mind giving the two of us a minute.”

“I have to go pick up Camden and Lily anyway,” Felicity says. “So take all of the time you want.” She gives my arm a squeeze and Uncle Rob a quick hug then heads out the door.

Uncle Rob sinks into the chair across from me. “I won’t beat around the bush,” he announces. “I think you’re making a mistake here, Kristen.”

Where’s my whipped cream? I can already tell that I’m going to need dairy and sugar for this conversation. I search the table, but Felicity must’ve taken it with her. The traitor.

“Your aunt told me that she told you about our fertility issues, and that you have some fertility issues of your own.”

He’s not asking me a question, but I nod anyway.

“Did she tell you that I don’t have any fertility issues? That I could go out and father a child any old time I want?” My eyes widen in shock at his phrasing, and he grimaces. “I didn’t mean that to sound so crass. Just trying to make a point. My point being that Gloria is my wife and the love of my life, her fertility issues don’t change that. And I sure as heck don’t resent her for it.”

“I see what you’re trying to do here,” I interrupt. “But, Uncle Rob, our situations are totally different. You’d already been married to Aunt Gloria for years when you found out she couldn’t have kids. Harvey could still walk away from me without ramifications or legal proceedings.”

“Exactly!” Uncle Rob smacks the table. “He could walk away without anyone thinking any less of him for doing so, but he doesn’t want to! If anything, the fact that he still wants to be with you when it would be so easy to leave speaks volumes more about his feelings for you than me standing by my wife.”

I shake my head at him, not wanting this hope he’s feeding me to settle in and stick around. “He’s just not thinking straight right now. He’ll change his mind soon enough.”

My uncle huffs his dissent. “Well, I’ve said my piece. If you want to be a stubborn young fool there’s not much I can do about it.” He stands to go. “But so you know, I’d bet my truck on that man loving you till death do you part, in *sickness* and in health.”

I don't say anything in response, not trusting my voice. Uncle Rob heads out of the kitchen, but then stops in the doorway, placing one hand on the wall as he turns back to me.

“So just to clarify. You're not going back to the hospital voluntarily?”

Voluntarily? My brain catches on that strange choice of word as I shake my head no.

“Well okay then. You leave me no choice.” He puts two fingers to his lips and whistles sharp and loud. I understand too late that I'm about to be ambushed. Two gray-haired men in mechanics coveralls labeled Virgil and Clay burst into the kitchen, arms ready to grab me. That's right, I'm about to be kidnapped by a trio of sixty-something-year-old men.

It's like *Taken* meets *Grumpy Old Men*. Only unlike Liam Neesen, I think my dad would just fist bump my uncle if he knew.

“Uncle Rob!” I exclaim as the three of them corner me. “You have got to be kidding me right now! You're not really going to force me to come to the hospital at the hands of your mechanic buddies.”

“It was this or use that LifeAlert button your aunt just installed on my phone. But I thought the first responders might not respond too kindly to a false alarm, and then they might not have brought you to the hospital like they would a person who'd actually fallen. Plus that probably all would've taken longer,” he adds with a shrug, and his cronies nod their agreement.

Oh my word. My uncle has gone insane.

“Alright, now we can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Uncle Rob tells me. Next to him Virgil cracks his knuckles. Or maybe that sound was his knees or his back. With a man of his age I can't really be sure. Whatever it was, the effect definitely wasn't menacing, like he intended. On the contrary, I'm now fighting the urge to laugh. Maybe I'm as crazy as them.

“So your plan is what? Carry me out of here by my limbs. Virgil here grabs an arm, Clay takes the other arm, and you get my legs?”

“Or you could just come with us,” Uncle Rob suggests.

“People will see you.”

“We’re more spritely than we look,” Clay speaks for the first time.

“Fine.” I’m calling their bluff. “Take me.” I hold my arms out in front of me with a challenging set to my jaw. The three men exchange looks, and for a beat I think I’ve won, but then with the finesse of a synchronized swim team, they move forward in unison and grab my limbs just as I outlined for them-Virgil grabs an arm, Clay takes the other, and Uncle Rob gets my legs.

Then they carry me out the Wilders’ front door and dump me unceremoniously into the backseat of Uncle Rob’s beloved truck.

“Don’t even try to make a run for it,” Uncle Rob tells me as he starts the engine. “Child safety locks are on.” He eyes me in the rearview mirror, then tosses back a container of Wet Ones. “And you oughta wipe your face,” he suggests. “You’ve got some sort of white schmuck all over your chin.”

Chapter 38

KRISTEN

Virgil and Clay are apparently my entourage now, because they follow us to the hospital to help bring me inside. I choose to accompany them nicely this time, because Clay informed me that Virgil had called ahead to tell the receptionist they were bringing a psychotic patient in and could she please prepare security. I'm not sure if he's bluffing or not, but after my last attempt to call their bluff ended with me being carried like a piece of furniture (seriously, I'm pretty sure I heard my uncle tell Virgil to pivot when we walked through the front door) I'm not taking any chances.

"What are you even trying to achieve here?" I hiss at my uncle as the three of them surround me in the elevator. I'm like an NBA point guard dribbling in the middle of a zone defense.

"You need to hear Harvey out, and he can't very well follow you, so I brought you to him."

"Unless Harvey can cure infertility, there's really nothing he can say to change my mind. I'm not burdening him with my damaged uterus." I cross my arms stubbornly over my chest.

Virgil and Clay start hemming and hawing about me saying infertility and uterus. Ninnies.

"We'll see," is all my uncle says in reply. The elevator dings for our floor, and maybe Virgil really did call ahead, because the receptionist buzzes us right through. Although we're in the recovery wing, not the psych ward, so who knows.

My aunt meets us in the hallway, a pleased look on her face. "Mission accomplished," she says to my uncle. "Thank you, boys," she tells Virgil and Clay. "Harvey said you'd come through for us, and of course he was right."

“Wait a gosh dang minute,” I cry. “This was Harvey’s idea?”

“Of course,” my aunt replies. “So stop acting like you’re somehow saving the man from a life of unhappiness by walking away and start realizing that for him a life of happiness is one spent with you.”

Her words hit me like a truck, and I’m so stunned that Clay is able to push me effortlessly to the door of Harvey’s room all on his own. He gives me a little shove, and I stumble inside.

Harvey’s eyes find me right away, and I try my darndest to feel nothing when he says my name, but the truth is I feel everything. My whole body lights up like the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree on a dark December night. I may have walked away from this man an hour ago, but clearly my hormones didn’t get the memo. I think that’s them chanting, “kiss him, kiss him” like a bunch of giggly cheerleaders. I mentally steal their pom poms and tip over their pyramid. There will be no more kissing today.

“Sorry about the whole snatch and grab routine,” he tells me. “I’d have followed you if I could’ve gotten out of here without a bunch of medical staff swooping down on me. Not that I have a car anymore anyway,” he adds with a grimace. “Rob told me my truck got totaled in the accident.”

His truck! The one we spent so many nights in. “Oh Harvey, I’m sorry. I know how much you loved that truck.”

“Believe me,” Harvey’s voice dips low and husky, “my truck isn’t what I’m upset about losing today.”

“Harvey,” I burst out desperately, “why are you making this so hard? Don’t you get that I’m trying to do the right thing here?”

“The right thing?” He scoffs. “There’s nothing right about the two of us not being together, Kristen. You think I’ve got my head in the clouds about this whole infertility thing, that in a few years I’ll be bitter about never getting to have biological children, but let me tell you something, Doc. I lived eight

years without you in my life, so I already know what that option looks like.” He slices his hands through the air. “And I don’t want it. I only want you. Anything else we can figure out, as long as we’re together.”

“C’mon, Harvey.” My resolve is weakening, about to crumble to the ground faster than a tower of uneven Jenga blocks if he says one more sweet thing, but I have to try one last time to make him see. “Life isn’t like the movies where you can just guarantee we’ll live happily ever after despite all of the odds stacked against us. In real life you can’t possibly want a future with a broken woman.”

Harvey’s eyes darken. “There’s nothing broken about you, Kristen.”

Tears spring to my eyes. “I can’t have children, Harvey. Women are supposed to be able to have children, and I can’t.” I shake my head. “What else would you call me if not broken?”

“Fine,” Harvey relents, “maybe you are broken.” Ouch. I suck in a breath as the words hit me. “But who isn’t broken in some way or another, Kristen?” He puts a hand to his heart. “I know I am. Losing my dad so young, then losing my sister, those things broke me. But you, you fix me. Your broken piece fits my broken piece and makes me feel whole again.”

Your broken piece fits my broken piece and makes me feel whole again. His beautiful words bounce from my brain to my heart, etching themselves across it like a special inscription on a locket-there whenever I need to take a peek and remember them.

“Do you really mean that?” I whisper.

Harvey’s answering smolder makes my knees weak. “I said what I said,” he taunts me with my earlier words. “Now what are you going to do about it?”

Yup. There go the Jenga blocks. Crashing down with a bang of finality. This man is it for me, and I’m ready to believe that I’m it for him too.

“I’m going to get back over there so we can try out that kiss that always marks the beginning of a happily ever after.”

A smile spreads across Harvey’s face as I cross the room to him.

“You and me,” he whispers as I settle myself against him, “is absolutely my happily ever after.” Then he kisses me, the room fades to black, and the credits roll.

Also by Heather Miekstyn

[A Christmas Dare](#)

[A Cup of Cheer](#)

A Heart Sisters Romance

About The Author



As a child, Heather Miekstyn used to spend hours in her room creating characters, then writing out the first half of their stories before eventually losing steam. Then she discovered the romance genre and realized the key to finishing any good story-a happy ending.

Heather resides in Michigan with her husband, four daughters, and their rambunctious black lab. When she is not writing, she can be found reading, running, or playing Bananagrams. She hopes her books leave you feeling like you've just been hugged by a Hallmark movie.

For more information visit her website,

www.heathermiekstyn.com or follow her on Instagram [@heathermiekstyn](https://www.instagram.com/heathermiekstyn)

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