

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

Lost to You

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KELLY ELLIOTT

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For more information on Kelly and her books, please visit her website www.kellyelliottauthor.com.



Table of Contents

[Chapter One – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Two – Mason](#)

[Chapter Three – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Four – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Five – Mason](#)

[Chapter Six – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Seven – Mason](#)

[Chapter Eight – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Nine – Mason](#)

[Chapter Ten – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Eleven – Mason](#)

[Chapter Twelve – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Thirteen – Mason](#)

[Chapter Fourteen – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Fifteen – Mason](#)

[Chapter Sixteen – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Seventeen – Mason](#)

[Chapter Eighteen – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Nineteen – Mason](#)

[Chapter Twenty – Palmer](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One – Palmer](#)

[Epilogue – Braxton](#)

[Other Books by Kelly Elliott](#)

Dear Reader,

A note to you before you begin the book. The Seaside Chronicles is NOT a stand-alone series. They are interconnected stories with the siblings' stories being carried throughout the series. The books are best read in order or you may find yourself confused, and this writer does not want that to happen!

You can find out more about the books at the link below.

<https://kellyelliottaauthor.com/library/#seaside>



Chapter One

Palmer

October 31

A nanny.

What in the hell was my sister Addie thinking when she volunteered me for a position as a nanny? For starters, I'd never babysat once in my entire life. The closest I'd come to

babysitting was looking after the dogs I walked for a living. Well, that was one of my jobs, anyway. Let's just say I was more comfortable with animals than small children.

Anyone who knew me knew I'd make a terrible nanny. I'm too free-spirited. I'd let the kid get away with everything, for goodness' sake. Not to mention I'd have no idea what to do with them. At least with a dog I knew how to entertain them. But a child... the thought made my entire body quake.

"A nanny," I mumbled as I watched my sister Addie walk down the aisle toward her high school sweetheart, Gannon. They were finally getting married after life had kept them apart for far too long.

I smiled as I watched my father place Addie's hand in Gannon's. It was a small wedding, and the best part about it was that it was taking place on Halloween. The rainy weather had caused the wedding to be moved from outside to inside, but everything was so beautiful and my sister had never looked happier. In the end, that was all that mattered.

Drawing in a deep breath to keep from crying, I looked past the happy couple and my eyes caught sight of the father who had recently been occupying my thoughts.

Mason Bryan.

Father to Charlie, who was five years old and had started kindergarten in Seaside after they'd moved here from Boston. He was probably the cutest kid I'd ever met—not that I had met a ton of kids in my twenty-seven years. Mason was the new doctor in Seaside, and with his good looks, he'd become pretty popular among the sick and the not-so-sick.

Did I mention the man was hot as hell? Even the local gossip column had written about him a few times already. And according to Addie—who worked as Mason's office manager and helped out with patients since she was also a nurse—the rise in female patients had been hitting record numbers. Apparently, there were several women in Seaside who had suddenly become sick after Mason took over the practice from Dr. James, our town's previous doctor for as long as I could remember.

“Stop staring at the hot doctor,” my sister Sutton whispered next to me.

I shot her a dirty look. “I’m not!” I hissed.

She raised her brows and gave me a questioning smirk.

“I wasn’t staring!” I whisper-shouted. That caused Addie, Gannon, and the preacher to turn and look at me. My cheeks instantly heated, and I gave them all a quick smile while mouthing *sorry*.

Once the wedding ceremony was over and an endless number of pictures had been taken, we all made our way to the reception room, where the party really began. It warmed my heart to see my two sisters, Addie and Sutton, so happy and in love. A small part of me was jealous, but I’d come to realize that the word love and I were not kindred spirits. I’d had one too many bad relationships to even consider getting involved with anyone again. At least not anytime soon.

My mind traveled back to Mason, aka the hot doctor, with his dark blond hair and hazel eyes. I quickly pushed *that* thought away.

After a few hours of playing the dutiful bridesmaid, I found a chair and sat down to rest my aching feet and watch everyone enjoying themselves. My sister Sutton was dancing with Brody, her husband of only a month or so. I couldn’t help but smile as Brody dipped her and she let out a laugh. My eyes drifted to the right, and I caught sight of Addie and Gannon in a sweet embrace on the dance floor.

Nope. Not jealous at all. Not one bit.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

Brody and Gannon were brothers, so it was kind of sweet they’d married two sisters.

Sighing, I lifted my wine glass and took a sip while I scanned the room. Suddenly, a little boy with the bluest eyes appeared in front of me.

Placing my wine glass on the table behind me, I said, “Hi there, Charlie.”

He gifted me with a brilliant smile. Oh dear, he was gonna be a heartbreaker someday, there was no doubt about that.

“May I have to dance?”

I drew my brows down in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

“For what?” Charlie asked.

I shook my head. “No, I mean, what are you asking?”

He looked up at the ceiling and then mumbled something before he asked, “May I have *this* dance?”

I felt a little chuckle slip free. “Why, of course. I’d be honored to dance with you, Charlie.”

The little guy held out his hand, I took it, and we both walked to the dance floor.

As we swayed to the beat, I leaned down and said, “You’re a lovely dancer, Charlie.”

He smiled, and it was then I noticed his missing front tooth. Lord, could he be any cuter?

“Thank you! You dance good thoo, Ms. Palmer.”

Oh goodness, the toothless lisp.

“Can I walk a dog with you sometime?”

Laughing, I replied, “I think I could arrange that.”

The song ended and I leaned down and kissed Charlie on the cheek. “Thank you for the dance, Charlie.”

He blushed and kicked at nothing on the floor before he turned and rushed across the room to my mother, who bent down to hear what he had to say. I knew my mom was going to make an amazing grandmother one day when one of her kids finally had a baby.

“Seems like you’ve captured the heart of my son.”

I spun around and came face to face with Mason. It wasn’t like I had never talked to him before. I had, but it was when I’d thought he was simply a tourist moving through town. At the time I had also thought he was hot. Really, really hot. The man made my heart beat like a hummingbird’s wings.

Smiling, I replied, “I think it’s the other way around.”

Something moved across Mason’s face before he cleared his throat. “Palmer, I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

Oh. Crap. He’s going to ask me to be his son’s nanny. Run, Palmer! Run!

I managed to keep the panic out of my voice as I asked, “What’s that?” I closed my eyes when I heard my voice go up a few octaves.

“Adelaide mentioned that you might be interested in possibly being Charlie’s nanny.”

Before I could say anything, he went on.

“I understand you have other jobs, and I’m sure we can work around them. Charlie is in school from seventy-thirty until two-thirty. I wouldn’t need you during those hours. The office is closed on Fridays and the weekend, so those would be free too.”

Before I had a chance to tell him that I wasn’t exactly nanny material—even though I adored his son—my mother appeared with Charlie in tow.

“This little boy is certainly a charmer, Dr. Bryan,” my mother said. Did she bat her eyes at the good doctor? Lord, give me strength.

Mason flashed her a bright smile and my stupid stomach did a little flip at the sight of his dimples.

Okay, ignore the way he makes you feel, Palmer. Ignore it.

Then, if possible, his smile grew bigger. Goodness, the man had a face that could light up a room.

“Please, call me Mason.”

Holy hell, was my mother blushing?

“Mason it is,” she said.

Charlie started to dance around and grab at himself. “Daddy, I have to go to potty.”

Mason bent down. “Right now, buddy? Are you sure?”

Charlie nodded. He looked up and gave me that toothless grin while still dancing around.

Okay, the father makes my stomach twist into knots and the kid makes my heart jump. This is not a good sign. I'm treading through dangerous territory here.

Mason straightened back up and gave me a sheepish grin. "Um, looks like our conversation will have to wait a bit."

All I could do was nod and silently thank the Lord above that I got out of answering his question. Once Mason and Charlie walked away, my mother turned to me. "He's such a sweet boy."

"Which one?" I mumbled.

She turned and smirked at me. "Very funny, Palmer. I was talking about Charlie, but now that you bring it up, Dr., er, Mason, is a very sweet man as well. I hear nothing but wonderful things about him."

"That's what Addie says too."

She tilted her head, and I knew it was coming. "He's looking for a nanny, and he mentioned that Adelaide tossed out your name."

"Not going to happen, Mom."

For a moment, I swore my mother was going to stomp her foot, cross her arms over her chest, and throw a full-on fit right there in the middle of my sister's wedding reception.

"And why not? Adelaide said he'd pay a handsome wage."

I screwed up my face as I stared at her. "What does that mean?"

Mom looked at me with a confused expression. "What does what mean?"

"A handsome wage. What does that mean? Is it above average, normal, or out of this world?"

She stared at me for what felt like forever. With a shake of her head, she finally answered. "It means you'd probably be

making more money watching little Charlie than all of your silly jobs combined.”

And there it was. I loved my mother, but when given the chance to bring up what I did for a living, she always jumped at it. A familiar rush of anger swelled up in me. It happened anytime my mother degraded my jobs.

“I happen to make a decent amount of money, Mom. I have my own house.”

“You rent,” she deadpanned.

Drawing in a deep breath, I went on. “I’m able to have all the things I want, so I don’t see what the issue is.”

She rolled her eyes. “Palmer, you pick up other people’s dog poop. Is that really what you want to do with the rest of your life?”

I frowned. “No, it’s not.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

It was my turn to fight the urge to stomp my foot and cross my arms. Okay, I did cross my arms, but in a very adult kind of way.

“I do it because it pays for my rent, my food, and other things. I do it, along with my other jobs, because I don’t know what I want to do with my life, Mom. But I know I love animals, and I like what I’m doing right now.”

She sighed. “You could always take over as manager of the restaurant. I know Ruby would keep you on when we finally sell it to her.”

A strange pang hit me in the chest when my mother mentioned how she and my father would sell the Seaside Grill at some point. They had owned it my whole life. I’d practically grown up in that restaurant and had some amazing memories there, but that didn’t mean I wanted to run it for the rest of my life. The restaurant was something my parents loved. It was their passion. Not mine. But I also had zero ideas about what I wanted to do with my life, and it was beginning to frustrate me.

Oh, I had passions. I loved to paint, and I loved working with sea glass, but hardly anyone knew about my art.

“Mom, we’ve been over this a thousand times; I’m not interested in the restaurant business. That’s your thing, not mine.”

“Well,” she said with a huff. “What *is* your thing?”

With a wink, I said, “When I figure it out, you’ll be the first to know.”

Before she had a chance to reply, I swiftly turned and headed toward my brother, Braxton.

When I grew closer to him, he smiled that brilliant smile of his. No wonder women threw themselves at him with his handsome looks, brown hair, and hazel eyes.

“Trying to get away from our mother, I see.”

Sighing, I grabbed a glass of champagne off a tray a waiter was carrying as he walked by. “She said my jobs were silly.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “When I first told Mom and Dad I was going to start my own fishing charter business, they both asked why I’d want to work with fish all day. So, I asked Dad why do you want to be in a hot kitchen all day cooking for other people?”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He said he loved doing it. I told him I loved fishing and that it made me happy. After that, they were both supportive. Same thing with Sutton. Once she told them her dream was to open her own store, they were beyond supportive.”

My parents truly were the best, and they really were supportive of their children in every possible way. Except for me. I was the wild child. The one who always got in trouble at school for talking too much or for doodling in my notebook when I should have been taking notes. I barely got through school—not because I wasn’t smart, I just never really wanted to be there. It was the main reason I refused to go to college. How can you get a degree when you have no idea what you’re meant to do with your life?

I was the one Bradley sibling who had no idea where her life was going. My parents really hadn't bugged me much about it until I turned twenty-six. It must have been some magical number for them.

I sighed. "That's the problem though, Brax. I have no idea what I want to do and that drives them mad. And the worst part is that I'm happy with my life. Why can't they be happy *for me*?"

Braxton stared at me for a good thirty seconds before he asked, "Are you though, Palmer?"

My mouth dropped open. Was he really asking me that? "Yes. I am. I mean, at least for now. No, I *am* happy. I really am. Do I want to do something different with my life? Yes. Eventually. I'm simply not sure what yet."

He gave me a soft smile. "What about your paintings, Palmer? You're so talented."

I rolled my eyes. "Brax, you're my brother, you have to say that."

Frowning, he replied, "Excuse me, but when have you ever known me to blow smoke up your ass? I mean it, Palmer. You're talented."

"And the minute I start trying to make money off of art, I'll lose my passion for it."

"Is that what you're afraid of? I haven't lost my passion for fishing."

I slowly shook my head. "I don't know, Brax."

He reached for my hand and gave it a light squeeze. "It'll come, sis. And until it does, keep telling Mom and Dad you're happy."

"I have!"

"No," he said with a shake of his head. "Really mean it."

I opened my mouth to tell him I did mean it, then snapped it shut. He winked and lifted his glass. "To finding our paths."

I clicked my glass to his but didn't say anything as I tipped it back and drank the whole thing.

About an hour or so later, Addie and Gannon finally left. After we cleaned up, I was ready to go to my room, kick off my heels, and watch a movie.

I was about to make my getaway with Sutton and Brody when I heard Mason's voice call out. Pausing, I turned to see him walking toward us.

Crap. Crap. Craptastic.

“Palmer!

I forced myself to smile and ignore the butterflies in my stomach when he flashed that dimple at me.

“Hey, Mason. I thought you took Charlie up to your room?”

Sutton and Brody exchanged a curious look between the two of them.

“Your mom was kind enough to offer to sit with him while we finished talking about the position.”

“The *position*?” Sutton asked in pretend surprise.

I tried to keep from throttling my own sister as I shot her a dirty look and reached behind her to pinch the back of her arm.

Hissing, Sutton stepped closer to her husband.

Coward.

Of course, Mason had missed the exchange and went about answering Sutton. “Addie suggested Palmer as a possible nanny for Charlie.”

Those hazel eyes of his were back on me with a soft smile. “Are you able to grab just one quick drink?”

Knowing I had to decline his invitation even though everything in me said to go have the drink, I was about to respond when Sutton spoke up as she gave me a little nudge closer to Mason.

“She’d love to have a drink and talk about it more. She was just talking about this opportunity as we were walking to the elevator.”

Mason’s expression went from unsure to happy as a clam. I was going to kill my sister. Kill. Her.

“Great. Just one drink. I know you said you were tired, and I don’t want to leave your mom with Charlie for too long. I’m sure she’s exhausted.”

Attempting to keep my voice calm and a smile on my face, I said, “How kind of her to offer to watch him for you while we chat.” Clearly one of my sisters egged my mother on with this nanny position. Traitors.

Brody took Sutton’s arm as he pulled his wife toward the elevator.

“You two enjoy your drink,” Sutton called out.

Mason and I both stood there for a moment and watched as the elevator doors shut. I could feel him turn and look at me. A strange, warm sensation ran down my back.

I closed my eyes and chanted, *Men. Are. Jerks.*

“Shall we? I won’t keep you longer than thirty minutes, I promise.”

My eyes snapped open, and I swallowed the lump in my throat as I nodded. I really liked Mason—that was the real problem here. The next thirty minutes were going to be the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I knew there was no way I would make a good nanny for Charlie.

Not when I was lusting after his father night and day.



Chapter Two

Mason

Late November

I sat at my office desk and tried not to let my head fall forward onto the wood as Jennifer Hall said her goodbyes and closed the door.

I'd met Jennifer at the Bradleys' house on Thanksgiving Day when they'd invited me and Charlie over. She was Braxton's date and she'd told me about her degree in elementary education. She was unemployed at the moment and looking for something that involved children. I'd really wanted Palmer to take the job, but she had flat-out refused when I'd asked her at her sister's wedding.

It was strange because the first time I'd ever met Palmer at the Seaside Grill, she really seemed to hit it off with Charlie. She was super friendly, and I felt like we'd made a connection in some way. If I was being honest, I felt a lot more than that...but I was trying not to think too hard on it. Since then, though, she'd been distant with me. Not Charlie, but me. It was clear she didn't like me, and I wasn't sure why.

She'd made it even more clear that she wasn't fond of me at Thanksgiving when she'd avoided me like the plague.

I sighed and pushed my fingers through my hair. Clearly I'd messed things up with Palmer, though I wasn't sure what I'd

done. Sure, I was attracted to her, but I thought I'd been professional and had kept my feelings hidden.

The night of Addie's wedding, she told me that she couldn't be Charlie's nanny. When I'd asked why, she'd stared at me like I should have known the answer. Then she'd looked down at my mouth...and that's when *it* happened. Something sparked, and I knew we'd both felt it.

She'd leaned in, and before I knew it, we were kissing.

The shock of how her kiss made me feel had me pulling back and staring at her. It wasn't because I hadn't enjoyed the kiss. It was the opposite. It had stirred something inside of me that I'd buried a long time ago.

I'd softly said Palmer's name, and that seemed to pull her out of her daze. She'd quickly slid off the barstool and had taken a few steps away from me. Her cheeks went red, and I knew she had misunderstood why I'd pulled away from the kiss.

My mind drifted back to the moment.

Shocked by the kiss, I drew back. Palmer looked around as if she was searching for a way to escape. When she finally looked back at me, she said, "I didn't mean to do that. I drank too much, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, I wasn't...I wasn't expecting it, that's all."

Her eyes went wide with horror. "I don't normally kiss men like that, I..." She frantically shook her head. Before I had time to explain how I felt when she'd kissed me, Palmer turned and started to walk away. She stopped and looked back at me.

"Thank you for thinking of me, but I really can't be Charlie's nanny. I'm sorry."

Then she practically ran out of the bar.

A light knock sounded on my office door, pulling me from the memory. Clearing my throat, I said, "Come on in."

Adelaide poked her head in and smiled. “How did the interview go?”

I closed my eyes and ran my hand down my face.

“That good, huh?” she asked as she sat in the opposite chair.

Dropping my hand, I slowly shook my head. “It started out fine. She told me about herself, how she taught second grade for the last four years and before that, she taught kindergarten. I thought for sure she was the right person for the job.”

“What happened?” Adelaide asked.

It was a dick thing to do, but I replied, “She kept talking. The more she talked, the more I wanted to push her out the door.”

Adelaide brought a hand up to her mouth to keep from laughing. I liked Adelaide. She was an incredibly talented nurse who ran the office like a pro. I had hired her as the office manager, and boy, did she manage it. Everything ran smoothly. And the fact that she was a nurse and could help when things got busy was a bonus.

“She focused on Charlie at first, but then she said if I hired her, she would also be more than willing to provide *other* services.”

Adelaide’s face went white. “Oh no.”

“Oh yes,” I replied. “She told me I was hot, that she knew how to be quiet during sex, and that she wouldn’t expect anything in return.”

Adelaide closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. After opening them again, her gaze met mine. “I’m so sorry, Dr.—er, Mason.”

I smiled. I had told Adelaide a dozen or so times to call me Mason. “Why are you apologizing?” I asked.

She gave me a small shrug. “You wouldn’t have asked her to interview if you hadn’t met her at my parents’ house.”

“She seemed like a nice person.”

Adelaide raised one brow but didn't elaborate on what she was thinking.

"Does your brother know she's, um, willing to cheat on him?" I asked.

Adelaide let out a bubble of laughter. "Trust me, my brother could care less what she does. They're not dating. They're just..." Her voice trailed off, and from the blush on her cheeks, I quickly figured out what their relationship consisted of.

I brought my hand to the back of my neck. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm running out of time. I have to find someone soon."

She chewed on her lower lip. "Let me talk to Palmer again."

"I don't think Palmer likes me, Adelaide."

Her eyes went wide and something moved across her face, but I couldn't read it. "She likes you, Mason. She's just not good with...change."

Shaking my head, I said, "She made it clear she wasn't interested."

Adelaide tapped her finger on her chin, obviously in thought.

I stood and closed my laptop. "I'll figure it out. I may have to look outside of Seaside, maybe find someone who can be a live-in nanny. The house I'm interested in buying has a smaller guesthouse in the back. It was originally the carriage house."

Her brows rose. "Really? Where is it located?"

I nodded as I slipped the computer into my bag. "Down on Bay Street. Dr. James mentioned that his brother was selling his house. They want to downsize. They do have a renter in the carriage house though, so I'd have to give them time to vacate."

Adelaide covered her mouth with her hand.

"What?" I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, trying to hide the fact that the house clearly meant something to her. “Nothing at all.”

Slipping the backpack over my shoulder, I smiled. “Thank you for coming in today. I know we have Fridays off, and you don’t normally work today. But I wasn’t comfortable having Jennifer alone here with me in the office.”

She returned my smile with one of her own. “It was my pleasure, Mason. Where are you off to?”

“There’s an art show in town at the community center. Charlie is fascinated by art, and I promised I’d take him.”

This time, Adelaide couldn’t hide the fact that she was grinning from ear to ear.

“What?” I asked with a slight laugh.

“Nothing. Enjoy your weekend.”

“You’re acting weird.”

Pointing to herself, she replied, “Me? Nah. Have a good weekend!”

And with that, she turned and headed out of my office.



“Over here, Daddy!” Charlie called out as he pulled me to an area that was set up for kids to draw and paint.

A woman about my age bent down to speak to Charlie. “Hi there, what’s your name?”

“Charlie. This is my daddy.”

The woman looked up at me and smiled. “Hi there. Does Dad have a name?”

Smiling, I said, “Yes, Mason Bryan.”

She stood up. “The new doctor in town? That Mason Bryan?”

“That would be me.”

“Ms. Kelsey Roberts. It’s nice to meet you and Charlie. I teach art at Seaside Middle School.”

“Really?” I asked.

She nodded and looked at Charlie. “But after the holidays, I’m moving to the elementary school.”

My son smiled brightly and jumped up and down. Ms. Kelsey Roberts was a very pretty woman, and clearly my son noticed as well.

“What about Mrs. Dobson?” I asked.

“Mrs. Dobson is having a baby, and I’m going to take over her position. She decided she wants to be a stay-at-home mom.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

Ms. Roberts nodded.

I placed my hand on Charlie’s head. “Charlie here loves art.”

She smiled. “Is that so? Would you like to come paint me a picture, Charlie?”

“Yes! Yes!”

As soon as Ms. Roberts took Charlie’s hand, he let out a gasp and cried out, “Palmer!”

My head snapped to the right and for a moment I forgot how to breathe. Palmer stood there dressed in overalls and a long-sleeve black shirt. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail and her blue eyes bounced from me to Ms. Roberts before landing back on me.

“Palmer?” I said, feeling myself smile.

“Do you two know one another?” Ms. Roberts asked.

Palmer nodded before she dropped down and let Charlie practically throw himself into her arms.

Clearing my throat, I turned to Ms. Roberts. “Yes. Um, her sister Adelaide is my office manager, and I’ve come to know

the family.”

“Daddy asked Palmer to be my nanny!” Charlie stated.

“Nanny?” Ms. Roberts said to Palmer, as the two women exchanged a look. I couldn’t tell if they were friends or not.

When Ms. Roberts laughed and then looked back at me, I saw Palmer shoot her a dirty look. “Palmer as a nanny? That’s funny.”

Palmer stood, gave Ms. Roberts one last look, and then took Charlie’s hand. “Come on, Charlie, I’ll help you get set up with some paints.”

I watched Palmer and Charlie head over to an empty table. She took out some paper for him and then set up three different colors of paint.

Turning to Ms. Roberts, I asked, “You seem to know Palmer well, Ms. Roberts. Are you friends?”

She stared at Palmer with a blank expression before turning her entire body toward me. “Please, call me Kelsey.”

I nodded. “Call me Mason.”

“Well, to answer your question, Mason, we went to school together. I wouldn’t say we were best friends, but I do know her. She’s always been a bit of an odd duck, if you will. Never really knowing what she wants to do with her life. It’s a shame, really.”

I felt myself frown. “Why is that a shame?”

She blinked a few times. “No, I mean, she’s talented with painting, very talented. I would even go so far as to say she’s better than me. She simply chooses not to let people see her talent, for whatever reason. I guess she likes working multiple jobs.” She shrugged. “To each his own.”

I glanced back over at Palmer. Something inside me tightened as I watched her laugh at whatever Charlie said to her. She was teaching him the proper way to hold a paint brush.

“I agree,” I said. “Some of us take longer to figure things out in life, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Where’s Charlie’s mother? Is she here?”

Subtle. Everyone in town knew I wasn’t married and that there was no mother in the picture.

“She isn’t in his life.”

For a moment, Kelsey looked embarrassed, almost horrified she had asked the question. “I’m so sorry, I forgot that. Small-town gossip and all. I try not to pay attention to it, but yes, I do remember hearing that.”

“No worries,” I said with a smile.

“So, you’re looking for a nanny for Charlie?”

I looked over at where he sat. He was chewing on his lip as he carefully moved the brush over the paper, and the look of concentration on his face nearly made me laugh. Palmer glanced over at him every so often since she was dividing her time between Charlie and a little girl around his age.

I focused back on Kelsey. “I am. With my schedule, it’s hard for me to pick Charlie up from school. Getting him there isn’t an issue—unless the clinic has early appointments, which is normally only once a week.”

“Have you looked into the after-school care? It’s a wonderful program.”

I smiled. “I have, yes. But after spending all day in school, I really don’t want him to have to spend another few hours there. And most of the afternoon programs are already filled up, so that isn’t an option anyway. They book up fast.”

She nodded. “They do. This may seem out of left field, but I could always watch him for you.”

“You?”

Laughing, she said, “I do have experience with children.”

My face grew hot. “I’m sorry, Kelsey, I didn’t mean for that to come out like it did. It’s just, you’re a teacher there, and

I assumed you were busy working even after school gets out.”

“You would assume correctly. I do stay and work about thirty minutes to an hour after school lets out. But I try to do most of my lesson plans over the weekend, so I could rearrange some things. I don’t mean permanently, of course, just until you can find someone to help you. A temporary thing.”

I smiled while my shoulders lost some of their tension for the first time in months. “That could possibly work. I have a high school student who watches him now. She’s been a huge help, but she’s graduating early this semester and will be heading off to travel around Europe before she starts school next fall.”

“Must be nice,” Kelsey mused with a wicked gleam in her eye. “Seriously though, Dr.—I mean, Mason. I don’t mind helping at all. I truly do love kids.”

“I may not need you at all if I can find someone permanently.”

She shrugged. “That’s fine too.”

A thought occurred to me. If I was going to have this woman possibly watch my son, Charlie and I both needed to get to know her better. “What are you doing for lunch tomorrow? I’d love for you to come over so you and Charlie can get better acquainted.”

Her face lit up with excitement. “I’m free! Here, let’s exchange numbers. And who knows, if things don’t work out with Charlie, maybe you and I can strike up a friendship.”

“Maybe,” I say with a forced smile. I really wasn’t in the market to start dating right now, and besides, if I was, there was only one woman I’d be interested in...and she was currently helping my son learn how to paint.

“Dad! Dad! Look at what Palmer helped me wif.” *The toothless lisp strikes again.*

Looking up from my phone after saving Kelsey’s number, I grinned.

Palmer stood next to Charlie with a tight smile on her face. “Are we interrupting?” she asked, looking over at Kelsey.

“Not at all,” Kelsey said. “We were exchanging numbers since I’m having lunch with Mason and Charlie tomorrow.”

One of Palmer’s brows rose as she glanced at me but didn’t say anything. It bugged the hell out of me that I couldn’t read her. Was she angry I was having lunch with Kelsey? Jealous? Happy? What in the hell was she thinking?

Kelsey smiled, then looked down at Charlie. “What did you make?”

He ignored Kelsey and grabbed my hand to pull me toward the table. “Look! Look!”

I picked up the paper on the table, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was a horse. A very well-done horse.

“Charlie, this is amazing.”

He beamed up at me with so much pride on his face that my heart squeezed in my chest.

I felt Palmer next to me before I saw her. “How?” I asked, turning toward her.

She shrugged. “He asked me how to draw a horse, so I showed him. He followed along and this was what we got. He’s very talented, Mason. And really seems to love art.”

Kelsey walked up and looked down at it. “Nice job, Charlie.” She turned to me. “We can totally work on technique if I end up watching him for you.”

“What?” Palmer and Charlie both asked at the same time. Although, I wasn’t sure what they were asking about: Kelsey watching Charlie, or Kelsey degrading my son’s work right in front of him.

Before I could reply, Palmer leaned into Kelsey and whispered, “Did you just say that to him? He’s five, Kelsey, and you’re worried about technique?”

Kelsey blinked a few times, then shook her head. “No, I...I didn’t mean...”

Her voice trailed off when Palmer looked at me and asked, “Is Kelsey going to watch Charlie for you now? Are you going around asking every available single woman in Seaside?”

The tone of her voice, as well as her words, pissed me off. Who was she to question who I decided to have watch my son? She’d made it perfectly damn clear she wasn’t interested in the job.

I wanted to pull Palmer to the side and tell her she had no right to say that to me. Instead, I put on my best smirk of a smile—childish, I know—and replied, “She might be, or at least she might help me out until I can hire someone full time. And being single isn’t a requirement.”

Charlie tugged at Kelsey’s hand. “Can we draw, Ms. Kelsey? If you watch me?”

She laughed and bent down to tussle Charlie’s hair. “We sure can, Charlie.”

Standing, Kelsey looked at Palmer. “Do you mind if I sneak away for a bit? I’d love to show Mason and Charlie around the rest of the show.” She looked at me. “I’m on the committee, so I know all about the exhibits.”

“I see,” I said, glancing between Kelsey and Palmer. A part of me wanted Palmer to say that she *did* mind. That she needed a break or was about to leave. Or better yet, that she would show us around herself. None of that happened though.

“Not at all,” Palmer said before she bent down and spoke to Charlie. “Great job today, buddy. I can’t wait to see what you paint next.”

Then she stood and said, “Have fun.”

Before I could reply, Kelsey said, “We will! Come on, Charlie.”

I stood there for a moment, unable to move. What in the hell was it about Palmer that made me feel like I was losing my damn mind?

“Dad! Come on!”

I tried not to frown as I turned and joined Kelsey and Charlie.



Chapter Three

Palmer

“Who are you glaring at?”

“Harlee!” I said as I jumped and shot her a dirty look. “What are you doing here?”

“I told you I was volunteering today.”

Sighing, I moved to the table where little Candace was drawing. I had been helping both her and Charlie with their art earlier, and Candace was still working on hers. “I forgot you said you would be here. And for the record, I wasn’t glaring at anyone.”

“What does glaring mean?” Candace asked as I sat down in the chair next to her.

I smiled. “Nothing.”

“I hear my daddy telling my mommy that he doesn’t like it when she glares at him. She glared at him last night, and he slept on the sofa ’cause of it.”

Harlee and I both looked at each other and then back to Candace. How in the hell were we supposed to respond to that?

Hitting me on the arm, Harlee motioned for me to say something. But all I could get out was, “Um.”

“My mom is here, got to go! Bye, Palmer!” Candace said as she grabbed her piece of art and rushed toward her mother.

“Saved by the glaring mom,” Harlee whispered while I tried not to laugh.

Spinning around, she looked at me. “I thought you were only volunteering until one.”

“I was, but then Kelsey decided she needed to give Mason the grand tour of our little town art show.”

Harlee blinked a few times. “Kelsey Roberts?”

I nodded. “If I had known she was running this booth, I wouldn’t have volunteered to help out.”

“I thought you two made up years ago. Are you back to being rivals? This time for the hot doctor?” Harlee asked, referring to the strained friendship between Kelsey and me. We had made up years ago, and I thought things were fine—until she started giving Mason *the look*. The one that said *take me to bed*.

Narrowing my eyes at Harlee, I stated, “I am not her rival, thank you very much. I simply...” Looking around to make sure no little kids were in the booth, I finished, “I simply don’t like her at the moment. That’s all. This has nothing to do with her or Mason.”

Harlee looked past me and frowned. “Mason seems to like her.”

I peeked over my shoulder to see the two of them walking together with Charlie between them. I hated how the sight of the three of them together like that made me cranky.

“Someone’s glaring again,” Harlee sing-songed.

“I’m not glaring! Don’t you have somewhere you need to be?”

Smiling, she took my hand and squeezed it. “Palmer, what’s going on? You haven’t been yourself lately.”

“What do you mean I haven’t been myself? I’ve been myself. I’m me. There’s nothing wrong.”

Harlee gave me the look that every best friend gives when they know you're spewing a load of bullshit. "Ever since Doctor Hottie showed up, you haven't been the same. Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about, Harlee. Nothing. Now go be the good-doer you always are."

She drew in a deep breath and exhaled. Then she looked up and something caught her eye. Or someone. "Listen, I need to head over to the booth where I'm volunteering. Let's get together for drinks soon, all of us girls. Okay?"

I smiled. "Sounds good."

After watching Harlee walk away, I turned as Kelsey approached with Mason and Charlie. I reached under the table and grabbed my purse. The moment Kelsey stepped foot into the booth, I was hightailing it out of there. I hadn't had a chance to even look at any of the exhibits yet.

"I'm back!" Kelsey announced.

Tossing my purse strap over my shoulder, I flashed her a wide grin. "Great! I'm off, have fun."

And before Kelsey could say a word, I moved past her and Mason. I bent down and smiled at Charlie. "Have fun today, Charlie."

Trying not to break into a full-on run, I hurried toward the opposite side of the event space. The children's booth was set up at the entrance. It was done that way on purpose so that people could drop their kids off and enjoy the rest of the art show without their little ones in tow.

As I meandered around the different exhibits, I stopped and looked at a display that showcased local art. They had arranged the show so that each exhibit had a theme. Some were watercolors only, some sculptures. Some were by artists who lived in the northeast or who were from other countries. It was rather impressive that Lucy Marshall, the art director at the University of Maine, was able to pull together such a great event for a smaller town like Seaside.

There were a large number of people looking at the local display, which I was glad to see. There was something about supporting local artists that always seemed to pull on the heartstrings of folks. Some of the pieces were watercolors, some were oil paintings; there were a few small sculptures, and one iron-work piece.

My breath caught when I saw my own painting up on the wall. It was a landscape of the sea I had painted one day while sitting in the widow's walk of my parents' house. A storm had been moving in right before sunset, and the colors of the sky were so breathtaking that I'd grabbed my sketchbook and colored pencils and had gotten to work sketching. I also took a photo of the sky, which was so helpful once I went back to do the actual painting. It was one of my favorite pieces I'd ever done, and it had been hard for me to put it on sale. My brother Braxton had seen it once and begged me to let him have it, but I'd held on to it. I knew that if I was ever going to attempt to sell my work, this would be the piece to do it with.

I had to focus on breathing so I wouldn't draw attention to the fact that I was internally freaking the heck out.

I had done it. I had finally put up a piece of my work for others to see. Sure, I'd painted plenty before, and had even given some of my family the art I'd painted or drawn throughout the years, but I had never put myself out there like this. I hadn't even signed my real name on this piece, choosing to use a pseudonym instead. It was my middle name combined with my mother's maiden name. Elizabeth Ryan. No one would ever put two and two together unless they were family.

"Hey, Palmer. I was wondering when I would see you."

Turning, I smiled at Lucy Marshall. She oversaw the art show and was the only person who knew I had a painting up for sale. Well, besides my family.

"Hey there!" I replied as I hugged her. "The turnout has been amazing, Lucy."

She nodded and looked around. "It really has. I was worried, as you know, since Seaside is a smaller town and all. But all the advertising I did in Portland and the surrounding

areas paid off. There are a large number of art lovers in Maine. Plus, I've heard that most of the Airbnbs are booked up, as well as the Seaside Motel."

I glanced around. "It's great to hear about the revenue this is bringing in for Seaside."

"Have you gotten a chance to see everything?"

"Not yet," I replied. "I was volunteering in the kids' booth for a bit. I'm excited to see what's here though."

She put her hand on my arm and gave it a light squeeze. "Go enjoy yourself, and be sure to say goodbye before you leave."

"I will."

I spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying the many different exhibits. I purchased a small vase and a watercolor of the sunset over the Atlantic Ocean that I planned on hanging in my bedroom. I also purchased a few art supplies from a vendor, and I couldn't wait to get home to use them. I had an idea for my next painting and had already been sketching it out in my mind while I strolled through the exhibits.

As I made my way toward the exit, I glanced over and saw that my painting was no longer hanging up.

My heart jumped to my throat, and I dashed over to the local exhibit.

An older man I had seen at the Seaside Grill before stood there with a sweet grin on his face. I was pretty sure his name was Gus. I pointed to the empty spot where my painting had been hanging. "The painting...um...the one with the storm moving in during sunset?"

He nodded and glanced back at where I was pointing. "The one by Elizabeth Ryan?"

I nodded as I numbly answered, "Yes, that one."

"I'm pleased to say it sold a few hours ago."

I pressed my hand to my mouth. "What? It sold?"

His smile faded. “I’m so sorry if you were wanting it. It was a very popular piece. So many other people have also expressed regret they didn’t buy it when they first saw it. She’s a local artist, you know. I don’t know anything about her though. I’m told she used a fake name.”

I nodded, unable to utter a single word. Did he say that so many people had been interested in it?

“No one knows anything about her, but she’s been the talk of the show. It’s like a mystery—and this town loves a mystery.” He looked at me more closely. “Aren’t you a Bradley? Your parents own the Seaside Grill.”

My eyes went wide. “The talk of the show?”

“Well, like I said, it was a popular piece today.”

I looked at the spot again and then back to Gus. “Um...I’m so sorry. Yes, I’m Palmer Bradley. My mother and father own Seaside Grill.”

He flashed me a bright smile. “I thought so. You’ve waited on me a time or two.”

“Probably,” I said, still trying to wrap my head around the fact that my painting had sold. “Um, do you know who bought it? The painting, I mean.”

“I’m sorry,” he said with a frown. “I’m not sure.”

I smiled. “That’s okay. I was curious, that’s all.”

Turning, I started toward the exit with a smile on my face and a little extra pep in my step.



“What do you mean you’re going to be selling? I thought you loved your house!”

Alice and Doug James looked at each other and then back to me. Alice spoke first. “It’s such a big home, and we’re getting older. It’s time to downsize. I’m so sorry, Palmer.

We've loved having you here and being able to rent out the carriage house to you. Maybe the new homeowner will let you stay."

I sighed and sank down onto my sofa as I tried to hold back the tears that stung the back of my eyes. *This isn't happening.*

I looked up and asked, "I've saved up some money and can put in a down payment. Do you think the new owner would be willing to sell the carriage house to me?"

They exchanged another look, and then Alice shrugged. "I don't think it would hurt to ask him. He might be understanding considering the circumstances."

I had no idea what that meant, and was about to ask, but Alice kept talking.

"He's coming over for dinner tonight. We'll have him come on back to speak to you about it if you'll be home this evening."

Blinking a few times, I stuttered my answer. "A...uh... yeah...sure, that's fine. My brother will be here, so I don't see a problem with it."

Were they really going to send a complete stranger over to my home to talk to me? Were they that desperate to sell? Maybe he was a local resident. I prayed he was.

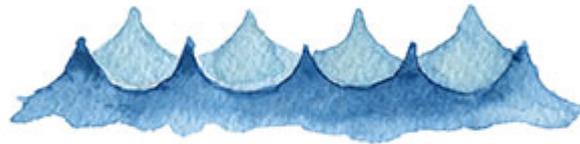
Doug and Alice both stood.

"Thank you for giving me the heads up, though, I appreciate it," I said as I walked them to the door.

Alice gave me a hug. "Of course. You've been an amazing tenant and it was the least we could do."

I forced a smile while we exchanged goodbyes. Then I closed the door and leaned against it, letting out a groan.

"My mother is going to have a field day with this."



Chapter Four

Palmer

“This isn’t funny, Brax!” I said as I put a plate of spaghetti and meatballs down in front of him.

“I’m sorry, Palmer. I’m not laughing at you, just at the circumstances of it all. You know Mom is going to ask you to move in with her and Dad if the new owner boots you out.”

Rolling my eyes, I sat down across from him at my little kitchen table. “I know. But I’ve already spoken to Harlee, and she said I could move in with her until I find another place.”

“Harlee?”

I chewed the bite I took and nodded.

“You’d move in with *Harlee*?”

Swallowing, I asked, “Yeah, why? What’s wrong with Harlee?”

His expression was blank, but I saw something in his eyes I couldn’t put my finger on. “Nothing’s wrong with Harlee. I was simply surprised for a second.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Why would you be surprised? She’s my friend. Or more like a sister.”

He sighed. “I know that, Palmer. I guess I figured she was dating Thomas and...”

I raised a brow. “And?”

“Nothing, it doesn’t matter. You can always move in with me if you need to.”

“Oh God, no!”

He frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’d have to listen to all the endless women you bring home to have sex with. No, thank you.”

“Excuse me,” Brax said, putting his fork down. “I don’t bring home endless women to have sex.”

Laughing, I said, “This is me, Brax.”

He shook his head, and I could see the frustration on his face. “Palmer, I’m not a manwhore. First off, I don’t have time to endlessly hook up with women. Second, I’m not...”

The way my brother’s face had suddenly gone serious made me set my own fork down and look at him closely. “You’re not what?”

“As much as everyone wants to think so, or how I make it seem, I don’t sleep around like that. I like to flirt but...I don’t know. I wouldn’t mind finding someone and settling down and having kids.”

I dropped back in my seat and stared at him. “Wait, are you being serious?”

“Of course, I’m being serious,” he said with a frown. “You don’t think I want to settle down and have a family someday?”

Clearing my throat, I replied, “I mean, sure, I think you do, but I thought you were enjoying being single.”

He shrugged. “I do enjoy being single. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to find someone to love.”

I blinked a few times and then leaned forward. “Is there someone you’re serious about?”

For the briefest moment, something moved across my brother’s face. It almost looked like regret. “No, there isn’t.”

The sadness in his voice made me wonder if there *had* been someone. Before I could dive in deeper, the doorbell

rang.

I jumped up. “That’ll be the guy who’s buying the house from Doug and Alice. I really hope he’s not a dick.”

“What about dinner?” Braxton asked as he stared down at his plate.

“Keep eating. I doubt this will take long. He’s probably some investor who’s going to tell me to push off.”

Braxton laughed while I stopped at the door, drew in a deep breath, and then plastered on a fake smile. I opened the door and started to say hello—but then froze.

The man standing on the other side of the threshold was clearly as shocked as I was.

“Palmer?”

“Mason?”

I heard a loud boom of laughter come from Braxton as he made his way over to where Mason and I stood simply staring at each other. “Holy shit, did this get good or what!” Brax said.

I snapped my head to the right and glared at my brother. “Brax, weren’t you just saying you didn’t want your food to get cold?”

“Did I come at a bad time?” Mason asked, taking a few steps back.

“No!” Braxton said, at the same time as I snapped out, “Yes.”

“I can come back or...um...”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You’re the guy who’s buying the house? I can’t believe this.”

Mason pushed his hand through his hair as he said, “This makes so much sense now.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

His eyes looked glazed, and for a moment it appeared as if he’d forgotten I was there.

“Your sister...I, um, I think she knew where I was talking about when I said I was going to buy this house. And Alice and Doug said... It doesn't matter. You live here?”

I dropped my hands to the side of my body, suddenly feeling so tired. Tired of fighting my feelings for the man standing in front of me. Tired of the way everyone felt like they had a say in my life. Tired of feeling...lost.

Our eyes met, and I couldn't ignore the way my body heated simply from his gaze on mine.

“Palmer? Are you going to answer Mason?” Brax smirked.

I shot my brother a dirty look. “Will you please go eat your spaghetti, Brax!” Turning back to Mason, I replied, “Yes, I live here. Are you really buying the house?”

He nodded, and my stomach dropped.

“Will you be...will you want me to move out?”

“No,” he said, a little too quickly. I could hear Braxton chuckle, but I ignored him. “I mean, I thought maybe I could use it for...”

His words trailed off.

“Use it for what?” I asked.

“Nothing. You don't have to worry about moving, Palmer. I can promise you that.”

A sense of relief instantly washed over me, and I had to blink a few times to hold back the tears. Was I really on the verge of crying? For goodness' sake, what was wrong with me?

“Thank you, Mason. I really do enjoy living here, and I was heartbroken at the idea of having to leave.”

He smiled, and I felt my stomach flutter.

Looking past me, he said, “I'll let you two get back to eating. I'm sorry I interrupted you. Alice told to come by and speak with you.”

“I told her I could buy the carriage house, if you wanted to sell it.”

“Sell it?”

I nodded. “Or I thought maybe Alice and Doug would like to sell it first. I wasn’t sure—I just knew I really didn’t want to leave.”

Mason smiled once again. “I plan on buying the house, and the carriage house is part of the deal. It was one of the main reasons I was interested.”

“Oh?” I asked with raised brows.

“Did you know Palmer lived here?” Braxton called out from the kitchen with a mouthful of food.

I wanted to die of embarrassment right there on the spot. I was going to kill my brother.

Mason shook his head. “No, I didn’t know at all. I’m pretty sure Alice and Doug *thought* I knew, but I wasn’t aware of it.”

I swallowed as I instantly realized the reason he wanted the carriage house. He was, after all, still looking for someone to watch Charlie.

He focused on me. “Like I said, you don’t have to worry, Palmer. I have no intention of making you move. You’re more than welcome to live here for as long as you want.”

I chewed on my lip for a few moments before I asked, “So you’re for sure buying the property?”

A wickedly handsome smile grew over his face as he replied, “I most certainly am.” He looked past me to Braxton. “Enjoy your evening, Braxton.” Glancing at me, he added, “Palmer.”

Then, as if my world hadn’t been turned upside down, he walked back toward the main house. I could feel my brother walk up behind me.

“I cannot wait for Ms. Seaside to find out about this.”

I jerked my head to the right and stared up at him. “Who?”

“Ms. Seaside. That’s what everyone’s calling the person who writes the gossip column now.”

“What if it’s a guy?” I asked.

Braxton shrugged before heading back over to the table. “Are you going to eat your dinner?”

I stared at Mason’s back as he retreated down the long driveway. Sighing, I said, “You can have it.”

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

December 1, 2022

IT'S ALL ABOUT THAT BASS.

Seasiders,

Word on the docks is that Palmer Bradley has a new landlord. That’s right, Seaside’s newest Zaddy, Dr. Mason Bryan, is the proud owner of 505 Bay Street. That includes the carriage house where Palmer herself lives.

I’m not sure if you fishes remember, but Dr. Zaddy was hoping Palmer would become his new nanny. Not for him, for his five-year-old son, Charlie. One must wonder if Dr. Zaddy went to the extreme of buying the house she lives in, since Palmer wasn’t ready to hang up her pooper scooper for a new career just yet.

I’ve got my ear to the pier, my fishes, and will keep everyone updated.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

Harlee sat across from me in the booth at my folks' restaurant as she read the latest gossip column.

She looked up with her brows pulled down and asked, "What the hell is a Zaddy?"

I groaned and buried my hands in my face while Sutton answered. "I had to look it up. It's a hot dad with swagger. Hence, a Zaddy."

I dropped my hands to my lap, watching Harlee blink a few times. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I get a *DILF*, I mean that he is, but a *Zaddy*? This only confirms the writer has to be old or a man."

"Why does that confirm it?" I asked. "If anything, they'd have to be younger to know that term. *We* didn't even know it!"

Harlee looked at me like I'd grown two heads.

"Again," Sutton started, "how does everyone in this town think you're such a sweet, innocent, caring do-gooder with you calling Mason a *DILF*?"

Harlee winked. "I *am* all of those things, with a little bit of spice sprinkled in."

Sutton let out a *pfft* as I grabbed the newspaper. "This is serious, you guys!" I said. "I'm a target now. They won't stop until they get their meat. And they've dragged Mason and Charlie into it this time."

"Their meat?" Sutton and Harlee both asked.

"Yes. The gossip on me and Mason. The meat."

Harlee leaned in. "Wait, is there gossip about you and Mason?"

"No! Of course not."

"Can he even buy the house that fast?" Sutton asked.

I sighed once again and leaned back in the booth. "He paid cash and waived an inspection as he expedited the closing

process. And the title company got it through fast. He's officially the new owner. He even sent over a new lease for me to sign. The crazy part is, Addie said that when he told her about buying the house, he had every intention of letting the person in the carriage house out of their lease so he could hire a nanny and have them live there."

"Wait," Sutton said with a shake of her head. "Then why is he letting you stay?"

Harlee giggled. "He likes her, that's why."

I jerked my gaze over to Harlee. "What?"

"Come on, Palmer. It's so obvious you both like each other. And you did kiss him."

Sutton gasped as I closed my eyes and internally cursed out Harlee.

"Hold on one damn second. You kissed him?" Sutton demanded.

"Kissed who?" Addie asked, sliding into the booth next to Harlee.

I shot Harlee a glare.

She gave me a sheepish smile. "Sorry, I thought they knew."

Addie looked around the table, confused. "Who knew what? Wait, what are we talking about?"

Before I could say a word, Sutton started talking. "Okay, I don't even know where to start."

"The paper?" Addie asked with a sad face aimed at me. Please, that bitch was glad that this Ms. Seaside had moved on to another person and the heat was no longer on *her*. What was Ms. Seaside's beef with my family, anyway?

"Oh God, no," Sutton said. "I mean, that started it. Palmer kissed Mason."

Addie's mouth dropped open. "What!"

I slid down in the booth as nearly all the nearby tables turned and looked at us. “Do you mind?” I hissed. “The whole damn place can hear you!”

Addie looked around before she focused back on me. “When did this happen?”

I closed my eyes and tried hard to imagine myself somewhere else. Anywhere but where I currently was.

“At your wedding,” Harlee replied. I kicked her under the table, but it was Addie who let out a yelp.

“Sorry, I was aiming for Harlee.”

“Jesus,” Addie mumbled, rubbing her leg.

“Yeah, be careful,” Harlee said. “She’s carrying a ch—”

All eyes went from Harlee to Addie.

“Were you about to say a child?” I asked.

Harlee’s eyes darted over to Addie and you could see she was pleading for forgiveness through her eyes.

“Oh my God. Did you really say that?” Addie glared at Harlee.

“It was a slip! I tried to stop myself!” Harlee stated.

“Wait. What?” I asked. “You’re pregnant?”

“Shhh!” Addie said as she glanced over at Sutton—who was very quiet.

It was my turn for my jaw to hit the table. “Oh my God. You’re pregnant too?”

“Okay, *that one* I didn’t know about,” Harlee stated.



Chapter Five

Mason

It wasn't until I got home and saw the local paper that I realized why everyone who'd come into the office today had huge smiles on their faces. Even Lacy Hathaway—who had a fever of a 102 and had tested positive for both the flu and strep—couldn't stop smiling at me.

“Dr. Zaddy?” I asked as I read the article for the fourth time. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you have swagger. And I think it means you're like a DILF.”

I turned and looked at Kelsey, positive the expression on my face was one of shock and disbelief. She smiled and shrugged.

“What's that, Daddy?” Charlie asked.

“Nothing, Charlie, nothing.”

Kelsey mouthed “sorry” to me before she set a plate of lasagna down in front of Charlie and another in front of me. After the art show, we had met up with her for lunch the next day, and since then she had somehow managed to slip into our lives. She was currently taking care of Charlie after school, and was apparently feeding the two of us in the process. I still had Lori Anne—the high school student whom I'd first hired when I came to Seaside—available to watch Charlie. She got

out of class at noon, so it was easy for her to pick him up after school.

Kelsey had taken it upon herself to tell Lori Anne that she wasn't needed anymore. I'd told Kelsey that it wasn't her place to do that. She had apologized and said she would never overstep again.

Kelsey sat down and smiled at me as she held up a pitcher of lemonade. "I hope you don't mind me making dinner. I love to cook and this gave me an excuse."

I took a bite of the lasagna. "I appreciate it, but it really isn't necessary."

Charlie shoved some salad in his mouth and chewed before he said, "I like it!"

"Charlie helped make the salad today."

Smiling, I looked at Kelsey. "You really have helped, although Lori Anne was still able to work until after the holidays."

Kelsey brushed off my comment. "It's been a lot of fun. Charlie hangs out in my classroom while I finish up for the day, then we come on home and get ready for dinner."

Something in her eyes made me feel a bit wary. I wasn't fond of the way she'd used the word *home*. The last thing I wanted to do was give her the impression that I was interested in anything more than having her help out with Charlie.

"Well, I never really dreamed it would be this hard to find a nanny."

She winked. "You'll find someone. I was going to ask, did you need help moving into the new house?"

I shook my head. "I hired movers and it should be easy. We've hardly unpacked since our move here."

"Yeah, a lot of my toys are still packed up," Charlie said. "I can't wait to see 'em again!"

Kelsey and I both chuckled.

The doorbell rang, and I paused, my fork in midair. “I wonder who that could be?” I asked as I stood up. “Excuse me a moment.”

Kelsey grinned. “Of course.”

I made my way to the front door of the rental I was living in. The last person I expected to see standing there was Palmer.

“Palmer?”

She pushed me aside and hastily shut the door behind her. “I don’t think anyone saw me. I parked a few blocks down.”

I looked out the large bay window to see that it was snowing. “It’s snowing outside. Why would you walk?”

Pulling her hood down, she momentarily robbed me of breath at the sight of her. She was so beautiful with those big blue eyes of hers staring up at me. One could say they were sky blue, but there were times when they were so deep you couldn’t help but get lost in them. I gave my head a shake and refocused while she spoke.

“I didn’t want anyone to see me coming here.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

She stared at me for a moment before she said, “You haven’t seen the article yet, have you?”

I smirked. “The one about Dr. Zaddy?”

Palmer rolled her eyes. “Okay, you’ve seen it then. Mason, people think there’s something going on between us.”

“Palmer, I’m not worried about a little town gossip. By next week, Ms. Seaside will have moved on to someone else.”

She let out a bark of laughter. “You haven’t been here long enough to know the woman has it in for my family. She’s been talking about my sisters and my brother for months! She’s mentioned me a time or two as well, but nothing terribly bad. I don’t even know how she knows you asked me to be Charlie’s nanny, and that I said no. For all I know, she knows about—”

“Mason?”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Kelsey standing there with what looked like a forced smile on her face. When I turned back to Palmer, I was taken aback by the look on *her* face. I couldn't tell if she was surprised, angry, or upset. The change in her eyes made me instantly want to explain Kelsey's presence.

She pulled her eyes off of Kelsey and looked up at me. "I'm...um...I'm sorry. I wouldn't have come if I'd known you had a guest."

"It's fine. Kelsey made us dinner and stayed to join us. She's been watching Charlie for me since Lori Anne—" I looked back at Kelsey. "Well, that's a long story."

Palmer frowned. "I thought Lori Anne was babysitting him until after Christmas."

Before I had a chance to respond, Kelsey did. "She needed to focus on graduating and wanted to attend some functions with her friends. I told her I'd take over for her."

I stared at Kelsey with what I knew had to be a stunned look. Why in the hell would she interject herself into this conversation about my son? She was clearly getting too comfortable here—and that needed to change.

Turning back to Palmer, I said, "I've asked my mother to come and stay for a bit while I get moved and settled in. She'll be able to watch Charlie for me until winter break, and hopefully by the time he heads back to school, I'll have found a permanent nanny."

I made a mental note to call my mother the moment everyone left. It wouldn't be hard to talk her into coming and helping. She and Charlie adored one another, and I knew my parents would love to stay in the new house with us over the holidays.

Palmer nodded, her eyes bouncing from me to Kelsey. "Well, I...I guess if you're not worried about the article, then I won't be either."

"It's purely town gossip," Kelsey said as she walked up and stood next to me. She put her hand on my arm. "I

wouldn't be surprised if Ms. Seaside tries to link us together romantically too."

I looked at Kelsey's hand and then up at her. Before I could say anything, Charlie came running into the room.

"Ms. Palmer!" he cried as he raced by and threw his arms around Palmer's legs. I took that opportunity to step away from Kelsey and break her hold on me.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" I asked.

Kelsey quickly said, "Oh, I don't think there's enough lasagna if we want to have leftovers for tomorrow, Mason."

Holy shit...could she be any ruder or more obvious?

Palmer clearly forced herself to smile. "I already ate anyway, but thank you." She bent down, hugging Charlie, and grinned widely. "How have you been, buddy?"

"Good!"

"Been drawing?"

He nodded. "Ms. Kelsey has been helping me draw a horse."

"That's wonderful!" Palmer said as she ruffled Charlie's hair. "I can't wait to see it." She stood and cleared her throat. "I better let you get back to dinner."

I stepped forward. "Let me at least drive you back to your car, Palmer."

She let out an unamused chuckle and suddenly looked exhausted. "Nonsense. I'm fine."

Kelsey smirked at her. "I don't know how you manage to do that little job of yours and scoop up dog poop in this kind of weather."

I shot Kelsey another look of disbelief. Why in the world would she attempt to degrade Palmer like that?

Palmer ignored her and glanced down at Charlie. "I'll see you around, buddy."

“See ya ’round!” Charlie said as he moved to my side and grabbed my leg.

Palmer looked at me. “Again, sorry to have bothered you.”

“It wasn’t a bother at all, Palmer.”

Turning to Kelsey, she said, “Good seeing you, Kelsey.”

Kelsey practically purred like a kitten as she replied, “You too, Palmer.”

I opened the door and watched Palmer flip up the hood of her jacket and head down the steps. She practically ran down the street, away from the house.

“Mason!” Kelsey called out. “It’s freezing. Shut the door before you let all the heat out.”

I gritted my teeth and stepped inside. Kelsey had already made her way back to the dining room. It was time to nip this in the bud.

“Sorry, Charlie, but looks like you’re heading to work with me again.”

He looked up at me, and it felt like he knew the exact reason why.



Kelsey had made herself at home after dinner, helping me clean up the dishes and the kitchen. Then she’d suggested a movie before Charlie needed to get ready for bed. I’d nixed the idea and sent Charlie up to his room to read one of the books my mother had sent last week.

When I came back downstairs, Kelsey was on my sofa, her feet tucked up under her legs with her laptop open.

“Kelsey, I’ve got a lot of notes I need to organize on my patients, so I’m going to have to call it a night.”

She looked up and flashed me a flirtatious smile. “I don’t mind if you want to work. I’ve got some work to do as well. We can work side by side.”

I cleared my throat and rubbed at the back of my neck. “I think you’ve misunderstood the situation here.”

With a slight tilt of her head, she asked, “What do you mean?”

Moving toward her, I said, “I really appreciate all the help you’ve been with watching Charlie after school, and even making us dinner. I hope you know that. Although, I never asked you to dismiss Lori Anne.”

“I know, and again, I’m sorry for overstepping. But as far as helping and making dinner goes, I don’t mind it at all.”

I nodded. “Right. Um, I think you’ve gotten the wrong impression about *me* though.”

She pulled her legs out from under her and shut her laptop. “Wrong impression?”

“Kelsey, I think you’re a nice person and, like I said, I appreciate you offering to help with Charlie. But I’m not interested in anything else.”

“Anything else?”

Christ. Why is she making this more difficult than it needs to be?

“I’m getting the impression you might think there’s something more between us than friendship.”

She blinked a few times. “Well, yes, I thought we were getting along fabulously.”

“I like you, but only as a friend. I’m not interested in anything romantic with you.”

Her eyes went wide while her mouth formed a perfect O shape. It took her a few moments to speak. “I see. I feel silly now.”

“I’m so sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, because that was never my intention. It’s been about Charlie the entire

time.”

She nodded and stared down at her bag before she started to pack up her laptop. “Do you need me to watch Charlie after school tomorrow?”

“Um, no, I’ll pick him up from school.”

Forcing a smile, she slipped her shoes back on and went to get her coat. She put her bag and purse over her shoulder and headed to the front door. “Well, I think I’m going to go ahead and leave.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry, Kelsey.”

“We got our wires crossed is all, Mason. Not a big deal.”

After walking over to the front door, I reached out and opened it. Before Kelsey stepped outside, she stopped and turned to face me.

“What about Palmer?”

I drew my head back as I looked at her. “What do you mean?”

She let out a slight chuckle as she shook her head. “You may not be interested in anything romantic with *me*, Mason, but it’s pretty clear you don’t feel the same way about Palmer. And I think she might reciprocate your feelings.”

For a moment, the kiss we’d shared at Adelaide’s wedding reception came racing to the forefront of my thoughts. But I pushed it away. “Palmer and I are friends, and that’s it. I can promise you, there isn’t anything between us.”

Kelsey raised a brow and then tilted her head slightly. “For someone who could see it so clearly with me, you aren’t looking very hard when it comes to Palmer. I’ve known her a long time, Mason. She doesn’t *ever* get flustered. Honestly, I was a bit jealous of her, but I’m woman enough to admit when I’m wrong, and I was wrong about you and me. However, I don’t think I’m wrong about you and Palmer.”

Turning, she started down the steps and out to her car.

After doing a sweep of the area to see if anyone might have seen Kelsey leaving, I shut the door and let out a long breath.

I walked back into the kitchen and stared down at the gossip column. Palmer had seemed so agitated by it. After a quick glance at my watch, I pulled out my phone to make call.

“Lori Anne, are you able to come babysit Charlie for an hour or two?”



Chapter Six

Palmer

I slammed the front door shut and took off my coat before hanging it up on my entrance coat rack.

“Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I can’t believe I ran over to his house like that! And Kelsey? Why does seeing her there make me all stabby?”

I paused and stood there for a moment.

“Oh my God. I’m talking to myself. This is how it starts. This is how a person loses their mind over a stupid, good-looking man. This is exactly why you swore off men, Palmer.”

I dropped onto my sofa and rested my head against the back of it. Closing my eyes, I drew in a slow, deep breath, held it, then released.

Kelsey? Why Kelsey? Of all the people in Seaside, why did Mason have to date *her*?

My body began to relax slowly as I attempted to let go of the tension in my shoulders. Right as I felt myself drifting off to sleep, the doorbell rang.

“Go away!” I called out.

It rang again, followed by loud knocking.

“What in the hell! Do you not understand the words *go away!*” I shouted right before I threw open the door to see

Mason standing there.

“M-mason?”

Glancing behind him, I asked, “Where’s Charlie?”

“Home—Lori Anne is watching him for a bit.”

I stared at him with what I was sure was a confused expression. “Why are you here?”

He looked over my shoulder and then asked, “May I come in? It’s kind of cold out here.”

“Yes!” I said as I stepped to the side. “Sorry about that.”

Mason walked in and took off his jacket. I held out my hand for it and hung it next to mine. He still had a scarf around his neck as he waited for me to invite him in fully.

“Did you want anything to drink or...” My voice trailed off. *Or what, Palmer? What exactly are you offering up here?*

“No, thanks.”

“Please,” I said as I motioned to the sofa. “Sit down.”

He did as he drew in a deep breath. “Palmer, I know you said you weren’t interested in the nanny position...and I think I might know why.”

I sat opposite him in my favorite chair. It was the very first thing I ever purchased for my house. It was large enough for me to curl up in with a book and a hot cup of tea. And for some weird reason, I felt safe in the chair. I wasn’t sure what from, but at least I wasn’t sitting next to Mason, where I could spontaneously climb on him and beg him to take me.

I closed my eyes and inwardly told myself to stop.

Getting myself in check, I looked at Mason with squared shoulders. “Is that so?” I asked, raising a brow.

“Well, I mean, at first I thought it was because—”

“I wasn’t interested?”

He smiled, and I tried to ignore the way it made my heart skip a beat. “That, and the kiss.”

Ahh yes, the kiss. He would have to bring that up.

“That was a mistake,” I said as I tried not to fiddle with my hands.

He nodded. “Charlie adores you, you’ll already practically be living with us, and I would really love it if you were his nanny.”

Something about the way his eyes gazed into mine when he said that made me want to leap over the coffee table and promise him anything.

“But why me, Mason?”

He shrugged. “For starters, Charlie adores you—as I already mentioned. You’re talented and smart and could teach him things I can’t. You live close by.”

I tried not to give him a smirk as he attempted to hide a smile and failed.

“You come highly recommended by your sister and mother.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that one.

“And I trust you, Palmer. I don’t know how to explain it... I think you’d be good for Charlie. He needs someone like you in his life, especially since he doesn’t have his mother around.”

“I’m not his mother, Mason.”

He sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “I know that. I’m not looking for a mother for him, I’m looking for a strong woman in my son’s life. And if I’m being honest, *I* want you in our lives, too.” Then he added, “As a friend.”

Okay, wow, that sweet gesture made my heart do a weird little flip.

I wrung my hands together while a million and one reasons filtered through my mind as to why I shouldn’t take the job. But I also thought about why I *should* accept Mason’s job offer. It would be an experience no doubt, and Charlie was such a sweet kid. And then there was Mason.

Before I could think about it another second, my mouth decided it wasn't going to wait up for my brain any longer.

"I'll do it."

Mason opened his mouth as if ready to argue his point some more, then shut it. And then *it* appeared. The smile that made my stomach flutter and my heart race. Oh good...the dimples were also out. Perfect.

He stood, which made me stand as well. He walked over to me, and I sucked in a breath before I found my voice.

"But we need to make one thing clear," I stated as I put my hands on my hips. "Our relationship stays strictly business. That kiss..."

My voice trailed off as Mason's eyes drifted to my mouth. For a hot second, I was sure he was going to lean down and bridge the distance between us with those soft, plump—wait.

No! No! No!

"What about the kiss?" Mason asked with a teasing smile.

"It was a mistake," I reminded him. "I should have never kissed you back."

Mason leaned in some, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. "I wasn't the one who kissed you, Palmer. You kissed *me*."

I opened my mouth to deny it, but then realized he was right. "I was drunk."

He slowly raised a brow and tilted his head.

"Maybe I wasn't drunk," I said, "but I wasn't thinking clearly."

Mason nodded and took a step back. I instantly missed the heat from his body. With a smirk, he said, "Fine. All business."

"Fine. I saw that your little temporary nanny was cooking for you. Will you need me to make meals?"

He held up his hands. “That was a misunderstanding. I don’t need you to cook or clean—nothing like that. I simply need you to be there for Charlie. Maybe give him an after-school snack. I can handle dinner.”

“What if you’re running late with patients?” I asked.

“I make it a habit not to over-schedule so I can be home for my son. It’s a rule that I won’t break.”

And there went my heart. Again. Melting into a puddle right there on my floor. Well, the floor actually belonged to Mason—or would, when it was all said and done.

“Um, we should probably talk about pay,” I said.

I could see his body relax some, and I tried not to smile. The relief was practically dripping off him. “You can stay here rent free, of course, and otherwise, give me a number you feel is fair.”

Staring at him, I said, “Rent free?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. I wasn’t going to charge whomever I hired if they wanted to live here.”

“Well, I mean, I can always help out anytime you need. Like mornings, or if you do happen to need to work late, or... if you, um...go out on a date.”

“That’s good to know. Thank you.”

I hated that my stomach dropped in disappointment when he ignored my comment about dating.

“When would you want me to start?” I asked, wondering if I was making a huge mistake.

“As soon as you can.”

I paused for a moment. I could still do my dog walking and poop-scooping jobs while Charlie was in school. I’d have to give up a couple other jobs, but the longer I thought about it, the more excited I got.

I couldn’t figure out where my change of heart was coming from. Was it the idea of spending time with Charlie? Or seeing Dr. Zaddy more often?

Oh Lord. Damn you, Ms. Seaside.

I took a breath to calm my nerves. “Okay, well, I can start tomorrow if you need me to.”

“Yes!” Mason practically shouted. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Tomorrow would be amazing. I’ll let the school know you’ll be picking him up. I just need your license plate number to give to them.”

I nodded.

Mason reached for my hand, and I prayed he didn’t hear the way my breath hitched. “Hey, are you sure you want to do this? I know I’ve been asking you over and over...” His words trailed off when his eyes met mine.

I gave his hand a squeeze. “I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t want to, Mason. Even with you being all stalker-like.”

The corner of his mouth twitched.

“I think the change will be nice,” I said.

Aaaand I’m not telling you that I was insanely jealous when I saw another woman in your home, so there’s that as well.

No, that part I was going to keep to myself.



I parked my car and turned off the engine before I drew in a deep breath. The nerves hadn’t kicked in until I’d pulled into the elementary school parking lot. Mason told me I could either park and walk up or wait in the line. I decided to park and walk up so I could introduce myself to Charlie’s teacher. It was cold out, but it hadn’t started to snow yet today, so it was the perfect opportunity to do a little meet-and-greet. The faster I got it over with, the faster the gossip would die down.

“It’s now or never,” I said, opening the car door and slipping out. I locked it and tucked my hands into my coat as I

headed toward where Mason said to wait. As I got closer, a few moms looked at me with curious expressions. I knew one or two of them, since we'd gone to high school together. It was hard for me to believe that girls I went to school with had kids already. Kids old enough to be in school, to top it off.

I saw Kathleen Duncan standing there. I knew she'd gotten married right out of high school and that she'd had a baby not long after.

"Palmer?" Kathleen asked as I grew closer to the group huddled outside the school. She let out a chuckle as she glanced at the other mothers. "It's true! You're Charlie Bryan's nanny!"

I forced myself to give her a carefree smile. I wasn't stupid. I knew people talked behind my back—and sometimes within earshot, so I could hear them. I wasn't on the path that people thought I should be on, and honestly, I had never given a rat's ass what people thought. But suddenly...suddenly it seemed to matter a hell of a lot, and that bugged me.

Stopping in front of the group of women, I looked at each of them while I flashed a wide grin. "I guess Ms. Seaside got one thing right, didn't she?"

They all laughed, but I could see the millions of questions rolling around in their heads.

"I mean, no one can blame you for taking the job. Dr. Bryan is one hot daddy," a woman with red hair said as she looked me up and down.

"A zaddy!" Kathleen stated with a laugh.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "I see we have some local gossip column fans among us."

The laughter and giggles swiftly died down, and Kathleen cleared her throat. "So, will you be volunteering at the school since Dr. Bryan doesn't have the time?"

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. "I'm sorry?"

The redhead piped up. "Oh, it's a big deal to volunteer at the school. I mean, the teachers are so overworked and usually

all of us moms—and some of the dads—try our best to help out when we can.”

“There’s a sign-up sheet in the office,” someone else said. “When you drop Charlie off for school tomorrow, you should sign up.”

I turned to look where the new voice had come from. Claire Press. I really didn’t like her in high school, and, from the way she was currently eyeing me, I knew I wasn’t going to like her now.

“Maybe. I’ll have to talk to Mason and see what my schedule is.”

They all looked at me with shocked expressions, and then all said as one group, “Maybe?”

I gave them a one-shoulder shrug. “Maybe. While Charlie’s in school, I have other responsibilities.”

Kathleen laughed. “Surely you don’t mean dog walking!”

The group broke into laughter once more, but when I glared at each of them, they stopped. I was determined to get one thing straight with these women: I was not a pushover.

“I most certainly *do* mean that. I also own my own business.”

“Picking up dog shit,” Claire scoffed. I heard one mom gasp in horror.

“That’s right,” I said to Claire. “Believe it or not, there are some people out there who don’t enjoy that part of pet ownership. And some who are just plain lazy and think it’s beneath them to do it. By the way, so sorry I couldn’t work you into my poop-scooping schedule, Claire. I hope you’re over your gag reflex.”

The entire group swung their eyes toward Claire. Kathleen snarled her lip. “You were going to pay someone to clean up your dog’s mess? You complained about the people who use Palmer’s services when *I* was thinking about calling her!”

Claire swallowed hard, looking as if she was about to make a run for the hills.

“I have an opening on Thursdays, Kathleen,” I stated.

Kathleen whipped her head around to look at me. “I have three dogs and three kids. I just...I don’t have the time to do it.”

I smiled. “I’d be more than happy to add you to my client list.”

“Hey, what about me? I asked first.” Claire folded her arms over her chest.

I shrugged. “Sorry, Claire, I don’t do business with bitches.”

Turning to the rest of the group, I said, “I know that me working as Charlie’s nanny is a big gossip story. I hope we can end it all right here, ladies. Yes, I nanny now. Yes, I walk dogs and scoop poop. I also volunteer at the pet shelter, and I work part time at the vet clinic, and guess what—I’m happy. My life is full, and I’m not stressed or worried about what other people think of me, because their opinions,” I turned to Claire, “don’t mean a thing to me.”

Before anyone could say a word, the bell rang. I turned my back on the women and walked away a short distance as I waited until I saw Charlie appear. He was talking to a little girl as he walked out. The teacher followed behind them with a smile on her face.

Most of the kids rushed to their waiting mothers and fathers while the others headed for the pick-up line.

“Charlie!” I called out before he could head in that direction. When he saw me, his face lit up like the Fourth of July. A strange feeling of warmth circled my heart, and I had to fight to keep the sudden onslaught of tears at bay.

Okay, what was that about? The stress of what happened with the moms had clearly made me more emotional than normal.

“Keep it together, Palmer,” I whispered as Charlie came rushing over and threw himself at me, nearly knocking me off my feet.

“Goodness!” I said with a laugh as I bent down. “Are you happy to see me?”

He nodded. “Daddy said you’d be here to pick me up!”

I ruffled his hair and stood. Taking his hand, I looked down at him. “Your daddy has given you a very important job to do.”

“What?” Charlie asked, his big blue eyes staring up at me with anticipation.

“He asked if you would introduce me to your teacher.”

He jumped with joy. “Yes! Yes! Come on!”

A moment later, I was being dragged through the crowd and over to Charlie’s teacher.

“Mrs. Witters! Mrs. Witters!”

The woman turned and smiled when she saw us approaching at full speed. I slowed down, much to Charlie’s disappointment. Once we got to her, I drew in a breath. “Whew. He’s fast!”

She laughed. “He is indeed. Hello, I’m Mrs. Ritter.”

“Ritter?” I asked, looking down at Charlie.

“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “Mrs. Witters.”

Ahhh, the missing tooth. I cleared my throat and looked back at the teacher. “I’m Palmer Bradley, Charlie’s new nanny. I’ll be dropping him off occasionally and picking him up most of the time.”

Mrs. Ritter beamed down at Charlie, then looked at me. “How wonderful. I know Mr. Bryan was beginning to worry about finding a nanny. It appears he did a good job; Charlie has been talking about you all day.”

Glancing down at my new fan, I let out a little chuckle. He was looking up at me with that toothless smile of his.

“Really?” I asked, giving him a wink.

“I told Mrs. Witters you liked to draw.”

I felt my cheeks heat as I looked back at the teacher. “I, um, mostly paint.”

“Perfect! There’s a competition going on in art class that requires our students to pair up with their mom or dad for a group project.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun. I’ll let Mason...um, Dr. Bryan know.”

She gave me a warm smile. “Charlie informed me today that he was hoping *you* would sign up with him.”

I felt my heart jump. “Me? But I’m not his...I’m not his mother.”

“That doesn’t matter. Not everyone has a mother and father—and some kids don’t have either. It’s all about participating in a group project with someone you care about. It’s clear to me that Charlie already adores you.”

Oh dear. My heart couldn’t possibly feel any fuller than it did in that moment.

I blinked back tears and reached down for Charlie’s hand. “I would love to be a part of the competition.”

Mrs. Ritter clapped and smiled. “Terrific! I’ll sign you both up then.”

As Charlie and I started for my car, I glanced down to see him smiling up at me. “What’s with that smile?”

He shrugged. “I’m happy, that’s all.”

And that was the moment I knew becoming Charlie’s nanny was the right decision.



Chapter Seven

Mason

It only took me one day to see that I had made the right choice to pursue Palmer to be Charlie's nanny as hard as I did. I knew the moment Adelaide had suggested her that she would be perfect. From the moment we'd met Palmer in her folks' restaurant, she'd connected with Charlie in a way I hadn't ever seen another person do. All of my pushing had been worth it, because I hadn't seen my son so happy in a very long time.

At the dinner table that night, he went on and on about how Palmer had signed up to be his partner in the art competition, and how today after school he'd helped her walk two dogs—and how she'd given him a dollar for helping out. He informed me that he'd put it in his piggy bank the second they'd gotten home.

“Palmer said I can help walk the dogs every day after school. We sat down and she helped me count how much I'd make in one week. Then in two weeks, and then for a whole month!”

“Is that right?” I asked before I took a bite of the eggplant parmesan that Palmer had made, even though I'd told her she didn't need to cook. I had to admit, when I'd gotten home and she'd told me it was in the oven on warm, I'd wanted to kiss her. It had been a long day, and knowing I wasn't going to have to cook meant I could spend more time with Charlie.

“Yep!” Charlie said as he shoved a forkful of salad into his mouth.

“And what was the total amount you came up with?” I asked.

He went to speak with food in his mouth, and I raised a brow in warning. After chewing and swallowing, he said, “If I walk the dogs with Ms. Palmer after school, I get a dollar each day. So, for four days, I get four dollars, Daddy! Four dollars! Then at the end of the month, I’ll have sixteen dollars!”

I had to fight not to laugh at his excitement. “Charlie, this is your first job!”

He paused for a moment, then gave me his toothless smile. “It is! I haves a job, Daddy!”

“You *have* a job.”

“I have a job!”

I smiled. “Do you like walking the dogs with Ms. Palmer?”

He nodded. “I do! I even got to pick up the poop when Rocky went. He pooped a lot, Daddy. I gagged a little, but I did it. Ms. Palmer said I didn’t have to, but I wanted to help her cause she picked up the poop from the other dogs. I wanted to be a good helper. She said she was super proud of me.”

Still trying not to laugh, I said, “Good job, buddy. What kind of dog is Rocky?”

Charlie looked up in thought. I could see it on his face the moment the word came to him. “He’s a boxer!”

“A boxer, huh? That’s a great name for him.”

Charlie nodded, clearly not getting the reference since he was only five.

“Do you want to see the painting that Ms. Palmer and I started?”

His question reminded me that the painting I’d bought at the art show was still sitting in my bedroom. “How about we

clean up, then you go get the painting, and I'm going to get the one I bought at the art show so I can pack it up for the move."

A sparkle of happiness shone in my son's eyes, and I wanted to kiss Palmer for being the one to put it there.

Truth be told, it was one of the many reasons I wanted to kiss her.



A light knock on the back door drew my attention away from the eggs I was making for Charlie. I smiled when I saw it was Palmer.

I motioned for her to come in.

"Hey," she said, "I wasn't sure if you needed me to take Charlie to school this morning or not."

It was a Wednesday, but I usually tried to take Charlie at least three times a week if my schedule at the office allowed me to. "I'm taking him today, but if you want to ride along, I can show you how drop-off works."

She smiled. "That sounds good. You don't mind dropping me back off here?"

"Nope, not at all. My first patient isn't until after nine this morning."

Palmer glanced around the kitchen, pausing when she saw the painting project that she and Charlie were working on.

"He's so over the moon happy about this project."

Smiling, Palmer looked at me. "His teacher told me that Charlie asked if I could be his partner. I have to say, it really warmed my heart."

"He's crazy about you. Has been from the first moment he met you at Seaside Grill." Her cheeks turned pink, and I would have given anything to know what she was thinking.

“The feeling is mutual.”

I looked over my shoulder and called out, “Charlie! Breakfast is almost ready!”

“I can’t find my blue sock with the red on it!”

Palmer laughed. “Want me to go help?”

“If you don’t mind. Have you eaten breakfast? There’s plenty.”

“I had a smoothie, but thank you.”

She disappeared to go help search for the missing sock.

Right as I was setting the last plate of eggs, bacon, and toast on the table, Charlie came rushing in. “Daddy, something’s wrong with Palmer!”

My heart stopped. “What do you mean?”

“She saw your painting, and she won’t stop staring at it. The one you were gonna pack last night.”

“Sit down and start eating, buddy. I’ll be right back.”

Charlie did as I asked. Once I saw that he was eating, I headed into the living room.

Sure enough, Palmer was standing there with the oddest expression on her face as she stared at the painting I’d propped up against one of the walls. I’d meant to pack it last night but hadn’t gotten around to it.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

She turned and looked at me but didn’t say a word. I couldn’t read the expression on her face, but it almost looked as if she was in shock.

“I was told a local artist painted it. Whoever they are, they’re incredibly talented. Look at how the colors blend so beautifully right here.” I pointed to the sky with the oranges, reds, and yellows. “I love sunsets and sunrises, so as soon as I saw this, I knew I had to have it. I don’t know how to explain it—it spoke to me. It’s the perfect reflection of Seaside, and

the reason I moved here. And the storm moving in makes it even more accurate.”

When Palmer didn't say anything, I turned to look at her. My heart stopped for a second time that morning when I saw she was crying.

I took her by the upper arms and gently turned her to look at me. “Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?”

She sniffled, and I looked around for some Kleenex. Pulling two out of the box on the coffee table, I handed them to her.

She took them and tried to smile at me.

“Are you okay, Palmer?”

After a few moments, she nodded and then cleared her throat. “I can't believe you were the one who bought it.”

Shit. Palmer must have been one of the other people who'd wanted to buy the painting. “Were you interested in it? I know there were a lot of people looking at it. Even while I was standing there, I heard a few people express interest.”

Her eyes widened as she looked up at me.

“I wasn't about to walk around and risk it selling while I finished checking out the other exhibits, so I bought it on the spot.”

I watched as she wiped a tear away. That single tear nearly brought me to my knees.

“Palmer, why are you crying? Did you have your hopes set on it that much?”

She shook her head.

Reaching for her hand, I gave it a slight squeeze. She drew in a deep breath and exhaled before her eyes met mine.

“I painted the picture. *I'm* the artist, Mason.”

I looked at the painting, then back to Palmer. Pointing at it, I asked, “You painted this?”

Before she could answer, Charlie called out, “Dad! Your breakfast is getting cold!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I was getting a taste of my own medicine from my five-year-old son. Palmer giggled as she attempted to get her emotions in check.

“We are certainly not finished with this new revelation,” I said, giving Palmer a pointed look.

All she did was nod before she headed back into the kitchen.

Charlie and I finished eating breakfast while Palmer insisted on cleaning up. I was pretty sure she needed something to do to keep her mind off the fact that I’d been the one to purchase her artwork.

“Ready?” I asked as Palmer gave me a nervous smile. I wasn’t sure if she was worried about the drop-off or the fact that I owned her painting. I had to admit, it was crazy how drawn I was to that piece. And knowing it was Palmer who’d painted it?

I couldn’t let me mind go there right then.

“Ready. You’re sure you don’t mind dropping me back off for my car?” she asked as we walked into the garage. It was filled with empty moving boxes, so I could start packing the few possessions I had in the rental house.

Charlie made a beeline for the backseat of my Bronco Sport as he struggled to put his coat on. Palmer slipped into the front passenger seat and started to rub her hands together.

“Let me get this started and heated up,” I said as I pushed the button to start the car.

Nothing.

Palmer and I exchanged a look.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

With a frown, I said, “It’s not turning over. The battery must be dead.”

“Already?” she stated with a disbelieving laugh. “How long ago did you buy it? It looks new.”

“Six months ago,” I answered, popping the hood of the car. Grabbing my battery tester, I hooked it up. Yep. It was dead.

“What in the living hell?” I asked out loud.

Palmer got out of the car. “Let me drive Charlie to school and you to work. I can come back and take out the battery and replace it with a new one.”

I stared at her.

“You can close your mouth, Mason. There *are* women out there who know how to take an old battery out and put a new one in.”

I was pretty sure my mouth was still hanging open.

“Daddy, I’m going to be late!” Charlie shouted as he got out of the Bronco and gave both of us a stern look.

I moved Charlie’s booster seat from my car to Palmer’s as fast as I could. “I’ll have to get one for your car so we don’t have to do this every day.”

“Hop in my car, buddy,” Palmer said. “I’m driving this morning.”

Charlie fist pumped. “Yes!”

Of course my kid would be all excited to drive with Palmer in her car. She had a Jeep, and what kid wouldn’t want to ride in a Jeep? It didn’t even matter if the top was off or not.

As we neared Charlie’s school, I glanced over at Palmer. “I’m sorry about this.”

She smiled. “No worries. I’m just glad I stopped by this morning.”

“Me too,” I said with a soft chuckle. “Okay, turn at the second entrance. Yes, right here.”

Palmer turned into the parking lot of the school and fell in line behind the other cars.

“This is the side for kindergarten through second grade. Wait until you pull up to the teachers, then stop and Charlie will get out. They want you to wait until a teacher opens a door and says good morning, so that the kids aren’t all getting out at the same time and running around.”

Nodding, she said, “That makes sense.”

When Palmer pulled up, one of the teachers peered into the backseat. She opened the door and said, “Good morning, Charlie!”

“Morning, Mrs. Adams!” Charlie said as he grabbed his backpack and climbed out of the Jeep.

Mrs. Adams gave both Palmer and me a warm smile. “Have a good day!”

“You too!” we both said in unison.

The door shut, and I pointed for Palmer to follow the rest of the cars. “Go out this way and that’s it.”

“Easy-peasy.”

“Okay, so how long have you been painting?” I asked immediately.

The change in subject caught her off guard. She gripped the steering wheel a little too tightly and cleared her throat. “I’ve loved to draw and paint for as long as I can remember.”

I slowly shook my head while I stared at her profile. Christ, she was beautiful. Did she even see how stunning she was? “Why not sign your work with your real name?”

She gave me a quick glance, and I saw the corner of her mouth tilt up some. “I did sign it.”

“You did?”

Palmer nodded. “Yep, but in a place and in a way you wouldn’t be able to see unless I showed it to you.”

I smiled. “You sneaky thing. Why not sign it normally though? Why keep it a secret?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve always only shared my artwork with my family and never really had the desire—or courage, if I’m being honest—to share it with the world. It’s always been my safe place, for lack of better words. The idea that I might put myself out there and have everyone say I sucked... Well, I wasn’t ready for that. I’m *still* not ready. I was totally blown away when I found out someone bought it.”

I smiled. “I wish you could have heard the way people were going on and on about your painting, Palmer. I’m not lying when I say you’re talented.”

It was right then that she pulled up to my office. She drew in a breath and slowly let it out before she spoke. “When I saw that painting sitting in your living room, Mason... I don’t know how to put it into words. I was shocked. Happy. Proud. Scared. It all felt like it was tumbling around in my head.”

“Why did you cry?” I asked.

Her eyes looked down, and I followed her gaze. I didn’t even realize that I had reached over and taken her hand in mine. I withdrew it, and she looked up. There was an expression on her face that I couldn’t read, but something in her eyes told me she wasn’t angry that I’d taken her hand.

“I...I guess it made it all real. I mean, I know I put the painting in the local art show, but in my mind I honestly never imagined anyone would be interested. It’s not that I don’t think I’m talented, I do. It’s hard to put something that you’re passionate about out there for the entire world to judge.”

I nodded. “I can understand that. But now that you know, will you sell more paintings?”

The corners of her mouth tilted up slightly. “Maybe.”

Palmer suddenly screamed when someone knocked on the window of her door.

Glancing up, I saw Adelaide standing there with a huge smile on her face. Palmer mumbled something under her breath about sisters and then rolled the window down.

“You two look like you’re having an intense conversation,” Adelaide said.

“Mason’s car wouldn’t start, so I drove Charlie to school and Mason to work.” Palmer turned to me. “Do you need me to pick you up later?”

I was positive Adelaide would have offered me a ride home, but I found myself saying, “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all. I better get going; I’m volunteering at the pet shelter this morning before I head out to walk the pups.”

A part of me wished she would give up that job, since it was freezing outside. But Palmer seemed to like it, so who was I to say anything?

“Have a good day, Palmer,” I said. “Thanks again.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome. Have a good one.”

As Adelaide and I walked around to the side door of the historical Colonial house where my medical office was, I could feel Palmer’s eyes on me. With one quick glance over my shoulder, I confirmed my suspicion.

“Be careful there, Mason, making those googly eyes at Palmer,” Adelaide warned with a hint of teasing in her voice. “Tomorrow is Thursday, and you know what that means.”

I groaned. The gossip column.



Chapter Eight

Palmer

It had been two weeks since I'd started to nanny for Charlie, and the Seaside gossip column hadn't mentioned me or Mason once. I wasn't sure if I should be overjoyed—or worried that she was saving up for something big.

Pacing back and forth in my living room, I stopped and glanced out the window. A big truck was parked in the driveway, and a few men were making quick time moving Mason and Charlie into the main house.

I turned away from the window. I had told Mason I would help him get organized and unpacked. He'd even offered to pay me. That had hit me hard in the gut. Maybe that meant he had moved on from the attraction between us and it really was all business now.

I should have been glad. No, I *was* glad. It was hard enough to fight that insane pull to him when he'd been sweet and flirty. Now that he was keeping it strictly business, it was easier not to picture him naked every time I saw him.

Sighing, I dropped onto the sofa and glanced down at this week's gossip column.

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

December 15, 2022

FROM THE DOCKS

Seasiders,

The holidays are almost here and I, for one, am excited about all the upcoming activities planned. One of the main events here in town is the Seaside Noel Boat Parade, which our very own Princess of Seaside, Harlee Tilson, organizes. Harlee is also in charge of the Christmas Carol Stroll through downtown and some of the historical homes off Main. Toy donations will be accepted in order to help give the less fortunate kiddos in Seaside some Christmas gifts. You can either drop your donation in the carolers' bags, or you can bring it to the Seaside Chronicle's office. Cash donations are appreciated as well. Let's make this year's Children's Christmas Celebration the best one yet!

In other news, someone please alert Braxton Bradley that his attempts to seek out my identity will fail. I'm a much smarter fish than he.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

I couldn't stop the smile that spread over my face. It was true, Brax had been asking around in an attempt to find out who Ms. Seaside was. It appeared she really did know everything that happened in our town.

It was nice to see her use her column for a bit of good, even if she had taken another jab at a Bradley in the process.

A sudden knock on the door nearly made me scream. I cleared my throat and headed over, fully expecting to see Mason on the other side.

“Hey, I was just—” I shut my mouth and stared at my past standing in front of me, looking as handsome as ever. “Deacon?”

A wide smile erupted on his face as he took a step forward and kissed me on the cheek. “You look beautiful as always, Palmer.”

I was pretty sure I had a stunned expression on my face. I hadn’t seen Deacon in almost five years.

“When...when did you, um...are you still...”

He laughed and glanced past my shoulder. “May I come in?”

My eyes darted toward the driveway before I looked back at him. “Of course, sorry, come on in.” I opened the door and moved to the side so that he could enter.

“You’re a hard person to track down, Palmer.”

Frowning, I shut the door and walked toward him. “All you had to do was stop by the restaurant. Let’s cut to the chase—why are you here?”

“I’m back.”

His words caused a sinking feeling in my stomach, like someone had dropped a brick in it. “You’re back? You mean you’re out of the Marines?”

He nodded and smiled that wickedly sexy smile of his that used to get me all tingly. Not anymore.

Sitting down on the sofa, he put his ankle over his knee, smiled, and said, “Yep. I’m out for good, back in town, and ready to pick up where I left off.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “I know you’re not referring to us. If my memory serves me correctly, you told me you were leaving Seaside because there was nothing here for you. That included me. You told me you couldn’t see a future with me,

and that you hoped I would grow up by the time you finally moved back home. And correct me if I'm wrong here, but didn't you cheat on me as well?"

He cringed a bit. "I said all that, huh?"

"Yes, and I like how you completely ignored the cheating part."

"It was a mistake. The cheating thing." He sat back and looked at me. "Have you?"

I tilted my head and regarded him with a hard stare. "Have I what?"

"Grown up any? Tell me you're not still working all those crazy jobs. I hope you took my advice and went to college."

What in the hell did I ever see in the man sitting in front of me? Wait, I know. I saw a handsome boy whom I thought I'd loved. Stupid, silly girl.

"I'm afraid to disappoint you, Deacon, but I still walk dogs. I still work at the vet clinic if I'm available to help out. I do own my own business though."

He raised his brows and leaned forward. "That's great, what is it?"

"I pick up other people's dog shit."

It took everything I had not to start laughing at the expression of horror on his face.

"Oh, and I recently added a new job. I'm also a nanny."

"A nanny?"

Nodding, I folded my arms over my chest and watched his gaze travel to my breasts and then back up. "Yes. Mason Bryan is the new doctor in town. He has a five-year-old little boy, and I take care of him when Mason is at work. He owns this place, as well as the main house."

"Wait, you work as a nanny? *You?*"

Anger started to boil up inside of me. I really wanted to junk-punch this asshole, so it was time he left. I turned and

headed to the door. “I think it’s time for you to go, Deacon. Clearly, we have nothing to say to each other. Reunion time has ended. And the unpleasant walk down Memory Lane is complete. So goodbye.”

“Wait,” he said as he stood. “Palmer, hold on. I’m being an ass, and I’m sorry. It’s just, it’s hard for me to see you as a nanny. And picking up other people’s dog shit... Honey, you’re better than that.”

For the life of me, I would never know why I blurted out my next sentence. Maybe I needed to validate myself, which pissed me off. I knew I would lie in bed later tonight and kick myself over and over for it.

“I also sold one of my paintings.”

He stared at me in disbelief. “You did? You actually took the leap and sold one?”

For all of Deacon’s faults—and he had a laundry list of them—he was supportive of my art. He always told me I needed to sell my paintings and that people would love them. Turns out he was kind of right.

“I did.”

“Honey, that’s amazing.”

He started to make his way over to hug me, but I put my hand up. “I’m not your honey, Deacon. I’m not your sweetheart, your honeypie, darling, baby... I’m none of those things. To you, I’m simply Palmer.”

He slowly shook his head. “Don’t you remember how explosive we were together?”

“I remember the sex was good. Was it explosive? Maybe the naïve girl I once was thought so, but I’m no longer her.”

His head jerked back as if I’d slapped him. He looked down at the floor and then back at me. “I left in a shitty kind of way, and I get that you’re angry. Once you’ve had some time to cool down and truly think about how right we are for one another, we’ll talk.”

I opened the door and turned toward him before I motioned for him to leave. “That’s never going to happen, Deacon. You see, I *did* do a lot of growing up while you were gone. I learned a very important lesson. I don’t need men like you in my life. I don’t need a man at all, as a matter of fact. I’m perfectly fine on my own, and the last thing I need is some jackass, stuck-on-himself dick trying to control how I live my life. Now, get the hell out of my house.”

He stood there staring at me, and I could tell he was mulling over his next move.

“Deacon. *Leave.*”

Clearing his throat, he looked out the doorway over my shoulder, then walked over to me. He stopped and leaned in. “This isn’t over, Palmer. I’ll win you back. You’ll see.”

I laughed. “Goodbye, Deacon.”

He walked past me, and when I turned around, I nearly gasped. Mason was standing there, his arms over his chest and a hard expression on his face. As Deacon walked by him, they both exchanged a look of warning. I wasn’t exactly sure what they were warning each other about, but the amount of testosterone coming off both of them was insane.

After Deacon made his way down the long drive and was out of hearing range, Mason looked at me. “Who was that?”

“Old boyfriend who thinks he can simply walk back into my life and pick up where he left off. He doesn’t seem to remember that he broke up with me before he left.”

Frown lines appeared between Mason’s brows. “What an idiot.”

“Why is that?”

“Why is he an idiot?”

I nodded.

“Because he broke up with you. Probably realizes now what he gave up.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but then snapped it shut. After a moment, I cleared my throat. “I was about to come up to the house to help out when he stopped by unexpectedly.”

The hard look on Mason’s face softened, and he smiled. “No worries. Charlie wants you to help him set up his room. Actually, he wants you to help him *pick* a room, and then help set it up.”

Laughing, I grabbed my coat, phone, and keys. “Sounds like I’ve got important work to do. Lead the way!”



THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

December 22, 2022

THIS WEEK’S CATCH

Seasiders,

News on the pier is that Deacon Parker is back in town after serving in the Marine Corps. A big welcome home to him and a thanks for serving our country.

Speaking of...

Deacon was seen leaving Palmer Bradley’s house the day after his return to Seaside. Apparently, he didn’t stay for long, and Palmer’s new boss, Dr. Bryan (aka Dr. Zaddy), interrupted the happy reunion. For those who don’t know or remember, Palmer and Deacon were once an item—a pretty serious one, if I recall. Is there a reconciliation in the works?

We'll have to wait and see. We may have a love triangle going on, my fishes! Oh, wouldn't that be a fabulous scandal! Seaside hasn't had one of those in some time. I have to say, I'm not on Deacon's side. Can you imagine it...Palmer Parker? That name alone should be a hard pass for Palmer.

From the smile on Ms. Bradley's face lately, though, I'm thinking she rather enjoys her new job as a nanny.

Deacon may have his work cut out for him if his intentions are to win back Palmer.

I'll have to keep my ear to the sand for any additional news.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

I sat in the booth at the Seaside Grill and looked at my two sisters, Harlee, and my mother as they each took turns reading this week's gossip column, which featured me *yet again*.

My mother was the last to finish. She looked up at me and simply said, "Wow."

Blinking a few times, I replied, "Wow? That's all you got, Mom?"

"So, Deacon's back in town?" Sutton asked as she picked up her coffee.

I turned and glared at her. "Yes, he is. How in the hell did *Ms. Seaside*—" Abruptly turning to Harlee, whom I knew was about to suggest it could be a man, I pointed and growled, "She signs it *Ms. Seaside* now, so we know it's a woman!"

She held up both hands in defense. "Sorry, old habits and all."

"How did she know Deacon came to my house last weekend? No one was there. Only Mason saw him."

Addie and Sutton shrugged while my mother and Harlee both gave me blank expressions.

“Movers, maybe?” Addie asked after a few beats of silence.

I rolled my eyes. “None of you are any help.”

Braxton walked up to the table and smiled. “Finally, this week’s gossip column is not about me.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at my brother as he slid into the booth next to Harlee.

“Move over, Harlee,” he said, giving her a push with his hips.

“Hey! In case you didn’t notice, Sutton is sitting here next to me and she’s pregnant, jackass.”

Brax leaned forward and smiled at Sutton. “You okay, sis?”

“Perfectly fine,” she replied.

Brax looked at Harlee and stuck his tongue out while she rolled her eyes. “Are you ten, Brax?”

Before the two of them could get into a debate about how immature my brother was, I said, “Brax, I need your help.”

He looked at me. “Anything for my baby sister.”

I placed my hands on the table and met his questioning gaze. “We need to find out who’s writing this column.”

Brax sat up some, clearly interested in where I was going. “I’m listening...and as you know, I’ve already been asking around.”

“I’m serious. I’ve had enough.”

“Hold on a minute.” Sutton put her fork down and wiped the edges of her mouth. “It was all fine and dandy when they were writing about me and Addie, but now that you two are being talked about more often, you suddenly have to find out who’s writing the column?”

“Yes!” I replied. “Did you read it, Sutton? She all but claimed I’m sleeping with Mason!”

“I didn’t get that out of it,” Harlee said. “I think she simply means you look happier. Which, I hate to say, I agree with her. She was making an observation.”

Addie nodded. “I’m with Harlee on this one. I don’t think she meant it like that, Palmer. The woman likes to gossip, but I don’t think she’d take it to that level. Everything she writes is true and has actually happened. She may allude to things sometimes, but that’s what makes the column fun.”

My mother also nodded in agreement.

“Fun? *Fun?* Was it fun when she was writing about you and Gannon? If I recall, you were pissed. Wait. Hold on a second here. Are you all taking her side?” I stammered.

“There are no sides,” my mother sighed.

My jaw fell open. “There most certainly are sides, Mom.”

The conversation paused for a moment, and then Sutton finally answered my question from a few moments ago. “I find it funny that now you’re bothered by the column. You used to laugh when she picked on Brax.”

A look of pretend-hurt crossed my brother’s face. “I’m offended, Palmer.”

This time, I stuck my tongue out. “You’ll get over it. Now, we need to put our ears to the ground and find out who’s writing this damn column.” I turned to Harlee, who had taken a bite of her bagel. “I need to know everything you know about this person.”

Her eyes went wide, and she chewed faster before swallowing. “I’ve told you a million times, only my dad knows who the author of the column is. I don’t have any new information to give you.”

“How does she get her articles to the paper?” Brax asked.

“Someone delivers them to my dad’s office,” Harlee answered. “But that guy doesn’t know either. I’ve already questioned him.”

“Did you ask him where he picks up the article?” Brax asked.

Harlee nodded. “Yep.”

We all sat there and waited for her reply. “And?” I prompted.

“It changes each week. He gets a text from a number that changes every week as well, and the text tells him where he’s supposed to pick up that week’s column. He gets it on Wednesday mornings. Oh, and if she has a special edition, he also gets the text the day before it runs.”

“So, Wednesday is the day we need to be watching,” I stated.

“Wednesdays,” Harlee repeated, then picked up her bagel once again. Before she took another bite, she added, “But I’m telling you, you won’t find her. Many people have tried.”

I looked at Brax and smiled. “We haven’t tried yet.”

He nodded. “We’re gonna find her, I can feel it in my bones!”

Harlee and Sutton both rolled their eyes while my mother smiled.

“Good luck, kids. You can do it if you try hard enough, I just know it,” Mom said as she slipped out of the booth and gave Brax and me an encouraging smile. Leave it to our mother to attempt to cheer on our attempt at spying.

Addie covered her mouth to hide her giggle. Then she dropped her hand as she turned white.

“Shit,” I mumbled as I slid out of the booth so Addie could run to the restroom. Her morning sickness seemed to be getting worse.

As she hurried off, I called out, “You laugh now, but you won’t think it’s funny when I find out the real person behind this Ms. Seaside.”

It was only then that I noticed the entire restaurant staring at me. With an awkward smile, I slipped back into the booth,

where I found Brax shooting me a dirty look.

“You might as well announce it in the paper that we’re going to try and find her,” he growled.

With a shrug, I picked up my fork and started to eat my breakfast. I was going to find this person and expose her, once and for all!



Chapter Nine

Mason

The gossip column had been on the back of my mind for the last two days, especially since Palmer kept avoiding talking to me about this Deacon guy whenever I brought him up.

I felt Charlie pull on my coat. “Daddy? Where’s Palmer? She promised she’d be here.”

Charlie and I were standing on the pier as we waited for the Seaside Noel Boat Parade to start.

I glanced back down the pier, looking for Palmer. “She’ll be here, bud. I know Palmer, and she wouldn’t break a promise.”

A few people stopped to say hello, and some even introduced me to their family and friends. That was one of the things I loved about Seaside—the small-town feel it still had. I wasn’t the only doctor in town, but there were only two others, and both were near retiring age. My practice was growing faster than I’d original thought it would. So much so that I was thinking of hiring a physician assistant.

“I brought hot chocolate!”

I turned at the sound of Palmer’s voice while Charlie jumped for joy.

“I love hot chocolate!” he said as Palmer carefully handed him a cup.

“It’s hot, buddy, so wait a bit for it to cool off.” Turning to me, Palmer smiled and handed me a cup. “I will never understand why we have a boat parade in the dead of winter.”

I laughed and took the cup, inhaling deeply and nearly groaning when the smell of chocolate hit me. Hot chocolate was one of my weaknesses. “Then tell me, who thought this parade was a good idea?” I asked before taking a sip.

Palmer laughed. “That would be Harlee. Once you see the boats all lit up, you’ll get it. Addie and Gannon decorated his boat this year.”

I raised a brow. “Really? She didn’t mention that. Poor thing has been spending a lot of time visiting the porcelain throne lately.”

“What’s that, Daddy?” Charlie asked.

“It means that Mrs. Addie has been getting sick a lot.”

My son’s brows pulled in tight, and I could see the instant worry on his face.

“Nothing bad,” I said. “She’s going to have a baby.”

“And that makes her sick?” he asked.

“Sometimes it does. Not always.”

Palmer let out a humorless laugh. “Put me down in the sometimes-it-doesn’t category, please.”

“Are you gonna have a baby, Ms. Palmer?”

Palmer nearly spit out the hot chocolate she’d sipped before she started to frantically shake her head. She looked around, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I don’t think anyone heard him,” I said, “so you probably won’t be featured in next week’s article.”

The look on her face was a mixture of relief and surprise. “Don’t kid yourself,” Palmer stated. “She has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“Apparently.”

A somber look appeared on her face. After a deep breath in, she slowly exhaled. “Mason, I’m so sorry you’re being dragged into the column.”

I gave her a wink. “It’s not saying anything too terrible.”

She had a worried look on her face as she glanced down at Charlie and then back up at me.

“Palmer, who cares what other people think? I don’t.”

“But…” Her voice trailed off.

“But what?”

“I don’t want it to affect you or Charlie in a negative way.”

“The only thing that would do that is if you quit.”

A soft smile played at the corners of her mouth. “I’m not going to do that. I really enjoy my time with Charlie. He’s a bright light in my world.”

“Mine too. And we’d both be lost without you, Palmer.”

Our eyes met, and I was positive she could feel the crackle of heat between us, even in this cold weather. She swallowed hard before focusing on Charlie.

“We get to vote for the boat we like the best,” she said. “So be sure and pay attention to each one.”

Charlie jumped up and down in delight. “I’m gonna vote for Mrs. Addie’s boat!”

Palmer beamed with pride. “That’s my boy!”

A strange pain hit my chest as I watched the two of them together. Charlie’s mother had wanted nothing to do with him, and that hurt my heart more than I could ever put into words. It had already been difficult to make her care enough to stay healthy while she was pregnant. She just wasn’t looking forward to being a mother and it showed in every way possible.

Even with her sleeping with my brother, a part of me believed that she always knew she wasn’t carrying my brother’s child. That she’d known Charlie was mine, and that

was why she did what she did. The second she'd given birth, she'd asked the nurses to take Charlie and me out of the room.

I was more than happy to leave her presence. The hardest part had been waiting for the paternity test to come back. Once I had confirmation that Charlie was my biological son, I'd filed for divorce and full custody.

Ashley had never once even looked at our son. Whenever Charlie asked about her, I told him a few stories, but I was always honest with him. I told him she didn't want to be a part of my life or his, and that it had nothing to do with him. The questions about her started to get fewer and fewer over the last year, until he finally stopped asking.

"Mason? Mason?"

I shook my thoughts away and looked at Palmer. "Sorry, I was thinking about something."

She frowned slightly. "Something unpleasant, by the look on your face."

Nodding, I replied, "Very unpleasant, but no longer important."

She pointed to the wagon she had been pulling behind her when she walked up. "I brought some chairs for us to sit on, and a basket with some snacks and a blanket in case we get cold."

My brows shot up. "Why, you've thought of everything."

Palmer winked. "This isn't my first rodeo."

Before I could reply, Harlee walked up to us.

"Hey! Are you guys ready for the parade?"

"Yes!" Charlie and Palmer said in unison.

Harlee handed each of us a piece of paper. "Here's your ballot."

Palmer took one for each of us. "Oh good, there weren't any left when I got here."

Harlee's smile widened. "The turnout this year has been amazing. Especially with it being so cold. And since there's a chance of snow."

Palmer sighed. "I'd love for it to start snowing when all the boats come out. How pretty would that be?"

Harlee nodded. "I know, I thought the same thing. Okay, I better get going—it's going to start soon. Have fun. Don't forget that we'll have hot cider and s'mores in the park across the street after!"

Charlie's eyes widened. "S'mores? Daddy, please tell me we can go!"

I laughed. "Sure, we can go, as long as you're not cold."

"I'm not!" Charlie answered.

Palmer and I got the chairs situated and grabbed the blanket. People were lined up down the north side of the pier, as well as along the shore.

"You got great seats, Mason," Palmer said excitedly as she wrapped the blanket around Charlie.

"Hi, Charlie!"

I turned to see a little girl Charlie's age standing next to us, along with her mother and father.

"Lily!" Charlie exclaimed, jumping up and going over to his friend.

I stood and reached my hand out to the father as I introduced myself. "Mason Bryan, I'm Charlie's father."

"Jace Werther, and this is my wife, Emily."

"Nice to meet you, Emily."

Turning, I looked at Palmer, who had also stood up. "This is Palmer Bradley," I said.

Emily exchanged a smile with Palmer. "Hey, Palmer, how're you doing?"

"I'm doing well, how are you guys?"

Emily looked at her husband and beamed. “We’re doing great. Expecting another baby in April.”

“Congratulations!” Palmer said.

“That’s wonderful news, congratulations,” I said as I looked over to see Charlie pointing to where the boats would be coming out of the channel and into the bay.

“Lily talks about Charlie a lot,” Emily stated, glancing at the kids. “He’s been an amazing friend to her.”

I smiled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“He’s a great little boy, and so kind to everyone he meets,” Palmer said.

Emily and Jace both nodded. Then Emily looked at Palmer. “I’m the room mom for Lily and Charlie’s class. If you ever want to help with any parties or events at the school, I wouldn’t turn down the help. A lot of moms volunteer at the school, but most aren’t interested in helping with the parties.”

I was surprised to see how Palmer’s face lit up. “I would love that. Thanks for asking, Emily.”

She nodded then called out for Lily. “Come on, pumpkin, Grandpa and Grandma are waiting for us.”

Lily and Charlie hugged. I snuck a peek over at Palmer, who simply lifted her brows ever so slightly.

“Bye, Lily!” Charlie called out as they started to walk farther down the pier.

“I’ll chat with you soon, Palmer!” Emily sang with a wave of her hand.

When they were out of earshot, Palmer placed her hand on my arm. “You don’t mind, do you? I’d love to help, and I know it’s super hard for you to do it with your job. And I think it’s good for—” She instantly pressed her lips together.

I nodded. “I know what you mean, and of course I don’t mind. Thank you for being there for him, Palmer.”

Even in the darkness of night with only a few lights illuminating the area, I could still see the blush on her face.

“It’s starting!” someone farther up the pier shouted.

“Come on, Charlie, let’s get in our seats and bundle up.” I motioned for Palmer and him to sit. Once we got settled, I wrapped the large blanket around Charlie and Palmer.

“You’re not cold?” she asked as her eyes met mine.

The way my heart felt like it paused in my chest shouldn’t have caught me by surprise. I wasn’t going to deny that I was attracted to Palmer. Very attracted. But my feelings for her beyond that felt as if they were changing, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

With a shake of my head, I looked out over the water while Charlie gasped. “Wow! Dad, Ms. Palmer! Look at that boat! It’s my favorite!”

We both laughed.

“Charlie, it’s the first one, buddy,” Palmer said. “You have to see them all first before you decide. But here’s what I do. I put a little tick mark next to the ones I like.”

“Good idea!” Charlie said.

By the end of the parade, each entry on Charlie’s card had a tick mark next to it.

As we gathered up all of our stuff, I said, “Not going to lie, I think Addie and Gannon had the best boat. I’m not sure how they got those lights to look like a Christmas tree with real bulbs on it, but I’m here for it.”

“Me too, Dad!” Charlie announced. “I’m voting for Mrs. Addie and Gannon’s boat.”

“That makes three of us,” Palmer said. “Are you ready to go across the street for some more fun?”

Charlie fist pumped. “Yes! Let’s go, you guys!”

Grabbing my hand and then Palmer’s, Charlie nearly dragged us to the park as the snow started to come down.



I softly shut Charlie's bedroom door and made my way downstairs. I was exhausted but wasn't ready to turn in for bed quite yet. After pouring a glass of whiskey, I grabbed a book and sat down on the sofa. My mother and father had gone out to dinner to Pete's Place instead of going to the boat parade and weren't home yet.

A set of headlights caught my eye.

Standing, I watched as someone pulled into the driveway I shared with Palmer. It wasn't her car, and it only took me a moment to figure out who it was.

Deacon Parker.

It was childish of me, but I grabbed my cell phone and called Palmer.

"Hey, is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I just got Charlie to bed. He was wound up, but I'm pretty sure he fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow."

She chuckled. "It was fun. Cold, but fun."

"Agreed."

There was a moment of silence before she asked, "Was there something you needed?"

You.

It was on the tip of my tongue, but instead I said, "I hate to ask this, but do you think you can help me hang up the painting? My mother and father are out to dinner, and I'd like to get some advice on where to hang it."

And I don't want you spending time with your ex-boyfriend.

"The painting?" she asked.

"Yes, the one I bought. The one you painted. I'd like to hang it up before anything happens to it."

"Um...ahhh..."

Had the jerk called her ahead of time to let her know he was coming over? Shit. Maybe Palmer had made plans with him. The idea of her being with him nearly sent me into a tailspin.

“If you’ve got plans, I totally understand,” I said. “I’m sure my parents will be back soon, and my mom can help me decide where to hang it up.”

“No!” Palmer said. “I mean, no, I don’t have any plans. I do, however, have an ex-boyfriend who doesn’t seem to understand my world does not revolve around him.”

“I’m sorry?” I asked, pretending I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Nothing. Let me take some garbage out and then I’ll head up to the house.”

“Do you want me to come get you?” I asked. “It’s cold and snowing.”

She laughed. “First off, I literally live less than a minute from you. I can manage walking. And second, when you’ve lived your whole life in Maine, you aren’t afraid to walk outside in the cold and snow, Mason.”

I smiled. “I did grow up in Boston, Palmer. But okay, I’ll leave the back door open for you.”

“Thanks, give me ten minutes.”

After hanging up, I began to pace the living room. What was she saying to Deacon? Was he finally getting the idea that Palmer wanted nothing to do with his ass? Maybe I should have offered to help her—but she hadn’t realized that I knew her ex was there.

Glancing up at the clock for the tenth time, I grabbed my jacket and started for the back door. Twenty minutes had passed since I’d hung up with Palmer.

Before I reached the door, it swung inward and Palmer stomped her feet on the rug to remove any loose snow.

She looked up and smiled. “Sorry. It took me longer than I thought it would.”

“Um, no worries. I was just going to make sure you didn’t get stuck in a snow drift.”

She laughed as she took off her gloves, hat, and scarf. “It’s really coming down.”

I took off my jacket and hung it back up on a hook next to the back door. Then I took Palmer’s and did the same. She placed her other items on the bench.

“Did you see the weather?” she said. “They didn’t think this storm would make it to the coast, but it sounds like we might be getting more snow than they thought.”

Nodding, I said, “I heard something like that.”

She stood there with a smile on her face. “So, do you want to do it?”

I was pretty sure my eyes went wide. “Do it?”

“Yeah,” she said as she walked past me and through the large, updated kitchen to the living room. “I mean, it’s about damn time.”

Blinking a few times, I had to adjust myself when the image of taking Palmer on the living room sofa popped into my head.

“I thought you didn’t want to...” My voice trailed off when I saw that she had stopped in front of the painting that was on the floor, leaning against the wall.

Glancing over her shoulder, she frowned slightly. “You thought I didn’t want to what?”

It was then I realized that she had been talking about hanging the painting. I felt like an idiot, and my growing hard-on deflated immediately.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Nothing. Nothing.”

Turning back around, Palmer studied the painting and then looked around the room. “I think it would look good on this wall over here. The light won’t shine on it from the windows, and it will be the first thing you see when you walk into the

room. It's the perfect size for that wall, as well. Almost like it was made for it."

I couldn't tear my eyes from Palmer as she picked up the painting and walked it over to the wall. Her blonde hair was pulled up into a bun that sat on top of her head, with a few strands hanging down and framing her neck and face. Her blue eyes looked so full of life, and I loved that her painting was making her so happy.

"You need to start thinking about furniture for this room, Mason."

I nodded. I already had a lot of furniture, but the house was huge. Five bedrooms, four-and-a-half bathrooms, two living rooms, plus a formal dining, a kitchen, and a breakfast area. Not to mention the finished basement that had been converted into a man cave by the previous owner.

"Have you seen how big this house is?" I asked with a halfhearted laugh.

"Well, I'm more than happy to go shopping with you. I had a blast furnishing my little place."

"I think I'll take you up on that."

We stood there for a few moments staring at each other before Palmer cleared her throat. "Do you have something to hang this up with?"

"Yes. Right. Sorry. It's right here."

I walked over and got the small case of hangers as well as the hammer.

"This won't wake up, Charlie? You hammering a nail in the wall?" she asked.

"Are you kidding me? That kid can sleep through anything. He's always been that way, even as a baby."

She raised a single brow, and then sat down on the sofa while I moved the painting around the wall until we found the perfect spot.

Once it was hung up, I took a seat next to her and looked at it. “The first official thing I’ve hung up in this house.”

“I’m honored.”

Turning to look at her, my breath caught in my throat. Her eyes met mine and that familiar heat between us crackled through the air.

“Would you, um, like a glass of wine?” I asked.

“Do you have anything stronger? I’m not much of a wine drinker.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Of course Palmer would want something stronger. “I’ve got whiskey, scotch...”

“Whiskey sounds good. Plus, it’ll warm me up.”

My mind conjured up a few other ways to warm Palmer up, and none of them had to do with whiskey.

“Mason?”

Shaking my head, I forced myself to move my feet and walk away from her. “Sorry, I was trying to remember where I put everything.”

She chuckled as she followed behind me. “This *is* a huge house for the two of you.”

“I hope to fill it up with more kids someday.”

I paused for the slightest moment. Where in the hell did that come from, and why had I said it to Palmer?

“You’ve always wanted a big family then?” she asked, slipping onto one of the barstools at the large kitchen island.

“I don’t know if I’ve always wanted a big family. After having Charlie, I knew I wanted at least one or two more kids. I only had my brother growing up, and he was a lot older than I was.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything as I took out two glasses and filled them with a finger of whiskey.

“What about you?” I asked, handing her the drink. “Do you want kids?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “I mean, I haven’t really thought about it too hard. I loved having older sisters and a brother. They tortured me most of the time, but I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

I let out a sigh and leaned against the kitchen counter. “I thought I’d have them back to back. Kids, I mean.”

Palmer set her glass down on the island and tilted her head as she regarded me.

“You look like you want to ask me a question,” I said with a chuckle.

“I do, but it’s sort of butting into your business.”

I motioned for her to ask.

“What happened to Charlie’s mom? Why isn’t she in his life, or *your* life, for that matter? I mean—” Her cheeks reddened. “I’ve heard a rumor or two.”

That caused me to lift my brows. “Is that so?”

She smiled that breathtaking smile of hers. “Yep.”

Lifting the drink to my mouth, I downed the whiskey and set the glass on the counter.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, Mason.”

“No, I want to tell you.”

She swallowed hard. “Do you want to go sit in the living room?”

Drawing in a deep breath, I pushed away the dread I felt anytime I talked about my ex. I might as well get it over with now. Motioning toward the living room, I said, “After you.”



Chapter Ten

Palmer

Mason's body tensed when I'd asked about Charlie's mother. Maybe it was a step beyond what a nanny should be asking, but I also knew Mason and I were becoming friends. Plus, Charlie had asked me about his mother the other day, and I'd had no idea what to say to him. I'd changed the subject but had decided to talk to Mason about it.

We both sat down on the sofa, and I turned my body to the side and tucked my feet under my legs. I had a feeling this wasn't going to be a quick story.

Mason took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then let it all whoosh out.

"I met my ex-wife, Ashley, when I was in medical school. She was in nursing school nearby, and we were set up on a blind date by my brother and her best friend, who were dating at the time. We hit it off and started dating. Things were great at first, just like with any new relationship, I guess.

"My brother, Nick, and Ashley somehow started to play tennis together each week. His girlfriend at the time—Lisa was her name—was in law school, so she was busy. Just like I was busy. So, while Lisa and I were buried in school and internships, Nick and Ashley struck up a friendship. When Ashley told me she wanted to get married, I was in love with her and thought, why not? Let's do it. We got married at the

Justice of the Peace because I couldn't take any time off. Nick and Lisa were there as witnesses.

“About a month or so after we got married, I got off early from a shift at the hospital. I came home and found Nick and Ashley together in our bed.”

My chest ached with a familiar pain. I knew what it was like to have someone betray you, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling at all. I reached for Mason's hand, and he gave me a soft smile.

“The crazy part was...I wasn't angry at all,” he said. “What does that even say about my feelings for Ashley? I don't know. Or maybe I knew all along.”

His eyes met mine, and I could see the confusion in them. He slowly shook his head and let out a humorless laugh.

“How do you not get angry when you find your brother and your wife in bed together?” he asked.

I gave him a one-shoulder shrug. “I'm not sure. Were you in shock?”

“I suppose I was, but the anger never really came. Don't get me wrong, I was pissed they'd betrayed me. So maybe I should say I wasn't sad.”

“Did you not have a good marriage?”

He tilted his head as he thought about my question. “I think it was an okay marriage. I don't honestly think I was ready for it, though. Later, Ashley told me she'd panicked because she realized she was developing feelings for Nick, so she thought if we got married, they would go away.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lord, that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.”

Mason grinned. “I thought so, too, but I guess in her mind it made sense. Anyway, I moved out the next day. Then about a month and a half later, she found out she was pregnant. Our divorce was finalized after she had Charlie, and I confirmed he was mine.”

I brought my hand up to my mouth as I gasped. “She didn’t know who the father was?”

A look of pure anguish crossed Mason’s face, and all I wanted to do was pull him to me and hold him. But it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. It must have been hell for him if what I thought was true. Did Mason agonize over whether Charlie was his or not during her pregnancy?

“She didn’t. We had to wait until Charlie was born, and then they did a DNA test.”

I gasped again. “But you’re brothers. How were they able to determine which one of you was the dad?”

“We’re not twins, so we don’t share the same DNA makeup. They could find out the exact paternity. Obviously, since I have Charlie, you see how that went. After Charlie was born, Ashley told me she didn’t want anything to do with him. She never held him. Never once even looked at him.”

I slowly shook my head, no words coming to me. How could a mother do something like that after giving birth to her child?

When I finally found my voice, I asked, “How could she do that? How could she walk away from him?”

Mason’s eyes filled with so much sadness, I had to blink back tears. “He wasn’t Nick’s son. She wanted to be with Nick, and the only way she could was to walk away from me and our son.”

“Did *he* tell her that?”

Mason slowly shook his head. “I don’t know. I just know she signed away her parental rights.”

“That’s terrible. Poor Charlie. How did you manage to finish medical school with a newborn?”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. “My parents. They helped by watching Charlie for me while I was in school and working. I couldn’t have done it without them. And putting him up for adoption wasn’t an option.”

“What did your parents think? Do they still talk to your brother?”

Mason adjusted a bit on the sofa to get more comfortable before he started to speak once again. “They were upset, angry, hurt. Like I was. Of course, they would never turn their backs on him, but it was about a year or so before any of us talked to Nick again. Or saw him, for that matter. Then, one day, he showed up at my apartment and said he was sorry.”

“Did you at least make him sweat it out a few weeks before you accepted his apology?”

Laughing, Mason rubbed at the back of his neck and then his temples, as if the memory might be giving him a headache. “Let’s just say things still aren’t a hundred percent between us, and I don’t think they ever will be.”

I cleared my throat before I asked, “Are they still together?”

Mason shook his head. “No. They broke up when Charlie was around a year and a half. Since then, Ashley has tried to get back into the picture.”

I nearly choked. “What? She wants to be in Charlie’s life now that she isn’t with your brother?”

“Not only that, she wanted to get back together. It was one of the reasons I moved to Seaside. To get away from that whole mess.”

It felt like a brick landed in my stomach. “And now you and Charlie are the center of gossip here in Seaside. I’m so sorry, Mason. I don’t know why this Ms. Seaside is so obsessed with my family.”

“She doesn’t only talk about your family. And truth be told, she isn’t all that bad.”

“I know she doesn’t,” I said with a sigh. “But she sure does like to talk about us.”

Mason laughed. “Well, to be fair, you are an interesting bunch.”

I smiled, though I managed to hold back a giggle. “Does Ashley know where you and Charlie moved to?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t really keep it a secret, and I suppose if she wanted to find out badly enough, she could. I don’t think she will though. Last I heard, she was dating someone. Charlie doesn’t even know what she looks like.”

I glanced down at our hands, which were still entwined. I knew I needed to pull away, but I couldn’t seem to break the connection between us. I looked back up into those beautiful hazel eyes of his.

“Charlie asked me about his mother the other day,” I said.

It was Mason who withdrew his hand from mine. “What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I blinked a few times, taken back by his sudden change in mood. “I, um, I meant to. I was going to.”

“What did he ask you?”

“If I knew his mother. I told him the truth. That I didn’t know anything about his mother, but if he was curious, he should talk to you about it.”

Mason relaxed a bit and sighed. “It was probably pretty naïve of me to think he wouldn’t be more curious as he gets older, especially with him being in school now.”

“If he asks me again, I’ll do the same and direct him to you.”

Mason gave a short nod. “Thank you, Palmer. I’m sorry I didn’t give you more of a heads up.”

“It’s okay, I get it. I’m just sorry you and Charlie don’t have Ashley in your lives.”

His eyes turned dark and fury crossed his face. “I’m not. She doesn’t belong in my life *or* Charlie’s. And since moving here, that has only become clearer to me. The best thing she ever did for us was sleep with my brother and get caught. It saved me from a very miserable marriage and saved Charlie from having a selfish mother.”

All I could do was swallow the lump in my throat.

Mason leaned toward me, and I felt my own body being drawn to his.

Don't do it, Palmer. Do not kiss him, for crying out loud!

Mason lifted his hand and put it on the side of my face. When his thumb lightly brushed over my lip, I felt my entire body shiver with an anticipation I hadn't felt in a very long time. Maybe not ever. I'd never wanted a kiss so badly in my entire life.

“Daddy?”

I jerked back while Mason jumped to his feet and turned to face Charlie, who was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey, buddy. What are you doing up?”

“I heard a noise, and it woke me up. I think I need a puppy to keep me safe.”

I brought my hand up to my mouth to keep from laughing. Charlie had been talking about wanting a dog since he'd started helping me with dog walking. And he had fallen in love with a puppy at the pet shelter when I'd brought him there to help me clean out some kennels one day.

“Ahh...” Mason said before he sliced his fingers through his dark blond hair. “I think all talk of puppies should be saved for another day. I'll come and tuck you back into bed.”

Charlie must not have seen me because he simply turned and started to head back up the steps. I decided it would be best if he didn't know I was there.

As I waited for Mason to put Charlie back to bed, I headed into the kitchen to wash the two glasses. It was getting late, and I needed to make my way back to my house. Whiskey, my cat, was probably pissed I hadn't fed him yet.

I dried the glasses and put them back in the cabinet. When I turned around, I nearly let out a scream. Mason was leaning against the doorjamb of the kitchen looking sexy as fuck.

Look away, Palmer. Look. Away.

“I should, um...head on back to my place.”

“Do you want me to walk you down the driveway?”

A bubble of nervous laughter slipped free. “No, I’ll be fine. Is Charlie okay?”

The left corner of his mouth rose in a smirk. “He’s good, just bargaining for a puppy.”

“Christmas? Hey, speaking of, you don’t have a tree up yet.”

“Haven’t had time to set one up in the living room, but there’s a small one in the family room. And Charlie has a little tree my mother got for him in his room. We put it up every year.”

A warm rush of feelings swept over me as I thought about Mason putting up a little Christmas tree in his son’s room. It was so sweet, and it only made me fall for him more.

We stood there for a moment, the air crackling between us. “I better go,” I finally said.

A part of me wanted Mason to stop me, pull me into his arms, and kiss me. I wanted to feel his lips on mine again. To find out what he tasted like in this moment.

As I walked by him, I swore he reached out for me but then stopped. I drew in a deep breath and made my way over to my jacket.

“Palmer?”

I stopped walking and turned to face him. I nearly fell back when I realized he was so close to me.

“Y-yes?” I stammered.

His eyes searched my face for what felt like forever before he stepped away. “Maybe you can help me pick out a puppy at the shelter for Charlie. If they have any. My office is closed this whole week of Christmas except for emergencies, so I’m free anytime you are. My parents will be here to watch Charlie.”

I was pretty sure I blinked about a dozen times before finding my voice. “I’d be honored to help you pick one out for him. There’s a puppy he fell in love with when we were helping out the other day.”

“Great. Good. Thanks.”

I nodded. “Yep. Sure. No problem.”

Spinning on my heels, I closed my eyes and inwardly cursed. After slipping on my jacket, hat, scarf, and gloves, I turned back to Mason. “Let me know when you want to go visit the shelter.”

He nodded. “Sounds good. Maybe tomorrow. Would you be able to hold on to the puppy until Christmas Eve? Would Whiskey be okay with it?”

Oh God. I wanted to jump on him and take him right here.

“Whiskey will love having a friend,” I managed to say in a normal voice. “Okay, night!”

“Thanks for helping with the painting...and for the talk.”

I lifted my hand, too afraid to look at him again. “No problem! Tell Charlie I’ll see him soon.”

After walking down his steps and trying not to fall in the fresh snow, I practically sprinted back to my little house. The fact that I didn’t fall should have earned me an award—instead, it would probably land me in the gossip column again.

Nanny seen running from boss’s house.

I groaned as I stepped inside and shut the door.

“He’s off limits, Palmer. Off limits.”

As I undressed and headed to the bathroom for a hot shower, I chanted those six words over and over.



I pulled the apple pie out of the oven and placed it on the counter while taking in a deep breath. Cinnamon and nutmeg filled my senses, and I felt myself getting giddy with excitement

“Oh man, that smells so darn good!”

It was Christmas Day, and I couldn't wait to go over to my parents' house. Each year, we all rotated who was bringing what to our family dinner. This year, I was in charge of desserts. So I made an apple pie, a no-bake éclair, and a cherry pie. Both pies were made from scratch. My parents raised me right, after all.

With one last longing look at the apple pie, I said, “Okay, you cool off while I go change.”

My doorbell rang right as I was about to head to my bedroom. Frowning, I walked over to the front door and peeked out to see Mason and Charlie standing on my doorstep, both of them bundled up.

“Merry Christmas!” Charlie and Mason said when I opened the door.

Laughing, I motioned for them to come inside.

“Come in! You both look like you're freezing. How long have you been outside?”

Mason trembled as he shook off some loose snow. “Just from the back door to here. I don't think I've ever felt temperatures this cold before.”

Charlie held up a box that had a giant red bow on it. “Daddy and I got you a present, Ms. Palmer!”

My heart melted on the spot. I had dropped Mason's and Charlie's presents off last night, giving them to Mason's mother, Jennifer. Charlie and Mason had been out walking Charlie's new puppy that I'd kept until yesterday afternoon. He was a ten-week-old lab-boxer mix, and he was the dog that Charlie had fallen for the moment he'd seen him at the pet shelter.

I reached for the present and smiled at both of them. “Why, thank you! Where’s the puppy?”

“He’s with Grammy and Grandad. We named him!” Charlie practically shouted with delight.

“You did? What did you come up with?”

Charlie smiled that toothless grin that made my heart skip every time I saw it. “We named him Clarence!”

I felt my eyes grow wide as I looked at Mason. “Is that an old family name?”

He laughed. “No, it’s not. Charlie heard it on one of the shows he likes to watch and thought it would be a great name for the puppy.”

I bent down and smiled at Charlie. “I love it! I think it’s perfect for him.”

He bounced on his toes. “I think so too! When can Clarence come play with Whiskey?”

I glanced around my place to look for the aforementioned cat. He was clearly sleeping in today. “You can bring him over anytime to play.”

Charlie smiled, looked at his dad, and then back at me. “Ms. Palmer, will you come over for Christmas dinner?”

I pulled my mouth down into a sad face. “I wish I could, buddy, but I’m going over to my parents’ house to spend Christmas with them.”

Before Charlie or Mason could respond, my cell phone rang. It was my father’s ringtone.

“Give me one second, that’s my dad.”

I rushed over to grab my phone and answered with a, “Merry Christmas, Daddy!” I had tried calling earlier but figured they were taking advantage of one of only two days a year they closed the restaurant.

“Merry Christmas, baby girl. First, everyone’s okay—but we’re going to have to cancel Christmas at our house.”

My heart dropped. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Your mother’s feeling poorly. I think she has the stomach flu, and I’m not that far behind her. With Adelaide and Sutton pregnant, we don’t want to be around them. I’ve called them, and they’ve both decided to have a quiet day at their homes with Gannon and Brody. Your brother called earlier; he’s been up all night, throwing up.”

“Do you think he also has the flu?” I asked.

“Maybe; the three of us had an early dinner yesterday. Your brother was snooping around, asking some of our customers if they had any thoughts on who Ms. Seaside was.” He chuckled. “Your mother is convinced someone laced the food because of all of Brax’s questions.”

I felt Mason walk up to me, so I turned to face him. Into the phone, I asked, “Did he at least get any information?”

Dad laughed. “No.” Then he started to cough.

“Dad, the stomach flu doesn’t usually have a cough associated with it.”

“Is everyone okay?” Mason asked.

“Hold on, Dad. Mason’s standing right here.” I removed the phone from my ear and said, “My parents think they have the stomach flu, and so does Brax. But my dad has a cough as well.”

He frowned. “Would they like me to stop by and take a look at both of them?”

“Do you want Mason to stop by there, Dad?”

“No! And for Pete’s sake, Palmer, I simply coughed. I’m not hacking up a lung. We’ll be fine, and Braxton said he’s fine as well. He said he’ll probably open a can of soup soon if he can keep down the crackers he ate earlier.”

“Do you have enough fluids besides water?”

My father sighed. “We’re fine, Palmer. Don’t forget, we took care of four kids who were often sick. I think a day or two of rest is what we all need. I’m sorry you’re going to be

alone for Christmas though. I'm sure if you call Sutton or Adelaide, they would love to have you over."

I felt my body sag. I was going to be alone for Christmas. The one day a year I absolutely looked forward to being with my family.

"No, no, it's okay, Dad. I'm sure Addie and Sutton will enjoy a day of rest. You both rest up. Do you want me to drop off a pie or any food?"

"We've got plenty of food here, and honestly, I don't think I could eat anything right now. Maybe ask your brother, but I think he'll give you the same response."

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "I understand. Well, let me know if either of you need anything, okay? I'll give Brax a call as well and let him know that if he needs anything, I can bring it over."

"Will do, sweetie. I'm so sorry to leave you alone on Christmas."

Smiling wanly, I replied, "It's okay, Daddy. I'm sure I can keep myself busy today."

"I love you, darling."

"Love you too. Tell Mom I said I love her, and I hope she feels better soon."

"Will do."

The call ended, and I let out a long sigh. It took me a moment to remember that Mason and Charlie were still here.

Turning to face them, I attempted to seem unfazed by the news that Christmas with my family was canceled for this year. "Looks like everyone's going to be staying home this year."

Mason's eyes softened as he looked at me. "I'm sorry your parents aren't feeling well."

"Me too." I looked around nervously before focusing back on Charlie and Mason. "Do you want to take a pie, or maybe even two of the desserts? I also made a no-bake éclair."

Mason's face lit up. "Charlie had a better idea—why don't you grab what you made for your family dinner and join us for Christmas today."

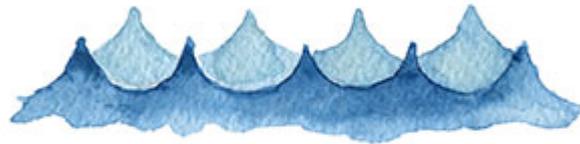
Charlie started to jump. "Yes! Yes! Oh please, Ms. Palmer, please come over to our house for Christmas! We're going to play games and have lots of fun. Grammy made a turkey and all kinds of food. Pleeeeease!"

I opened my mouth to say no, but the look on Charlie's face and the smile on Mason's made me clamp it shut. I chewed on my lip for a moment before asking, "Are you sure? I mean, I don't want to intrude, but the idea of being here all alone is not a pleasant one, if I'm being honest."

Mason winked, and my stomach did a little flip that I promptly ignored. "I'm positive," he said. "My mother cooked enough to feed half the town. They'll love having you with us, and you'll all be able to get to know each other better."

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face as I said, "Okay, then I'd love to join you guys."

Charlie fist pumped, and Mason beamed with happiness.



Chapter Eleven

Mason

The moment Palmer agreed, I knew I was in a lot more trouble than I'd originally thought.

I'd been able to keep my feelings for Palmer in check for both of our sakes, as well as Charlie's. The more time I spent with her, the more I valued our friendship, and I absolutely thought of Palmer as more than just Charlie's nanny. She was a friend. A friend I really, really wanted to get to know in intimate ways.

When she'd said yes to spending Christmas with us, my heart had done a weird little flutter and a feeling of excitement had rushed through my body at the idea of her spending time with my family. I couldn't wait to see what my mom and dad thought of her—and that alone should have been a warning sign. *All* of those feelings should have been warning signs, which I chose to ignore, because to hell with it.

I wanted Palmer with us today. I hated that she was missing out on Christmas with her family, but I was over the moon that her plans had been altered. I wanted to watch her with Charlie, and see if she thought my father's dry sense of humor was as funny as I did. I wanted to...

I let my thoughts wander away, because I knew that what I wanted and what Palmer wanted were two completely different things. I tried not to read into the way she'd been

looking at me lately. Or how her smiles seemed to be a bit more flirty.

Pushing open the back door, Charlie and I rushed in. Before I could say a word, he ran into the kitchen, tracking snow everywhere, and cried out, “Palmer is coming over for Christmas!”

My mother’s eyes met mine as I stepped into the kitchen and took my coat off. I hung it over one of the backs of the chairs right before my mother took it and put it on one of the coatracks in the small mudroom off the kitchen. I knew better than to toss my hat, scarf, and gloves onto the table, so I followed her and put them on the bench.

“Charlie, come get your coat off!” I called out.

Mom leaned against the doorjamb as she watched me help Charlie take off his boots and coat.

“Palmer’s joining us today?” she asked with a hint of amusement in her voice.

I glanced up at her. I hadn’t even given it a second thought that my parents might mind, but now I had a sinking feeling that maybe they would. Clearing my throat, I asked, “Is that okay?”

She stared at me a beat too long before replying, “Of course it is. I made enough food to feed a small army.”

“Then why did you pause?”

A slow smile spread across her face. “No reason, Mason. Are you worried we won’t like Charlie’s new *nanny*?”

The emphasis on the word *nanny* wasn’t lost on me.

“Not at all. I simply realized I should have asked first since you did most of the cooking.”

“I don’t mind at all, but I thought you said she was excited to spend the holiday with her family?”

I finished getting all the winter gear off Charlie. “She was, but both of her parents aren’t feeling well, and neither is her brother. Her two older sisters are both pregnant, and they

decided to stay home and enjoy a quiet day with their husbands, since they're both still early in their pregnancies."

Mom nodded. "I can see that. The first six months I was pregnant with both you and your brother, I was exhausted all the time."

I watched as Charlie bolted through the kitchen. "Hey! Where are you going?" I asked.

Without looking back, he answered, "To tell Granddaddy that Ms. Palmer is coming over!"

I shook my head while my mother let out a soft chuckle. "He seems to really like Palmer."

"He does." Turning to her, I said, "I didn't want Palmer to be all alone on Christmas."

"No, of course not," she said. When I looked over at her, her eyes were saying something else.

"Charlie loves Palmer, Mom, and she's become a good friend to me. There isn't anything else going on, so stop looking at me like that."

She faked a shocked expression. "Looking at you like what? I didn't look at you a certain way."

I shot her the same look she'd given me a thousand times when she was calling me on my bullshit. "I know you better than that, Mom."

She waved her hand at me and said, "*Pfft*. Nonsense."

"Ms. Palmer made two pies and some chocolate dessert! Daddy's going back over there in an hour to help her carry it over," Charlie announced as he walked into the kitchen with my dad.

All my mother did was smile down at Charlie before looking at me again. I could tell she was holding back from asking a million-and-one questions. Not that she hadn't already asked them when I'd first told her about Palmer. And then again after the first time they'd actually met.

To put her out of her misery, I changed the subject. “Palmer and Charlie are working on a secret project, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “It’s going to be for Daddy!”

“A secret project, huh?” Dad asked as he gave my mother a look.

Mom walked over and turned on the top oven light and looked in. After turning off the light again, she faced me, her head tilted slightly. “And you mentioned she was single?”

“Three times now,” I answered with a roll of my eyes.

“And you said Adelaide, your office manager, was the one who suggested her sister could be a nanny for Charlie?”

I had told my mother and father that at least *five* times. “Yes.”

With a confused—or at least a pretend-confused—expression, she asked, “Why do you think it took Palmer so long to agree to be Charlie’s nanny?”

Because we kissed. Because there’s something between us that neither of us will admit.

Instead of saying that, I opened my mouth and prayed I’d think of something to say, but Charlie beat me to it.

“Cause she has lots of other jobs she likes. But she still has her walking dogs job and her poop-scooping job.”

I nearly lost it laughing at the expression on my mother’s face when Charlie mentioned the poop-scooping business. She already knew about the dog walking. Charlie had told her and my father all about it, and how Palmer was paying him and teaching him how to save his money. After that story, my father had turned to me and told me to marry her.

“Lots of other jobs?” Mom inquired with a curious brow lifted.

Dad cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, did you say poop-scooping job? I thought it was dog walking.”

Charlie nodded. “She does both! Dog walking is every day. She bought me this envelope thingy and every time she gives me a dollar, I put it in one of the envelopes.”

That caused my father to lean in closer to Charlie. “What are the envelopes for?”

I could see Charlie stand up a little taller. He was so proud of saving his money. “Well, Ms. Palmer told me to write a list of things I want. Almost like a list to Santa. So I did, and then we...” He looked up in thought before the light bulb went off. “Then we broke it down to the things I *really* wanted. We wrote them on little stickers and then put them on the envelopes. So, each time I get paid, I put a dollar in a different envelope!”

Smiling, I fought the urge to correct Charlie’s misuse of *broke it down*. I glanced at my mother, who appeared to be searching for something to say. Her eyes were misted over, and I hurried over to her.

“Mom? Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

My father turned his attention from Charlie to Mom. “Jen, darling, are you okay?”

She nodded and fanned her hand in front of her as if she was attempting to wave away the tears that threatened to spill.

“What’s wrong?” I asked gently.

Her eyes met mine, and she lowered her voice. “That is the one of the sweetest things I’ve ever heard. For her to teach that to Charlie. I knew she was paying him, but to be such a positive role model in his life is so important. He’s needed a female figure for so long, and with me not being here for you both...”

Her words faded away while my father embraced her.

Smiling, I replied, “I know. I thought it was a pretty neat idea.”

“I might have to look into that for your mother.” Dad attempted to hide a laugh, then said, “Oooff,” when my mom threw an elbow into his side.

“Anyway,” Mom said as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “I like this girl.”

I slowly shook my head. “So, you’ve decided you like Palmer because she’s showing Charlie how to save money?”

She shot me an exasperated look. “No, not just that. I adore the way Charlie adores *her*. And she’s clearly a good... *friend*...to you.”

I brought my hand to the back of my neck as I closed my eyes and counted to ten. Focusing back on my mother, I said, “Mom, I know you want there to be something more there, but there isn’t. Please, will you accept the fact that Palmer is simply a friend and a wonderful influence in Charlie’s life?”

She slowly smiled before making her way over to me. She gently patted my chest. “Oh, Mason. When will you ever learn?”

Then she turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving me more confused than ever.

I faced my father, and before I could say a word, he held up his hands and said, “I’ve tried to figure her out so many times, I’ve simply given up. You’ll soon learn, son, that some battles are not worth the fight.”



I lifted my hand to knock on Palmer’s door, but it swung open before I could. There she stood with a giddy expression on her face.

“I was watching for you! Man, the snow is really coming down, isn’t it?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the near blizzard we had going on before facing Palmer. “I don’t think it’s going to stop anytime soon.”

She winked. “Good thing I can walk home, or I’d be stuck at your house.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t think that would be a bad thing, but I smiled and said nothing.

“I’m ready—let me slip my coat and gloves on. I’ve got the two pies in that bag and the éclair in the other one.”

Two bags were sitting on a small table next to the front door. I stepped inside and took them both.

Palmer appeared in front of me again.

“No hat?” I asked.

She tilted her head as she regarded me. “We’re only walking to your back door, Mason.”

“I still think you should put on a hat and a scarf. Do you know how much heat you lose from your head and neck?”

The corners of her mouth twitched with a hidden smile before she reached over and grabbed a scarf off her coatrack. Then she picked up a gray hat with a giant ball on the top and slipped them both on.

“There. All warm and tidy for a less-than-one-minute walk.”

“You haven’t seen how much snow you need to hike through yet.”

I motioned for her to step out of the house first, then I followed. Palmer had a keyless entry, so she reached over and hit the lock button. She checked that the door was locked, and then we made our way down the drive and to the back of my house.

“Does it always snow like this on Christmas?” I asked.

“Not always. We’ve had a few years where there was no snow at all. Those are my least favorite Christmas memories though.”

“Is Christmas your favorite holiday?”

Palmer took a few moments to think about the question before she answered. “That and Halloween. Even to this day, I love to dress up for Halloween. It killed me when Addie got married on Halloween and I couldn’t wear a costume.”

I laughed. “Charlie loves Halloween as well.”

“Has he ever had a Halloween party?”

“Um, no. Did you have one when you were little?”

Palmer stopped walking and stared at me with a befuddled look on her face.

“What?” I asked.

“You’ve *never* had a Halloween party?”

I shook my head. “We haven’t ever had *any* parties before.”

Palmer gasped and pressed her gloved hand to her mouth. Dropping her arm to her side, she asked, “Not even a birthday party?”

Swallowing hard, I replied, “No. But I was in medical school, and then busy with interning and trying to work enough hours to provide for us while paying off my student loans. Then I was focused on buying a private practice and...”

Palmer started to walk again, saying something I couldn’t hear.

“What?”

She kept walking, but when she got to the back door, she spun around. “Charlie’s birthday is in April, right? We’re having the party to beat all parties. I can’t wait to start planning it!”

I raised my brows. “We are?”

“Yes, we are.” She shook her head and sighed. “I can’t think about it right now or I’ll get lost in the planning, and I want to be present since your parents are here. But starting tomorrow, the planning begins, mister”

I lifted my hand to salute her, but then realized I was holding bags full of pies. “Right. Planning starts tomorrow.”

Palmer smiled and opened the door that led into the mudroom. I followed and we were both immediately greeted by my mother, my father, and a beaming Charlie.

“Ms. Palmer!” Charlie said as if he hadn’t seen her an hour ago.

“Let me take those from you.” Dad took the two bags out of my hands.

“Thanks, Dad.”

While Palmer and I both started to remove our coats, I said, “Mom, Dad, you’ve met Palmer already, but it was pretty brief.”

She smiled. “Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Bryan. Thank you so much for letting me spend the holiday with your family.”

My father smiled back at Palmer. “You are more than welcome. Jen made plenty of food. More than the four of us can eat in a week.”

Palmer laughed softly.

Mom walked up and gave Palmer her sweetest smile. “It’s nice to see you again, Palmer. I’m so sorry to hear you can’t be with your family today, but we’re thrilled to have you spend Christmas with us. I made enough food for an army.”

Palmer looked around at all of us. “Thank you so much for having me. The thought of spending Christmas alone was a tough one.”

“Ms. Palmer, do you want to see what Santa brought me?” Charlie asked.

With a wide grin, she nodded and then looked at my mom. “Do you need any help in the kitchen?”

Waving Palmer off, my mother said, “No. Dan can help me if I need anything. The three of you go off and enjoy yourselves.”

I arched a brow in Mom's direction, but she refused to look my way.

Charlie grabbed Palmer's hand and nearly dragged her out of the kitchen. I followed but glanced back at my parents. They both gave me a smile that said they knew something I didn't. I pointed to them both and shook my head.

"I know," my mother said in a hushed voice. "Just friends."

Nearly groaning, I headed out of the kitchen to catch up with Charlie and Palmer.



Chapter Twelve

Palmer

Charlie nearly ripped my arm out of its socket as he pulled me through the house and to the family room. A large tree was up, though it looked like someone had taken a box of decorations and simply tossed it onto the tree.

“Ahh, the proof of a child in the house,” I said as I glanced back toward Mason, who was a few paces behind us. He smiled and shrugged.

“Ms. Palmer! Ms. Palmer! I got a paint set!”

I widened my eyes in an overexaggerated way as I looked at the paint set. “Charlie, this is wonderful!”

He nodded in excitement. “I know! Now we can paint together.”

My heart melted instantly as I stared down into his big blue eyes. “I would love to do that, Charlie.”

“Look what else I got!”

The next few minutes were spent with Charlie on the floor in front of the tree as we went through all of the toys that Santa brought him.

“My oh my, when did Santa find time to do all of this?” I asked as I peeked over at Mason, who was currently trying to put together some robot toy.

“Amazon.”

I giggled, and Mason looked over at us. My breath caught when our eyes met. For a moment, all I could do was stare at the man across the room.

“Ms. Palmer? Ms. Palmer?”

Snapping out of my temporary haze, I looked down at Charlie, who had been trying to hand me a toy car. “Are you ready to race?” he asked.

“Um, yes,” I answered, taking the car from him. “Which side of the track am I on?”

He looked down at the track, then back at me. “You’re a guest, so you can pick.”

“How sweet of you.”

Before I knew it, I was cheering for my little green car to beat Charlie’s around the track and laughing like I hadn’t laughed in years. Charlie took his car racing very seriously.

“Who’s hungry?” Mrs. Bryan asked as she appeared in the opening between the hallway and the family room. “Christmas lunch is ready.”

Mason stood, then reached down to help me up. I tried to ignore the way my entire body tingled from his touch.

Charlie reached up and took my hand. “You can sit next to me, Ms. Palmer.”

“I’d be honored to sit next to you.”

We made our way into Mason’s formal dining room, which had been miraculously updated since the last time I’d been here only two days ago. A beautiful wood table that seated ten people sat in the middle. I had no idea why in the world Mason thought he needed such a large table, but it looked stunning in the room. The upper half of the walls were painted a light blue, while the lower half was made up of white panels that kept with the age of the home. A matching buffet sat on one end of the room, while the other side housed a stunning grandfather clock that was chiming half past noon.

When I stepped up to the table, I nearly gasped. The first thing I saw were two beautiful, vintage-looking silver

candelabras. There were also two single candlesticks with silver ornament balls resting on top. It was so simple, yet so elegant.

In the middle of the table was a beautiful flower arrangement with white, red, and green flowers. To either side were fresh Frasier fir bows with silver ball ornaments placed randomly among the branches.

Silver placemats were the base for the stunning place settings, which consisted of white plates with a simple silver lining. Red napkins rested on top, with a salad dish on top of that. Beautiful crystal glasses were placed at four of the place settings, while a Snoopy Christmas glass was at Charlie's spot.

"Mrs. Bryan, this is beautiful. Where did all of this come from?"

She flashed me a wide smile. "Please, call me Jen, and thank you. I adore doing things like this and don't get to very often. I knew Mason wouldn't have anything unpacked, so we brought it all with us."

"Where did you get this furniture?" I asked.

Mason glanced around the room. "Mom and Dad brought all of it with them, too. It was my grandmother's set, and I've always loved it."

"It's beautiful."

His mom chimed in, "We also brought a bedroom set that belonged to Mason's great-grandmother, for the guest bedroom. It's beautiful; I'll show it to you later, Palmer. For now, everyone sit down. All the food is on the table, and Dan needs to go get the ham."

"Dad, sit, I'll get it."

"Palmer, would you be a dear and grab the rolls and the bottle of wine I left on the kitchen island?" Jen asked.

"Yes, of course," I said as I followed Mason into the kitchen.

"I feel terrible I didn't help cook any of this," I said as I found the basket of rolls on the island with the wine sitting

next to it.

“Don’t,” Mason said with a chuckle. “My mother used to run a large catering company in Boston. She lives for doing stuff like this. Any excuse for a party, and she’s all in. Hence all the decorations, even though it was only originally going to be the four of us.”

“I bet your mom and my mom would be besties.”

He laughed. “They’re actually thinking of moving to Seaside. They miss Charlie.”

I gave him a sideways glance. “Just Charlie?”

A boyish grin spread over his face and my stomach did a little flop.

“I thought so,” I mumbled as I headed back toward the dining room.

“Palmer?”

Stopping, I turned to face him. “Yeah?”

Was that a blush on his handsome face?

“I’m glad you were able to join us. Charlie loves having you here...and so do I.”

My heartbeat sped up, and I had to focus on keeping my breathing steady and calm. The fact that Mason was happy I was spending Christmas with his family did things to me that I wasn’t ready to read into.

I replied honestly. “I’m really glad I’m here as well.”

We stood there staring at one another. Neither of us willing to admit the crazy attraction that was clearly there.

No, no, no, Palmer. Do not do this. This is your job, he is your boss, and no matter how much you adore Charlie, you cannot have playtime with his father.

Someone cleared their voice from behind me, and I jumped.

“Did the two of you get lost?” Jen asked.

“Oh, you scared me,” I said with a nervous laugh.

When she looked at Mason, something passed between the two of them.

“We were talking about how much Charlie loves having Palmer here,” Mason said. I ignored the little stab of pain in my chest when he only mentioned Charlie’s name.

“He hasn’t stopped talking about you since you walked away from the table,” Jen said to me.

I forced an easy smile. “Then I should probably get back with these rolls.”

As I made my way past Jen, one of her brows rose, and I felt like a teenager who had been caught doing something naughty. I rushed back to the formal dining room with the rolls and the wine.



Hours later, I was tangled up with Mason as we played Twister. Charlie had picked the teams and had paired me and Mason, and himself with Jen. Dan was spinning the color wheel.

“Left hand yellow,” Dan stated as he let out a bark of laughter. “I think this is going to do you both in.”

Frowning, I replied, “A Bradley never admits defeat.”

Mason looked up and frowned as well. “I think my father’s cheating,” he said to me.

“Why?” I grunted, attempting to hold myself up.

“I have to go between your legs to get to the yellow.”

I gasped. “Oh craptastic, I thought all these crazy positions were my bad luck.”

“Do we fall and give up?”

I was positive my eyes went as wide as saucers. “You want me to *quit*?”

“Um, well, it’s either that, or I put my body, um…” His words trailed off.

Giving him my sternest look, I said, “Man up, Bryan! Left hand yellow!”

He closed his eyes before he dropped his head. With a deep breath, he moved between my legs—and it was only then that I realized I probably should have listened to him.

“Now what?” he asked with my woohoo practically on top of his face.

“Oh dear, this is no longer PG,” Jen stated, putting her hand over Charlie’s face. Dan let out a loud laugh. Once Mason started laughing, I couldn’t hold it in, and we tumbled to the floor.

“We won!” Charlie shouted as he hugged Jen. “They fell! We won!”

Mason helped me up and winked at me, and I suddenly wished we were still in that crazy position.

Turning to face his father, Mason said, “You cheated.”

“What? I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dan mused.

Jen patted Mason on the chest. “Son, don’t teach Charlie about poor sportsmanship.”

Mason’s mouth dropped open, and I had to cover my own to hold back my laughter.

Charlie tugged at my hand. “Ms. Palmer, will you read me a story?”

Okay, this dad and son duo was going to be the death of me. My heart fluttered, and I was pretty sure my eyes misted over as Charlie gazed up at me.

“I would love to read you a story. Let’s help clean up first, okay?”

Charlie got to work helping to put away the two Twister games.

Mason leaned in and whispered, “He’s getting tired. When he asks you to read to him, it’s his way of saying he wants to sleep.”

“Good to know.”

The next thing I knew, I was in Charlie’s room, sitting on the bed next to him reading *The Giving Snowman*, while he lay in his father’s arms and drifted off to sleep.

Once he’d nodded off, Mason gently pulled away from where he was snuggled up next to Charlie, and we both tiptoed out of the room.

Music floated up the stairs as we made our way down the steps.

Mason smiled. “My parents love to dance, so there was always music playing in the house growing up. I can bet you they’re dancing in the kitchen right now, and at least one of them has a dish towel over their shoulder.”

That was exactly how we found Jen and Dan, and I couldn’t help but smile at the two of them. They reminded me so much of my own parents. Leaning against the counter, I realized this was what I wanted. Someone who wanted to dance in the kitchen with me. Someone who wanted to cheat at Twister to have a bit of fun.

I peeked over to see Mason smiling as he watched his parents. He reached for my hand and pulled me to him, and we joined his parents in a dance.

“Moon River” started to play, and I felt myself melt into Mason’s arms while we slow danced.

“I love this version,” I said softly.

“Who sings this?” Mason asked.

“Kina Grannis; her voice is so beautiful. I adore her version of ‘Can’t Help Falling in Love.’ It’s so romantic.”

Mason moved his hand to my lower back as he drew me in even closer. I wanted to bury my face in his chest, draw in a deep breath, and store it all away so I could remember every second of today for the rest of my life.

We fell into a comfortable silence as the song played, and we danced alongside Jen and Dan.

With my eyes closed, I allowed myself to get lost for a moment, to drift into a dream. Mason and I dancing every evening in the kitchen after putting Charlie down for the evening. He would lift my chin and kiss me ever so softly as he whispered, *I love you, Palmer*. Then he'd rest his hand on my swollen belly and talk to our baby.

My eyes snapped open, and I took a step back to give myself some distance from Mason's heat.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, I swore he felt it too. The pull between us. The undeniable attraction that was there.

Stop this, Palmer! You were the one who told him you only wanted to be friends.

Friends.

Friends.

Friends.

"Thank you for letting me spend the holiday with you and your family."

Mason cleared his throat. "Of course. Charlie loved having you here."

I smiled, but I had to admit it hurt a little that he hadn't included himself in that statement. What did I expect though? I had told him nothing could happen between us. Right now, I was seriously asking myself why I'd made that stupid rule.

"We all loved having you here," Jen added with a warm smile.

"Yes!" Mason said. "All of us."

I felt my cheeks heat, and I turned away from Mason to focus on his mother and father. "Thank you so much, Jen, for all the amazing food. And to both of you for making this such a great day. I haven't had this much fun in a long time."

Dan walked up and gave me a hug. "The same goes for me, kiddo. I hope we'll see you again soon."

Jen nodded. “Yes, please say you’ll come over for dinner at least a few more times before we head back to Boston.”

Smiling, I replied, “I would love that, thank you.”

The four of us stood in the kitchen and looked around at one another before I said, “Well, I should get home and check on my parents and brother. Thank you again, I had a lovely time.”

Mason stepped forward. “I’ll walk you to your place since it’s gotten dark out.”

“You don’t have to do that, Mason. Honestly, I’ll be fine.”

Jen moved to give me a hug. “Nonsense. Let the boy walk you home.”

Before I could argue with her, the doorbell rang. Everyone stood there, clearly confused.

“Who in the world would that be on Christmas at nearly eight at night?” Jen asked.

Mason headed to the front door as he added, “And with a blizzard outside.”

For a moment, I panicked. “You don’t think it has to do with one of my parents, do you?”

Jen shook her head. “No, darling, I’m sure they’re fine.”

I turned and followed Mason, with Jen and Dan in tow.

When Mason opened the door, I heard Jen gasp and Dan curse.

A beautiful woman stood in the doorway with her black coat covered in white snow. She certainly wasn’t dressed for the blizzard that was happening outside.

No one said anything while Mason stared at her. Pieces of her brown hair peeked out from her hat, and then she smiled up at Mason...and I caught sight of her blue eyes. I instantly knew who she was.

Charlie’s mother.

Her eyes flicked past Mason to take in Jan and Dan, and then me. She frowned slightly before plastering another smile on her face as she focused back on Mason. “Are you going to make the mother of your child stand outside in the freezing cold, or may I come in?”



Chapter Thirteen

Mason

I couldn't believe my eyes. There was no fucking way that Ashley was standing there. An instant rush of anger swept over me, and the only thing I could think was thank God Charlie had already fallen asleep.

When Ashley spoke, she pulled me out of my shocked stupor.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Mason, I'm freezing, and it's taken me forever to find where you live. The least you can do is invite me in."

"Like hell I will. You can take your ass back to whatever rock you crawled out from under. Or better yet, go back to Nick."

Mom cleared her throat, and I glanced back over my shoulder. That's when I remembered Palmer was still here.

Shit.

Facing Ashley again, I said, "If you have something to talk about you can call my lawyer; otherwise, you need to leave."

Ashley drew in a long, deep breath and then exhaled. "It's dark, and I'm tired, cold, and hungry. Stop being such a jerk and let me in. It's Christmas, after all."

I wanted to strangle her.

“I don’t care what day it is; you’re not coming into the house.”

“Where am I supposed to go then, Mason?”

I let out a harsh laugh. “Not my problem, Ash.”

She started to look alarmed. “Where am I supposed to find a place to stay on Christmas?”

“Again, not my problem,” I said. “You should have thought of that before you decided to come to Seaside.”

I felt Palmer step closer to me. She placed her hand on my arm. “Maybe you should let her come in before someone sees you arguing out here.”

Shaking my head, I looked at Palmer. “She’s not coming anywhere near Charlie.”

Palmer glanced at Ashley and back to me. “My house then?”

I looked at Ashley, who was now glaring at Palmer. Hell, I didn’t want her anywhere near Palmer, either.

“No,” I said. “She’s an adult, she can find a place to stay.”

“Mason Bryan.”

I spun around and looked at my mother. “You, of all people, surely do not expect me to let her into this house?”

“No,” my mother said. “But you should go to Palmer’s and get this figured out before Charlie hears.”

That made Ashley’s face light up. “I want to see Charlie.”

Without taking my eyes off of her, I said, “Palmer, will you please bring me my jacket and hat so we can go to your house?”

“Yes, of course.”

As Palmer and my mother hurried to get our coats, I stepped out onto the covered porch. I was so angry, the cold wasn’t even fazing me.

“What in the fuck do you think you’re doing, Ashley?”

She gave me a one-shoulder shrug. “I want to see Charlie. You changed your phone number, so I had to take drastic measures in order to find you both.”

I raised a brow. “And that was?”

“Hiring someone to keep an eye on your parents.”

“What?” I heard my father nearly shriek. “You’ve been having us watched?”

Ashley’s shoulders slumped. “Dan, it was the only way I could find Charlie and Mason. Nick won’t speak to me or return any of my calls. He has security at his building, and they won’t even let me step foot in there.”

“I see he finally wised up,” I said.

“I have the right to see Charlie, Mason. I want to see him *now*.”

I nearly grabbed her and shook her. “You signed those rights away, or don’t you remember?”

“Here,” Palmer said as she pushed my coat and gloves into my body. “Put these on and let’s take this away from a public street.”

I scanned the area. A few cars were driving by, moving through the snowstorm slowly, and I could see lights on in the houses across the street. I knew Palmer was right; standing on my front porch arguing with my ex wasn’t good for anyone.

After putting my coat on, I said, “Let’s go.”

Palmer headed down the driveway first, and I followed.

“Wait. I don’t have snow boots on!” Ashley cried out.

“Not my problem!” I replied.

As we headed toward Palmer’s, I glanced over my shoulder to see Ashley trailing behind us. I lowered my voice and said, “I’m so sorry, Palmer.”

“Why are you saying sorry to *me*?”

I shrugged, but she was more focused on where she was stepping. A large amount of snow had fallen throughout the

day.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The day was perfect and now it’s tainted.”

“We’ll get this all worked out, Mason. I promise. The important thing is to keep her away from Charlie.”

If only I had Palmer’s optimism. It wasn’t a good sign that Ashley was here. It only proved that she was still up to her old games. She didn’t care about Charlie. No mother who signed away her rights the moment her child was born would suddenly fall head over heels in love with him. No, she was here for another reason.

Once we finally made it to Palmer’s, I waited outside for Ashley while Palmer went in. She had insisted on making us a pot of coffee.

The second Ashley stepped into Palmer’s house, I wanted to shudder. Something about her being in Palmer’s space made me feel sick to my stomach.

She glanced around while she took off her designer coat. Then she looked at me. “What should I do with this?”

I grabbed it and hung it up on the coatrack by the door.

Ashley slowly made her way around the living room as she peeled off her gloves. “She lives here?”

“She has a name. It’s Palmer. And yes, she rents it.”

“From you?”

I ignored her question. “Cut to the damn chase, Ashley. What do you want?”

Turning to face me, she plastered on a fake smile. “I came to see you and Charlie.”

“Why?”

“Can’t a woman want to see her husband and child?”

“Not when she doesn’t have a husband, or a child.”

Direct hit. Ashley flinched but then put on the same fake smile and sat down on the sofa. “Quaint little place she has

here.”

I ran my hand down my face and let out a frustrated sigh. “You’re not going to see Charlie. No matter what you say or do, you will *not* see him.”

“Has he asked about me?” she asked with a tilt of her head. I could see so much of her in Charlie. His smile, his eyes. Everyone said he looked like me, but that was because no one had ever truly seen his mother. He was the spitting image of her.

“No, not in years.”

That seemed to deflate her a bit. “Probably because you never told him about me.”

“And why would I?” I asked, folding my arms over my chest. I still had my jacket on so it made it a bit difficult.

“Because I’m his mother, Mason.”

“No, you’re the woman who gave him life, Ashley. You didn’t even want to hold him after he was born, so don’t give me that *I’m his mother* bullshit. Tell me why you’re really here?”

She looked at me again, giving me a once-over as she ran her tongue over her bottom lip. “Are you dating?”

I ignored her, and she started to laugh. “I’ll take your silence as my answer. Really? *Her?*” she asked, jabbing her thumb in the direction of the kitchen.

“Palmer is Charlie’s nanny.”

Her eyes went wide. “Nanny? Wow, you must be rolling in dough if you’re able to hire a nanny for our son.”

“*My* son.”

She smirked. “If my memory is correct, it took both of us to make him, and I did all the work bringing him into the world.”

Before I could respond, Palmer walked in carrying a tray with three mugs and a pot of hot coffee.

“I figured you might like something hot to drink,” she said.

Ashley looked down her nose at the steaming pot. “I don’t drink coffee. But thank you.”

I wasn’t about to point out that she’d always drunk coffee in the past. For all I knew, she’d given it up.

Palmer set the tray down on the coffee table and then sat in a seat across from Ashley. She rested her hands in her lap, and I could tell she was feeling a bit awkward.

“So, what are we going to do about me needing a place to stay?” Ashley asked. “Your house is big enough, Mason. I’m sure you have a spare room I can stay in.”

I opened my mouth to tell her to shove it up her ass, but Palmer responded first.

“I’ve taken care of it.”

Ashley and I both swung our heads to look at Palmer, who sat there with a soft smile on her face.

“What do you mean, you’ve taken care of it?” Ashley snarled.

“A friend of mine owns a bed and breakfast in town, and I called her while I was getting the coffee ready. I asked if she had any available rooms and if I could call in a favor. She said she did, and that you’re more than welcome to head on over. It’s only for one night though.”

I nearly lost it laughing when Ashley’s mouth fell open. I had to fight the urge to go over, pull Palmer up, and kiss the living crap out of her.

“You want me to stay at a bed and breakfast?” Ashley asked.

Palmer gave her a one-shoulder shrug. “I don’t think you have any other options, as it seems clear to me that Mason doesn’t want you staying at his house.”

Ashley’s mouth opened again, then snapped shut.

“Her husband has a four-wheel drive truck with studded snow tires, and he’s on his way over to pick you up,” Palmer

continued. “I wasn’t sure if you drove or took a taxi here?”

Blinking several times, Ashley snapped her head back to me.

I simply smiled. “Looks like your problem’s solved. You can stay there tonight, and tomorrow you can leave Seaside.”

When it was clear Ashley wasn’t going to say anything, Palmer went on. “He should be here in the next ten minutes. Do you have a car parked outside?”

Jerking her head back to Palmer, Ashley said, “I’m sorry?”

Leaning forward and speaking slower, Palmer asked, “Did...you...drive...here?”

I could practically see the flames shooting out of Ashley’s eyes. “I’m not one of the kids you nanny; I understood you perfectly fine.”

Palmer raised her brows. “Okay, do you have a car?”

“Who is this woman, and why is she grilling me?” Ashley asked.

I had taken off my jacket, so I folded my arms across my chest once more. “I already told you who she is. Where’s your car, Ashley? She’s only asking because clearly you can’t drive it in this kind of weather, and we’ll need to get your car for you if you left it somewhere. I honestly can’t imagine how you got here without driving—even if it was a rental you got at the airport.”

“Someone dropped me off.”

I leaned forward. “Someone dropped you off? Like an Uber?”

Her eyes drifted away from mine, and I knew a lie was coming. “Yes.”

Palmer’s phone rang.

“Hello? Oh hey, Tim. Yes, if you’re able to. You got here faster than I thought you would. Okay, great. Thanks.”

She hung up and looked at me. “Tim is here with his truck. He can take you to the bed and breakfast for the night until you figure out what to do. Maybe the friend who dropped you off can pick you up there tomorrow.”

Ashley stood. “You think I’m going to climb into a truck with a stranger? You’re insane!”

“He’s not a stranger,” Palmer stated. “He’s a police officer for the city. He and his wife also run a local bed and breakfast, which happens to have an empty room. I would call yourself lucky you even found a room to stay in tonight. And honestly, I’m not the one who showed up on someone’s porch on Christmas expecting to be welcomed in.”

I tried to hide my smile when Ashley simply stood there with a dumbfounded expression on her face. She finally turned around and looked at me. “You’d really make me leave rather than let me spend the night in your house?”

Palmer stood. “You’re more than welcome to stay here if you’d like.”

“What?” Ashley and I said in unison.

“There’s no way she’s staying in your place,” I said. “I don’t want her anywhere near Charlie.”

Ashley sighed. “Fine, I’ll go to the stupid bed and breakfast.”

Headlights shone through the front windows of Palmer’s house, signaling that Tim was here.

“Looks like your ride’s here,” I said as I moved to get Ashley’s coat. She grabbed it from me and hastily put it on.

“This isn’t over, Mason. I want to see Charlie.”

I balled my fists at my side. I was about to lay into her when Palmer stepped between us. “I’ll walk out and introduce you to Tim.”

With a huff, Ashley followed Palmer out of the house. The moment the door shut, I started to pace. I wanted to hit something. What in the hell was she thinking, showing up

here? And on Christmas day of all days. I was glad Charlie had been exhausted and had already fallen asleep.

A few moments later, the door opened and Palmer rushed back in. “Okay, Tim is taking her to the Seaside Bed and Breakfast. Glad that is over.”

I walked over to Palmer and helped her take her coat off. When she turned to face me, I closed my eyes and sighed. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing to me?”

When I looked down into those ocean blue eyes of hers, I wanted to pull her to me and lose myself in her. I wanted to forget all about Ashley and whatever bullshit she was up to. I only wanted to think about the woman standing in front of me and the way she made me feel.

“I don’t know. It feels like I should say I’m sorry.”

“Not on my account,” Palmer stated as she picked up the tray and headed into her kitchen. “Do you think she’s really here to see Charlie?”

I rubbed at the ache in the back of my neck. “No, not at all. I mean, not unless she grew a conscience, which I highly doubt is the case.”

Palmer cleaned out the coffeepot, then put the mugs back into the cabinet before she leaned against the counter and studied me. “Then why do you think she’s here?”

I slowly shook my head. “I don’t know. My first guess is money.”

“Does she have any legal recourse to see Charlie?”

“No, none. As a matter of fact, I need to alert the school that only four people are allowed to check Charlie out. You, me, and my parents.”

“She had to have come here with someone. She didn’t walk to your house in those designer boots and coat.”

I nodded. “I’ll call my brother tomorrow and see if he’s been in contact with her. From what she says, he won’t speak

to her or see her.”

Palmer gave me an understanding smile.

“Thank you for finding her a place,” I said. “You’re nicer than me. I wouldn’t have given two shits if she’d slept under a bridge tonight.”

She pushed off the counter and took a few steps closer to me. “You don’t mean that.”

“The hell I don’t.” I closed my eyes and cursed. “You don’t understand, Palmer. That woman brings out the worst in me. She gave up Charlie without even thinking twice. Which tells me one thing: she’s here for something other than Charlie.”

Her eyes went wide, and for a moment, I saw something cross her face that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. “Do you think she wants you back?”

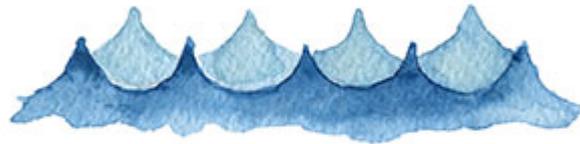
I tossed my head back and laughed. “I highly doubt that. She knows I can’t stand to even be in the same room as her. No, it’s something else. My mom and dad are here, and she knew that and came anyway. She wants us all together for some reason.”

Dropping down onto the sofa, I leaned back and closed my eyes. “Why can’t she stay away from us?”

I felt the couch dip as Palmer sat next to me. She took my hand and gave it a light squeeze. “Don’t stress over this, Mason. It’s been a wonderful day, and I don’t want her to take that away from you.”

Smiling, I kept my eyes closed because it felt so damn good to relax. With Palmer sitting next to me, I could feel myself calming down. “It was an *amazing* day.”

I felt myself slowly relax more and more, until a peaceful contentment finally washed over me.



Chapter Fourteen

Palmer

Oh dear.

I stood and stared at Mason who had fallen asleep on my sofa. And he was in a dead sleep, snoring and all.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and found Mason's number. I knew he'd left his phone in the kitchen at his place, and I was hoping it wasn't on silent. Hitting the green button, I waited for either Jen or Dan to answer.

Jen answered. "Palmer, what's going on? We saw a big truck pull into the driveway and then leave a couple of minutes later."

"That was Tim; he's the husband of my friend, Terri. They own a bed and breakfast in town and I called to see if they had any rooms available for Ashley. Tim offered to come pick her up since he has a truck that can weather the storm."

"And she went with him?" Jen asked in a shocked voice.

"She did indeed, but it wasn't an easy task. Something isn't right, Jen. I have a terrible feeling about that woman."

"I agree, and so does Dan. Is Mason on his way back over to the house?"

I glanced at the sleeping man on my couch and internally sighed. Even while sleeping he was still handsome.

"Well, he kind of sat down on the sofa, leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. I don't think I've ever

seen a person fall asleep so fast. And he's in a deep sleep. Snoring like all get out."

Jen let out a laugh. "I'm not surprised. That boy has never had a problem falling asleep anywhere. Especially when he's tired and stressed. I think it's a coping mechanism, if I'm being honest."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yep. You should have seen me trying to wake him up for school some mornings after he was up nearly all night studying. I don't know how an alarm ever wakes him up."

"What should I do?" I asked. There was no way Mason could spend the night in my house.

"You can leave him there; he'll probably sleep like a log on your sofa."

"He can't stay here!" I practically shouted the words. Lowering my voice, I added, "I mean, that wouldn't look right. I work for him. What if people found out?"

Jen chuckled. "What people? It's a blizzard and your house is behind his. No one would even know he was there."

I brought my thumb up to my mouth and instantly started to chew on my nail. I hadn't really been worried about people finding out, more like I had been worried I would be tempted to join him, and sleeping wasn't on my mind. "I think I'm going to try and wake him up. Maybe spraying some water on his face will do the trick."

The line was silent for a few moments before Jen replied, "Maybe."

"Okay, well, I'll give it a try."

"Sounds good. I'll go ahead and put your number in my phone—it's good for Dan and me to have it, anyway, since you're watching Charlie and all. And because we're most likely moving here, we'll want to keep in touch, I'm sure. For Charlie's sake, I mean."

I could totally hear the sarcasm in her voice.

“Send me a text, and I’ll add yours to my phone as well.”

“Will do! Enjoy your evening.”

Before I could even come up with a response to that, she hung up. A second later, I got a text that simply said *HI*. I saved it and added her name to my contacts.

“Okay,” I said as I turned and faced Mason. “Time to wake you up.”

For the next fifteen minutes, I tried, and failed, to wake up Mason. I was even tempted to slap him across the face at one point.

“You leave me no choice. You have to leave.”

I filled up a cup of water, dipped my fingers into it, and then started flicking it onto Mason’s face.

He stirred and mumbled something about five more minutes.

Leaning down in front of him, I grabbed his shoulders and started to shake him.

“Mason! Wake up! You need to wake up!”

His eyes flew open, and he popped his head up. He looked around, then back to me.

I could see the confusion on his face, so I said, “You fell asleep on my sofa.”

I dropped my hands from his shoulders, stood back, and watched as he ran both his hands down his face and moaned.

“I’m so sorry, Palmer.”

“It’s okay,” I said, kicking at nothing on the floor. “You should probably head back to your house and get some sleep.”

He nodded and stood. “Yeah, probably. Thanks again for helping me with Ashley.”

Smiling, I felt a weird little zip of something run through me. *What was that?* I couldn’t place exactly what it was, so I pushed it aside. “Sure thing. I’m just sorry she caused stress for your family on Christmas.”

He sighed. "I think this is only the beginning."

I reached for his hands and held them in mine. The rush of energy that sizzled between our bodies caused my breath to catch in my throat. "If it helps, I'm here for you and Charlie."

Mason's eyes turned dark as he stared down at me, and my entire body responded in ways I had never experienced before. I felt hot even while I shivered under the intensity of his stare. My stomach pulled with something I couldn't name. It wasn't desire or lust. It was more like a longing. A need. I slowly drew in a breath and held it for a moment, praying I could keep my feet firmly on the ground.

"Thank you," he whispered as he lifted his hand and placed it on the side of my face. I fought the urge to lean into his touch. It would be so easy to do. To get lost in the moment. Then he spoke again, and I felt my resolve to keep things platonic slipping even more.

"I don't know what we would do without you, Palmer."

I tried to come up with some witty reply, but the words stuck in my throat. I was held captive by the bubble that had formed around us. For that moment, it was only the two of us.

The gold and green specks in his eyes danced as he searched my face for something. Permission, maybe? To act on this intense feeling between us? For me to tell him to leave? It was all beginning to be too much. I felt like I was drowning in a sea of so many different emotions.

Then it happened.

Mason leaned down as I lifted my head, and our lips met. The kiss was so soft and tender, I nearly started to cry. Or maybe it was because I had been wanting this again so badly since last October.

His hand slipped into my hair, and I placed mine on his chest, fighting the urge to wrap my arms around his neck.

Mason broke the kiss, then leaned his forehead to mine as he whispered, "I'm sorry."

I closed my eyes. I wanted to tell him not to apologize. That I'd wanted that kiss as much as he did, if not more.

Instead, I took a step back, giving us both the distance we needed.

Mason turned and grabbed his coat, slipping it on while we both remained silent. He reached for the door, stopped, and said, "Thank you for today."

And then he was gone. I couldn't even find the words to speak before he slipped out the door and I was left standing there.

I brought my fingers up to my lips and gently touched them. Then I collapsed down onto the sofa and stared at the Christmas tree in the corner of the room.

"Oh, Palmer. You've gone and fallen in love with him."



The day after Christmas, I avoided Mason the best I could. The snow had let up and most of the streets had been cleared, so I left to go check on my parents. After that, I swung by my sisters' houses and left gifts and then went to Braxton's. By the time I got back, Charlie had called me and asked if he could come over so we could paint.

I was relieved when I opened the door to see Jen standing there. When Charlie went off to set up his paints, Jen pulled me to the side and said that Mason was meeting with Ashley that afternoon, since he was heading back to work tomorrow.

"Is she coming to the house?" I asked softly.

Jen shook her head. "They're meeting at the Seaside Grill."

"My parents' place?" I asked in a stunned voice.

My shock clearly took Jen by surprise, because she frowned and gave me a questioning look. "Yes. Is that a

problem?”

I shook my head. “No, of course not.”

After Jen left, Charlie and I spent a good amount of time deciding what he wanted his first project with his new paints to be. We still had the school project to work on as well, but he wanted to do something special for his grammy and granddad. After deciding on a sunset, we got to work painting until it was time for Jen to pick up Charlie for dinner.

“Would you like to come over for dinner?” she asked while she bundled him up.

Every part of my body wanted to scream *yes*. I wanted to see Mason and hear about what happened with Ashley, but for once, my brain won out. “Thank you for asking, but I ate a late lunch with my brother. I appreciate the invite though.”

Jen looked disappointed for a beat, but then covered it with a grin. “Another time then?”

“Yes,” I said as I nodded. “Another time for sure.”

Two days after Christmas, I found myself helping my folks out at the restaurant during the breakfast shift, since Mom was still feeling under the weather. When the bell above the door rang, I looked up and smiled.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Braxton as he walked to the counter and sat down. I slid a cup of a coffee in his direction.

“So much better. I stopped by and checked on Mom.”

“And? How is she?”

He chuckled. “She was snuggled up on the sofa reading a book. A small part of me thinks she’s feeling a lot better but is taking advantage of a few days off.”

“I don’t blame her, to be honest. I wish Mom and Dad would seriously consider retiring.”

Brax took a drink of his coffee. “I suspect once Addie and Sutton have the babies, they will. They’re going to want to spend time with the grandkids.”

“I think you’re right. That might be the thing to get them to finally sell this place to Rosey.”

The bell above the door rang again, and I glanced up to see Sutton enter. When she spied us, she raced over.

“Have you seen it?” she asked.

My stomach dropped when I saw the newspaper in her hand.

“Seen what?” Brax asked.

Sutton put the paper down on the counter, took off her coat, then sat down. “I’ll take a hot tea, please.”

I stared at her. “Do you really think I’m going to go get you something when you slap the paper down on the counter and tease me like that? The only reason you’d ask us if we’ve ‘seen it’ is if a special edition of the stupid column came out.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. I’ll get my own tea.”

“Christ,” Brax mumbled as he opened the paper and found the column.

“What does it say?” I demanded while he narrowed his eyes and read. When he didn’t say anything, I asked again, “What does it say?!”

He looked up, sighed, then slid it over to me. I snatched it up and read.

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLE

December 27, 2022

***CREATING A WAKE – SPECIAL
EDITION***

Seasiders,

It was a busy holiday for some folks in the area. I had a hard time trying to figure out what to report in this special edition. Both pieces of news will be causing a bit of a wake, there's no doubt about it. So I'll get right to it.

At a Christmas party his parents put on, Deacon Parker was overheard saying that he intends to open a fishing charter business come spring. Now, as we all know, Seaside already has a successful fishing charter that Mr. Braxton Bradley owns and runs. A little seagull planted in my ear that Mr. Parker stated he could do a better job at it than Mr. Bradley. Now, I, like you, enjoy a good piece of gossip, but this is downright wrong as everyone knows Mr. Parker couldn't catch a fish if someone put it on his line. Consider this a heads up to Seaside's very own Catch of the Season to watch his back.

I also heard out on the docks that our town doctor might have had a blast from the past pay him a visit. Dr. Zaddy... er...Dr. Bryan was seen the day after Christmas in the Seaside Grill having a heated conversation with a beautiful brunette with striking blue eyes. I'm told someone overheard a bit of the conversation, and it led them to believe that the mystery woman—who, I might add, is still in Seaside—is none other than the doc's ex-wife. Yikes, did we just discover another love triangle in our small little town?

Stay tuned as I keep my ear to the docks.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

I nearly let out a scream as I looked up at my brother. Sutton leaned over to Brax and said, "I ordered your usual breakfast for you."

Brax gave her a head nod. "Thanks, sis."

"Love triangle? *Love. Triangle?*" I ground out between clenched teeth.

Sutton nodded. "I thought that part was interesting too. At least she didn't mention you spent Christmas with Mason and his family."

I slowly shook my head. "She didn't mention it because no one knows except you guys and Harlee." Focusing back on Brax, I nearly reached across the counter and slapped him. "Why are you smiling?"

He shrugged. "I didn't know I was."

"Well, you were."

Sutton giggled. "Maybe it's because for the first time, Ms. Seaside took his side."

He turned to Sutton. "She did, didn't she?"

After taking a sip of her tea, she put it down and replied, "She sure did. I found that interesting as well. Seems to me, Ms. Seaside doesn't care for Deacon. Or at least, she likes you better than him."

I narrowed my eyes at them. "Okay, but can we get back to the fact that she knows Ashley is Mason's ex? Why would she write that? And why does she have to bring stupid Deacon in on all of this?"

My two siblings both shrugged before Brax said, "Because it's gossip and that's what she writes, Palmer. Are you okay?"

"Yes! No! I...I don't know."

They both stared at me like I'd grown two heads. I exhaled. "I'm worried about Charlie. I don't want people to start gossiping about him and his family when he's trying to get settled in."

Sutton raised one brow. "Is it just Charlie you're worried about?"

"Of course it is," I snapped back a little too quickly. Deciding to change the way the conversation was going, I looked at Brax. "We need to find out who this is."

"Agreed."

The bell rang, indicating an order was up. “I’ll be right back,” I said, then dashed to pick up the food and drop it off at a table. After refilling a few cups of coffee, getting orange juice cleaned up that a five-year-old spilled, and trying to explain to Mrs. Parsons that I already knew her grandson, Blake, was single and handsome, I finally made my way back to Sutton and Brax. Their breakfasts were in front of them, and they were both eating.

“Okay, I haven’t had time to do any leg work,” I said. “Brax, what about you? It’s your off season, so you should be gaining more ground than me.”

He wiped his mouth and nodded. “I do have a bit of information.”

Hope filled my chest. “Tell us!”

After glancing around to make sure no one was listening, he leaned in. Sutton and I did the same. “I sat outside the *Chronicle* last week and this week.”

“Okay...” Sutton and I both said.

“Harlee was right: a different guy runs the column in every day. I never saw the same person coming and going around the same time. That was...until yesterday.”

I couldn’t help it—I gasped. “Go on!”

He laughed and picked up his fork. “I saw the same guy, pretty sure his name is Jet, yesterday that I saw last Wednesday. He wasn’t carrying anything, but that doesn’t matter; I’m guessing she types up her articles on a single sheet of paper since they’re all kind of short. Anyway, I watched him walk into the *Chronicle*, then fifteen minutes later, he walked out with Mr. Tilson.”

“Harlee’s dad,” Sutton whispered.

“Yes. They parted ways, and I followed the guy.”

“Where did he go?” I asked.

A smile twitched at the corner of Braxton’s mouth, and I knew he was enjoying teasing us.

Suddenly, he said, “Ouch! Damn it, Sutton, that hurt!”

“Stop playing around, and I won’t have to kick you.”

I smiled and high-fived my sister before focusing back on Brax. “What happened next? Where did he go? Who did he meet?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I was three cars behind him, and they wouldn’t let me on the ferry. It was full by the time I got there.”

“Crap!” I said, then looked around to make sure no one heard me. “Okay, well, if that was a courier, that means he also takes the ferry on Wednesdays.”

Brax nodded. “Assuming he takes the ferry each Wednesday, but we don’t know that for sure.”

I nodded.

“I was thinking of parking and watching everyone come and go. If I see someone I recognize from my time spent watching the offices at the paper, I’ll follow them.”

Pointing to him and smiling, I said, “That’s a great idea!”

Suddenly, Sutton said, “The lighthouse. Didn’t Harlee once mention something about the lighthouse?”

Brax and I looked at each other and then back at Sutton. I shook my head. “Not that I’m aware of. I honestly don’t remember her saying anything about it.”

Sutton sat back. “Hmmm. For some reason, the lighthouse feels like the place you need to be.”

“It’s worth looking into, especially since he headed over on the ferry,” Brax said. “If I don’t catch anyone I know tomorrow, then I’ll go and hang out at the lighthouse next week.”

A thought hit me. “I have a better idea. You watch the *Chronicle*, and I’ll head out to the lighthouse. Maybe I’ll even take Charlie. He might like it.”

“You want to take a kid to the lighthouse in the middle of winter?” Brax asked.

I frowned. “I didn’t think about that. Okay, maybe you should be the one to check out the lighthouse.”

In that moment, I heard the door open and looked up to see Ashley walking in.

I immediately dropped down below the counter and hid. I had no idea why I hadn’t wanted her to see me. I could care less what people thought of me, but for some unknown and confusing reason, I dropped like a rock.

Brax leaned over the counter. “Um, Palmer? Is everything okay?”

“No!” I whisper-shouted. “Mason’s ex just walked in!”

Brax disappeared, and when I looked back up, I saw my father standing there, his hands on his hips. “What in the hell are you doing?”

I put my finger to my lips. With a roll of his eyes, he spun on his heels and headed back toward the kitchen. I heard him shout, “Sue, I need you to take over Palmer’s tables!”

It was like high school all over again. One day, Deacon had come into the restaurant, and I’d panicked that he would see me waiting tables. I’d done the exact same thing, and my father had covered for me. I wasn’t sure why I didn’t want Ashley to see me working at the restaurant. I had never in my life—with the exception of Deacon that one time—been embarrassed by what I did for a living. And that included working at my parents’ restaurant. All four of us kids helped out from time to time. Why was it different with this woman? Maybe with Ashley a part of me had cared. Ugh. I was going to be up all night replaying all this shit in my head.

Sue walked out and looked down at me. “Section six,” I whispered.

She drew in a breath and exhaled. “I know I’ve worked here too long when this doesn’t faze me at all.”

“Thanks, Sue!” I said with a wide grin. “You can have all my tips from earlier.”

She walked off, and I slowly stood and scanned the restaurant. Ruby was waiting on Ashley in the back corner. I hurried around the counter and sat down next to Sutton.

“Okay, what’s going on? You’ve never been embarrassed to be seen working here before,” Sutton said with a worried look on her face.

Brax whispered, “It’s Mason’s ex.”

“Where!” Sutton nearly shouted.

“Oh my God. Does being pregnant make your brain not properly function?” I asked.

She stuck her tongue out at me. Then she frowned. “You know, Harlee asked me the same thing yesterday when we were at the store.”

I rolled my eyes and peeked over my shoulder. Ashley was still alone and looking at the menu. “Why is she still in town?” I mumbled.

“When did she get here?” Sutton asked.

I turned back around. “Christmas evening. I was still at Mason’s place when she showed up. She claimed she wanted to see Charlie, but Mason and his parents think she’s here for another reason. She said she didn’t have a room booked and wanted to stay at Mason’s.”

“Wow, that’s rude,” Brax stated.

Nodding, I replied, “I know. I arranged for her to stay at Seaside Bed and Breakfast. She only stayed one night.”

“And how do you know that?” Sutton asked with a curious look in her eyes.

“I talked to Terri, and she told me Ashley left the next morning.”

“Have you asked Mason?” Brax asked.

“No, I’ve been avoid...” My words trailed off.

“Avoiding him?” Sutton asked as she bumped my arm. “And why is that, baby sister?”

Sue stopped in front of me. “Food or drink?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks, Sue.”

She winked, grabbed the pot of coffee, and left.

I turned back to my siblings. “Now is not the time or place to talk about why I’m avoiding him.”

“How do you avoid your boss?” Brax asked.

I shot him a glare. “I’m not watching Charlie right now because it’s winter break and Mason’s mom and dad are here. So it’s easy to avoid him.”

“And when they leave?” Sutton asked.

The bell on the door rang again, but I was too lost in Sutton’s question to pay attention to who’d entered the restaurant.

Brax let out a soft chuckle. “Well, looks like you might have to jump and hide behind the counter again. Mason just walked in.”

“What?” I whisper-shouted as I peeked over my shoulder. My heart dropped as I watched him walk over to Ashley and slide into the booth across from her. “They’re meeting again?”

“Ms. Seaside will love this. Especially if she finds out you dropped to the floor and hid from Ashley,” Sutton said with a giggle.

I closed my eyes and cursed.

“The way I see it is, you have two options, Palmer,” Brax started. “You don’t let it show that them being here together bothers you. Or—”

“Wait,” I said as I held up my hand to stop him. “I’m not bothered that they’re here together.”

Both Sutton and Braxton gave me a look that said they were calling bullshit.

I implored myself to speak clear and strong. “I’m not bothered that they’re here together.”

“Riiiiight,” Sutton mused.

“I’m not!” I insisted.

Sutton looked past me toward Mason and Ashley. “Then go on over and say hi.”

“Why would I do that?”

She shrugged.

“Okay, as fun as this is, I need to get going. I’ve got some repairs to do on one of my boats.” Braxton stood, dropped his napkin down, then pulled out some money and left it on the counter. We always ate for free but made sure to leave a good tip. I almost got up and started to clear his plate and cup, but Sue beat me to it.

“Have a good one, Braxton!” she said with a wide smile and wink.

“You too, Sue.”

Turning to face me and Sutton, he gave us one of those sweet brotherly grins of his. “Palmer, I’ve never in my life seen you so rattled. Maybe it’s time to admit how you really feel.”

My mouth fell open as I watched my brother give Sutton a kiss on the forehead, grab his coat, and head out.

“Did our brother give me advice about...feelings?” I asked.

Sutton giggled. “I believe he did. And I must admit, I think he’s right, Palmer. You haven’t been acting like yourself since Mason Bryan moved to town.”

I wanted to cross my arms over my chest and pout, but instead I harrumphed.

“Palmer.”

His voice sent shivers down my back, and I was pretty sure I stiffened like a board.

Turning, I forced myself to play it cool. “Hey, Mason. How are you?”

He smiled, and I felt that familiar flutter in my stomach. I fought the urge to press my hand to my midsection. “I’m good. I’ve been trying to get ahold of you. Did you get my text?”

“About talking?”

“Yes,” he said. “Are you free now?”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is when the ugly green monster decided to show up.

My gaze drifted past him, and I met Ashley’s cold stare. “Aren’t you eating with Ashley?”

Sutton cleared her throat, causing me to jerk my eyes back to Mason.

He smiled again, but that was the only thing he did. His eyes were void of any emotion at all.

“I was speaking with her, but I declined her invitation for breakfast.”

“Oh,” I said, because it was the only thing my stupid brain could come up with.

“Don’t tell Mom and Dad I even suggested this,” Sutton started. “But there’s that new little breakfast place down by the pier. It has a beautiful view of the bay, and I bet with all the snow we’ve gotten, the beach looks stunning. I heard their breakfast tacos are to die for.”

Mason looked at Sutton. “Addie was telling me about that place. They’re only open for breakfast, but they also do lunch on the weekends. I think she said it’s called Taco Hut.”

Sutton pointed at Mason. “Yes! That’s it. And Palmer here was commenting on how hungry she is.”

“I was?” I asked in a sarcastic tone.

Sutton elbowed me. “Yes, you were.”

I shrugged. “Apparently, I’m starving. I will admit, a breakfast taco does sound rather good right now.”

Mason’s eyes lit up. “Great. I’ll drive, if you’re okay with that.”

“Let me grab my jacket and stuff, and I’ll be right back.”

Trying to walk normally instead of dashing to the back office, I casually strolled through the kitchen. Once I got to my parents’ office, I pulled my coat and hat on and grabbed my gloves.

When I spun around, I screamed.

My father clutched at his chest. “Jesus, Mary, and all the saints, Palmer! Do you want to give me another heart attack?”

“Dad, oh my God! Are you okay?”

He nodded and then shook his head. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Oh. I was going to, ahhh...”

“Leave?”

“If that’s okay? Sue seems to be good with covering my tables. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. Where are you and Mason headed off to?”

I went to speak but couldn’t. I simply stood there with a blank expression.

He smirked. “Cat got your tongue?”

Because I was the youngest, and I knew my father was fully aware of what I was doing, I confessed my sin.

“I’m going to Taco Hut with Mason for breakfast tacos.”

My father closed his eyes, drew in a long, deep breath, and then snapped them open again. “Bring me back two bacon, egg, and potato tacos—and I want the green sauce.”

My mouth fell open and stayed open until my father reached over and shut it with his finger. “Hurry before I put you back to work.”



Chapter Fifteen

Mason

The ride to Taco Hut was silent for the first few minutes before Palmer clearly couldn't take it anymore.

“Why is she here? Does Charlie know she's here? Has she demanded to see him again?”

I fought to keep from smiling as I answered each question. “She refuses to leave. She claims it's because I won't let her see Charlie, but I know better.”

“You're sure that's not why?”

I nodded. “As for your second question, no, Charlie does not know she's here, and I want to keep it that way. I think my first answer covered your last question.”

“I'm so sorry she's causing you stress. Why did you meet up with her this morning?”

“I was actually looking for *you*.”

She snapped her head in my direction. “You were looking for me?”

“Yep,” I said as I put my turn signal on and pulled into the parking lot. “Addie told me you were covering a shift this morning. We didn't have any patients scheduled, so I thought maybe we could talk since you've been avoiding me.”

“I have not!”

I laughed. “Palmer, I've called, I've stopped by your place, *and* I've texted you. I haven't heard from you since the night

of Christmas.”

“I’ve been...busy.”

I put the car in park and unbuckled to face her. “Doing what?”

“Doing what?”

“Yes, Palmer, doing what?”

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out so she shut it, opened the door, and got out. Laughing, I followed suit.

Once we were inside the Taco Hut, we both ordered and then went and sat down at a table. There were three other couples in the place, all on the other side of the restaurant.

After Palmer took a sip of the Diet Pepsi she’d ordered, she sat back. “Did you see today’s paper?”

I internally winced. “I did.”

“A love triangle. I mean, really?”

“Why do you let it bother you so much? Who cares what people think?”

“I worry about Charlie.”

I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. She tried to pull it back as she looked around nervously.

“Palmer, look at me.”

Reluctantly, she did.

“Charlie is fine. I’m fine. No one’s getting hurt because of a gossip column.”

“For now.”

“No, not for now. Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?”

Her eyes searched my face as she stalled for time.

“Don’t think so hard and be honest with me,” I said. “Please.”

“We can’t be anything more than friends, Mason.”

I gave her an incredulous look. “Why not?”

She blinked a few times. “I work for you.”

Laughing, I replied, “You’re Charlie’s nanny.”

Pointing at me, she replied, “Exactly, Mason!”

“What does that have to do with you and me?”

I let go of her hand when she dropped back in her seat. “What if things don’t work out? Then what? I really, really adore Charlie, and I honestly wasn’t expecting to love being his nanny as much as I do. I don’t want to jeopardize that.”

It was my turn to sit back and give her a long hard look. “You were fighting this attraction even before you were his nanny. Why?”

She drew in a breath and then slowly exhaled before her eyes met mine. “I won’t lie to either of us—the first time I saw you, I was attracted to you. Then the more I got to know you, the less I could ignore those feelings. I haven’t had much luck when it comes to the men I’ve been with. I’ve always had this idea of what a relationship should look like, and that was modeled after my own parents’ relationship. Then I see your mom and dad and...I want that, but I don’t think I’ll ever get it. I mean it, I have *zero* luck with guys. Did you meet Deacon? He’s one example of the huge mistakes I’ve made in my past.”

“Um, hello, have you met my ex-wife? She slept with my *brother*, and I had to wait her entire pregnancy to find out if Charlie was my son. She wouldn’t agree to do the invasive test to find out ahead of time.”

She gave me a soft smile.

“Palmer, we all go through bad relationships, but that shouldn’t scare you off from ever trying again. What happened to us in the past doesn’t mean it will happen again. Maybe this thing between us goes somewhere, maybe it doesn’t. Don’t you think we should at least try and see where it takes us? I know I want to.”

Chewing on her lip, Palmer leaned in closer and lowered her voice. “Mason, I’ve never...I’ve never...” Sighing, she closed her eyes for a moment and cursed. “Damn it. I’ve never

felt this way about *anyone* before. Yes, I've felt attraction, lust, desire, longing. I once even thought I was in love. But with you...it's like I feel you there before I see you. I think about you when you're not with me and wonder what you're doing. I look at your son and I see *you*, and it makes my heart actually flutter."

"And that's...bad?" I asked with a bit of hesitation.

"Yes! I've never felt like this about any guy, let alone a guy who has a kid. There's so much more at stake than you and me. Charlie is involved, and that scares me."

"Charlie scares you, or me being a single dad scares you?"

She swallowed hard. "It's you, Mason. *You* scare me. I know in here," she pointed to her chest, "that if I gave you and Charlie my heart and things didn't work out, I would be destroyed. That scares me. Because with you it's..." Her words drifted off.

"Different?"

Her eyes snapped up to meet mine, and she said one word that would forever change my life.

"Yes."

I cleared my throat to try and dislodge the emotion that was clogged in there. I wasn't even sure what to say. So, I decided to lay it all out in the open. I was going to take a chance for once, and leap.

"After Ashley, I told myself I wasn't going to open myself up to anyone. Not when I had Charlie to think of. I was doing pretty damn good until you walked up to that table in your parents' restaurant. Your smile had my breath catching in my chest, and the way you looked at Charlie and instantly took to him...it made me feel hopeful for the first time in years. I won't lie either, Palmer. When Addie suggested that you could be Charlie's nanny, I wanted it to happen for purely selfish reasons."

She looked amused. "Why?"

“To have you in my life. *Our* lives. To see you every day, to talk to you about Charlie, and to have a friend. I fought so hard for you to take the job because I didn’t want to ignore what I felt between us. I can honestly say I’ve never felt this way before with anyone, either. Not even Charlie’s mother.”

Palmer blinked rapidly, looking away as her lower lip trembled slightly. She turned back to me, and with the sweetest, most confused expression I’d ever seen, whispered, “I’m still scared.”

I put my hand out for hers, waiting for her to make the next move. When she did, folding her hand around mine, I felt my heart jump in my chest. A bubble of excitement nearly exploded from my body, but I held it back.

“I am too,” I said. “And if that means we start off slow, then that’s what we’ll do.”

She gave a small nod. “What about the column and the gossip and the threesome?”

Laughing, I squeezed her hand. “I like the little threesome thing we already have going on.”

Her brows shot up, and at the exact same moment, they brought out our tacos. I waited for the waitress to walk away again before I clarified.

“You, me, and Charlie.”

The smile that spread across Palmer’s face was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. And somehow, I knew everything was going to be okay.



“She’s still here, Mason. What are you going to do?”

I put the pot I had dried into the cabinet and turned to face my mother. “I am very aware of that fact, Mom. I also think

she goes to the Seaside Grill every morning for breakfast to see if Palmer is there.”

Her eyes went wide. “Why would she think she’d see Palmer there?”

I sighed and leaned against the counter. “She knows her family owns the place. She also saw the two of us leave from there together the other day.”

A wide grin erupted on her face.

Putting my hand up, I said, “Don’t.”

She faked a confused expression. “Don’t what?”

I lifted a single brow and gave her a look that said *really?*

“Did I say a single word when you went to Palmer’s place for dinner last night?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“And did I say anything when the two of you took Charlie to the park this morning to build a snowman?”

I fought the urge to smile at the memory of us playing in the snow with Charlie at the park. I hadn’t seen Charlie laugh or have that much fun in a long time. Palmer was not only good for my soul, but my son’s as well. “No, you didn’t say a word.”

Mom folded her arms across her chest as if to say she’d proven her point.

“We’re taking it slow, Mom. There’s a lot to consider.”

“As you should. You dove headfirst into something with Ashley, and look what that brought you.”

“A handsome grandson,” my father stated as he walked into the kitchen and kissed my mother on the cheek. “Good morning, darling.”

“Morning, how did you sleep?” Mom asked as she poured my father a cup of coffee.

“Like a baby. I’m going to miss that bed.”

Smiling, I reached for my own coffee and joined my dad at the breakfast table. Through the large window in the breakfast nook, I saw a light snow falling outside. “Have you thought any more about when you’re going to move here?” I asked my parents.

Mom placed a bowl of fruit down in front of my father, who promptly asked for a real meal. She ignored him as she sat down next to him.

“Guess not,” he mumbled, taking a bite.

“Your father and I have talked a lot about it. We were originally thinking this summer, but we’ve so enjoyed spending time with Charlie, and now getting to know Palmer like we have... We think it will happen as soon as we can coordinate everything.”

“Really?” I said with a grin. “Charlie is going to be over the moon.”

“We’ve fallen in love with this little town,” Mom said.

Dad finished chewing. “I’m with your mom. I love watching those giant ships coming in. Crazy to think Adelaide’s husband is steering them.”

Mom perked up. “Oh, I just adore her! You lucked out with hiring her.”

Taking a sip of coffee, I replied, “Tell me about it. I couldn’t run my practice without her. The Bradley sisters are all amazing women.”

Mom was clearly trying not to smile, but I saw the corner of her lip twitch.

Dad sat back in his chair. “Well, since your mother and I have officially decided to make the move to Seaside, we told Lou, our realtor friend. He already has a buyer, and the guy wants to move fast. We’re going to have to leave a bit early and head back to Boston if that’s okay with you. I know you were looking forward to us staying for New Year’s Eve.”

I felt a smile spread over my face. The only hard part about moving to Seaside in the first place had been leaving my

parents behind. “I’m more than okay with it—if you’re okay with not being here on New Year’s Eve.”

My mother reached her hand across the table for mine. “You truly are the sweetest boy. I know we told Charlie we would have a little family party, but I think you and Palmer can handle doing a little something with him. And since we spent Christmas here, it’s only fair to see Nick for New Year’s. Apparently he’s seeing someone and really wants to introduce us to her.”

“Really?” I said. “Well, hopefully she’s a step up from Ashley. And Charlie will be happy to have you here full time. The quicker you can get here, the better. You know you can stay here as long as you need until you find a place.”

“Thank you for offering, but your father and I already found a house for sale right on the beach.”

“You’ve been looking?” I asked.

She nodded. “Since the third day we were here.”

Dad chuckled as he added, “And you’ll never guess who it belongs to.”

I gave them a questioning look. “Who?”

Dad replied, “Adelaide’s sister and brother in-law, Sutton and Brody. Apparently, Brody had the house before they were married, and they’ve decided to make Sutton’s home their own.”

“Mom, Dad...this is great! You’ve always said you wanted to live on the beach.”

They turned to one another and smiled. “We’re pretty excited about it. We sent them an offer yesterday—and they accepted.”

“Charlie’s going to be thrilled,” I said as I stood to give them each a hug. “I’m so happy, you have no idea.”

After a round of hugs, we all sat back down and the conversation turned more serious.

“We haven’t—” Mom started, then cleared her throat. “We haven’t told Nick we’re going to be moving.”

Even though Nick had hurt me badly, he was still my brother. “He should be fine with it. After all, he’s traveling all over the place with this job. Why would it matter?”

That made my mother’s eyes tear up. “Boston is still his home. With us leaving, he’ll be there alone when he does come home.”

I nodded. “I get that.”

Mom gave Dad a look, and something passed between them before they focused back on me.

“Back to the original conversation we were having before your father got here,” Mom said. “Ashley. Mason, I’m afraid she’s here to cause problems for you.”

“It’s a free country, Mom, I can’t make her leave.”

“What about Charlie?” she asked.

“Once he goes back to school in the new year, I’m going to warn them about her. Now that she knows where we are, I think it’s for the best.”

“I wish she’d come out and admit why she’s here,” Dad stated.

I huffed. “You and me both. But she likes playing games, and I’m pretty sure she’s figured out that Palmer and I are more than friends.”

Mom smiled. “Well, it’s obvious to anyone who sees the way the two of you look at each other.”

Dad added, “Not to mention the fact that Palmer is Charlie’s nanny, and the two of them are growing closer. That probably doesn’t sit well with Ashley, either.”

I sighed as I rubbed the back of my neck. “But she gave him up. She didn’t want to be a part of his life. Why now? When I’ve moved away and started fresh and have finally found...”

My words drifted off. What had I found? Success with my medical practice. Joy watching Charlie thrive in his new school. And then there was Palmer. My heart started to race as I thought about what life would be like with her in it. And as something more than just Charlie's nanny and my friend.

“When you've finally found what?” my father asked.

I answered with one word that summed it all up. “Happiness.”



Chapter Sixteen

Palmer

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

December 31, 2022

IF WISHES WERE FISHES – SPECIAL EDITION

Seasiders,

Another year has come to an end and I, for one, am excited to see what lies ahead for the wonderful residents of Seaside in the coming year. I do hope that all the wishes you make tonight at midnight come true for you! Don't forget the Seaside tradition of going to the end of the pier and tossing in your wish with a fish—but please remember that we use small bait fish for this wishing process. Someone from Seaside PD will be on hand to make sure we don't have a repeat of last year. Yes, I'm talking about the person who attempted to toss a small wishing well into the ocean. That's littering, and we're not about that. Please respect this tradition that has been in place since our little town was founded in 1762.

Speaking of wishing...I wish Palmer Bradley and Mason Bryan (also known as Dr. Zaddy) would get on with it already! They've been spotted numerous times out together—both with sweet little Charlie Bryan and without—yet they would like for everyone to think they're simply friends. But, from this writer's POV, there's something there beyond friendship. Consider this the gentle nudge everyone else is too afraid to give them. After all, this writer believes in love—and love is indeed in the air when those two are within fifty feet of one another.

Now, back to the chatter of Deacon Parker starting his own charter business. I'm happy to report that he has already changed his mind and is currently working for Don Michaels, who you all know runs the local shrimping boats. Maybe Deacon realized there's more to owning a charter business than meets the eye. It also appears his attempts to win back Palmer Bradley have either failed, or he has since moved on. Knowing him like I do, I'm going with the latter.

Enjoy your New Year's Eve parties, my fishes! And just know, I'll have my little seagulls out and about this evening to catch every secret moment.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

I ran up the steps to Braxton's house and rang the doorbell. I was about to pound on the door with my fist when it finally opened, and my brother stood there looking at me like I'd lost my mind.

“Jesus Christ, Palmer. What in the hell time is it?”

Brushing past him, I rushed in. “It's eight.”

He sighed and shut the door as he mumbled curse words under his breath.

“Did you go out last night?”

Glancing back at me like I was an idiot, he replied, “Hello, it’s New Year’s Eve.”

“Last night wasn’t.”

He dropped onto his sofa and let his head fall back. “Whatever, Palmer. It’s the weekend. It was Friday, I went to a New Year’s Eve-Eve party and got drunk out of my mind. My head is pounding, and you better have a damn good reason for being here so fucking early.”

“I found a clue.”

Lifting his head, Braxton opened one eye. “What are you talking about?”

I rushed over and sat on the coffee table before handing Brax this morning’s special edition column. “Ms. Seaside. She gave a huge clue to her identity, but I think she didn’t mean to. It was a slip-up.”

That made him perk up. “She did?”

“Yes!” I said, nearly bouncing on the table.

Brax sighed and said, “Let me get some coffee. I can’t deal with you right now without at least some coffee and an Advil...or five.”

I waited patiently while my brother made some coffee, put on sweatpants and a long-sleeve shirt, and then made some oatmeal to go with his orange juice and vodka and three Advil.

“I’m sorry, but does drinking alcohol really help recover from a hangover?” I asked.

He shrugged as we sat at his dining table. “It works for me, and that’s all I care about. Okay, I’m ready now.”

“It’s about damn time! Okay, here, read this.”

I slid the newspaper across to Brax. After he read the first paragraph, he looked up at me with an odd expression on his face.

“What?” I asked.

He frowned, then shook his head and said, “Nothing,” and kept reading. Then his eyes shot up as he looked at me again. “She knows Deacon.”

I nodded frantically. “*Well*. She knows him *well*. This means she’s for sure a local resident—which I think we all knew at this point. But she also revealed something else.”

“She has to be younger.”

With one finger on my nose, I pointed at him with my other hand. “Bingo! She might be around my age. I mean, if she knows Deacon well, and knows what a complete, uncommitted buffoon he is, then she knew him before he went into the military, when we dated.”

“Okay,” Brax said as he stood and paced. “And you don’t think it’s Kimberley? She’s a huge gossip.”

“She is, but Brax, she can hardly string five complete sentences together. And I’m not trying to be mean; she only made it through high school because she was sleeping with the assistant principal.”

My brother gasped. He legit gasped like a girl. “She was?”

Laughing, I pointed back to the column. “Let’s focus on this more and less on Kim. It’s not her.”

“She could be having someone else write it using her notes.”

My shoulders sagged for a moment as I let that sink in. Why was I so adamant that it couldn’t be Kim? Would I be bothered if it was? I tilted my head as I thought about it. The idea that it could be someone I knew on a personal level never really crossed my mind.

“It’s possible,” I finally said. “But I highly, highly doubt it. Oh! Wait. Kim isn’t even in town. She’s been on a cruise with her boyfriend for the last three weeks. They’re over in Europe somewhere.”

Brax looked almost disappointed.

“Were you hoping it was her?” I asked.

He shrugged, then looked back down at the paper. “What about Olivia Newman?”

“Olivia? She’s older than me.”

“That doesn’t matter. She dated Deacon when you two were on one of your breaks.”

I blinked a few times as I let the idea take root. “Olivia... Newman. It would make sense, considering Ms. Seaside went after Adelaide and Gannon so hard. And she liked Brody, so it would make sense that she fixated on them, as well.” Looking at my brother, I asked, “Did you ever date her?”

“Hell no. I can’t stand her. But she’s come on to me plenty of times and was never happy when I rejected her.”

I pressed my hand to my mouth. “Oh my gosh. It fits with how she’s talked about you in the past. I mean, it’s pretty clear Ms. Seaside can’t stand you.”

“Hey, that’s being a little harsh, isn’t it?”

I raised a single brow. “Is it? She doesn’t like you, Brax.”

“No, she doesn’t like me. But...” His words trailed off.

“But what?”

With a half shrug and smug look on his face, he went on. “I have pissed off a few women in this town. I mean, I can’t help it if so many of them want to conquer all that is Braxton Bradley.”

I fake gagged. “Please.”

“I think we need to put Olivia in the maybe pile.”

Nodding, I said, “Okay, she’s in the maybe pile. What about Laney Reynolds, the cashier at the grocery store?”

Brax thought about it for a moment. “I think she’s a bit too young. She *would* hear a lot of gossip though, from people coming through her check-out line. Yeah, I think she should be in the maybe pile as well.”

I pulled out my phone and started to make a list. “Okay, so far we have Olivia and Laney. Mom is convinced it’s Mrs.

Pritcher, the librarian.”

Brax thought about it and nodded. “I can see that.”

“Maybe column?”

“I think so.”

We sat quietly for a few moments before I said, “I still think it could be Mr. Hall. He’s worse than Kimberley.”

“And he could be signing it Ms. Seaside to throw people off.”

“Yes!” I nearly shouted.

“Although, Ms. Seaside has written about Mr. Hall before.”

I frowned, then smiled. “Could be another tactic to throw us off his trail.”

“That’s true. Let’s put him on the maybe list.”

I hastily typed in his name.

“Hey, Palmer...what if this turns out to be someone we know?”

Pausing, I met his gaze. “I don’t think it’s a question of if; I think we *do* know them. There have been a few times where I’m not sure how they got their information.”

He nodded, and that look of unease appeared on his face once more. “Unless they really do have a bunch of eyes and ears out there.”

“I have no doubt in my mind that there are a few people on her payroll.”

Brax rubbed his temples, like he was thinking hard on something. “Maybe we don’t need to know who it is.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “Yes, we do. Did you not notice that she wrote about me and Mason again?”

He lifted his brows. “She’s right though. It’s pretty damn clear you two like each other.”

I sent him a glare. “You’re supposed to be on my side, Brax.”

“I *am* on your side, Palmer. But let’s be honest, nearly everything she writes is true—at least to an extent.”

“That doesn’t excuse the rest. She assumes things and plants things in people’s ears. She’s a gossip, Brax! One who has set her sights on our family.”

He sighed. “Not just our family. She talks about other people as well. Even Harlee, who everyone in this town loves.”

I dropped back and exhaled. “So, you’re saying you don’t want to find out who it is anymore? Is it because they stood up for you with the whole Deacon thing?”

Brax let out a boom of laughter. “Like I was afraid of Deacon. I *also* know him, and I wasn’t the least bit concerned about what that idiot was going to do. I’m glad he’s leaving you alone.”

Nodding, I replied, “I think that has to do with Mason. He thinks we’re together.”

My brother raised his brow in question. “And are you?”

“We’re seeing where things go.”

He smirked. “What does that mean?”

“It means, we’re taking things slow.” I closed my eyes and got ready to be honest with my brother. But before I spoke, I glanced around his house and took in how clean everything was. I never really noticed that my brother was a neat freak.

“You’re stalling.”

I let out a soft chuckle and looked at Brax. “I do like him. I think I’ve liked him since the first moment I spoke to him, if I’m being completely honest.”

“It’s obvious he feels the same way.”

Nodding, I said, “I don’t know how to explain it, Brax—this feeling I feel for Mason.” I rubbed my chest. “It’s like

nothing I've ever felt before. It scares me and excites me at the same time. I'm just worried."

He leaned forward and gave me a knowing smile. "Because it feels so different?"

"Yes," I replied. "And then there's Charlie to think about."

Brax got up and walked around the table to me. He sat down and took my hand in his. For some odd reason, tears pricked at the back of my eyes. I loved my brother, and he was never the type to hide his emotions. He grew up with three sisters, after all. But there was something in his expression this time. Like he knew exactly what I was talking about.

"Palmer, you're not the woman you were when jerks like Deacon were in your life. You're strong, independent, smart, and one hell of a catch, if you ask me. And Mason... I don't know him all that well, but from the small amount of time I've spent with him, he really seems like a great guy and fantastic father. He has a good head on his shoulders, from what Addie says, and he fiercely loves his son. Anyone can see that.

"Given what I know of the two of you, I highly doubt anyone is going into this on a whim. Go slow, like you said. And let me give you some advice. Just because this thing you have with Mason feels stronger than anything else, and you're worried it might break more than your heart...take the leap, sis. Take it—because if you don't, you're going to have to sit back and watch him move on and know that you might have given up the best thing that ever happened to you."

My heart dropped when I saw the sadness in his eyes. I squeezed his hand and asked, "Who was she?"

He shook his head. "Someone who scared the living shit out of me, so I pushed her away."

I smiled. "I heard love can do that."

He exhaled and laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Yeah, I guess so."

"I'm sorry, Braxton. I'm sorry you didn't take the leap."

His eyes met mine. "So am I, Palmer. So am I."

Clearing my throat, I said, “Okay, well, enough of that heavy emotional stuff. Do you really think we should drop the search for Ms. Seaside?”

Brax gave me a one-shoulder shrug. “I wasn’t able to find out anything when I tried my little stakeout, but we can still keep digging if you want.”

“Maybe we *should* let it rest.”

He nodded.

Smiling, I wrapped my arms around him. “No matter what people say, you’re a good guy, Braxton.”

He pushed me away, then put his hand on my face and laughed. “You are such a brat!”



It was supposed to be a small family party at Mason’s, but when his parents left to head back to Boston early, he asked if I wanted to invite anyone over. Sutton and Brody, Addie and Gannon, Harlee and Thomas, and Braxton and his date, Lynn—along with her five-year-old daughter Reese—all showed up. Charlie and Reese were in the same class, so they had a blast playing together. Clarence, Charlie’s puppy, followed the kids everywhere until he finally passed out around ten. I was honestly surprised that both Charlie and Reese were still going strong at nearly midnight.

Sutton walked up to me, Harlee, and Addie, and smiled. “I have to say, a New Year’s Eve party where I’m not drinking any alcohol isn’t all that bad.”

Addie laughed and held up her sparkling water. “I’ll toast to that.”

“I’m not even pregnant, and I’m not drinking,” Harlee said with a frown. “But that’s because I know Thomas can’t *not* drink.”

“I thought you were going to break up with him,” I said quietly as I looked over to where Thomas and Brax were in deep conversation about the right type of bait for a certain kind of fish.

“We *did* break up.”

Everyone turned and looked at Harlee. A chorus of “You did?” filled the air.

“Yes, but we still decided to be one another’s date on New Year’s Eve.”

Addie nodded. “That makes sense. Was it mutual then?”

“Pretty much,” Harlee said before she took a sip of her drink.

Sutton leaned in more. “Okay, but what’s the deal with Brax dating a single mom?”

We all turned and looked at Lynn, who was staring at Brax like he hung the moon—even though he was still talking about fish.

“That one is a bit shocking, not going to lie,” I said. “I saw him earlier, and he made no mention of the fact that he’s dating someone with a kid.”

“Interesting,” Harlee mused. “Maybe he’s finally ready to settle down.”

“Braxton?” Addie, Sutton, and I all said at once.

Harlee chuckled, then shrugged. “I don’t know. Or maybe he really likes her and doesn’t mind that she has a little one.”

The look on Harlee’s face was one of utter sadness.

Sutton and Addie must have noticed as well, because they glanced at me with confused expressions.

“Harlee, was there ever something between you and Braxton?” I asked.

She looked me directly in the eyes, and I could see the internal conflict that was waging a war in there. But before she could say anything, Lynn walked up.

“It’s almost time, ladies! Grab ahold of the man you want to kiss at midnight,” Lynn said with a wink.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like Lynn. She was nice enough. It was that something felt off—or maybe it was because she didn’t seem like the type of woman Brax would date.

Harlee gave her a polite smile and headed off in the direction of Thomas and Brax.

Addie leaned into me and whispered, “How much do you think Harlee wants to pick Brax over Thomas?”

I turned to face her. “You see it too?”

Sutton huffed. “Please, it’s hard not to notice how they secretly look at each other when they think no one else is watching. I thought Harlee was going to strangle Jennifer on Thanksgiving.”

“Do you think something ever happened between the two of them?” I asked as I looked back over to where Harlee was now standing next to Thomas. When neither of my sisters said anything, I glanced back at them. “What is it?”

Addie chewed on her lower lip before she said, “Harlee would kill me if she knew I said anything.”

“Tell us!” Sutton urged. “Hurry, before the clock strikes midnight!”

“It was one night. That’s all.”

I gasped at the same time Sutton did.

“Harlee and Brax were together? As in, *together-together*?” I asked.

Addie nodded. “Harlee’s had a huge crush on Brax for as long as I can remember. One night at a party, one thing led to another, and they slept together.”

I looked back at Brax, who was currently shooting daggers at Thomas while he whispered something into Harlee’s ear.

“Shut up,” I said softly.

Sutton slowly shook her head. “I never knew.”

“It didn’t end well. Apparently, Harlee was open about her feelings for Brax, and he told her he didn’t feel the same way. That it was just sex for him and nothing more. Her heart was broken. I was so angry with Brax at the time, but you can’t make someone want to be with someone else.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” Sutton mused. “Talk about me and Brady 2.0.”

We all nodded.

“Poor Harlee,” I mumbled, right before I saw Mason heading my way.

“It’s almost countdown time, ladies, ready to ring in this new year?” Mason asked as he walked up and smiled at me.

“Are Charlie and Reese ready with their sparkling water?”

Mason laughed. “They’re both currently passed out asleep on the sofa in the formal living room.” The rest of us were in the family room with the large TV on, watching the countdown in New York City.

“Come on!” Lynn stated. “It’s almost time.”

“That’s my cue!” Addie said as she made her way over to Gannon, with Sutton right next to her. I watched both of my sisters kiss their husbands and gaze up at them with so much love.

The countdown started, and I turned to face Mason with a grin. “I’ve been thinking about something the last hour. Will this be our first official kiss or our second one?”

“Third. I kissed you at your house on Christmas night.”

“Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen...”

I could feel my stomach twist into knots as my heart raced with the anticipation of kissing Mason again. “I think it should be our first *official* kiss,” I said, “but not our first kiss.”

His brows pulled down as he tried to work that out in his head. Then he laughed.

“Six, five...”

“First official kiss it is then.”

Placing his hands on the sides of my face, he leaned in and stopped right before he touched my lips with his. Everyone yelled out, “Happy New Year!” and Mason looked deeply into my eyes.

“Happy New Year, Palmer.”

Forcing my mouth to form words, I whispered, “Happy New Year, Mason.”

And then he kissed me.

It started off slow and tender, but quickly deepened. My goodness, what a kiss it was. My entire body felt like I was in a free fall, heading right into a beautiful abyss. Our other kisses weren’t anything compared to what I was experiencing now. It was a breathtakingly beautiful experience that I would remember for the rest of my life.

And that was when I knew—Mason Bryan had the power to destroy me, body and soul.

But I was going to take the leap.

When the kiss ended, Mason rested his forehead against mine, both of us breathing as if we’d run a marathon.

“I’m glad we made that our first official kiss,” he said softly as I held onto his arms to keep from dropping straight to the floor.

“Me too,” I replied, focusing on getting my breathing steady and even again. I drew my head back and looked up at him. With a nervous laugh, I said, “I think I need a drink!”

He winked. “I can help with that.”

Slipping my hand in his, he walked over to the makeshift bar, poured a glass of champagne, and handed it to me. I had to force myself not to down the whole thing in one gulp.

“Daddy?”

We both turned to see Charlie standing in the doorway. He yawned. “I’m ready to go to bed now. I don’t think I can wait for the ball to drop.”

I looked up at Mason and waited to see what he would say.

“Okay, buddy. Let’s say goodbye to Reese.”

“She’s still sleeping on the sofa. Can Ms. Palmer take me up to bed?”

My heart melted on the spot, and it only took me a second to reply. “Of course I can, as long as your dad doesn’t mind.”

Mason winked. “I don’t mind at all. Do you want me to come up and say good night in a bit?”

Charlie looked as if he was going to fall over right there. He shook his head, then grabbed my hand and we started toward the steps.

I looked back at Mason and mouthed *sorry*. He simply smiled.

After we made our way upstairs and I helped Charlie brush his teeth, we got settled in bed and I read him a story. I wasn’t two pages in before he was out like a light.

Carefully slipping off the bed, I covered him up, turned off the side light, and tiptoed out of the room. Once downstairs, I found Mason in the kitchen cleaning up.

“Where is everyone?” I asked as I picked up an empty plate that once held cheese and handed it to him.

“They left. Addie and Sutton were exhausted. Harlee seemed a bit off, and Lynn wanted to get Reese to bed, so Braxton took them home.”

I nodded, took out a dish towel, and started to dry the dishes that Mason had already washed.

“I can help you clean up in the morning if you’re tired,” I said. “I’m sure Charlie will still get up early tomorrow morning.”

Mason chuckled. “I’m hoping he’ll sleep in a little.”

“Fingers crossed,” I said as I put a bowl away.

Mason had put on music, and “Always on My Mind” by Elvis came on. He let the dish he was holding slip into the

water as he turned to face me. “Want to dance?”

My stomach fluttered, and I put the dish towel down and took his offered hand. “I would love to.”

One dance led to two, then a lesson in salsa dancing. Four songs and a few drinks later, we were in Mason’s bedroom. I was held aloft against the door in his arms, while he peppered hot kisses down my neck. When his hand moved to my breast and squeezed lightly, I let out a moan from deep in my throat.

“Christ, Palmer, I want you so fucking bad.”

I dropped my head back against the door as I felt a rush of wetness between my legs. The only thing I could manage to say was his name. “Mason!”

My head was screaming for us to slow down. We were moving too fast—after all, hadn’t we both agreed to go slow? And now here we were, in Mason’s bedroom, with his hand moving under my shirt. He yanked my bra down and started to play with my nipple, pulling another moan of pleasure from my throat.

“I need to touch you,” I gasped as I tugged his head forward. “Please, Mason.”

He let me slide down the door. The moment my feet touched the floor, my hands were at his pants while his were trying to pull my shirt over my head. Our movements were fast and jerky, and it felt as if we would expire at any moment if we weren’t skin to skin in the next thirty seconds.

Before I knew it, my pants were off, and Mason was sliding my panties down. My bra was the only thing I still had on—and even that was halfway off since he’d pulled it down.

“I need to taste you, Palmer. *Now.*”

On his knees, he lifted my leg and put it over his shoulder as he caressed me between my legs. I sucked in a breath and had to clamp my hand over my mouth to hold back my cry of pleasure. How in the hell long had it been since a man had touched me?

Clearly too long.

Then his mouth was there. His tongue swept up through the folds and flicked my sensitive bud, and I nearly lost the ability to stand. I reached for him, for the door, for anything I could hold on to. Mason Bryan was licking me like a goddamn ice cream cone, and my entire body was shaking.

“Oh God. Yes. Ma...Ma...Mason!” I cried out as he slipped his fingers inside me. “I can’t...I need to...I...oh my God!”

And then it happened. I came so hard I had to press my hand to my mouth yet again to hold back my screams. The last thing I wanted to do was wake up Charlie.

It was the most intense orgasm of my life. I wasn’t even aware of Mason carrying me over to his bed and dropping me down. He crawled on top of me, and when I was finally able to think, he smiled.

“There’s more where that came from.”

The only thing I could say was, “Good.”

My breathing was labored, but my body started to wind up again as I took in a naked Mason. My eyes went to his cock—and I blinked a few times.

“You’re huge!”

He bent down and kissed my neck, then moved to my nipple, where he abused it in the most amazing way. He looked up, letting my breast drop from his mouth. “Thank you,” he replied with a wicked grin.

“Don’t go thinking I’m some naïve young twit who wonders if it’ll fit or not.”

Mason laughed. “Not in a million years would I think of you like that.”

“Good,” I said as I wrapped my legs around him and drew him closer. “I need you inside me, Mason. Right now.”

“Protection?” he asked.

“On the pill.”

I thought his eyes were going to roll to the back of his head. “Fucking *yes!* I’m not going to last thirty seconds.”

“Well, that will suck.”

Placing his hand between my legs once again, it was his turn to groan. “You’re so wet and ready.”

“Yes, I am, and if you don’t move faster, I’m going to have to give *myself* some pleasure.”

He laughed and moved until he was at my entrance. In one fluid push, he slipped inside. I gasped at the fullness. When I said it had been awhile, it had *been* awhile. The burning sensation of Mason filling me disappeared as he started to move ever so gently.

I hooked my heels over his ass and whispered, “Faster, Mason. Please, go faster.”

He buried his face in my neck. “I’m not going to be able to last long. You feel so amazing. God, Palmer!”

The buildup was coming. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. I arched my back and moved my hips so that our bodies hit together in just the right way.

“Mason! I’m going to come. Faster! God, fuck me harder, Mason!”

“Jesus Christ... Palmer...”

He reached between us, and all it took was him touching my clit and I exploded.

“*Yes,*” I hissed as I fell apart once again, this time with Mason falling right along with me.

Chanting my name over and over as if it were a prayer, Mason shuddered as he came. It was the most intense moment of my life. Only later would I realize I had actually told him to fuck me. Lord, who was I?

Mason held his body weight off me, but he didn’t attempt to move away yet. He captured my mouth with his and our tongues moved in the most beautiful of dances. I had never

been kissed in such a way, and my heart nearly burst from my chest.

“It’s never been like that before,” he said when he finally rested his forehead on mine. “Never.”

I moved my fingers lazily over his back, barely able to get out a sound. “Same.”

He moved off of me and made his way to the bathroom, returning with a warm washcloth so he could clean me up. No man had ever taken the time to tend to me after lovemaking. It was so nice and made me feel even more special.

Then he crawled under the covers and pulled me to him. I drifted off to sleep and dreamt of a family of three walking along the beach as their son picked up seashells.

Happy. I was so incredibly happy—even if we had gone from slow to warp speed in one day.



The warmth of the sunlight hitting my face caused me to stretch and open my eyes—and then I quickly sat up and looked around the room.

Everything from the night before came rushing back.

“Oh no,” I whispered as I closed my eyes tightly and prayed it was all a dream.

I opened one eye and saw that I was still in a room that *wasn't* my bedroom. My other eye opened—and I had to fight the urge to flee as fast as I could. One look at myself and I felt my heart drop to my stomach. I was naked. I *never* slept naked. A light blue sheet was pooled at my waist, and the cool air made my nipples tighten.

Or maybe it was the memory of last night. Or the man sleeping in the bed next to me.

The bed moved, and I held my breath. I heard soft breathing coming from my left.

Slowly turning my head, I saw him lying there. A deep pool of want and need hit me so hard, I nearly gasped. Then reality reared her ugly head.

“What did you do, Palmer?” I whispered to myself, right before I realized I needed to get the hell out of there.

I carefully slipped out of the bed and began to quietly search for my clothes. Once I’d found everything but my panties, I rushed into the bathroom to get dressed.

Tiptoeing back into the bedroom, I held my breath and quickly headed to the door. I carefully opened it and slipped out. I sped down the steps and to the back door. Just as I opened it, I heard someone call my name.

“Ms. Palmer? Are you gonna make me breakfast?”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was when the panic hit. Turning, I forced myself to smile as I looked down at the little boy I was nannying.

“Morning, Charlie.”



Chapter Seventeen

Mason

I woke up to the sound of Palmer sneaking her way out of my bedroom. As soon as I heard the soft click of the door, I frowned and sat up, then swung my legs over the bed and stretched. Lord, it had been a long time since I'd been with a woman, and the wait was worth it.

In the bathroom, I splashed my face with some water and tried to figure out at what point Palmer and I had lost control last night. One minute we were dancing, taking it slow, and the next she was telling me to fuck her harder.

“Fuck,” I mumbled as I reached down and adjusted my hard dick. Sex with Palmer was unlike anything I had ever experienced in my entire life. And it wasn't only because I had damn near almost forgotten what sex was like. No, it was because I had *made love* to Palmer. Hearing her call out my name was like music to my ears. The feeling of her body falling apart around me was the most beautiful gift I'd ever been given. And losing myself inside of her...shit.

I wanted to do that every day for the rest of my life.

I pulled on a pair of sweats and a long-sleeve T-shirt. My wish that Charlie would sleep in had obviously come true. Whenever I slept longer than him, he was always knocking on my door to wake up, asking for breakfast. The kid had a healthy appetite.

Since all was quiet, I decided to head down to the kitchen to make some coffee before waking up Charlie. Palmer had

most certainly gone back to her place, where she would analyze and overthink what we had done, but I hoped she'd come to the same conclusion as me. We were made for one another.

As I approached the kitchen, I heard giggling. Charlie and...

My heart stopped as I paused outside the kitchen. Palmer was still here, and she was with Charlie. I leaned against the wall and listened to their conversation.

"Where did you learn to make dog pancakes?" Charlie asked.

"Well, you know how my mom and dad own the Seaside Grill?"

"Yeah."

I could hear mixing in a metal bowl. "My parents love to cook and bake, so when I was growing up, they taught me how to make all kinds of things. On Sunday mornings when they didn't work, they'd always make us special pancakes. Sometimes they would be puppies or cats. My dad even made bunnies on Easter mornings."

"Will you teach me how to make your special pancakes?"

Palmer started to speak and her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and answered, "Of course, Charlie. I'll teach you whatever you're interested in knowing."

"Like painting?"

"Yes, just like painting."

There was some shuffling as they moved around the kitchen, and then Charlie spoke again. "I really like to paint. Do you think I could be as good as you someday?"

"I know you can be. You're already very talented. Much more than I was at your age."

"Really?" he asked in an excited voice.

"Yep. And I'll even show you how to make things with the sea glass we find on the beach."

“Sea glass? Cool!”

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the wall. In the five years since I’d had Charlie, I’d never once wished for a mother figure. In my mind, I could do it all. I knew having a mother could be positive for Charlie, but I wasn’t about to open my heart to anyone and chance them hurting my son.

I’d always had an idea of the perfect person in the back of my mind, though. She would love me and Charlie unconditionally. She would teach Charlie all the amazing things my mother had taught me, and show him what it means to be a good man. But her face was always blurred in my mind—until the day Palmer had walked up to our booth and started talking to us.

Since that moment, whenever I pictured that perfect woman, it was Palmer Bradley.

These last few weeks, it felt like Palmer had been a part of our world forever. It wasn’t a question of *if* I could fall in love with her; after last night, I knew that the woman currently teaching my son how to make the perfect pancake was the love of my life. And I would do anything and everything to prove to her that she was the only woman who would ever own my heart.

“How come your pancakes taste better than Daddy’s and Grammy’s?”

I smiled and rubbed my chest where it felt like my heart was beating faster than normal.

“It’s because of a secret ingredient my mother told me about.”

“Tell me! Oh, tell me, Ms. Palmer!”

A sweet laugh filled the air as Palmer chuckled. “Do you promise to keep it a secret? Only you can know.”

Charlie must have been thinking about it because he finally said, “But I promised Daddy I would never keep secrets from him.”

“That’s a good promise to keep with your daddy. You can tell him, then.”

“Then I promise.”

“Ready?” Palmer asked. “You have to be really, really, reeeeeally ready.”

Charlie giggled. “I’m so ready!”

“The secret ingredient is…”

It dawned on me that I was holding my breath. I could only imagine what Charlie was doing.

“Tell me!” Charlie pleaded.

“Cinnamon!”

A long pause ensued. “That’s it?”

I pushed off the wall and walked into the kitchen.

“Why do I feel like Charlie also thought that was rather anticlimactic?” I said.

Palmer spun around and faced me. I hadn’t been sure what I would have to deal with the first time I saw her again after last night, but to my pleasant surprise, her cheeks pinkened and she gave me a brilliant smile.

“Anticlimactic, huh?”

“What does anticlimic mean?” Charlie asked.

I rubbed the top of his head before giving him a kiss. “It means you thought Palmer was going to say something like chocolate chips and syrup with a side of whipped cream.”

Palmer laughed. “Sit down and give them a taste. Then we’ll see how anticlimactic they are.”

I slid onto the barstool next to Charlie. My kitchen had a large island, and on one end was an eating area with four stools.

“There is one thing I can say for sure,” I said. “I wasn’t using that word last night.”

Palmer glanced over her shoulder and flashed me a wicked grin. That was a good sign. I felt a little bit of the tightness in my chest slip away.

“No, it wasn’t a word I would have used either.”

Charlie looked between us, clueless about the conversation going on around him.

“Why the slip away?” I asked.

She focused back on the pancakes. “A moment of panic.”

I watched as she took them out and placed several small pancakes on a plate. After a few moments, she put the plate in front of Charlie.

“It’s Mickey!” Charlie exclaimed as I studied Palmer.

“Charlie, can your dad have some of your pancakes?”

Pushing the plate toward me, Charlie said, “You can have the ears, Dad.”

Palmer handed me a fork and a plate. I took the ears and put a little syrup on them before taking a bite. My eyes went wide as I chewed. “Okay, this is the best pancake I’ve ever had. There’s no way you put just cinnamon in there.”

She laughed. “A splash of vanilla as well.”

Charlie started to talk with this mouth full, but I raised a brow. He hurriedly chewed and then said, “I say Ms. Palmer should make all the pancakes for us from now on! She’s even better than Grammy, but don’t tell her that.”

I pretended to zip my mouth shut and toss away the key.

“Orange juice?” Palmer asked as she moved to the fridge.

“I’d love some.”

“Charlie?”

He swallowed. “Yes, please. Here, Daddy, I can’t eat all of these.”

Charlie and I shared the pancakes while Palmer told us about the time her mother made her a birthday cake in the

shape of a shopping bag and filled it with different types of candy.

“Can Mrs. Barbara make me a cake for my birthday?” Charlie asked.

Palmer’s eyes misted over. “I think she would love that.”

After helping Palmer clean the kitchen, Charlie ran upstairs to play for a few minutes before our game of Twister. Me against Charlie.

Once we were alone, I walked over to Palmer. “You snuck away.”

She smiled and looked down at the floor before focusing back on me. “I will admit I had a moment where I freaked out this morning. But then I ran into Charlie, and he asked me to make him breakfast, and it felt so right. Maybe that’s silly... and it’s for sure not going slow.”

I lifted my hand and tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear. “I don’t think I’m interested in going slow anymore.”

That beautiful blush hit her cheeks again. “I dare say I’m not either.”

Smiling, I whispered, “Good.” Then I captured her mouth with mine.

We quickly got lost in the kiss. Her fingers laced through my hair, and I lifted her up and set her on the kitchen island.

“I want you, Palmer.”

She dropped her head back as I kissed along her collarbone. “We can’t, Mason. Charlie’s upstairs.”

“I can be quick.”

Shaking her head, she looked me in the eyes. “The next time you’re inside me, I want it slow.”

I groaned and had to adjust my hard-on. “One touch, Palmer. Let me touch you.”

Her fingers dug into my hair, and for a moment, I thought we were going to break in the kitchen—but then the doorbell rang.

“Who in the hell would be at the door this early on New Year’s?” I asked.

The sound of little feet running down the stairs had me stepping back and helping Palmer off the island.

“It’s Grammy and Granddad!” Charlie cried out.

“Your parents?” Palmer asked in shock. I took her hand in mine, and we headed to the front door. “Thank God they didn’t just walk in.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. By the time we got to the front foyer, my parents were giving Charlie hugs and kisses.

“Palmer, what a wonderful surprise to see you here,” my mother said as she pulled Palmer in for a hug.

“Ms. Palmer made me the best pancakes, Grammy!” Charlie announced.

Mom jerked her head up to look at me, and then Palmer. “Is that so?”

“I did, with Charlie’s help of course.”

“When did you get into town?” I asked as I took a small bag from my mother.

She patted me on the chest and chuckled. “We got in yesterday, but we didn’t want to spoil your party.”

A small part of me wondered if they had left town at all and had simply gone to a hotel to give me more privacy.

I silently thanked God they hadn’t come over last night, or it never would have happened between me and Palmer. “Where’s your luggage?” I asked.

Dad gave Palmer a hug and then put Charlie on his shoulders. “Tell me all about your first New Year’s Eve party, buddy.”

As they started off for the family room, my mom followed, with me and Palmer taking up the rear.

“It’s at the bed and breakfast we booked,” Mom said.

“Mom, you don’t—”

She held up her hand to stop me from talking. “Mason, we want to stay there and give you some privacy.” Her eyes dropped to where I’d clasped Palmer’s hand with my own. “I have a feeling you’ll be needing it.”

Palmer blushed, and I was pretty sure I did as well.

“Now, we came to gather up Charlie to take him snowshoeing in the park. I figured you might have a bit of a hangover.”

“I didn’t drink that much, to be honest,” I replied.

Mom smiled. “Well, then you and Palmer can spend the day together.”

The image of Palmer back on the kitchen island with me between her legs popped into my mind. “That would be great. I think we were going to try and do the last of the unpacking.”

Without missing a beat, Palmer added, “Only a few more boxes left!”

Frowning, my mother said, “I was thinking more along the lines of going out somewhere. Lunch, maybe.”

“There’s this new Italian restaurant that opened on Main Street. I’ve been dying to try it out. Maybe we could meet you...” Palmer’s voice trailed off when I squeezed her hand.

My mother acted as if she didn’t notice. “Oh, we would love to meet you for lunch, but I think we’re going to drive up the coast a bit and try that new burger place. I saw it on the Instagram. They have amazing shakes. Over-the-top shakes with cake and cotton candy and all kinds of sweets. Like a s’mores shake! I think Charlie would love it.”

“It’s Instagram,” I said.

With a quick nod, she replied, “I know. That’s what I said.”

Laughing, I said, “No, you said on *the* Instagram. It’s just Instagram.”

“Pish posh. You know what I mean.”

Palmer chuckled next to me.

“Charlie, go get your winter clothes and your ski pants on. We’re going snowshoeing and then to get hamburgers and shakes!” my mother called out. The next thing I knew, Charlie was racing past us and up the stairs.

I leaned in and whispered, “The second they leave, we’re going back to the kitchen.”

Palmer elbowed me but smiled.

Twenty minutes later, my folks were out of the driveway, and I was dragging Palmer back to the kitchen.

“Really? The kitchen, Mason?” She giggled.

“The kitchen, the laundry room, the two living rooms, the formal dining room, the breakfast table, the garage—and then we have your place to break in.”

“That’s a lot of sex, but after your performance last night, I’m willing to tackle it if you are.”

I pulled off her shirt and tossed it to the floor while she started on my pants. I went to pick her up, but she stopped me.

“The island? You don’t think that’s kind of...gross?”

I drew back to look at her. “I have Lysol. A lot of it.”

She pressed her hand to her mouth to hold back a laugh.

I took in her entire body with my gaze, feeling my insides quake with anticipation. “I have never wanted a woman the way I want you, Palmer.”

She smiled, but it was a shy one, not her normally self-assured smile.

“I want to make love to you,” I said.

“Isn’t that what we were already going to do?”

“No, I was going to bury my face between your legs until you screamed out my name and then we were going to break in the island.”

She tilted her head and regarded me. “And now you don’t want to do that?”

“Oh, I do. We’re doing part one though.”

I lifted her up and put her on the edge of the island before I brought her to orgasm with my mouth. I loved to hear the way she moaned and made those little whimpering sounds in the back of her throat. It took everything I had not to come simply from listening to her.

Once she came, I picked her up and carried her to my bedroom. Gently laying her on the bed, I started to kiss her from the tips of her feet to the tip of her nose. Worshiping every inch of her body was my new favorite thing.

“Oh God, Mason,” she whimpered as she dug her hands into the sheets and squirmed on the bed. When I slipped my fingers inside her, we both moaned.

“So wet.”

“So ready,” she panted.

With a soft chuckle, I moved over her. I was at her entrance when she lifted her hips.

“Mason, please.”

I placed my hands on either side of her face while I held my weight off her with my forearms. Our eyes met, and I knew—I knew in that exact moment that I was going to ask her to marry me. Sooner rather than later.

To hell with going slow.

I pushed inside of her as I took her mouth with mine. We kissed leisurely while I moved in and out at an unhurried pace. She wrapped her legs around me and ran her feet over my calves, causing my entire body to hum with pure pleasure.

When our lips parted and our eyes met, I knew Palmer felt the same way I did.

It felt like heaven.

“I want to say it,” she whispered.

“I do too.”

She brought a hand to the side of my face and then around to my neck. She tugged me back to her mouth, and we got lost in each other.

We spent the rest of the day in my bed, talking, making love, and talking some more. We stayed that way until my father sent me a text that they were on their way back.

“Take a shower with me,” I said as I led Palmer into the bathroom.

“Mason, they’ll be back soon, and I really need to get home. Poor Whiskey does have an auto feeder, but I do need to give him some attention.”

I shook my head. “Stay for dinner. I’ll order a few pizzas and we can do movie night. Please, Palmer.”

She drew in a deep breath and then exhaled. “I will if you let me go shower and change at my house. I know the moment we get into that shower, you’re going to ravage me again.”

I raised my brows. “I’m sorry, who ravaged who?”

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she dug her teeth into her lower lip before answering. “Fine, we both did our fair share of ravaging. I really *do* need to go home though. I promise I’ll be back as soon as I shower and call my parents.”

“Fine. Here, put this on.” I handed her my robe, then wrapped a towel around my waist and followed her back to the kitchen, where our clothes lay in a pile.

Palmer got dressed and slipped on her boots, jacket, hat, and gloves before making her way down the driveway. I watched until she was no longer in sight.

I glanced at the time and then rushed upstairs to shower. I couldn’t have wiped the smile off my face if I tried.



Chapter Eighteen

Palmer

“Ms. Palmer,” Charlie said as we walked through the grocery store picking out food from the list we’d made earlier. Charlie was heading back to school on Monday, after his long holiday vacation. Since New Year’s Eve week, I’d spent almost every waking moment at Mason’s house. I was, of course, watching Charlie again, since Mason was back to normal office hours, and Jennifer and Dan were busy planning their move to Seaside.

I would make dinner, spend some time with the boys, and then head to my place. Once Charlie was asleep, I’d sneak back to Mason’s house, and we’d spend hours either talking or making love. It had been the most blissful few days.

Now the weekend was coming, and life would go back to somewhat-normal next week. One major change I’d already made was deciding to hand the reins of my poop-scooping business over to a young couple who were looking to earn money while going to college. I still owned the business, but once they proved they could maintain and grow it, I would eventually turn it over to them.

Charlie and I still did my dog walking duties each day. That was not something I was willing to give up. I adored my time with the dogs. And my volunteer position at the shelter could be cut back to a few days a month, or whenever they really needed me. I did, however, give up my violin lessons and focused more on painting and making my sea glass trees.

I'd been putting the trees in Sutton's boutique all fall, and they had been selling out almost as fast as I could make them.

"Ms. Palmer!" Charlie said again, this time pulling on my arm.

I chuckled. "Sorry, I was daydreaming. What's up, buddy? Did I miss something on the list?"

Charlie looked up at me with a nervous expression, and I was instantly put on guard. "There's a lady who keeps following us and looking at me and waving."

My heart dropped, and I stopped walking. "Do you still see her?"

Charlie nodded and looked past me. I spun around and gasped when I saw Ashley standing several feet away. When she saw me, her smile faded, replaced by a look of total disdain.

I turned away from her and glanced around the area of the store we were in. Kelsey Roberts was looking at tomatoes. I rushed over to her. I had seen her last week, and things hadn't been awkward at all between us. I was glad. Not that we were going to be besties, but we could at least be friends. And I needed someone I could trust at that moment.

"Kelsey."

She turned and smiled when she saw me and Charlie. "Charlie! Palmer. It's so good to see you."

"Hi, Ms. Roberts!"

"Kelsey, I need to ask you a favor."

Her smile slipped some, probably because of the panic in my voice and the alarmed look on my face. "Of course, what is it?"

"Will you watch Charlie for me for one moment? Do *not* let him go, or out of your sight." I wasn't sure if Ashley was here with someone or not. I wouldn't put it past her to try and take Charlie from me.

Kelsey looked down at Charlie, then back at me. “Is everything okay?”

I forced a smile. “Yes, but I need to speak to someone, and I need Charlie to stay here with you while I do it.”

It only took Kelsey a moment to piece everything together when she saw Ashley. After all, Ms. Seaside had written about how Mason’s ex-wife was in town.

Bending down, I smiled at Charlie. “Will you do me a big favor and wait right here while I go talk to the strange lady?”

Charlie looked back toward Ashley and then to me. “Yes, but she’s coming this way.”

I put Charlie’s hand in Kelsey’s. I whispered, “Don’t let him hear us.” Then I spun on my heels and marched over to Ashley.

Stepping in front of her, I put my hand on her cart to stop her. “What do you think you’re doing?”

She tilted her head and regarded me for a moment. “I’m shopping for food, what does it look like?”

I felt my heart race in my chest as I attempted to remain calm. “It looks like you’re following us and trying to communicate with a child who has no idea who you are. You’re scaring him.”

Ashley’s eyes darted over to Charlie, then back to me. “I wouldn’t scare him if Mason would let me talk to him. He’s my son.”

I leaned in closer to her and lowered my voice. “I don’t want to make a scene right here in the middle of the grocery store, but if I have to, I will. Listen to me right now, and listen good. Stay away from Charlie. Stay away from Mason, and just leave. You have no rights to Charlie.”

A slow smile spread over her face. “Who says I’m here only for Charlie?”

My stomach dropped, and I prayed my reaction to her comment didn’t show on my face. With a smirk, I hissed, “You’re too late for that, sweetheart. Now, I suggest you get

on your broomstick and fly back to wherever the hell you came from. And if I see you so much as look in Charlie's direction, you'll regret it."

She acted shocked as she asked, "Did you just threaten me?"

"I warned you."

"The last time I looked, this was a free country."

With the biggest smile I could muster, I replied, "You have no idea how miserable I can make things for you here in Seaside. Don't forget, I grew up in this town, and I know nearly everyone here—including the owner of the hotel you're staying at. One call from me and you won't have a place to lay your head anymore."

Ashley's eyes widened, and her fake smile faltered slightly. "If you think your little threats will stop me, you're in for a surprise. I'm here for what's rightly mine."

I tilted my head and let my gaze slowly roam over her. When our eyes met again, I shook my head and then let out a bitter laugh. "Rightly yours? I don't think so. You gave them both up five years ago, and guess what? They're *mine* now, and I will defend and protect them with every ounce of my being. I suggest you tuck your tail between your legs and go crawl back into the hole you came out of. No one wants you here. And another thing, lady, you're not fooling anyone. I can see right through you. You're trying to use Charlie to get money out of Mason."

She jerked her head up.

"Pathetic," I said. "What happened, did Nick finally cut you off, now that he has a new girlfriend? Well, you're not going to get a dime from Mason. Not one single cent. So stop trying to fuck with the life of a little boy for your own selfish greed."

"You tell her, Palmer!" I heard a female voice say to my left.

Ashley's mouth opened, then closed. Her eyes darted over to Charlie, and I stepped to the side to block her view. "I don't

think you want to test me to see how far I'll go to protect that little boy," I said.

She straightened her shoulders and cleared her throat. "He is—"

"*Not* your son, and soon enough he'll be mine—so back the fuck off!"

I looked over Ashley's shoulder—and saw Mason standing there.

She followed my gaze, then spun around. "Oh...Mason! Thank goodness! This crazy woman you hired to watch our son threatened me!"

A vein in Mason's neck started to throb, and I watched as he attempted to gain control over his temper. "I can show you the paperwork you signed where you gave up all rights to *my* son. And as far as Palmer goes, she isn't just some woman who's watching Charlie."

I couldn't see Ashley's face, but I saw her body stiffen. "You're actually dating her?"

Mason's eyes met mine, and he smiled. "It's more than that."

My stomach fluttered, and I swore my heart swelled in my chest. Now wasn't the time for that, though.

"What does that mean?" Ashley demanded.

Mason looked back at her and sighed. "I suggest you leave now, before I call the cops. I don't think they would find the fact that you're harassing a young boy something to joke about."

Ashley looked back at me, and I simply raised my brows, smirked, and, for good measure, shrugged.

Facing Mason again, she let out a disbelieving laugh. "You had a chance to take me back, and you lost it."

Mason's brows drew down as his face scrunched up in disgust. "I haven't lost anything, Ashley. I've gained so much in my life after you left, you have no idea."

She huffed and started to walk away, but the same person who had called out earlier said, “You can at least take the cart back to the front!”

Turning, I saw that it was Mrs. Pritcher, the town librarian, standing there with her hands on her hips.

Mason and I looked at each other, and he raised a single brow. When I glanced back to Mrs. Pritcher, I nearly laughed. She looked like she was ready to take off after Ashley.

“Where’s Charlie?” Mason asked.

I turned and looked in the direction where Kelsey had taken Charlie. I was going to kiss her when I got over there. She had Charlie completely occupied. “I hope she was able to keep him from hearing or seeing any of that,” I said as I focused back on Mason. “What are you doing here?”

“We had a break between patients and your sister had some weird craving. She wants artichoke with pesto dip and some feta cheese.”

“Feta cheese?”

Mason shook his head. “That’s the part you find weird?”

I chuckled. “She’s always loved artichoke, so that doesn’t surprise me. The pesto is a new twist, though, but I thought she hated cheese.”

He shrugged. “I’m going to say hi to Charlie.” Before we started to make our way over, Mason took my hand in his. “You have no idea how much I want to kiss you right now.”

“Me? Why?”

“I heard what you said to Ashley, and I...”

I placed my hand on his chest and whispered, “I know.”

“Daddy!”

Mason turned and caught Charlie in his arms. “Hey, buddy! Fancy meeting you and Palmer here.”

Charlie beamed at his father. “We’re shopping for food, Daddy.”

Mason chuckled. “I gathered as much.”

“Some strange lady was following us, but Ms. Roberts said Ms. Palmer was taking care of it.”

Mason looked at me and grinned. “She did, buddy. Ms. Palmer loves you very much and won’t ever let anyone hurt you.”

Charlie looked at me—and I saw tears building in his little eyes. I reached up and put my hand on the side of his face. “What is it?”

His lower lips trembled. “You love me?”

Oh my goodness. My heart squeezed. “I love you very much, Charlie.”

Suddenly, a dam burst, and tears started rolling down his cheeks as he reached for me. I took him and held him tightly. “I love you too, Ms. Palmer!”

My eyes met Mason’s, and I gave up trying to hold back my tears as I held Charlie closer. Mason discreetly wiped away a tear of his own.

Then I heard nearby sobbing and turned to see both Kelsey and Mrs. Pritcher crying as well.



THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

January 12, 2023

THE LUCKY ANGLER

Seasiders,

If you haven't heard about what happened at the Hartford Supermarket by now, let me fill you in. A little crab told me that Palmer Bradley confronted Dr. Mason Bryan's ex-wife after she was seen following Charlie around the store. Then, if that wasn't juicy enough, Dr. Bryan showed up. After a few moments of heated conversation, Ashley (last name unknown) stormed out of the supermarket, and according to a source, she had the nerve to leave her cart behind.

A tender moment ensued when Dr. Bryan's darling little boy, Charlie, and Palmer exchanged I love yous, prompting Kelsey Roberts, our new elementary school art teacher, and Mrs. Pritcher, the town librarian, to burst into tears at the display of love.

It was also observed that Dr. Bryan and Palmer shared a moment as well. Could it be that something serious is blossoming between the two? This writer is holding out hope! They'd make a darling couple, don't you agree?

Other news from the docks suggests that Mrs. Pritcher has also found love! I'll keep my ear to the sand for more information. It appears that love is in the air here in Seaside and it's not even spring yet!

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

I placed the newspaper down on the table and looked up at my two sisters. We had started meeting at the grill every Thursday for lunch, along with Harlee. We told ourselves it wasn't because the gossip column came out on Thursdays; we pretended it was a good day to get together.

I drew in a breath, then said, "I think it's Mrs. Pritcher."

Addie shook her head. "No way is it Mrs. Pritcher."

The bell above the door rang, and Harlee came rushing in. “Sorry I’m late. I had a meeting at the newspaper, and it ran over.”

“Did you read it yet?” Sutton asked.

Harlee looked at Ruby as she came over to our table and smiled. “I’ll have the usual, please.”

Ruby winked. “You girls are becoming too predictable; you need to shake things up a bit.”

Harlee laughed and then looked around at each of us. “Did I read what yet?”

We all stared at her like she’d lost her mind.

“Hello?” Sutton said. “The column?”

Harlee rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, I read it.”

“And?” I asked.

Giving me a blank stare, Harlee asked, “And what?”

Sighing in frustration, I dropped back against the booth. “And do you think it’s Mrs. Pritcher?”

Crinkling her nose, Harlee shook her head. “I don’t see it being her. She’s locked away in the library most of the time. One has to wonder why she doesn’t get out more. Isn’t she only like forty?”

I shook my head. “If Ms. Seaside is to be believed, she has a secret life, and I’m not sure how old she is. For sure close to forty, I would say.”

Addie and Harlee both giggled.

“For the love of God, you three, be serious,” I said. “Mrs. Pritcher was there. She saw and heard the whole thing.”

“And so was Kelsey. And how many other people were in the store that day, Palmer?” Sutton asked.

I cursed under my breath.

She smirked at me. “I guess that answers my question.”

Harlee thanked Ruby for the cup of coffee and the water she'd brought over to the table. "What I really want to talk about is whatever's going on with you and Mason."

I felt myself blush.

Addie looked at me and said, "All I know is, I've been working with Mason for how many months now...almost four? And I've never seen him so happy. He even whistles now."

Sutton laughed. "What does whistling have to do with being happy?"

Harlee pointed at Addie. "Okay, I can always tell when my parents have..." She shuddered, then went on. "When they've been intimate. My dad walks around whistling."

All of their wide eyes swung to me.

"You little brat! Why haven't you told us?" Sutton demanded.

Addie leaned in closer and said, "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it. Mason changed the schedule, and now we have two hours for lunch."

Harlee gasped. "Oh my God, are you having nooners while Charlie's in school?"

I slapped Harlee's arm. "Shut up!"

"I didn't need that visual," Addie mumbled.

"I think I'm going to talk to Brody about longer lunch periods. Harlee, I may need you to cover for me at the store," Sutton said, looking totally serious.

Harlee laughed. "I'm here for you, girl."

"Will you all stop it?" I said. "There is no afternoon delight happening."

Sutton slowly shook her head. "You are so lying. You're totally having afternoon delight! It's written all over your face."

“I’m with Sutton on this one,” Addie said. “Mason leaves for lunch every day, and he never did that before Christmas. Just saying.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, it’s all fine and dandy to talk about my sex life with Mason, but can we get back to the article?”

Harlee sighed. “You’re no fun. If I’m not having sex, I want to at least talk about it.”

“You and Thomas are still broken up?” Sutton asked before she took a bite of her club sandwich.

“We’re still friends, and I have no doubt in my mind that if I gave him a call, he’d come over. But I don’t want that type of relationship anymore. I need to move on.”

Addie, Sutton, and I all exchanged a look.

I reached for Harlee’s hand. “Move on from what? I didn’t think you were all that into Thomas, but you sounded utterly heartbroken right then.”

Harlee’s eyes jerked up to meet mine and she attempted to play off my concern. “Don’t be silly. I’m not the least bit heartbroken over Thomas or anyone else.”

I smiled slightly. “Harlee, it’s okay. You know you can trust us. We won’t judge or say a word if you want to tell us something.”

Her eyes bounced around to all three of us and for a moment, I thought she was going to open up. Then she smiled. “There isn’t anything to tell you guys. Honestly.”

Deciding to let it go, I focused back on the column. “Okay, so if you don’t think it’s Mrs. Pritcher, then who?”

Harlee sighed. “Seriously, Palmer, why are you so obsessed with finding out who Ms. Seaside is? If I remember correctly, she said she was wishing you and Mason the best.”

I looked at Harlee. “She said we made a cute couple.”

She gave me a warm smile. “And you do. I’m simply saying, you’re focusing so much of your attention on this, and

for what? What will you actually do when you find out who's writing the column?"

Chewing on my lower lip, I replied, "Probably nothing. Plus, I did tell Brax I'd let it go."

Harlee nodded. "Then let it go and focus on what's going on in your world. Mason and Charlie."

I looked down at my half-eaten meal and grinned. When I looked up, the three of them were watching me. "I've never felt this way before about anyone."

Sutton reached across the table and took my hand in hers. I could feel tears forming at the back of my eyes.

"I'm in love with him," I said, "and that scares me because it's happening so fast."

Harlee wrapped her arm around me.

Addie sniffled, then wiped her nose before she spoke. "Oh, baby sister, how I've been waiting for the day when someone would knock you off your feet."

We all laughed, then simultaneously sniffled as well.

"I get where you're coming from," Addie added.

Sutton squeezed my hand. "So do I. It's hard to give your heart to someone when you know they could easily break it in two. But at the same time, when you take a chance on love, it's the most beautiful thing in the world."

Addie nodded. "Do you remember when that storm came in and Gannon fell trying to board the ship?"

I nodded. "Yes, that was terrifying for all of us, especially for you."

After drawing in a deep breath, Addie exhaled. "For one moment, after I found out he was okay, I panicked. I wanted to run, because in my mind, I knew I wouldn't be able to live without Gannon and the fact that his job could take him away from me..." She slowly shook her head. "I thought I'd be better off without him in my life than to have him get ripped away."

“What changed your mind?” I asked.

“That’s easy. I only needed one second to realize that not having him in my life at all would be worse than not living a life with him for as long as we’re blessed to be together. The kind of love you’re feeling for Mason *should* make you scared.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Really?”

Sutton spoke next. “Yes! It’s the passion, the desire—and I don’t just mean sexual desire. I’m talking about the desire to simply look across a room and see him. To have him sleep next to you in bed and wake up every morning with a *good morning, beautiful*. It’s the kiss he gives you when you’re least expecting it, and the one he gives you when you’re making love. That kind of love is powerful, and if you’re lucky enough to find that with someone, take hold of the reins, Palmer, and enjoy the ride.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I let Sutton’s words settle in.

“Jesus H. Christ. When did you become so...deep?” Harlee asked.

Sutton let go of my hand, took a drink of her water, and shrugged. “I’m not sure. I think it has something to do with the baby. Or it’s these kick-ass prenatal vitamins I’m taking.”

We all stared at her before bursting into laughter. The kind of laughter that makes your belly hurt and erases all the anxiety swirling inside of you.

I loved Mason. And I was going to tell him the moment I saw him. No more waiting and making sure this would all turn out okay. I was going to grab the reins, damn it, and enjoy the ride!



Chapter Nineteen

Mason

Thursdays were my day to pick up Charlie from school. We always did something together those afternoons. It had become our tradition since moving to Seaside. Today, I was taking him down to the marina where Braxton was going to give us a tour of one of his fishing charter boats. Since Charlie had asked about learning how to fish when it was warmer, I was going straight to the top.

I pulled up to the pick-up line and saw the principal standing there with Charlie. The hairs on the back of my neck stood, and I knew something was wrong.

She walked up, and I rolled the passenger-side window down.

“Afternoon, Mr. Bryan.”

“How are you, Principal Walker?”

She gave me a warm smile. “I’m doing well. Are you free to park and chat for a few minutes?”

My eyes went to Charlie. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, Charlie isn’t in any kind of trouble.”

Her smile tightened a bit, and I nodded. “I’ll park and be right in.”

After practically sprinting across the parking lot while dodging parents who were pulling out of the school, I finally

made it inside. Principal Walker was still standing at the entrance with Charlie.

When she saw me, she leaned down to him. “Charlie, I have to speak to your dad about a special project I need his help with. Mrs. London is going to read a story to you in the library, then your dad will come pick you up, okay?”

Charlie looked at me, and I smiled. “I’ll be right there, buddy. Give me a minute to speak to your principal.”

I followed the principal into the main office and down the hall to her personal office. She motioned for me to take a seat. I did and tried like hell to keep my leg from bouncing. I was never a fan of being sent to the principal’s office.

“I’m sorry if I scared or worried you. Charlie is fine—he really isn’t in any kind of trouble—but we did have an incident right before school was let out. We tried to call you, but it went straight to voicemail.”

I pulled out my phone and cursed. It was dead. “Did you try calling Palmer Bradley?”

She nodded. “We did, and she said she was on her way, but I informed her that you would probably get here first since this happened minutes before pick-up.”

“What happened?”

Principal Walker rested her elbows on her desk and cleared her throat. “A woman by the name of Ashley Whitman showed up right before school was letting out. She said she was Charlie’s mother and was here to pick him up for a doctor’s appointment.”

It took everything I had not to jump up and leave to go find that bitch. I shook my head and clenched my jaw tightly.

“The receptionist at the front told her she wasn’t listed as one of the approved pick-up people. She started to argue with her and reiterated that she was Charlie’s mother. Lisa—that’s the receptionist—knew about your ex-wife. I hate to admit this to you, but she reads Ms. Seaside’s column and knew that there was some animosity between you and Ms. Whitman. She pressed an alert button that automatically calls me and alerts

the vice principal to call the police. When I showed up and explained to Ashley that she wasn't allowed to take Charlie, she left the office and started running down the halls, screaming your son's name."

I closed my eyes and tried to fight the urge to throw up. When I opened them again and refocused on her, I asked, "Did he hear her?"

She shook her head and clasped her hands on the desk in front of her. "No. Luckily, Charlie and his class were outside checking on their garden in the greenhouse. They were on their way back in, though, when our school resource officer got to Ms. Whitman and contained her. I don't believe Charlie witnessed anything."

"Where is she now?"

"The police took her down to the station only moments before you pulled up."

I scrubbed my hand down my face. "That bitch." I looked up and said, "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

"This is a scary situation. Do you have a restraining order out on Ms. Whitman?"

My chest tightened and my stomach turned over. "No, but that's going to be the first thing I do tomorrow morning."

"I wanted you to know that we'll be keeping an eye out for her. If anyone sees her on school property, the police will be called."

"Thank you, Principal Walker. I appreciate that. I guess I need to have a talk with Charlie. He's never alone, but if Ashley was willing to come to his school, Lord knows what else she'll try to do."

"He doesn't know her, I take it?"

"No," I said, sinking down farther into the chair. "She gave him up the second he was born. He's never even seen a picture of her."

She gave me a small nod. "I think now might be the time to let him know she's a dangerous person."

I brought my hand to the back of my neck. “Agreed.”

I stood, and Principal Walker followed. “If there’s anything we can do, Dr. Bryan, please don’t hesitate to let us know. We’re a small community, and we look out for one another. Especially for our kids.”

Shaking her hand, I said, “Thank you so much. I truly appreciate it.”

Turning, I headed out of her office and went directly to the library. After retrieving Charlie, I sent a text to both of my parents, letting them know what Ashley had done. As far as any of us knew, she’d left town after the supermarket incident. If I saw her, it was going to take an army to keep me from wanting to strangle her.

When I opened the car door for Charlie, he stood there for a moment before asking, “Daddy, am I in trouble?”

I bent down and smiled at him. “Not at all, buddy. Principal Walker wanted to know if I could help with the spring carnival.”

His little eyes lit up with hope. “What did you say?”

“I said yes, of course.”

Charlie jumped for joy.

“Come on, let’s get buckled in. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“I love surprises.”

Twenty minutes later, we were walking down the pier of the marina, headed to where Braxton kept all the charter boats.

When we were almost there, I saw Braxton walking down the pier toward us.

“Hey, Charlie!” Braxton called out.

I smiled. “You remember Mr. Bradley, Palmer’s brother.”

Charlie looked up at me. “The one with all the boats who fishes?”

I nodded. “He’s going to give us a tour of one of his boats.”

Right as Braxton reached us, both of our cell phones rang.

I pulled it out and saw that it was Addie. “It’s Addie.”

“It’s my mom.”

We both laughed and answered our phones. “Hey, Addie, is everything okay at the office?”

“Everything’s great here. Unfortunately, Palmer has been detained by the police for an incident.”

“What?” Braxton and I said at the same time, clearly us both receiving the same news at the same time.

“Ahh...I hear you’re with Brax,” Addie stated. “Drop Charlie off at the office and I’ll take him to get a snack and then bring him to my house.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Ashley?”

“Yep,” Addie said as she popped her P. “I guess Palmer hit her.”

I couldn’t help it. I smiled. “Where?”

“Smack dab right in the nose. They’re pretty sure it’s broken. Good news is, Ashley went after her first, and it all took place in front of about five cops.”

Sighing, I looked down at Charlie. “Hey, why don’t you close up the office, meet me at your brother’s boats, and maybe let Charlie take the tour we’d planned?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep. Charlie is really looking forward to it, and I don’t want to let him down.”

I heard Addie type something on her computer. “You don’t have to tell me twice. As long as we’re not going out on the water. I don’t think my pregnant ass could take it.”

Laughing, I said, “No plans for that type of adventure.”

“Be there as soon as I can.”

After I hung up, I told Braxton that Addie was on her way. He wanted to go to the police station, but I convinced him to let me go alone. That it meant a lot to Charlie to learn everything about boats and fishing.

Once Addie arrived, and I assured Charlie I would be back as soon as I could, I headed to the police station. When I arrived, an older woman was behind the desk. She flashed me a wide grin.

“You must be Dr. Zad...er...Dr. Bryan.”

Holding back a smirk, I nodded. “That would be me. I’m here to break out the woman I love, who apparently broke my ex-wife’s nose.”

She chuckled. “You do know this will most likely end up in a special edition of the column.”

I sighed. “Oh, I’m sure it will.”

“Palmer’s in Captain Earl’s office. He’s the chief of police, in case you didn’t know.”

“I did not know that,” I said with a nod. “Thank you.”

“Down the hall, third door on the left.”

I could hear Palmer’s laughter as I grew closer to the office. The door was ajar, so I knocked first then pushed it all the way open.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Palmer leaning against the captain’s desk. Two officers, neither of whom I’d ever seen before, were demonstrating the proper technique to throw a punch. Or at least, that’s what I thought they were doing.

“Don’t tell me you’re teaching her more ways to punch someone,” I said as I stepped into the room.

Both men laughed, and the older gentleman walked toward me. “Captain Earl.” We shook hands. “I’ve known Palmer since she was in diapers. Her daddy and I are best friends.”

Looking at Palmer, I raised a brow. She smiled and gave a small shrug.

“Is that why she’s in your office and not in a cell?” I asked.

He laughed. “She’s not in a cell because Ms. Whitman had it coming, and we have nothing to charge her with. But I wanted to make sure Palmer was with someone when she left so she didn’t try to double back and break into that *woman’s* cell.”

I looked at Palmer. She shrugged again. “She pissed me off.”

The other officer, a younger kid who couldn’t have been more than twenty, stepped up. “Clay Earl, it’s a pleasure to meet you finally. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, Doc.”

We shook hands. “Thank you,” I said.

Palmer pushed off the desk. “Okay, let me explain before you launch into *what were you thinking* and all of that.”

I nodded and folded my arms across my chest.

“I got the call, and when I found out she was arrested, I knew you would be there to take care of Charlie—so I came here.”

“With what intention?”

Palmer made a face that said she wasn’t really sure she wanted to tell me. “Well...I came to kick her ass. But by the time I got here, Captain Earl talked me out of that plan. So I decided I would simply talk to her. Try and find out what in the hell she was thinking by showing up at Charlie’s school. So, they brought Ashley into the interrogation room and the moment she saw me, she snapped. I didn’t even say a word.”

I raised a questioning brow at her.

“I didn’t!”

Officer Earl piped in. “She really didn’t. I was in the room with them.”

After giving Earl an appreciative nod, I turned back to Palmer. “Then what?”

“Then what?” she asked, drawing her head back in question. An evil-sounding little laugh escaped from her lips, and she replied, “I punched her. I mean, she was coming after me, so I pulled my arm back and hit her. Hurt like a sonofabitch, because apparently I don’t throw a punch correctly.”

“Um, that’s what we were teaching her when you walked in,” Captain Earl said with a sheepish grin.

“I see,” I replied. “What did Ashley do after you hit her?”

“Well, it was rather dramatic...wouldn’t you say, Clay?”

He nodded. “Totally dramatic.”

Palmer smiled at the kid, then looked at me. When I gave her a look, her smile faded. “She fell to the floor screaming and saying something about how she couldn’t believe I broke her nose. *I* can believe it—my hand is still stinging.”

I closed my eyes and fought the urge to smile. When I opened them, Palmer was looking up at me with those beautiful blue eyes of hers.

“Palmer, she’s crazy. Why would you risk coming here?”

She stared at me like I’d grown two heads. “She was trying to take Charlie! There’s no way I was going to let that go. No way at all.”

I dropped my hands to my sides and walked up to her, cupping her face in my palms. “I love that you rushed here to defend Charlie. Thank you for being you.”

She blinked a few times before she asked, “So you’re not mad?”

“Oh, I’m mad that you put yourself in a room with that nutcase. But I could never be mad at you for defending my son. I think I’m more jealous that you were able to get to her before I could.” I looked at the two cops. “Not that I would ever hit Ashley. I may *want* to hit her, but I would never follow through with it.”

Both of them lifted their hands as if to say they didn’t hear anything. I looked back at Palmer—then kissed her.

“Um...we’ll, ah...leave you two alone,” Captain Earl said.

Palmer grinned. “Thanks, Cap. Thanks, Clay.”

When I heard the door click shut, I kissed her again, this time deeper. We drew apart, and I ran my thumb over her lower lip.

“I said I wasn’t going to say this so early, but I love you, Palmer. I’ve never loved anyone like I love you. I want you to know that.”

A single tear slipped free from her eye, and I brushed it away.

“I have a confession,” Palmer whispered.

“Tell me.”

“I’ve been in love with you since I saw you walk into the Grill. There’s nothing in this life of mine that I want more than to love you and Charlie with my whole heart and soul.”

My heart felt like it grew six times its size.

“I’ve been waiting my whole life for you, Palmer Bradley. And I honestly cannot believe we’re saying we love each other for the first time in a police department after you punched my ex-wife.”

She laughed and dropped her head onto my chest. “Now what?” she asked, gazing back up at me.

I pulled in a breath and exhaled. “Now we sit Charlie down and tell him about Ashley—and about us.”

Her cheeks turned a beautiful shade of pink. “I really love that little guy, you know that, right?”

I nodded and placed my hand on the side of her face. “I know you do. And you have no idea how much that means to me. I wasn’t planning on falling in love, you know. My focus was on Charlie. But I’m so glad I moved to Seaside, and even more glad that you were at the restaurant that day.”

“Me too.” She drew her brows in and asked, “Why did you pick Seaside?”

“To be honest,” I said as I looked up in thought, then back down to her. “I’m not really sure why I picked Seaside for Charlie and me. It felt...right.”

“I love that,” she said before lifting on her toes to give me a sweet kiss. “Let’s go.”

I pulled her back when she started to head out. “Wait, you’re really not in trouble or anything for hitting Ashley?”

“No,” she said with a chuckle. “She came after me first. I was defending myself. I have witnesses.”

I laughed and then let my smile fade away as a thought came to me. “Before I leave, I’m going to file a restraining order.”

Palmer took my hand in hers. “I gotta say, after what she did, I don’t think she’s going to be leaving jail anytime soon.”



It turned out that Charlie hadn’t even missed me while he was learning all about boats and fishing. By the time I followed Palmer back to her place to drop off her car and we got to the marina, the tour was wrapping up.

Later, as Charlie climbed out of his seat in the car, he said, “Daddy, I really like Addie and Braxton! They made me laugh.”

I ruffled his hair and smiled down at him. “I’m glad, buddy. I’m sorry I had to leave; I’ll make it up to you, okay?”

“It’s okay. I had a lot of fun.”

As we walked toward the house, Charlie reached for my hand, then Palmer’s. The gesture nearly brought me to my knees.

Christ, why was I so damn emotional when it came to Charlie and Palmer?

The second we got into the house, Charlie declared that he was starving.

“You go spend some father-son time together while I make us dinner,” Palmer whispered to me. “I think it needs to just be the two of you when you explain Ashley to him. Then, after we eat, we can tell him about us.”

I blew out a breath. I knew the day would come sooner or later when I’d have to tell Charlie about his mother. I’d been lucky that he hadn’t really had very many questions about her yet.

“Thanks, babe.”

She pulled her head back and gave me a sexy smile. “Babe? I like that.”

I chuckled. “Do you?”

With a quick glance over at Charlie to make sure he wasn’t watching, she reached up and kissed me and used her fingers to mess with my hair. “Stop stalling.”

Then she turned and headed to the kitchen, leaving me no choice but to tell Charlie and get it over with.

I found him in the family room playing with his cars. My heart filled with so much love and happiness as I watched him. It was hard to imagine that someone so pure and beautiful was made by someone with a heart like Ashley’s.

“What are you playing?” I asked as I sat down next to him.

“Cars. This one is broken and needs to go to the car fixer-upper place.”

I fought a chuckle. “The car fixer-upper place? You mean the garage?”

He looked up at me. “Do you fix cars in our garage?”

That time, I did chuckle a little. “No, buddy. I mean the place where you take your cars to get them fixed is also called a garage. But it’s a different kind of garage.”

He stared at me for a moment before asking, “Why do they have the same name?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really know. Maybe because they kind of look the same, but a garage where cars are fixed is a lot bigger.”

Charlie tilted his little head and thought about that, then he picked up his car and started to play. “Well, that don’t make no sense.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know, that’s what I said.”

Deciding to let it go—after all, one had to pick one’s battles—I picked up a car and started to put it on the track. “Charlie, do you remember the lady at the store who was following you and Palmer last week?”

He nodded. “Yeah. She was at my school today.”

My heart stopped. “Did you see her? I mean, did you talk to her?”

With a shake of his head, he replied, “No. When we were going to the greenhouse, I saw her walk into my school.” He looked up. “Daddy, is it bad if I think she’s a bad person?”

Swallowing hard, I asked, “Why do you think she’s a bad person?”

He gave a half-shoulder shrug. “You know how you told me about stranger danger and if something doesn’t feel good, I should listen to my heart right here?” He placed his hand on his chest.

“Yes, I remember.”

“She makes my heart feel something, and it isn’t good.”

I closed my eyes and inwardly cursed. Damn, my son had good intuition. “Charlie...I know her.”

His head snapped up. “You do? Do you like her?”

“No, buddy,” I said as I leaned back against the sofa. “I need to talk to you, Charlie, and it’s about Ashley—that’s the woman you saw at your school and in the grocery store.”

He spun around on his butt to face me, his attention one-hundred percent focused on me.

“Charlie...she’s your mother.”

He blinked a few times, looked down at the carpet, then back up at me. “The one who didn’t want me?”

A feeling of dread rushed through my body. “Who told you that?”

“I heard you and Grammy talking about my mom once. That she signed something that said she wasn’t my mommy because she didn’t want me.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. Dammit all to hell.

Focusing back on Charlie, I said, “Buddy, when I said that, I was angry, but not at you. I shouldn’t have worded it that way.”

“But she didn’t want me? That’s why she isn’t my mom?”

I exhaled and felt my entire body deflate. “I promised I would never lie to you, Charlie. She didn’t want either of us. You *or* me...but you know what?”

His eyes went wide when I told him Ashley hadn’t wanted either of us. “What?”

“I’m so glad she didn’t want us, because then we never would have moved to Seaside.”

He smiled. “I like Seaside!”

I chucked his chin lightly. “I’m so glad you do. I do too.”

“And we wouldn’t have met Ms. Palmer.”

“No, we wouldn’t have.”

Charlie looked down at his little hands, then back at me. I could tell he had something he wanted to say but wasn’t sure if he should.

“Buddy, you can tell me anything. I promise I won’t be mad.”

“Sometimes at night when I say my prayers—you know, the ones I say in my head after we’ve said them together?”

I nodded.

“Sometimes I pray that Ms. Palmer will be my mommy.”

My breath was instantly knocked out of my lungs. The look in my son’s eyes was one of pure hope. “I’m so sorry you don’t have a mommy, Charlie.”

“It’s okay, Daddy. If I could pick a mommy, it would be Palmer.”

“And if I had a son, I’d pick you.”

Charlie and I both looked up to see Palmer standing in the doorway, tears in her eyes and oven mitts on both hands. If the sight of her wasn’t so beautifully perfect, I might have laughed.

“Really?” Charlie asked.

Palmer wiped her tears away with the oven mitts, then pulled them off and dropped them to the floor. “Really, really. I love you, Charlie. So very much.”

Charlie stood and rushed over to Palmer, who went to her knees and scooped him up into a hug.

“I love you too, Ms. Palmer.”

Palmer drew back and looked at him. “Just call me Palmer, Charlie.”

“You want me to call you Palmer Charlie?”

I started to laugh as Palmer did a little laugh-cry and pulled Charlie back to her. Our eyes met above his head, and she nodded.

“Do we have time?” I asked.

“Pizza’s in the oven.”

“Hey, bud, come sit over here on the sofa with Palmer and me.”

Standing up, Palmer took Charlie’s hand and they made their way over to the sofa. I got up and sat next to them, with Charlie in the middle. I took his free hand.

“Charlie, Palmer and I have something to tell you.”

He looked between us. “Is it that you kissed?”

Palmer’s mouth fell open, while I gawked at him.

“I saw you kiss each other. And Palmer looks at you like Kathy Lewis looks at me at school, and Kathy told me she loves me.”

“Wait, how does she look at you?” Palmer asked.

Charlie tilted his head and put his hands under his chin. Then he batted his eyes fast and gave us a little smile.

Palmer looked at me and frowned. It took every ounce of strength I had not to laugh.

“My best friend Paul...well, he said that Kathy gives me doe eyes. That’s what his dad said a girl does when she really likes a boy. Looks at you like she’s looking into a super bright light and blinks really fast and smiles. I’m not sure why she’d smile. Don’t the light hurt her eyes?”

I lost the battle and started to laugh. Palmer, on the other hand, put her hands on her hips and said, “That is not how I look at your father.”

Charlie covered his mouth and giggled while he nodded.

“I do not!” Palmer insisted, but this time a smile broke out on her face.

“It’s okay, Ms...um...Palmer. ’Cause Daddy gives you the same look.”

Her smile turned into a full-on grin.

“Hey, I don’t bat my eyelashes.”

“Well, Ms. Roberts told me at the grocery store that you and Palmer had eyes for each other, so I guess you do.”

Palmer and I both looked at one another and started to laugh.

“I guess we do,” I said, as Palmer kissed Charlie on the top of his head.

“Do you love my dad?”

Palmer's smile softened, and she gazed down into Charlie's eyes. "I do love him. And I love you."

Charlie looked at me. "Do you love, Palmer?"

My eyes met hers. "I love her very much."

Charlie jumped to his feet. "Great! Let's call Grammy and Granddad and Mrs. Barbara and Mr. Keegan!"

Looking confused, Palmer asked, "Why?"

Charlie gave us both a befuddled look. "'Cause you two have to get married now!"

I was pretty sure my jaw was in my lap. Palmer nearly choked on air, and Charlie simply stood there looking as pleased as all get out.

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

January 14, 2023

CREATING A WAKE – SPECIAL EDITION

Seasiders,

Again, this writer has called it. It's official. Dr. Mason Bryan and Palmer Bradley are a couple. I couldn't be happier for the two of them. Of course, this news comes after Palmer was nearly arrested for punching and breaking the nose of Mason's ex-wife, Ashley Whitman. Did I say nearly arrested? It was self-defense, or at least that's how the story goes.

News around the docks is that Harlee Tilson is planning a Valentine's Day town dance. Funny that she would choose that particular holiday to plan a town dance around—after all, her

track record with successful relationships is rather...slim. But, this writer is looking forward to seeing everyone enjoy themselves. I'm sure I'll have a newsflash or two after that little shindig!

Stay tuned, my fishes.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside



Chapter Twenty

Palmer

One month later

The bell above the door to Sutton's boutique, Coastal Chic, dinged as I walked in. I snapped the door shut before any cold could get in. It had been a freezing winter, and February was turning out to be even more glacial than January.

"Brrr, could it be any colder out?" I said, shaking the snow off my shoulders. "I ran a few feet from my car to here, and I feel like I'm freezing to death."

Sutton laughed. "It's been a blustery winter, hasn't it?"

"Yep," I said as I pulled off my hat and gloves. "My car didn't even get warm during the drive here."

"How was sledding?" Sutton asked.

"A blast, except I'm pretty sure Mason has frostbite on his toes. He and Charlie stayed an extra thirty minutes after the rest of us called it quits. Well, Brax stayed behind with them too."

Sutton hung up a shirt on a rack and then made her way over to give me a hug as soon as I had peeled off all my winter garb.

"Is Harlee here?" I asked, glancing around the store.

"No, she had a meeting at the paper with her father."

I followed Sutton around to the back of the counter, where we both sat on stools. “I told her I would help with the decorations for the dance,” I said. “It sounds like everyone’s looking forward to it.”

Sutton’s eyes lit up with excitement. “I think so! I’ve heard so many people talking about it. I also heard there’s a betting pool on when you and Mason are going to get married.”

I rolled my eyes. “He hasn’t even *asked* me to marry him. We’ve only been dating for a month and a half.”

“Well, according to Charlie, you both make doe eyes at each other even more now.”

I laughed. “That kid, I swear. He wanted to marry us off the first day we told him we were a couple.”

My hand found Sutton’s swollen tummy as we both smiled.

Sutton glanced down at our hands. “I cannot wait to be a mom.”

“Is Brody excited?”

Her face beamed with happiness. “Oh, Palmer, he’s so happy. He’s already bought her a few outfits.”

“Her?”

She blushed. “He’s hoping for a girl, but honestly, we’ll be happy with a healthy baby.”

“Brody and Gannon are going to make amazing fathers, just like you and Addie are going to be incredible moms.”

Sutton reached for my hand. “And you?”

“I’ll be their favorite aunt.”

She smiled. “I mean, what about you and motherhood?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I already feel like I’m a mom. I mean, I love Charlie as if he were my own. He’s a handful, but I love every second of it. As soon as Mason and I officially started dating, I told him I refused to be paid for taking care of Charlie.”

“Did he argue with you?”

“He did at first.” I smirked. “But then I told him I wanted to use the time that Charlie was in school to go back to school myself.”

Her eyes went wide. “What? Palmer, why didn’t you tell us that was your plan?”

“I don’t know,” I said as I shyly looked down at the floor. “With the money I’ve been making with my sea glass trees, I’ve saved up a pretty good nest egg.”

“Do you know what you want to go to school for?”

Nodding, I said, “Art. I was talking to Kelsey Roberts, and she said the school has been thinking about hiring another art teacher, but not for another year or two.”

Palmer’s mouth fell open. “You want to teach art?”

“I think so,” I said with a little chuckle. “Since I’ve been volunteering so much at Charlie’s school and helping him with his art projects, I really think this is where my heart is telling me to go. It’s so fun to watch the kids’ little faces light up when they draw or paint something. It makes me so happy. I think that’s what I’ve been waiting for. Something that makes me happy. I mean, I do love to paint, and I’m over the moon that I’ve sold some paintings.”

She regarded me as she said, “I hear a *but* in there.”

“But...that’s my passion. And right now, I don’t know if I want to share a whole lot of that with other people.”

“That’s okay. Just sell the pieces your heart is telling you to sell.”

I smiled. “Mason said the same thing.”

Sutton winked. “Smart man.”

“He is.” I drew in a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before releasing it. “Kelsey also suggested I teach a class at the art museum on how to make sea glass trees. She actually put some feelers out, and there was a lot of interest.”

“Oh wow. Those trees are so uniquely you though. And they sell the moment I put them out.”

“I’m not worried about not being able to sell them; besides, once I start school, I don’t know how much time I’ll have to make more. I’m hoping I can still keep walking my pups. Charlie loves it so much. Plus, he’s been taking Clarence on walks with us. It’s a fun time for the two of us.”

Sutton gave me a warm smile. “I think it’s so sweet that you have such a strong bond with Charlie. And Addie said Mason spends every Thursday afternoon with him, doing some kind of father-son thing.”

A rush of warmth spread through my body as I thought about my two favorite men. “He’s such an amazing father, Sutton. He truly makes time for family. He doesn’t work late, doesn’t make his employees work late, and honestly, he’s the only person I’ve ever met who truly knows how to balance his time well.”

She giggled. “Probably because he was a single dad. It’s good, though, that he puts family before his career. Addie adores working for him. And Brody said the few times Mason has shown up for guys’ night, he’s been a hoot. I kind of think Brody and Brax have a man crush on him.”

I rolled my eyes and snorted. “I think Mason has one on Gannon and Brody, as well. All he talks about is how thrilling their jobs are. Charlie has also been asking Gannon a ton of questions about his job lately.”

Sutton frowned.

“I know. The last thing I want is for my son to do such a dangerous job.”

Sutton froze, and it was my turn to frown. “Are you okay? Did the baby kick hard or something? Are you going to throw up? Oh my God, are you still throwing up? That has to suck!”

She shook her head. “Palmer, you just called Charlie your son.”

My eyes went wide, and I mumbled, “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. Your exact words were, ‘the last thing I want is for *my son* to do such a dangerous job.’”

Sucking in a breath, I slid off the stool as I covered my mouth.

“It’s okay to think of him as your son, sweetie. Calm down and take a few deep breaths.”

Doing as she said, I inhaled, then exhaled. Inhaled, exhaled and thought of Charlie’s biological mother. Ashley had pleaded guilty to attempted kidnapping and was set to go to trial later this month. She wasn’t going to be an issue for Charlie and Mason again. I would make sure of it. It turned out she was so far in debt and was hoping that Mason would take her back, and when that hadn’t happened, she came up with the crazy idea of taking Charlie and demanding money to return him safely. What kind of mother would ever do that?

I closed my eyes and drew in another deep breath before meeting my sister’s gaze.

“Better?” she asked with a concerned, motherly look on her face. Oh yes, she was indeed going to be a wonderful mother. Of course, she’d had an amazing mother to set an example.

Nodding, I closed my eyes and counted to ten before opening them again. My voice cracked when I said, “I really want to be his mother, Sutton.”

She pulled me to her and hugged me so tightly, I could hardly breathe.

“Can’t. Breathe!”

She loosened her hug some, then stepped back. Cupping my face in her hands, she whispered, “It’s going to happen.”

I nodded. “I know. I guess I didn’t realize how badly I *want* it to happen until now.”

She giggled. “Well, you only have to wait until the dance and—” She stopped talking. Her eyes widened in horror before she dropped her hands and turned away from me.

My heart started to race. “What did you say?”

“Nothing. I need to go count vibrators!”

She rushed into the back room and up the steps to the section of the store that Harlee called The Pleasure Cave. I followed behind her.

“Did you know,” she started to say as she climbed the steps, “that in the state of Texas, it’s against the law to own more than six vibrators?”

“You’re changing the subject, Sutton. What did you mean by that?”

“We got this new lubrication in that Harlee’s raving about,” she said with an awkward laugh. “Brody snuck a bottle home yesterday.”

I grabbed her arm and spun her around. “What do you mean, I only have to wait until the dance?”

Sutton closed her eyes. “Palmer, pleeeeeease forget I said that.”

Taking her by her upper arms, I gave her a little shake. “Don’t make me shake this baby out of you. What did you mean?”

“I’ll ruin it! Do you really want me to ruin your engagement surprise?” She gasped and slapped her hands over her mouth.

My stomach did a little flop and my heart felt as if someone had put one of those shocker things on my chest. “Oh. My. God. He’s going to ask me to marry him at the dance?”

“No.”

I raised a brow. “Sutton.”

She scrunched up her face and stomped her feet. “Okay fine! Yes, he’s planning on asking you at the dance. He already asked Mom and Dad for their permission.”

I pressed my hands to my heart. “Oh my gosh, he did?”

Sutton practically melted on the spot. “Yes! Isn’t that so romantic? He had Charlie with him!”

“Wait! *Charlie* knows?”

“Yep,” Sutton said, popping the P.

I looked away. “That little stinker can really keep a secret.”

“I know, so please act surprised, Palmer! They would be so upset if they knew I let it slip.”

Smiling, I pulled her in for a hug. “You can’t help it if you have pregnancy brain.”

She hit me on the back and then giggled. “You wait. Your turn is coming, and I’m going to remind you that you said that to me.”

I took a step back, my cheeks aching from smiling so much. “He’s going to ask me to marry him! He’s going to ask me to *marry him!*”

Sutton grabbed my hands, and we both started to jump up and down.

“Um, what’s going on?”

Sutton and I spun around and faced Harlee. I couldn’t keep my excitement in at all. “He’s going to ask me to marry him at your dance!”

“Palmer!” Sutton shouted.

“What? I’m excited, and I can’t hold it in!”

Harlee laughed and pulled me into a hug. “I know. I’m helping him plan it.”

I pushed her away, and she stumbled into one of the displays. “Jesus, Palmer!”

“You knew?”

“Everyone knows!” she exclaimed.

My mouth fell open. “Everyone?”

“No, not everyone,” Sutton stated as she tossed Harlee a dirty look. “Just the family. Ours and Mason’s. Harlee knows because she’s helping with something—and do not even *think* of telling her about it, Harlee.”

“Wait. I’m not considered family?” she asked.

Sutton looked confused. “What?”

A hurt expression moved across Harlee’s face. “You said the families know, and Harlee, but I was helping him plan it.”

Sutton opened her mouth to speak, then shut it, then opened it again.

I stepped forward. “She didn’t mean it like that, Harlee. You’re more than a friend. You’re like a sister.”

“Like a sister,” Harlee said flatly.

I shook my head and closed my eyes before focusing back on her. “That’s not what I meant.”

She forced a smile. “No, I get it. I do. Um, I came up here to tell you I signed for those new sweaters you ordered, Sutton. I put them in your office.”

“Harlee,” Sutton said as she reached for her.

Taking a step back, Harlee said, “I better get back down there—I heard the bell on the door.”

We all knew it was a lie; no one had come in. Sutton and I let her go and watched as she went down the steps.

Turning, I hissed at Sutton, “You mucked that up!”

“Me?” Sutton whisper-shouted. “You said *like* a sister!”

“How in the hell else was I supposed to say it? She *is* like a sister! I guess I could have said she *was* a sister to us, but geesh.”

Sutton sighed. “Harlee has been overly emotional the last few weeks.”

“Probably because that damn Ms. Seaside has been going after her.”

With a look that said I was being dramatic, Sutton replied, “She’s only written about her a couple of times.”

“And both times she’s mentioned how single Harlee is.”

“Well, she is. Hey...do you see a pattern? It’s like Ms. Seaside goes after the single people, and once they get hitched or something, she moves on.”

“She still mentions me and Mason.”

Sutton waved my comment off. “Yeah, but it’s to report that you were seen kissing or to speculate if the rumors are true that you’re shacking up. Which, by the way, are you basically living at Mason’s now?”

“No.”

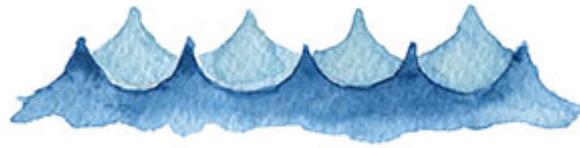
She gave me a look that said she didn’t believe me as she crossed her arms over her chest.

I sighed. “Fine. I may keep a toothbrush and some extra clothes there. But we try not to let Charlie know when I stay the night.”

“Fair enough. Come on, let’s get down there and try to make amends for you hurting Harlee’s feelings.”

“Me! You started it with your insensitive remark.”

She waved her hand in the air once again as she descended the steps. “Potato, potahto.”



Chapter Twenty-One

Palmer

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

February 11, 2023

TIDE'S IN – SPECIAL EDITION

Seasiders,

Tonight is the big Valentine's Day dance, and yes, I'm aware that Valentine's Day is Tuesday—but we couldn't very well have a town dance on a school night, now could we?

A little sand crab has informed me that some pretty exciting things will be happening at tonight's dance. I'm not one for ruining a surprise, but don't keep your head in the sand, my fellow Seasiders, or you may miss something important.

I've heard from a few seagulls I have on the inside that Harlee Tilson has done a wonderful job planning and organizing the dance. I'll be keeping my fingers and toes crossed that she finds true love tonight. After all, she's been dreaming of her Prince Charming ever since she was a schoolgirl in pigtails.

One can only wonder if Seaside's Catch of the Season will be showing up with a date this evening or going solo. Since it appears Braxton Bradley doesn't know what the word commitment means, this writer is going to guess he'll be debuting a new "special friend." Oh, to be young and single and ready to mingle. This writer only wishes...like I've said before: if wishes were fishes, we'd have lots to fry. Or grill, for those who are looking to keep it on the healthy side.

Enjoy your evening, my fishes! And remember, Thursday's regular edition will be one you don't want to miss!

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

I'd been trying to make myself forget that Mason was going to ask me to marry him tonight at the dance, but it wasn't an easy thing to do. Harlee had been withdrawn since our conversation at Coastal Chic, and no matter how many times Sutton or I tried to speak to her, she'd tell us she was too busy with the dance to chat.

After walking into the community center a short while ago with my sisters and our partners, I could see that Harlee had indeed been busy.

The place had been transformed. Red, white, and pink hearts hung down from the ceiling. White twinkle lights were strung from wall to wall, adding a beautiful effect. At the end of the room was a giant balloon arch. Round tables were placed around the edges of the room, with a dance floor in the middle. Under the balloon arch was where the food had been set up. There was even an area that was full of candy, and beautiful red, white, and pink roses made up the centerpieces on each table. Harlee hadn't missed a thing.

"How in the world did she find the time to do all this?" I asked, while walking around with my sisters and their husbands, saying hello every now and then to people we knew.

Sutton shook her head. “I don’t know. Or how she found the money to do it.”

“Donations,” Addie stated. “Harlee is the master when it comes to fundraising. Like the hot chocolate and s’mores in the park during the boat parade—that was all to raise money for this event.”

I smiled as I looked across the room at Harlee. She was wearing a form-fitting red dress with a scandalously high slit. She looked stunning. I’d opted for a vintage satin cocktail dress that I’d found at Sutton’s store. Sutton and Addie both looked darling in their dresses. They were more modest but still form-fitting to show off their baby bumps. Addie’s was long-sleeved while Sutton had opted for a cap-sleeve dress.

I caught Mason’s eye across the room, and I nearly sighed. He was dressed in a suit and tie, and Charlie matched him. They both looked so stinking handsome.

“Oh, I see someone from high school I haven’t seen in forever!” Addie said. “Gannon, want to join me?”

Gannon nodded, then said something to Brody before he followed Addie across the room.

“Is Brax not here yet?” Sutton asked, glancing around the room.

“He is,” Brody said. “He’s probably hiding in the men’s bathroom.”

I laughed. “Why?”

Brody finished his drink and chuckled. “The stupid bastard came alone, and he’s already been hit on three times and asked to dance six.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Poor handsome boy. Afraid of a little attention from the single women here in Seaside.”

“Who’s Harlee’s date?” Sutton asked.

I shrugged. “From what I can tell, she doesn’t have one. I think she’s going to be pretty busy tonight and probably opted to come alone so she wouldn’t have to manage a date.”

“Smart girl,” Sutton stated.

At that moment, Harlee looked toward us and smiled. She lifted her hand and waved, and the three of us waved back. Then she turned her attention to someone who walked up to her to chat.

“I think I’m going to check out the food table. Do you and the baby want anything, Sutton?” Brody asked.

I couldn’t help but smile at Brody.

“Oh, if they have pimento cheese sandwiches, will you grab me one? No, two! Wait, get me three!”

Brody and I both laughed.

“I better get four, just in case,” he said.

Sutton blushed but kissed her husband before he turned and headed off in the direction of the food.

“Something has been bugging me,” I said to Sutton as I glanced back at Harlee. She had moved on to someone else, clearly making her rounds.

“What’s that?”

“The other day when Harlee got so upset, I don’t think it was just over the whole *she’s like a sister* thing.”

Sutton looked at me with a concerned expression. “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. I mean, she’s never acted that way before. Or at least, she’s never verbalized it. We’ve always included her in everything we do, so I don’t think that’s what was actually bothering her.”

“Do you think it’s the gossip column? As you said, Ms. Seaside does keep pointing out how single she is.”

I watched Harlee carefully as she made her way around the room. It seemed like she was looking for someone...but who? She was trying not to make it noticeable, but I could tell she was searching.

“She’s looking for someone,” I said.

Sutton followed my gaze back to Harlee. “What do you mean? She’s walking around talking to everyone. That’s what a good hostess does, Palmer.”

I shook my head. “No, Sutton, she’s distracted. Look.”

After watching Harlee for a few moments, Sutton said, “She is! Who’s she looking for?”

And right at that moment, we had our answer.

Braxton walked into the room, and Harlee did a doubletake. She watched him walk over to the bar, not taking her eyes off of him until someone said something to her that made her turn and smile.

“Brax,” I whispered. “She was looking for Brax!”

Sutton glanced between Braxton and Harlee before looking at me. “Do you think something’s going on with them?”

I shook my head. “No, I think something *already* happened between them in the past.”

Sutton frowned. “That’s not news, Palmer.”

“No. I think something big happened. Not just sex.”

When I looked at my sister, she was staring at me with a blank expression.

“We know they had a one-night stand,” I said, “but maybe it meant something more. A couple months ago, I had a heart-to-heart with Brax. He all but admitted that he was in love with someone but had let her go. What if that someone was...”

We turned and looked across the room. At the same time, we both said, “Harlee.”

Sutton and I started to slowly walk around the room as we followed our friend. Every so often, she would glance over at Braxton, who was still standing at the bar drinking a beer.

“She’s moving closer to him!” Sutton whispered, grabbing my arm and giving me a shake.

“Yes, I see that. Will you please not rip my arm out of its socket with your weird pregnancy super-strength?”

Sutton looked down at her grip on me and let go. “Sorry.”

“She’s getting even closer,” I said as we made our way around some tables and casually pretended to be talking. But Harlee wasn’t paying any attention to us. Her focus was purely on Braxton now.

After giving Mrs. Pritcher a hug, Harlee excused herself and finished the short distance to where Braxton was still standing. She walked up to the bar and ordered a drink.

“He’s saying something to her,” Sutton said, hitting me on the arm.

“I swear if you weren’t pregnant right now, I would elbow you in the side. Stop hitting and grabbing me. I see the same thing you do.”

“She’s turning to leave!”

I narrowed my eyes and watched Harlee head toward an exit that led to a long hallway filled with meeting rooms and the restrooms. I swung my gaze back to Brax.

He finished off his beer, took a quick glance around the room, then went in the same direction.

Sutton and I both gasped.

“Oh. My. God,” I whispered. “They’re having a clandestine meeting!”

Sutton snorted. “Meeting? I think not. A hundred bucks says her hair doesn’t look so put together when she comes back.”

I covered my mouth to giggle.

“Brax and Harlee. Why do you think they’re keeping it a secret?” Sutton asked.

“*Psh*. Isn’t it obvious? They don’t want to be in the gossip column.”

Sutton thought about that for a few moments. “Do you think?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Here you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you, Sutton.”

We both turned to see Brody standing there with two plates. One was piled high with sandwiches, the other with cookies, brownies—and were those pickles? Gross.

“Ohhh, thank you, baby!” Sutton said as she went for a sandwich and a pickle. She took one bite of the pimento sandwich and then a bite of the pickle. I swallowed hard to keep from gagging.

Brody leaned in and whispered, “It’s probably best not to watch her eat. Next it’ll be the brownie and the pickle together.”

That time, I *did* gag. “You are so gross, Sutton! Eww!”

My sister stopped chewing, looked at me, then went back to looking for her next odd combo.

I caught sight of Harlee coming back into the room.

“It’s Harlee!” I said, causing Sutton to turn and look.

“They can’t be done that fast,” she said.

“Who did what fast?” Brody asked.

Ten seconds later, Brax appeared. Looking perfectly composed, same as Harlee.

“Jesus, was it even good for her?” I asked.

Brody frowned. “What are you two talking about?”

“That can’t be,” Sutton said, her words muffled around whatever she’d stuffed in her mouth.

“What can’t be? Someone tell me what’s going on!” Brody insisted.

I turned to him. “Harlee and Brax snuck off, but they weren’t even gone for five minutes. There’s no way they could have gotten it on and then come back in that time.”

Brody rocked on his heels and said, “Actually...”

Sutton and I both shot him a warning look.

He held up his hands. “I think I’ll go find Gannon.”

“This took a turn,” Sutton said. “Harlee looks...not mad.”

I looked at her closely. “Rattled. She looks rattled.”

Tilting her head and looking harder, Sutton agreed. “Yeah, she does look rattled. Do you think they had a fight?”

“With the way they always bicker, that’s a strong possibility.”

“You two look deep in conversation.”

My stomach did a little flip at the sound of Mason’s voice. I spun around and couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face. “Did you finish talking to your fan club?”

The moment we’d stepped into the room, a group of people had gathered around Mason. A few of the women had attempted to charm Charlie, and I’d had to laugh because he’d been soaking it all in.

Mason smiled. “The only fan club I have is you and Charlie. At least, the only two I care about.”

“Good answer,” Sutton mused before taking a bite of a pickle sandwiched between two oatmeal cookies.

I looked down at Charlie. “Are you having fun?”

He smiled “Yes! I’m going to ask Lily Abernathy to dance.”

I blinked a few times and then looked at Mason, who simply shrugged.

“You’re going to ask a girl to dance?” I said.

Charlie nodded. “Yep.”

Mason chuckled. “Kid has more confidence than I did at five.”

“Dad, I’m almost six.”

Mason closed his eyes and nodded. “Right. Sorry about that.”

Charlie sighed, and it took everything I had not to laugh.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen?”

All eyes turned to Harlee, who was standing on the stage. She had a bright smile on her face and seemed to have recovered from whatever had happened between her and Brax.

“First, I want to thank everyone who came to the dance. Your entrance fee of five dollars will be donated to the food bank here in Seaside, for those who need a little bit of extra help when it comes to feeding their families. So, thank you so very much, and thank you to those of you who have made larger donations to the food bank. It means the world to them, and to me.”

Everyone clapped.

“We’re about to kick off the dance part of this dance party. But we’re going to do it a little differently. We have a special request for tonight.” Harlee smiled and waved someone over. Mason walked up onto the stage.

I jerked my head to the right to see that he was indeed gone from my side.

“When did he...how did he?” I whispered softly. Charlie reached up and took my hand in his.

“Come on, Palmer!” he urged, and we started to make our way toward the stage.

“Thank you so much, Harlee,” Mason said. “And thank you for helping me plan this.”

Harlee gave a nod and smiled.

Mason looked out over the crowd. “For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Dr. Mason Bryan. I bought Dr. James’s medical practice last year. I recognize a number of faces in the crowd, and I’m glad to see you here and not in my office.”

The crowd laughed.

“Although I do love it when you stop by to say hi or to bring Addie some homemade cookies, so please keep doing that.”

As the crowd laughed again, Mason cleared his throat and looked at Charlie and me. We were still making our way through the crowd.

“When I first moved to Seaside, I thought I was looking for a fresh start. Not only for me and my medical practice, but for my son, Charlie. We both needed a clean slate, and somehow, Seaside, Maine, popped up on a website I was looking at. I thought I was drawn here for the small-town feel, the beautiful scenery, and the great school system. We came to visit, and I soon realized that the people who live here were a huge factor in why I ultimately decided to make Seaside our home.”

He paused for a moment as he searched the crowd again. When our eyes met, he smiled.

“Then I walked into the Seaside Grill one day, and a beautiful woman came up to our table. She had a smile I was positive could light up any room, and blue eyes so deep a person could get lost in them. But when she turned and saw Charlie, her smile brightened even more. It was then I knew why I was *really* drawn to Seaside. It wasn’t for all those reasons I mentioned earlier.

“It was fate. Fate brought us to Seaside.”

I felt a sob slip through my lips, and I covered my mouth with my free hand.

“I once swore I would never open my heart again unless I was a thousand percent sure that the person taking it wouldn’t hurt me or my son. It only took one smile from Palmer Bradley for that oath to crumble.”

A rush of *aww* and *how sweet* swept through the crowd. A few people looked at me and smiled.

Charlie tugged my hand again. We started to walk once more, and soon we were at the front of the stage, where Mason was looking down at me.

“I know that in you, Palmer, I’ve found my soul mate. The love of my life. And I know how much you love me and Charlie. And there’s a question we both want to ask you.”

Charlie pulled me toward the steps, while I frantically wiped at the tears rolling down my cheeks.

Charlie and I stopped in front of Mason, who was now facing us and not the crowd. Mason took a jewelry box out of his left pocket and handed it to Charlie.

“Can I go first, Daddy?” Charlie asked as the crowd laughed softly.

Mason looked at me, then down at Charlie. “Um, sure you can, buddy.”

Then, the one thing I *wasn't* expecting happened.

Charlie got down on one knee and opened the box.

I gasped as I looked down at a silver necklace. It was a large circle intertwined with a smaller circle.

“Palmer?”

I jerked my gaze up to Charlie's big blue eyes. “I was... well...I was hoping you would want to be my mommy? Daddy is going to ask you to marry him.”

I heard more laughter from the crowd as I looked at Mason and saw him slowly shaking his head while smiling. I focused back on Charlie, and he continued. “So if you say yes to me, you probably have to say yes to him too.”

I covered my mouth while I laughed and sobbed at the same time.

Bending down so I was eye level with him, I said, “Charlie, I would be so honored to be your mommy.”

Tears burst from his eyes as he wrapped his little arms around me. “I love you, Palmer. I love you so much!”

Holding him tightly, I tried to speak between gulps of air. “I...love you...too. So very much, Charlie.”

Charlie drew back and looked up at his father and smiled. “She has to say yes to you now!”

I couldn't help it. I laughed, and so did Mason and the rest of the crowd.

Mason took my hand and helped me up, then *he* went down on his knee. He opened a different box, and I started to cry once again.

“Palmer, there is nothing in this life that I would rather do than spend it with you by my side. You have brought me so much happiness in the short amount time I’ve known you, and so much love. I can’t imagine living a single day without you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” I said as I cupped his face in my hands and bent down to kiss him. He stood, pulled me into his arms, and held me tightly to him while cheers erupted.

Harlee walked back up to us. “Well, if you didn’t shed a tear during any of that, you are a lost cause.”

The crowd laughed again as Mason set me back down and I wiped at my tears. He slipped a beautiful oval diamond on my finger, then kissed the back of my hand.

“Mason would like to ask one more thing of you, Palmer,” Harlee said.

I looked at him with raised brows.

“Can I have this dance?” he said.

Placing my hand in his, I answered, “I would love that.”

Harlee was about to speak when Charlie yelled out, “Lily! Will you have this dance too? With me, not my daddy.”

A tiny voice from somewhere in the laughter of the crowd cried out, “Yes!”

The DJ took over and asked us to move to the dance floor. Lily’s mother brought her over to Charlie, and he mimicked what his father did with me and kissed the back of her hand.

“Look out there, Doc! You’ve got a little charmer,” Lily’s mom said.

Mason laughed as he looked down at Charlie. Lily’s mom wiped a tear away and then turned to Lily’s father. The moment the music started, I began to cry again.

“Mason,” I whispered, dropping my head to his chest.

“Can’t Help Falling in Love” by Kina Grannis was playing. He’d remembered that I said I loved this song.

“When can we get married?” Mason asked.

Lifting my head from his chest, I smiled. “When do you want to get married?”

A wicked smile appeared on his face. “I want to say as soon as possible, but I don’t want to deny you a wedding.”

I glanced down to the right, and my heart nearly burst from my chest when I saw Charlie dancing with Lily. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” I said.

Mason followed my gaze and laughed.

Turning back to him, I spent a moment taking everything in before I spoke. “I’ve always wanted a big wedding right down on the beach.”

“Then a big wedding you’ll have. And it just so happens that I know a couple who have a house on the beach.”

“Your mom and dad! Are they here?” I asked, looking around the room.

He laughed. “They *are* here. I think they’re sitting with your parents.”

It didn’t take long to find them. The four of them were laughing at something. It warmed my heart to see how well they all got along. Dan and my father had hit it off immediately and had already made plans to go on a fishing trip. Much to my brother’s dismay, they were chartering a boat out of Boston. My mom and Jennifer had both discovered they shared a love of quilting. They were planning a trip to Sisters, Oregon, to go to a quilting festival together.

My parents had planned all of this after hinting that they’d be retiring before the babies came. They hadn’t made an official announcement yet.

A thought hit me, and I looked up at Mason, who was gazing down at me with so much love in his eyes that it made my knees weak.

“I have an idea, and I think it’ll be the perfect solution to me wanting a big wedding and you wanting it to happen quickly.”

“Talk to me.”

I chewed on my lip. “We could go to Vegas and get married now. Then have a big wedding ceremony this summer.”

His brows shot up and a wide grin spread over his face. “I like this idea very much.”

“Addie and Sutton are both due this summer, so I’d have to take that into consideration. Both of them are due in July, so we could easily plan an August wedding.”

“Is that enough time to plan it?”

“Six months?” I looked up in thought. “I think so.”

“Then let’s do it. Let’s run off to Vegas and get married!”

Laughing, I asked, “When?”

“This coming weekend. We can leave Friday night, spend a couple days in Vegas, and come back Monday night.”

“Don’t you have patients on Monday?”

He shook his head. “No, the office is closed. I’m having the heating unit replaced.”

“Oh my gosh, are we really going to do this?”

The corners of his mouth rose. “I think we are.”

I wrapped my arms around him and whispered, “We should sneak away and celebrate.”

His eyes darkened. “Where?”

I took a quick look around, saw Addie and Gannon dancing nearby, and approached them.

“Addie, can you watch Charlie for fifteen minutes?”

“Twenty,” Mason said.

She gave us a look that only a mother would give. “And may I ask why?”

“No, you may not.”

With that, I took Mason’s hand, and we snaked our way through the crowd. We pretended to head to the drink table and then quietly snuck out and down the hall.

“All the doors are locked,” Mason said as he jiggled another knob.

“Here! This one’s open.”

When we walked in, he stopped.

“The bathroom? You want to have sex in a public bathroom?” he asked.

I locked the door and leaned against it. “What’s wrong, Dr. Bryan? Afraid to be adventurous?”

“*Pffft*. Afraid. I’ll show you afraid. Turn around.”

My stomach dipped, and I spun around.

“Put your hands on the sink.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I gave him a sexy smile. “I like this bossy version of you.”

Mason lifted my dress—and then moaned when he realized I wasn’t wearing panties.

“Fuck, Palmer.”

“I didn’t want a panty line.”

Of course I wasn’t about to tell him that I’d planned on having sex in this dress and wanted easy access.

I heard him rustle with his pants and then felt him at my entrance. He teased me for a few seconds before he pushed inside.

“Yes!” I hissed. “Mason, yes!”

He moved fast and hard, and when his hand slid around to find my breast, I moaned softly. Sex with Mason was amazing every single time. When we were one, I felt so complete.

“More,” I whispered as the sound of his body slapping mine drove me close to the edge. Our parents were only yards

away. Not to mention damn near the whole town, and the local doctor was in the bathroom having sex with his new fiancée.

I giggled, and Mason stopped. “You know, it doesn’t really bode well for the guy when the girl laughs during sex, babe.”

I dropped my head and laughed harder.

“Palmer!”

“I’m sorry! It’s just that everyone we know is out there and we’re in here...”

“Fucking?”

“Yes!”

“Stop laughing and I can wrap this up faster!”

I covered my mouth with my hand to keep from laughing again. Mason sighed, then put his hand between my legs and found my clit. I gasped.

“Not so funny anymore, is it?”

I shook my head. “Faster. I’m so close!”

With one press of his thumb against me, I fell apart, and Mason came not that far behind me.

“Jesus, Palmer. That was amazing.”

He pulled out some paper towels and cleaned us both up before helping me right my dress.

“Do I look like I just had sex?” I asked, turning to look in the mirror.

“The blush on your cheeks might give you away.”

“You go out first, and I’ll wait for a few minutes and follow.”

He leaned down and kissed me. “Already bossing me around, huh?”

I reached up and kissed him.

He gently bit down on my lip and then stepped back. “I love you.”

His words sparked a crazy flutter in my chest and my breath hitched. Would I ever get used to hearing him say that? “I love you too. Now go before people notice we’re both gone.”

He gave me a light slap on the ass, unlocked the bathroom door, and slipped out. I wasn’t sure how long I sat in the bathroom...three minutes, maybe...before I opened the door—and let out a scream.

“Jesus H, Sutton! You scared the living shit out of me.”

She shot me a dirty look, then eyed me up and down. “While I’m out here nearly drowning in pee, you’re having sex in the bathroom!”

I pushed the door open more. “I’m alone.”

Sutton rolled her eyes. “Please, I saw Mason walk out. Don’t lie, your face says it all.”

Shrugging, I said, “I can’t help it if I have a spontaneous future husband.”

Her mouth dropped open. “I’ll have you know, my husband is just as spontaneous, if not more.”

I raised a brow.

“What’s that look supposed to mean?” she said.

About that time, Brody came walking down the hallway. “Hey, is everything okay? You’ve been gone forever.”

Sutton turned, grabbed him by the lapel of his coat, then used her other hand to pull me out of the bathroom. She pushed Brody inside and turned back to face me. It took everything I had not to laugh at the confused expression on Brody’s face.

“Don’t worry, Brody,” I said. “In about thirty seconds, I’m going to become your favorite sister-in-law.”

I started down the hall. Before Sutton shut the door, I heard Brody say, “What did she mean by—Sutton!”

Smiling, I lifted my head high and walked back into the party.

“If our parents knew what you and Sutton were up to, they’d be horrified!” Addie whispered when I walked up to her.

Turning to face my older sister, I pretended to be confused. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She rolled her eyes. “You never were a good liar, Palmer.”

THE SEASIDE CHRONICLES

February 14, 2023

RIP TIDE – SPECIAL EDITION

Seasiders,

My fishes, I know I don’t normally do two special editions in one week, but news on the docks is that we have a shark circling in the waters of Seaside.

Take caution, dear shark, you may want to find other waters to feed in.

Fair winds and following seas!

Ms. Seaside

That’s it for now, my fishes!



Epilogue

Braxton

One Month Earlier

I wrapped my coat tightly around me as I stood off to the side of the ferry landing on Lighthouse Island. It was a Tuesday. I'd never come on a Tuesday before, only Wednesdays.

Watching the small group unload from the ferry, I looked for the faces of the guys I suspected were runners for *The Chronicle*. I knew the lighthouse played a part in this whole thing, and I wasn't going to stop until I figured out who in the hell Ms. Seaside was. Even though I'd told Palmer we needed to drop the search, I wasn't about to.

As of yet, I hadn't seen anyone who looked familiar, but then something told me to come on Tuesday instead. So here I was...waiting by a group of trees, holding up a map and acting like a tourist.

A group of people who all appeared to be together walked off the ferry boat. They moved toward the small museum that was housed on the island. One person, a woman, stepped out of the group and started to make her way up the path that led directly to the lighthouse overlooking Penobscot Bay. Something about her was familiar, so I kept my eyes on her instead of looking back at the small stream of people disembarking off the ferry. January wasn't really a touristy time of year, but there were still people who came over to visit the lighthouse and the museum.

I pulled my hat down some and started to walk in the general direction of the woman while making it seem like I was going to take another path. Her pace picked up as she drew farther away from the group, and I narrowed my eyes.

What was the pull that made me follow this one woman? Maybe it was because Ms. Seaside was a woman—or so I thought.

Glancing behind me, I saw another small group of people making their way toward the lighthouse. They were close to me, so if she looked behind her, I was hoping she would think I'd simply pulled ahead of the group.

We all continued making the short hike up the hill toward the lighthouse.

As the woman made her way closer to the entrance, I hung back a bit and stepped off the path, making sure I had a clear view of the entrance so I could see her when she came back out. I nearly fell twice attempting to get through the damn snow, but I was tucked in enough that I didn't think she'd see me.

When she got to the door of the lighthouse, she paused, then turned and glanced around before she stepped inside.

The second I saw her face, my heart dropped.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “I knew it!”

I nearly fell back on my ass as my suspicions became truth.

“Harlee.”

Someone to Love is coming January 3, 2023

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