A romantic couple embracing at night. The woman is wearing a red coat and a patterned scarf, and the man is wearing a dark blue jacket. They are kissing. The background is filled with warm, out-of-focus lights, likely from a city or festival.

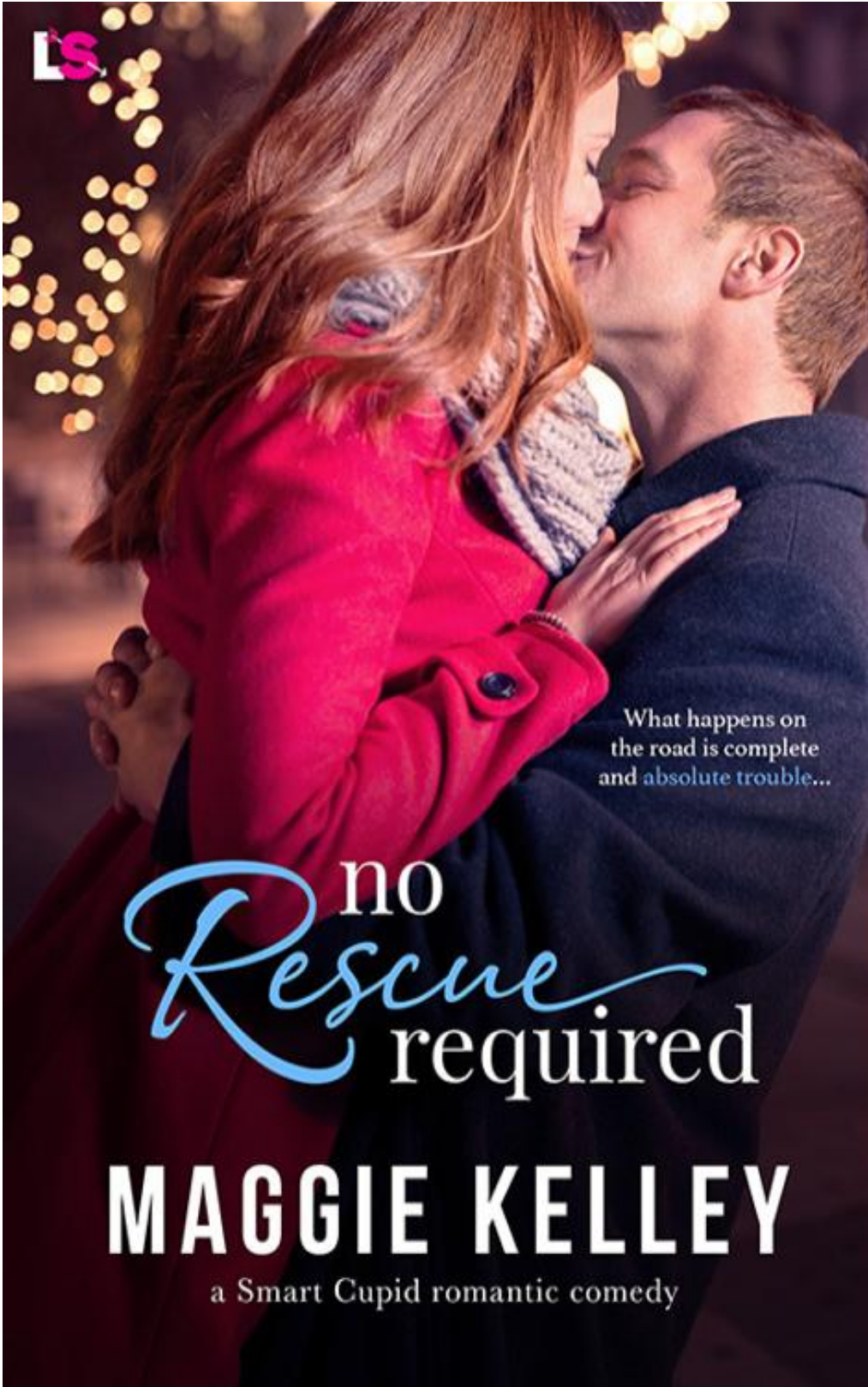
LS

What happens on  
the road is complete  
and absolute trouble...

no  
*Rescue*  
required

**MAGGIE KELLEY**

a Smart Cupid romantic comedy



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The Best Kept Secret

The Wrong Kind of Compatible

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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**LOVE**  
→struck→

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*For Road Trippers Everywhere*



# Chapter One

*December 21, 5:48 p.m.*

*Beaumont, Kentucky, 844 miles from home*

Ryan Callahan, ex-ballplayer, current sports agent, and diehard single, needed a date, an Uber, and a Brooklyn ale. Not necessarily in that order.

To make matters worse, he was in a major time crunch. He had to be at an event in precisely thirty-six hours, and if he didn't manage to come up with a plus-one on his own, he'd be forced to accept his sister's offer to fix him up.

He hadn't been worried this morning. Plenty of time to find a willing partner, he'd figured.

But that was before he'd got stuck in Kentucky.

Before the day's epic fail.

Before no Uber to the airport.

Before the possibility of missing his flight.

He picked up his pace. He just needed to get home so he could put today behind him, grab that beer, and double down on finding a date. Not like he was going to find a plus-one for the weekend in this blink-and-miss-it town. He glanced down an empty side street. Not a soul on the street. Not like December in Manhattan, where people crowded the sidewalks, elbow to elbow, shopping bags full of brightly wrapped packages. He'd take the city, with its energy, noise, and crowds, over a small town any day. He wasn't exactly *anti*-small town, but close. Closer after this trip.

He sighed and kept walking toward the corner, his bad knee starting to ache. All he'd wanted was to meet with a kid he'd seen play point guard. So, he'd texted him. Set up the meeting. Booked a flight. Simple.

Except that was where simple ended. His direct flight had been delayed, and he'd landed hours late after a painful, snack-free layover. No rental cars were available, so he'd

called an Uber, which had taken off the second it dropped him in the middle of town, leaving Ryan to find his way back to the Lexington airport.

All of which he could have handled. But then, after traveling eight hundred miles in good faith during the *fricking* holiday season, Ryan had shown up for the meeting only to have the kid's father take one look at him and kick him to the curb. Stared him in the face and said, "We don't trust no doggone city slicker."

Like the guy was living in some off-brand cowboy movie.

He yanked open his tie. Rookie mistake, arranging the meeting with the kid. Rookie, *rookie* mistake. Should've nixed the suit, too, and worn jeans and a flannel shirt. If he had, maybe he wouldn't be leaving with no meeting, no contract. *Nada. Zip.*

Not that he was giving up. He never gave up. Giving up was not his way. The draft was in six months—plenty of time to figure out how to sign the player he knew was something special. The kid deserved a solid contract, and the truth was, Ryan was as ethical as they came. If Mason signed with his agency, Ryan would protect him from the rat race of the sports world, keep him safe, train him right, not let him fall into situations that could undermine an athlete's development.

But he'd have to figure out the details later. Right now, he needed to find his way home, back to New York, back to sanity.

He turned at the corner and walked toward the only place with a light in the window. POSEY, the sign said. He looked around. *Okay, Posey, what's your address?* No number, no distinguishing features, just a white clapboard building and a big, fat CLOSED sign. *Naturally.*

In a futile effort, he reached for the door handle and pulled until he felt resistance, fighting back the urge to kick in the door, knowing it would only result in criminal charges, and, quite possibly, spending the next six months in a Bluegrass State prison.

He let go of the door, took a step back, and tried to think. All he needed was an address so he could request that Uber out of Smallville. One stinkin' address. He pulled his phone from his pocket and typed *Posey, Beaumont*, into his browser, and *12 Main Street* came back. Main Street. Should've guessed. Every homespun whistle stop had a Main Street. He typed the address into the app, but no cars were nearby. He could request one from Lexington, but that was a couple of hours away, and it was already growing dark and getting colder by the minute. There had to be a better option—something local.

If he could wait inside, at least he'd be able to get warm while he figured out the ride situation. He cupped his hands around his eyes and peered into the window. The place was empty. Except...wait a second.

He took another look. Someone was behind the counter, a woman wearing what looked like an old-school Kentucky Wildcats shirt. Good sign. She liked sports, or basketball, at least, so maybe she wouldn't reflexively disparage all big-city agents. He knocked on one of the white door's small glass inserts. She looked up, appearing surprised at first, then vaguely suspicious.

*Shit.* Suspicion wasn't good. Suspicion wouldn't get him shelter. Or a ride. A ride to the airport would be phenomenal luck. He took in the refrigerated case of flowers behind the counter. Of course. *Posey*. The neighborhood flower shop. An idea formed. He'd manage two issues with one bouquet. He knocked again.

"Excuse me, Wildcat Girl?" *Wildcat Girl?* Not exactly charming, but his brain was moving a mile a minute. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I...I have a floral emergency."

From his side of the door, Ryan offered a faint smile, which only seemed to deepen her suspicion. He could tell by the wrinkle in her forehead. Why all the mistrust? Was it a small-town thing? Maybe he'd knocked too hard. Maybe he shouldn't have called her Wildcat Girl or used the words "floral emergency." Maybe he was fucking this up royally.

He let go a frustrated sigh and placed his forehead against

one of the rectangular panes. *Today is just not my day.* At this point, he'd have better luck walking to the airport. Only one hundred and forty-eight miles...he'd be home by New Year's.

He drew in a breath to regroup, and when he looked up, the woman stood on the other side of the painted wooden door, her face framed by one of its small windows.

A half smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "What kind of floral emergency?"

Ryan stood still, momentarily dumbstruck by how pretty she was. Tired, as if she'd had a long day, too, but beautiful in a midwest Kentucky kind of way. Not that he should be noticing her natural appeal, and, frankly, midwest Kentucky wasn't topping his list right now. He'd be better off charming his way into her shop rather than appreciating the curves of her face, or the depths of her skeptical green eyes, or messy topknot of her strawberry blond hair.

"You're not local." The half smile had vanished, and the look she gave him through the window was pointed. "How do I know you're not some Ted Bundy-like smooth talker come to take advantage of my weakness for floral emergencies?"

This time he was the one who smiled. Standing in the cold, in Kentucky, frustrated by failure and desperate to get home, he'd smiled. Couldn't help it. He liked the muted twang in her voice, the disbelieving sense of humor. He took a step back and dug out his license and business card. He shoved the wallet back into his pocket and pressed the identification and the small, printed card against the windowpane. *Ryan Callahan. The Callahan Group. New York State Driver License 018 063 111.*

Still seeming undecided, she leaned in close and narrowed her eyes. "Not the best license photo I've ever seen, but... okay." She snapped an image of his license with her cell, punched a code into the alarm system, and opened the door. "You have eight minutes." She held up the phone. "But just so you know, I have Marty from the fire station on speed dial, and he is big and brawny and ready to come to my rescue."

Ryan walked into the old-fashioned shop, a grin on his face.

“No rescue required.”

She nodded, but he noticed she'd slipped the cell into the back pocket of her jeans and left the door open, just in case. *Pretty and cautious. Good combination.*

“So, what's the emergency?” she asked, walking toward the refrigerated case of flowers.

“Right, the emergency.” Ryan shoved his ID back in his wallet and pulled out his cell. “Can I just confirm your address?”

She turned toward him, a hint of that suspicion back in her eyes.

“Of the shop, just the address of the shop.” Now it was his turn to hold up his phone—and both hands. “I need an Uber to the airport, and your store is pretty much the only place I know in town.”

“Twelve Main Street.” She gave him an obvious once-over, a reminder that she'd pegged him as an out-of-towner long before he'd coughed up his license. “Or you can just tell him Posey on Main. Kitty-corner from the Pik Pak Market.”

“Kitty-corner?”

Both hands fell to her hips. “I guess city boys don't use the term ‘kitty-corner’?”

Ryan shook his head, trying to keep an excess of humor out of his voice. “Until a second ago, I didn't think *anyone* used the term ‘kitty-corner.’” *Or “doggone city slicker,” for that matter.*

She tugged at the hem of her shirt—so not a city girl. “Well, if it suits your northern sensibilities better, go with 12 Main Street in downtown Beaumont across from Grandpa Joe's.”

“Thank you.” He pulled out his cell, tapped the address into the app. The sooner he hightailed it out of this town, the better.

“Oh, you're welcome,” she said in a voice too sweet to be good news. “My guess is it'll take him at least fifty minutes to get here.” He glanced up from the phone. “See, Del's on a winter fishing trip along the Kentucky River, and if I know

Del—and I have since the summer I turned seven—he’s had a few beers after spending the day reeling in saw-jaws and a few walleyes, so yeah, fifty minutes is a fair estimate, if you’re lucky, and he hasn’t been hitting the bourbon.”

He quit tapping through the app screens and shot her a quick look. “Del?”

“Delbert Martin,” she said, allowing the most adorable smile he’d ever seen to slide across her face. “The only licensed Uber driver in these parts.”

He rubbed at the back of his neck, pretty sure he looked as foolish as he felt. “Only licensed Uber driver, huh?”

She gave a small shrug. “You could try Beau Steele over on Fort Couch, but last time he tried to drive on the open road, he took out a couple of steers. Wasn’t pretty.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” He unraveled his tie, thinking he was running out of options faster than a Jordan Hicks pitch in the ninth. “Shit, what am I supposed to do now?”

Looking as if that wasn’t her problem, she walked past him and pulled on the door to widen the exit. “Well, for starters, since your *floral emergency* doesn’t seem like such an emergency to me, you can wait outside.”

He shoved his tie into his pocket and stepped toward her. “Yes—right. My floral emergency, absolutely. I was just hoping to call...” Arms crossed over her chest, she stared back at him. “Fair enough. Guess I’ll deal with potentially missing my flight later.” He took out his wallet and handed her his Amex. “I need to send flowers to a client. A possible client, really. Or, more accurately, to his mom.”

Her mouth twisted to one side again and yet, somehow, still managed to be cute. “You need to send flowers to a possible client’s mom? That’s your floral emergency.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Ryan offered up his in-the-living-room, sign-on-the-dotted-line smile, the one he’d perfected over the past seven years. “I really do.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, pulled out her cell, and checked the time, as if she had somewhere to go. He wondered

where that might be.

“Well, since it’s an emergency that involves someone’s mother.” She gave him a pointed look. Even southern hospitality had its limits. “But you are down to five minutes.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

She spun away from the door, walking back to the floral case. “Are you thinking roses?”

“Sure, roses always get the job—”

“Because I think roses can be cliché.”

“Whatever you think is best.” He dialed into his voicemail and pressed the phone to his ear. “Any chance there’s a nonfishing, fully licensed cab company around here?”

“One local company, but good luck getting them to take you all the way to Lexington,” she said, turning her attention back to the flowers. “I’d go with Kentucky wildflowers, some grass-of-parnassus, rose pogonia orchid, and iris. Maybe add camellias and amaryllis for the holiday.”

He covered the phone’s speaker with his palm, wishing she’d move a little faster. Time was of the essence. “Sounds good.”

“Expensive, considering the time of year,” she said, turning his Amex between her index and middle fingers. “And, of course, there will be an upcharge, seeing as we’re closed.”

Ryan watched as she pocketed his credit card and started pulling flowers from the case, wondering exactly how much this was going to cost him. Her accent might be all Kentucky, but her attitude felt very New York. “I’d expect nothing less.”

Her hands sorted the blooms into mismatched piles, adeptly trimming away the leaves. “Where would you like to send these?”

“Excuse me?” He was trying to pay attention, but there were so many damn voicemails. Like a freaking avalanche of problems to solve. He’d bet half the office had cut out early to hit the holiday market before the tourists crowded out the locals. Not that he blamed them. An early Friday sounded good to him about now.

“Where do you want to send the flowers?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry.” Ryan switched the phone to his other hand so he could unearth the business card on which he’d written Mason’s family’s address and offered it to her. “Here you go.”

She took a look and set the card down on the black granite counter. “Is your flight back to New York?”

Ryan placed his hand over the speaker, still trying to pull his messages. “I’m sorry?”

“Your flight tonight,” she repeated, glancing down at her cell vibrating against the granite. “Are you heading back to New York?”

“Yep. Back to the city.” If he could find his way out of here.

“So, do you live in Manhattan?”

“Park Slope, actually.” He gave her a curious look. “My office is in Midtown.”

“Right. The Callahan Group.” She made a small sound of approval in the back of her throat. “Are you in finance?”

“I am not in finance, no,” he said, giving her a curious look. “Not an investigative journalist, either—are you? Because this conversation is starting to feel a lot like one of those *Dateline* interviews.”

She laughed. “A *Dateline* interview?”

Ryan gave a slow, deliberate nod. “The murderous kind on Thursday, late at night. Makes a guy look around his apartment, feeling like something isn’t quite right, but he’s not sure what.”

“Oh, that kind.” She put the bouquet in a vase and ran his credit card for the total.

“Yeah, that kind.” He skipped to the next voicemail—his assistant, sounding stressed.

She handed him back the Amex. “I don’t watch *Dateline*.”

“Well, you’re not a New Yorker, so that makes perfect...aw, no, no, *no*.” He stabbed a few icons on the screen, hoping if he



deleted his assistant's message telling him that his flight was canceled, he might still make it home tonight. "Dammit, this cannot be happening."

"No need to curse."

No need to curse? Was she for real? "Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

His phone buzzed with a text from the airline confirming the voicemail. His jaw tightened. *Unbelievable.*

*No contract. No date. No ride and...no flight.* He tore a hand through his hair, trying to stay cool and even-keeled despite the fact that he felt like losing his mind in the middle of the quaint flower shop. "My flight is canceled. I can't believe it. This is *just* not my day."

"Mine, too," she said.

"Sorry?" Ryan shook his head, trying to focus, trying to be calm, trying to understand. Not her fault he was living through some *Groundhog Day* version of hell. She was pretty and kind; she'd even gone along with his floral emergency. "Yours, too?"

"My flight tonight. To New York." She picked her phone up from the counter and showed him the screen. "Canceled, too. I guess we're both stranded."

# Chapter Two

*December 21, 5:55 p.m.*

*Beaumont, Kentucky, 844 miles from Manhattan*

Sabrina Hayes looked back at the man who'd worked his way into her flower shop with his big-city attitude and air of desperation and wondered if, despite the canceled flight, today was *her* lucky day. Heck, she'd never even *seen* a man who looked like him. Not in real life, anyway. On television. In a magazine. But not up close and personal.

Tall and blond in a Hemsworthy kind of way with a muscular frame that cried out "full-time member of the Manhattan Sports Club," she'd bet he looked incredible in joggers and a performance tee, because right now, standing in her tiny, failing shop, all cool in the gray suit he was sporting, *incredible* didn't come close. Pass-out gorgeous? That was closer.

"You're going to New York?" he asked, his fingers flying over the screen of his phone.

She rested her hip against the smooth edge of the granite. "New York. That was the plan. Before my flight was canceled, anyway. Not everyone in Beaumont spends the weekend ice fishing for walleye, you know."

He looked up briefly from the screen. "Point taken."

Sabrina shook her head at the cancellation notice on her cell. A curl fell out of her topknot and she shoved it behind her ear. She'd spent a week's income on the ticket, more on her bridesmaid dress and an expensive trip to the Lexington Sephora, all because she wanted to be there when her friend Manhattan matchmaker Jane Wright married the man of her dreams. Now what was she supposed to do?

"Any special reason you're heading to New York?"

Not only was the man drop-dead, but apparently, he was a mind reader, too. "A wedding," she said. "My best friend's wedding. The rehearsal is tomorrow night."

“Can’t miss a wedding.” He swiped through a set of screens on the phone. “I can book you a flight, too, if you want. Let’s see what’s available.” His brow wrinkled, which didn’t seem like good news. “Looks like there’s no way to get another flight out tonight. The next available option is...*might* be tomorrow. More likely Sunday.” He glanced her way. “Apparently, all flights are grounded because of a nor’easter up and down the coast.”

So much for “here comes the bride.” Or today being her lucky day. The wedding was on Sunday. If she waited, she’d miss girls’ night out and the rehearsal.

“What about a charter?” he asked in an übercompetent, urban kind of way. Like everyone could simply buy another ticket or jump on a charter.

She sighed. In all honesty, she couldn’t afford a rental car, much less a second ticket or a charter flight. The shop was close to foreclosure, and she was already stressed to the max. “You’re sweet to look, but I don’t think...”

“Yeah, you’re right, no charter flights out of Brennan Farm Airport, either.” He leaned against the counter, concentrating on the phone in what she could only guess was his problem-solving mode. He tossed a look at the deserted street. “Even if I could book us a charter, how could we get to the airport? I’m guessing there’s no rental car option within fifty miles.”

“Good guess.” She slipped the phone into the back pocket of her jeans.

His fingers stilled. He grew quiet for a minute, as if putting together a couple of puzzle pieces, and looked over at her. “How were you planning to get to the airport?”

She tugged at the hem of her shirt. Did that matter? Her flight was officially canceled. “Why do you ask?”

He pushed away from the counter. “Maybe we can help each other out?”

Her eyes narrowed on his hopeful expression. If he was angling for a ride to the airport or car rental place, he should be angling in another direction. Yes, he was gorgeous, and

okay, maybe she'd been trying to get the lowdown on him since she let him into the shop, but traveling alone with a guy she barely knew on the back roads of Kentucky? *Don't think so.*

“Considering all I know about you is that you live in Park Slope and take a not-so-great driver’s license photo, I’m not sure how I can help you.”

“You know more about me than I know about you.” He gave a shrug that was sexier than it ought to have been. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Well, it isn’t Wildcat Girl.” She handed him his receipt, feeling a tad guilty about the guy being stranded eight hundred miles from home—but not so guilty that she was offering him a ride. “And it’s Sabrina, since you sort of asked.”

“Sabrina.” He rolled back on his heels, looking pleased that he’d managed to get a response. “Like the movie.”

“Like the poem.” She swept the stems into the wastebasket under the counter with a sigh. Everyone always thought it was the movie. “My parents are English professors.”

“Ah, ‘Sabrina Fair’—nice. The mermaid who was a savior.”

She looked up, surprised. “That’s the one.”

“Well, *Sabrina*, I’m Ryan,” he said, placing his hand flat against his chest. “Named after Nolan Ryan, starting pitcher for the New York Mets. My parents were not teachers. They were fans. Played second base all four years in college, scouted by the Mets until a knee injury, and now I’m an agent.”

“Ah, a sports agent.” All Manhattan Sports Club and gray suit. She should’ve known. “That’s why you’re sending flowers to Bethany Hollis. You came to see Mason.”

He countered with a short, businesslike nod. “I came to offer him representation.”

A smile crept across her face. “Did his dad call you a city slicker?”

He let go a self-deprecating chuckle, an endearing sound that

had her mind taking a sharp left. Self-deprecating laughter didn't seem all that dangerous.

“Didn't even make it past the front door.”

Her smile widened. “Sounds about right.”

“Think it was the suit?” He tugged at his collar, looking less sure of himself than he had a moment ago. “I was wondering if it might have been the suit.”

Sabrina cleared her throat, thinking the suit looked custom and tailored and completely wrong. “Might have been the suit, and also the fact you talk kind of fast.”

“I'm a sports agent from New York. Of course I talk fast.”

“Exactly—all the typical city agent stuff,” she said. “Bet you were prepared with some strong strategies, too. Thoughts on development until he's eligible for the draft, a few training options.” His expression said she'd totally nailed it. “Well, in case you haven't figured it out yet, Beaumont isn't Manhattan. Here, a little southern charm goes a longer way than shoptalk.”

Not that Ryan Callahan was without his own charms, but “nice and easy” didn't exactly go with the three-piece and high-end leather oxfords. “I could help you with that—the southern charm. And maybe...” Her voice trailed off as a plan formed in her mind.

He tilted his head to one side. “I'm listening.”

Sabrina drew in a breath, pretty sure her idea qualified as a Big Mistake, but if she didn't take the chance now and lay it all out there, she never would. Was her idea bold? Totally. But *she* had to get to New York. And *he* had to get to New York. If he checked out, then, why not?

“Hand me your phone.”

“Sorry.” He looked around, taken aback. “Is that an example of southern charm?”

“Hand me your phone, *please*.”

“My phone? What do you need my—”

“Just do it.” She exhaled. “Pretty please with sugar on top.”

And a cherry.”

“Since you added the cherry.” His expression shifted into amused bewilderment, but to his credit, he rolled with the request and handed her the phone.

“Thank you.” She swiped past the initial screen of icons, noting the Uber app, a sophisticated sports-statistics calculator, and a few financial resources. “This is your Instagram?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She wasn’t on social media much but figured a fast-paced guy like him would have his entire world on social. Her instinct proved to be correct.

“Lots of athlete photos, sports influencers, game updates. Seems legit.” She flipped the phone around to show a photo of him with a pretty, young woman. “Is this your girlfriend?”

“My sister, Erin.”

“Oh. Erin Callahan, pretty name.” She swiped Instagram aside and scrolled through his contacts, thinking she had never been so bold in all her life, and also thinking the next step required an extra dose of charm. She offered up a sweet-as-pecan-pie smile. “May I call her? Your sister.”

He made a sound at the back of his throat. “You mean, call her on the phone?”

“Traditionally, that’s how it’s done.”

“Sure, why not?” he said, his hesitation short-lived. “And while you have her on the line, can you do me a favor and let her know I’m stranded in Beaumont? Kitty-corner from the Pik Pak Market.” He nodded at the phone and flashed a crooked grin. “No girlfriend, by the way.”

Sabrina felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she tried not to consider the effect of that crooked smile. She tapped call, then speaker. His sister picked up the phone on the first ring.

“Ryan, are you home?” Erin asked in an anxious voice. “The weather is kicking in, and I am starting to worry.”

The love and concern in the other woman’s voice knocked

Sabrina for a loop, and for a minute, she didn't know what to say. Literally. No thoughts in her head, except one: the six-foot-something guy in the gray suit with the high-end business card and platinum Amex, valid New York license, and Instagram full of friends and family was clearly *not* Ted Bundy.

“Ryan? Are you okay?” The woman's voice echoed through the speaker.

“Hey, 'Rin. Yeah, I'm fine, one hundred, no need to worry,” Ryan said, stepping in. He gave Sabrina a quizzical look. “I'm still in Kentucky. No snow here, and I...well, I just stopped into a local flower shop to send Mom her birthday bouquet. Figured I'd call the expert and get your recommendations.”

*Pretty sweet for a city guy.* Reassuring his sister, sending his mom flowers. Not only was she probably safe to give him a ride, but he'd likely make a fine escort.

“Everything okay with you in the city?” Ryan asked his sister. “Any chance you'll get snowed in or lose power? I can call Marcus, ask him to stop by and check on you.”

“Please do not send Marcus.”

“Okay.” The adorable grin breaking across his face made Sabrina think his sister might have a crush. “No Marcus, not unless you *ask* me to call him.” He looked over at her and gestured toward the phone. “Either way, I'll check in with you as soon as I get back to New York, but if you have a sec, can you do me a solid and talk to the florist, work out the gift for Mom? You know me. I'm not a flower guy.”

“No, you are not, but you have other nice qualities,” she said with a quiet laugh. “I'm happy to help, just don't forget to call me.”

“As soon as I get home.”

“Promise me you will not call Marcus.”

“I promise,” he said, still smiling. “No Marcus.”

“And please—be careful.”

He dipped his hands into his pockets and shot another glance

in her direction. “I will be.”

“Okay,” his sister said in a gentle tone. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Sabrina’s heart warmed as she listened to the way he spoke with his sister. They seemed close, the way family should be. Her parents were devoted to one another, but there never seemed to be much room for anyone else in their lives. Even their daughter. She’d always wished for a sibling, someone to share secrets and history with, someone to count on. *If wishes were pennies...*

She took the phone off speaker and put it up to her ear. “Hello, Erin? This is Sabrina from Posey. What do you think your mom would like?” She paused and looked over at Ryan. “Yes, he’s fine. No, don’t worry, I’ll take good care of him.”

Ten minutes later, she’d written up the order for delivery next month and enjoyed an easy conversation with Erin, who mentioned more than once that her brother was “the nicest guy.” Not that Sabrina was looking for a nice guy—for *any* guy. She wasn’t.

But she *was* interested in someone to share driving time with, and with her limited choices, the nice city boy who happened to be pass-out gorgeous seemed like her best—and only—option. Besides, she trusted her instincts.

“Okay.” She took in a breath, her heart rate kicking up a notch, knowing this was easily the wildest thing she’d ever done. “I’ll drive you.”

“To the airport?”

“To New York.”

“Oh.” He rubbed a hand across his jaw, his expression uncertain. “I was thinking more along the lines of helping each other find a new flight or rental car, maybe a ride to the airport. But driving together all the way to...”

“I know, it’s not my original or ideal plan, either, but we both need to get to the city, and if I have to drive, I could use someone to share the driving time and expenses,” she said,



coming from behind the counter to return his cell. “So, unless you want to wait it out for the weather to clear up, or a rental car to miraculously appear, you can come with me to New York.”

He gave her an assessing look. “So, does this mean I passed?”

“Passed?”

He closed out his Instagram and pocketed the phone. “Your cyberstalking inspection.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Not sure it can be called cyberstalking, since you’re standing right there, but...yes, I feel pretty certain that I will not end up the subject of your next *Dateline* Thursday night.” She cocked her hip to one side. “Do you blame me?”

“For making sure I was trustworthy before deciding to bail me out?” He shook his head, an earnest expression stamped across his face. “No, not at all. On the contrary, I respect you for it. I hope Erin would do the same rundown if she were in your position.”

*Talk about a perfect answer.* The smile he offered was reassuring, too. *Sugar.* Her heart rate leaped up another maddening notch. *Sugar, sugar. Sugar.*

“Okay, then,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

He nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Holy Christmas, she was road-tripping with the Gorgeous Man in the Gray Suit. Sounded Hitchcockian, but with her decision made, now was not the time to mistrust those instincts. She walked over to the front door, flipped the lock, checked the CLOSED sign, and turned off the outside light.

“Give me one second.” She pulled the cell from the pocket of her jeans to text Jane, thinking it was always good to have backup. “I need to text my friend in the city.”

*Hey, Bride-to-Be. My flight was canceled, so I won’t be in New York tonight for girls’ night. Driving up, so I should be in Brooklyn...* She stopped typing to calculate the time. If it was

about a thirteen-hour drive and they drove straight through, plus the difference in time zones, she figured an ETA of... *around seven tomorrow morning. Plenty of time before the rehearsal.*

She scanned the text quickly, decided it sounded relaxed and carefree and not like she was flying by the seat of her boyfriend jeans and freaking out. She tapped send. *Ping.*

A quick glance over at Ryan told her that he was waiting patiently.

“Ready to roll?” she asked.

“Ready to roll.”

Sabrina walked over to the counter, picked up the flowers he’d ordered for Bethany, and started toward the back of the shop. *Ping.* Her phone signaled a text. She tucked the arrangement into the crook of her arm and glanced at her cell. From Jane. Not surprising. Her friend was the most on-top-of-it person she knew.

“Can you hold this for a minute?” With an apologetic smile, she handed off the arrangement and scrolled down to read the message.

*Driving?!? New York is covered in snow. Just catch a flight tomorrow.*

*Already tried. I can’t reschedule a flight until Sunday.*

Okay, maybe she *could* get a flight tomorrow, but that was only a maybe, closer to a probably not, and she didn’t want to miss the rehearsal. Cringing at the little white fib, she tapped out another text. *Don’t worry, Jane. I’ll be fine. I promise.*

Sabrina pictured her firecracker of a bestie pacing in her office. The three small dots blinked indecisively in the corner until...

*Text me every 100 miles.*

She sneaked a quick look at her codriver. *Every 100 miles. XO.*

Another ping. *xoxo.*

“Everything okay?” he asked from behind the oversize floral arrangement. “You’re sure it’s all right, me tagging along? I don’t want to cause any—”

“Everything is fine, and anyway, I can’t leave you stranded.”

Sabrina slipped the cell into her back pocket and moved into the rear of the shop. Once there, she opened a small, refrigerated case and removed the custom box that housed Jane’s living bouquet.

Created with fifteen sage-colored succulents of varied sizes, the bouquet had a semiwild style accented with spraying eucalyptus and red and white astrid. This was a magical, one-of-a-kind arrangement, and she knew Jane would adore it.

Ryan stepped through the doorway and glanced at the flowers. “Cool flowers.”

“Made special for the bride.” Sabrina smiled, thrilled by the stunning arrangement. “It’s a living bouquet. Not all the flowers are cut, and some of the succulents can be replanted, so she’ll always have part of her wedding day.” She unhooked her jacket and canvas satchel from the back of the door, added the red garment bag containing her bridesmaid dress, and motioned toward the exit of the shop with her chin. “The van’s out back.”

He made a move to help her. “I can help carry some of the —”

“Nope, it’s okay,” she said. “I’ve got it.”

“Please.” He reached for the bouquet box, a quiet insistence in his voice. “Let me help.”

“Are you sure?” Her gaze dropped to his knee, remembering how he’d winced as he walked into the shop. “The system I designed to nourish the flowers is partly made of pebbles, so the box is heavy.”

“All the more reason.” His smile was so reassuring, it was hard to say no.

She bit down on her lower lip. There *was* a lot to manage, she thought before handing off the flowers, waving him

through the exit and kicking the door closed behind them.

When she caught up with him a half dozen steps later, Ryan was standing in the narrow alley, his wide back against the brick wall, his size even more evident in the penned-in space of the alleyway. He stared at their soon-to-be ride. “We’re driving to New York in a floral truck?”

Sabrina tossed out what she hoped was a reassuring smile. Technically, the Ford Transit Connect was a cargo van she’d had retrofitted with a refrigerated back, all-wheel drive, and a customized Posey logo. But, yes, they were driving to New York in a floral truck.

“Right after we deliver your flowers.”

# Chapter Three

*December 21, 6:22 p.m.*

*Beaumont, Kentucky, 846 miles from home*

As the logo-imprinted Ford pulled into the driveway of the Hollises' ranch-style home, Ryan experienced some major déjà vu and a truckload of second thoughts. He was a by-the-book guy. Sending a discreet bouquet, following up with a call, attending the kid's next game—all seemed wiser than showing up with the town florist an hour after being kicked to the curb. Hell, for all he knew, Bill Hollis had a rifle to go with his cowboy boots and *Gunsmoke* lingo.

Add into the mix the idea of driving thirteen hours to New York with a woman he'd met ten minutes ago, and it was like he was living in one of those romantic comedies his ex had loved so damn much. *Might not be a smart move on your part, Callahan.* He drew in a breath and exhaled. But he needed to get back to New York, and she was his option. His *only* option.

"You're sure this is a good idea?" He climbed out of the van and closed the door. "Just showing up with a delivery? No call. No advance warning." *You know, in case there's a rifle.*

She looked at him from across the hood, a small wrinkle forming between her brows. "Flowers are always a good idea, but just to be on the safe side, maybe..."

"Maybe?" He was already out of his element. "On the safe side" did not sound good.

Coming around from the driver's side, she took the floral arrangement from his hands and balanced it on the hood. "Maybe you want to lose the jacket."

"*Lose the jacket?*" he said. "I already left my coat in the back seat, and it's like forty degrees."

She tapped a weather app on her phone. "Closer to thirty-seven, which *is* colder than usual for Beaumont, but not exactly freezing, and we are trying to make an impression here."

“And the jacket makes the wrong impression?”

She folded her arms across her barn-style fleece. “You’re the one who said the suit might’ve been a mistake, and if I’m being perfectly honest...” She gave him a once-over. “Gray pinstripes say uptight, fast-talking city agent who can’t be trusted.”

“The jacket says all that?”

She bit down on her lip. “Pretty close.”

“Jesus, don’t hold back.” He stared over at her for what felt like a full minute, as if he might will her to change her mind. “Fine, I’ll lose the jacket.”

“Thank you,” she said, all honey-voiced and southern.

“You’re welcome.” He moved his phone into the pocket of his pants and took off the jacket, folding it precisely along the crease.

Her head tilted to one side. “Definitely better, but if I’m being—”

“Perfectly honest?” he finished with intentional big-city irony.

She raised a brow, fully onto his sarcasm. “Yes, if I’m being *perfectly honest*, I’d have to say the vest is a little stuffy, too.”

“The vest is *not* stuffy,” he said, unbuttoning it.

Her eyes narrowed. “Maybe if we roll up your sleeves.”

“The rest is fine. Come on, let’s go.” He made a move toward the house, but her hand caught the edge of his shirt and tugged him back, and—man, she was *really* pretty.

Pretty in an unexpected way that threw a man off his game. Standing there, her fingers wrapped around his shirt, her wide eyes staring up at him, her hair falling away from the topknot to frame her face—everything about her stirred up his insides.

“Well, bless your sweet heart.” She gave him a warm smile, her hands already working on his shirtsleeves. “No need to worry. I promise this’ll just take a second.”

*Well, bless your sweet heart.* The words *sounded* nice, but Ryan was pretty sure he'd been played, and now she was close enough that he could breathe in the floral scent of her skin, see the constellation of freckles across her nose, feel the deftness of her movements against his skin, and it all made him feel off-balance. *She* made him feel off-balance.

Surprised by the strength of his reaction, he took a step back and cleared his throat. "Okay, let's get this over with."

"Get this over with?" She pinned him with a look. "Not exactly a winning attitude."

She was right. Bossy, but right.

"I know, I *know*." He scrubbed his face with his hands. "Mason is a good kid and a terrific player. I can develop his fundamentals, prepare him for the draft." Best part of his job, making a ballplayer's dream come true. The way his hadn't. He pushed away a stab of bitterness. "I'm just not sure I'm up for another curb-kicking."

"Oh, I think we're safe. I mean, we brought flowers." She swiveled around to pick up the bouquet and tossed him another smile. "Truth be told, Mr. Hollis has a soft spot for me."

Somehow, Ryan wasn't surprised. This quick-witted woman with the honeyed voice seemed capable of wrapping almost any man around her little finger. "No kidding."

"Dated my grandmother back in middle school."

Sabrina traded the vase for his vest and jacket, then tossed them carelessly into the back seat. His mouth twisted to one side. So much for maintaining the crease of the jacket.

"Oh, don't worry, there won't be any trouble," she said, misunderstanding his expression. "Beth Hollis likes me, too." She closed the door with her hip and started up the path to the door.

Ryan hung back, perplexed. "Aren't you going to lock the door?"

"The door?" She turned around, a confused look on her face.

He nodded toward the Ford. “Of the van.”

“Heck, no. Everyone in town knows the van’s mine—it says Posey right on it. I don’t think anyone plans to jump-start the engine and drive off with her. I mean, I haven’t locked a car door since I was in...” Her expression shifted in some indefinable way. She waved away her thoughts. “Suffice it to say, this isn’t New York.”

“Obviously, Beaumont is *not* New York, but—”

“Exactly,” she said, starting up the walkway. “Beaumont is *not* New York.”

Ryan held up both hands in surrender and moved away from the van. No sense in arguing with the woman. He’d only been trying to help. He knew how life could go sideways, how it was best to take precautions. He shook his head. Not his business. If she thought it was fine, then...fine. Locking the doors was his instinct, not to mention a damn good idea, but if she was ready to roll the dice with the colossal dress bag of hers, who was he to stop her?

“Now remember, we don’t have but a minute before we’ve got to hit the road. Let’s get in there, bust out some southern-style charm, and go, okay?” Halfway up the flagstone path, she whipped around to face him. “No statistics. No fast talk. No highfalutin contract details. Just flowers and ‘your son’s a real fine ballplayer.’ Got it?”

“Got it.” He gave her an assured, deal-is-done smile, but her reaction made it clear the smile had failed to inspire the usual confidence.

“Maybe I should do the talking.”

Ryan chuckled. Yep, she was bossy, but he was a guy used to being in charge. This was *still* his business, if not his turf. “Thanks, but I can speak for myself.”

She turned back around, but not before he caught a glimpse of the impish expression on her face. “Didn’t have much luck the first time.”

“Yeah, but this time I’m not wearing my jacket.” He fell in stride next to her, ready to give his best pitch. “Not to mention,



my shirtsleeves are undone.”

She glanced over as they approached the front door. “They *are*.”

“So, what could go wrong, right?” He’d end up with a deal or get tossed back out to the curb. Either way, he’d give his all. “Besides, this time I’ve got you to show me.”

“Show you what?” That suspicious look returned, landing solidly in her green eyes.

His smile widened, all irony at its edges. “The magic of all that southern charm.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but the click of the metal latch must’ve stopped whatever comment was coming his way, because her mouth snapped shut.

The door swung open, and Bill Hollis stood there, looking more relaxed than he had an hour ago, clad in the same faded denim shirt, a beer bottle in his hand.

“Sabrina, darlin’, what a nice...” The affection in his voice matched the delight of his expression—until his gaze slid past Sabrina to zero in on Ryan.

“Now, hold your horses, what are you doin’ back here?” he asked.

Ryan shifted the flowers to one side. “Mr. Hollis, I would like the chance to—”

“Merry early Christmas, Bill,” Sabrina chimed in, breezing through the door like a summer wind in winter. She planted a fast kiss on the man’s cheek and tossed a look back at Ryan. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing Ryan along. He’s a pretty good guy. Underpaid deliveryman, too.” She winked back at him. Literally, she winked. “Any chance Beth is home?”

And without waiting for an answer, Sabrina disappeared inside the house, leaving a bemused Bill Hollis standing in the entry. The older man opened the door another inch in begrudging invitation, his eyes narrowed on the shirtsleeves. “You look better without the suit.”

• • •

Twenty minutes later, armed with a care package of angel-shaped sugar cookies, a six-pack of Coke, and a University of Kentucky stadium blanket, Sabrina waved to Beth Hollis and pulled out of the driveway, grateful for the generosity, even if she had laughed nervously when Beth handed her the blanket, “in case she had car trouble,” because...no.

No reason to worry, no trouble on the horizon, no red flags.

Once inside the Hollis home, Ryan had proved to be as nice as advertised, quickly earning a shot at their trust. He seemed to have a legitimate interest in Mason, and in the time they’d spent with the family, Sabrina realized Ryan was more than a guy in a high-priced suit, and now she felt even more confident in her decision to give him a ride. Besides, company on a road trip was always good. She glanced over at him. Unless that company ate all the snacks.

“Those cookies are meant to last the whole trip, you know.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll save you one,” he joked, pulling a few more from the container. “Beth Hollis makes the best damn cookies I’ve ever tasted, and I’m not just saying that because I haven’t eaten anything since the smoothie and veggie wrap I picked up at the airport Urban Crave.”

“A smoothie and a veggie wrap?” She shot him a quick glance, noting how his wide-cut shoulders and better than six-foot frame filled the front cab. “Please don’t tell me you’re a health-food nut.”

“Not sure I’m a health-food *nut*,” he said, pointing at the container. “But, yeah, I mean, I try.”

Sabrina scrunched up her face. “Guess that makes Heavenly Hot Dog out of the question.”

He studied her with a New Yorker’s intense curiosity. “What’s a heavenly hot dog?”

“Not *a* heavenly hot dog.” She smiled despite herself. “Just Heavenly Hot Dog. It’s a restaurant in Almost, West Virginia. My gram used to take me there on road trips. Best dogs in the

region.”

“*This joint?*” He stared at an image on his cell, obviously having looked up the place. “Looks more like a roadside stand than a restaurant.”

Sabrina chuckled. “Maybe. But it’s a *great* roadside stand. No health food allowed,” she said, her voice softening. “My gram loved the place. Every time we went, she’d get the special, a chili dog and fries. The Loaded Dog was my favorite. Deep-fried with mustard, onions, relish, slaw, sauerkraut, nacho cheese, jalapeños, and bacon.”

“A heart attack in a bun.”

She raised a skeptical brow. “Maybe we can get you a salad.”

He readjusted the seat belt and shifted in his seat. “I’ve had a hot dog before.”

“Sabrett’s, right?” She had to keep from rolling her eyes. All New Yorkers loved Sabrett’s. “Sorry, but a Heavenly dog beats a street dog every day and twice on Sundays.” She tilted her head toward his phone. “Oh, and if you’re scrolling through the options, I’m pretty sure they don’t sell smoothies, so you’ll have to go rogue and get a beer.”

“I drink beer.” The look he gave her was pointed, as if she’d taken his man card.

She fought back a smile. “Let me guess—*craft* beer.”

Yep, there it was again, the man-card look. “You say that like it’s an issue. Like real men don’t drink craft beer,” he said, looking out the window. “Nothing wrong with craft beer.”

She snickered at his somewhat adorable pout. This was going to be a long trip if he was going to get cranky when she referred to a hot dog place as a restaurant or called craft beer an oxymoron.

“Can you put the address of the restaurant into your Google Maps?” she asked, happy to switch the subject. “The van doesn’t have navigation.”

“Sure.”

His sidelong glance said he was surprised her souped-up Ford lacked a high-tech nav system, and Sabrina felt the heat rise into her cheeks. No navigation. No unlimited data on her phone, either. She'd cut back on everything with the shop looking at foreclosure.

"According to Google, we'll be there by eleven."

"Eleven? That's a little late," she said, taking the exit for Interstate 68 East. "Is that okay with you?"

"Are you kidding? I'm a New Yorker. I'm the king of late-night dinners." His tone was casual, but she noticed how he gripped the edge of his seat as she accelerated onto the highway. "If you'd rather stop earlier, that's fine, too. I'm happy to check out the hot dog place if that's where you want to go to since it's your grandmother's favorite—"

Was *her* favorite, she thought without correcting him.

"No, Heavenly is perfect." She merged into the right lane and slowed to the speed limit. If they drove through the night, they'd make it to the city in plenty of time, even with a stop for dinner. Plus, she could text Jane from the restaurant.

Sabrina flicked a look his way. He seemed tense, his jaw held tight, his gaze locked on the phone, back to work, totally focused. Probably had a ton of business to do—emails to return, big, impressive clients that needed his attention.

Not that she was surprised by his focus. His world was light-years away from her small life in Kentucky, a life where consequential emails were few and far between. Her life was simple. No traffic, no noise, no constant rush. All her energy went to making a go of the modest floral shop her grandmother had willed to her, the one bearing the nickname Gram had so lovingly bestowed on her when she was a little girl. Sabrina felt the quick sting of tears and tightened her grip on the wheel.

"Anything interesting?" she asked with a nod toward his cell.

"Just work." He shot a quick glance in her direction. "You'd think the holidays might mean a break, but there always seems to be a contract issue or trade deadline. Playoff bonuses."

“Football season.”

“Are you a fan?”

“I’m a big-time fan.” All the summers she’d spent running with the boys in Kentucky had taught her to appreciate sports. She’d been shy, a lonely outsider visiting for a few months from the city, mostly keeping to herself, reading or working in the garden, but the boys who lived next to Gram knocked at the door every night after dinner, asking her to play pickup basketball or Frisbee or night tag. Eventually, she joined in, and lucky she did, because they were still friends.

“Remember how the Giants beat the Patsies in the Super Bowl on that—”

“Gutsy throw from Manning.” He replayed the game’s big pass as much as he could in the passenger seat, his body filling the front cab. “Yeah, great game. Cool you appreciate sports.”

Sabrina lifted her shoulders. “I mostly love a good underdog story.”

“Me, too. That’s why I love developing talent. A solid draft can mean everything to a kid, to a family.” He gave her a curious look. “Funny, you’re a Giants fan. Being from Kentucky, I would’ve taken you for a Bengals girl.”

Sabrina wrinkled her nose. She didn’t want to get into her lonely childhood in the city or how she’d left Columbia during her junior year to care for Gram while she was sick with cancer. Not that she needed to worry. His phone rang and... conversation over.

“Sorry, I’ve got to deal with this,” he said, already refocused on the texts lighting up the screen, back in the crisis-management mode she’d witnessed in the shop.

Sabrina eyed the phone, feeling Scrooge-like for no reason. The man needed to work. Not his fault. He cared about his clients, but she knew his type—*work, work, work*. She grew up in a house of *work, work, work*, playing second fiddle to her parents’ careers her whole life. She still didn’t understand how work took precedence over people.

Without conversation, the van was quiet. She tapped her

fingertips on the steering wheel.

Music, that's what she needed. Every road trip needed music. She punched a preset for her favorite station, and Keith Urban's "I'll Be Your Santa Tonight" spilled from the speakers as her thoughts turned to the next few days in New York—technically her hometown, but a place that had always left her feeling she wasn't...enough. Should she call her parents while she was in the city? As if they'd make time to see her.

She pushed away the unwelcome thoughts. Her plan didn't have to change because she was driving and not flying. Just get to the city, get Jane married, get back to Kentucky. Back *home*.

She turned on the blinker to merge, and having wrapped up his issue, Ryan slipped the phone into the center console, arranging it so she could see the directions on the screen. The simple gesture touched her heart. Other than her gram, no one had ever looked out for her, not even in a small way, and his thoughtful courtesy reminded her how concerned he'd been talking with his sister, his impulse to look out for her, the casual way he'd said *love you*.

Not words she'd heard much growing up. Except for Gram. Her parents weren't big on affection, except with one another, so she had to stock up on *I love you* during her Kentucky summers. Gram always said kindness was in the little things—delivering a cup of coffee in the morning, offering to make supper, bringing in the newspaper. Big gestures were nice, but the small stuff made up a person's life.

"Hey, before I forget to tell you," he said, "I appreciate the assist with Mason Hollis. I admit I was pretty thrown by having the door shut in my face."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Not a guy who's used to rejection?"

"Not really, no." He looked over, wearing an expression that probably made the Midtown girls melt like a Kentucky snowfall. "Most of the time, the answer I get is yes."

"I bet."

“I’m talking clients, not women.”

She raised one brow. “Of course you are.”

“Seriously?” A vague irritation flashed across his face. “Truth is, I wasn’t prepared to go back to the Hollis place tonight, not after the ‘city slicker’ comment, but thanks to you, I’ve got a shot to sign Mason, an opportunity that seemed unlikely an hour ago.” He paused. “What can I say? There really is some magic in that southern charm of yours, so thank you. I owe you.”

She looked over briefly, touched by his acknowledgment. “You’re welcome.”

The inside of the cab grew quiet for a moment, neither having much to say—or, more accurately, not knowing what to say, considering they were fundamentally strangers.

Ryan tapped his knuckles on the console and nodded toward the radio. “Not a bad song.”

“One of my favorites,” she said, appreciating Maren Morris’s lyrics about putting her car in drive, finding an escape. “You like country music—that’s a good sign.”

He gave her a look that said *you’ve got to be kidding me*. “No upstanding New Yorker *likes* country.”

“I can always sing along,” she said, glancing in his direction. “Convert you into a fan.”

“So, you must be a good singer?”

“No,” she laughed. “I’m like karaoke’s worst nightmare.”

“I bet you look adorable onstage, sporting cowboy boots, singing Shania.”

“I do *not* wear cowboy boots.” She shook her head, chuckling. “And trust me, nothing is adorable about me singing karaoke—absolutely nothing.”

His brows lifted. “So, no road-trip serenade?”

“No road-trip serenade.”

“Maybe next time.” He shot over another one of those cool-

guy smiles.

*Maybe next time.*

Except there'd never be a next time. Apart from the fact that he liked sports and was down for karaoke, she scarcely knew the guy, and what she did know was in opposition to the low-key life she'd chosen. He was high-end cashmere and pricey gym membership, excessively work-focused and supposedly health-conscious, and not at all her speed. He was also surprising and kind in a way she hadn't expected when he'd come into the shop.

But no—*no*. She tightened her grip on the wheel. This trip was nothing more than a rideshare, and thinking about his finer qualities was just a road to nowhere.

In twelve hours, Ryan Callahan would be a memory, an impossibly gorgeous guy from the city who'd stumbled into her shop on a random Friday night, a guy along for a thirteen-hour ride, down for sharing driving time and expenses.

Nothing more, nothing less.



# Chapter Four

*December 21, 10:51 p.m.*

*Heavenly Hot Dog*

*Almost, West Virginia, 581 miles from home*

*So, this is what the Twilight Zone feels like,* Ryan thought, standing inside what had to be the quirkiest roadside stand in America.

A rustic shed covered in Christmas lights and filled with everything from a sleigh stacked with presents to a leg lamp straight out of *A Christmas Story*, this place was unlike anything he'd ever seen—and he was a New Yorker.

“Welcome to Heavenly Hot Dog, y'all.” A man wearing a plaid shirt and Santa hat smiled from behind a counter plastered with bumper stickers. “You two lookin’ to get hitched?”

“Hitched?” Ryan asked, a hint of panic in his voice. “As in *married?*”

“Well, yeah, married.” The man looked back at a bun-shaped wall clock and wiped his hands on his apron. “Most late-night lovebirds walk in looking to take advantage of our Heavenly Weddin’ Chapel. ’Course, you need a West Virginia marriage license, but otherwise, we’re full service.”

“Full service?” he repeated, feeling like he’d dropped into a parallel universe. “As in, until death do us part?”

The man chuckled. “Well, now, we don’t much focus on the death part, but the marriage is legit. I’m licensed to perform the ceremony, and my wife’s a fan of all things romantic, so the chapel is full of flowers and those white lights everybody loves.” He grinned. “Of course, the reception is all about the dogs.”

“All about the dogs.” He held his arms out wide. After four hours of bluegrass music, he’d experienced enough country to last a lifetime, but this place was next level.

“He’s from New York,” Sabrina said, jerking her head in his direction.

Plaid Santa nodded, as if that explained everything. “Well, grab yourself a seat, take a look at the menu, and let me know what works for you.”

Sabrina busted out one of the adorable smiles that had knocked Ryan flat in her shop and moseyed over to a booth wedged between a ginned-up bathtub and an old-time cola machine. She tucked her body onto the red leather banquette, and a faraway, almost wistful expression colored her features as her fingertips touched the edge of the wooden table.

She slipped her canvas bag from her shoulders and smiled. “I can still remember Gram notching my name here. Took out her Swiss Army knife and etched ‘Sabrina’ right into the corner. Said she wanted me to always remember that I was special.”

Ryan leaned in to look and found her name among the many written in black marker or carved into the wood. He wondered why she’d needed reassurance. “How old were you?”

“Seven.” Her soft-eyed expression grew guarded as her mind shifted back from the memory. “Long time ago. First summer I spent in Kentucky.”

“First summer in Kentucky?” he asked, shrugging out of his coat and sliding into the opposite side of the booth. “I thought you were a tried-and-true Beaumont girl.”

“Oh, I’m a country girl. I just didn’t always live in Beaumont.” The there-and-gone flash of emotion in her eyes told him those long-ago summers were off-limits, despite her casual tone. Made him wonder why. “So, how did you know about my name?”

“Your name?” he asked, surprised by the quicksilver change. “What do you mean?”

“The poem.” She unzipped her jacket before handing him one of the vinyl-covered menus. “You don’t exactly strike me as the scholarly Milton type.”

*Talk about assumptions.* “Why? Because I’m a sports guy?”

“Maybe.” She looked up from her menu, a hint of mischief in her voice.

He made a mocking sound at the back of his throat. “Not like that’s presumptuous.”

“Oh, please, no more than the look on your face when we walked in here.”

He leaned forward. “You do know this place is like some kitsch-filled alternate reality, right?” His mouth twitched. “Or maybe you missed the sign over there that says, IF YOU HIT IT ON THE RUN, WE’LL PUT IT ON A BUN.”

She laughed out loud, and the sound struck him as generous and real, not practiced in the way of so many women he’d known. He liked her laugh, liked *making* her laugh.

“I happen to enjoy the sense of humor.”

He raised an eyebrow and focused on the menu. “Well, I’m officially starving, so if the food is as good as promised, maybe I’ll enjoy it, too.”

“Guess we’ll find out,” she said, diving behind her own menu. “Oh, look, they have a Don’t Have a Cow burger. Definitely your speed.”

“Aren’t you funny?” he said, playing along with her wisecracking comment. “Nothing wrong with the occasional greasy spoon.”

“Or the occasional Christmas cookie.”

Her sly smile evoked one of his own, but if she thought for one second that she could get under his skin by yanking his chain over his penchant for health food—or his lack of commitment to said preference—she had another thing coming. “Think I’ll step out of the box tonight and go with the Mountaineer Special.”

She looked over at him, humor stamped across her face. “Not exactly vegan.”

“You know what they say.”

Sabrina leaned forward, and the challenging gleam in her

eyes was his speed. “No—what do they say?”

Damn, he enjoyed a challenge. “When in West Virginia...”

Plaid Santa showed up to take their order. “You folks decided?”

She looked up and gave Santa an easy nod. When she wasn’t being bossy, her country ways felt relaxed and fun, like a mini break from his übercompetitive world. Not that he’d ever want to live in Kentucky. He loved the city, the energy, the competitive vibe, the fast pace. But he liked her way, too. He liked her bright-green eyes, flowery scent, strawberry curls, and her easy, familiar manner.

Hell, they’d only met five hours ago, and yet, here they were, traveling like, what? Not exactly friends. Casual road trippers? Effective strangers? He ran a hand over his jaw. He didn’t know. But in nine hours, he would be back in his own bed, back to Life as He Knew It. That much was for sure.

Her menu hit the table. “I’ll take the Loaded Dog, please.”

“And I’d like the Mountaineer Special and a Miner’s Daughter.” He grinned at Sabrina. “In case you didn’t know, it’s a craft beer.”

She rolled her eyes in his direction, ordering without a glance at the menu. Like a regular. Or a beer savant. “A Cold Trail Blonde, please.”

“You got it.” Plaid Santa grabbed up both menus and turned to go. “Ready in ten.”

“Sounds good, thanks.” Ryan stretched his legs under the table and settled his arms across his chest. “Quite the place, this Heavenly Hot Dog.” His mouth lifted at the edges. “Interesting choice from you, too—a Cold Trail Blonde. Do you know if that comes in a draft?”

“A draft?” Her eyes narrowed, already halfway on to him. “I don’t believe so, no.”

“I’ve just never heard of that particular *brewski*,” Ryan teased.

“Aw, well, now, that’s cause it’s probably not available in

your neck of the woods.” The muted Kentucky twang edged its way to the forefront of her voice, as if reminding him of her southern roots. “Seeing as it’s a Mountain State Brewing exclusive.”

He gave a slow nod. “So, you do know it’s a craft beer?”

She countered with a cool shrug. “I think it’s a microbrew.”

Ryan laughed. For a country girl, she was a serious beer snob. “So, let me get this straight. Real women drink microbrews, but not craft beer, and real men are just...”

“Impossible? Pretty much.” She nestled against the leather booth, studying him with a new, faintly accusatory curiosity. “Don’t try to distract me by ordering real food and a Miner’s.”

“Distract you from what?” He looked around the place, not sure what she meant. The Dierks Bentley medley hammering at his brain must have undercut his ability to think. Then, understanding hit him. *Beer snob. Sports guy snob. Not exactly a scholar snob.* “Oh, right, you’re still puzzling out how a city jock like me knows ‘Sabrina Fair’?”

His tone fell into the range of congenial, but he’d rather take a pass than answer. Lucky for him, a distraction arrived in the form of two beer cans sheathed in clear plastic cups.

Sabrina pulled the blond ale toward her. “So, how *did* you know?”

Persistent, he’d give her that. He popped the top of his beer, lifted the cup, and tried to evade the question. “Why so interested? Just a poem, right?”

“I don’t know. Because the baseball-playing poet doesn’t add up to me,” she said, rolling the can between her palms. “Maybe I’m wondering about who I’m road-tripping with.”

He gave her a teasing look. “Or maybe you’re nosy?”

“I prefer curious.”

“Most nosy people do.” He smiled and wiped the aluminum lip with a napkin and poured his beer, watching the chocolate stout color the clear plastic. *May as well go with the truth. Part of it, anyway.* “The answer is simple, really. My fiancée.”

“Your fiancée.” Sabrina blinked over at him, her expression stuck in a gear between surprise and shock. “Now, wait just one minute here—you’re *engaged*?”

“Is that so impossible to believe?” Her obvious and, frankly, extreme incredulity stung more than her assessment that he wasn’t the scholarly type. Apparently, he wasn’t the marrying kind, either. Not that he was, not anymore, not after the ugliness of his breakup, but hell...

“No, no, not *totally* impossible,” she said, backpedaling in a way that might have been endearing if he hadn’t just been insulted. “But, back in the shop, you stated you didn’t have a girlfriend, and a minute ago you were so freaked out by the possibility of ‘death do us part’ that an engagement moving toward a forever vow situation seemed...unlikely?”

“Oh, I see,” he said. “So, my completely normal reaction to getting hitched in a wedding chapel inside a hot dog stand to a woman I met five hours ago means I must be single?”

She set her beer aside. “No, I don’t think it means—”

Ryan waved away her words, not wanting an apology or explanation. He didn’t know why he’d mentioned his ex in the first place. “No, I’m not engaged. Not anymore,” he said, fighting not to let the past get the better of him. “I should have said my *ex-fiancée* is the reason this not-entirely-dumb jock knows about ‘Sabrina Fair.’ Add up better for you?”

“Well, no. I never...” She toyed with the condiment bottles on the table, offhandedly building a wall of hot sauce between them. “I mean, I never meant to imply—”

“You did, but I get it.” He sat back, expecting a lecture on how a little southern charm might prevent future breakups, but all he got was a rueful look and blissful silence.

Short-lived, blissful silence.

“So, the *ex* was the poetry freak,” she said as if that made so much more sense.

“No, my ex was not a *poetry freak*.” He raised his cup, took another sip of the stout. “She was a Harrison Ford freak. Left me for a guy who looked just like him.”

Sabrina's mouth tipped up on one side. "That's not true."

"You're right, it's not true." He felt his jaw tighten but managed to return the half smile, an improvement over the days when thinking about his ex sent him into a twisted funk. "Pretty sure that's a Hugh Grant line from a movie in her relentlessly romantic Netflix queue."

He tapped the cup on the table. If only his ex-fiancée had broken off their engagement for a reason as mundane as another man. Might've done less damage. And he *was* damaged, in a way. Being left without a backward glance because he was no longer a prize athlete with a guaranteed future hurt. Trust was no longer second nature, much less commitment. He dated, occasionally, when he wasn't traveling. Probably part of why his sister worried, why she was always trying to fix him up. Fix *him*.

He laid his hands flat against the table. "Truth is, she left me because I sustained some injuries and couldn't play baseball anymore, which was a real confidence booster," he said, thinking he might need a second beer, knowing he'd forgo in case she asked him to drive. "But I was lucky. Before she took off, she force-fed me the Ford version of *Sabrina*...several times."

"I'm sorry," she said, a wince in her voice.

"You should be," he said with an ease he didn't feel. "It's a terrible movie."

Her gaze held steady. "No, I meant—"

"Thanks, I know what you meant." He shifted in the seat as the piped-in music moved from Bentley to Blake Shelton, a mind-numbing rundown of country's greatest love songs.

She tugged on her Wildcats jersey as the usual, inevitable sympathy worked its way across her face. He liked it better when she was giving him a hard time about his suit.

"So, um, what kind of injuries?"

His insides twisted predictably. "Just...injuries."

*Career-ending, relationship-ending injuries.*

“I don’t talk much about the situation.”

Her empathetic gaze zeroed in on his face. “I understand.”

He gave a vague nod and picked up his phone. Better to focus on his work than marinate in his past, he thought, scrolling through his calendar. *Event, Sunday night. Contract renegotiation, Monday morning. Injury report in the afternoon.* He set the phone facedown on the table. *Injury report.*

He looked over at his road-trip partner-turned-dinner date, struck again by how pretty she was, how easy she was to talk to. Hell, he’d already told her more about his injury and broken engagement than he told most. *Why?*

His on-the-record bio stated he’d sustained an injury, blown out a knee during the off-season, and never come back to baseball. A half-truth designed to hide a painful reality.

Ryan drew in a breath. “Probably more on edge about the subject than usual, thanks to the fact that I expect to run into my ex and her new and improved fiancé at an event this weekend.” The potential run-in was part of why he’d been thinking about taking a date.

“New and improved fiancé?”

“Yep.” He winced at his cynical tone, covered with a quick smile. “A client of mine, a good guy.” *Too good for her, honestly.*

“Ouch.”

He tapped his index finger on the back of his phone. “Double ouch.”

Sabrina nodded, quiet for a minute. She looked toward the counter for their order. Took a sip of her beer. “So, what kind of event?”

“Ha!” He laughed and pointed his index finger in her direction. “See, you are nosy.”

“No, I’m not—” She let go a gentle laugh. “Well, okay, maybe a little.”



“I think you’re selling yourself short.” He gave her a teasing look and took a sip of his beer. He lifted a shoulder. “Just this Sportsman of the Year type of event. No big deal.”

“Sounds like a big deal to me.” She leaned forward, elbows on the table, all unpretentious ease. “Could you skip it? Take in a ball game instead?”

*Take in a ball game instead.* Most women he knew would be maneuvering for an invitation to the televised, gift-bag laden event, but not this one. She was saying the hell with it, skip it, hit up Madison Square Garden. Probably be happier at a game or hanging at home listening to her god-awful music, enjoying a beer.

Obviously, he was guessing; he didn’t know her well, or at all, really. They were just two people sharing a ride. Instagram buddies at best. But he felt sure she wasn’t the kind of woman who pursued a guy for the imagined perks of being with an athlete.

“I’m being recognized for community service for a baseball camp I run for kids in the Bronx who want to play ball.” He leaned back against the booth. “Better if I go.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, a teasing glint in her eye. “So, you really *are* a nice guy.”

“Maybe.” He laughed.

He’d been called a few choice names during his seven-year career. *Draft junkie. Moneyballer. Contract shark.* But *nice guy?* Not one he often heard in his competitive business, so to be acknowledged for the camp felt pretty sweet. Even better, the award meant a higher profile for the work he’d been doing with the kids.

“Secret’s safe with me.” She twisted an invisible key in front of her lips and tossed it.

Ryan smiled at the quirky gesture. She was disarming and kind, a winning combination in his book. He valued kindness and strove to be a good guy to his family and his clients.

Still, agenting was tough. A good agent couldn’t afford to look weak in a room full of sharks, and there’d be plenty of

sharks around on Sunday night. He chose to focus on the work, generally attending major events alone. But this one time, he'd been thinking of breaking his habit of going stag. He'd mentioned the idea to his sister, who immediately came up with her fix-up proposal. But Ryan had balked.

His sister meant well, but a blind date was not what he needed.

He needed a friend, a woman without any expectations, a woman who wouldn't make any relationship demands. A casual last-minute date.

*No demands, no expectations.* The words echoed through his mind.

*A last-minute date.*

Ryan looked over the rim of his cup at his exceptionally pretty road-trip partner, suddenly curious to know if she had a plus-one for the weekend. He wasn't big on weddings, but given the circumstances maybe they could work another deal. "So, what about you and love?"

# Chapter Five

*December 21, 11:11 p.m.*

*Heavenly Hot Dog*

*Almost, West Virginia, 581 miles from Manhattan*

Not many men threw her for a loop—a likely benefit of her tomboy nature, her well-known lack of interest in serious romance, and a series of summers spent jumping railroad tracks and playing Wiffle ball with the guys in Beaumont. But ever since Ryan Callahan had tapped on her door, Sabrina had felt knocked sideways. Like she was living in a whole new world.

She pinned him with a look. “Is that a real question? Me... and love?”

“Sounds real to me.” He set the Miner’s on the table and opened his foil-wrapped meal in an overly meticulous way that somehow managed to be sweet rather than annoying. “I mean, hell, I spilled about my ex, her new fiancé, not to mention her over-the-top penchant for romantic movies. Ball’s in your court now.” He looked over at her. “So, what’s your story?”

Sabrina took a sip of her beer, her mind spinning. She wasn’t one to talk about her love life, or total lack of a love life, to anyone, much less her sexy traveling companion. “Not sure I have much of a story where love is concerned.”

Her nonexistent love life might be by choice, but that didn’t make it less...nonexistent.

“Come on, a girl like you?” he asked in a hushed tone. “At least *one* highly intelligent, ice fishing Kentucky guy must’ve tried to sweep you off your feet.”

*A girl like you.* Having spent so much of her childhood summers running with the boys, Sabrina had never really thought of herself as *a girl like you*. More like *one of the boys*.

She tore open her meal. “Ice fishing isn’t exactly a foolproof way into a girl’s heart.”

Ryan bit into his hot dog and chewed. “Maybe not, but let me tell you, this place might be the way into mine.” He pointed at the all-beef, antivegetarian dog. “This is incredible.”

“Definitely not health food.” A smile slid across her face, pleased he liked the place that was so special to her, charmed by the mention of a way into his heart. “But I’m glad you like it.”

“Amazing.” He wiped a bit of mustard from the corner of his mouth, and the casual gesture made him seem less buttoned-up, more appealing. “So, if it’s not ice fishing, what is it?”

“What is what?” She splashed an excess of Tabasco on the checkered container, focusing on her hush puppies rather than his increasing appeal.

“The way to a girl’s heart.” He let go a smile spicier than any hot sauce, and her heart rate kicked up a notch in response. “Come on, you can tell me. Once we hit New York, we’ll probably never see each other again, so since I told you something about me, and we’ve still got hours to kill, it’s your turn. Give me some insight into the female psyche.”

*Love. The female psyche. The way to a girl’s heart.* Talk about a conversation that felt out of her comfort zone. Now, if they were talking about Kentucky basketball or floral bouquets, walleye or reality television, she’d have more to say, but she didn’t have a clue about matters of the heart. Growing up, her parents’ fairy-tale marriage, their closed circle of two, had left little room for a child. Their love was so treasured and private, their relationship so completely focused on each other, she’d always felt like...well, like an afterthought. Or worse, an outsider.

“Not sure I’m the best one to offer advice.” Sabrina tore apart a couple of the deep-fried treats. “Love seems like a fairy tale to me, just not necessarily the good kind.”

She thought of all the summers she’d spent in Kentucky while her parents traveled, committed to their academic pursuits, invested in their *relationship*, in their *work*. What she would have given to be allowed to tag along, even once. She’d pass on that kind of love.

“Aren’t all fairy tales the good kind?” He set down his sandwich and took a sip of his beer. “Maybe you haven’t found your happy ending yet.”

“Or maybe you’ve watched too many episodes of *The Bachelorette*.” She wrinkled her nose. “Next you’ll be talking about connections and journeys.”

He raised a brow. “For the record, I do not watch *The Bachelorette*, but I don’t buy this whole act you’ve got going, either. I bet there’s more to your story.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but there *is* no big story,” she said, feigning an ease she didn’t feel. No need to get into her reasons for her relationships being few and far between. “Just a couple of guys. Boring postmortems. No drama. Nothing serious.”

“Nothing serious, huh?” He tapped the side of the cup, his gaze laser-focused on her. “No drama? No *heat*?”

“Nope, nothing serious.” And definitely no heat. She kept her expression composed and casual. “I’ve been so busy running the shop, I’ve had no time to think about dating.”

Not exactly the truth. While the place did demand her attention every waking second, the shop was hardly drowning in orders.

Ryan gestured toward her bottom lip, and when she didn’t respond, he reached out with the corner of his napkin to wipe some hot sauce from her mouth. The casual move caused her breath to catch in her throat. Literally—for a second, she couldn’t breathe.

He looked away and picked up his beer. Clearing his throat, he asked, “What about Marty?”

Still distracted by her breathless reaction to his simple gesture, her brain stalled out completely. “I’m sorry—Marty?”

“The guy.” He volleyed back a look that said, *you know*. “The fireman who was ready to come to your rescue if I stepped out of line in your shop.”

“Oh, right—*Marty*.” She felt the burn of a blush crawl across

her cheeks. “Married. Three kids. Sends his wife daisies twice a year like clockwork, on her birthday and their anniversary.”

Her Galaxy vibrated against the table. She reached for the phone, and a worried text from Jane blinked up at her. Shoot, she’d forgotten to text when they’d stopped for dinner.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Everything’s fine.” She waved a hand into the space between them. “I just forgot to text our progress to my friend Jane.”

“The bride?”

“Yep, the bride,” she said, tapping the screen. “She wants to know how far we are from New York, and I am not good with distances.”

“Easy enough for us to find out.” He asked Siri for the correct distance, and the app answered with an efficient ease Sabrina assumed he evoked from everyone. “Five hundred and eighty-one miles as the crow flies.” He set down the phone and dived back into his meal. “You’re a country girl—what does that expression mean?”

Sabrina shook her head and smiled. “Not exactly a country-girl expression. More like Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*.” She texted the update to Jane. “Means the straight-line distance between two places.” *Or potentially between two people coming from different places.*

He raised his eyebrows.

She lifted a shoulder. “A hazard of growing up with two lit professors,” she said, wrapping up her dinner. “I’m going to take the rest of mine to go. We need to get moving if we want to make it to Manhattan by ten.”

“I’m ready to roll if you are.” He crushed the empty foil wrapper into his plastic cup and placed two twenties under the Tabasco. “Think that’s enough?”

“Probably twice as much as the bill.” She bit down on her bottom lip and reached into the pocket of her jacket for some money, thinking twenty dollars cut deeply into her cash

reserves.

“Twice as much is fine.” He eyed the bills in her hand. “No, please, this one’s on me.” Before she could respond, he waved off any objection. “If not for you, I’d still be in Beaumont trying to figure out a way home, not to mention I’d have missed out on the best damn hot dog in the region, so let’s consider dinner a thank-you.”

“Well, thank you—for dinner.” She tucked the money into her pocket. He couldn’t possibly realize how much every penny counted for her right now. “Most guys I know wouldn’t spend a nickel to see Jesus ride a bicycle.”

He smiled over at her. “Obviously you know the wrong kind of guys.”

Did she? Know the wrong kind of guys? Ryan Callahan was unlike any man she’d known. She looked over at him, steady and unreasonably gorgeous, his suit pressed and perfect, and just laying her eyes on him started butterflies dancing in her stomach.

*Butterflies.* She grabbed her coat and bag and made a beeline for the front door. She’d heard about the feeling. Her mother talked endlessly about the feeling of falling for her dad. But for Sabrina, butterflies were a definite *no*. Butterflies were giddy and all-consuming and led down the path to relationships with no room for anything or *anyone* else. Exactly what she *didn’t* want. Nope. She was a no-butterfly zone.

Except when she turned at the door, there he was, Ryan Callahan, moving toward her with that easy, athletic grace of his on full display, and just like that—*butterflies*.

“Well, now, look at you two,” the owner said, walking out from behind the counter, smiling like it was Christmas morning. “Under the mistletoe.”

Her eyes widened. “Mistletoe?” *Please not mistletoe.*

“Right above you, young lady.” He wiped his hands on a red dish towel and nodded toward Ryan. “Now, I can’t be sure, but I’m thinkin’ this guy here found his way under there on

purpose, so don't mind me." He smiled over at Sabrina. "You just go on ahead and kiss him."

She felt her skin heat to a full-on blush. *Kiss. Ryan. Callahan.* No, no—no. She pressed her hand to her cheeks. If only she was on one of those game shows where a chute opened so she could simply vanish from the face of the earth.

"Can't break a tradition now," the owner said, looking from one of them to the other, doubling down as if he'd invented the holidays. "What's the season without mistletoe?"

"Well..." Ryan bent his head to catch her gaze. "It *is* Christmas."

Her voice wavered. "*Almost* Christmas."

She lifted her eyes to meet his, and the warmth in his smile made her heart skip a beat in her chest—*exactly why she needed to leave. Now—right now.*

She cleared her throat and pointed toward the door. "We need to go."

"We do?" He blinked over at her, then at the door. "Oh, right, we do." He stepped away from the mistletoe and shot a look at the owner. "We're behind schedule."

"*Way* behind." She backed her way toward the exit, her hands raised in an awkward goodbye. "But, um...merry almost Christmas."

"Merry almost Christmas to you, too," the owner said with the smile of a man who knew more than he should. "Drive careful now."

"Thank you, we will." Ryan lifted his hand in goodbye as he opened the front door, and she dashed over the threshold, grateful for the rush of cold air on her flushed cheeks.

Sabrina started toward the van, shivering along the way, whether from the drop in temperature or the realization she'd wanted to kiss Ryan, she wasn't sure. *Probably both.*

He caught up to her in a few laid-back strides, seemingly unfazed by their non-kiss. "My mom always had mistletoe hanging inside the front door when I was growing up."



She slanted him a look, aiming for casual. If he was okay with their non-kiss, she was okay with it. “I bet all the neighborhood girls tried to kiss you.”

“Maybe one or two.” He pressed his lips together like he was trying not to smile. “I tried to run, but some of those girls were fast.”

She let go a laugh, and her breath clouded in the air. How nice it must have been to have a family Christmas. She envisioned a house full of joy and fun, cookies baking in the oven, a tree decorated with strings of popcorn, and stockings by the fireplace. After seeing him with the Hollis family, she could imagine him with his own, and the images touched a place of longing in her heart. She would’ve loved that kind of Christmas.

“Why so quiet all of a sudden?” he asked.

“Oh, just thinking about the holidays,” she said in a breezy tone. “With the wedding and the shop, not to mention our unexpected road trip, the season’s been a little...”

“Hectic?” He blew into his cupped hands.

She offered up a smile. “A whirlwind.”

“Well, if you need a break,” he said as they approached the van, “I’m happy to drive.”

“Are you sure? Because a break *would* be really nice.” She turned around and tossed him the keys. “I mean, if you think you can handle her...”

“Oh, I can handle her, all right.” He walked around to the passenger side, pressed the remote, and, realizing the door was already unlocked, pinned her with a look. “You really need to lock your van.”

“Lord have mercy, she is right where we left her,” she said, sliding into the front cab, zeroing in on the radio. “We can still listen to country, right?”

“Any chance you’d be willing to switch it up? ESPN?”

She scrunched up her face. “I thought you liked my music.”

“‘Like’ is a strong word.”

“Well...” She angled her chin in mock defiance. “I happen to love sports radio.”

Ryan leaned in, a wide smile spreading across his face. “Fantastic. ESPN it is.”

He shut the door in one smooth motion, and she settled back in the seat, watching as he walked around the front of the van in his strong, effortless way, all self-assured and male in his pinstripes. His sandy hair had a subtle wave that skimmed the back of his black wool coat. He reached up to adjust the collar, caught her gaze through the frosted window, and his perfect mouth curved into a smile as if he couldn’t hold it back.

*Killer smile, pass-out gorgeous, ridiculously sexy.* If it weren’t for his obsessive work habits and lackluster taste in music (based on her only knowing he didn’t like country), he’d be the perfect road-trip companion, she decided as he climbed into the driver’s seat, still wearing that onto-you grin.

“Okay, Sabrina Fair, let’s crank up the heat and make some magic happen.”

She rolled her eyes in his direction. “Just drive.”

“You’re the boss.” He put the key into the ignition and turned it forward to start the engine, but instead of switching over, the van made this odd, high-pitched whirring sound. He gave her a quick glance, tried again. Same deal. His brows snapped together.

“What the hell?” He bent to the side and looked at the underside of the steering wheel as if there was an answer there. “When was the last time you had the van serviced?”

Sabrina bit down on her bottom lip. She was usually good at keeping up with maintenance, but with the shop being underwater and money so tight... “I’m not sure.”

He looked over at her, a quick flash of stress in his eyes. “You don’t keep records in your home filing system?”

“No, I don’t,” she said, suddenly defensive. Who had a home filing system?

“Okay, well...” He drew in a breath. “Any chance you’ve got a digital record on your phone? Or a printed receipt?”

Hoping against hope, she gave the glove box a cursory once-over. “No, I don’t think I...”

Honestly—a *receipt*? More than likely, Dave Henry’s Beaumont repair shop didn’t have a computer, much less one that offered proof of payment.

“Nope, nothing in there,” she said, closing the glove box. “But I’m sure everything is fine. No need to panic.” She leaned closer to him and pointed to the floor. “Just pump the gas three times. Slowly. Nice and easy, then turn the key again.”

He gave her a dubious look. “Three times, nice and easy, then the key.”

“Three times, then the key.”

“Okay, let’s give it a try.” He drew in another breath and followed her instructions with the precision she’d come to expect from him. Except it didn’t work. He pumped the gas a few more times, and the sound reached a fever pitch. “Dammit.”

*Again with the cursing...*

“Okay, stop—stop,” she said, hands splayed across the dash. “Don’t flood the engine.”

“Flood the engine?” he asked. “That doesn’t sound like we’re about to flood the engine.”

She tossed him the *you’re such a New Yorker* look. “Do you even *own* a car?”

He ran a hand through his hair, looking more than a little stressed. “I live in Brooklyn, so, no, I do not currently own a vehicle. But if I did, all the maintenance records would be placed neatly in clearly labeled file folders in my office so my car would always be in working condition. And I’d have a roadside assistance app on my phone. For emergencies.”

Not sure the situation qualified as an *emergency*. “Well, this may come as a surprise to you, but not all of us have security

apps or filing systems to rival the United States Treasury Department.” If he sensed her attempt at humor, he didn’t show it. She lifted her brows. “Maybe she doesn’t like you.”

He did a double take. “She?”

“Rosie,” she said with a deliberate shrug in her voice. “Maybe she just doesn’t like you. Maybe the magic only happens when I drive.”

“This is *my fault*?” His hands gripped the wheel tight. Like, supertight. Like break-his-knuckles tight. Had she said he was to blame?

“No.” She fished out a pair of gloves from her pocket. “Not necessarily.”

“Not necessarily?”

“Not necessarily—no. Then again, *I’m* not here to lay blame.” She shoved her hands into the gloves and crossed her arms over her chest. “Not like some other people I know.”

“I’m not here to lay blame,” he said, the tension building in his voice. “In fact, I’m not blaming you, it’s just...you need to be prepared, to protect yourself.” He shook his head. “Life can change in an instant. Everything can change.” He drew in a breath and rubbed a hand across his jaw as if searching for calm. “You think you can get her started?”

“Get Rosie started, you mean?”

“Yes, Rosie.” He opened the door, already halfway out of the van. “If you think you can get her started, let’s give it a try. If she starts, we can manage the driving situation.”

*If she starts?* Sabrina pushed aside the possibility, jumped out of the cab, and gave Rosie a quick once-over.

The headlights cut a sharp line into the dark, so obviously there was no issue with the battery. At least, that’s what she told herself as their paths crisscrossed through the bright beams.

*No need to panic. Just a quirky issue with the key, or the gas pedal, or possibly, the engine.* She climbed into the driver’s seat as Ryan settled next to her. *Okay, here we go.*

Hands on the wheel at ten and two, she sent a silent plea to the heavens and pumped the gas pedal three times. *One, two, three.* Then she turned the key and honestly expected—or maybe half expected—to hear the engine turn over, but she got the same high-pitched whirr as Ryan—and then nothing. *What in the devil's name...*

Okay, now it was feeling more like an emergency. She scrunched up her face and tried not to let him in on the fact that she was slowly starting to panic. Without the engine running, the night was so still, and the lack of sound, save the gusting wind, reminded her they were in the middle of bear country in a cargo van that refused to start with a half-eaten tin of sugar cookies and a stadium blanket between them. *Definitely* not a good situation.

“All right, no big deal.” He scrubbed his face with both hands, looking like it was totally a big deal, but his tone remained übercalm. Eerily calm. “We’ll call roadside assistance. We have cell service. We can give them a call and be back on the road in another hour or so, right?”

“Well...” Sabrina bit down on her bottom lip, sensing that as stressed as he seemed, he was not going to be pleased with the fact that she had no roadside assistance. Or more accurately, that Dave Henry was her go-to roadside assistance guy, and that he was now more than one hundred miles away in Beaumont.

He leveled her with a look. “Please tell me you have roadside assistance.”

She took a shaky breath and met his eyes. “Not technically, no.”

“Not technically, no,” he repeated, lowering his forehead into his hands.

“Well, you’re the guy who files everything.” Her gaze wandered to the frost flowers blooming at the edges of the windshield. “Don’t you have roadside assistance?”

“For what?” He looked up in disbelief. “As you rightly pointed out, I don’t have a car.”

“Jumper cables?” she suggested, brows raised.

“Funny, but no, I don’t happen to have a set of jumper cables on me,” he said, a sardonic expression carved into his face. “As a matter of fact, I don’t even have a second pair of pants.”

“I didn’t mean *you*—”

“I know. You meant, does Plaid Santa have jumper cables?” He waved toward the restaurant and opened the door of the van. “Everything’s okay. Let’s just hope he’s got a set of cables and a roadside emergency kit in the back of a truck big enough to give Rosie a jump.”

“Plaid Santa?” Sabrina tried not to smile—this was *so* not a smiling situation. “Did you just call him Plaid Santa?”

“Yeah, he was wearing a plaid shirt and a Santa hat when we walked in, and it seemed like...” He let go a sigh, shook his head. “Just do me a favor. Stay here, okay? And lock the doors—*please*.” He gave her a reassuring look. “I’m going to ask if he has any jumper cables. I’m sure it will all be fine.”

He climbed out of the van, shut the door, and walked across the parking lot. Or, more precisely, *strode* across the parking lot. She wiped the condensation away from the inside of the windshield and watched him, fighting back the smile she knew was completely inappropriate. Her brain should be focused on Rosie, or keeping warm, or figuring out where the money would come from if Rosie needed major repairs—it should not be noticing how incongruous Ryan Callahan looked striding through a gravel parking lot full of West Virginia kitsch in his cashmere-blend coat and designer three-piece.

Nope, not at all. None of it should be funny.

In fact, the list of not-funny items grew with each passing second: her van refused to start, and with eighty dollars and a credit card approaching its limit, she was so broke she could hardly afford to pay attention. She only had eighteen hours to make the rehearsal dinner of her best friend’s wedding, a too-sexy road-trip partner sneaking under her emotional defense system, and hundreds of miles left to drive. If she looked up “last-straw territory” in the dictionary, she’d find a description

of the last couple of hours. She *should* be panicking.

But as she watched Ryan Callahan stride closer to the door of Heavenly Hot Dog, the whole night seemed kind of funny. Strangely, wonderfully, *terribly* funny.

# Chapter Six

*December 21, 11:30 p.m.*

*Almost, West Virginia, 581 miles from home*

This was not funny. *This* was a nightmare.

Ryan stood next to Plaid Santa, now better known as Mike, and looked under the van's hood in full problem-solving mode. He'd been lucky Mike was still closing the place when he'd knocked on the door, but his luck may have officially run out. The problem with the engine seemed bigger than both of them.

He took a step back and buried his hands in his coat pockets. The van was an issue, no doubt, but he wondered if the real trouble, the trouble keeping him from his whiskey-spiked eggnog and king-size bed, might be the one wrapped up in the adorable strawberry blond package.

He looked over at her, sitting calmly behind the wheel as if jump-starting the engine and rolling out of here was a given. Being prepared, being in control was important. How could she be so unruffled? Like she didn't mind being stranded. Like all this was a walk in the park.

His gaze shifted to the ground. He always felt the need to fix a situation. In business, his drive to solve problems worked. His contract negotiations were ironclad. His endorsement deals, the best in the business. But his need to manage personal situations had cost him, too.

Mike pulled a rag from the back of his jeans and wiped the oil from his hands. "Hate to be the one to tell y'all this, but a jump ain't gonna do it."

He ran a hand across his jaw. No matter how much Mike hated to say it, it wasn't half as much as Ryan hated to hear it. "I'm guessing you don't think it's the battery."

"Definitely not the battery." Mike yanked on the West Virginia University ball cap that had replaced the Santa hat and pointed at the posts. "No corrosion. Looks clean. Nope,



from the sound of the engine, seems like it might be the timing belt, possibly the starter motor.”

Sabrina climbed down from the driver’s seat and hooked her gloved thumbs into the belt loops of her jeans. “Is that bad?”

Mike chuckled. “Well, it’s not good. A failed timing belt can be catastrophic, cause engine damage, the whole kit and kaboodle. Better if it’s the starter.” He unlatched the metal prop rod and closed the hood. “Either way, it’s a good thing I was still here. You folks ain’t going anywhere tonight.”

Ryan closed his eyes and counted to ten. No sense in losing it when it was nobody’s fault. Better to stay calm and figure out what the hell they were going to do next. He rubbed the muscles at the back of his neck. “Any place we can stay until morning?”

“You’re welcome to stay with me and my wife. We’re not too far up the road—”

“That’s so kind, but—”

“Any chance of a hotel?” His words tumbled over hers, his hope clear as the night air.

Mike looked from one to the other and gave a slow nod of misunderstanding. “Happy to take you two lovebirds to the motel by the river. The Dive Motel & Bar, four, maybe five, miles away. Not a problem.”

Ryan gave a weary smile. The Dive Motel & Bar. Probably not the Plaza, but, hey, beggars couldn’t be choosers when the alternative was an overnight in a subzero cargo van. He reached out his hand. “Mike, we’d be in your debt.”

The older man gave his hand a firm shake, clapped him on the shoulder, and turned to walk toward the main shack. “All right, then, come on round back and we can climb in the pickup, get you settled for the night.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said, following behind, grateful they’d be getting out of the cold, hopeful the Dive Bar served whiskey, or better yet, tequila. He turned toward Sabrina, who no longer smiled as she stood rooted by the side of the van. “What do you think, Sabrina? You coming?”

She bit down on her bottom lip. “Mike, did you say you’ve got a pickup?”

“Yes, miss, I do,” he said, turning toward Sabrina. “Got a pickup around back.”

Sabrina angled her hips to look over her shoulder at Rosie. Ryan felt his body tense from his forehead to his toes. Why was she hesitating? Was she concerned Mike wasn’t the good guy he seemed to be? Did she want to run another Instagram check?

Ryan walked over and put a reassuring hand at her elbow. “You okay?”

She looked up at him, all wide-eyed and bundled up in her oversize checkered jacket, like a sexy tomboy version of Amy Adams if Amy Adams had been on *Northern Exposure*.

“I’m fine, but...” She paused long enough for him to worry. “I can’t leave my dress.”

His brows knit together. “We can get it tomorrow, no problem.”

“What if the van gets towed?” She lowered her voice to a heated whisper. “I need the dress for the wedding, and I can’t leave the bouquet. The flowers will be frozen by morning.”

He nodded, patiently. “Sabrina, the van *will* be towed. That’s the plan.”

“My point exactly.”

Ryan scrubbed his face with both hands. “Okay, but the van won’t start, so we need to have it towed, and if it can’t be repaired, we’ll have bigger problems than a frosted bouquet.”

“*If* it can’t be repaired?” Her voice leaped up an octave in sudden panic, all semblance of her earlier calm, a distant memory. “Is that even possible?”

He drew in a breath of the bracing night air. *Stay cool. Stay cool. Do not repeat the word “catastrophic,” do not cause a meltdown that might lead to an all-nighter in the parking lot.*

He shifted closer, keeping his voice calm and steady. “I’m

sure Rosie will be fine, and I know how important the bouquet is to your friend, but maybe we can leave the dress until...”

“I’m not leaving without the dress.” She crossed her arms over her chest and pinned him with a look. “And I am definitely *not* leaving the bouquet.”

*So. Stubborn.* He stood still, staring back at her, not wanting to blow their ride out of here, suspecting there was a right response and a wrong one, and not knowing which was which.

“You two okay?” Mike asked, probably worrying he’d be the one to end up on *Dateline*. He gestured to the restaurant. “I’ll go around back, bring the pickup over by the front.”

“Absolutely.” Ryan offered a quick wave. *God, please don’t let him decide to bolt.*

“I just have to get a couple of items from the van,” Sabrina called out before whirling back to face Ryan, her pleading expression unsettling something in his chest. He might not understand why, but the dress was important to her, and if it was important to her...

He blew out a gust of air. “Okay, let’s go get the dress.”

“And the bouquet.” She tossed him a fast smile and yanked open the door of the van.

“Yep.” Even he could tell the arrangement was cutting-edge—no way they were leaving that behind. “And the bouquet.”

While she collected her stuff, Ryan kept his gaze trained on the restaurant. Maybe it was the New Yorker in him, but he worried Mike might take off. Not something Ryan would do. Once committed, he was all in, but he’d seen enough in the city to be concerned.

“Listen, Sabrina, I know the wedding gear is important, but we also don’t want to risk being left behind, so if we can just get the goods and hightail it over to the restaurant before he changes his mind...”

“Just get the goods?” she said in a teasing tone of voice. “What are we, in *Ocean’s Eleven*?”

“Hey, I happen to like *Ocean’s Eleven*...” Ryan turned

toward the van, and there she was—half in, half out of the back seat, her jacket riding up enough to reveal a line of her bare skin below its checkered edge, and suddenly, his brain short-circuited. Man, maybe he really *did* need a date.

“Can you grab this?” She shuffled out of the back and without waiting for an answer pressed the dress and blanket into his chest. She shut the door with her denim-clad hip and held up her index finger. “One more minute.”

“One more minute,” he said, managing the bag crammed to the max with what looked to be some type of silver netting.

Over the edge of the bag, he saw Sabrina unload the bouquet box and a rectangular suitcase on wheels. Finished, she closed the back, locked the van with the remote, and waltzed by him dragging the Samsonite behind her on the graveled lot.

“Are you coming?” she asked with a backward glance.

He shifted the dress onto his shoulder and shook his head, a dazed smile working its way across his face. “Now she’s locking the doors.”

• • •

As soon as Mike pulled around, Sabrina knew she was in trouble. A two-seater up front, she and Ryan might have been able to squeeze into the cab, but that would mean her bridesmaid dress and Jane’s bouquet would be riding third-class in the open flatbed—and there was no way she could risk the dress flying onto the highway or the flowers dying in the freezing temperatures. Not only was the arrangement her wedding gift to her friend, but the design represented her last, best hope to save the shop.

As fate would have it, Jane had become a semifamous matchmaker in Manhattan, and because she was also an A-plus friend, she’d arranged for the flowers to be part of a *Page Six* sneak peek at her wedding. She thought the publicity might kick-start interest in the small web store Sabrina had built for the shop. But a living bouquet that arrived DOA? *See you later, Posey.*

She straightened her shoulders. Not going to happen. This design was the perfect finishing touch for Jane, and Sabrina refused to let her down. Or let Grammie down.

Mike rolled to a stop, the gravel crunching under the tires of the pickup. Sabrina slipped past Ryan, opened the passenger door, and deposited the bouquet on the front seat. She tucked her arm on the edge of the Chevy's storm-gray door and leaned into the cab. She felt genuinely grateful for the save, but this next part might require all the southern charm she had in reserves.

“You’re sure you don’t mind carrying us to the motel?”

He offered up a kindhearted smile. “Can’t leave you stranded, now can I?”

Sabrina scrunched up her face. *Stranded* seemed to be the theme of the last five hours, she thought, noting how Ryan edged his way closer, energy coming off his body in waves. “How far did you say it was to the place?”

“Few miles,” Mike said. “I can have you there in fifteen minutes.”

Fifteen minutes. Could they freeze to death in fifteen minutes? She tilted closer to Mike and kept her voice quiet. “Any chance we can ride in the flatbed, maybe look at stars?”

A curious look creased his face, but he covered his confusion with an easy shrug. “Fine by me. Might get cold by the river, but it’d be nice and romantic back there.”

“Perfect, that’s absolutely perfect.”

“Sabrina, can I talk to you?” Ryan asked in a low voice, his hand at her elbow. “Are you sure riding in an open flatbed is a good idea?”

She blinked up at him, surprised by the hint of anxiety in his eyes. They were only going a few miles.

“We’ll be fine. It’s just a short run up the road. My friends and I used to pile in an old pickup and drive all the way out to the lake—never had any trouble at all.” She raised her brows in the direction of the pickup’s front seat. “Besides, I’m not

cozying up with you in the front cab of that Chevy.”

He leaned up against the truck. “You don’t like cozying up?”

“Not really, no.” She pried the garment bag from his hands, grateful he hadn’t argued much about the flatbed, because there was *no way* she was sitting on his lap, close and snug, especially with the sexy way he was leaning against the truck kicking up all her butterflies.

She brushed away her thoughts and pivoted toward the door of the cab. *Dress first. Butterflies second.* “Mike, I hope you don’t mind if my bridesmaid dress rides shotgun.”

“Not at all.” He opened the door a bit wider. “You two on your way to a wedding?”

“We are.” She nodded, maneuvering the oversize garment bag into the seat and tucking its edges around the boxed-up bouquet. “In New York.”

“Well, now we’re talking.” One hand on the steering wheel, he leaned forward to catch a glimpse of Ryan. “Be the two of you walking down the aisle soon, I can tell.”

Ryan made some noise in the back of his throat that Sabrina refused to interpret.

She shot him a fast look and double-checked the bag’s zipper. “Looks like she’s all set.”

“Have dress, will travel.” Mike gave her a quick wink and pulled a business card from the sun visor. He slid the pen from behind his ear and scribbled a number on the back of the card. “Here’s the information for the local garage. We’ll get you settled for the night, and you can call Pete in the morning to look at your van. Tough to say, but maybe he can get you up and running in time for the wedding.”

Sabrina slipped the card into the back pocket of her jeans. “Mike, you’re a lifesaver.”

“No problem at all.” He tossed the pen into the center console. “Happy to help.”

Ryan leaned closer to the open door. “Any chance we’ll be taking the highway?”

“Nope, just local roads,” Mike said in a relaxed tone. “Easy, romantic ride back there.”

“See?” She gave Ryan a fast smile and shut the door, careful not to mess with the dress. “Easy as Sunday morning.”

She grabbed the handle of her suitcase and walked to the back of the truck as Ryan pushed away from the side and followed. “You don’t think it’s a little…”

“Chilly?” she said, completing his thought. “Yes.” She parked the bag near the back wheel and swiveled around to face him. “But I’d rather manage the cold than let my one-of-a-kind, silver-sequin-and-layered-tulle dress fly off onto a parkway in the middle of West Virginia.”

“Frostbite be damned?”

Her chin tilted at an angle, almost like a dare. “What’s a little frostbite between friends?”

“So that’s what we are calling ourselves—friends?” His mouth tilted on one side, and then, in one fluid movement, he scooped her into his arms.

Her eyes rounded in surprise. “Hey—”

“What?” His gaze fell to her lips, and for one impossible second, Sabrina thought he might kiss her. She foolishly hoped he’d kiss her, despite having bolted from the mistletoe situation. She stared up at him, breathing suddenly difficult, but before her imagination got the better of her, he hoisted her over the truck’s edge and deposited her into the back of the pickup.

His blue eyes met her astonished gaze. “You’re the one who wanted the drive to be nice and romantic.”

“I absolutely did not—that was Mike.” She adjusted her voice to a hush and tried not to notice how his arms flexed as he placed her bag in the corner at a predictably perfect right angle. “*Mike* said it would be nice and romantic. That man is so sweet, he thinks we’re an actual couple, too shy to kiss under the mistletoe, not a couple of desperate road trippers whose flights were canceled last-minute and whose cargo van refused to start.”

“Desperate road trippers—okay.” He climbed into the back of the truck and eased his body beside hers. “Guess we’ll go with that, since friends went over so well.” He gripped the edge of the flatbed and tapped on the rear windshield to let Mike know they were settled, then turned to face her. “Obviously, we’d never be an *actual* couple.”

“Exactly, we’d never be an actual couple,” she said, her body leaning into his as the truck rolled toward the exit of the lot. “Hey, wait a minute—why *obviously*?”

Why was he so darned quick to say that? Not that she ought to be asking. She had way bigger fish to fry—fish like saving Rosie, affording her motel room, and ignoring how cozying up in the back of a pickup felt a lot like actual coupledness.

“For starters, you’re a country girl who doesn’t lock her van.”

“And *you’re* a city guy who watches too much *Dateline*.”

His brows arched. “You listen to too much country music.”

“A girl can’t listen to too much country music.” She snatched up the blanket and snapped it open as the pickup rumbled out of the lot.

“No, a girl can definitely listen to too much country.” The truck accelerated onto the two-lane road, and Ryan visibly tightened his grip on the side panel. “Plus, and I didn’t want to mention this fact, but you’re a Wildcats fan.”

“*Everyone* in Kentucky is a Wildcats fan.” Sabrina gave him a look and tucked the blanket around them. “Honestly, I think your suit may be buttoned up too tight.”

“I happen to like my shirt pressed and my collar buttoned and my life in order.”

“Life can’t *be* in perfect order.”

“Maybe not,” he said in a faraway voice. “But a guy can damn well try.”

*Always with the cursing.* The truck dipped into a pothole, and Ryan grasped the edge to steady them. He drew in an extended breath.



Sabrina noted his white-knuckle grip, the sudden tension in his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine—fine.” He shifted his body and turned to her with a self-conscious smile that belied his words. “Guess I’m just not a flatbed guy.”

“Country roads, right?” Sabrina returned his smile, hoping to reassure him. “Probably not too many opportunities in the city to race around in a flatbed, but I love riding in the back of a pickup. Almost feels like a hayride. Not saying this was my ideal plan for tonight...”

The look he shot over was full of his special brand of irony. “No?”

She chuckled. “No, definitely not, but it still feels nice. The stars are so beautiful. Makes me feel connected to something. I don’t know...” Her voice trailed away. “To my grandmother, maybe.”

His response was heartfelt and quiet. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“I know.” She nodded, still looking up at the stars, feeling the loss of her gram so acutely her heart literally ached with emotions she didn’t know how to manage. “I just miss her.”

“Loss is never easy,” he said, drawing in another breath, his face tilted up at the night sky. He stayed quiet and still for a long while. “I had an accident on a night like this—clear, cold—years ago, but I still remember how the sky looked. Black, dotted with stars.”

“Ryan, now I’m the one who’s sorry...” She looked over at him, awash with a sense of remorse. “No wonder you’re not comfortable back here.”

“No, it’s fine.” His tone reassured her. “Not like you could have known.”

“No, but...” Her brows drew together in concern. “You must travel so much for work...”

“I do,” he said with a glance in her direction. “Not usually in a pickup.”

“Or florist van.”

“No.” He turned toward her now, and she could see a faraway hurt in his eyes that belied the smile on his lips. “But I’ve learned to muscle through it all.”

“Still.” She held out her upturned palm. “Hold on to me. If we hit another bump, or even if we don’t, if you feel uncomfortable, you can squeeze as hard as you like.”

He looked down and laced his fingers with hers. “Thank you.”

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re welcome,” she said, her voice faltering. “Makes sense now, why you gave me a hard time about letting the roadside assistance lapse.”

“So, why did you?” he asked, so quiet it was almost a whisper.

Her gaze took in his red nose, the shadows beneath his eyes, the snowflakes sitting on his lashes. “Just a lot of expenses with the shop.”

Her gaze drifted to the riverfront, to its starlit edge lined with tract homes, each one dressed up with colorful lights and gilded trees that shone from the windows, trimmings she’d never had growing up essentially alone in the city. She held on to Ryan’s hand, thinking about what he’d said about his mom, thinking how much Sabrina would have loved a Christmas of mistletoe and gingerbread houses, a roaring fire and a decorated tree.

*A family.*

She turned back, and he was looking over at her, his eyes as deep and dark blue as the sky around them, and something shifted behind her rib cage. Something emotional. A different kind of girl could get lost in those eyes. *Don’t get lost, Sabrina, don’t get lost.*

She refocused her gaze on the metal edge of the tailgate. “You want the truth?”

He inched closer. “The whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

“Well, if that’s the case.” Her tone was lighthearted, but her emotions were all over the map. She drew in a shaky breath. *May as well just put it all out there.* “The truth is the cool-looking wedding bouquet riding shotgun is meant to be featured on *Page Six*.”

“Of the *Post*?” Ryan let go a low whistle.

“*Page Six* of the *Post*.” A smile inched its way across her face. “A dream come true, right? My friend Jane—she’s the bride, not to mention an in-town celebrity and high-profile matchmaker, so her wedding will be featured in all the city style sections—”

“Wait, is this the woman who made some kind of a love bet on morning television?”

“Yep, she’s the one.” He’d shifted so the wool collar of his coat brushed her cheek, and she breathed in the scent of his skin, trying—and failing—to ignore the way his nearness made her heart rate kick up. “But how did you know that?”

He chuckled. “My sister followed that story. Never stops talking about it.”

“Makes sense, considering the bet was all over the news and Facebook and Twitter,” she joked, leaning into his shoulder, her body seeking warmth. “Anyway, the wedding is kind of a big event in New York, and if the bouquet is featured on *Page Six* and gets some attention, I’m hoping that will drive a few clients to Posey’s website, draw in more business, and...”

He offered up a knowing nod. “You can renew your roadside assistance.”

Her cheeks heated, despite the chill. “Not to mention settle my bills, redesign the ecommerce site, fix up Rosie, and keep the shop as vibrant as my gram wanted. I need the shop to survive for her, and to keep a part of her for me.”

“I get it. I’m glad you told me.” He let go of her hand to tuck the blanket around the edge of her hip, and the gesture felt more intimate than he’d probably meant it to be. “Confiding in another person can be tough. I mean, there are still...situations in my life...I don’t talk about.” The truck coasted around

another curve, and her body shifted close enough to feel his warm breath on her cheek. “But what’s the point of bottling everything up, especially now? We’re here, together, in this unexpected situation. After we cruise back into the city, we’ll probably never see each other again, so what’s the point of... holding back?”

After tonight, they wouldn’t see each other again.

She drew in a steadying breath, the cold air failing to quiet the emotions firing on all cylinders. “No need to hold back.”

He looked over, his blue eyes kind, his unstudied brand of adorable as plain as the frost on the window. “Not if you don’t want to, not with me, not tonight.”

*No need to hold back.* Sounded simple when he said it, and yet she knew that as open as she appeared, as easy as it was to share a ride with a friend or breeze into a neighbor’s home, when it came to relationships, she held a real piece of herself apart, never letting people all the way in. Funny how he seemed to know that about her. How could he possibly?

The question sent her pulse rate skyrocketing, and although Sabrina had no real answer, as the truck eased around another corner and the neon lights of the motel flickered into view, she wondered if life and relationships, even love, if all of it hinged on a person’s ability to dive in or her need to hold back.

If now wasn’t the time to hold back...

Then maybe it was time to dive in.

# Chapter Seven

*December 21, 11:40 p.m.*

*The Dive Motel*

*Almost, West Virginia, 585 miles from Manhattan*

Their arms loaded with wedding gear, Sabrina and Ryan stood outside the entrance of the vintage-style motel and watched the taillights of the Chevy disappear into the darkness. Behind them, an old-school LOBBY sign blinked on and off, casually marking time, and although the realization arrived late, when it came, Sabrina felt her stomach sink into her low-top sneaks.

She was officially alone.

In a motel.

With Ryan Callahan.

Technically, not *in* a motel, but, more accurately, they stood in the parking lot of a motel, his arms full of flowers and silver tulle and her brain full of thoughts about how they weren't meant to be a couple, and how after tomorrow they'd never see each other again, and how even though she might want to dive in, she needed to hold back, because she felt...well, besides chilled to the bone...she didn't know how she felt.

Tingly. Dizzy. Emotional.

She shifted her weight from one sneakered foot to the other and peeked over at Ryan. He'd taken off his coat and wrapped up the bouquet to keep it from freezing, which was so sweet that just the sight of him standing there had her heart running a Derby lap in her chest.

Foolish, that's how she felt.

She gave her thoughts a serious shove and turned toward the low-lying motel with an eye to spending the night. More retro than rehabbed, the place was everything she'd imagined. A neon sign, steeped in classic Americana, blazed THE DIVE into the dark, local trucks spotted the parking lot, and country music spilled from the adjacent bar, despite being close to

midnight. Every inch of the place was infused with a heavy dose of nostalgia, an off-the-beaten-path kind of romance that could make any woman feel dizzy and foolish. She squared her shoulders and turned to face the flickering LOBBY sign.

One night. She could handle a single night of a completely platonic road trip. No need to become confused with thoughts of relationships and fairy tales and diving in. No. Keep it simple. All she needed to do was go on inside, get a room, and sleep off the way he gave her butterflies in the middle of a winter road trip. Three steps, easy as baking up a pecan pie. She straightened the line of her messenger bag, reached for the handle of her suitcase, and started toward the door, hoping the office was warm enough to thaw her icy-cold feet.

Tomorrow morning, when she was no longer frozen, she'd call Pete's Autobody, Pete would fix up Rosie, and she and Ryan Callahan would get back on the road to never seeing each other again, which, despite her churning emotions, was the right course of action. She sneaked a peek at him over her shoulder and bit down hard on her lower lip.

Inside the lobby, Sabrina parked her suitcase by the registration desk and tapped the bell perched at the edge of the speckled Formica counter. Ryan stood a few feet away, framed by two narrow silver trees, her red dress bag situated neatly over his shoulder. An expression of interest transformed his face as he studied a series of vintage photos of the motel, and the warmth rising in his cheeks only served to make him more attractive—sexier, even.

Sexy was not what she needed right now.

She turned away and focused on the bell, fighting back an urge to bang the darn thing repeatedly. Patience was a virtue, but if banging on the bell would get her out of this lobby and into her own room so she could stop thinking about how enticing Ryan Callahan looked and how good he smelled, even after riding in the back of the Chevy, then maybe she'd have to give up on virtue and bang it out.

As Sabrina debated the merits of her impulse, a petite woman who looked to be in her late fifties approached from

the back office. She wore a smile and a gold name tag stamped with the name Mary.

“Can I help you?” she asked in an efficient tone.

Silver Christmas trees and a helpful woman named Mary. Two positive signs.

Sabrina set the bouquet box gently on the counter, adjusted the blanket still draped over her shoulders, and breathed a sigh of relief. Even though she'd be racking up another charge on her Visa and compounding it in the morning when she got Rosie out of hock, Sabrina finally felt as if everything was back on track. *One night.* She had this one on lockdown.

“Yes, please,” she said with a short nod toward Ryan. “We'd like two rooms.”

A pained look crossed Mary's face, swiftly replaced with a courteous, efficient smile. “Oh, honey, I'm sorry, but we don't have any rooms available tonight.”

Sabrina blinked, certain there must be a mistake. “No rooms?”

Seriously, how could they not have any rooms? This was the middle of rural West Virginia, four days before Christmas—who the heck was staying here? Or could it be Mary wasn't keen to rent a room to a desperate, windblown woman wearing stadium fleece?

Not that she would blame her.

“Nothing at all?”

The older woman looked over at Ryan, then back to Sabrina, obviously a bundle of nerves. “Yes, I am sorry, but we're all booked for tonight. The Snowball 500 is tomorrow.”

She gripped the edge of the blanket. “The Snowball 500?”

*Be patient now. Keep it southern. Keep it easy.* The situation seemed dire, but she'd been in worse spots and had always managed to find a way out. No reason tonight should be different.

“Mary, we are in a bit of a serious mess here.” Her hip

pressed against the counter, she kept her voice low and conspiratorial. “See, my cargo van broke down over at Heavenly Hot Dogs, and we can’t get a hold of Pete until the morning, meaning we are all out of transportation, and, frankly, with nowhere to stay, we are all out of luck right now, so if there is any way you could see fit to—”

The woman perked up. “You know Pete?”

Sabrina blinked again. Okay, now she was in a real pickle. Lie, and they might get to sleep in the lobby. Tell the truth, and frostbite between friends might not be so theoretical.

She glanced over her shoulder at Ryan, feeling like she didn’t want to let him down. This was her fault. She’d offered him a ride, and instead of delivering, she’d landed them in this fix. But she couldn’t lie, not to the helpful woman with the pained look and embossed name tag.

“No, sadly, we don’t know Pete—yet.” The woman’s face fell, but rather than give up, Sabrina forged ahead before Mary felt compelled to show them the door. “But we know Mike. In fact, Mike brought us here. In his Chevy. Dropped us off.” Sabrina pointed outside. “Right there by the walkway. Good guy, Mike.”

“Yes, he is.” Mary nodded, clearly preferring Pete.

Sabrina stood still and held her breath, hoping Mike’s name would negate the effect of her overwrought appearance and obvious desperation and magically save her backside.

“Well...we do have *one* room,” the woman said, uncertainty written across her face as clear as the black ice on the road. “Just not one we normally rent out. The room’s clean, of course, but it’s small and has a bit of history, so we tend not to offer...”

“A bit of history?” Sabrina asked with hopeful concern. “What kind of history?” Like a “country star slept in this bed” kind of history or “site of a bloody murder” kind of history?

Mary glanced over her shoulder, then back at Sabrina. “People say it’s haunted.”

“Haunted?” Her eyes widened. “Like by an actual *ghost*?”



The older woman nodded slowly. “A real, true-to-life ghost, confirmed by the Ghost Hunters. Have you ever seen their show on the Syfy Channel?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Oh, well, the Ghost Hunters are investigators who report on paranormal phenomena and occurrences, and after visiting the motel, they told us that particular room is off the charts.”

“Off what charts?” she asked.

“The paranormal charts, honey.” She leaned closer, her voice hushed. “When the motel was an inn, a woman who worked here fell in love with a local bootlegger, Jonathan Jones, but while he was away on a run, she fell in love with another man and left town. He came back to propose, but she was already long gone. He waited for years for her return but died alone in this motel.”

“That’s heartbreaking.” *And terrifyingly specific.*

Mary nodded. “We think he’s still here, haunting the room, waiting for his long-lost love.” [She opened a drawer behind the counter and looked inside.](#) “Now, let’s see, the Ghost Hunters left us this disclosure form, kind of like a waiver, in case people came by wanting to stay in the room.”

“A *waiver*? Um, I’m not sure we want to sign...” But before she finished, Ryan weighed in from across the lobby.

“We’ll take the room.”

Whoa—wait. *What?* Her head swiveled in the direction of his voice. Had she heard that right? Had he just agreed to spend the night in a haunted motel room?

She gave him a look. “Don’t you think we should—”

“Take it? Yes, we should take it.” Ryan closed the gap between them with the kind of speed that said he’d had enough, and he pulled out his Amex and sealed the deal faster than she could say *boo*. “We...will...take it.” He looked over and smiled. “Ghost and all.”

After signing the disclosure promising not to sue the motel if a ghost scared one or both of them to literal death, they left the

office, and now Ryan led the way down the external corridor to their room, which was, apparently, all the way at the end, next to the town cemetery.

*Next to the town cemetery.* Sabrina tightened her grip on the vintage key fob, looping it onto her index finger like a bead on a rosary. *Lord, please, don't let the room be haunted, but if it has to be haunted, please, please, let there be two beds, preferably at opposite sides of the room.*

If she was honest, Sabrina wasn't 100 percent sure which made her feel more unsteady—the idea of spending the night in a haunted motel room or the notion of being alone in said room with Ryan Callahan. Obviously, Ryan was a nice guy who apparently had no issues with the paranormal, but he was also a virtual stranger, a *superattractive* virtual stranger who made her feel dizzy and emotional, and now they were sharing Room 102 of the Dive Motel. Easily the wildest night of her life.

“Just so you know.” She gripped the handle of her suitcase, falling in stride next to Ryan as he moved down the exterior hall. “I intend to pay you back for tonight as soon as we get to New York.”

“No need.” He slowed his pace to allow them to walk side by side. “I'm the one who jumped on the situation.”

“I'm the one whose van won't start.” The looming streetlight flickered and buzzed with an eerie escape-room vibe that made her rethink the choice to stay. “Are you sure staying here is a good idea? What if this place is really haunted?”

Ryan glanced over as if to say, *seriously?* “I don't believe in ghosts.”

“Well, neither do I. Not really, anyway.” She glanced up at the droning lights. Didn't mean she wasn't freaked out. “Still, there must be a reason that other folks believe.”

His mouth lifted on one side, clearly dubious. “Maybe.”

“Don't be too quick to write off the idea.” She noted the vending machine on the left. A snack might take the edge off her nerves. “You're the one who encouraged me to say

anything, and right now, I'm saying that for all we know, we are about to full-on enter *The Shining*."

He chuckled. "Good to know what's in your Netflix queue."

"Nothing wrong with old-school horror." She stumbled forward as her suitcase caught on the uneven pavement. Hopefully just the pavement. She threw a paranoid look over her shoulder and tightened her grip on the handle. "Let's just survive the night and get to New York so you can continue your Hugh Grant festival and I can deep-dive into *The Conjuring* with Janey."

Ryan stopped and turned to look at her. "Really, *The Conjuring*? Before her wedding? She might prefer Hugh Grant." He nodded in the direction of the door. "You've got the key."

"Oh. Right." Sabrina turned toward the door, surprised, and found it was 102. "Didn't realize we were here already." She released her death grip on the bag and noticed her palms were sweating. This was it. The moment of truth. She set the key into the lock and twisted to the right.

"Wait a minute." He leaned close enough to whisper. "Did you hear that?"

Her hand stilled. "Hear what?"

Ryan took a half step toward the door, actively listening. "That weird creaking...like someone was walking on the floorboards *inside the room*."

Her eyes grew wide. "Are you serious?"

He edged the door open with his foot as a devilish grin creased his face. "No, I'm not *serious*. I just wanted to see if I could spook you."

"Well, mission accomplished." She gave him a pointed look and stepped into the room, which was, if not haunted, certainly the smallest motel room in all of America. "Oh, sugar."

*Only one bed*. Not even a queen-size, a full, if they were lucky, and definitely not big enough for an average-size woman, a brawny former ballplayer, and a lovelorn spirit.

*Sugar, sugar, sugar.*

“Looks pretty clean to me.” Ryan flipped on the light and strolled across the industrial carpet without a minute’s hesitation, seemingly unconcerned that the dark-colored flooring might hide bloody murder. He held up her bridesmaid dress. “Are you okay if I hang your titanic bag of silver in the closet?” When she didn’t respond, he looked back. “Sabrina?”

Still standing just inside the doorway, she took in the undersize bed, the frayed-at-the-edges comforter, the navy-blue carpet. “Yeah?”

“You okay?” he asked. “There’s no ghost. I was just teasing.”

“Oh, I know. I’m fine.”

He gave her a playful look. “Even if there was a ghost, I’d protect you.”

*Good to know.* She peeked around the edge of the door and took another step inside to take a closer look at the place. Sure enough, Ryan was right. The room looked perfectly clean. The bed, despite being undersized and covered with an aggressively floral bedspread, looked comfortable. A seventies-style television topped with workable rabbit ears sat on top of a long dresser, and two upholstered chairs flanked the narrow front window. There was even a mini refrigerator. What was there to worry about?

The door slammed shut behind her, and Sabrina practically jumped out of her skin. She shot a look back at the door as her heart took up residence in her throat. “Jeez Louise.”

“Just the wind.” Ryan opened the closet door. It rattled across its metal tracks.

“Just the wind?” She set her suitcase upright under the window. “I thought you were the guy who obsessed over all those *Dateline Mystery* stories, so how can you be so relaxed?”

“I told you. I don’t believe in ghosts.” He hung her dress on the left side of the closet. Closed the rattling door. Cool and collected. “But if I did see one, I’d assume she wanted

company.”

“Naturally, you’d think about a female ghost.” Sabrina pulled the stadium blanket from her shoulders, struck by the insight of his otherworldly assumption. “So, ghosts are lonely?”

“Ghosts are lonely.” He dug his hands deep into his coat pockets. “Makes sense to me.”

Made a strange kind of sense to her, too. Loneliness was something she understood, a constant of her childhood. He smiled over at her, and she smiled back, suddenly all too aware of her racing heart, the single flower-covered bed, the unexpected intimacy of the circumstance.

*Not so lonely now...*

She cleared her throat. Draped the blanket over the suitcase. “I’m going to...”

“How do you feel about...” he said. Their words tumbled over one another. “Go ahead.”

Sabrina held up the floral box. “I’m going to set this in the shower, so unless you want to jump in there with me...” Her eyes grew wide, and her words trailed off as she realized she’d sort of *invited* him into the shower. “Not that I’m, I mean... I’m not suggesting...I was thinking if you wanted to jump in the shower, not necessarily with me, um, excuse me...”

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks and made a beeline for the bathroom. Okay, there actually was something more awkward and embarrassing than the mistletoe incident.

She pressed her back against the closed door and tried to breathe. What the heck was going on with her? Yes, there was only one bed. Yes, the guy looked like a freaking Hemsworth, but this road trip was more business than romance. Lord, this was all so unlike her. What happened to the “no drama, no heat” girl? Must be because she was traveling to the city for the wedding.

Shoot. The *wedding*.

When did she last text Jane? Her brain felt too topsy-turvy to

keep everything straight. She balanced the bouquet box on the sink and pulled her phone from her jacket. Dinner. Last text was at dinner. Before Rosie. Before the motel. Her thumbs tapped out a new message.

*Hey, Bride-to-Be. Sooo...looks like I'm not going to make it there for girls' night out, after all. Rosie sort of broke down outside a hot dog place in West Virginia, but I'm fine, all's well. I caught a ride and I'm in a motel. I'll get the van fixed up and be there tomorrow in time for the rehearsal. Have fun tonight! xo.*

Pleased with the reasonably stress-free tone of the text, Sabrina felt like she finally had the night under control. She simply needed to take a breath, keep her living floral arrangement, well, *living*, and get through one night with her unreasonably hot road-trip guy. *Like baking up a pie*, she thought as her phone buzzed with an incoming call. She tapped on the screen to answer.

“What do you mean, you caught a ride to a motel?” The concern in Jane’s voice reverberated through the phone line despite the sleepy jazz in the background. “Do I need to be worried? Because I feel worried.”

So much for under control. Trust Janey to cut straight to the heart of the matter. “No need to worry. I am completely fine, and...if it puts your mind at ease, I’m not exactly alone.”

“Not *exactly* alone?” Jane asked, sounding confused *and* worried. “I don’t understand. Did you decide to bring a plus-one to the wedding? Is there a new guy that I don’t know about?”

“Not a new guy...no.” Sabrina closed her eyes and tried *not* to think about how she’d practically invited the not-new guy into the shower.

“Wait a sec, bae, I’m stepping outside so I can hear you.” The sounds of Smalls, the speakeasy Jane had chosen for her girls’ night out, faded as her friend moved toward the door.

Sabrina hadn’t wanted to mention Ryan until *after* she was safe and sound in Manhattan. Not that *she* felt worried, but

*Jane* was already stressed about her driving to New York, and she was *not* going to like the idea of her road-tripping with a virtual stranger, nice guy, or not.

“Almost there, hold on.” The music ebbed away, and the street sounds grew louder as her bestie made her way outside the bar, a favorite joint located blocks from her apartment in the Flatiron. “So, when were you planning to tell me about this not-exactly-alone situation?”

Sabrina drew in a calming breath and aimed for a breezy vibe, as if road-tripping through a snowstorm with a superhot stranger was totally, *totally* normal. “Well, I met a guy...”

“You *met* a guy?” Jane repeated in a dazed and disapproving tone. “At a motel?”

“No...” Sabrina lowered her voice to a hush, hoping to keep the all-girls, locked-in-the-bathroom call on the down low. “Not at the motel, at the shop.”

“In Kentucky? You met a guy in Kentucky.”

“Yep, in Kentucky.” She braced for the inevitable lecture. “Funny thing, his flight was canceled, too, and he needed a ride to Manhattan, so...”

“You offered a ride to a random guy in the shop whose flight got canceled?” her friend asked with a definite edge to her voice. “Sabrina, have you lost your mind?”

“I did an Instagram search first.”

“Oh, well, if you did an Instagram search, nothing to worry about at all,” Jane continued, obviously upset. “What’s this guy’s name?”

Sabrina scrunched up her face and hoped for the best. “Ryan Callahan—why?”

“Because I’m going to call my brother the attorney and ask him to do a criminal background check.” Jane must’ve flipped to speaker, because Sabrina could suddenly hear New York street sounds mixing with the staccato of her bestie’s tapping at some app on her phone.

Her insides groaned. “What in the devil... Why is that

always your first response?”

“Because a girl can never be too careful.”

“I *am* careful. I checked his Instagram, looked up his company, snapped a photo of his license,” she whispered. “I even called to talk with his sister.”

“Do you mean his sister who buries the bodies for him?”

“No, I mean the one who seemed nice, like someone we’d be friends with. Honestly, Janey, I feel safe with this guy. Just a sense I have, and you know I have good instincts about people. He sent his mom flowers, and he’s sweet to his sister.” She drew in a breath and tried to sound calm and reassuring. “Trust me.”

“I do. I *do* trust you. I just...” she said, a sigh filtering through the phone line. “Can you at least text me his license? For my own peace of mind.”

“Only if you promise not to run his prints.” She tucked the phone under her chin, lifted the bouquet from the box, and set the arrangement carefully into the sink.

“Yes, I promise. I just want to have the information.”

“If it will make you more comfortable with the situation, I’ll send it over.” She wiped her hands on her jeans, attached the photo of Ryan’s license to a text, and pressed send.

“Thank you. I will feel much better knowing I have all the...” *Ping.*

“Whoa—wait.” Sabrina heard her friend’s swift intake of breath as text popped onto her screen. “*This guy?* You’re locked away in a motel room with this guy?”

“What do you mean—*this guy?* Do you know him?”

“No, he’s just...incredibly gorgeous.”

Her face softened into a smile. “He’s just a nice guy who needed a ride.”

Jane practically snorted. “A nice, *gorgeous* guy who needed a ride.”



“Yes, Ryan is a nice, gorgeous guy who needed a ride, and I get why you’re concerned—it was a wild impulse on my part, but I went with my gut and everything’s okay,” she said, touched by her friend’s protectiveness. “He’s not giving any weirdo vibes. And *you* are getting married in two days, and I need to be there. I can’t believe it’s finally here.”

“Two days,” she said, a soft kind of amazement in her voice.

Jane Wright, the matchmaker who believed love was a matter of statistical compatibility, had fallen head over heels. Sabrina looked over at the bridal bouquet, struck by a momentary sadness. In time, she might end up on the outside of her friend’s fairy tale, and while the idea hurt a little, she couldn’t help but be happy for her friend...and hope for the best.

“So, this guy?” Jane asked in her straightforward way. “Is he really, truly nice?”

“He is really, truly nice.”

“Because he is really, *truly* hot.”

Sabrina swallowed hard and tried not to think too much about that. “Really, *truly* hot.”

Jane let go a small chuckle. “Fine, if you say you’re okay, I believe you, but call me in the morning, or before then if you need me. Middle of the night, whenever, okay? *Anytime.*”

“If I need you, I will. I promise, but I’m fine,” she said, happy to hear her friend sound reassured. “I’ll text in the morning when I have an updated ETA in Brooklyn.”

“Be sure to make it first thing in the morning,” Jane continued, a bit of mischief in her voice. “I want to hear all the details on your night with this truly hot guy.”

“Nothing detailworthy will be happening,” she said with confidence. “I’ve known him for all of six hours.”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes.”

Ryan knocked at the door. “Sabrina, you okay?”

“Janey, I have to run,” she said, her words coming out in a

quiet rush.

“Sabrina?” he called again.

She pocketed the phone and threw open the door.

“Everything okay?” He looked past her shoulder into the bathroom. “Sorry, I thought I heard something.”

“Like a ghost?” she joked. Her hand gripped the knob, and she leaned into the door, aiming for a casual vibe that said, *I’ve definitely not been talking about you for the past ten minutes.*

“No, not like a ghost.” He rested his shoulder against the opposite doorframe as the hint of a smile played at his lips. “Found the thermostat, turned up the heat.”

Sabrina looked over at him, and all she could do was smile and nod. As far as she was concerned, there was no need for a thermostat, because every move the man made turned up the heat. She’d never felt this way—so interested, so *emotional*. What was happening to her?

Nothing. Nothing was happening to her. The late hour, the intimacy of the vintage motel had created this topsy-turvy feeling, that’s all. *Nothing else is happening.* But he looked so ridiculously attractive in his now-rumpled suit and disheveled blond hair and all she could think about was the morning and its sexy potential details, which was not nothing.

She cleared her throat. Looked down at her sneakers. “What were you going to say?”

“Say?” Ryan asked.

“Earlier...you know, before I...”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Invited me into the shower?”

Even though she knew he was only teasing, Sabrina felt the heat rise back into her cheeks as she looked up to meet his gaze. “I did *not* invite you into the shower.”

“If you say so.” He offered up an easy shrug and that Nice Guy smile, the one that despite being so nice sent her pulse catapulting toward the ceiling. “I was going to say...tequila.”

He gave a nod in the direction of the still-open motel bar. “As in...how do you feel about tequila?”

*Like it's a darn good idea.* She returned his smile. “Love it.”

# Chapter Eight

*December 22, just past midnight.*

*The Dive Bar*

*Almost, West Virginia, 585 miles from home*

Ryan opened the door of the Dive Bar, and Sabrina breezed by, filling his senses with the scent of winter wildflowers and bracing night air, and the experience nearly knocked him flat. He liked it a lot—a whole lot—but he liked the view as she walked over to the bar substantially more. Even the oversize basketball jersey and checkered jacket were doing it for him. He shook his head and moved inside the bar.

*Tequila. Definitely.*

As he walked over toward the bar, he took in the rest of the place, which was full enough to be lively, but not crowded. Decorated to the max with blinking lights and signs exclaiming, JOY TO WEST VIRGINIA and DON'T GET YOUR TINSEL IN A TANGLE, it felt like Christmas had exploded in the place, a not-so-subtle reminder that what he wanted put him solidly in the naughty column.

He joined Sabrina at the bar, and, unsurprisingly, her southern ways had already kicked in. Settled on a high bar stool, she chatted with the bartender about the best holiday country songs to play on the jukebox angled in the corner.

She glanced over and tapped on the bar as the bartender laid two Mad Elf beers behind two shots of tequila. “Already ordered.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said to the bartender, noting how he left to pour drinks for another couple at the end of the bar. *Smart guy. She's with me, at least for tonight.* He turned back toward Sabrina. “Thanks to you, too. I like your choices, but the rest of the night is on me.”

She shook her head. “No, you got dinner, not to mention the room is on your Amex.”

“Why are you arguing with me?” He shrugged off his coat. “I’ve got the rest of—”

“I’m not arguing.” She looked down at her feet as they bounced off the bar stool. “I also don’t want you to feel obligated to pay because I told you I’m struggling financially.”

Ryan leaned over to catch her eye. “I don’t feel obligated. You’re giving me a ride home, and now I have a chance to pay you back.”

She shrugged her coat away from her shoulders. “Some assist.”

“Are you kidding? I could be wandering the streets of Beaumont looking for a place to crash, but I’m not. I’m halfway home, enjoying tequila.” He lifted his shot glass in a well-earned toast. “Once your bouquet hits *Page Six*, you’ll be back on your feet. Pay me then if you want, but we don’t need to stress over the details until we find out what’s up with Rosie. Sound fair?”

Sabrina toyed with her glass, looking torn. Clearly worried about her finances, she still didn’t expect him to pick up the tab, which, ironically, made him want to pick it up more. He felt like he could trust her, and he didn’t trust too many people. Not since the accident.

She touched her shot glass to his and tipped back the tequila. “Sounds more than fair.”

Ryan watched her face pucker at the sting of alcohol on her lips, stared as her tongue flicked the salt from her wrist. He really wanted to kiss her. Bold one moment, vulnerable the next, she’d sneaked under his skin. Way, way under.

So much for only wanting to share driving time and expenses. He knocked back his tequila, chased the liquor with a pull from his beer, and touched the bottle to hers. “To Rosie.”

“To Rosie,” she said with a laugh so real and unaffected and honest, he feared the tequila and mad elves would not be enough to keep him from kissing her tonight.

Not a good idea. Not unless he meant to take up permanent

residence in West Virginia. He ran a hand across his stubble and forced his attention on the college football wrap-up show playing on the television above the bar. *Much, much safer.*

“Hey, Ryan?” Her quiet voice sneaked past the protection of his thoughts. “Do you really think the bouquet will be a difference maker for me?”

He looked over at her and saw that same flash of insecurity he’d seen cross her face at dinner. Where did that come from? “Do *you*? That’s the real question.”

“I hope so. I think so.” Her softly spoken words revealed the self-doubt he sensed buried under all her ease and charm. “I’m not sure.”

He caught her gaze and held it, wanting to reassure her, hoping to help her see the possible, even if he wouldn’t be there when she made it real. “You should believe in yourself.”

“I should.” She smiled at him in a way that made him think she’d taken a step toward eliminating some of those self-doubts. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He took a pull from his beer, and the mix of tequila and lager in his bloodstream warmed him considerably. He was grateful she’d taken pity on him and given him a ride, and despite the nonstarting cargo van, the kitschy motel, and the fact he’d be rescheduling everything on tomorrow’s schedule, he felt lucky to be here with this woman. “Are you hungry? I’d be happy to order something.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks.” Her toes tapped against the bottom rung of the bar stool as she shifted her body toward him. “But how do you feel about line dancing?”

His brows shot up, wary of the question, but appreciative of the shift. “Line dancing?”

“Yep, line dancing.” She glanced over her shoulder at the jukebox.

He set the beer down on the bar. “I don’t think we have line dancing in Manhattan.”

“Well, Wyatt told me the jukebox plays Bill Monroe and the

Bluegrass Boys' 'Christmas time's A-comin', and how about this time of night, people start two-stepping, and while you may not know this about me, I am a girl who loves a good line dance." A smile curved her lips as she ran her palms along the top of the wooden bar. "Maybe you want to try something new?"

"New is overrated." He looked over at the bartender, whose name must be Wyatt. Seemed like a decent guy, but if he thought he'd be line dancing with Sabrina, there was no way that was happening, not if Ryan had any say in the matter. "But I prefer my days to be planned."

"What about your nights?"

His brows lifted. "Now, there's an interesting question."

Sabrina pinned him with a look. "I didn't mean that in the way you make it sound."

He leaned closer, his response already locked in. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." The pink blush that colored her cheeks added to the effect of her.

"Well, then, I'll give you a straight answer. Yes, I like my nights planned, too." A smile edged across his face. Let her mull that one over. "Besides, even if I *was* line-dancing material, I'm not sure my three-piece has the right look."

Disappointment flickered in her eyes. "Well, the suit is a bit buttoned-up."

"Not the first time you've explained that to me." His smile widened. "But if I were dancing with a girl who had the right look, she might make me look good."

"Really?" Surprise transformed her face. "Because I am a girl who has the right look."

Ryan chuckled at her obvious delight. "Not quite yet you don't." He raised his hand and called out to the bartender. "Hey, Wyatt, any chance I can get one of the straw cowboy hats you've got for sale?"

Wyatt gave him a thumbs-up, unhooked the souvenir hat, and

walked toward them.

Ryan handed the bartender his Amex. “Can you put it on our tab?”

“You got it.” Wyatt tossed the hat next to the two empty shot glasses and gestured at the jukebox as he walked away to run the card. “Your song’s up next, Sabrina.”

“*Your* song?” Ryan picked up the hat and looked over at Sabrina, sensing he’d been played, southern style. “Any chance this song happens to be a Bill Monroe classic?”

“Maybe,” she said, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. “But you’re going to love line dancing. Trust me, it’s easy as can be—a little rock motion to start, then a shuffle and a pivot.”

“Oh, I can handle a little rock motion.” He set the cowboy hat on her head and tugged down on the brim, thinking he’d love to rock her all night long, knowing he’d have to settle for a line dance. “Not sure I know how to pivot or shuffle.”

“Well, then, there is something else I can teach you.” Sabrina glanced up at him from underneath the straw hat in an inviting way that sent his senses into overdrive. No matter how much the damn thing had cost, it was worth every nickel. “What do you say...are you in?”

“I’m in.” The beginning notes of the song played from the jukebox, and as the space in the middle of the bar filled with a kind of organized chaos, Ryan reached for her hand, guiding her into the back corner. “If I’m going to give this a try, the fewer witnesses, the better.”

Sabrina laughed, entwining her fingers comfortably into his. “Are you kidding? I’m just impressed you’re ready to get your country on.”

“Don’t kid yourself, little Miss Honky-Tonk.” He gave her hand a playful tug, and her body fell into his, sending shock waves through his system. “I’m a New Yorker, tried and true.”

Her chin angled up, almost like she was daring him to kiss her, and in that moment, Ryan had never wanted anything more in his life. “Okay, city boy, show me what you’ve got.”



He spun her away, then back into his arms before joining the country line. Dancing fell out of his comfort zone, but the song had a chill vibe that made him loosen up quickly, laughing when he missed a step, enjoying the feel of Sabrina's hand in his. Maybe *not* having his suit pressed and his life in order was an option worth exploring sometimes.

When was the last time he'd had *fun*? Ryan could scarcely remember. He'd been isolated by his injury and the prolonged recovery that had followed. His time had been spent battling back physically, and when he grew stronger, he'd elected to focus on work until, eventually, building the agency consumed him. He traveled so much for work that when he was home, he chose to spend his time with his sister and friends, some clients. Dating fell low on his priority list.

A lot like Sabrina—casual dates, boring postmortems, very little real *heat*. He'd become inaccessible in his own way, so intent on proving his worth. Focused on the constant texts and calls, emergencies and demands, he'd forgotten to enjoy the everyday moments. To live in these moments, the moments that matter.

*Right here. Right now.*

The dance line shifted, and his gaze found her across the way, moving to the music, sneakers squeaking on the parquet floor, hips swaying back and forth, turning a simple country dance into a full-scale lesson in sex appeal.

He reached for her waist and pulled her close. She lifted her face to his, adorable in her new hat, her pale skin flushed, her strawberry curls framing her face. He wanted to kiss her. No, he *needed* to kiss her. Right here, right now, in the middle of a West Virginia motel bar. How the hell did he get here?

A canceled flight. An open storefront. A shared ride home.

Done, done, and done.

His well-planned life tripped up by a series of haphazard decisions. He brushed a loose curl from her cheek with his thumb, noting the quiet darkening of her eyes, the soft rise of her body against his. In a different universe, would he still be

here holding this woman? God, he hoped so.

The music drifted from bluegrass into a slow-moving Willie Nelson tune that Sabrina called “Pretty Paper.” He fell quiet for a moment as their bodies swayed to the folksy love song. He folded her hand into his and placed them together against his chest. She gazed up at him for a moment. He rested his cheek against her forehead, and as they circled the dance floor, Sabrina quietly sang a few words, lost in the simple beauty of the lyrics about how time flies.

He spoke softly. “You have a beautiful voice.”

Her eyes met his. “I didn’t want the night to end without a road-trip serenade.”

Ryan let go a low laugh, circling her away from his body and then back again as one song wandered into the next.

Last call came and went, and as the place thinned out, he drew her closer, the world narrowing until all that mattered was the feel of her in his arms, her tequila-warmed breath on his cheek, the soft jasmine scent of her skin. He pressed his lips against her temple as the song ended, took her hand, and led her to the bar, where he settled the bill and she bundled up in her plaid fleece jacket and straw hat.

The combination made him laugh even as she pinned him with a look. He slipped into his coat and reached back for her hand as they moved toward the exit.

Outside in the cold, away from the din of the music, closer to the room, the night felt muted and still. Snow fell softly from the sky now, pristine and white, covering the slanted rooftop of the motel, creating a mid-December hush all around them.

Ryan couldn’t remember if he’d ever experienced this kind of quiet. He looked over at Sabrina, taking in the way the flickering yellow light from the lamppost illuminated the snowflakes collected in the curls peeking out from beneath the hat. She was so pretty, he couldn’t help but stare.

As if sensing his interest, she tilted her face toward him. Cheeks pink with cold, she ran her tongue over the curves of her mouth, an unspoken tension building between them as they

made their way from the bar to the room.

At the door, Ryan slipped the key into the lock, no concern for the resident ghost, no impulse to tease. Different thoughts filled his mind now.

Once inside the room, darkened except for the outside lights peeking through the window, he pressed his back against the door until the lock clicked. He reached out and caught the hem of her jacket and drew her toward him inch by inch, as if in slow motion. He leaned forward ever so slightly, his gaze locked onto hers.

“I want to kiss you.”

Sabrina looked up at him, her expression full of indefinable emotion. “Okay.”

*One word.* One word was all it took to shift the ground beneath his feet. He tightened his grip on her jacket as if he was afraid to let go. “So, you’re okay with a kiss?”

Her words came out in a quietly spoken rush. “I am *so* okay with a kiss.”

Exactly what he’d been hoping to hear. A grin broke across his face. His palms slid along the line of her jacket, reaching up to tip back the hat as he leaned in to kiss her, slow and gentle at first, the touch of his lips on hers. His hands moved to frame her face, and she let go a small sigh. Her lips parted, ready to explore the kiss, and his tongue dipped inside. She tasted like tequila and lime, earthy and citrus-sweet, and he let himself get lost in the moment—no demands, no expectations, nothing except the pleasure of this moment. *Now.*

Needing to get closer, he swept away the hat and tossed it on the bed. With his lips still on hers, he wrapped his arms around her waist, swung her around, and pressed her back against the closed door. His hands coasted along the outside of her jacket to find the exposed skin where the oversize jersey hung off her shoulder. His fingers traced the line of her collarbone, circling up to entangle in the curls at the nape of her neck. He deepened his kiss slowly, adding intensity with her every soft sigh of encouragement until the moment he needed to stop or

risk not being able to tear himself away. He hadn't allowed himself to get close to a woman, to trust again after the accident. But with *this* woman, maybe he could.

He drew back slowly, his fingers still twisted in her curls. "I had to know."

In a kind of slow motion, she lifted her eyes to meet his, emotion shimmering in the depths of her darkened emerald eyes. "Had to know what?"

A wide grin broke across his face. "What your lips tasted like."

• • •

The wonder in his smile sent Sabrina's senses reeling. Her vision blurred at its edges, and her breathing grew soft and shallow. *That smile, that smile, that smile.* Her thoughts ricocheted through her brain. *And that kiss. I could die from the romance of this moment and be content.*

She gazed up at him feeling moon-eyed and present, but who needed happily ever after when there was a man in the world who smiled the way he smiled, kissed the way he kissed, and whispered seductive words like *I had to know...what your lips tasted like?* Goodness gracious, to heck with happily ever after. Happily kissing right now was absolutely fine, so impossibly, wonderfully fine that she wanted to kiss him again, and then, as if under some strange spell, her arms encircled his neck, her fingers curled into the hair that skimmed his collar, and his mouth fell down to hers in sexy slow motion.

His hands fell to her hips, steadying her as her eyes drifted shut and the ground seemed to shift beneath her feet. A sigh fell from her parted lips, inviting him closer. The kiss intensified as he explored her open mouth, and when he pulled away, the lingering effect left her dizzy. They stood there for a moment, his fingertips against her flushed cheeks, their breath coming swift and soft, both seemingly surprised by the electricity between them. Call it spontaneous. Call it *road-trip desire syndrome*. Sabrina didn't care. All she knew was that

she wanted to kiss him again—no, she *needed* to kiss him again.

Not necessarily forever, just right now.

Even after eight hours of total chaos, the man was gorgeous enough to eat with a spoon—his stubbled chin, the slightly long blond hair, the irresistible crinkles at the edges of his eyes. She'd never been this close to a man who made her feel *this way*. So emotionally off-kilter.

She drew in a quiet breath. No matter how enthralled she felt right now, she needed to be careful and cautious. Diving into bed with him after knowing him less than a day was unthinkable, a mistake of epic proportions. But how was she going to resist him?

Simple as pecan pie? Who had she been kidding? Never had she felt a kiss in every part of her body. Exactly why she needed to stop.

One more kiss and she'd call it a night.

She curled his fingers around the lapels of his cashmere coat and coaxed him down toward her mouth again. She breathed in the woodsy aroma of the soap that still clung to the collar and reveled in the way it mixed with his masculine scent, everything coming together in an intoxicating combination of juniper and tequila.

She swayed closer and let her lips crash up against his, and bless his city boy heart, he went right along with her, kissing her more deeply this time, slow and sweet like molasses, burying his fingers in her hair to keep her close. The more completely he kissed her, the more her brain short-circuited, and she returned his kiss with a kind of gentle abandon she never would have imagined seven hours ago.

Or *ever*.

When he finally broke away, Sabrina tightened her grip on his lapels and tried not to fall back into the door, but it was hard. Her knees felt weak, like some kind of romantic cliché. But it was true. Her knees literally felt weak. If the door hadn't been behind her, she would've sunk to the floor in an

emotional, unstrung mess.

He brushed a curl away from her cheek. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine—wonderful, really.” She mustered up a half-hearted smile, scarcely recognizing her own voice. “Just not the kind of girl who moves beyond a kiss.”

This man was a one-night-only opportunity, and while part of her wanted to indulge in whatever might exist beyond a kiss, the sensible, keep-relationships-breezy part of her held back. Somewhere in her gut, she knew that a one-night stand with this nice, hot guy would leave her more emotionally involved than the sensible part of her could handle.

“Sabrina, you don’t need to be the girl who moves beyond a kiss.” He leaned in and kissed the inside of her wrist. “You don’t need to be any kind of girl. You’re lovely being you.”

*Lovely being you.* If that wasn’t the most romantic string of words she’d ever heard.

Still. Better to leave it alone.

*Safer* to leave it alone.

“So, we agree.” Sabrina took a step back, straightened the line of her coat. “Whatever happens in the Dive Motel...”

“Stays in the Dive Motel.” His blue gaze settled on hers as a mischievous smile creased his impossibly gorgeous face. “Especially the part about how I’ll be sleeping totally naked.”

# Chapter Nine

*December 22, 1:33 a.m.*

*The Dive Motel*

*Almost, West Virginia, 585 miles from home*

“Totally naked? What about underwear?” Her eyes rounded in surprise. “Maybe that’s a negotiable item, the whole naked-sleeping situation?”

“Not entirely negotiable, not when you only have one pair of pants.” Ryan held back a laugh. The expression stamped across her face was half wonder, half concern, and somehow, it made the urge to keep teasing her impossible to resist. He rolled back on his heels, enjoying the situation. He wasn’t in control of the moment or of his feelings—hell, nothing had gone according to plan all day, and the truth was that for some reason, he felt okay with it.

“Oh, shoot—right.” She chewed on her lower lip, and the simple gesture made him want to reconsider their one-kiss pact. “I forgot about the no-pants situation.”

“But, yes, I am wearing boxer-briefs. Hopefully, I can find a place to get some sweats or something in the morning, but tonight, it’s just me and my underwear.”

“So not *totally* naked,” she said.

“No, not totally.” He sent her a wicked smile and jerked his chin in the direction of her bag. “I assume you’ve got something.”

“I do.” Her cheeks flamed a deep scarlet that made him near desperate to sneak a peek at the nighttime options she had tucked in that bag. Must be sexy stuff to earn *that* blush.

“Okay, then, good, at least one of us will not be half-naked.” A fact that might get him through the night, lying next to her in the same bed, but he had his doubts. He cleared his throat, shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “You can take the first shower.”

She gave a preoccupied nod but made no move to leave. “We need a better plan than that.”

“A better plan?” *Like showering together? That kind of plan?* He shook his head at his short-circuiting brain. Jesus, what was happening to all his nice-guy thoughts? Not to mention his well-earned sense of caution.

“I’m thinking it all through in my mind and...” She tilted her head and tapped her index finger on her lips. “...well, if *I* take a shower first, then I will be here when you come out.”

He shrugged, missing her point entirely. “So, put your head under the covers.”

Balled-up fists fell to her hips in a stance that was an unwavering *no*, followed by words meant to set him straight. “I’m not sleeping underneath the covers with your total nakedness.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the bathroom door, hoping she wasn’t thinking what he thought she was thinking. “What do you expect me to do, sleep in the bathtub?”

Her mouth twisted to one side, as if she were considering the idea. “No. I mean maybe, if there’d been a bathtub, but since there’s not, I’m thinking...”

His eyes narrowed in on her. “I am not sleeping in the shower.”

Her exasperated sigh echoed in the tiny room. “No one is suggesting you sleep in the shower, but if I take the first one, then I’ll be here when you get out.”

“So?”

“So, you’ll be naked.”

“Oh, I see.” He rolled back on his heels. Not even her obvious disapproval curbed his desire to needle her. Nope, he just dived right in. “You don’t trust yourself to see me naked.”

“Trust doesn’t come into the situation.” She doubled down on the disapproval. “I simply don’t want to be haunted by the image of you dressed in nothing but a motel towel.”



He narrowed his eyes farther, not quite believing her. “So, what do you suggest?”

She swallowed hard. “Let’s see...what if *you* get in the shower first while I make a vending machine run, and when I get back, you’ll be squeaky clean and safely under the covers.”

“Squeaky clean and *naked* under the covers,” he teased, thinking he’d never met a woman quite as bossy as this one. “Where will you sleep?”

“On top.” She cocked an eyebrow at his amused expression. “Of the covers, obviously.”

“*Obviously.*” He crossed his arms over his chest and leveled her with a measured gaze. “I don’t think I like the idea of you making a vending machine run on your own.”

“I am a grown woman, the machine is literally yards away, and this is, like, the safest town in America.” The look she sent his way told him she’d brook no arguments. “I’ll be fine.”

Ryan might not like her going on her own, but he wasn’t about to fight over the situation. “Fine, but take your phone in case you run into any trouble.”

“I will not be running into trouble of any kind.”

“Take your phone, or I’m hauling you into the shower right now.” Not that he’d haul her anywhere, as that was off-limits, even if some wet and wild time *did* sound like fun.

“Okay, fine.” She fished the cell from her pocket and waved it into the space between them. “Satisfied? If I’m not back in five minutes, come rescue me in your little white towel.”

As she disappeared into the hallway, Ryan tamped down his instinct to follow her. What was it his ex used to say? He had a serious rescue complex. A complex that had cost him. The memory brought forth the kind of bitterness that took effort to shove aside. *Get in the shower, Callahan. Everything’s fine. You’re fine. She’ll be fine.*

*Fine. Fine. Fine.*

Annoyed by the way that memory still set him on edge, Ryan turned on his heels and strode into the bathroom. As the

shower heated up, he stripped away his clothes, folded everything, and set the tidy pile on the metal rack. He stepped into the narrow stall, and as soon as the water hit his back, his cell rang in the other room. His calm disappeared faster than an out-of-the-park homer. He knew he should've gone with her. He ripped aside the curtain, stepped from the shower, and hustled into the other room, leaving a trail of water behind him. He snatched up the phone from the bed, his mind registering the name on the screen.

*Erin.* He winced, knowing he had promised to call. He slid the bar to answer. "Hey, sis."

"Ryan, where are you?" Her normally steady voice rocketed through the line. "I've been worried sick. I thought you were going to call..."

"I know, I'm sorry." He dragged a hand through his wet hair. "I promised I'd call when I got back to New York, but I'm not in New York."

"You still should have called."

Why was she always right? "Yes, I should have called, but I'm fine."

"Are you still in Kentucky?" she asked. "Did you reschedule your flight?"

"No and no, but trust me, I tried. There are no flights going in or out of JFK, LaGuardia, or Newark. I'm just crashing for the night in a motel a few hours from the city."

"In a motel?" He could hear her pacing the tile floor he'd laid in the kitchen of her apartment. Ever since the accident, she worried anytime he was on the road.

"Kind of a long story, honestly." He looked down at the pool of water forming at his feet. "I hitched a ride."

"You hitched a ride with who? And why did you stop at a motel?" she asked. "They're predicting more snow—couldn't you drive straight through?"

He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Our van broke down outside this hot dog place...something about the starter...but

she's being towed to a garage and should be fixed up in the morning. I'll be there tomorrow."

There was a short pause at the other end of the line. "She?"

Ryan tilted his head to the ceiling and closed his eyes. He'd blown it. Once his sister figured out that he'd hitched a ride with the pretty florist from Kentucky, she'd call every hour on the hour until he was home safely, and then she'd hold the situation over his head, possibly for all of eternity. "Rosie."

"The van is named Rosie?" Ryan could almost literally hear the wheels turning. "Oh my God, you're driving into the city with the florist."

He opened one eye. "Erin, can I tell you everything in the morning?"

"Do I want to know how you ended up riding in a van with a woman you just met? Or have you been dating her? Is *this* why you keep dodging my blind-date plans?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

His sister sighed into the phone. "Just tell me you're okay."

"Erin, I'm fine—I'm a grown-ass man." He heard the words and groaned aloud, instantly guilty. His sister was concerned about him, which was understandable. "I'm sorry. I promise you, I'm fine. But seriously, I've got to go."

"Call me in the morning."

*Holy shit.* The door to the room swung open. "Yep, absolutely. Call you in the morning."

Sabrina stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide.

"Promise."

"I swear."

Ryan ended the call and dropped the phone onto the mattress, but it was too late.

*Way too late.*

• • •

Oh Lord, he was naked.

Ryan grabbed the cowboy hat from the bed and held it in front of his manly goods, but not before she got a sneak peek at his perfectly athletic body wearing nothing—not one stitch of anything. Her eyes slammed shut.

“Sabrina, I didn’t mean...I got a call. I thought I had more time and...”

Palms splayed out in front of her, eyes closed, she backed toward the door. “No, no, it’s okay, I just...I forgot my wallet, so I came back to the room, totally my fault.” She stumbled into her suitcase. Her eyes flew open as she reached to steady the bag and she caught an inadvertent glimpse of his backside reflected in the mirrored door of the closet. “Oh my Lord.”

She whipped around, turning the ramrod line of her back toward him. Oh, sweet Jesus, she’d seen it all, every inch of his otherworldly body, and now she was never going to survive the night, not under the covers, not even with a barricade of every single pillow in every single room of the motel between them. Honestly, she could scarcely breathe. She hadn’t *known* a man could look that unfairly beautiful.

She pressed her palms to her cheeks and tried to keep from spiraling into total embarrassment. “Ryan—”

“Sabrina—” Their words tumbled on top of one another again. She drew in a breath. He cleared his throat. “You go first.”

“Okay, so, here’s what going to happen,” she said. “I’m going to make the snack run now so you can enjoy your alone time in the shower, or, rather, you can take your time in the shower, that’s what I meant to say—take your time—and I’ll be back when you’re safely tucked into bed.”

Eyes forward, she took two sideways steps toward her luggage and unwound the messenger bag from the top, not caring about finding her wallet or singles or change, not caring about anything except stepping outside and forgetting all about the last thirty mortifying seconds.

*Just focus on the snack run. Get out, get back, get to bed.*

She tightened her grip on the messenger bag and moved toward the door as an article she'd read about the "sexiest Netflix and chill snacks" popped randomly into her brain. She reached for the door. Nope, no mixed nuts and watermelon balls tonight. Just good-old fashioned cheese puffs and candy and a hot guy naked under the covers.

"Sabrina, hold up a minute. Don't go."

Her hand stilled on the doorknob. *Don't go*. Her heart leaped forward as she imagined six different scenarios during which this man uttering the words "don't go" should cause her heart to skip a beat, and knowing *don't go get snacks* was *not* one of those situations.

Over the pounding of her heart, she heard the shower running, but she hadn't heard him move away. He must still be there, just a few feet away. She'd only caught a quick glimpse, but she envisioned how his broad shoulders glistened with water, the way he pushed back his dark-blond hair, the surprised look on his handsome face when she'd walked in.

If she turned around now...

"We're both adults." His words broke into her thoughts. "Let's be reasonable."

*Reasonable. One hundred percent.* She released her death grip on the doorknob, thinking that his low voice was like a thrill ride that made her pulse race and her head spin. "We are adults."

*Consenting* adults.

"Exactly." Ryan cleared his throat. "No need to get jacked up about a little bit of nudity."

"I agree."

*Heck, what's a little nudity between friends who've known each other for a total of nine hours and were deeply lip-locked ten minutes ago? Didn't mean she wasn't a nice southern girl.*

"So, we're good?" Ryan asked.

"Absolutely." Her response came out edgier than she'd intended.

“As long as we’re truly good, and you are not hatching a plan to go sleep in the lobby, I’ll turn around and get back into the shower,” he said, presumably moving toward the bathroom. “Five minutes, I’m out, you’re in, and we crash and forget... whatever we need to forget.”

Sabrina gave a fast, hopefully convincing nod. “Blame the tequila.”

He let go a self-effacing chuckle that sent her heart lurching back onto the thrill ride, top of the hill, ready to come crashing down. “Always blame the tequila.”

She listened as he backed toward the shower. Only good manners kept her from sneaking another peek. Well, good manners and a healthy dose of preservation instinct. As her pulse kicked back into high gear, her mind ticked off the golden rules of her childhood summers, everything Gram had taught her. Be courteous. Be friendly. Be humble. Behave yourself.

*Behave yourself.* She drew in a steadying breath. *Behave yourself with the gorgeous naked stranger who kisses like heaven.* She. Was. Doomed.

A minute later, she heard the click of the bathroom latch, and when she was completely sure he was safely back in the shower, she turned around slowly, pressed her shoulders against the closed door, and slid down to the floor. *Doomed.*

Offering a man as sexy as Ryan Callahan a ride in her logo-covered cargo van was impulsive and maybe not a great idea overall, and even though she couldn’t possibly have known they’d end up stuck overnight in a room the size of a ring box with one teeny-tiny bed, she still—well, she should’ve known better. Did know better but ventured on the side of trusting him. *We have to trust sometimes, don’t we?*

But now here she was, emotions all over the map, feeling *feelings* she suspected she’d been avoiding her entire life. She flopped her suitcase onto its side, thinking she needed to be ready to dive into the shower when he got out. The less time spent ogling his spectacular muscles or listening to the sound of his voice, the better. She unzipped the top and dug out the

nectarine-and-honey-scented toiletries she'd bought at the Lexington Sephora. She set them aside, hooked her pinkie under the strap of a camisole emblazoned with the word "Bridesmaid," and snatched up the pair of matching red shorts. A gift from Jane.

Her brows knit together. When she'd packed for the trip, she'd envisioned a girls' night, not an unexpected sleepover at the Dive Motel. Sporting these in front of Ryan seemed a bit daring, but considering her other option was nothing...guess it was racy red pajamas for the win.

She placed them over her shoulder, picked up the Wildcats blanket that lay next to the bag, and turned her attention to the bed. She lifted herself up from the floor and unfolded the blanket, noting with some concern that the stadium covering was smaller than she'd need.

Hoping for a couple of extra blankets, she went to the closet, but all she found was her dress and a few spare pillows. She pulled them from the shelf, walked over to the bed, and lined the pillows down the middle in a demented barricade designed to keep temptation four down-filled inches away. Like that was going to work.

A minor infatuation with a gorgeous stranger during an off-the-books road trip was an adventure, but that kiss...that *kiss*. Probably not the wisest course of action.

She pressed her palms against her cheeks. *I want to kiss you now*. His words echoed through her mind. *Are you okay with a kiss?* How had she responded? *I'm so okay with a kiss*. Not only had she kissed the man, but she'd pulled him back after the first one, more than okay with it.

Why? *Why?* Because he'd accused her of holding back her emotions? She wrinkled her nose. To be fair, he hadn't *accused* her of anything—he'd simply offered to listen if she needed to confide in someone, noting how he'd be the perfect guy for the job given they'd be parting ways when they reached the city and would never see one another again.

Except she didn't feel like she was holding back, even though that was her usual *modus operandi* in relationships.

She felt open and emotional, as if the molecules inside her were buzzing at some new frequency, and for the first time in her life, she didn't feel the need to hold back—not as much, anyway. But they'd already agreed to a one-kiss détente, and even if her insides hummed—*especially* if the situation made her insides hum—one kiss was enough to risk.

With that thought ringing in her mind, she plumped up each pillow to create an extra inch of separation and was so focused on the activity that she failed to hear the water stop running or notice the sound of the bathroom door open, so when she turned around, Ryan was already there, standing in the doorway wearing the little white towel of her dreams.

His gaze flicked to the demarcated line of pillows on the bed, and his mouth turned up on one side. She lifted her chin as if daring him to say a word.

Instead, he stepped away from the door and waved her inside. "It's all yours."

She yanked the lacy pajamas from her shoulder, wishing she'd brought something else, some head-to-toe jogger set. "Thank you."

Once she was safely inside the bathroom, she stood with her back against the closed door. Her gaze slid over to the bouquet, and the arrangement stared back at her from the sink like some magical symbol of weddings and love and deep-diving kisses.

Except she didn't believe in that kind of magic. Well, for some people, maybe. Just not her. She moved away from the door, switched on the shower, and realized she'd forgotten her toiletries. She glanced in the direction of the room, knowing there was *zero* chance she'd be asking Ryan to bring them to her.

Rather than test her emotional fortitude, she stripped away her clothes and climbed into the shower, hoping to wash away all her feelings, but the water rushed over her in a way that felt sexy and forbidden, as if her body was attuned to his, despite the closed door between them. She turned off the water in one swift motion, toweled dry, and slipped into her bridesmaid



pajamas. *One night, that's all it is. One night and a little bit of naked.* She opened the bathroom door an inch and peeked into the room, which was dark except for the outside lamp flickering in that spooky way.

As promised, Ryan was already tucked neatly under the covers, so she sneaked through the door and padded quietly across the carpet. She lifted the Wildcats blanket, climbed into bed, and pressed her back into the wall of pillows. On the other side, she heard his even breathing and wondered if he'd already fallen asleep. She didn't expect to sleep at all. Thinking about his body lying inches away, his perfectly defined deltoids curled around his pillow, made her literally exhale something akin to longing. She pulled the blanket up to her chin and snuggled into its warmth, hoping he'd not heard her mortifying sigh. She lay still, listening to his breathing, feeling her own accelerated heartbeat, thinking about the last eight hours.

Outside, the light flickered again and then went dark. A twinge of apprehension twisted in her stomach. Probably the bulb burning out. But then she heard a knock. A distinct, persistent knock on the door to the room. *Lord, have mercy. Who could that be this time of night?* Her fingers tightened on the blanket. Ryan failed to move an inch. Hadn't he heard it, too?

She pressed down on one of the pillows and peeked over the wall. "Ryan?"

The mattress dipped as his body shifted toward her.

"Yeah?"

Another noise outside brought her back from the edge of reason. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" his voice whispered into the darkness.

She moved aside another pillow, a little freaked out. "The knocking, at the door."

"I didn't hear anything."

"The light went out."

“The outside light?” he asked with an obvious lack of concern. “Probably on a timer.”

Made sense, logically. But she couldn't shake the feeling there was more to the story. “You really didn't hear the knocking.”

He moved to the edge of the bed. “If it will make you feel better, I can check it out.”

“No—no.” *God, please don't get up.* Seeing his more-than-half-naked body in all its glory again would blow her mind more than a random poltergeist at the door. “Probably just my imagination.”

“Probably.” He shifted onto his side and smiled over at her. She must've been staring, because there was a gleam in his eyes. “But if you want to move the pillows and get a little closer, I'm okay with it.”

“Well...maybe.” Unsure if he was teasing or making a genuine offer, she shot a quick glance at the door and decided she'd sleep better if they were a little closer. “But just for protection.”

He gave a slow, serious nod. “Just for protection.”

“In case...” She bit down on her bottom lip. “If I tell you, you can't laugh.”

“I won't.”

“Promise.”

He inched a tiny bit closer. “I swear.”

She hesitated, then said, “In case it's Jonathan.”

Ryan fought back a smile. “The ghost?”

“Yeah, him. So, if I move the pillows so I can get closer, you won't tease me and we *both* understand the move is just for protection,” she said, wondering which of them she was trying to convince.

“*Just* for protection.”

Ignoring the half smile still parked on his handsome face,

and feeling silly for being nervous about a ghost, she set aside the last two pillows, leaving no barrier between them save the thin polyester bedspread and threadbare motel sheets.

She peeked over at him. “Make sure you stay under the covers.”

Ryan gave a small salute. “Stay covered, snuggling for protection purposes only. I got it.” He leaned closer, a smooth intimacy in his voice. “But if you change your mind, let me know.”

“Good night, Ryan.”

“Good night, Sabrina.” His voice drifted lower as his gaze moved to her lips. “I know we agreed what happens in the Dive Motel stays in the Dive Motel, but for the record, that kiss by the door might top my list of all-time favorites.”

“*Might* top your list?” Her heart somersaulted as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers.

“Top three for sure.” He looked over at her with an inky gaze, brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, and tucked it behind her ear. His hand coasted her jawline, and he brushed a soft good night across her lips before he moved away, before his eyes drifted shut.

Not ready to sleep, Sabrina lay awake in the darkness. After a while, his breathing grew even and measured, and she edged closer to the temptation of his warm, strong body, the realization striking her anew—she was in a motel with Ryan Callahan, the guy she met in her shop just hours ago.

Her fingers curled around the edge of the fleece, and she tucked the blanket under her chin. How did she get here? The entire day...since the moment he'd walked into the shop felt so...surprising, so surreal. She let her gaze take in his face, boyish in sleep, his damp hair, uncharacteristically messy and imperfect. If she reached out to him now, she knew what could happen, and part of her wanted to feel him against her, inside her. But no.

Not only was she a nice southern kind of a girl who'd been taught to behave and respect herself and do all the right things,

but she'd also grown up in Manhattan and was still enough of a city girl to know all about protection, and she didn't have any handy, or even in range of handy, and so, as her gram might say, now was not the time to test the Lord.

She smiled into the dark, appreciating how simply being with him offered a respite from her recent loneliness. Lying next to him, taking pleasure in his steady breathing, noting the moment when he drifted into a deeper sleep, was enough for tonight. Enough for forever, really, considering how—if all went well—they'd be back on the road tomorrow.

But what a ride so far—so much more than she expected.

Sabrina lay next to him, quietly wide-awake, every molecule in her body attuned to his, every thought in her head spinning, reckoning with the realization that she'd never felt so taken with a man, and she wondered if, after the wedding, when she was back home in Kentucky, these moments lying next to Ryan Callahan would end up topping *her* list of all-time favorites.

The answer came swiftly and certain.

Yes. Easily.

# Chapter Ten

*December 22, 6:03 a.m.*

*The Dive Motel*

*Almost, West Virginia, still 585 miles from home*

Normally a restless sleeper, the result of the nightmares he'd endured after the accident, Ryan was surprised he slept so well in a strange place. He woke early, too, but rather than rouse the sleeping bridesmaid so they could follow up with the garage and get back on the road, he stayed in bed, staring at the woman beside him. If he was honest, he wanted to kiss her the whole time.

*The whole time.*

He wanted to taste the soft skin of her neck, sink his teeth into her shoulder, dig his fingers into her hips and nudge her closer. He wanted to throw away caution and lean into the quietly electric space between them and kiss her awake, not caring where it might lead.

As he watched the soft, gentle rise and fall of her breathing, he remembered how she felt melting into him, how she'd pulled his lips back to hers, her soft breasts against his chest, her mouth, the way she tasted. He shifted in discomfort as his body responded to the memories.

What had gotten into him? He couldn't remember being this attracted to a woman. Not in a long time. Not since the accident. Sure, he dated when time allowed, but he was mostly going through the motions, living up to some standard or expectation. But *why*? Why Sabrina? How had she sneaked under his skin? Was it a matter of trust, of sensing she'd never trade him like a commodity? Maybe. He wasn't sure. He only knew he was content to be lying here, debating whether to wake her with a kiss.

As if she sensed his thoughts, her eyes fluttered open. She pressed her face into the pillow to hide a yawn, then turned to peek over at him.

“Morning already?” she asked in a sleepy voice that had him fighting back his not-so-nice-guy impulses.

“Not a morning person?” he asked.

Her eyes widened as if the idea was beyond comprehension. “Not hardly.”

Ryan reached out and tucked a curl behind her ear. Dropped an unplanned kiss near her temple and watched her cheeks turn a faint pink. At least he wasn’t the only one affected by the chemistry between them. “I have to go.”

“Wait, where are you going?” she asked, pulling the Wildcats blanket up to her chin and reaching for her cell. “What time is it?”

He rolled onto his side, hoping to hide the way his body hardened in response to the low dip of her lace-covered pajama top as she moved. Another minute in this bed with this woman and he’d be looping the tiny strap onto his index finger and tugging on it slowly until he revealed the curves she’d hidden away under her basketball shirt and oversize jacket. After that, all bets would be off.

*All* bets, he thought as he pulled himself upright in one swift movement, determined not to give in to less-than-decent impulses. “Well, sunshine, it’s not that early if we want to pick up Rosie and hit the road to get back to the city.”

And he did want to get back to the city. Back to reality. Back to normal. He *did*.

He made a twirling motion with his index finger. “You may want to turn around unless you want to catch another glimpse of more than you bargained for.”

A playful smile touched her lips, but she turned and buried her face in one of the pillows. As he rose, Ryan tugged the sheet from the bed. She laughed and tightened her grip on the Wildcats blanket. He anchored the sheet at his waist and glanced back at her, thinking he’d miss her when their road trip ended.

Probably more than he even knew.

Twenty minutes later, showered if not shaved, Ryan walked the aisles of Almost Country Big and Tall trying not to think of Sabrina, the curve of her shoulder, the soft morning scent of her skin.

Nope, he was here for perspective and some clean clothes. Sadly, Almost Country Big and Tall didn't offer much except endless racks of Wrangler jeans and thermal T-shirts, most of which were bright red or green and stamped with an image of an open-engine Ford Raptor and the words "Snowball 500."

"Guess these are my options."

He sent a quick text to Erin, knowing she'd want to hear from him this morning and, once he finished, made his way down the jam-packed aisle. He picked up a package of boxer-briefs, a pair of jeans, one of the thermal tees, a Snowball 500 fleece jacket, and two logo hats—one with a pom-pom. He added work boots for him and a shearling style for Sabrina that he thought would fit, all of which he'd probably end up donating. He glanced down at his wrinkled suit. At least this stuff was clean.

Finished, he took everything to the register and waited for the kid behind the counter to scan his purchases. He wanted to get back to the motel. *Only one reason for that*, he thought, taking the Amex from his wallet.

When was the last time he'd spared a thought for what he wanted? Most of his time was spent managing other people's lives and his clients' needs and occasional troubles superseded his own. So, what did he want?

He'd always wanted to play baseball, so when his playing days came to an abrupt, unexpected end, he'd stopped thinking about what he wanted. Instead, he focused on what he *needed*. He'd needed to get back on his feet, which meant physical recovery. He'd needed to build the agency, because that was the best way to stay in the game after the accident.

*The accident.* He ignored the familiar punch to the gut, picked up the bag, and walked through the door into the sunshine. He tried not to notice how the day that had changed his life forever had started as bright and sunny as this one. No

point looking back.

Instead, he started toward the motel, his coat collar raised against the chill. His knee bothered him in the early morning, especially when it was cold. He ignored it, per usual.

He walked by the office. Inside, a pot of coffee brewed. The world was waking up around him. He stopped inside and fixed coffee for Sabrina, tea for himself, and walked down the corridor to the room. Not wanting a repeat of last night, he opened the door slowly, but Sabrina was already dressed in dark jeans and a flannel shirt, looking sexy as hell.

She turned to wave him inside as she paced the floor, and that's when he caught a glimpse of the stress etched into her features. *Shit*. Sexy was good. Stress, not so much.

"I'm sorry, Pete, I'm missing something—are you saying Rosie *can* or *can't* be fixed?"

She tossed an anxious smile in his direction, and the word "catastrophic" echoed inside Ryan's memory bank. He fought back a groan and put the Big and Tall bag on the table.

"So, she can be fixed, that's great." She tucked the phone under her chin and gave him two slightly awkward-looking thumbs-up. "I'm relieved because I thought you said... Oh, I see."

She stopped mid-pace. Not a good sign.

"How long will that take?" She nodded, back to pacing. "Um, any chance you know about the wedding that I'm... I see. Yes. Okay." She shot him another nervous glance. "Well, that would be a real boon if you can make it happen. Yes. Okay. Thanks, Pete. 'Bye."

Ryan set his shoulder against the doorframe, thinking the conversation wasn't the worst one-sided discussion he'd heard in his lifetime. Maybe there was still a slim chance in hell that they'd make it back to New York today.

"Okay, what do you want first?" Sabrina slipped the phone into her back pocket and turned to face him. "The good news or the not-so-good news?"



He lowered his chin and shot back a worried look. “Is there any bad news?”

“Bad news?” She looked down at her feet and shifted her weight from side to side. “There’s news that could be considered bad depending on how you take it.”

“Give me the good news.”

She raised her gaze to meet his and offered up a tense smile. “Rosie can be fixed.”

His eyes narrowed in on her face. “And the not-so-good news?”

Sabrina twisted a curl around her index finger. “Pete doesn’t have the part she needs, and he can’t get the part for two days.”

“Two *days*?” He enjoyed a spur-of-the-moment road trip as much as the next guy, but...

“I know.” She spun on her heels and went back to pacing. “I know, that’s the potentially bad news, but there is a train from Charleston that will get us to New York—eventually.”

He cocked a dark brow. “Eventually?”

“Eventually, as in one more day,” she said in an overly cheerful tone. “Seems there’s an overnight train that runs through Pittsburgh and can get us to New York early on Sunday.”

“Early on Sunday?” He rubbed a hand across his brow, thinking that missing the Excellence in Sports dinner might be considered worse than showing up without a date.

“We should be there in time for the wedding and your event.” She flashed a desperate smile. “Course, I’ll be missing the rehearsal, so hopefully Jane won’t blow a gasket...”

“There must be some other option.” Not that he minded an extra night with the kissable redhead, but he needed to get back to New York, like, yesterday. “An earlier train, maybe?”

“Great idea, and yes, there actually *is* an earlier train.” A

look of pure dismay clouded her features. “But Pete won’t take us to the station to catch the earlier one...”

“Why the hell not?” His schedule was packed. He needed to prepare for the event, and if he wasn’t back soon, his sister would have a dozen blind dates lined up. He’d feel obligated and end up locked into dinner dates until March. *No. No, no, no.*

“Well, it’s an hour’s drive, which isn’t too bad, except...” She drew in a long breath and opened her eyes a fraction too wide. “For the Snowball 500.”

“Okay.” Ryan reached into his jacket for his phone. “So, we’ll find another ride.”

“I don’t think we will.” A sigh accompanied her next string of words. “Apparently, the Snowball 500 is the annual race that kicks off the holiday season in Almost.”

“Yes, I *know* what the Snowball 500 is.” He pulled the fleece jacket from the shopping bag and held it up as if it were Exhibit A. “But why can’t we find another ride?”

“According to Pete, there’s not a living soul within one hundred miles willing to skip the biggest race of the season to take a couple of jackasses who need a new alternator to the train station.” She looped her thumbs into her belt loops and cocked her hip to one side. “Well, that’s basically what he said. I added the ‘jackasses’ part.”

Ryan looked over at her, all flushed and stressed out and adorable and endearingly competent—and it hit him. For once in his life, he didn’t need to manage everything or find a solution. Sabrina already had one, and even if this solution didn’t get them back to the city today, this was the best they could do. What was one more night?

Ryan ran a hand across the stubble on his jaw. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Disbelief stamped across her face, she continued, “No alternate plan, no internet search for a different station or flight or car rental place—just *okay*?”

“Yes—okay. I mean, I confess I googled it while you were calling us jackasses, and there’s no rental car or taxi option

since we're kind of in Mayberry, so..." He offered up a shrug, amused by how well she had him pegged. "If Pete's willing to give us a ride to the train, that makes us lucky, right? Otherwise, we'd be here two more nights. You'd miss the wedding. I'd miss the dinner. So, I agree, we get to New York first and figure out how to get back to Rosie when she's all fixed up."

"We?" She drew out the word in a way that made it sound multisyllabic and smiled up at him, all tomboy-sexy in her jeans and flannel. "*We* can figure out how to get Rosie?"

"Not like I'm going to leave you stranded." He tossed the jacket on the bed. "If not for you, I would've slept on a bench outside the Pik Pak Market last night."

"Oh, you keep saying that, but..." She cleared her throat and ran her palm over her denim-clad hip in a self-conscious way. "I'm sure you would've figured out something."

Ryan lifted his shoulder. "Maybe, but none would have been as much fun as a wild ride with a country girl." He arched one brow, grinning over at her as her face went more than a little pink. "Give me a minute. I'm going to brush my teeth and change so we can check out."

She gave a short nod. "Sounds like a plan. You clean up, and I'll just check you out. Or rather, I'll check us out." Her face went from pink to full-stop red as she backed toward the door. "Not *you*. I meant *us*. Out of the room. Out of the motel, I mean. Check *us* out."

Ryan kept grinning, enjoying every second of her spinning out, which might be the most endearing, refreshing reaction to him that he'd ever experienced. In his world, there was always an angle, but with Sabrina, nothing seemed planned, nothing seemed calculated—hell, nothing seemed to make sense. She was honestly unlike anyone else he knew. But he liked her—*a lot*.

He liked her despite her lousy taste in music and irrational fear of ghosts, her lack of roadside insurance and her junk food diet. In fact, the more time he spent with her, the more time he wanted to spend with this adorably flushed, adorably

competent strawberry blonde. Maybe it was time to take his own advice and dive the hell in.

His gaze took in her curves in her fitted shirt and low-slung jeans. He felt his body react to the sight of her. No sense pretending otherwise—he wanted this woman. But he also knew that no matter how much he liked her—and he *did*—they only had twenty-four hours before they reached New York.

His smile faded as reality settled in his brain. He was a Manhattan-based workaholic man whose broken engagement had left him more than gun-shy. She was a heartfelt Kentucky woman whose dating life suggested her own set of insecurities. He may have known Sabrina a short while, but he felt sure she wasn't a "twenty-four hours, then nothing" kind of girl.

And that's all they had.

Before he did something stupid, he turned away, resisting the urge to place a fast kiss on her mouth, resisting that driving impulse to dive in. He needed to get a grip. You never knew where that driving impulse might lead, but he wasn't ready.

...

Sabrina watched him move across the room with his smooth athletic grace, her thoughts racing toward the R-rated section. An unfamiliar combination of nerves and shyness fizzed inside her, and she had to admit that despite Rosie being out of commission, there was a hint of excitement at the prospect of spending another day—and night—with Ryan Callahan.

Of course, she'd probably have to ask her parents for a short-term loan to get Rosie out of hock, an idea that dented her pride, and she'd be missing Jane and Charlie's rehearsal dinner, which made her the worst bridesmaid in the history of the world, but nothing, not even her terrifying financial state or worries about making it to Manhattan in time, dampened the fizzy excitement bubbling through her. The way he'd looked at her made her feel phosphorescent, as if she was shining from the inside out. But a glow wasn't going to get her

to New York or save Posey or change the fact that relationships were inherently risky.

Experience had taught her not to be reliant upon another person or be captivated by a man, to the point that that was all she believed in. This fizzy, radiant feeling didn't change the fact that she needed to be self-sufficient, to forge her own path. Maybe she couldn't control the effervescence inside her, but she could manage her emotions. She could avoid getting too wrapped up. She was a modern, single woman in charge of her own thoughts, her own feelings, her own world.

Period.

Even if he did make her feel safe and protected and capable.

No. More. Glow.

But just because she didn't want an all-consuming relationship didn't mean kissing was out of bounds. If she could set aside all Grammie's good southern girl rules for the length of a train ride, in consideration of the fact that it *was* a wedding weekend and she *was* a bridesmaid, then...more kissing might not be entirely off the table. Maybe. Possibly.

She pulled her phone from her back pocket, flopped onto the chair by the window, and checked out the cardboard carrier on the table. There were two cups. One marked *coffee*. The other, *green tea*. She lifted the top of the coffee, knowing the healthy morning elixir must be meant for Ryan. She took a sip of the java. Perfect amount of cream, just enough sugar. Her gaze flicked to the door of the bathroom. How had he known?

She took a second sip and opened a new text on her phone. She tapped her thumb against the screen, thinking that Jane might not be happy she'd be missing the rehearsal. But what could she do? She set down the paper cup and started texting.

*Happy Day Before the Big Day! Are you awake?*

The response came quickly. *Yep. How's the truly hot guy?*

Sabrina smiled and shook her head. *He's sweet.*

*So why are you talking to me?*

*Funny.* She wrinkled her nose at the phone. *FaceTiming you*

*now...*

She tapped on the option to switch to FaceTime, and her friend appeared on the screen, propped in bed. Lying next to her was Charlie, her sleeping fiancé.

Jane smiled into the screen. She kept her voice quiet. “So, when will you be here? I can’t wait to see you and hear more about this guy.”

“Well, I’ve got a bit of an issue—not with Ryan, with the van.”

Her friend sat up a bit straighter. “What kind of issue?”

Sabrina felt her insides cringe. *Better to put it all out there.* “Like it won’t start.”

Jane’s face collapsed, and she made a move toward Charlie. “Let us come and get you.”

“No. No way.” Her response was quiet but certain. “Your rehearsal dinner is tonight. I’m not going to have you worrying about me.” She flicked a quick look toward the bathroom. “I’ve got this. I just won’t make it until tomorrow morning,” she said, close to crying at the look of disappointment on her friend’s face. Jane wanted her to be there, and the last thing she wanted to do was let her down. “I will be there on Sunday, Jane. I promise.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know you will.” She glanced over at Charlie and tugged on her right ear, a longtime habit. “See you tomorrow, then. Keep me posted.”

“Will do.” She ended the call more determined than ever to get to Manhattan, armed with a newsworthy bouquet and dressed up in holiday silver. Marriage might not be for her, but it was for Jane, and Sabrina refused to miss this wedding, not for anything in the world.

She walked over to the closet and opened the left side to pack up her dress. The dress wasn’t there. But she felt certain Ryan had hung the dress on the *left* side. Huh. An unexpected chill skittered across her skin, and she glanced over her shoulder. The room was empty. Strange. She slid the door in the opposite direction and found her dress at the far end of the

closet.

The chill brushed nearer, across the back of her neck this time.

Not wanting to examine *that* further, she unhooked the bag and laid it across the bed next to her already-packed bag. The faster they could get out of there, the faster—

“Hey, Sabrina?”

“Yeah?” She spun around...and everything stopped. Her heart. Time. *Everything*. Looking at him, tall and strong, clad in a pair of jeans that formed to his hips and thighs in a way that made it seriously hard for her to breathe, she felt like she'd been hit with a stun gun.

He rested his hands on his hips, doubling down on the whole look. “What do you think?”

Sabrina swallowed hard and tried not to stare. But she failed. Miserably. A 100 percent fail. What did she think? She thought he was the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. In the suit. Out of the suit. In denim, out of the denim. She'd take him however she could get him. She could barely breathe, barely string two thoughts together, so she said the first thing that popped into her head.

“I think you look like a sexy urban cowboy.”

“A sexy urban cowboy, huh?” A playful smile lifted the edge of his mouth. “Guess I can work with that. Better than uptight, fast-talking city agent who can't be trusted.” He slid his folded suit neatly into the Big and Tall bag and nodded toward her dress bag. “Probably ought to pack up and get out of here. Last thing we want to do is miss the train.”

Sure, right. Last thing they wanted to do was miss the train, because if they stayed here, she might sink her teeth into his shoulder and tug off those Wranglers, which she wanted to do, and if she did, well, she feared the emotional rabbit hole she might dive into afterward.

“Yep, we do not want to miss that train. Give me one second to pack up the bouquet and we are out of here.” She felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she made a beeline for the bathroom,

turning around only after she had put a safe distance between them. “Oh, and I almost forgot—did you move my dress from one side of the closet to the other?”

“No.” He dragged the fleece jacket across his bitable shoulders. “Why?”

Sabrina felt that strange chill at the back of her neck but waved off the sensation. Her flushed skin simply felt cold—that was the rational explanation. Not like a lovelorn ghost would be interested in her bridesmaid dress.

“No reason,” she said, aiming for breezy.

She slipped into the bathroom and boxed up the flowers in record time, praying she could keep the bouquet in the motel fridge until it was time to go to the train station. Despite the unexpected detour, the sage looked healthy and the flowers were still colorful, but they were delicate, and the arrangement’s success was critical to the wedding, to the shop, to *everything*.

With her mind stuck in stress mode, she didn’t hear Ryan come up beside her, and when his hand touched her shoulder, she practically jumped out of her skin.

“Hey, I almost forgot,” he said, suppressing his amusement. “I bought you a present.”

She lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. “A present?”

“I was thinking of you when I was out this morning.” He reached into the plastic bag and pulled out the knitted green hat with a pom-pom on top and the Snowball 500 logo embroidered on the front. He broke into a grin. “Didn’t want you to be cold.”

“That’s so sweet, thank you,” she said as she pulled on the hat. “I love it.”

“Picked up snow boots for you, too.” He glanced down at her bare feet. “Size six? My sister’s size, so I thought that might be right.”

“Six is perfect, but you really didn’t...” Her pink-lacquered toes curled under as if hiding their nakedness, which made her



feel instantly ridiculous. Just naked feet, for crying out loud.

“Have to do it?” He nodded. “Think of them like a Christmas present.”

“Well, thank you.” A blush heated her skin, making her feel twice as ridiculous as her toes. When did she become the blushing kind of girl? “But I don’t have anything for you.”

“Still time.”

*Still time.* Would they even think of one another come Christmas?

He looked into her eyes as if he wanted to kiss her again, and it took everything she had not to give in to her impulse to do the same, but before either of them decided to kiss or not to kiss, the bathroom light fizzled and popped like a holiday confetti cracker.

Ryan laughed aloud. “Guess that’s our cue to leave.”

She liked his laugh. His smile. It managed to be kind and playful at the same time, and combined with the way his laugh lines deepened near the edges of his eyes, his smile had her head spinning in a brand-new way. What was she supposed to do with all that?

Her fingertips touched the edge of the embroidered beanie. “Honestly, I love the hat.”

“Looks good on you.”

Her heart skipped at his easy compliment, and when his hand fell to the small of her back to guide her through the door, the simple gesture sent her thoughts spiraling deeper into unfamiliar emotional terrain. *So protective. So considerate. So sexy.*

Ryan carried the dress bag and her suitcase while Sabrina managed the Big and Tall bag and the bouquet, but just as they crossed the threshold into the outside corridor, her phone pinged. *Must be Janey.* Sabrina shifted the flowers and the bag, dug her phone from her pocket, and opened the text. *Nope. Not Janey.* Her brows came together in confusion as she read the text from Ryan that blinked up from the screen: *Don’t*

*forget the hat, darlin'.*

She looked at Ryan, expecting him to be grinning at his own joke, but he appeared to be his usual, focused self. “Why did you text me about the hat?”

“Text you about the hat?” He glanced over, genuinely confused. “I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.” She held up the phone. “I didn’t even know you had my number, and I’m clueless about how you ended up in my contacts, but there you are, see? Ryan Callahan.”

Ryan read the text. “*Darlin’*? Sorry, but I’m pretty sure I’ve never used the word ‘darlin’.” He pulled his cell from his pocket and tapped on the message icon. “See? No text.”

“Well, so...if you didn’t send the text, how do you explain *that...*” she asked, gesturing toward the still-open door to Room 102. “Did you put that there?”

Ryan looked over her shoulder into the room, and there, sitting in the middle of the bed, was the straw hat from last night.

“No,” he said, deliberately, giving the simple word a whole new meaning. “Did *you*?”

Sabrina took a slow step back. “I did not, and there is no way that hat was there when we left the room.” She dragged her gaze up to his, her eyes wide, her voice a panicked whisper. “Now do you believe in ghosts?”

“No, I do not believe in...” The door to the room slammed shut. He pinned her with a look. “But we should definitely get the hell out of here.”

# Chapter Eleven

*December 22, 10:15 a.m.*

*The Snowball 500, Almost Town Center, 585 miles from Manhattan*

Twenty minutes later, strolling over to the town's winter carnival, Sabrina still felt spooked by her haunted ex-cowboy hat. She looked up at Ryan. "You have to admit that was freaky."

"Freaky, yes." Ryan glanced over at her, his brows raised. "Ghostly? I don't think so."

She wrinkled her nose in his direction. "Well, maybe you'd be okay spending another night there, but I know I wouldn't get a minute of sleep." *Not one minute. Nope.* Not even if Ryan kept her wrapped in his arms like a Christmas present. "Good thing we don't have to stay."

Ryan laced his fingers through hers as they passed through an archway of blinking metal snowflakes. "Oh, I don't know. Last night had its highlights."

Her heart sped up as she remembered the thrill of waking up beside him, vaguely amazed that he was here with her, in the middle of West Virginia, sporting vintage-wash jeans and a red fleece, a shadow of stubble across his chin and a half smile on his face, looking like he *fit*.

Then his phone buzzed—*again*.

"Sorry." He looked over with a sheepish smile. "Give me one second."

Just like her parents. Her sigh crystallized in the cold morning air, remembering the one and only time her parents had taken her to a winter carnival. She'd wanted to see Santa Claus, but, not eager to wait in line, her parents had found a bench off to the side. As she neared the front of the line, she looked over at them to wave, but they sat unaware of her, bent over some literary journal, commiserating with one another, consumed with work.

Well, she wasn't about to miss out. Continuing along a brick sidewalk dusted with snow, Sabrina breathed in the quaint, picturesque town. In every direction, the fairground bustled with people and holiday spirit. Lights cascaded from the evergreen trees that lined a walkway, which circled around to a twenty-foot Christmas tree in the middle of the square. Brightly decorated booths offered everything from ornaments to funnel cake, and in the distance, beyond rows of glowing snowflakes and the line of families waiting to see Santa, stood a slew of off-road vehicles ready to take on the frozen wintertime playground in a race to the finish.

*Totally cool.*

Funny how this place tugged at her heartstrings, like a vision of her perfect, magical Christmas, and even though leaving for the city weighed on her mind, she understood why no one in this small West Virginia town wanted to miss the excitement, the same way she never wanted to miss the tree lighting at home in Kentucky. Or the fireworks on New Year's Eve or the music festivals on Main Street during the summer.

As they rounded a corner, her gaze zeroed in on a colorful stand selling her favorite, peppermint hot chocolate. She pointed at the stand, and Ryan nodded. A country version of "Winter Wonderland" drifted in from the speakers, and Sabrina ordered two cups with extra peppermint and candy canes. She dug into her pocket for some cash, but before she could pay, Ryan gave the kid a twenty-dollar bill and told him to keep the change. The kid lit up like a Christmas tree. Sabrina glanced over at Ryan.

"Sorry for the distraction." He jerked his jaw at his phone in his offhanded way. "Just clearing my schedule for this afternoon, managing an issue with a client."

*Work, as expected.* "An important issue?"

He tapped out another text. "Depends on who you ask."

Sabrina nodded at his phone. "I'm sure your schedule was full." She picked up the cups and pressed one into his empty hand. "I'd understand if you need to work."

“No, it’s fine.” He pocketed his cell. “Honestly, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now and nothing else I’d rather be doing than spending the day with you. And considering we’re at a winter country fair, that’s saying a lot for a city guy like me.”

She waved up at the bright, cloudless sky. “Well, it *is* a beautiful day.”

A slow smile worked its way across his face, and something flickered in his vivid blue eyes, something reassuring, something sincere, and that *something* made her insides fizz like vanilla cream soda. “Beautiful.”

Her heart was filling up so fast it felt hard to breathe. She couldn’t help but smile back at him. “I’m happy to spend the day with you, too.”

Leaning in, he brushed a soft kiss across her lips. “Almost like a date.”

Her voice was a whisper. “Almost.”

Then his phone buzzed—*again*.

He ignored the sound and draped his arm casually around her shoulder. “Do I see one of those milk-bottle games up ahead?”

Sabrina bit down on her bottom lip. “Maybe you should answer?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he said, gesturing toward a booth off to the right. “No, I’m ready to win you the biggest stuffed animal in the place.”

Her eyes widened. “One of those oversize Frosty the Snowmen?”

“Can’t do better than Frosty.” He tapped his paper cup against hers. “Frosty is the man.”

“Frosty *is* the man.” She laughed.

Ryan gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze, and together, they made their way toward the Snowball Toss. Halfway there, his phone chimed a second time and then a third.

She gave him a sidelong glance and tried not to be annoyed. “If you don’t answer it, I will.”

He dipped into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

He let go a beleaguered sigh. “High-maintenance client. He’s a good guy, but he failed to earn his Pro Bowl bonus, and now Nike is trying to pull his commercial contract.”

“Can they do that?”

“Be tough—the endorsement deal isn’t tied to my client’s Pro Bowl status,” he said, tapping on the screen. “Just executives playing hardball ahead of our meeting on Monday.”

“Are they worried your client doesn’t have enough star power?” she asked. “Most guys I know care more about the regular season than the Pro Bowl. Maybe send over some season footage. Play some hardball of your own.”

Ryan looked up at her, a surprised expression on his face. “Funny, I was just texting that same idea to my assistant. Once I have some legit tape, I should be good to go into the negotiation on Monday.” He fired off the text, tucked away his cell, and pulled her close. “Now, *we* can go get you that Frosty.”

Sabrina smiled up at him, caught up in the circle of his arms. “Well, Frosty *is* the man.”

...

An hour later, having won his almost date’s heart with a carnival prize, Ryan stood on the side of the snow-covered racetrack shoehorned in the crowd, his arms wrapped around Sabrina, his hands settled at her hips. He rested his chin on top of her head and breathed in the soft scent of her hair. She smelled outrageously good. Like fresh air and blue skies. Like comfort and peace.

*Comfort and peace.* The thought hit him hard. He’d been chasing those line items for longer than he cared to admit, unable to trust. He hadn’t felt at peace in a long time, not since

waking up in the hospital alone. Focused, direct, productive. A guy who got shit done, yes. But not at peace.

Walking toward the track earlier, he'd felt a familiar tension build up in his muscles, but rather than face his emotions or anxieties, he'd taken his usual route and zeroed in on work, a guaranteed way to make him feel more in control. He drew in a breath of cold air.

Hell, he never thought he'd be here—three days before Christmas, hanging out along a snowy racetrack in West Virginia with a honey-voiced Kentucky florist. But as the sound system kicked into a bluegrass holiday tune, Ryan realized there was no place he'd rather be and no one he'd rather be with other than Sabrina. He pressed his lips against her temple, unable to remember the last time he felt anything close to the possibility of this woman.

The overhead music faded, and a pair of announcers in a makeshift sound booth officially welcomed the crowd to the Snowball 500. Cheers went up all around them. Ryan joined in and pulled Sabrina a smidge closer. He told himself the move was to protect her from the chill in the air, but the deeper truth was that he liked the electricity that buzzed between them.

The initial heat took off inside the red fencing defining the snowy mountain road, and the crowd cheered with excitement as the first truck out of the starting block took off high on a crossover jump. Ryan drew in a sharp breath as a rush of adrenaline kicked in hard. *Holy shit.*

He spoke next to her ear. "ESPN ought to cover this. It's incredibly cool."

"Don't start another deep dive into work now." She tilted her face toward his, and a curl fell loose from the edge of her hat. He reached out and tucked it back inside.

"Just commenting on the race." He let his hands coast from her waist to her hips. "Downhill on the back side. Some throw-down action. Risky stuff."

She gave him a pointed look. His face broke into a grin. "I'm talking about the race."

“Oh, I’m sure you are.”

“Never know, one of these guys might need serious representation.” He jutted his chin toward the racers entering the second half. “Payout for the Daytona was twenty million.”

Sabrina swallowed hard. “Dollars?”

He chuckled. “Yep. Twenty million.”

“Good heavenly days.” She sipped at her hot chocolate. “In that case, maybe I should get Rosie retrofitted with some studded tires.”

“Get her all gussied up with a pink floral spoiler, kicked-up racing stripes, Formula 1 ‘Posey’ across the hood.” His chuckle deepened into a laugh. “I’d represent you.”

Two trucks turned at the final corner of the circular track, one of them drifting as the driver took the curve toward the finish. A cloud of snow filled the air around them. Sabrina turned her face into his chest, laughing like a kid in the middle of an unexpected snowstorm.

He tightened his arms around her instinctively, anxiety building inside him as he watched the race unfold. The tough terrain required skilled drivers, and as they raced toward the finish, cheers erupted all around them, Sabrina looked up at him, eyes bright, cheeks pink with the cold, and Ryan felt an intense, undeniable chemistry kick up around them.

He brought his lips down to hers, kissing her softly but completely, oblivious to the cold, or the thunder of the race, or the smiles turned in their direction. His only concern was Sabrina.

If last night’s kiss had tested the waters between them, this one drew him into their depths, and he felt like he was drowning in her feminine curves, in the gentle feel of her. He wanted her to know how he felt—hypnotized by the moment, surprised by the depth of his desire to kiss her despite knowing her just seventeen hours. Rather than tell her, he showed her, wrapping her close, moving his mouth against her delicious lips, warming them with his own.

He dipped a hand beneath the hem of her checkered jacket



and under the flannel shirt and felt the warmth of her skin beneath his fingers. He pulled away to take in the sight of her. Eyes gone dark green, her lips wet from kissing, her eyelashes touched by snowflakes. *So beautiful.*

He leaned his forehead down to hers, then dropped another kiss at the corner of her mouth. He drew back, and she gazed up at him, a soft sound of contentment escaping her lips, as if she was meant to be here with him in this moment. *Meant to be.*

A second later, the sound of crashing metal sent his pulse rate sky-high. He tightened his grip on Sabrina as his gaze flew toward the track, to the trucks, stacked against one another, pressed awkwardly against the red-and-green fence.

He went completely still.

He wanted to breathe, but his heart smashed so wildly in his chest that breathing felt impossible, and he feared he might sink to his knees, haunted by the images of a winter night, the twisted steel of the accident that had ended his career and scarred his heart.

“Ryan...” She turned toward the track, then back to look at him. “Ryan, are you okay?”

*Are you okay?* Her voice echoed through the fog of his thoughts. Yes, he was okay. He wanted to speak, to reassure her, but his mouth failed to form the words. He was fine. *Fine, fine, fine.* Always his answer. He closed his eyes against the images locked in his brain: his demand for the car keys, his ex-fiancée’s refusal to give them up, the screech of the wheels, the smashing of metal.

“Ryan?” she repeated, urgency in her voice now.

He watched as the drivers climbed out of the trucks, each one smiling, waving matching caps as cheers went up around them. Another set of racers drifted past the mash-up. A crew moved toward the trucks and pulled them back onto the track. The thrum of his heartbeat slowed. He drew in a breath. The crash was not life-altering. Not this one, not here in the present.

Ryan pulled his gaze from the track and looked over at Sabrina, offering up a smile he knew failed to reach his eyes. “I’m fine.”

Only minutes ago, he’d thought about *meant to be*? The familiar rise of panic inside his chest felt like a brutal reminder that there were no guarantees. Nothing was meant to be.

“Ryan?” Her brows knit together in concern. “Does this have anything to do with—”

“I’m fine. *Honestly.*” He reached for her hips, keen to return to their easy rapport, but their earlier intimacy had vanished into the cold, thin air. “Startled by the accident, that’s all.”

Evading the obvious worry in her eyes, he interlaced his fingers with hers. “Come on, let’s get you a refill on your hot chocolate.”

Leaving the racetrack behind, they crisscrossed through the crowd, back to the section of the park dotted with brightly colored booths, every step a chance to regain control of his emotions and recapture his equilibrium. He’d already shared more with her than any person he knew except his family, and yet, once they got to Manhattan, he and Sabrina would be off in different directions. Ryan knew that. He *knew* that. So why was he even thinking past tomorrow? Why did he want to tell her everything about the accident?

As they walked across the park, Ryan fought back the panic. He still remembered the agony of waking up in the hospital after the crash, the devastating loss of his career, not to mention the woman he thought had loved him. He was grateful he’d survived, grateful he’d turned the loss of his career into a win by focusing on his family and clients and developing players like Mason Hollis. He’d been fortunate to build a new career.

But had he built a new life? He glanced over at Sabrina and Ryan knew—somehow, some way—he wanted a complete life, with a relationship, a family. Love. He *did*.

But love meant not holding back, and not just for a road trip, but for a lifetime, and right now he didn’t feel capable of that

kind of promise.

He drew in a breath of the bitter-cold air, wishing he could go back to the moment when he had kissed her without reservation, the moment before he saw the look in her eyes, the confused, concerned look that told him, no matter how far he'd come, he was still broken.

# Chapter Twelve

*December 22, 4:05 p.m.*

*Charleston Station*

*Charleston, West Virginia, 546 miles from Manhattan*

Sabrina glanced around the historic train station, managing a bushel of new emotions coming at her like oncoming traffic. Soon, she'd be saying goodbye to Ryan Callahan, and she didn't know how she felt about that fact.

How could she know?

This morning at the carnival, he'd kissed her so freely, kissed her in a slow, fiery way that lit up her insides like a shooting star streaking across her heart. She'd felt this indescribable connection shimmering around them like some magical snowfall that could transform her. How was this happening?

She had never sought an intense emotional, physical combustion with a man—or, more accurately, she had never *felt* or *wanted* the kind of overwhelming connection destined to exclude everything save that one person, and yet, when his lips touched hers, she'd stopped hearing the crowd and roar of the engines, stopped feeling the cold of the air and the warmth of the cup in her hand. All she'd felt was Ryan Callahan, *his* lips, *his* heartbeat. She'd never felt anything like the mix of desire and ease she'd felt with him in the last twenty-two hours. Totally unexpected. Completely electrifying. Confoundingly real.

But since the fender-bender at the race, Ryan had seemed different. She wondered if his reaction was a response to his accident. She wanted to ask, but he seemed so shaken up and distant. Or, not *distant*, exactly—more courteous, an impossibly perfect gentleman, which, considering how badly she wanted to kiss him again, left her insides jumbled, so now she was taking a breather in the gift shop of Charleston Station.

Across the way, Ryan checked the schedule board for their

platform, already in full problem-solving mode. She dragged her gaze away from the source of her internal chaos to focus on the shop's surprisingly comprehensive magazine rack.

She picked up the latest *Sports Illustrated*, followed by *Slam*, *Men's Health*, *Baseball Weekly*, and a gift bag decorated with reindeer clad in tiny tartan scarves. The purchase would dent her spare cash, but she wanted to give Ryan a gift. He'd purchased their tickets and organized their schedule, carried her suitcase and her bridesmaid dress. Not to mention her one-of-a-kind bridal bouquet and oversize Frosty the Snowman. He deserved a Christmas present.

After the cashier rang up her purchases, Sabrina wrapped the magazines up in the bag and tissue paper, and just as she reached for the door, her phone rang. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled it out, pleased to see Pete's Autobody on the screen.

Hoping for good news, she tapped on the screen. "Hello, Pete."

"Hey, there, Sabrina," he said in his gruff voice. "Halfway back to Almost, I got a call saying your starter's gonna be in on Monday. Van'll be ready for you midweek."

A wave of relief washed through her. "Pete, you are a godsend."

"Oh, now, nothing but my job," he said. "Call when you're comin' in to get her, and have a safe trip into the city now."

She smiled into the phone. "Thanks, Pete. Talk with you next week."

Grateful Rosie would soon be back in working order, and already looking forward to returning to Almost with Ryan, Sabrina sailed through the shop door. She sent a quick text to Jane to let her know she'd be arriving by morning, and even though she was cutting the time seriously close, Sabrina hoped her friend wouldn't stress. Ryan waved her over, and as she walked toward him, Jane's reply arrived, a simple heart emoticon and the words "be safe."

"Train is on time—5:05 p.m.," he said in his precise manner.

“Platform number one, track number two.”

“Sounds like we’re almost on the way.”

“Almost on the way.”

She swallowed hard. “So, then, you’ll make it to your event.”

“And you’ll make it to the wedding.”

The truth settled into the silence between them. In the morning, she would go her way and Ryan would go his, two mismatched road trippers who’d shared driving time and a couple of kisses during one holiday season, nothing more, nothing less. Except it felt like so much more.

Sabrina looked down at the vintage tile floor. Shuffled her feet. Looked back up. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. The garage called. Rosie will be ready next week.”

“That’s terrific.” He dug his hands into his coat pockets and looked over at her, wearing an inscrutable expression. “I’m in Baltimore next week.”

“Oh, I thought...” Disappointment colored her tone.

He stepped toward her. “I’m sorry I can’t...”

She waved off his apology and took a step back. “No, it’s okay.”

Of course he couldn’t drop everything and race back to Rosie. What had she expected?

She shook her head. How could she have been so foolish? She’d forgotten to pay attention. She’d gotten carried away. Standing amid the last-minute travelers crisscrossing the train station, clad in mismatched sweats and carrying mixed luggage and canvas tote bags, she had forgotten the facts. Ryan Callahan might be wearing fleece and denim, but he wore them under a cashmere coat. He might be carrying a Big and Tall bag, but tucked inside the plastic shopper, his three-piece suit lay neatly folded, waiting to be rushed to the dry cleaner by his assistant. Not unexpected, if she thought about the situation logically. But, no, she’d been thinking with her heart.

“Back to reality, right?” She yanked at the hem of her checkered coat, searching for the right words to say next. “Jane and Charlie will drive me down to pick her up. Or my parents, maybe, if I ask them.” Her hands flew into the air. “I didn’t really expect you to drop everything to take me to Pete’s Autobody.”

“Your parents?” His phone buzzed with an incoming text. He pulled out his phone and typed out a message. “Are they in New York?”

“Manhattan,” she said, dismissing the topic.

Attention still glued to the screen, he mumbled, “Well, that explains the mystery.”

She blew out a breath, exasperation rising in her chest. “What mystery?”

“The mystery of why you use all those unfathomable southern expressions but you’re bossy like a New Yorker.” He shot her a look as if he’d solved a riddle, then turned back to his phone, brows drawn. “The mystery of you.”

She glanced at the station clock, thinking that she was not mysterious and definitely not bossy, and when she looked back, he was still focused on his phone. “Everything okay?”

“Fine, fine.” Ryan glanced up from the phone. A second text hit the inbox, and he turned his attention back to the screen. “Asking my assistant to get my tux together.”

*Work, of course. A tuxedo, naturally.*

*Foolish me.* She sneaked his Christmas gift into the messenger bag slung over her shoulder, a dull ache in the center of her chest. Over the past twenty-four hours, she’d forgotten how different they were, how far apart their worlds were, and even worse, even knowing all these differences, Sabrina harbored a sneaking suspicion that she’d been falling for the man.

*Foolish, foolish me.*

• • •

As they waited for the train on the outside platform, Ryan's gaze drifted from Sabrina to the darkening horizon. The blue-black of the evening sky turned to soft yellow above the mountains, a striation of color in the winter sky. *So still. So peaceful.* And so far from the city he thrived in.

He'd seen the flash of emotion in her eyes when he mentioned his trip to Baltimore, and it killed him to hurt her. But what was he supposed to do? Not go?

He looked over at her, standing beneath the old-fashioned streetlamps that lined the platform. Her cheeks blushed pink from the chill, and her curls glowed red like a soft ring of fire, like a wild winter angel. *His angel.* He imagined tossing her a football in a big backyard, running bases or fly-fishing in the spring. He shook his head. There was no future for them. They were almost home—well, his home, anyway—almost back to reality.

In the distance, the train blew a loud whistle, and as the engine rolled into the station, Ryan felt the rumble of the tracks. *So much for the stillness and peace of the mountains.* He took a step back. The incident at the racetrack had unnerved him, and now the roar of the train put him briefly on edge. He drew in a breath and pulled himself together.

Everything was fine—*fine.*

The train stopped, and he and Sabrina gathered up their haul of wedding gear and packages and moved toward the entrance to the sleeper car. The conductor punched their tickets and gave their stash of luggage a sardonic look, which probably should have been his first clue.

“Holy catfish,” Sabrina whispered as she stepped onto the train. “How are we going to fit through here?”

His thoughts exactly. The hallway felt like a shrunken form of the Lincoln Tunnel. He set the roller suitcase in front of him, put Frosty on top, and slung the dress bag over his shoulder. What was that childhood game? Make a wish and hold your breath through the tunnel?

“Probably pass out before we reach the end,” he grumbled.



Sabrina threw a glance over her shoulder. “Did you say something?”

“Nope.” A tight smile creased his face. “We’re all the way at the end, on the right.”

He moved the suitcase forward and accidentally clipped the back of her heel. A short sound of pain escaped her, and she turned around, brows drawn together.

“Sorry.”

“No worries,” she said, but suddenly off-balance, she knocked an empty seat with the bouquet box and visibly paled as she tried to keep it from toppling over onto the train floor.

*God, don’t let anything happen to the flowers,* he thought, moving forward, trying not to smash anyone with the massive dress bag. Or the Big and Tall bag. Or Frosty.

Finally, they stood in an even narrower hallway, outside Compartment A. “This is us.”

Her hands clutching the floral box, Sabrina glanced over at him, doubt stamped on her face as she slid open the door and peeked around the edge of the frame. “Definitely cozy.”

Ryan felt grateful to have secured a sleeper last minute, but —*shit*. The bed, if it could be called a bed, was folded into the wall, with a second bunk overhead. His jaw tightened. *Shit, shit, shit*. Their compartment looked like a one-man locker room. He’d barely endured one night lying next to her, breathing her in, pretending to sleep while he contemplated the risks involved in reaching out to touch her, to kiss her. He’d never survive tonight. No way, no chance. He noted the emergency exit handle on the so-called picture window. At least he had options.

His brows lifted. “Not sure ‘cozy’ is the right word.”

He followed Sabrina over the threshold, the bag in between them like a safety barrier, but when he stepped in far enough to accommodate the bridesmaid dress and the stuffed snowman, they were only inches apart. He closed his eyes. God help him. It was going to be a long night.

He jerked his chin to the slider. “Any chance you can get the door?”

Sabrina bit down on her bottom lip, seeming to consider the situation, then leaned in, her body grazing his as she reached beyond his shoulder to close the door. He imagined pinning her body into the corner of the undersize compartment, kissing her up against the window, discovering what lay beneath the checkered coat and button-down shirt.

The train whistle blew and burst the image completely.

Ryan shook his head, lurching back to reality. “Let’s put everything...”

“If I can just sneak past you...” Sabrina angled her body to ease by him, and her backside brushed against his groin, causing raw physical need to shoot through his body. “I can put the flowers in the sink.”

He turned away to hide his body’s reaction and opened the shallow closet. The place was smaller than the motel room by half. He looped the Big and Tall bag on the hook at the back and hung the embossed red bag from a link near the top bunk. The damn dress took up one-third of the room, and he was starting to lose it. *Breathe, Callahan, breathe.* He jimmied the suitcase in the other corner next to some chair-like contraption and turned back toward Sabrina. But—*whoa.*

A low sound scraped from his throat. Her backside in her jeans stood in his line of vision, and the view was incredible. Everything about her drove him wild—even her deft management of the flowers in the sink, a sink that looked like it was made for a frickin’ elf—sent his mind and body spinning off into dangerous territory. *God Almighty.*

He tore a hand through his hair. *Nice guy—you’re a nice guy, Callahan. Yeah, sure. Nice guy be damned.* If he was going to endure another night this close to this woman and *stay nice*, he needed some air. He needed *space*.

He wasn’t ready for the kind of relationship he knew she deserved—the incident at the racetrack had proven that much. He’d tried to go with the flow, tried not to focus on work, to

let go of his impulse to manage and fix, and he'd landed square in the middle of a panic attack. Yeah, right about now, space would be good.

He cleared his throat. "I think I'll take a look around the train, see what's up."

He moved toward the door, and as he brushed by her, she swiveled around, and the casual contact with her body sent an electric shock through his system, something he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Maybe ever.

Sabrina stopped mid-swivel and stared up at him, then looked away as if she didn't want to be caught staring. But he kept staring. He couldn't help himself.

For a full thirty seconds, neither moved. His heart slammed against his rib cage. He'd only known her a day, but there were so many parts of her that he already appreciated—the way she challenged him, her strength and vulnerability, her essential *goodness*—so many parts of her that made him feel a little less broken. So many parts of her...to love. If only he were up for the challenges of love. He wasn't, but he wanted to be. He drew in a breath and reached out to trace the curve of her cheek. Her face tilted toward him, her eyes wide, her breath shallow and quiet, and he knew—he *knew*—that her quiet was an expectant kind of quiet, an anticipatory quiet that made his heart race.

God, he wanted to kiss her again. "You are beautiful."

He brushed a strawberry blond curl from her cheek with the pad of his thumb, and his gaze fell to her mouth. He had tried to keep her at a safe distance, but here, in this elf-size compartment, there was no place to hide his reaction to this woman. He wanted her. All of her.

His fingers traced a line from the inside of her elbow to her wrist. He interlaced his fingers with hers and tugged her gently toward him until her body fell into his, her breasts grazing against his chest, her hips angled into his, her thighs soft against his frame.

He held her gaze as he traced the lines of her body. She

shivered with what he believed in his soul was desire as he slid his palms over her hips to her shoulders and along the curve of her face. He felt the rush of his pounding heart. To test his limits, he leaned toward her an inch, then another, in no rush.

Holding her gaze, he let his index finger move aside the deep vee of her shirt, exposing a gentle slope of freckled skin. He bent his head and dropped a kiss on her collarbone, then moved along her neck to the place behind her ear.

“Ryan,” she sighed, swaying closer.

Unable to resist, he covered her lips with his, kissing her in the way he’d wanted to kiss her since the first moment he laid eyes on her through the small rectangular glass panes of Posey’s front door—with curiosity and need. His lips moved against hers, teasing and gentle, growing more insistent as he traced the line of her lips with his tongue, and when her lips parted under his kiss, he accepted her invitation and deepened his exploration of her mouth.

At the first caress of his tongue inside her mouth, an impatient sigh escaped her. His heart raced, beating hard against the thermal shirt, scant protection against the heat building between them. His hands moved from her face, along the gentle curve of her waist to the swell of her hips. He pulled her hips forward to feel the line of her body against his.

A moan scraped from his throat as her hands grazed his chest and shoulders, her fingers burying in the hair at the back of his neck. Bodies locked, he turned her around so that her knees were against the unopened bed.

Her head tilted back in an invitation, and his mouth moved back to her throat, licking and tasting, enjoying the feel of her body in his arms. His palms ran along the hourglass curve of her waist to the side swells of her breasts. Her eyes drifted shut, and he brushed his palms lightly across the hard tips of her breasts until she threw back her head and let go a husky whimper. He wanted to know if she wanted more, needed more.

“Sabrina.” Even to his own ears, his voice sounded hungry and rough.

A smile touched her lips as she unbuttoned her shirt to reveal the sexiest pink lace bra he had ever laid eyes on. “Kiss me again.”

Emboldened by her words, he tugged the slim strap down her shoulder, allowing him access to the edges of the bra that had made his mouth go dry. Her body shifted in an invitation, which he accepted, moving his mouth to her throat, licking and tasting, enjoying the taste of her skin. He let his hands roam her lace-covered breasts, loving the feel of her.

He kneaded the soft flesh, tweaking the pointed tips until she arched forward to fill his hands more completely. He reveled in the soft whimpers falling from her lips. She edged her body closer, silently asking for his touch, and turning back now felt impossible. Instead, he circled the edge of her nipple, first with his palm, then with the tips of his fingers, pinching and tweaking as his tongue licked and kissed through the lace. He nipped at her peaks, caressed her curves, loving the way her body trembled, responding to his every bite and touch. He moved his knee between her legs, felt the heat through the thin denim and understood that need drove her now, too.

“I want you inside me,” she confessed in hushed, desperate tones that had his hands moving to the button of her jeans. He slipped his fingers inside her.

God, she was so ready for him. So soft and willing. Her body moved against his playing fingers, eager to find release. His thumb circled, easing in and out of her in time with the seductive little thrusts of her hips. He felt a wonderful give and take between them, a power to lay one another bare. She looked so vulnerable and open to his touch, even as she drove him wild with need.

“I want you to come for me,” he whispered against her neck.

“Don’t stop,” she said, her breathing ragged as she edged closer. “Please don’t stop.”

Her quiet pleading thrilled him. He’d forgotten how it felt to watch a woman come apart in his arms. He wanted to give her more. His mouth captured her soft lips as his hands coaxed her to the edge, and her gentle, need-filled sounds turned to

satisfied cries, the pleasure rushing through her body as he guided her through a series of tremors.

“Oh my God,” she said, her nails digging into his muscled shoulders as she bucked against him, the sensation building his own need. He wanted her, and he wanted her now.

He whirled her around, her back pressed against the picture window.

“Protection,” she uttered softly. “We need protection.”

*Damn.* Of all the times *not* to have a condom. He lowered his forehead against the window and turned his face toward Sabrina. “Any chance at all you have one?”

She shook her head. He tilted his face into her curls and breathed her in, indulging in the enticing combination of flowers and honeyed lemon. *Of all the times to be unprepared.*

“The Essentials,” she whispered against his mouth.

Ryan dropped his head forward, agreeing a condom was essential, and even though he’d lose his chance to be with this woman, he would never put her at risk, never put *them* at risk.

“Down the hall.” The slight, needy movement of her hips encouraged him. “The Essentials down the hall.” She slipped past him, picked up her shirt, and dragged it across her shoulders. “Let’s go look.” She reached for his hand and tugged him forward. “All those vending machines we passed on the way to the room with essentials...maybe?”

A hopeful, heated smile broke across his face. “Maybe they’ll have protection.”

Sabrina turned around, gave a small nod, and then bit down on her lower lip, looking every inch the casual southern beauty.

He grabbed her hips, pulled her close, and brushed a kiss near her temple as a low growl rumbled up from his chest. “I like the way you think.”

Not to mention the way she moved.

# Chapter Thirteen

*December 22, 5:15 p.m.*

*Onboard the Cardinal, careening toward Manhattan*

Three minutes later, disheveled, and highly motivated, Sabrina tugged Ryan into the Essentials area at the end of the train car, moving from vending machine to vending machine: Gatorade and water, Coke and Sprite, protein bars and Lorna Doones, toothbrushes and Tylenol, and finally, in the far corner in the last machine, the one loaded up with soaps and shampoos, an entire row of condoms. *Hallelujah.*

She gave Ryan a sideways glance, wondering if he had a preference. So many to choose from: glow in the dark, flavored, studded, Christmas colors. “What do you think?”

He looked over wearing an expression that said, *Do you really want to know?*

Her brows lifted. “Glow in the dark?”

“How many hours left on the ride?” He shifted them deeper into the corner, the shaking of the train echoing the trembling inside her body.

“The train ride?” She pressed up against him, disbelieving she was really here, in this hidden corner of the high-speed Cardinal talking condoms. “Maybe...fourteen hours.”

Nice southern girl rules to the wind—all she needed was one look at that tiny compartment to know another night lying next to him without being with this man was impossible.

“What do you think?” She tugged on the collar of her coat and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Should we go with glow in the dark *and* studded?”

His eyes darkened in a way that set her on fire. “As I said, I like the way you think.”

Ryan ran his Amex for one of each kind and turned toward her with the four packets fanned out in his palm, a massive grin on his face. “I couldn’t resist the Christmas colors.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“God, yes.” His voice turned thick and husky. “If you do.”

“Well, if you’re sure...” Sabrina plucked the studded packet from his palm. “Because I hear the food on these trains is amazing.” She snagged the flavored packet. “Or we could skip dinner *and* the sex and take on trivia night in the lounge.” She nodded playfully at the flyer taped to the side of one of the vending machines. “If you want.”

“What I want is you.” He bent his head and let his teeth graze across the tender places along her neck, his lips blazing a trail lower to the deep vee of her shirt in an agonizingly slow, languid process. “What do you want?”

He flicked his tongue across her nipple, and she released a soft cry. “You. I want you.”

“Good...me, too.” His hand moved between her legs and applied enough pressure to cause another sound to tumble across her lips, stroking her in an intimate way that promised her everything. Another second and she’d be begging him to take her in the vending area.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

With the condoms tucked in the back pocket of her jeans, Sabrina took his hand and followed him back to the tiny room where they’d spend the next fourteen hours learning everything there was to know about one another, and by the time they opened the compartment door, she was wearing a smile bright enough to light up all the streetlamps on Main Street.

Once inside the room, Ryan pulled her close, moving in a semicircle so that her back was against the door he’d slid shut behind them. Framing her face with his hands, he kissed her again, tenderly dropping his lips to the edge of her temples, the curve of her cheek, until finally moving to her waiting lips. She pulled him closer, parting her lips under his, coaxing him deeper into the kiss, her body seeking out his warmth, his strength. She felt so emotional with this man. So vulnerable, so all in. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this way, and



even though they only had hours together, she wanted him—she wanted to dive all in.

As her heart raced ahead, as quick as the fast-moving train, she leaned into him, her mouth clinging to his lips. When she finally came up for air—nearly breathless, vibrating with need, her cheeks flushed, blood rushing through her veins—the look in his eyes told her that he wanted her, too.

She threaded her hands under the fleece and slid her hands over the wide expanse of his chest as she pulled it over his head. The thermal underneath clung to his muscled abs, and she let her hands drift down to sneak under the hem and feel the hard muscles that sent her thoughts racing. He drew in a sharp breath and slid his palms under her tee, moving alongside her body, heating her skin as he pulled the cotton away, leaving only the lacy pink bra. He traced the edges of her breasts with his thumbs circling her nipples to draw out a raw, unchecked moan of desire.

Trembling inside, she arched toward him, pressing her body against his. Her mouth moved under his, suddenly fierce and demanding, as she clutched at his shirt, finding the hem of the Henley and moving it slowly it over his head. She threw the shirt over his shoulder. Her palms roamed over his naked skin, across his shoulders, down his chest and along his stomach. Her fingers moved to the button of his jeans, but he stopped their progress and held them tight.

“Yes.” His next words didn’t matter, because whatever happened next, Sabrina wanted it. Feeling the way she felt right now, she couldn’t believe she had waited, couldn’t believe she’d let even one night go without being with this man, without knowing how his body would feel moving inside hers. Yes, she was sure. “I am 100 percent sure.”

Ryan took her face in his hands and looked down at her with his deep-blue, liquid eyes. This *feeling*, she thought, mesmerized, *this feeling is everything*.

He unhooked the front of her bra and swept it away to reveal her breasts to his gaze. He drew in a breath as if he felt as awestruck as she did and bent to take one of her nipples into

his mouth. His lips on her skin felt delicious, his tender nibbles sending shock waves of desire through every nerve in her body.

The rest of their clothes disappeared in a frenzy of movement and kisses. From somewhere, far away or under their feet, the train rumbled and whistled as they raced toward the city, where she knew she'd face the end. But not yet. Not yet.

He kissed her again, harder now, with increasing desperation. His hands traced the curves of her stomach, and his mouth explored the pulse at the base of her throat as he pressed his thumb along the crease of her hips and slipped his fingers inside her, coaxing and teasing until she felt like she could no longer breathe, no longer wait.

She dug her nails deep into his shoulders. "Ryan," she whispered. "Please. Now."

Needing nothing else, he drew her close, cradling her in his arms as he moved them to the narrow bed, still half tucked away. She wrapped around his waist, clinging to him as he rolled on top of her, testing his weight. A hushed sigh escaped her as she felt the hardness of his erection against her stomach. She reached back for a condom and slid the protection over him.

A slow, agonized smile spread across his face, and he eased her panties over her hips. Her heart raced, her blood lit on fire, knowing she'd soon feel him inside her, moving with her body. Feeling suddenly shy, she glanced away, but his mouth found hers and drew her back with an achingly sweet kiss.

She gazed up at him, his strong body balanced above her, amazed to be here with this man who was a stranger, and yet, something else entirely. Like a dream.

As if sensing her emotion, Ryan dropped a fervent, lingering kiss on her parted lips, circling her tongue with heated strokes until her trembling body rose to meet him. He entered her slowly at first, increasing his rhythm as she met him stroke for stroke. She felt a well of emotion bubble up inside her as her body found his and moved with him in a rhythm that belonged

only to the two of them.

She felt the tightness coiling inside her stomach, and her eyes drifted shut as he continued to plunge into her depths, harder now, twisting and teasing until she threw back her head and let go a husky whimper. His hands grabbed hold of her hips. Another moan escaped her lips. Her body grew impatient, and he adjusted his body higher, eager to drive her toward home, quickening his pace as she moved against him, desperate for release. His hand moved down the back of her thigh to the bend at her knee and looped under to tug her legs open. He plunged deeper, and she cried out, her hands digging into his shoulders.

“Don’t hold back,” he whispered against her ear.

“Ryan!” she cried out. “Oh my God. Ryan, I can’t...”

He slipped his tongue into her open mouth, moving and guiding her to the next level of tiny explosions within, pulling her body closer until no space separated their bodies, until he was deep inside her, as deep as he could go, rocking her as the exquisite agony vibrated through her, and he buried his face in her neck and tumbled with her over the edge.

• • •

A few hours later, they sat opposite one another on the now-extended bed, sated and relaxed, their knees touching as they shared room service from the dining car out of disposable takeout boxes. He was grateful to have the night with this sexy, beautiful woman. He wanted to know her, not simply her physical response to his touch, although he had loved the way she’d come apart in his arms, so open to him and vulnerable in that strong, sweet way of hers, but he wanted more. He wanted to know *her*. He wondered why she’d named her van Rosie, and believed in ghosts, and if she’d ever gone ice fishing in Kentucky, and stupidly, most of all, if she’d be spending tomorrow with a plus-one.

Tomorrow. After they’d said goodbye. Even the thought hurt. But he’d heard the love in her voice when she spoke about the shop, how she wanted to keep the place vibrant to keep her

grandmother close. She'd never leave Kentucky even if he asked her. And how could he ask, knowing how she felt?

"So close to the city now." He tried to shove all his unwelcome thoughts to the back of his mind. "Looking forward to the wedding?"

"I am." She wiped her hands on the paper napkin and set aside the container. "But I'm a little nervous, too."

"Nervous?"

She shrugged her slim shoulder. "I want the day to be perfect for Jane, and I wanted to come through for her the way she's always come through for me."

He laid the last of his Mediterranean chicken on a narrow side table, then snaked his hands around her sheet-covered hips to slide her closer. "*Wanted* to come through?"

"The bouquet." She slid away, taking the sheet with her. She stepped over to the elf sink and touched the flowers in a gentle way that made his heart ache. "I'm worried about all the temperatures changes. The frost has been hard on the eucalyptus, and the astrids are starting to wilt at the edges." She looked at Ryan, tension at the edges of her eyes. "What if the bouquet doesn't make it? Posey means everything to me. If I lose the shop..."

"There's got to be a way to make it right," he said. "Maybe you can find fresh flowers at a florist in the city? Or we can \_\_\_"

She gave a crooked smile. "Always the problem solver."

Ryan flinched. *Guess the rescue complex was obvious.* "Sorry, I didn't mean to sound..."

"No, please, you sounded like you want to help. I'm just not sure there's a fix." She came back into bed and placed her hand on his knee. "But I appreciate how you always look for a solution, whether it's a charter from the airfield or a last-minute rental car. You *care*. I love that."

He laid his forehead against hers. "Is that a nice way of saying I have a rescue complex? That I need to manage every

situation and fix every problem?”

“No, Ryan.” She took his face in her hands. “More like my way of saying you really are a nice guy.” She pressed her lips to his. “A sexy, generous, patient...”

“Damaged?” he asked, not quite meeting her eyes.

“God, no.” Her brows knit together. “Where would you get that idea? Is this somehow related to the accident you mentioned?” Her hand dropped to his knee, and she traced the line of the faded, jagged mark. “Does it have to do with this scar?”

“I don’t know.” Ryan rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb, surprised not to feel the rush of anger that normally accompanied the mention of his scar. “Maybe.”

“This really smart guy once told me not to hold back.” She held his hands and looked at him with a light in her eyes that made him feel almost whole. “You don’t have to hold back.”

He brushed a grateful kiss across her mouth, believing he could trust this woman, trust her with the pain he buried inside. “The accident.”

She waited.

When he was ready, Ryan drew in a breath and laid it all out. “I was playing ball at Oregon State my senior year. Baseball was everything to me, my whole life. I’d already been scouted, but I was still playing college. The team was in the off-season, under curfew, and late one night, my fiancée called me from this party. She was missing me and drunk.” His mind stepped back in time, remembering the late call, the sound of her voice, the unusually cold winter. “I didn’t want her to drive home, so a buddy of mine and I snuck out, broke curfew. I was frustrated by the time I got to the party. Didn’t want to get caught breaking the rules.”

“You had a lot on the line,” she murmured. “It’s understandable.”

“Not to her,” Ryan said. “I insisted on taking her home, but she didn’t want to leave, accused me of having a rescue complex.” He released a hard laugh. “Whatever that meant. I

was only trying to help, and she...”

Her hand felt warm on his knee. “She’d had too much to drink.”

“Definitely too much to drink.” He scrubbed his face with hands. “We argued, she went to her car, I demanded her keys, and when she refused to give them to me, I got in the passenger seat, still trying to reason with her, but she was unreasonable, fueled by alcohol. She slammed the car into drive, and the next thing I remember, I was being life-flighted out of the wreckage.”

“Oh, Ryan. I’m so sorry.” She let out a shuddery breath. “I assumed it was a sports injury, in a game situation, not something—”

“Preventable.” Ryan nodded, braced for the pity he knew he would find in her eyes if he looked. “I woke up in the hospital—no internal injuries, mostly fine, except for a destroyed knee. No baseball, no contract, no career. My ex suffered minor injuries, healed quickly, and broke off the engagement. Nice enough girl, but not built for the tough stuff, and my recovery looked like it would be tough.”

“I see.”

“The process was brutal, and not just physically. I didn’t know who I was if I wasn’t playing baseball,” he continued, searching for the right words. “I didn’t know if I was *enough*.”

She held his gaze. “Enough?”

“Without baseball.” He drew in a breath. “I wondered if the accident was my fault, my instinct to solve every problem, fix every situation...”

“Ryan, the accident was *not* your fault.” She shook her head in disbelief. “You were trying to do the right thing, and baseball...that’s what you did. It’s *not* who you are.”

He gave an absent nod. “I know, but I didn’t always feel that way, and my recovery took time. It was months before I gave up on playing baseball. But eventually, I shifted gears and built the agency to support young players, to see their dreams come true.”

“Of course you did.” Her tone carried an edge he’d not heard in her voice, and when he looked in her eyes, he saw strength and empathy, not pity. “What you went through, what you lost breaks my heart. I feel sick knowing you were hurt in that way, left alone to manage your recovery and all the challenges. But I’m not surprised you turned difficulty into a win. You’re so much stronger than you understand, and even though I haven’t known you very long, I know you’re a man who makes the best of a situation.”

A sound erupted from the back of his throat. “Like a road trip gone rogue?”

“Like a road trip gone rogue...and so many other situations.” A smile broke across her face but failed to wipe away the hint of sadness in her voice. “In a way, I understand what you went through. I know what it means to feel...dispensable.”

He laced his fingers with hers, shifted his body closer on the narrow bed.

“I spent so much time with Gram because my parents never had much time for me. Or much interest, to be honest.” Her mouth tipped to one side in wry acceptance, and he saw the flash of pain in her eyes. If only he could take it away. “They were so invested in one another, in their work, in the travels, so without a brother or sister, I spent a lot of time feeling alone.”

“Sabrina...” He tilted his head to catch her gaze, needing to be the man who helped her cope with the hurt she must feel. “No child should feel that way.”

She tugged the sheet up to her chin. “I remember one time at school, being in the nurse’s office with a fever. The nurse called my parents. I waited all day under this blanket, wishing someone would come take me home.” Her fingers tightened on the cotton. “When my mother finally arrived, she was all apologetic efficiency.” Her gaze drifted to the window. “Like I was a detail to manage.”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “Must have been pretty lonely.”

Sabrina nodded. “Summers in Kentucky with Gram were

wonderful, though. A woman before her time, she taught me all about sustainability and the importance of the natural world. My mother left Beaumont for the city and never looked back. Married my father, stayed in New York. Never went home. Broke my gram's heart a little. But I always loved Kentucky."

"Posey was her place?"

"Yes." An expression of love softened her face. "I adore that little shop. While my parents traveled, invested in their work and careers, Grammie raised me in Posey. I can't lose the shop." She looked back at him, anxiety in her eyes. "My gram trusted me, loved me fiercely. My parents...I know they love me, too, but... And now if the shop closes..."

He held her hands in his. "Posey will be fine. *You* will be fine."

But even as he said the words, his heart hurt for her. His family supported all his choices, had loved him when his world came crashing down. He understood love *because* of his family.

"Not all love is exclusive. Some loves expand your world... your soul." He traced the curves of her face with his fingers, wondering if his heart was talking about her. "You'll see."

She tipped her head and curled into him, her body soft and warm, her voice wistful. "Only another twelve hours on the road trip of a lifetime."

"Only twelve hours?" His fingers trailed along the curve of her naked hip, and she glanced up at him, an inviting, hopeful smile lifting the edges of her lips, and his heart skipped a beat. He edged closer. "I think we should make the most of them."

He bent his head to kiss the gentle curve of her throat, then let his lips move across her shoulders, raining persuasive kisses that seemed to ignite the air around them. Her body arched toward him, practically begging for more. And he was more than willing to please her.

His lips traveled over flushed skin while his hands slipped the rumpled sheet away from her body to cup her ass. Pulling



her against him, he let his tongue intertwine with hers as they fell back against the bed in a hot, needy tangle.

His palms ran along the tender curve of her thighs, inching them apart so he could caress her with his tongue. The first playful flick made her cry out, but it was only the beginning. Her body arched and bucked against him, and when she thought she could take no more, he raised his lips to her right breast and took her aching nipple into his mouth, his mouth warm against her heated skin. Her eyes drifted shut.

“Please look at me, Sabrina,” he said, his voice low and husky.

Her gaze found his and held on as he positioned his body above her. He pulled one of the condom packets from the pocket of his jeans and tore it open with his teeth. A sigh escaped her parted lips, and he bent to give her a slow, lingering kiss as he inched inside her. He rocked her gently, increasing the rhythm as her breath grew ragged. With both hands on her hips, he drove her harder, thrusting down as he rode her body toward another climax.

With abandon, Sabrina threw her head back, crying out as she reached a shattering orgasm, sending tremors through her body, waves of desperate longing that rose beneath his hands. Wanting the moment to last, Ryan slowed his pace, sliding in and out of her, drawing out her climax until she sighed with pleasure.

His body tightened like a live wire, and her hips rose up to meet the now-quickening pace of his thrusts until his body tensed before falling against her in pleasure and release. Their bodies still locked together, he kissed her breathless, wishing time would stop as the train raced along the track toward home.

# Chapter Fourteen

*December 23, 7:15 a.m.*

*Onboard the Cardinal, 202 miles from Penn Station in Manhattan*

A small sliver of yellow light sneaked through the blackout curtains closed over the picture window, a subtle reminder morning had arrived, and Manhattan wasn't far behind.

A slew of emotions warring inside her, Sabrina reached for her phone. She blinked her eyes open, then wrinkled her nose at the screen. Already seven fifteen. Her head fell back against the warm pillow, and a quiet sigh escaped from her chest. She closed her eyes against a sharp pinprick of pain at her temple. In a few short hours, she'd be walking away from the man who now slept so soundly beside her, and as thrilled as she was to celebrate her friend's wedding, to have made it in time with the bouquet, leaving Ryan felt next to impossible.

She looked over at his sleeping form, noting the way the sheet had slipped low on his hips, the way his blond hair fell recklessly across his forehead. Her heart gave a painful squeeze at the sight of his kind, handsome face, and she buried her nose into the soft cotton sheet and breathed in his warm, masculine scent.

Suddenly, seemingly without warning, all the emotion she had spent a lifetime holding in check flooded her system. Her past passion-free relationships, the friendships she'd managed to keep platonic, the boring postmortems when a man got too close for her comfort—none of it, *nothing* had prepared her for the rush of emotion she felt with this man.

Maybe if she'd never felt him kiss her or move his fingertips across her skin, she could have escaped the slivers of pain that had already started at her edges, that she sensed moving toward the center, that would camp out in her heart the moment she said goodbye to this man. *Maybe then*. But it was too late for maybes. Ryan Callahan had unknowingly stolen part of her, a part that would remain with him in the city while

the rest of her stayed miles away.

She'd always known there was no such thing as a happy fairy tale. She just hadn't known what that meant. Until now. Now she understood that she'd been waiting—waiting for the moment when she felt that connection she'd seen, and resented, in her parents. A connection that made the rest of the world melt away. She peeked up at him, the man who'd found his way into her shop and, later, into her heart. How had she fallen so hard, so fast?

Not only were there literal miles between Beaumont and Manhattan, but no matter how many roadside stands and souvenir booths they stumbled across together, their worlds would always be different. He managed million-dollar clients. She needed help to get her ten-year-old cargo van out of hock. He'd built his business from the ground up while she struggled to keep hers afloat. Was he going to move his big-city agency to small-town Kentucky? Was she packing up and going back to New York, a place where she'd never felt loved? No. No, she was not.

She didn't want to be all wrapped up in one man, so tunnel-visioned and emotional that the rest of the world fell away. Sure, the idea of a fairy-tale romance was enticing, but she knew from experience how isolating that kind of love could be, and she never want to be part of making another person feel the way she'd felt growing up. Never, not for anyone in the world.

But she was happy she'd spent the past thirty-six hours with this man, and even as she prepared to let go, she knew these memories of him were burned across her heart.

She inched closer and pressed a soft kiss on his stubbled jaw. He shifted his weight toward her, his eyes half open, a smile curving his lips as he held her in his arms. "Get some more sleep," she whispered.

A low sound vibrated up from his throat, and he burrowed into the pillow. Not wanting to wake him, she moved aside the covers and climbed gingerly from the narrow bed.

With all those mixed emotions still churning inside her,

Sabrina padded the two steps to the compartment's slim shower. If the train arrived on time, she'd have an hour to make it to the ceremony, which meant a fast goodbye. Sabrina wasn't sure she was ready for goodbye.

• • •

Ryan woke up to an empty train compartment. She was gone?

He bolted upright and banged his head into the metal outline of the top bunk. *Dammit.* He rubbed at his forehead and hoped he wouldn't end up with some humiliating bruise he'd have to explain tonight.

*Oh, yeah, hit my head rushing after this redhead on a train.*

He swung his legs over the edge of the foldaway bed, wondering where she was. The train vibrated under his feet, still rushing along. Must be around somewhere. He walked over to the shower. The honey-like scent of her shampoo clung to the humid air. He went over and pulled back the blackout curtains. The snow-covered landscape rushed by. He wondered where they were. How close to the city. He checked his cell.

An hour out of Penn Station. An hour left with Sabrina.

Last night had been incredible. Did they have to give that up? She had family in New York. He traveled, sometimes to Kentucky. They could work out some dating-like situation.

*Dating-like situation?* Who was he kidding? She was a bossy Kentucky girl. He was an uptight New Yorker. He could barely find time to text his sister or plan a single date. How did he intend to manage a long-distance relationship? Texting? Instagram? He'd tried to look her up—she didn't even have an account. So—what? They'd spend an occasional weekend together when he wasn't in some small town watching a game?

He grabbed his jeans from the floor and tugged them over his hips. No, a long-distance, online relationship wouldn't work. Not for long, and Sabrina deserved better. She deserved a man who could prove to her how expansive love could be. He'd been that kind of man before the accident. But was he

still?

The compartment door slid open, and he looked over to see Sabrina standing there, holding a carrier with breakfast, coffee, and tea. She walked over to press a soft, gentle kiss on his lips.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” he managed, stunned by the sight of her in her dress. “You look...”

“Nice?”

Ryan felt a light-headed rush at the sight of her. If carting the colossal dress bag for miles meant seeing her like this now, he would be damn glad to do it again.

“Amazing,” he said.

Truth be told, she looked like an angel in the silvery dress. A sheer, round neckline enhanced her curves and fell in at her waist, cascading in waves to the floor. Embroidery of some kind created vintage-looking flowers along the top of her dress, allowing her skin to appear through the sheer top covering her body in a way that was sophisticated seduction. Her hair fell in soft strawberry curls around her face and shoulders, and as his gaze moved down, Ryan couldn't help but notice the sexy silver shoes and the hot-pink polish on her toes that matched the slim bra strap peeking out from beneath the silvery dress. So *not* a tomboy.

“You look amazing,” Ryan said.

“You look pretty amazing yourself.” A sly smile edged across her features. “But the train is on schedule, so unless you want to hit Manhattan in nothing but your Wranglers...”

Before she could finish, he bent his head and captured her lips in a kiss full of longing and wishes and hope, and when he pulled away and took in the sight of her, Ryan thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, maybe even the kind of woman who could unbreak a man's heart.

If he was able to risk it. Was he ready to risk it?

His nerves jolted at the sudden sound of his alarm, set as an assurance that he'd be packed up and ready to say goodbye.

He shot a look toward the phone. “Shit.”

“No need to curse.”

He laughed despite the painful squeeze in his chest. “I’m going miss you like hell.”

“Me, too. Like hell.” She took a step back, smoothed the circle of her silvery dress and looked up at him, a smile touching her lips. “Almost time to go.”

He nodded. “Almost time to go.”

*Minutes.* That’s all he had left with her. *Minutes.*

Ryan wanted more time.

The train had rolled into Penn Station on schedule, leaving less than an hour for Sabrina to get to the wedding across town. He held her hand as they zigzagged through the holiday travelers filling the station, bustling around, moving toward new destinations, and already the hustle and energy of the city had settled into him. Ryan felt it in his bones. He was home. God, there was no place in the world like New York.

He glanced at Sabrina and pulled her close to avoid a kid careening past on a skateboard. She’d thrown the fleece jacket over her dress, and the look busted the angel image completely, but in his eyes she was even more beautiful. Adorable. Charming. Sexy as hell.

Together, they spilled out of the station and onto the street, the cacophony of the city rising loud and clear. The air hit him like a wall of cold. Damn, the cold in Manhattan was colder than anywhere else, even in the back of a pickup on a West Virginia road. He’d survived the ride. Part of him thought he could face anything with Sabrina.

He looked over at her as her gaze searched the street for the cab. His heart broke a little to see her so stressed. “Don’t worry,” he said, his hand at her elbow, “you’re going to make it.”

Just then, his phone vibrated to let him know the taxi he’d ordered on the Curb app had pulled up to the corner, and he pivoted Sabrina’s suitcase in the right direction. A minute

later, Ryan tapped on the window of the cab and held up his phone for the driver, who skillfully avoided eye contact. *Typical NY*. He shook his head and moved to open the back door of the cab.

Sabrina slid into the back seat with the bouquet box while he jammed the roller bag and Frosty in beside her. Everything was moving so fast. He wanted to stop, to think. Maybe he'd been wrong about the long-distance option. If they tried... He needed to think.

But Sabrina glanced at the clock on the corner and bit down hard on her bottom lip. She looked up at him expectedly. He stared back, standing on the Manhattan street corner freezing his ass off holding an Almost Country Big and Tall bag, not knowing how to say goodbye.

Or if he wanted to say goodbye.

The driver leaned over and rolled down the window. "Hey, girls and boys, I'm blocking traffic here. Are you two good to go, or what?"

Oh, sure, now the guy was into eye contact. Ryan shot him a back-off look and turned toward Sabrina, her silvery dress spilling all around her, her eyes full of emotion. He stared for a minute, his brain temporarily on emergency lockdown.

A charged silence grew as he searched for the right words, his hesitation underscored by the sound of the passing traffic, the white noise of the city he loved.

He made a move toward the car door. "Sabrina—"

"So, Frosty isn't invited to the wedding," she interrupted, pressing the carnival prize into his hands. "But maybe he can remind you of our wild road trip to Manhattan."

His heart absolutely stopped. This was goodbye. He'd been trying to find the right words, but she'd done it for him, and it hurt more than he'd expected.

He held the snowman against his chest. "I'll take good care of him."

"Oh, one more thing. I can't believe I forgot. I got you a

gift.” She yanked open her suitcase and pulled out a crumpled reindeer-printed bag. “Merry Christmas.”

“You didn’t have to get me a gift.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I know, but it’s not much—”

Ryan moved the paper aside to find four magazines. He looked over at her, and the glimmer in her eyes made his heart kick back up again. “First present of the season, and it’s perfect. Thank you.”

Swooping in, he dashed a kiss on her cheek. The gift, though small, told a story of how she knew him, how she appreciated his interests, and there was something touching about the magazines in the crumpled-up gift bag. Something that had his head spinning.

“No, thank *you*.” She smiled up at him, and his world spun further out of his control. “Thank you for getting me here on time, for Rosie, and the motel, and the train, and...for *everything*... For the road trip of a lifetime.”

Ryan felt a lump in his throat. So, that was it—a sweet, casual goodbye, and like a swift, solid kick in the gut, goodbye hurt. He knew there was no universe in which the two of them made sense, but every instinct wanted her to stay.

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I want to.” She brushed the sweetest kiss across his lips, and the scent of her skin filled the city air with Kentucky wildflowers. “You were my lifesaver. I never would have made it here without you.” She placed a protective hand on the bouquet box and tossed out a casual smile. “Let’s face it, you basically saved me from being the worst bridesmaid of all time.”

He tried to keep his return smile equally casual, though he felt like he could scarcely breathe. “I’ve heard the horror stories. No way you’re the worst of all time.”

“Well, maybe not the absolute worst.” She settled back into the cab, then glanced back up. “Oh, and good luck at your event tonight. I know you’ll be amazing.” She reached into her bag for a business card and pressed it into his hand. “If you’re



ever back in Kentucky...”

He gave a short nod and pocketed the card. “First floral emergency I get, I’ll call you.”

Something akin to pain flashed in her eyes, but she rewarded him with an attempt at a passable smile that made him want to kick his own ass. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

He tucked the last of the immense silver dress into the back seat and shut the door of the cab slowly until he heard a click. The car inched toward the street traffic, but before the driver could pull away from the curb, Ryan lurched forward and rapped on the top of the taxi.

*No—no.* He couldn’t let her go yet. He wasn’t sure what he needed her to know, but he wanted to say more than, “first floral emergency I get, I’ll call you.”

The taxi came to a short stop, and Ryan yanked open the door. She looked up at him from the back seat, surprised, possibly hopeful. His heart and mind were racing for the right words. He wanted her to know how special she was, how much he believed in her. But more than anything, he wanted more time. With Sabrina. More time to explore the feelings between them.

His next words rushed from his lips. “Be my plus-one.”

She blinked up at him. “Your plus-one?”

“Tonight.”

“Ryan, I can’t leave the wedding and...”

He grabbed the edge of the door, ignoring the exasperation of the driver. “We can figure something out. You can be my plus-one, I’ll be yours. I can swing by the reception, and then...”

His phone chimed, and out of habit he glanced down to check the message. *Work.* He made a mental note to call his client back later, but when he looked up, Ryan saw the resolution in her eyes. He could almost hear her thoughts... *Work, work, work.* Like her parents.

“And after tonight, then—what?” She looked up from inside

the cab, and while her tone remained gentle, her expression brought his plus-one scenarios to a full stop. “I’ll still be the flower girl living in Kentucky and you’ll always be the overworked city guy stopping in with his next emergency.”

“Sabrina, I didn’t mean...”

Her gaze bounced over his phone. “I know your work is important to you, and your work is in the city.”

She was right. His work was important. In a way, the agency had saved him after the accident. When he went to collect his ex that night, he’d put her needs before his, and he had nearly been destroyed. Was he supposed to take that risk again? Was he supposed to walk away from everything he’d built since?

“Sabrina...” His words caught in his throat.

“I have to go,” she said quietly but clearly. “I’m sorry. I can’t be late.”

*So much for second chances.* He’d made one foolish comment about a floral emergency and a mistake glancing at his phone, and now he was the city guy who was all about work. Just like her parents. Was that really all she saw in him? Hadn’t he shown her more? He’d let her in, revealed his heart to her. *Just a city guy.* He was more than that, and she was saying she saw him as one-dimensional, only saw the distance between them, and her words stung.

He swallowed over the lump in his throat. “Sabrina, that bouquet of yours is going to set *Page Six* on fire.” He looked her in the eye, willing her to believe him, to believe in herself. “You don’t need a rescue. You’ve got this.”

“Thank you.” A tear shone like crystal in her eyes, but she blinked it away with a smile. “Merry Christmas, Ryan.”

Ryan closed the cab door a second time and stood on the sidewalk, watching the taxi navigate into the Midtown traffic. A hassled Manhattanite with two kids in tow bumped his shoulder with a mumbled “excuse me,” and Ryan turned toward her in brief acknowledgment before looking back toward the taxi. He tapped the pay-fare option on the app he’d used to book the car and put away the phone.

A dull pain exploded in his chest as the cab made a right turn at the corner and vanished into the labyrinth of New York streets. He dug his hands into the pockets of his rumpled coat. "Merry Christmas, Sabrina."

# Chapter Fifteen

*December 23, just after noon*

*Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, New York*

With her suitcase gripped in one hand and the bouquet box pressed against her chest, Sabrina rushed from the cab and ran through the park, her heels clicking against the icy path that zigzagged through the snow-covered trees.

The cold air burned her cheeks and lungs as she raced past the frozen lily pond toward the wedding venue at the end of the Botanic Garden.

*Don't fall. Don't fall. Don't fall.*

As she raced along the path, her mind wandered to the scene at the cab. Should she have taken a chance and agreed to Ryan's plus-one suggestion? Would it have mattered? Or was she right and a plus-one, date-in-the-city deal would only have meant a deeper heartbreak when she inevitably went back to Kentucky and he stayed in Manhattan? Did he want *her*? Or did he simply need a date? Did it matter? Could she handle a relationship with him without losing herself? Her emotions were too much to process, so she shoved them away and focused on getting to the wedding—that's all that mattered.

As she approached the venue, she raised a hand to the security guard, who glanced at her buffalo-check coat flapping in the wind over her delicate dress. He raised his eyebrows but waved her ahead past the empty fountain and into the iconic glass-walled Palm House. One thought echoed in her brain.

*Please let the bouquet be salvageable.*

She burst through the door, and the wall of warmth enveloped her. Her eyes scanned the greenhouse-like space for Jane, landing instead on a narrow dress rack in the back corner. Hanging from the bar was a cocktail-length burgundy-red dress, Jane's wedding dress, a bold choice in the color of love and passion, and perfect for the wedding of Manhattan's hottest Cupid. With her dark hair and petite figure, she'd be

the knockout bride of the season. Sabrina drew in a breath, grateful and overjoyed to finally be here.

The bouquet box clutched to her chest, she hoped and prayed she could save the flowers, not just for Posey, but for her friend, who deserved a beautiful day. She deposited the box onto a nearby reclaimed-wood table, filling in the only space that wasn't strewn with white tea lights and greenery, and turned as Jane strode into the room flanked by her other bridesmaids, Marianne Wright and Kate Bell.

Nose buried in her phone, Jane didn't notice her until Sabrina's phone pinged, echoing inside the space. Jane looked up and launched herself at Sabrina, her arms wrapping her into a relieved embrace that was quickly followed by similar hugs from Marianne and Kate.

Jane flashed a grin, the one she'd been wearing since her engagement. "I'm so happy you're here. I was worried I was going to have to send the boys to go and find you."

The boys—her brothers, Nick and Jake, and now, of course, Charlie.

"No need to marshal the troops. I made it from the station right quick," she said with a smile. "Even if it took a broken-down cargo van, a rideshare in a pickup, and a high-speed train to get here."

"But you are here now, and this *bouquet!*" Predictably, Jane had already peeked in the box. "Bri, this is incredible—thank you, it's perfect. *Page Six* is going to go bonkers."

Only a true friend could fail to see the curling edges of the bouquet's centerpiece flowers.

"Well, the trip was a long one, so it's not perfect *yet.*" She shrugged off her coat and peeked over Jane's shoulder. "But if it's okay with you, I think I can steal a few blooms from the table arrangements and whip up a miracle."

"Whatever you think is best, but I already love it." Jane gave her another squeeze and pulled the other girls close. The three women looked at Sabrina expectantly.

"Any chance you decided to bring a plus-one, maybe

someone like the nice and supremely gorgeous guy who just happened to need a ride?” Jane asked.

Marianne looped her arm through hers. “I was thinking about the situation, and even if he really *did* just need a ride, the probability of a gorgeous man being on the exact right corner at the exact right time in Beaumont, Kentucky, is...”

“Damn near zero,” Kate, the solo blonde in their group, concluded as she popped open a bottle of Rosa Regale. “Even *less* than zero, if the guy is as hot as the photo Jane showed us last night. Sounds a lot like fate to me.”

Sabrina felt a blush rise on her cheeks. “Can we just toast to something, please?”

Jane handed out the crystal flutes, and Kate filled them to the brim with the pink wine. As they moved closer, the softly blinking lights illuminated each of their faces. Growing up, Sabrina had often felt lonely, but not now. Now, she knew how lucky she was to be part of such a loving group of women. Lucky to have known Ryan, too, even if only for thirty-six hours.

Jane raised her glass, a mischievous smile on her lips. “To the guy who shared a ride with our Kentucky girl.”

“To the *gorgeous* guy,” Marianne said with a smile.

“To the gorgeous guy.” Kate lifted her glass toward the middle.

Sabrina raised her glass, the ache in her heart needing to focus on her friends, on being here, not on how much she already missed him. “To Cupid and her bachelor.”

“Not a bachelor for long,” Jane offered in a sly tone that suggested her fiancé had better buckle up for the honeymoon. “To love and to destiny.”

The women echoed the toast, and as they sipped sparkling wine, Sabrina realized how falling for Charlie had changed Jane. Her bestie had never been a believer in destiny. Compatibility—yes. Destiny—never. But Sabrina loved seeing her friend this happy. Jane spent so much time finding love for other people. Now she’d found her own. No doubt, she and

Charlie were meant for one another, and Sabrina was thrilled to see her bestie starting a new life, even if part of her missed her friend already. *Life changes. Love moves us forward.*

Sabrina wondered if love might be in the cards for her. Her road trip adventure had changed her, too, and the next time a chance to love presented itself, she wouldn't hold back. Instead, she hoped to dive straight in and learn how to breathe underwater.

Across the vintage table, Jane caught her gaze and let go another knowing smile, the sixth sense that made her a great matchmaker on full display. Sabrina smiled back, knowing that no matter what their new lives brought, they'd always be friends.

“I know one day you'll meet your match, too.” Jane tucked her arm through Sabrina's and pulled her aside while Marianne and Kate topped off their wine. “Okay, girls, now that we're all here, let's get this show on the road!”

• • •

Showered and in sweats, Ryan settled on the leather couch inside his Park Slope apartment, his tux strewn across a matching chair near the window. He needed to get dressed for the event, but his heart wasn't in it. His heart was somewhere else in the city with a girl and a *Page Six* bouquet. He sipped his Amstel and flipped on ESPN, procrastinating, and God knows, he was not normally a procrastinator. He was the take-charge, get-shit-done guy. But tonight, chilling at home sans tuxedo sounded good. Not because of his ex, not because when he'd texted Erin to let her know he was home, he also took a pass on the fix-up, but because he couldn't stop thinking about Sabrina. Tried to stop. But—

Epic fail.

He picked up the container of his favorite Thai curry from the place down the street. He put it down, untouched. His thoughts drifted back to this morning, how after watching the taxi pull away, increasing the distance between them, he'd turned on his heel and gone to the office.

He took another sip of beer. *Typical Ryan Callahan solution.*

He'd already worked out a list of strong development strategies for Mason Hollis and training options for a couple of new clients entering the draft, and he'd checked in with his assistant to ensure all the details for the event were good to go.

Mid-afternoon, he'd spent a few hours buried in paperwork and contracts, spending his time two days before Christmas—on a Sunday—buried in his job. But this time the work didn't work. Because he wasn't like her parents. He wasn't all about work, committed only to one part of his life. Why didn't she know that?

Because he hadn't told her.

If only he'd had a minute more to think. But the truth was, he had had time on the road trip to convince her to give him a chance beyond their thirty-six hours. He'd just been too afraid to put himself out there. Because if he had, and his emotions got entangled and she decided not to leave Kentucky—what then?

She should go after her dreams. She should find a way to put Posey on the map. For her gram. For her self-worth. She deserved everything and more. But what if her everything didn't include him? What if her life in Kentucky ended up being more valuable to her than him? What if he *wasn't* worth the effort? He couldn't feel that way again.

So, he'd stood outside Penn Station watching her drive away and felt that familiar, unwelcome tension slip into his body. Fair or not, he'd been hurt. *I'll still be the flower girl living in Kentucky, and you'll always be the overworked city guy.* He closed his eyes against the memory.

He'd made an offhand comment, a careless one, to be sure, but then she'd cut to the quick with her response. There was no real chance for them. They were too different, the situation too rushed. Hell, he'd only known the woman thirty-six hours.

So, he'd watched her go, taken his usual route and zeroed in on work, always guaranteed to make him feel more in control.

Except his normal strategies didn't wipe away the tension.



So, he'd left the office early, something he never did.

Now he was at home, procrastinating. But the time had come to go. Maybe he wasn't up for a big event, but he was proud of his work. Honored by the award. Tonight wasn't about him. Tonight was about the kids. The recognition meant a higher profile and more funding for the camp. His focus needed to be on the kids. He took one last sip of his beer and set the bottle down on the marble table.

Across the room, Frosty stared him down. Probably thought he'd been an asshole letting her go, not following through on his instincts, not convincing her to give him a chance. *Wisdom from a carnival prize.*

Ryan got up, grabbed his tux, and narrowed his eyes at the oversize snowman. "Don't stare at me, dude."

# Chapter Sixteen

*December 23, 5:15 p.m.*

*Jane and Charlie's wedding, the Palm House*

*Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, New York*

Hours later, Jane and Charlie exchanged vows. Charlie promised to keep a secret stash of candy behind the bar of Temptation in case of emergencies, and Jane pledged to get takeout from Sal's Pizza at least once a week, since she was a terrible cook, and everyone cheered as the matchmaker and her bachelor kissed as husband and wife.

The band played "My Funny Valentine" in celebration before transitioning into a mix of danceable Christmas tunes and cool jazz. From the edge of the dance floor, Sabrina took in the magic around her—the tables dressed in shades of deep burgundy and sparkling silver, the flickering lights from the candles reflecting in the windows, the sense of joy and friendship in the air.

Marianne and Nick sat at a table near the front, and Sabrina saw Nick drop a hand to her stomach and a kiss on her forehead, both smiling, looking like more good news was on the way. In the middle of the parquet floor, Kate and Jake circled their friends in an East Coast swing while Jane and Charlie stood on the far edge wrapped up in one another's arms, swaying to the music, happier than she'd ever seen them.

Not that her friends' varied roads to love had been easy, but here they all were, examples of how relationships weren't made of fleeting romantic moments or a steady gaze in one direction. Love was a choice, an ever-changing, moment-to-moment decision to give to another person a promise meant to be shared.

And tonight, Jane had shared her wedding with Sabrina in a way that could change her life—by saving Posey. After her late arrival with frost-damaged flowers, Sabrina wove some

table roses and centerpiece greenery into the bouquet, and the result was truly magical. The *Post* photographer had already asked for the shop information, promising to feature an image of the arrangement and mention the shop's website in the write-up. He'd even suggested a hashtag to get the site trending: #enchantedPosey.

Ryan's words echoed through her heart—"that bouquet of yours is going to set *Page Six* on fire." He'd been so confident in her, so sure she could make a difference if she believed in herself—he'd given her that amazing gift.

Her emotions spilling over, Sabrina raised a flute of the pink champagne toward the glass panels that opened to the sky, knowing Grammie would be proud today. So proud. She took a sip of the wine and looked around the dreamlike venue with a beautiful sadness in her heart.

Ryan had been right, wonderfully, sweetly, joyfully *right*. Love *could* be expansive. Love needed to be shared, to be allowed to grow—that was the whole point. Finally, she understood, and she wanted a love capable of expanding her world, expanding her *soul*. Maybe she and Ryan were nothing alike, but she realized now their differences didn't matter. They'd already shown one another so much patience and compassion. She'd spent so much time—practically her entire life—protecting her heart, unable to commit because of the fear she'd lose herself in love, and yet, Ryan had done the opposite. He'd never asked her to be different, never wanted her to disappear. He'd shown her who she could be. And no matter how many miles lay between them, no matter how different their taste in music, their habits, their worlds, she'd always be grateful for his belief in her.

The way her parents chose to love remained a mystery to her, and she knew she'd handle her own love story differently when her love arrived, but she could forgive and love them still.

Funny how opening up to Ryan Callahan had led her heart to a new place, and although the idea of allowing herself to fall took her breath away, she wanted to try. She swallowed over the emotion rising in her throat. Somehow, after the road trip

of a lifetime, she believed she could build a love that would cast a far-reaching net of joy, without losing herself. Standing amid the reception, surrounded by her wide, expansive circle, Sabrina finally understood love, and more than *anything*, she wished she could tell him.

...

The night went off without a hitch. Ryan had accepted the Humanitarian of the Season statuette along with an award check to fund the baseball development camps for five years. He'd navigated the shark-infested waters, accepted some honest congratulations, and struck up a conversation with a potential new client. Now he stood by the bar, ready to do what he really came here to do. His gaze scanned the crowd until he saw her—his ex—standing in a small circle next to his client.

He set his beer on the bar and walked across the room, feeling as if he were moving in slow motion, as if at any moment, he'd sense the tightening beginning in his lungs, the rush of panic. But he didn't. He felt like a guy moving on. He closed the last of the distance between them and, as the din of the party echoed around them, he reached out his hand. "Mitchell."

"Ryan." The young quarterback smiled and reached out to accept his handshake, completely at ease. "Congrats on the award, man. That's awesome."

"Congratulations to you, too," he said, shifting his gaze toward the blonde next to him. "And to Meredith. I understand you two are engaged."

Mitchell grinned. His arm was draped casually across her shoulder. "Big news, right?"

"Big news," he said. An old reflex reared its ugly head, a protective instinct as he smiled at his ex, but other than that, he felt nothing. A twinge of sadness, maybe, for a time in his life long gone, a bit of curiosity, but otherwise... nothing. "Meredith, congratulations."

A pleading look ambled across her face, almost like guilt, and he felt a sense of sympathy rise to meet the sadness. She'd been a nice enough girl, just not built with the kind of strength required to pull through the tough times. He understood that now. He'd forgiven her ages ago. The time had come to forgive himself.

He wasn't responsible for the accident.

He wasn't at fault for wanting to make sure she got home that night. But he was responsible for his inability to move on.

He turned back toward Mitch. "Stop by the office this week. I should have more big news for you on the Nike deal."

With a nod of acknowledgment to the rest of the circle. Ryan made his way from the group, content in his decision to come tonight and to congratulate Mitchell and Meredith.

After his recovery and acceptance that he'd never play baseball again, Ryan had made good on the promise he'd made to himself. He'd focused his substantial energy on building his agency, a business he now loved. But he had failed to notice that he'd been building walls around his heart, too. He held the crystal trophy in his hand, a symbol of the rewards of his hard work—and there were many—and realized now was the time to take the walls down. Because while Meredith had never been the woman for him, Ryan suspected he'd found one worth fighting for.

And yet, he'd been ready to give up after one stumble. Maybe he wasn't prepared for what came next. Maybe the fear that gripped him occasionally would still be there, but if he didn't take a chance on this girl, then there would never be a chance worth taking.

Time for a game-time decision. He had two options: make the expected play and stay, do the bob-and-weave agent deal, and then move on, or take the unexpected route and go after what he wanted right now. *Sabrina*.

His heart pounded in his chest, but he didn't need a minute to think. Now was the time for action, to put everything on the line. He knew what he wanted. And that alone felt like a minor

miracle. He wasn't going to give up because of a misunderstanding outside Penn Station. He'd made a rookie mistake by not running after that taxi, but he wasn't going to let that mistake mean he missed out on the girl.

He pulled a ticket from his jacket pocket and made his way through the crowded reception to the coat check, his confidence building with each step. If they gave this romance a try, they'd have to deal with the logistics—city or country—but challenges were his specialty.

At the counter, he traded the ticket for his coat and strode toward the front door, his need for her as clear as the winter sky. She made him feel settled, less panicked. When she looked in his eyes, he knew he had value, beyond baseball, beyond the agency. She couldn't do that if she didn't love him, and if she did love him, they could figure the rest out, because whether this road-trip relationship was convenient, whether it made sense or not, the past thirty-six hours had been crazier and sexier and more fun than he'd had in... *forever*.

Forever. He knew what he wanted.

He rushed out of the building, onto the city's bustling streets. If he wanted more in his life—more unexpected moments, more connection, more *Sabrina*—then there was only one thing left to do: crash a wedding. He was going to crash a wedding. He moved toward the corner to hail a cab and realized he had no clue where the wedding was being held. *Minor setback, no problem.*

He tucked the trophy under his arm and slipped his phone from his pocket. *Cupid wedding*, he typed into his browser. A Cupid wedding chapel in Vegas popped onto the screen—not what he needed. He paced to the corner and ran a hand through his hair. Can't crash a wedding without knowing its location. He added more details.

*Cupid wedding. New York.*

Something called Project Cupid. Not a wedding.

*Cupid wedding. New York. Matchmaker.*

The screen lit up with several sites chock-full of courses to

help him become a matchmaker. *Okay...no.*

He set his award down on the sidewalk at his feet and dragged his coat across his shoulders. He needed a damn taxi. But he had to figure out where to go first. If he didn't come up with something soon, he'd be forced to call his sister for information about the story... *Wait a minute.* A smile pulled at the edge of his mouth as he realized he had the answer in the palm of his hand. He tapped the Curb app on his phone and scrolled to the last location, and *bingo*, 990 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn. *The Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Ten miles away.*

He looked all around but didn't see an empty taxi. He tried the Curb app. *Nope, nothing for twenty minutes—closer to an hour in Manhattan time.* He ran a hand through his hair, starting to feel an odd sense of déjà vu.

He snatched the trophy from the sidewalk and crossed against the light, searching for a cab. Everywhere he looked, there was neon but no cabs. He was in the middle of the city's retail jungle, billboards advertising everything from Apple technology to the latest Christmas album. He passed under the golden arches of McDonald's, strode by a Gifts & Luggage store and a rare coin shop.

Where were all taxicabs?

Then, he spotted one, parked in front of a pizza shop, its OFF-DUTY sign shining. The driver stood against the wall of the shop trading stories with the flower vendor at that next corner. *Flowers.* He needed flowers, and if he happened to catch the attention of the off-duty cabbie, all the better.

Trying not to look desperate, he booked it over to the vendor and bought a half dozen paper-wrapped bouquets in case Sabrina needed them for a repair job. *Always best to be prepared.* As he paid for the flowers, the cabbie walked up to the outside counter of the shop, picked up a pizza, and hustled toward his cab.

Ryan shoved his wallet into his jacket and walked over, arms loaded with flowers and a crystal trophy, trying to keep his shit together. "Listen, I know you're done for the night—"

The guy held out a hand. He knew the drill. “Buddy, I’ve been waiting for this pizza.”

“But there’s this girl,” he said, the urgency in his voice clear as moonlight.

The guy gave him a dubious look. “There’s always a girl.”

“I *know*.” Ryan shook his head as if he didn’t understand it, either, knowing he was throwing the Hail Mary to end all Hail Marys. “But not like her. This woman wears basketball jerseys and knows the Pro Bowl is in January. She’ll invite a stranger along for a road trip because she can’t stand the idea of leaving him stranded, but she’s afraid of ghosts.”

“My wife is afraid of ghosts.”

“So, you get it.” Ryan leaned against the cab. “This woman laughs when her van breaks down in the middle of a snowstorm, and her laugh makes a man chance hypothermia because it’s so amazing. Even though she drives him wild, he’d die to hear that laugh. This woman will ride in the back of a pickup and let a dress ride shotgun just so the fabric won’t wrinkle, which is nuts, but when she wears the dress, this silvery dress, this *woman* looks like an angel, and everything makes sense.”

“An angel, huh?” The guy gave him a long, hard look, made a low sound at the back of his throat, and jerked his jaw toward the car. “Get in.”

“Thank you, *thank you*,” Ryan called out, already yanking open the car door.

He shook his head and tossed the pizza onto the front seat. “My wife is going to kill me.”

“Maybe these will help.” Ryan leaned forward and placed two dozen roses on top of the pizza box.

As the cab pulled away from the curb, the guy caught Ryan’s eye in the rearview mirror. “You don’t know my wife.”

The drive felt like forever, and as soon as he’d paid the city’s most romantic cabbie, Ryan dived out of the car and hit the street running, the cold air, the sounds of the city streets



scarcely registering. He had one goal in mind: to get to the wedding in time.

He ran through the park that housed the botanical garden, snow from the unshoveled path seeping into his shoes as he sped past the ice-covered trees, his lungs raking in the cold night air. He passed the Christmas tree by Grand Army Plaza and rounded onto Washington Avenue, accelerating as he ran past the museum, slowing only when he saw the golden glow from the Palm House.

He dragged in a breath, pulled on the door handle, and slipped inside—but the place was empty. *Empty.*

He was too late. The wedding was over. He was too late with the flowers, not that she'd needed them. She'd told him roses were cliché. Bet she'd made a success of that living bouquet despite everything. Here he was, doing the same shit he always did, running to the rescue...one she didn't need, one that came too late.

He leaned against the edge of the doorframe, the roses and trophy pressed against his chest. Did he go to Beaumont? Try to find her in the city? Plans racing through his mind, he failed to hear the noise behind him, and the next thing he knew, a couple burst through the entrance, pitching him forward into a nearby table.

“Dammit,” he said holding on to his bad knee. “Yeah, that one hurt.”

“Oh my God, we didn't see you. Are you okay?” A petite brunette in a dark-red dress stepped toward him, flanked by a tall guy sporting a black suit, his matching tie undone and pulled away from his collar. “Do you need an ice pack? Charlie, get him an ice pack.”

Ryan waved away the need for emergency assistance, and as he did, his gaze caught sight of a bouquet. *The* bouquet. His heart skipped a beat. Maybe he didn't need to make a Beaumont run. Maybe he still had a shot here. A long shot, but still. “You must be Jane.”

She blinked, momentarily caught off guard, but then her eyes

skated over the award and roses, and a wide smile broke across her face. “And you must be the truly nice, truly hot guy who needed a ride.”

He raised his brows, unsure what to think of her description of him, hoping she’d heard them from a certain strawberry blonde. “Well, I don’t know...”

She glossed over his objections with introductions. “Jane Wright, or Goodman, or Wright-Goodman. We haven’t decided, but this is...my husband, Charlie.” She gave him a playful bump of her hip, turning to grin up at him. “Charlie, this is...”

He tucked the roses and the trophy under his arm and extended his hand. “Ryan Callahan.”

“The motel guy,” he said in a refreshingly candid way that made Ryan think they’d get along well. “Nice to meet you. Heard a lot about you.”

“Not too much.” Jane elbowed him gently. “Not the part about the line dancing or the bootlegging ghost or the cowboy hat.”

Charlie nodded, his features shifting into a sober expression. “Yeah, none of that.”

Ryan wondered what other details they’d learned, but whatever they might be, he had no time to stress, because Jane dived into the extended pause.

“Sabrina isn’t here,” she said, glancing at the empty venue. “Obviously, she *was*, but she went...out for a drink with some of our friends, and, well...”

The wheels seemed to be turning in her razor-sharp mind, then her eyes dropped to the bouquet, and a sly smile formed on her face.

“Well, she promised to take care of the bouquet while we’re on our honeymoon, and she...she forgot to take it with her.” She shared a conspiratorial look with her husband before she turned her gaze toward Ryan. “But now that you’re here, maybe you could do me a favor.”

He blinked, not sure if she was for real. “You want me to take care of the bouquet?”

She shrugged a slim shoulder. “Or you could just deliver it to Sabrina. She happens to be staying the night in my apartment.”

“Staying the night in your apartment?”

“Staying the night in my apartment, but *just* tonight,” she said, a smile blooming on her cherubic face. “So, this is your last shot.”

Ryan grinned back at her, relief flooding his system. He’d taken a van, two pickups, a train, and a taxi to get to this moment, and now, thanks to the city’s newlywed matchmaker, he was about to take his last, long shot—for the win.

# Chapter Seventeen

*December 23, closing in on midnight*

*Outside Jane Wright's apartment*

*The Flatiron District, Manhattan*

Armed with the bouquet, his award, and four dozen roses, Ryan had made his way from Brooklyn to Jane's apartment, debating whether to text or snap before deciding to take the old-fashioned route and show up like Cusack in *Say Anything*.

Except without the boom box.

Or Peter Gabriel.

So, here he was, in the rectangular entry of Jane's Beaux-Arts apartment building, no advance warning, holding a cornucopia of flowers. He pressed the buzzer for Apartment 4404. His heart pounded in his chest. He waited, then buzzed again, but no answer.

*Where could she be?*

He set the roses and his award on the maple bench and checked the time. She could still be out with her friends, some Wyatt-type bartender flirting with her. Or maybe his imagination was getting the better of him and she was tucked away in the apartment watching a horror movie, not answering. He hadn't come this far to bail out now.

Before he'd come in, he'd seen a few apartments shining with Christmas lights, but did he really want to be *that* guy, the guy who pressed all the buzzers until some agitated soul let him inside?

Not really.

Not if he could help it.

Ryan yanked open his tie. There was always the fire escape. Clearly, he was desperate. The decades-old staircase, decked out in twinkle lights and garland, had caught his eye when he'd arrived. Looked more like a death trap than a romantic

gesture. Still. He ran a hand over his jaw, debating the merits of the climb, but before he'd come to a decision, a group of carolers tumbled into the entry. Most were dressed like Dickens characters, although he saw one or two traditionally ugly Christmas sweaters. They carried sheet music and violins and looked like they'd enjoyed too many hot toddies.

A new idea formed. He lifted a hand to the group. He wasn't much of a singer, but he knew the words to a "Good King Wenceslas," which had to count for something in this life, and if the group were to be invited inside to carol...well, hey, he was wearing a tux.

"Can I help you?" asked the man carrying an illuminated lantern.

*Yes, thank you.* Finally, he was going to get a break. "I need to get in the building, but I've been buzzing and no one seems..." His words drifted away as the man stared, suspicion written across his face. Ryan held up the bouquet. "I'm delivering this bouquet."

His eyes narrowed like Scrooge on a bad day. "To what apartment?"

"Number 4404." He was wearing a tux and carrying a bouquet, for God's sake. What did they think he was—a cat burglar?

A woman in a stocking cap piped up from the back, "That's Jane's apartment. She's on her honeymoon."

"Yes—Jane. She's a...friend." Even to his own ears, his words lacked conviction. "I'm delivering to the woman staying in the apartment."

"Anyone seen a woman in the apartment?" The Scrooge-like inquisitor turned to his group of tipsy carolers, and a ripple of concerned murmurs echoed inside the vestibule. He swiveled back to Ryan, phone at the ready. "I'm calling the police."

"The *police*?—No, wait." Ryan held out both hands in a gesture that asked, *what had happened to peace on Earth and goodwill toward a guy in a major romantic dilemma?* "If you can just give me a minute—one *minute* to explain about my

holiday road trip. With this girl, this amazing, perfect-for-me girl from Kentucky.

Scrooge raised his lantern, his eyes narrowing. “There’s always a girl.”

• • •

After the postwedding nightcap with her friends, Sabrina left Smalls, music from the subterranean bar disappearing as she climbed the stairs to the street. Outside, the night air was cold, a stark contrast to the club, so she pulled her plaid jacket close over the silvery dress.

On the streets of Beaumont, she’d stand out like a flying reindeer, but not in New York. Nope. Not even one look came her way as she melted into the crowd crossing the street, everyone moving toward the next stop, midnight closing in.

Almost Christmas Eve.

Although her holidays in the city had never been particularly happy or festive, as she walked the four blocks from the bar to Jane’s apartment, she had to admit there was something magical about the season in New York, all decorated with shining lights and over-the-top store windows. There were a few aspects of the city she still secretly loved.

She glanced at her phone to check her pickup order at Morandi. An extravagance, given her financial situation, but if she was going to spend Christmas Eve alone, she going to do it with amazing Italian food. Another New York tradition she appreciated: takeout of all kinds, at any hour. A wistful smile touched her face at the memory of Ryan declaring himself the King of Late-Night Dinners. Her small chuckle crystallized in the air. She missed him already.

At the corner, she popped into the restaurant. She nabbed the brown bag from the pickup line, the one with *Sabrina* scrawled across the top, and smiled at the young man behind the counter, hoping to hide the fact that she was ready to dissolve into a puddle on the hardwood floor. *Merry Christmas.*

She stepped back onto the street as the rush of emotion threatened to overtake her, but tonight, she didn't push her feelings aside. She had decided to embrace the new depths she had dived into even if her heart ached for a while. She may have taught Ryan southern charm, but he'd taught her to believe in herself and in the value of opening up to love, and no brightly wrapped Christmas gift under the tree could have been better.

So, she planned to settle in with takeout and stream *The Exorcist*, figuring an exorcism might be required, given she'd been falling for Ryan Callahan since the moment she'd spied his terrible driver's license photo through the window. Not that she'd ever forget him. She peeked at her phone, half hoping he'd sent a text, then instantly regretted checking. *No sense waiting for the next floral emergency.*

She gripped the handle of the Morandi bag, determined to keep moving forward, but as she covered the last block, Sabrina found herself thinking about the city, about Ryan. She remembered how much she enjoyed walking in Central Park, Ess-a-Bagels, and summer jazz, Canal Street, the library, and late-night takeout, and as her memories toppled on top of one another, a rush of different images flooded her mind. Date nights and holidays, movies and karaoke, and time passing in a blink. Time she wanted to spend with Ryan.

City or country, did it matter? They were good at finding solutions together, whether the problem was a canceled flight, a broken-down van, or a haunted motel. Maybe they could find a solution to the distance factor, too.

The light at the corner popped, darkening the street and hustling Sabrina toward the entrance of the apartment building—and then, as she looked into the entryway, Sabrina's breath caught in her throat. Her heart had to be playing tricks on her. She took a step closer, then another. But no tricks were being played. He was *here*. Ryan Callahan, standing in the vestibule, heartbreakingly handsome in his tuxedo and cashmere coat, surrounded by a group of carolers. Like he was in a Dickensian huddle.

She twisted the key in the lock and opened the door, the cold

air rushing in. Not that she felt the cold, or much of anything, except her heart galloping behind her rib cage.

Ryan's gaze snapped right to her, his expression somersaulting through surprise to joy until landing firmly on relief. He smiled, the same smile he'd given in the shop the first time she'd seen him, the one that had turned her world upside down.

Sabrina closed her eyes. Opened them again. Her chest felt as if it was collapsing in on itself. He was here. In the entryway of Jane's apartment, only minutes until Christmas Eve. How did he know where to find her? Then she saw the living bouquet in his hand. *Her* living bouquet.

One of the carolers raised a lantern and looked over at her, standing in the doorway in her checkered coat and silver gown, clutching a takeout bag. "Is this the one?"

Ryan said something to the man with the lantern, then walked toward her. She took a deep breath. She felt like she could hear the seconds tick by. She tried not to hope, but her heart tumbled forward, refusing to listen to any warning. This was it. She was about to put it all on the line. Was he? Was that why he was here?

"The bride had a floral emergency." He held out the arrangement, an uncertain expression carved into his handsome features.

Her heart sank. "She *did*?"

He nodded. "She asked me to hand deliver this bouquet to the best floral designer in Manhattan...*and* Kentucky."

Sabrina reached for the flowers, noting the way his intense, sweet gaze scanned her face, not knowing what to say. But hoping. *Hoping, hoping, hoping.*

"How was your event?" she asked.

"Better than expected," he said, indicating a crystal statuette sitting casually on the wooden bench, obscured by a mountain of red and white roses. "Being there made me realize I had spent so much time afraid of being tossed aside that I didn't allow myself to believe in you when I should have. I know



you're not the kind of woman who bails when life gets tough." He edged closer, smiling. "I mean, your devotion to that van showed me how far you will go to protect what you love." He reached for her hand. "I should have told you at the taxi. I loved every minute of our road trip, the hot dogs and country music, the line dancing and the haunted motel. Every minute with you."

"The train?"

"Especially the train." He smiled. "But then I realized none of those experiences changed me, not really... It was just you...the magic of you, and how I feel when I'm with you—no longer broken, like my heart is back in one piece, ready to trust again."

"Me, too." She gazed up at him, all six feet something of him, drinking him in like he was one of those root beer floats she loved from the drive-in place in Beaumont. "Do you really think we can...make it work?"

The crowd of carolers inched forward, collectively holding its breath.

"I really do. We can start by picking up Rosie and spending New Year's together in Kentucky, then...we will build the future."

"But what about the Baltimore meeting?"

"Marcus will cover it. I've got a different meeting. With Bill Hollis." She blinked up at him, genuinely surprised. "He seems to think I'm the only city slicker with half a sack of morals."

Sabrina chuckled, and he drew her into his arms. He smelled like good dry cleaning, the kind only available in New York, and peppermint Life Savers, the kind she kept in the shop, and she couldn't help feeling that she wanted to kiss him.

"What do *you* think?" he asked in a quiet voice. "Are you ready to dive in? Because I am ready to roll—with every misadventure that comes our way. I can help you create an Instagram page for Posey, and you can come with me to every small-town baseball game in America, and we will make it

work.” He tilted his head to catch her gaze, and when her eyes met his, they were filled with every emotion she’d been holding back. “All I need is a chance.”

“Give him a chance, honey,” one of the carolers called out.

Sabrina chucked, pressing a tear from the corner of her eye with the edge of her palm. “Do I really need to go to every game?”

“Maybe not every game.” Ryan’s gaze dropped to the living bouquet between them. “But just so you know, I’d go anywhere with you.”

“Anywhere?”

He lifted his eyes and pulled her in for a kiss. “*Anywhere.*”

Outside, snow glistened on the trees, draping the city in a cold, soft hush. Inside the circle of his arms, the world was warm and full of possibility. She leaned into the kiss, into her fast-talking city guy, her sexy urban cowboy. Into her road-trip guy. “I think I’m falling for you.”

His hands moved to frame her face, tilting the tin ceiling on some invisible axis and throwing her thoughts in a tizzy, and then...he kissed her, the city’s skyline twinkling in the distance, shining like a pop-up Christmas card meant just for them.

Ryan touched his forehead gently to hers. “I think I already fell.”

In the crowded vestibule, the carolers began to sing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” in four-part harmony, but Sabrina could scarcely hear them, scarcely breathe, because her heart was brimming with emotion. She was here, in Manhattan, on the eve of Christmas, and Ryan was kissing her in his tender, trusting way, a way that made Sabrina believe he’d be kissing her tonight, and tomorrow, and *happily ever after*.

# Epilogue

*One year later*

The bell over the door of Posey chimed, and Ryan walked into the shop, his arms full of brightly wrapped gifts, packages, and holiday cards. He smiled as he walked over, looking happy to be finished delivering the shop's last-minute Christmas orders.

Ever since he'd set up Posey's Instagram account, Sabrina could hardly keep up with her new business. #enchantedPosey seemed to be trending every day. She even hired a young woman to help with orders and watch the shop when she and Ryan were staying in his Park Slope apartment or spending time on the road catching a ball game. During the time they spent in the city, Sabrina had rediscovered what she loved about New York—or at least a certain New Yorker—and together they had found the best of both worlds. She was officially the luckiest girl in town.

She smiled over at the man who'd won her heart with his city ways and kept it with his sincerity and kindness. He placed the packages on the granite counter and placed a fast kiss on her lips. *Luckiest girl ever.*

Ryan grinned over at her before diving into the packages like a kid on Christmas morning. "Okay, so we have cookies from Beth. She mentioned going to see Mason next weekend in Syracuse, thought we might want to meet her and Bill."

Sabrina held back her smile. Nowadays, Ryan occasionally joined Bill Hollis at the local brewpub to watch a game. Of course, Ryan was sweet as pie about the situation, but even though he'd signed Mason to a long-term development deal, he'd probably never live down his city-slicker moniker. But now he happily took it as a sign of affection.

"I picked up gifts from Marty and Dave Henry, too." He held up a package with a New York postmark. "This one's from Jane and Charlie." He set the boxes down and pulled several cookies from the Tupperware. "There are invitations to the Snowball 500 from Mike and Pete, too, and Erin wants to

know if we plan to be in the city through New Year's."

"New Year's in the city sounds perfect," she said, marveling at how her world had expanded tenfold since she'd first laid her eyes on this handsome, sexy man. "Jane and Charlie are having everyone at their new place. We should see if Erin wants to come." She tossed him a conspiratorial smile. "Maybe invite Marcus as well."

"Or maybe we should leave the matchmaking to Jane." He polished off a cookie, looking as if he'd never considered the idea. "Oh, and Marty wanted to thank you for the daisies you sent when his wife was in the hospital with the baby."

Sabrina tied a bow on a Christmas wreath ready to be shipped to an online order, then picked up her phone to show him the screen. "He just sent a picture of the new arrival, and she might be the cutest baby in the whole dang world."

Ryan dropped the cards on the counter, wrapped an arm around her waist, and pulled her close. "Don't get me wrong, she is very cute, but not nearly as adorable as her godmother."

She plucked one of the cookies from his fingers. "I still can't believe Marty and Susan asked me."

"From what I hear, you're the sister they always wanted." He grinned down at her, his expression full of all kinds of wickedness. "In fact, he may have told me about one summer at the lake when you may have done a little skinny-dipping."

"He did not."

"Oh, he did." He dropped a kiss on her lips. "Said the boys saw you swimming on your own and stole your clothes from the beach."

Heat rose high on her cheeks. "He shouldn't have told you that."

"Are you kidding?" Ryan tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "I'm thinking you and I need to put that on our to-do list."

Sabrina grinned up at him. "I'm in if you're in."

"I'm so in," he said, dropping another kiss on her lips.

Gazing up at him, her heart full, her tiny clapboard shop bursting with gifts and messages of love from friends and chock-full of new orders from around the region, she felt fortunate to have found a love so big that it was the perfect size to share. Every day her heart expanded. She'd even made plans to introduce Ryan to her parents, a choice she knew would make Gram happier than a summer night in Kentucky.

"I wish you had a chance to know my gram," she said in a quiet voice. "She would've loved you."

"I wish that, too." Ryan traced her cheekbone with his thumb, his blue eyes shining with love. "I know she's proud of you."

She leaned into his caress. "Thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

"For loving me the way you do."

"Well, you make it easy," he said, tugging on the hem of her Wildcats jersey. "Come on, I need your help with Rosie."

Sabrina tipped her head to the ceiling and released a low grumble. "Please don't tell me she needs another repair."

"Nope, took her in this morning, and Dave says our drive to the city for Christmas should be trouble-free." He laced his fingers through hers and tossed a casual look over his shoulder as they walked toward the door. "But I need your help with this last gift."

She gave him a sidelong glance as they stepped onto the sidewalk. "Another gift?"

Ryan unlocked the van with the remote, a playful look in his eyes. "Just one more."

Sabrina strolled over to Rosie, all spiffed-up thanks to a trip through the town's new car wash, and peeked through the window. "I don't see anything."

"Are you sure?" he asked, pulling open the door and waving her inside. "Can you double-check for me? I swear I left a package on the driver's side."

“The driver’s side?” she asked, climbing into the front of the cab. “Nope, I still don’t...”

Her brows raised as turned back and caught sight of the mistletoe tucked behind the rearview mirror. *Sweet, sexy man.*

Her lips curved into a smile. “What’s the season without mistletoe?”

His return grin was all kinds of adorable. “It *is* Christmas.”

“*Almost* Christmas.”

“Almost.” Ryan set his hands on her hips and drew her toward the edge of the seat. Leaning in, he brushed his lips to hers in his slow and tender way, the way that warmed her heart even during the December chill.

“But the mistletoe isn’t the gift.” He whispered the words against her lips, and her mouth curved into a small smile.

Her voice was hushed. “I thought the kiss was the gift.”

He pulled back only a fraction, then, as if unable to resist, dipped back to touch his lips to hers once more, softly. Sweetly. He tilted his head toward the glove box. “Check inside.”

The look of love in his eyes made her pulse rate shoot up through Rosie’s new moonroof, and she opened the compartment with shaking hands. Inside, she found a red velvet box.

With her heart filling up so fast with quiet joy she could hardly breathe, she turned toward Ryan, who had dropped to his knee, right there on the sidewalk.

“Marry me, Sabrina Fair, not because I need to be rescued, but because I can’t imagine my life without you.” He took both of her hands in his. “What do you say?”

Sabrina looked over at him, unable to form a coherent thought but wanting him to understand how much she adored him in this moment, in *every* moment.

Heart racing, she grabbed the collar of his coat, pulled him into the van, and kissed him with every ounce of her love,

every wild emotion, every hope for their future, as a magical snow began to fall.

Ryan eased away, smiling like a lovestruck fool. “Can I take that as a yes?”

She drew in a shaky breath, drinking in his heartbreakingly sincere face, marveling that she could be the lucky one. She had found a nice guy who truly belonged to her, belonged *with* her on life’s wild ride, and whose love was deep enough and real enough and big enough to share.

“You can take that as a yes,” Sabrina whispered. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Easily.

Yes.



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# Acknowledgments

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# About the Author

After ten years of survival, aka working, in Hollywood, this former actress and current author of sexy contemporary romance is living happily-ever-after in Pittsburgh with her longtime sweetie, AKA Husband Number 1, and their two punky kids. When not carpooling to birthday parties or testing her gourmet cooking skills by throwing a frozen pizza into the oven, [Maggie](#) daydreams about sneaking off to the Vegas or Napa, or even just the movies. A love of red wine, Italian food, and music round out her list of life's greatest joys. Oh, and Tuesday night karaoke, totally underrated fun.

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