

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is on the left, shirtless, with a beard, and the woman is on the right, with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored top. They are in a dark setting, and the lighting is soft and intimate.

ONLY WITH YOU

ANNAPOLIS
HARBOR SERIES

LEA COLL

ONLY
WITH
YOU

LEA COLL

Only with You

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Excerpt from Choose Me

BOOKS BY LEA COLL

All I Want Series

Choose Me

Be with Me

Burn for Me

Trust in Me

Stay with Me

Take a Chance on Me

Annapolis Harbor Series

Only with You

Lost without You

Perfect for You

Boudreaux Universe Novel

Easy Moves

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To learn more about her books, please visit her [website](#).

*To my husband, whose childhood story about breaking his arm
is finally memorialized in writing.*

CHAPTER ONE

Hadley

I SET MY EMPTY CHAMPAGNE GLASS ON AN EMPTY TABLE, tired of being at the Belles and Beaus Charity Ball. I turned to Layton to tell him it was time to leave, finding him on one knee. My face heated as the conversation around us quieted. A few people backed up to give us space.

“Layton, what are you doing?” I hissed.

“Hadley, we’ve only been together for a short time, but I’ve always wanted you in my life. Will you marry me?” His face was tilted up to mine, he grabbed my hand tightly, as if holding me in place, anchoring me to the moment.

I tried to draw in a breath around the tightness in my chest.

Our few dates flashed through my mind—outings with friends, charity events, and business dinners. We were rarely alone. We hadn’t even had sex. We didn’t love each other. Staring down at his face, the one filled with expectation, I wasn’t sure I even liked him.

I tugged on the hand Layton held, hoping he’d stand so we could speak privately. I needed to get him away from the crowd of spectators, but he didn’t budge. How could I tell him no in front of everyone? These people who pretended to be our friends were more interested in what we could do for them, whether it was status or money.

Layton’s eyes narrowed as if he sensed my hesitation. I sucked in a breath. He’d planned this. He wanted to put me on the spot so I couldn’t say no.

“Layton, we’ve only been dating for three months.” I smiled tightly keeping my voice low so no one could overhear.

Layton stood, tightened his grip on my right hand, lowering his mouth to my ear. “Say yes, Hadley.”

I was used to giving in to pressure from my father in situations like this. I wanted to please those I loved, but I didn’t love Layton. I couldn’t say yes to save him from the embarrassment of public rejection. I was irritated he’d put me in this situation, to begin with. I closed my eyes against the curious stares and the heavy expectation. “*I didn’t put us in this situation.*”

“Don’t embarrass me.” His voice was low and threatening. One thing I did know about him was that he hated not getting what he wanted. I’d seen him lash out at his employees if they didn’t do what he demanded. I never thought I’d be the recipient. If anything, he’d treated me with cold indifference. This public display was confusing.

The crowd around us began to shift. I’d been silent too long. Even if I said yes, the damage was done.

Layton cupped the back of my head, forcing me to look up at him. “Smile, sweetheart.” A muscle in his jaw clenched and his eyes held a warning—*don’t make a scene*.

I shook my head subtly, trying to communicate without words that we needed privacy for this conversation.

Layton turned away from me, raising our joined hands in the air. “She said, yes!”

My heart sank. How would I fix this? I didn’t like public spectacles or manipulation.

Shouts and claps erupted as relief swept through the room. Our parents and friends offered congratulations and hugs, but I didn’t take my eyes from Layton’s. His eyes warned me not to disagree with him. The one thing I’d been taught since I could remember was never make a scene. Reputation was everything, but this was different.

“I didn’t say yes, and you know it,” I said when most of the crowd dissipated. I also didn’t say no. The thought caused

a trickle of panic down my spine.

“You didn’t have to. You’re mine.” He lifted my hand, slipping an enormous diamond ring on my finger.

A sick feeling filled my stomach. Layton never saw me. He only saw a woman who looked a certain way, who held an advanced degree, and whose father was friends and business associates with his father.

I didn’t want to embarrass Layton, but I wanted to be clear about what I wanted. I tugged my hand away, slipped the ring off, and held it out for him. “No. You don’t ask someone you’ve dated for three months to marry you in front of a room full of strangers. I don’t love you.”

“Who said anything about love?” He crossed his arms, refusing to take the ring.

I sighed, disgusted that I’d gone out with him to keep my father happy. I shouldn’t have wasted any time on him. I slipped the ring into the front pocket of his suit jacket.

“You should have discussed it with me first. We could have avoided this.”

“I asked your father’s permission,” Layton said as if that was the sole deciding factor. As if my opinion didn’t matter.

Dad stood behind Layton. I had done what he’d wanted ever since Mom died. In the beginning, it was a desire for him to work less and be home more often. Over the years, it morphed into wanting his love and approval.

My father leaned in, whispering in a low voice. “Hadley Ann Winters, he’s a good match. Don’t say or do anything you’ll regret.”

“Why? What do you get out of me marrying Layton?” It had to benefit him in some way. He’d insisted I major in business and attend law school. Working at the U.S. Attorney’s office reflected nicely on him. He’d expressed pleasure when I started dating Layton, but he’d never taken things this far before. It was too much.

“It’s time for you to settle down and come work for me.”

“The answer is no, and it will always be no.” I looked at my father and then at Layton, so there was no mistake I was speaking to both of them. If I stayed, I’d say something I regretted. I hadn’t called my dad out on his behavior since my mom died and it wasn’t the time or the place. Instead, I turned and walked away.

I ignored the stares and whispers that followed me. I knew my dad operated on manipulation and lies but expecting me to marry Layton—someone I didn’t like, much less love, went beyond what I tolerated from him in the past.

A doorman opened the door as I approached, and I stepped out into the humid Louisiana evening. I was done with my father. I stood on the sidewalk, waiting for my driver to pull up, unease curling up my spine. I needed to go home and regroup. I needed to figure out how I was going to handle the fallout.

“That was quite an exit, sister.” I turned to find Colin leaning against the wall, a teasing smile on his face, his hands in his suit pockets.

“I wasn’t expecting any of that.” I gestured behind me.

“You weren’t expecting Layton to propose or weren’t expecting him to do it at an event in front of Dad, our friends, and a room full of strangers?” He placed air quotes around *friends* before walking the few steps to stand next to me.

I raised my brow at him. He smiled wider, so that his dimple popped. The town car pulled up and we waited for the driver to open it for us. “Neither. Where were you?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt the touching moment.”

“You’re such an asshole, sometimes.” I smiled as I sunk into the soft leather cushion.

“I’m a lovable asshole.”

“You are.” The little brother I’d worried about had grown into a man—one who, despite our father, was carefree and fun.

Colin’s face tightened. “It’s about time you stood up to him.”

“He said it was time I came to work for him.” He’d groomed me for a position in his business but now he was interfering in my personal life.

“He thinks marrying Layton will keep you close?”

“And under his thumb.”

“Will you let me be here for you like you’ve been for me?”

When I didn’t respond, he sighed heavily. All teasing was gone from his face, leaving the haunted look. The one he’d had after Mom died. The one I swore I’d fix. At her funeral, I vowed to be there for him. I’d never let him down.

“You’ve fulfilled your vow to me. It’s your turn to live a little. I’ll be fine.”

He was the reason I’d stayed so long in New Orleans when I wanted to escape Dad’s reach. What would it be like to be on my own with no apartments, no drivers, and no safety net? It usually would have scared me, but this time, the desire to escape overrode that fear.

“I think it’s time for you to do your own thing,” Colin said.

Since I graduated from law school, I tried to carve out a life separate from Dad, but in reality, I still lived in an apartment I didn’t pay for, in a building my dad owned. Who was I? What did I want? The sad part was after twenty-eight years, *I had no idea.*

CHAPTER TWO

Hadley

I STOOD IN THE DOORWAY TO MY FRIEND, TAYLOR'S OFFICE, AT the U.S. Attorney's office the Monday after the proposal. I was starting to think of my life as pre-proposal and post-proposal.

"What are you going to do?" Taylor asked.

"I don't know. I live in my dad's building at his insistence I live in a safe building." I'd acquiesced, but it was more evidence of my father's manipulation and control.

"Are you going to take that transfer to Baltimore?"

It was another Assistant U.S. Attorney's job. Instead of trying cases, I'd be assisting with rape kits and victims—ensuring the kits were processed timely and the cases proceeded without delays. Taylor had recently applied for and gotten a similar job here in New Orleans. Baltimore was far away from New Orleans, and my father. The thought of living on my own was scary.

Taylor's forehead wrinkled. "If living in his building means you have to marry who he wants, then it's not worth it."

"Each thing he has financed came with strings and expectations. If you major in business, I'll pay your tuition. If you go to law school, I'll pay for it." I'd wanted to major in English, but Dad thought it was an impractical degree.

"Someone offering to pay for your education is a big deal. I don't blame you. My parents did too, but there were no expectations or requirements."

“It seemed innocent. In law school, you’re told not to work. We were going to be too busy studying. My dad was all too happy to set me up in an apartment and with a driver. It was easy. It allowed me to focus on my classes.”

Looking back, Dad wanted me to be indebted to him. When he needed me to fall in line, I would.

“The only tie left is this apartment you live in?”

“Yes, and my nonprofit.” When I’d asked dad for money to start Kids Speak, I was thinking about what good I could do, not what he’d ask in return. I should have known better. I had plans to expand the nonprofit to other cities. Moving wouldn’t necessarily change anything. I’d already begun interviews for an acting director who could oversee the day to day operations when I couldn’t.

“He’s not planning on pulling his support from Kids Speak, is he?”

“He hasn’t said that. I wouldn’t think he’d want the negative publicity that would come with that move.” Kids Speak was just as good for him and his business as it was for me. Although, he benefitted from the positive publicity, and I thrived on building kids’ confidence through improved speech.

I’d started an organization of volunteers who worked to identify children with speech needs who didn’t meet the requirements to receive benefits through the county or school. Speech therapists worked with them after school to improve their speech and confidence. Some parents didn’t know there were private options available or, if they did, couldn’t afford it. Schools were already stretched thin with budget constraints and limited staffing.

“That’s good.”

“You must think I’m an idiot. Who allows their parents to have control over their lives like this? I’m twenty-eight years old and I’ve never made a single decision on my own.”

Taylor shook her head in disbelief. “I’m sure that’s not true. Did he make you work here?”

“He was strongly in favor of it.” My stomach churned. I was embarrassed to admit the reach of my father’s control, even to a friend.

“If you don’t want to work at the U.S. Attorney’s office, I have a couple of friends from law school, who are opening a firm in Annapolis. It’s a general practice law firm. Maybe you could figure out what you want to do. It’s also—”

“The opposite of this job. It’s risky and not part of Dad’s plan for me.” But was that a way to live my life? Doing something dad would hate? First, I did what he wanted. Then what he’d hate. Either way, he’d still have power over me. But maybe I’d be happier in a job where I could practice law in a variety of fields, instead of just criminal law, and figure out what I wanted to do.

“Think about it. You don’t have to make a decision yet.”

“Do you think they’d hire me? I’d need to take the Maryland Bar exam.” The thought of studying for months for another bar exam was not appealing.

“You could take the attorney exam since you’ve been practicing for a few years already and petition the court to practice while you wait for the results.”

The attorney exam would be easier. I was touched Taylor had researched the options for me. I had someone looking out for what I wanted versus what I could do for them. “You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?”

A smile played on Taylor’s lips. “You told me a few weeks ago that you needed to get out of Louisiana. Be honest with yourself—you’ve wanted out for awhile. Layton’s proposal was the catalyst to do something finally.”

I had told her that when I saw the job opening in Baltimore. The itch to leave, to get out from under my father’s thumb was strong. She was right. This feeling wasn’t new, but it had taken new meaning since the proposal. I had to do something. I had to figure out who I was.

“You’re right. Can you forward me your friends’ information?”

“Of course. Just so you know, I don’t want you to leave. You were the first person who was friendly when I moved here, but I think you need to. If you stay here, your dad will always have control over you.”

A shiver ran down my spine. Would my father always have some control over me? Would I ever be free?



I RETURNED TO MY OFFICE TO FIND MY PHONE BUZZING WITH messages from Layton and my father.

Layton: Babe, will you answer my calls? We need to talk about this. If you need me to say I love you—I will.

I snorted. Not that he loved me, but if *I need him to say it*, he would—how chivalrous of him. I ignored his message.

Dad: We need to talk about this. I think you’re making a mistake.

Hadley: I fail to see why we need to talk because I turned down a marriage proposal. My heart rate increased as anger spread through me.

Dad: You should have said yes. You created a scene by saying no.

I was embarrassed by the incident too, but I was more irritated that Layton would propose so publicly. If he knew me at all, he’d know I wouldn’t want something so personal to be played out in public. A second message came through before I could answer.

Dad: Have you thought any more about coming to work for me?

My fingers tightened on the phone. It was time I made my own decisions.

Hadley: No, I don’t want to and I’m happy with that decision. I’m not going to change my mind.

I turned off the ringer on my phone and opened a search page on my computer to look up the requirements to take the Maryland attorney exam.

The idea of moving across the country where Dad couldn't reach me sounded better and better.

CHAPTER THREE

Cade

Two months later...

ON THE WAY TO MY HAPKIDO STUDIO, I NOTICED THE NEW fancy white wooden sign hanging from a black iron post which read Arrington, Gannon, & Winters, with smaller words underneath, General Practice Law Firm. My eyes lowered to the *Free Consultation* sign in the window of the office next door. Maybe this was a sign I should take the next step with my businesses.

I opened the wooden door and stepped into the reception area. The reception desk held a computer screen and a standard office phone. There were indentations in the carpet from prior furniture or file cabinets. The walls were barren of frames, the only sound was a clock ticking. The air was musty and stale, as if no one had been here since the previous accounting firm vacated the premises.

Did I need to hire an attorney?

“Can I help you?” A young woman in a suit, her dark hair pulled tightly into a low bun, appeared with her brows raised. Her heels hadn’t made any noise on the threadbare carpet.

I cleared my throat. “Um yeah, I wanted to talk to someone about my businesses.”

“Of course.” She smiled apologetically, gesturing at the desk between us. “We just opened. We haven’t hired a receptionist yet.” Then she held her hand out to me. “I’m Avery Arrington.”

“Cade Morrison. Nice to meet you.” I gripped her slender hand in mine.

“What can I help you with?” She stood with her hands clasped in front of her as she waited for me to answer.

“I own the Hapkido studio next door.” I gestured in the direction of my studio. “I’m also a contractor. I need a contract drawn up for the first and have an issue collecting payments with the second.”

“Okay, let’s have a seat in my office. I’ll get more information from you.”

A woman with long red hair, clad in a white silky-looking button-down shirt tucked into a curve-hugging skirt appeared in the doorway. “I can handle this one, Avery, so you can return the landlord’s call.”

Avery’s face pinched. I got the impression she didn’t want to talk to the landlord. “Are you sure?”

The other woman smiled. “I’m sure *I* don’t want to talk to him and you’re the one who’s been corresponding with him. I can meet with the new client.”

Avery smiled tightly. “This is Hadley Winters. She’ll take care of you. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Morrison.”

Hadley smiled as her eyes settled on mine. She grasped my hand, sending a tingle through my fingers. “Nice to meet you.”

She was younger than me; she couldn’t have been out of law school for long. Her red hair fell around her face in waves, her smile reached her blue eyes.

“Come into my office. We can discuss what you need.” I followed her to a small office and tried not to pay attention to the way her skirt accentuated her ass and her heels showed off toned legs. She sat behind her desk and gestured at the guest chairs across from her. “Have a seat.”

I followed her instructions, glancing down at my sawdust-covered work clothes and muddy boots. I should have changed into different clothes before coming here.

Bookshelves lined one wall, framed degrees hung on the wall behind her, and a potted plant rested on the windowsill overlooking a courtyard. Her office looked more settled-in than her lobby.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Morrison?” Ms. Winters asked, drawing my attention back to her.

“I own the Hapkido studio next door and a contracting business. I want to take my businesses to the next level.” I shifted in my chair.

“How so?” She folded her hands on the desk in front of her and tilted her head.

“For my studio, I want students to sign yearly contracts with the money coming directly out of their credit card or bank account, so I have guaranteed steady income. Most of my students are minors, so this would be for their parents.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “How are they paying now?”

I’d always been casual about my business, but I was reluctant to admit that. I didn’t want her to think I wasn’t a good businessman, but honesty was probably best. “Cash. It’s drop-in, so they show up when they can. Students come and go. It’s not consistent or steady.”

Hadley winced. “It must be hard to know your income with that set-up. What about uniforms? Do you charge for them?”

“Right now, I’m loaning them out.” I sighed. It sounded worse out loud than in practice. It was nice at first since I hadn’t wanted a commitment, but now I needed the money from the studio to fund a side endeavor, making homes handicapped accessible for those who couldn’t afford it. The recipients received partial grants for renovations. I’d used Caroline’s life insurance payout to make up the difference, but that money was dwindling. My expenses were tax deductible, but I needed another source of cash.

“You need something in place. You’re running a business, not a charity. I can draft a membership contract for you and set

up the automatic payments. We'll just need to narrow down the incentives."

"Incentives?"

"Yeah, you want the students to feel obligated to sign a longer contract. For example, you can charge less for each additional year. You can offer free uniforms if they sign up. Maybe offer a free trial for a week or two to encourage people to try out your place and see why it's better than another one."

It sounded like she had some experience with small businesses, particularly karate-type studios. That made me more confident about hiring her. "Have you practiced Hapkido or something like it before?"

Hadley nodded, her lips tilting into a smile. "I don't remember the exact form, but I did for a few years. My mom didn't approve, but she indulged me—" She bit her lip and it seemed like there was more to her statement. Her expression moved from happy to sad. "For awhile anyway."

"She didn't see the importance of learning self-defense?"

"My parents decided I should focus on my classes and piano lessons." She waved a hand at me. "But enough about me, I'm here to help you. I'll draft a few different options and you can decide which you'd prefer."

"If I agree to hire you." My voice came out gruffer than I intended but I didn't want her to think I was going to sign with her without knowing the fees or checking out other options.

Disappointment crossed her face before she covered it with a small smile. "Of course. This is just a consultation."

I should have been grateful she'd let it go, but I was oddly disappointed. For some reason, I wanted to see her excited about retaining a new client.

"Did you want to discuss your contracting business too?" Her tone was professional and her eyes held polite interest.

"I started my contracting company four years ago. Customers pay installments as the work is completed, but I'm not great at following up for the final payment once the job is

finished. The work is done, so there's no incentive to pay that final check."

"There are legal steps you can take. Have you filed a mechanic's lien on the homes?" She lifted her pen, her expression hopeful as she waited for a response.

"No, I haven't pursued it. I don't know what the next step is honestly." How could I explain that for the first couple of years after my wife died, I'd barely had enough energy to make it through the day much less chase people down for money? I enjoyed working with my hands and finishing a job—making someone's house a home, but I wasn't as good about the business side of things.

"I can help. That's what I'm here for."

"How much will it cost?" I leaned forward so that my elbows rested on my knees.

"We can work out a set fee for each lien or payment we pursue, and I'll get an estimate for the membership contract. I'll confirm with Avery, but I think a few hundred dollars would be enough to draft one. We can also manage the payments and renewal of the contracts if you want."

I felt the weight on my chest slide and shift. It would be nice to hand these tasks to someone else, but it would also mean meeting with her again to finalize the contracts, to set up the payments, and to provide the overdue contracts for my construction business. Of course, her office was next door, so I'd see her from time to time anyway.

The thought sent excitement flowing through my body. I hadn't been attracted to anyone in a long time.

"Do you have a list of jobs and contracts for the people who haven't paid?"

"I do. I keep a file cabinet in my studio for the contracting business."

She rose from her chair. "Well, I'd love to take a look at them. Since you're right next door, I could get started right away. I have a feeling some of these contracts are old."

“Right now?” I asked, remaining seated.

“Right. You haven’t hired me. Sorry, we just opened and I —” She flushed and sat down.

I held my hands out to stop her. “I get it. You want your business to be successful too.”

“Yes.” Her lips tilted up.

That smile, directed at me, caused my heart to clench with an emotion I couldn’t put a word to—hope, longing, desire? If I’d met her before Caroline, I would have acted on this attraction. But not anymore. Guilt slid down my spine, leaving me cold.

“Did you have any more questions for me?”

I tried to focus on the questions I should be asking to determine if she was the right attorney. Not on how beautiful her eyes were or that if she leaned over slightly, I’d see the swell of her breasts under that silky shirt. “How long have you been in business? I know this office is new, but I’m not sure if you moved locations or—”

“The firm is new, but we worked in other jobs before we opened the office.” She looked around sheepishly as if it should be apparent.

“Do you have any clients?” I needed to figure out if Avery and Hadley were fresh out of law school or whether they had some experience.

She slowly shook her head. “You’d be our first real client for this firm. We take overflow cases for the public defender’s office.”

“How long have you been an attorney?” I’d couched this conversation as a fact-finding mission to determine if this was a solid business decision, but it satisfied my curiosity too.

“Five years now. I recently moved here from Louisiana. I worked as a prosecutor for the U.S. Attorney’s office.”

My brows raised. That was unexpected. That would make her twenty-eight or twenty-nine? Not as young as I thought. “Were you in court?”

“Yes. I’m an experienced trial attorney.” She spoke with authority, as if she was proud of her job history.

I wanted to know why she’d moved here from New Orleans. Why she’d leave a government job to start a firm? It was a risky thing to do. It made me want to know more about her.

I rose from my chair with a sudden need to escape. “It was nice meeting you. I’ll be in touch if I decide this is what I want to pursue.”

She stood, nodding, her face a careful professional mask, but I saw the flash of disappointment in her eyes before it was gone. “Of course, and I’ll send over an estimate for the things we discussed. Do you have an email, or would you prefer that I call you with the information?”

I followed her to the front of the office. My heart raced at the idea of seeing her again. “I’m right next door. Why don’t you drop it off? I’m here most weekdays between four and six and Saturday mornings at ten.”

“That would be nice. You can ask me any questions you have, too.” Her tone was strictly professional.

I paused in the front reception area that was now empty. There was no sign of Avery, no one talking on the phone, no clack of keys like anyone was working. I was reluctant to leave despite my desire a few minutes ago.

“It was nice to meet you, Mr. Morrison.” Hadley reached out her hand to me.

I gripped hers, unable to look away from where her soft skin touched my calloused fingers. “You’re welcome to come to my adult class and try it out if you’d like.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to take them back. I shouldn’t want to see her again. I wasn’t sure if she was interested or that I was ready to move on.

“I never pursued it after my parents made me quit.” She bit her lower lip as she thought.

“Why not?” She’d gone to law school and she’d moved across the country to start a new firm. All of those facts told me she was hard-working and persistent. Those were great characteristics for someone learning Hapkido.

“I was busy studying and then working. I’m also involved in a speech therapy nonprofit in New Orleans that took my free time.” Her face lit up when she talked about it and I wanted to know more.

I wanted to tell her about my involvement with renovating homes to make them handicapped accessible. It was then I realized I still gripped her hand. I’d inadvertently pulled her closer to me. With a start, I dropped her hand and stepped back.

Hadley’s face smoothed out. “Thanks for the offer. I might check a class out.”

I nodded at her before leaving—unable to speak. I was shaken up that I’d touched her for longer than was necessary. What was I thinking?

I stepped out onto the sidewalk. The sun warmed my neck. Meeting with Hadley had stirred up things I hadn’t thought or felt in such a long time. I wanted to be alone in the privacy of my office. I stepped inside the studio, locking the door behind me. I sat in my chair and dropped my head into my hands. I hadn’t wanted to reach out to anyone in years.

When my wife was sick, I couldn’t stop holding her hand. I was scared that if I let go she’d be gone. Caroline and I had been married for only two years. We’d just started to discuss the possibility of trying for a baby when she experienced frequent headaches and dizziness. We’d gone to numerous appointments with the doctors initially saying she was too young for anything serious. We insisted on testing. She was eventually diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor. After the surgeries and seizures, the doctors said they couldn’t do any more for her. She’d accepted her fate quicker than I had. She’d succumbed to the cancer which had ravished her body making her weak and a shell of the woman I’d married. The end was too quick yet at the same time, painfully slow.

When I'd discovered Caroline took her last breath—I vowed never again. I wouldn't put myself out there because it only ended in heartbreak. Nothing lasted forever.

In the time after Caroline's death, I couldn't make any decisions. In the beginning, I couldn't decide what to eat, so I didn't. I couldn't decide whether to work, so I didn't return calls from potential clients. Her parents took over and made all the arrangements for the funeral. They handled the estate, the financial matters, life insurance, everything. They'd even bought our house so I could move away from the memories. They were strong when I wasn't. I'd been weak and consumed with grief. I pushed everyone who meant anything to me away.

I'd gradually improved over time. I'd slowly emerged from the haze of grief to do side jobs in construction. It was easier to handle grief if I was the boss. If I needed a day off, I took it.

Lately, I craved more, a goal or a purpose beyond work or my charity. My heart lifted when I saw Hadley. She intrigued me. Maybe it was time to finally move on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hadley

I WATCHED CADE WALK INTO HIS STUDIO. HE HAD THIS AURA of sadness surrounding him that was palpable. There wasn't a hint as to why the entire time I met with him. Personal history wasn't necessary for his consult, but for the first time, I wanted to know why a client was sad.

I couldn't take my eyes away from him when I saw him talking to Avery. His wavy blond hair, worn, dusty jeans, muddy work boots, and navy T-shirt stretched taut over his biceps and pecs, with the words Morrison Construction over his heart, sent my heart racing. Cade was a man who worked with his hands and muscles all day long. Instead of it being a turn-off, it was sexy. Maybe there was a reason the men in my life in New Orleans didn't hold any appeal for me—they were too polished and too perfect.

When he left, I noticed his work truck parked at the curb, blue with white lettering that read Morrison Construction. There was no mention of a partner. The name didn't indicate brother or sons, like so many other construction companies. Just Morrison Construction.

Was he alone? Did he not have family? Was that the reason for his sadness? The real question was, why did it matter? He was a potential client. My first client. Whatever his history was, it wasn't mine. My problems were that of a poor rich girl. Rich in material things all of her life but poor in what mattered—real and true friends, a loving family, care and support from family members versus nannies and teachers.

Even if he looked at me with any interest, which he hadn't, I didn't have time for a relationship. I wanted to get the firm off the ground and expand my nonprofit.

"How did it go? Do we have our first real case?" Avery asked from her office as I passed by.

The small cases we'd gotten from the public defender's office helped us learn the players in the court system, the attorneys and the judges, but we needed more substantial cases to pay the lease. "He's not sure yet."

I shouldn't have told him we didn't have any clients.

"Of course. I hope we haven't made a mistake. There are so many established law firms in town that no one would give us a chance."

Excitement shot through me. "Maybe that's our answer. We need to seek out new and upcoming businesses versus established ones."

Avery's eyes shone with interest. "It's worth a shot."

"I promised him an estimate, so let's go over that." I wanted to charge enough that we got something, but not too much and he'd go elsewhere. He seemed content with how he'd done things so far. He might decide not to hire anyone and that would be detrimental for his businesses. If word got around that you didn't have to pay him, he'd be taken advantage of. If he wasn't already.

Cade needed our help. If he'd never collected on overdue payments, some might be past the statute of limitations. I wanted to help him and his businesses succeed almost as much as I wanted my first client. I didn't examine the whys of that too carefully.

Avery looked over the estimate we'd put together. "We'll have to charge more in the future, but for now, we need clients."

"I agree." I had a feeling if Cade took a chance on us, I wouldn't raise his fees.

“So, did you notice anything else about Cade Morrison?” Avery grinned.

“You mean the way he filled out that T-shirt?” I wasn’t immune to the body underneath his clothes.

“I can see why you volunteered to help him.” Avery’s smile was knowing.

“It wasn’t that. I wanted a case. I’m anxious for the firm to be successful.” I didn’t want Avery to think I made decisions based solely on how a client looked, even if Cade had made quite an impression on me.

Avery’s office was so much smaller than the one I had at the U.S. Attorney’s office. I was used to being busy—to the phone ringing with clients’ questions, emails from opposing counsel regarding upcoming trials, and people coming and going. I knew we’d just opened, and we needed to build our clientele, but I wanted it to happen sooner. I wanted this to be a success.

“It’ll take time, but we’ll get there.”

“When does Dylan start?” I asked. I’d interviewed over the phone with both Dylan and Avery. It was their plan to start the firm. They’d offered me a partnership if I could add some money to the pot. I had a fair amount saved since I hadn’t paid tuition or rent.

“She has a couple more weeks.”

She worked at another small law firm and they wanted her to stay longer to help out. My phone buzzed in my purse.

Dad: When are you coming home? I’ve allowed you a couple of months to have your little adventure. Now it’s time to buckle down and be responsible.

I growled at his insinuation that I wasn’t responsible, and at his favorite phrase *it’s time to buckle down*. I’d heard it so many times.

Hadley: This isn’t a phase for me. I’ve invested money into my law firm. This is what I want to pursue.

“Everything okay?” Avery interrupted my thoughts.

I startled. “Yeah, just my dad butting in where he doesn’t belong.”

“Overprotective parents?” Avery smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. We weren’t especially close. I didn’t know her history.

“The opposite. He wants to control every aspect of my life, but it’s for his benefit, not mine.”

“That sounds rough.” She smiled sympathetically.

My phone buzzed again. “I’d better go take care of this.”

“Good luck.” Avery smiled, turning her attention to her computer screen.

I sat in my desk to look at his message.

Dad: We need to talk. You can’t keep telling me no.

I had nothing else to say. I avoided responding to the next few messages until he called. I had to answer or he’d keep calling. I wouldn’t put it past him to show up here and that was the last thing I wanted. I wanted to be far enough away that he couldn’t drop in to give his opinion on how I was ruining my life and, by extension, his.

“Yes? I’m at work.” Not that he cared. Dad never cared what he was interrupting since he believed his issues were the only important ones.

“I can’t believe you’re wasting your time on some small firm.”

“I’m a partner.” I was proud I was able to invest my savings into it. Even if he’d been the reason I was able to do so.

“A firm with no clients, no reputation, and no business. When you had a perfectly good job offer here, and a proposal from a man from a reputable family.”

“That’s not what I want. Why are you pushing so hard?”

Dad sighed. “I expanded too quickly, and there’s more competition. The business is going under unless I do something about it. I need your help. I need someone I can

trust. I don't want this getting out to the employees or outsiders yet."

My heart raced. I'd never heard my dad talk about the business not doing well. He was always confident he could overcome any obstacle. The idea that my dad's business could go under was shocking.

"You need to do this for our family." This was my father's authoritative voice, the one he used to get us to do his bidding.

"No. I don't." Usually, I'd fall into line because I wanted his approval. As a child, it would mean no lessons, activities, or presents for whatever holiday or birthday was coming up. Now I wasn't sure what he'd threaten me with. I didn't live in his apartment building anymore. I didn't need him to pay tuition or my car payment. He didn't have any pull in my life that I knew of, but he must have something, or he wouldn't be pushing this hard. He seemed confident I'd change my mind.

"I might need Layton's father, Aiden Black, to bail me out." His voice was low, and his words came out in a growl.

This admission was unlike him. He didn't like to admit defeat. That made me think he was being honest. He was appealing to me as an equal, which was a foreign feeling.

Or, was Dad appealing to the side of me who'd always longed for his approval and by extension, his love? If he needed me, then he must be proud of me. But I couldn't forget he'd never made any decisions in my best interest. It was always for him.

We got a private school education because it was a status symbol. We dressed in the best clothes because how we looked reflected on our last name. We went to the best colleges so he could tell his business associates how brilliant we were. I pursued a prestigious job with a title, so he'd be proud of me.

"Aiden Black was willing to invest, but he's been griping about Layton's embarrassment over your public rejection. I'd hate to see something like that derail the business."

Aiden Black was a shark. He circled failing businesses and struck when the owner was at his or her most desperate,

offering to bail them out. It was anyone's guess whether he'd invest and help the company or sell it piece by piece. I knew my father would be crushed with the latter option. "Is he? Do you have any guarantee that he would invest and not sell?"

"Yes. I trust him." His tone was unwavering and firm. "I've supported you your whole life and I haven't asked for anything in return." I could hear the frustration creep into his voice. He was used to me giving into his demands and my reluctance was trying his patience.

"You haven't? Because I remember differently." There were always expectations that came with every expensive dress, gadget, camp, and class. Expectations on how to act, who to be friends with, and who to date. Nothing changed. I moved across the country to escape but I hadn't. I'd never be free.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cade

ON SATURDAY, THE EARLY MORNING SUN WOKE ME AS IT CAME through the curtainless windows. I got out of bed, not bothering to straighten the covers or make the bed. What was the point when I'd just fall into it exhausted at night? I hadn't brought any women home. I'd had one hook-up with a woman at a bar, but we'd gone to her place and I'd left right after feeling worse about myself. I hadn't even thought about another woman seriously until Hadley Winters. What was different about her?

I'd bought this house about a year after Caroline died, to get away from my memories in the old one. It was a fixer-upper I thought I'd renovate in my spare time to take my mind off Caroline. I wouldn't have time to feel sorry for myself. Now, the lack of time was holding me back, not grief.

A few years ago, I was asked to renovate a home to make it handicapped accessible. The family received a grant from the state that didn't cover the cost of the entire renovation. I paid for the difference with Caroline's life insurance. Between that experience and what we went through with Caroline when she was in hospice, the idea for my charity was born, Morrison Construction Rebuilds. It was more than renovations. It was making a home where the family's lives were manageable.

Now, I had a long waitlist. I wanted to help every single applicant on the list even though it wasn't realistic. I took on more and more projects. The result was not much time left over in the evening to fix my home. Maybe, I needed to make time for it.

I grabbed a change of clothes before heading to my bathroom to shave and shower. I turned on the water in the shower, with its mildew-covered tiles, turning the knob to warm, allowing the room to steam up before I stepped inside. Maybe it was time to demo this bathroom. Make this home a sanctuary instead of a rest stop.

I wasn't sure where to start. Instead of creating a personal sanctuary, maybe I could renovate it and sell it. I could move on to the next project without becoming attached to it.

My head lowered and my shoulders slumped as water sluiced over my skin. Maybe it was time for a change. Seeing, Hadley, yesterday had sparked something inside of me. A desire to feel something again.

There was a strange feeling of hope and anticipation tingling under my skin. I told myself it had nothing to do with the possibility of Hadley dropping off the estimate at the studio or her stopping by for a class.

Thinking of Hadley had my cock at half-mast. All I had to do was grip the base, squeeze, and stroke it. The desire was there tingling at the base of my spine and my cock twitched with desire, imagining what Hadley looked like under her tailored suit. I closed my eyes and braced my hand on the shower wall and stroked my cock faster with thoughts of her naked body under mine and her voice crying out my name, until I groaned with my release.

My awareness slowly returned. The water cooled. The wind outside rattled the house and the cold draft filtered through the drafty windows. I took several deep breaths thinking of anything other than the feel of Hadley's hand in mine or the way her ass looked in her skirt.

I turned off the water and dried off, careful not to look in the mirror. I was afraid of what I might see—a person who wanted to move on and live life again.

I quickly dressed in work-out pants and one of my Hapkido studio T-shirts. I placed my instructor uniform and striped belt in my bag. When I stepped outside, I welcomed the bite of the wind through my flimsy pants and jacket. There

was a lot of traffic on the road this morning with the brunch crowd. I parked in front of my studio. I couldn't resist glancing at the law firm next door as I unlocked the door. The office appeared to be closed.

Maybe I wouldn't see Hadley today after all. I doubted she'd be working on a Saturday when they had no clients. Maybe she wouldn't reach out. I'd been reluctant to hire her, so why would she drop off the estimate? She'd move on to more likely clients—ones who wanted her help. I hesitated, my hand on the door, waiting to push it open. Maybe I should have hired her yesterday. Then I'd feel good that I'd taken a step to clean up my businesses and take things seriously. I didn't have the energy to research someone else.

I finally pushed open the door to the dark studio. I turned on the lights, turning up the heat slightly so that it was warmer but not too hot for class. When children and parents filtered in a few minutes before ten, I picked an older student to run the warm-up and stretches so my mind could wander.

What could I do to increase interest other than using a contract and incentives—summer camp or after school programs? Did I want the responsibility of hiring someone to conduct those for me? Did I want my business to grow in that way, or did I want to keep it small and family-like?

Before Caroline got sick, I'd planned to go into business with my brother, Nolan, but those plans derailed with numerous doctor's appointments and treatments. Then I was overcome with grief. Maybe, it was time to talk to him about it. If I expanded the construction business, we'd have the ability to take on more projects, including more charity projects.

I shook off my thoughts so I could ease into teaching. Toward the end of class, I knelt on the mat and held a paddle up as the students ran full-speed toward me, executed a front roll, and landed lightly on their feet in front of me in fighting stance. I yelled out the name of the kick and braced myself for the impact on the paddle in my hand. With each thud and "Aye!" the vibration of the impact pierced down my wrist, into my arm and through my body, grounding me.

This is what I'd lived for—kids learning and perfecting each new skill. The confidence in a girl's eyes when she landed it with such force, my hand flew back a few inches. The pride in a boy's eyes when he executed a reverse spin kick for the first time. Maybe I wouldn't have what everyone else desired, a wife or a family, but I had this.

The bell above the door tinkled when I pounded my paddle on the mat three times in succession, the signal for the students to clean up and line-up to wait for more instruction. The kids responded with a series of claps and yelled, "Yes, sir," in a practiced ritual, I took pride in.

While the students rushed around to fold up mats and hang up the paddles, I turned to see who'd arrived. Hadley Winters stood, elbows on the half-wall between the waiting area and the studio, watching me with interest. Her eyes met mine and she smiled wide, my heart rate picking up, despite the talk I had with myself that I wasn't ready to feel anything for a woman. I wasn't ready for the anticipation shooting down my spine, the pounding of blood in my ears, the slickness of my palms. I wasn't ready.

"Are you here to drop off the estimate?" I stood and turned so that only the half-wall separated us.

"Yes, and to try out a class."

My eyes traveled over her the top half of her body I could see over the wall, which she'd clothed in a shiny work-out top that looked silky, and black leggings which clung to her body like a second skin. "Let me finish this class and then we can talk."

I thumped my paddle on the wall to get their attention.

Hadley jumped in surprise. The students stood on the line of tape on the floor.

"Yes, sir," they yelled, their eyes straight ahead, their backs straight.

I wondered what Hadley thought of the studio. I split them into groups, allowing an older student to take half of the class and I took the other half. I knelt on the floor as I called each

child up to perform a self-defense move based on their belt color. The children's classes were mixed in ages and abilities, since I'd noticed parents liked dropping off all their kids in one class versus having to attend two or three different classes based on the children's ages.

I tried to ignore Hadley and focused on the next move, directed each child, praising and correcting when necessary. When everyone had a chance to participate, I lined them up and we went over a few kicks and punches. When it was time for class to end, I broke them off and they ran to their parents.

I followed the kids out to the waiting area. The chatter was loud as they greeted their parents. I waited to talk to any parents or kids who had questions. After everyone trickled out, I turned my attention to Hadley.

She'd shifted her hip resting against the wall as she nodded toward the work-out area. "This is impressive. The kids listen to you. You're a great teacher."

Pride flowed through my body at her words. "When I got back into karate a few years ago, I did it for a workout, but the Dojo made me teach. I discovered I was good at it. The kids liked me, and I enjoyed it."

Hadley tilted her head as if she were listening to each word I said, like what I said was important.

"That's what made you want to open a studio?"

"Yes." Between the studio and the handicapped accessible renovations I took on, it allowed me to channel my grief positively.

"I saw a sign on your bulletin board about your charity, Morrison Construction Rebuilds."

I followed her finger to the bulletin board. "Yeah, that's something I started after—" I almost said after my wife died, but I stopped myself. "About four years ago. There are small adaptations, like installing a ramp or a chair lift for a senior citizen. I do those for whoever asks. But there are also more complex, full-home renovations for disabled individuals. Right now, I'm only able to take on a couple of home renovations a

year. I'd like to do more. That's why I want to make sure I'm earning whatever I can from the studio and contracting business."

"That's smart."

"It was my brother's idea to host a reveal party for the next house I'm completing. He invited local news outlets to gain interest and possibly donations. Rebuilds need the money, but I'm not a fan of attention."

Hadley's eyes shone with admiration and respect. "What you're doing is amazing."

"Thank you. I enjoy doing it." My cheeks felt warm. I did it because I loved the work and the looks on the family's faces when they saw their new home. I didn't do it for accolades, even though her admiration felt good.

She toed off her shoes before making her way around the wall to where I stood on the mats. "Are you ready to show me some moves?"

Her tone was flirty. I wanted to show her what I loved about karate and entice her into taking classes, but I couldn't ignore the racing of my heart when she stood before me. I'd have to be close to her when I showed her moves. I'd have to touch her.

I swallowed before answering, my throat suddenly dry. "That was my only class today, so, I'm free to focus on you."

My words were flirtatious, but the act was rusty in this post-Caroline me. I turned so she couldn't see the expression on my face. I walked to the middle of the mats to run through a warm-up.

I led her through a few stretches, trying to act as if she was any other student. "Do you remember what style you studied when you were a kid?"

"I don't." Her expression was apologetic.

"That's okay. We'll go through some kicks and see what you remember."

She nodded before getting into a loose fighting stance. I tapped under her elbow to lift it. I touched her shoulders, so she'd roll them back and adjusted her posture. I stood back to see the effect and then I tapped her feet, encouraging her to widen her stance. "Perfect."

I walked around her, noting the curve of her ass in those leggings, the tone in her calves, and the way the position pushed her breasts out. I stopped in front of her. Her face was slightly pink. I hoped my proximity and scrutiny affected her.

"Show me your punches." I ran through each one and then the kicks—the middle toe, the reverse spin, the ax, increasing in difficulty until she faltered. When she didn't know the name for a kick, I demonstrated the form.

"I'm impressed that you remembered so much when it had been so long since you took a class."

"Thanks. I am too." She stood with her hands on her hips.

"Even if you don't come back for another class, I'd like to show you a few self-defense moves, if that's alright?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

I went through the instructions and moves for a few basic defense moves I taught the lower belts. I tried to be objective and not think about how soft her skin felt beneath my fingers or the feel of her in my arms. I was close enough to smell her floral scent.

When we finished, I asked, "When you practiced, what did you like about it?"

I crossed my arms over my chest, my legs spread wide stood as I waited for her to respond.

She licked her lips, drawing my eyes to them. "I guess, the ability to focus on what was in front of me and block everything out."

I nodded in appreciation of her answer, trying to ignore the heat that flared in my body when she licked her lips. "Are you interested in earning a black belt? I can assign you a belt based on your abilities and you can work toward it."

Hadley sighed, looking away from me. “Honestly, I’ve sunk my money into the law firm, and I don’t have any to spare right now. Normally, it wouldn’t be a problem but—”

I understood that—placing all your hopes and dreams into one thing. I knew the worst that could happen when it all came crashing down. I wanted her to complete something she wanted to do as a child. To see the look of pride in her eyes when she did. I opened my mouth to respond—

“And before you offer to let me do it for free—don’t. You have to stop taking on charity cases. You’re running a business,” she said in a chiding tone.

“This is different. I’d be helping out a friend.” I told myself my actions were friendly, but I wasn’t so sure.

“It would be good. I’ve missed doing something physical and it would be nice to get my black belt—to finish something that was my own.” Her expression was wistful.

“You have finished a lot on your own, haven’t you? You went to law school. You started your own business, even if you have partners, it’s still commendable.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Your parents must be proud of you.”

A shadow crossed her face. “I don’t know about that. My dad wanted me to work for his business. He still does.”

I shouldn’t be concerned about her relationship with her dad. I should leave it alone even though I wanted to know what her childhood was like. Was her dad the reason she’d moved here?

“The evaluation is complimentary and if you change your mind, we can discuss options.”

“That sounds reasonable.” She grabbed a water bottle from her bag.

What was I doing? Did I want this woman around me more? That’s what would happen if I worked with her. She had quite a few belts to get through before she’d be ready for a

black belt. Depending on how hard she worked and how often she came, it might be a year or two.

“Did you want to discuss the estimate?” She pulled a file out of her bag and handed me the paper.

I focused on the numbers in front of me. “I’ve never hired an attorney before. I guess I was expecting it to cost more.”

She placed a hand on my forearm. “I want to be fair and we’re a new firm. You’d be taking a chance on us and if you do, I want to reward you for that. I want to promise you that these will always be your prices. For as long as I’m a partner, anyway.”

I tried to focus on her words, but I was distracted by the warmth of her hand. “I’ll think about it.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything less.” She slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder before walking toward the door.

I followed her, intending to lock the door when she left.

She turned to face me. “Thank you for this morning.”

“You’re welcome.” I wondered if I should mention she was welcome to try another class for free or if that was too pushy.

She turned, opening the door to leave.

“I have a class at six on Monday if you’re interested.” The words came out in a rush.

“I’ll think about it.” She turned slightly to me, a smile playing on her lips.

“That’s fair.” I hoped she’d take me up on my offer.

I watched her walk down the street and out of sight.

I closed my eyes and rocked on my heels. If I were her teacher, I’d have to be close to her, touch her. Could I be that close to her and not want more? If she were my attorney, we couldn’t cross that line anyway.

CHAPTER SIX

Hadley

I FORCED MYSELF TO WALK HOME, NOT LOOKING BACK EVEN though I felt Cade's eyes on me. Was he as affected as I was? When he grasped my arm to demonstrate a move, an overwhelming feeling of longing and desire streamed through me as my heart pounded. His thumb softly stroked the sensitive skin on the inside of my wrist and my breath came in short pants.

His touch was thrilling and sweet torture. I told myself it was the proximity to a man who took care of his body.

When he brought my back against his very defined chest and his arm across my neck, I'd closed my eyes for a second and breathed in his scent—the starch of his uniform and soap—before I cleared my mind and allowed my prior training to take over.

I checked his eyes to see if there was a flicker of interest, but there wasn't. He kept his lower body away from mine. I didn't see his eyes dilate, his breathing increase, or his words waver.

Cade had lines around his eyes that made me guess he was in his thirties. He'd seen life. He'd lived it and suffered. An aura of sadness clung to him like the smell of sawdust. It never lifted and it never washed off. If I pursued him, I'd have to deal with the source of his pain. Would he trust me enough to share it with me?

I'd relive today when I closed my eyes tonight. I'd remember his scent, his touch, and the strength of his body as

he twisted, flipped, and maneuvered me on those mats. I could easily imagine how he'd take control in bed.

Was it a good idea to continue with him as my teacher and my client? Especially when I was physically attracted to him. If he hired me, we couldn't date. A sexual relationship between an attorney and a current client was a violation of the rules of professional conduct. I'd worked too hard to have my license suspended or taken away.

Not only was it unethical for anything to happen, but I never pursued men. In my circle, potential suitors were analyzed, much like the moves we'd gone through at the studio. Did the man come from a reputable family with money? Did he have a good education and job? Was this a good match—one that our families would support? It was never as visceral and straightforward as reacting to someone's touch, his smell, or the desire to make someone smile.

I walked up the steps to my second-floor apartment, feeling pride in my tidy apartment, filled with things I'd bought. I stepped through the sliding glass door to the porch, overlooking the water. It was the reason I'd settled on this place. It was within walking distance to my office. It was calm and peaceful.

Had I felt anything for Layton when I first met him? A tingling in my blood, a vibration under my skin, a lightness in my chest, or a thundering of my heart? No, I hadn't. Instead, I'd listed his details as I'd study for an exam.

Degree from a prestigious business school. Check.

A well-respected family who came from old money. Check.

A job in the successful family business. Check.

But the other side of the coin was a man who was cold, calculating, and manipulative like my father.

When I imagined a marriage proposal, I thought I'd be elated. I'd be looking down at the man I could see forever with. My heart would be full. Shouldn't the proposal come with a declaration of love?

Kissing Layton was something I did but hadn't enjoyed. I hadn't imagined sinking into his hold to feel his body pressed against mine. I didn't close my eyes to breathe in his scent without distractions. It was nothing like how my imagination ran wild when it came to Cade.

Maybe the reason I was attracted to Cade was because he was his own man. He owned a business and made his own decisions. He didn't seem like he let anyone influence or pressure him. That was evident in how he'd assessed my moves this morning and carefully reviewed the estimate.

With his attentiveness to detail and form, I suspected he'd be phenomenal in bed. He'd note every sharp inhale of breath, each arch into him, and do whatever caused those reactions over and over again to please me. His pleasure would be derived from mine. The thought caused my core to clench.

My phone buzzed with an income text.

Cade: It's Cade. I hope it's ok for me to text. You gave me your card with this number on it.

Seeing his name pop up on my screen sent warmth coursing through my body.

Hadley: Of course.

Cade: I want to hire you. These prices are so low I can't say no.

Excitement shot through my chest that he wanted to hire me. I had my first client. My stomach sank. That meant my fantasies about him had to remain in my imagination. While he was my client, we couldn't date. I sighed, resignation flowing through my body.

Hadley: I'll bring over the attorney-client agreement on Monday and we can get started right away. The agreement that brought the code of ethics into play—the one that said I couldn't date my client.

Cade: Perfect. I'll get my overdue contracts organized.

Being his attorney would have to be enough.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cade

A WEIGHT LIFTED FROM MY CHEST AFTER I HIT SEND ON MY text to Hadley. It was the right decision. More money coming in meant more money for my Rebuilds program. If I wanted to approach Nolan and ask him to be my partner, overdue contracts would not be a good selling point.

I placed my gym bag on the bench inside my door and surveyed the dated kitchen with its aging appliances, chipped Formica, the peeling linoleum, and the walls that broke up the first floor. Which should I tackle first?

My body hummed with energy. I grabbed my ax and goggles from the garage and stood in front of the decorative wall separating the kitchen from the living room.

The tightness in my chest loosened with each swing. The vibration of the ax striking the wall reverberated down my arm into my shoulder. I swung the ax, reveling in the holes in the wall and the chunks of drywall dropping to the floor. A feeling of accomplishment—of *doing something for myself*—flowed through my veins as endorphins released in my brain, spreading a feeling of rightness.

I lowered the blade of the ax to the floor, still gripping the handle tightly. I relished the ache in my muscles, the twinge in my shoulder, the sweat which beaded on my forehead, and dripped down my back. All that was left were the pieces of drywall and dust on the floor. I should have covered my counters and floors first, but that didn't deflect from the sense of completion, of a new beginning.

I'd hired an attorney to handle the businesses. I started demolition of my house. Today was different than the other days. And for the first time since Caroline died, I wasn't afraid of different.

My phone buzzed on the counter. I brushed off the drywall dust before seeing Nolan's name on the screen.

"Hey, Nolan, what's up?" I asked.

"Cade?"

"Yeah, who else would it be?"

"Um. I don't know. It's just—" He cleared his throat. "You never answer the phone. I was going to leave a message."

"Do you want me to hang up so you can leave a message?" My lips twitched in an unfamiliar motion.

"No, man. I wanted to talk to you. I'm just surprised." His voice was tight. Like he was fighting through emotion.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he blew out a sigh. "Everything's fine. I just didn't expect... You sound good. Real good. What are you doing?"

When my parents faded into the background after Caroline died, Nolan was the one who called once a week and dropped by with take-out. I told him to leave me alone, but he wouldn't listen. He never forced me to talk about anything. He was there. I was grateful for his presence and support. I was thankful he hadn't given up on me even though I'd never expressed that to him. I was an ungrateful bastard.

"I'm tearing down that wall in my kitchen."

There was silence on the line for a few seconds like he was thinking. "You're demoing your house?"

"Yeah, I am."

"I'll be right over." He hung up.

I pulled water out of the fridge, took a long pull, closing my eyes as I relished the feeling of cold water sliding down my parched throat. Everything felt a little sharper, brighter,

and more in tune today. I grabbed a few garbage bags and gloves to clean up the mess, covering the vents and the counters with the tarp I kept in my truck. When I finished, I heard the key in the lock and the front door open.

Nolan stepped inside in a white T-shirt and old jeans, his usual work outfit, his eyes widening as he took everything in before finally settling on me. “I didn’t believe you.”

He gave me a long considering look. I suspected he wanted to ask what was going on even though he didn’t. “What do you need me to do?”

“You want to do the honors?” I picked up the reciprocating saw.

“I didn’t think this day would come.” His voice was thick with emotion as he turned his face away to put on a spare set of goggles and gloves he’d pulled from his back pocket.

I was the older brother, but when Caroline died—a big part of me was extinguished too. The part Nolan looked up to, the guy people respected was gone. I was a shell going through the motions but not really living. I was ready to get back to being the guy I was before.

When the framing and studs were down, we cleaned up before we loaded the debris into my truck bed. I’d take it to the dump later.

Nolan leaned his forearms on the truck rim. The breeze off the water was refreshing after working so hard. “What brought this on?”

I saw the happiness in his eyes. “Honestly, I don’t know.”

“You’ve moved on in some ways, with Morrison Construction Rebuilds, your house and our parents, but in other ways, you haven’t. It’s like you were stuck. I’m not even sure you were aware of it.”

I shifted on my feet and stuffed my hands in my pockets. I hadn’t realized Nolan was so perceptive. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get over it, but it’s time to plan for my future. I can fix this house up and sell it.”

His forehead wrinkled. “Is that what you want? I thought you bought this place to live in?”

“Regardless of what I want, rebuilding is the first step.”

“I’m happy for you, man. Do you think you’ll come to family dinner on Sunday?”

After Caroline died, I couldn’t face a house full of memories of Caroline healthy and happy. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“I miss you. I miss the brother I had.”

“I do, too. I’d like to get back to being that guy.”

Nolan slapped me on the back. “I’ll take whatever I can get because that guy—” He gestured at my house. “That guy wasn’t my brother. He was depressed. He was lost. I couldn’t reach that guy.”

I thought I had moved on. My charity occupied my attention. To hear my brother’s thoughts, sent regret coursing through my body. “I’ll try and be better.”

“I hope so. I’m here for you. Mom and Dad are here for you.”

“Want to order some pizza?” I wanted to change the subject. It was too heavy for the day I was having.

“Sure. You got some beer in this house?” Nolan held open the front door for me.

“You brought some over last time.” I pulled open the fridge that was empty except for beer, eggs, and some cheese. I handed a beer to Nolan as he scrolled through his phone. He ordered a couple of pizzas while I sat on the couch and turned on the TV to college football.

Nolan settled into the recliner. “So, what’s next?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you renovating the kitchen first?” He tipped his beer at the space we’d opened by removing the wall.

The kitchen looked even more outdated that the wall was gone. “I hadn’t decided, but now that the wall’s down, I probably should.”

“Knocking down the wall made a huge difference.”

“It always does.” I sipped my beer content to be present in the moment.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hadley

I WALKED THE FEW STEPS BETWEEN THE FIRM'S FRONT DOOR and the Hapkido studio's, carrying the attorney-client agreement and proposed contracts in a file. I'd spent a good portion of the weekend drafting various contract options for his karate studio. I didn't have to, but I wanted to impress Cade, so he'd refer us to his business associates and friends. At least that's what I told myself. It had nothing to do with impressing him as a man who I was interested in. I needed this. I needed a sign that I hadn't made a huge mistake in tying up all my savings in this firm.

As long as I didn't act on my attraction to him, I'd be fine. And so far, Cade hadn't given me any indication that he saw me as anything more.

I peered into the studio's dark windows. It was fifteen minutes until his four p.m. class. He said he usually arrived earlier, but all the lights were off. Maybe he was in his office. I knocked.

"What are you doing here?" a deep rumbling voice came from behind, startling me.

I turned around and came face to face with Cade. "Oh, hi. I thought you were—" I gestured behind me at the studio "—in there."

His lips twitched in amusement. It was so unexpected I couldn't take my eyes from his lips and almost missed his words. "I just got here."

My face heated and I lifted the folder of documents I clutched in my fingers between us. “I wanted to drop these off. It’s your attorney-client agreement and the proposed contracts.”

He raised his brow. “You drafted the contract already?”

I nodded, suddenly worried my hard work made me seem overeager. “A few options. We can go over them, see if they align with what you were thinking.”

Cade unlocked the door and held it open. I brushed past him as I walked inside. His familiar smell washed over me. My hair caught on the scruff on his chin. I turned just as he brushed it off and our eyes caught. An overwhelming desire to go on tiptoes and kiss the scruff on his chin coursed through me. I wanted to rest my hand on his chest to see if it was as hard as it looked.

I needed him to sign this damn agreement, so I’d stop thinking of him as a man and start thinking of him as a client, one I had no business thinking about beyond his legal needs.

“Let’s go to my office.” His voice was gruff, as if he was just as affected as I was.

I followed him down the hallway, through a door on the right.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t had a chance to get my files together yet.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I was anxious to get started.” I looked around his small office with its tall metal file cabinets, a basket of lollipops on his desk, and uniforms folded neatly on a shelf. He sat behind the empty desk. I sat in the only other chair, thinking he must not have many guests. Then I opened the folder on the desk between us and slid the agreement over to him.

“There’s nothing wrong with working hard.” He clasped his hands in front of him.

I ignored the compliment, not wanting him to be kind and understanding on top of being attractive. I needed to maintain my professionalism. “You can read, review, and sign it when

you're ready. I'll be happy to answer any questions. The estimate for the work we agreed on is attached."

He leaned his elbows on the desk and read through the agreement while I waited. The walls were empty. There were no degrees or pictures of a family. There was nothing that would tell me more about him. There wasn't even a mug with a saying on it that would tell me if he was a secret comedian or owned a cat or a dog. There was nothing.

I was so focused on trying to read the spines of the books on the shelf behind him I didn't realize he was signing the agreement until I heard the scratch of his pen on paper. "Sorry, did you have any questions?"

"No. It was self-explanatory." He pushed the signed paperwork across the desk.

I scanned the document before I added my signature under his. I stared at our names on the lines as the knowledge I couldn't pursue anything with him pierced my heart. I covered my disappointment with a smile. "I'll make you a copy and drop it by later."

"What else do you have for me?" He nodded at the rest of the paperwork in the file.

"I drafted membership contracts based on various incentives."

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost four p.m. I hadn't noticed it before, but the sounds of talking and laughter filtered down the hall through the door to his open door.

I rose from the chair, gathering my things. "I'm sorry. I'll go so you can get ready for class."

"It's not a problem. I'll take a look and call to set up an appointment."

I stepped toward the door when he said, "Did you forget this?"

I turned to find him holding the agreement in his hands.

I flushed and took the agreement. “Thanks for reminding me.”

He put his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “Have you thought any more about taking classes? I don’t mean to pressure you, but you’re giving me legal services for a reduced rate. A few classes are the least I could offer in return.”

I tilted my head, wondering if he was creating an opportunity for us to spend time together, or he was just nice. “Oh, you don’t have to do that. You’re doing me a favor.”

“Come to my adult class. I teach one at six p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. There are teenagers and adults.”

We wouldn’t be alone. His offer could have been a friendly one. I couldn’t resist seeing him again outside my capacity as his attorney. “Okay.”

“Great.” Then he smiled—the first actual smile I’d gotten from him. I practically stumbled I was so surprised. “Thanks for this. You’re helping me in more ways than one.”

“You’re welcome.” My voice came out strangled. I couldn’t take my eyes off the way his smile made him look younger.

“I’d better get dressed.” His smile turned almost teasing.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” *Sorry, I was distracted by the way your smile transformed your face into someone else—someone younger and carefree.* And now I was thinking of him changing out of his work clothes into his uniform. I imagined him naked. Heat flooded my face as I whirled out of his office.

I didn’t meet the eyes of anyone who was in the waiting room. I needed to get back to my office where I could analyze the conversation word by word and take a mental picture of his smile to remember it later. I hadn’t known him long, but something told me he didn’t smile often, if at all. Yet he’d smiled at me.



Cade

I FOLLOWED HER TO MY OFFICE DOOR, WATCHING HER UNTIL she left the studio. Then I softly closed and locked the door so I could change into my uniform. When I asked her to come to a class, I'd held my breath. I'd wanted her to say yes, even if it probably wasn't a good idea. She was my attorney. We had a professional relationship. Why was I so drawn to her? Part of it was that I got the feeling she was looking for something, or she needed something. In a way, she was lost too. I recognized the need to be seen when I looked into her eyes.

A general feeling of well-being stayed with me for the rest of the day. I'd committed to improving my businesses, my home, and the relationships within my family. I tried not to think about whether this would stick or if I'd slide backward. When I was around Hadley, hope filled my lungs, making it easier to breathe.

CHAPTER NINE

Hadley

THE REST OF THE WEEK, I BUSIED MYSELF REVIEWING NEW cases. I couldn't stop thinking about Cade's offer for me to take a few free classes. I didn't have friends other than Avery or a social life, so I didn't have an excuse. People said they put kids into karate to gain confidence which was something I sorely needed now.

I was on my own for the first time in my life. I was supposed to be discovering who I was and what I wanted even though I hadn't made any progress.

The phone rang. I picked it up, hoping it was a new client—someone who'd seen our advertisement and wanted to hire us. "Arrington, Gannon, & Winters, how can I help you?"

"We need to talk," Dad said.

Ugh. Why hadn't I checked the caller ID before answering? "I'm at work."

"The Kids Speak gala is coming up. We were going to announce the expansion to other cities and ask people to invest in your idea. How can we do that if you're not here?" Dad's voice was gruff; it was one he used when you weren't supposed to argue with him.

"I'll be there." Frustration crept up my neck. I'd hired a director to run Kids Speak in New Orleans, but I still oversaw it from Annapolis and was the face of the company.

"Permanently?"

"No, we've discussed this. My life is here."

He was quiet for so long I thought maybe he was going to let it go. “If the business goes under, I won’t have the money to invest.”

My stomach dropped. Could I run the charity without his help? Would I get enough donations at the upcoming gala to run it on my own? “I’m not sure what I can do about that.”

“You need to prove to everyone things are good between you and Layton. If you do, Aiden Black will sign the deal, so you’ll have the money for Kids Speak. Think what you can do with both of us backing you.”

Putting me in this impossible situation felt like a vice was squeezing my heart. Support his business and Layton, then my nonprofit would survive. Don’t and everything I worked so hard for would be gone. I’d looked forward to expanding the program here to be more hands-on. I wanted to see the joy on a child’s face when he or she read a sentence without stuttering or when they said his or her Rs correctly. I closed my eyes, hoping I wasn’t making a huge mistake. “I’ll be there representing Kids Speak. But everything isn’t fine with Layton and I won’t pretend otherwise.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

It was precisely the sort of pressure-filled situation I’d moved away from. The heavy weight of responsibilities and expectations settled back on my chest. This was the moment I needed to take a stand. “My life is here. I’m not working for your company and I’m not pretending things are fine with Layton.”

“If you want me to invest in Kids Speak, then you need to work for me. Put on a show for Layton and his father. I don’t care if you marry him, but you sure as hell better make up with him. Do whatever it takes.” He hung up without waiting for a response.

I dropped my head into my hands. I had to go to the gala, but I wasn’t sure what I was going to do about the rest of it. I wanted to stay strong. I wanted to be my own person even if I was still a long way from figuring out who I was.

“Are you okay?” Avery asked.

I raised my head to find her in the doorway her concerned gaze on me. “Yeah, it was just my dad.”

“There’s no ‘just your dad’ when it’s *your* dad.” Avery leaned her shoulder against the doorway.

Avery didn’t know all of the details, but she knew he was the reason I’d moved here. “True. I have the gala coming up for my charity, Kids Speak. We were going to announce our intention to expand to other cities. So far, my biggest investor is my dad and he can’t continue to back me if his company is going under.”

“That sucks. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have any extra capital for it. I can ask for donations at the gala, but that’s not a long-term solution. Without his backing, I’d need to plan more fundraisers.” The money my dad was fronting was the reason my charity had gained ground so quickly when other nonprofits faltered. Without him, I couldn’t expand. I couldn’t help as many kids.

“What if we did something here? We don’t have the funds to invest at this point, but what if the firm backs it and we have an event here to raise money. Highlight why we need to expand in Anne Arundel County and the good it could do.” Avery’s voice got more and more animated as she talked. “We could approach possible donors. I know Dylan would love to be involved.”

“It gets the firm’s name out there too. It could work.”

“Will your ex be at the charity gala?” Avery raised her brow and moved a few steps into the room.

“Yes, my dad wants me to make nice with him, so Layton’s father will invest in his company.”

Avery slid into my guest chair. “He wants you to marry him?”

I grimaced. “He said he doesn’t care if I marry him, but I’m supposed to do quote unquote whatever it takes.”

“You’re not going to get back with him, are you?”

My phone buzzed with an incoming email. I clicked on the message when I saw the subject line *Hadley’s itinerary* and held my phone up to Avery. “His assistant already sent me my itinerary with airline tickets.”

“I thought his business was having financial troubles?”

“I guess I’m a good investment if I can get Layton’s dad to come around. It’s always the same. He manipulates me to do what he needs. Whatever benefits him or the family in some way, but this feels different. He’s threatening the thing I’m most proud of.” I glanced at the photo on the edge of my desk. Me, in my law school cap and gown, with a shiny ivory sash indicating graduating *summa cum laude* across my chest. Not even my graduation from law school topped what I’d accomplished with Kids Speak and if Dad had his way, we wouldn’t continue operating as we had.

“Is it the same this time?”

This felt bigger. Dad needed me to walk away from the firm I’d invested my savings into, to work for him, and make-up with Layton—someone I didn’t love or even respect that much. The thought made it difficult to get air into my lungs. “What do I do?”

Avery blew out a breath. “I don’t know. I’ve never dealt with anyone that controlling. I can’t even imagine having a parent who would go to such lengths. How important is Kids Speak?”

“It’s more important than anything. It’s the thing I’m most proud of.” I’d hoped the firm would be a success and I could slowly take back control of the charity from my dad. But it looked like that would have to come sooner than I thought.

“Then we’ll do whatever it takes to make sure it survives and thrives.”

“Thank you.” The idea of the firm backing Kids Speak and its expansion had possibilities. But doing what my dad wanted was a sure thing.

CHAPTER TEN

Hadley

FOR THE REST OF THE DAY, MY UNEASE ESCALATED UNTIL MY heart thudded painfully in my chest, my stomach twisting into knots. No amount of pain medication eased my tension headache. I was no closer to finding a solution or prepping my case for the next day, so I decided to run home and grab workout clothes to attend the adult Hapkido class.

I pulled open the door to Cade's studio, my heart rate kicking up for a different reason. I was excited and nervous to see him. He stood in the center of the room in his black uniform, red and black striped belt, his feet bare on the mat as he instructed the kids. His voice was soft yet commanding—the kids listened to him with rapt attention and a little bit of awe.

He was right. He was good at this and it made him even more attractive.

"Are you new?" a woman dressed in a black uniform and brown belt asked.

"Yes. I don't have a uniform yet."

"That's okay. Cade will get you one after your first session if you like it. Have you practiced before?"

"When I was a kid."

"What made you come back?" The woman eyed me as if checking out the competition.

My eyes flew to Cade's, wondering how to get out of this conversation. "I work at the law firm next door and—" I

couldn't say he came to me for work necessarily because of attorney-client privilege. "I saw the sign and wanted to check it out."

"Have you met Cade?" the woman asked.

"She has." Cade's voice came from in front of us, low and full of promise—or at least that's how I interrupted it. Each time I heard his rumbling voice, I yearned to be closer to him.

My eyes traveled up his chest to the stubble on his chin and finally to his blue eyes. He looked pleased to see me and my traitorous heart thumped faster.

"Hi." My voice was soft and breathless. I hoped the woman next to us didn't notice.

"You have a new student?" the woman asked. She was shorter and stockier than me, with curly hair and brown eyes. She was cute, but she was even younger than me.

"I hope we do," Cade said to her, keeping his eyes on mine.

My nerves tingled with anticipation.

"We'll see." I couldn't stop the flirty tone from coming through my words as I cocked my hip, drawing his eyes down my skin-tight tank and black leggings. His gaze was like a smooth caress.

"I hope she doesn't slow class down," the woman said, irritation crept into her voice.

"Vanessa, you know everyone is welcome to come to the adult class. I tested her myself."

Vanessa huffed.

Cade was different from the first time we met. Then he'd been subdued. Now he took in everything—my body, my actions, and his eyes lingered on my lips when I talked. My blood pumped faster, in anticipation of what, I wasn't sure.

I wanted to ask if he was okay but not in front of Vanessa. I'd been worried about being so close to him since I was attracted to him, but I hadn't accounted for the fact that

another woman liked him—and probably had for a while. Vanessa concluded there was something between Cade and me. She'd pegged me as her competition when I wasn't.

"Let's get you a uniform. Come back to my office."

I felt the animosity rolling off Vanessa in waves as I followed him to his office. The belt around his waist accentuated his trim waist and broad shoulders.

He stopped in front of the shelf with neatly folded uniforms. "I'm surprised to see you here so soon. I thought you'd think about it for a few weeks, or I wouldn't see you at all."

"I planned to think it over longer, but things changed." I didn't want him to think I was desperate to see him.

"How so?" He flipped through the uniforms on the shelf.

"You know, family stuff." I hoped he was distracted and wouldn't ask any follow-up questions.

"This one should fit." He handed the carefully folded uniform to me, my fingers brushing his, sending a charge through my arm.

"Thanks."

"I'll grab you a belt." He pulled a box out of the closet and rifled through it. "What's this family stuff you mentioned?"

"I came here to get some distance from my family—they can be a little overbearing at times." I smiled to show him it was no big deal.

"Overbearing to the point of moving across the country for space?" He held the blue-colored belt out to me.

My mouth dropped open slightly at his accuracy. "Why do you ask that?"

"I was curious about why you moved here."

I wasn't ready to tell him everything. I barely knew him, and it was too personal for our attorney-client relationship. "My co-worker told me about her friends starting a business here. It seemed like a good opportunity."

He raised his brow like he didn't believe me.

"Where can I change?" I held my breath, hoping that he'd let it go. I already felt vulnerable around him because I was attracted to him. I didn't want him to know about my father and the way I'd let him control me over the years.

"I don't have a locker room. There's a bathroom upfront that will be packed since class just ended. Feel free to get dressed in here. The door locks." Then he was gone.

Should I have told him about my family? No, he was my teacher and my client. My issues were none of his business, just like his past was not my concern.

I locked the door to get dressed. Cade's desk was empty, but there were books on the shelves. I stepped closer to check out the titles. A few were instructional books on teaching Hapkido to adults and kids. I traced the spine of one with my finger, *How to Handle Grief, What to do When a Loved One Dies*. Why was it in his office?

I quickly stepped back, feeling like I'd been snooping when he'd trusted me in his space. Questions flew through my head. Was this why he'd seemed so sad when we met? Was he grieving a family member, a girlfriend, or a wife?

The discovery made him more off-limits than ever. I shook my head to clear it before walking out of his office to see that class had started without me. I quickly stowed my clothes and shoes in one of the cubbies. I waited at the entrance to the mats and when I met Cade's eyes, he nodded. I bowed before entering.

The students were lined up, going through stretches. I stood on the opposite side of the room from Vanessa. There were a few older men, older teens—two boys and a girl.

As we ran through the stretches, Cade asked each person how their day was—Vanessa talked so long he never got to me. She spoke about her fudge and ice cream shop on Main Street, how busy it was, she needed some work done, and could Cade help her. I stared at the ground to hide my disgust at her transparency.

He said he'd be happy to talk to her outside of class. I saw the flash of disappointment she quickly covered before moving to the next stretch.

I was relieved he'd reined her in. I didn't want to listen to her flirt with him any longer.

After the warm-up, we moved into pairs to practice our kicks. The older man held out a paddle in front of him. Before I landed my first kick, hands landed on my shoulder. "Let's see your fighting stance first."

I shifted on my feet trying to remember what Cade had shown me the other day.

"Good. Do ten sweeps." Cade stood with his feet shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed over his chest.

My palms felt sweaty even though they were fisted tight in the proper stance as I lifted my leg to punch the paddle. The resounding smack was satisfying. As I jumped back into position, I checked Cade's reaction.

"Where's your eye?"

"Sorry." I kicked again, yelling aye. Between the elimination of the word from my mouth and the smack of the paddle, I settled into a good rhythm, barely noticing that Cade was still observing us. When I'd completed ten repetitions, we switched positions.

I held out the paddle to my partner as Cade leaned over so that his words whispered over my ear. "Good job."

I drew in an unsteady breath at his proximity, his breath hot on my skin. I turned to respond, but he'd already moved onto to other students.

"Are you ready?" my partner asked.

"Sorry." I braced myself for the impact. I should have worked with Vanessa; her kicks were probably not as strong as this man's.

At the end of class, Cade approached me. "Did you like it?"

Before answering I took stock of my body—my headache dissipated at some point over the hour, I had an endorphin rush from the work-out, and my chest felt clear. “Yes.”

“Good. How’s your wrist?”

I rubbed it. “It hurts a little.”

“Next time, partner with Vanessa.”

I nodded. We were better matched strength-wise. I didn’t bother to mention she’d probably hate that arrangement.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hadley

“HEY, ARE YOU GOING OUT TONIGHT?” AVERY ASKED, stopping by my desk at five p.m. on Friday.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Well, we could go out if you want.” She looked uncertain. “I don’t have a ton of friends. Most of my friends from high school moved away after graduation. Taylor lives in New Orleans.” She shrugged like it was nothing. “We could go out for dinner, if you want? No big deal if not.” Avery chewed her lower lip.

I usually made friends easily. Since I’d moved, I hadn’t done much besides work, settle in my new apartment, and karate, which I had gone to two more times this week. I’d kept my distance, but I desperately needed a connection here that wasn’t Cade Morrison.

“Sure. I need to go home and change out of my suit, though.”

A relieved smile spread over Avery’s face. “Okay, I’ll send you the address of a restaurant by the water. If we get there after the dinner rush, it shouldn’t be too busy.”



Cade

I HAD A LOT TO MAKE UP FOR WITH NOLAN. NOW THAT I WAS standing in front of the entrance to the restaurant, I wasn’t sure

I was ready. Laughter and voices rang through the door as people came and left.

Nolan: Are you going to come in?

I looked through the large glass window to the bar where Nolan sat glass in hand, his brow raised as he watched me. I couldn't go home, not with him standing there watching me.

I sighed and took the few steps to open the heavy wooden door. I ignored the small hostess stand to my left and headed straight for the empty barstool next to my brother.

"I wasn't sure you were going to come in." Nolan's lips curled in amusement.

"I'm here, aren't I?" I settled into the stool. The last time I was in a bar, it was to see if I could forget about Caroline by being with another woman. It hadn't worked.

"What can I get you?" The bartender stopped in front of me, bracing his hands on the counter.

"Whatever you have on tap is fine. You pick." For the most part, I felt like I'd moved forward with my life since Caroline died even though it still felt weird to go out. I couldn't shake the twinge of guilt.

"I'm happy you're here," Nolan said.

I shifted on the stool to face him slightly. My strained relationship with my family was my fault. "I'm trying. I know I haven't been good company for a long time."

Nolan nodded in acknowledgment.

I had things to make up for with Nolan and my parents. We were quiet for a few seconds until the bartender slid my beer over to me. "Do you need menus?"

"I'll have the crab cake sandwich," Nolan said.

"Me too."

"Have you made any more progress on the house?" Nolan asked.

“I have. I started ripping out the guest bath upstairs.” Thinking about the progress I’d made in a short time felt good.

“You’re demoing everything at once? How will you live there if it’s all ripped up?”

“I’ll save the master suite for last. I’m the only one living there. It will be fine.”

“It’s not like you cook anyway.”

“That’s true.” I’d eaten a lot of takeout after Caroline died.

“Look.” Nolan tilted his beer to point out two women who were seated a few feet from us at the bar and for a few seconds, it was like before I’d met Caroline and we were hanging out as two young single guys. We’d scope the bar—he’d approach and flirt, while I’d always sit back and assess the situation first.

The memory of who I was before Caroline shook me a little. I would never be that guy again, young and carefree. But maybe there was room for me to have more in my life.

One of the women was petite with long brown hair that curled at the ends. The other one had red hair and I couldn’t help but think of Hadley. Their heads were tilted toward each other as if they were deep in conversation, unaware of anything going on around them.

When the bartender stopped in front of them, both women faced him, and I could see their faces. I drew in a sharp breath when I realized the one closest to me was Hadley.

“What, you know them or something?” Nolan asked, drawing my attention to him.

My heart thumped in my chest. I wasn’t ready for anyone to know I was attracted to Hadley. At least, not while we had a professional relationship. “The one with red hair is my attorney.”

“Your what?” His brow furrowed and he placed his beer down on the counter.

“My attorney. I hired her to collect overdue payments on the contracting side and to draft membership contracts for the

karate studio.”

Nolan nodded, respect in his eyes. “It’s about time you took your businesses more seriously.”

I shifted on the barstool, so I was facing Nolan. I didn’t want to interrupt Hadley’s evening out.

When the bartender took their menus and walked away, I heard her say my name, “Cade?”

I turned on my stool to find Hadley standing next to me, her elbow leaning on the counter—her friend was gone.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I winced. My questions were so lame. Clearly, she was out with a friend for dinner and a drink.

“I’m with a friend. You met her at the firm. Avery?” She shrugged. “I don’t know many people here yet.”

“Right.” I tipped my beer to my mouth, feeling her gaze follow the movement.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Nolan asked as he shifted forward on his stool, probably to get a better look at Hadley.

I leaned back so she could see him. “Hadley, this is my younger and more immature brother.”

My voice was light and almost flirtatious. Hadley smiled, reaching past me to shake hands with Nolan. Her hair brushed over my forearm. She was so close to me I could smell her fragrant shampoo. I tried not to think about how close she was to my dick.

“Nice to meet you, Hadley. You work for this asshole?” He dropped her hand and gestured to me.

She looked at me and then my brother, a conspiratorial smile playing on her face. She stood so close to me, it was difficult to breathe. “He hired me to do some work for him. I can’t talk about it. It’s protected by attorney-client privilege.”

“Of course not,” Nolan said. I looked in time to see him wink at her. He saw something between us. It must have been

my reaction to her leaning over my lap. “You’re welcome to join us.”

“Oh, I’m here with a friend. I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Nonsense. We can move to a high-top table.” Nolan grabbed his glass, moving to a table before I could protest.

Given my attraction to Hadley, I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to hang out with her in more social situations. It was hard enough to keep a distance from her in karate.

“Sure.” Hadley went to talk to Avery, who’d returned, presumably to tell her they were joining us.

“Why did you do that?” I asked as I moved to sit next to him. At least the table would be between Hadley and me.

“You’re interested in her.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he held his hand up. “It doesn’t have to be anything or lead anywhere but live a little.”

The idea of dating again made me feel older than my thirty-three years.

“Thanks for letting us join you. This is Avery, my co-worker, and partner at the firm. Avery, this is Nolan, Cade’s younger brother, and you remember Cade.”

Avery smiled shyly at Nolan, shaking his hand before moving to sit across from him. “Of course, I remember Cade. How could I forget our first real client?”

“I didn’t realize you were their first client. We should celebrate.” Nolan waved a finger at the waitress to ask for a round of shots.

I wasn’t confident I could hide my attraction to Hadley sober, much less after drinking.

“Shots?” I asked when the waitress left with his order.

“Relax.” Nolan shook his head at me before focusing back on Avery. “Are you from here?”

Gone was the weary brother who tried to pull me off my couch and out of my house. In his place was the Nolan I remembered from before, lighthearted and fun.

“Sorry, I’m late guys.” A woman dropped her purse on the empty chair next to Avery. “Hi, I’m Dylan.” She held her hand out to me and then Nolan while Avery introduced us.

“Nice to meet you. I’m the third partner at the firm. I’m just finishing up my last couple of days at my old job.” Then she turned to the other women. “I thought we were getting together tonight talk about Hadley’s nonprofit.”

“Nonprofit?” My gaze bounced from Dylan to Hadley. I remembered Hadley mentioning a speech therapy nonprofit during our first meeting, but she hadn’t mentioned it was hers.

“Yeah, it’s something I started in New Orleans and I’d like to expand it to other cities.” Hadley straightened.

“Specifically, in Annapolis,” Dylan said, all business.

“I’d love to hear more.” I shifted in my seat and rested my elbows on the table.

“Right. It’s called Kids Speak. I work with schools to identify kids who need help with their speech but don’t necessarily qualify for assistance. Speech therapists work with them after school. Kids with speech impairments like lisps or stutters are less confident and more likely to avoid saying words that will trigger their impairment to avoid teasing.” Hadley shrugged like it was no big deal, but I wanted to know why she’d chosen that particular issue. Had has she been the object of bullies for a speech impairment?

My charity grew from my experiences. I knew firsthand how difficult it could be to have a disabled or ill person in a home and try to fit in ramps, hospital beds, and equipment, which is why renovating homes to make them handicapped accessible was so important to me. “Why literacy?”

Hadley looked at each of us as if gauging interest before responding. “My brother, Colin, had a stutter when he was younger. He was teased in school, so my dad pulled him out and had him tutored until it stopped.”

I could feel the others’ eyes on us, but I couldn’t look away from Hadley. The way she’d straightened in her seat when Dylan mentioned the nonprofit. The way she’d glanced

down at the table when she'd mentioned her dad's reaction to her brother's stutter.

"I think it's important that kids have access to more services. Schools and teachers are overwhelmed with large class sizes and some parents can't afford extra tutoring. We work with the schools to identify the kids who could use extra help and work with them in after school programs. It's not just about speech therapy. It's also about building their confidence, so they're not afraid to answer questions in class or read out loud."

"That's amazing." Her passion and drive were impressive.

"Thank you." Hadley's face flushed pink.

The waitress stopped at our table to take Dylan's order. When she left Dylan said, "We wanted to brainstorm ideas to help with funding to make expanding Kids Speak a possibility here."

"Cade runs a charity, Morrison Construction Rebuilds, so he might have some ideas. I convinced him to invite the local media to our next home reveal to gain attention and hopefully, more funding. We like to make a big production when the family sees their home for the first time," Nolan said.

"I love that. What a great idea to gain attention." Dylan leaned her elbows on the table.

"In the beginning, I funded it mostly myself. Adding small things to someone's house was something my company could easily do, but then I go into full home renovations and that takes more money than my company can absorb on its own." I loved talking about the Rebuilds program, brainstorming ideas to make it more successful and reach more people.

"I need to research the schools in the area and find out what their specific needs are first. Then once we have that information, we can approach possible donors," Hadley said, thinking out loud.

"What's the best way to approach donors?" Avery asked.

"You said you already opened it in New Orleans. How did you get it off the ground initially?" I asked.

Hadley's face fell a little. "That was easy because my father and his business backed it. I didn't need to beg for money. I approached schools and pitched the program. I hired people to staff the afterschool programs and a director to coordinate it while I'm here."

"You never had to raise money?" I asked.

"From time to time, we hold dinners and balls to showcase our accomplishments and we do ask for donations there, but my dad's been the main benefactor. It allowed me to focus on the program and not worry about money. I know I've been lucky in that way."

"You know, it doesn't make it any less impressive that you had an investor, even if it's your father. As long as your program is making a difference, that's all that matters. Why can't you go to him now?" I asked.

"He's threatened to withdraw his funding," Avery said.

Hadley winced. "I don't want to rely on him anymore. I want Kids Speak to run on its own."

"I can understand that." I wanted to ask why he was threatening to withdraw his funds from a charity which was doing so much good, but I didn't. I sensed Hadley didn't want to talk about her family troubles.

The waitress placed our plates in front of us. "It looks like everyone had the same idea. Crab cake sandwiches for everyone."

I took a large bite of my crab cake and for the first time in a long time, the flavors burst in my mouth. It was like coming out of a coma and eating for the first time. It was that good. I opened my eyes and I caught Hadley watching me, her food forgotten on her plate. "It's so good."

"Looks like it," Hadley teased.

I was embarrassed she'd noticed my reaction. I nodded at her sandwich. "Try it."

"I don't know about this. Everyone says you have to try the crab cakes once." She took a tentative bite of her

sandwich, her eyes widened in pleasure. I swallowed hard. “Mmm, that is good. Different than when I’ve had a crab cake elsewhere.”

Her joy in eating the sandwich made me think of other things—how she’d react if I kissed her or brought her to orgasm. I mentally shook my head to clear it and focus on the conversation.

“Oh, you can’t eat crab cakes out of state. I did that once and got sick,” Avery said.

“Just like you can’t eat a beignet outside of New Orleans,” Hadley said in agreement.

“Good luck finding them outside of New Orleans.” The banter in the group flowed smoothly as we ate and talked about what Hadley should see of the town and how to avoid the times downtown was busy with tourists.

I wanted to do more than talk about the best tourist spots. I wanted to show her. The realization stunned me a little. The more time I spent with her, the more I wanted to know everything about her. Why did she leave New Orleans when she had a successful nonprofit there?

“It’s a good thing you live within walking distance. You don’t have to worry about finding parking when it’s busy in the spring and summer,” Avery said.

“Oh, where do you live?” I asked Hadley. I wanted to know more about her but didn’t want to seem overeager.

“I rent a small apartment overlooking the water. It’s exactly what I needed. Simple is everything.” Hadley said matter-of-factly, but her eyes were wistful as if simple was a big deal to her.

Did Hadley have a history like mine? Could she understand a bit of what I’d experienced? She seemed so much younger than me when I met her, yet when she talked, she seemed wiser. What had she endured that she’d learned to appreciate the little things?

I’d always wanted the next big thing, marriage, house, and kids. After Caroline’s diagnosis, other things mattered, holding

her hand for one more day, waking up in your bed and not the hospital, cooking and feeding her food she could taste, and a home free of nurses, family members, and caregivers. I'd taken the small things for granted.

Hadley's eyes locked on mine. It was like she could see everything I'd kept hidden—every emotion, every experience, everything. She saw inside me. No one saw or understood the depth of what I went through. Even my family members who were with me. Could Hadley? I had this sudden and overwhelming realization that out of anyone, she could. It was ridiculous because we'd only just met.

"I'm heading out." Nolan grabbed the bill.

Looking around the table, everyone had finished eating.

"I could have gotten that." I reached for it.

"I got it. Don't worry about it." Then Nolan winked. "You can get the next one."

He wanted me to come out and do this again. I'd enjoyed dinner because Hadley was here. "We'll see."

"You don't have to get our dinner. We should be getting yours." Avery pulled out some bills from her wallet. "At least let me pay for the tip."

"Go for it." Nolan pushed the billfold to the end of the table. Avery tucked a few bills inside.

"I need to get going too. I have all day depositions tomorrow." Dylan stood.

Everyone stood then, gathering their things to leave.

"I'm coming to your house tomorrow to continue demo." Nolan shrugged his jacket over his shoulders.

"I could use the help." We walked toward the door.

When we stepped onto the sidewalk, Avery, Dylan, and Nolan stepped to the right.

"Hadley, I'll see you Monday. I'm parked this direction," Avery said.

“I am too.” Dylan stood next to her.

“I’m going that way. I’ll walk with you,” Nolan said. We said our goodbyes. Nolan winked at me before following the girls.

“Were we set up?” Hadley shot me an amused look.

I shrugged because it sure looked that way.

“I walked,” Hadley said, making no move to leave.

“It’s dark. I can drive you home.”

Hadley’s face pinched. “I kind of wanted to check out the harbor. I haven’t seen it yet.”

“Then let’s go.” I wasn’t sure if she wanted to spend more time with me or if she originally intended to see the harbor tonight. My heart soared with the idea of spending time with her outside the studio.

When we turned to the left to walk the few blocks to the harbor, the crowd was thicker with people enjoying the warm evening. “Take my elbow. I don’t want you to get lost.”

She placed her hand on my elbow, the warmth of her fingers seeping through my skin, warming me. We crossed the street toward the dock that ran along the waterfront.

“You surprise me.”

“How so?” I glanced down at Hadley. Her hair blew behind her in the breeze and her eyes reflected the light from the overhead street posts.

“When we first met, I got this vibe from you—don’t come close, don’t ask too many questions, and don’t touch.” Her voice was soft, as if she was afraid to tell me the truth.

“You got all of that from one meeting?” Her assumptions didn’t surprise me. That was the vibe I intended to give off.

“I’ve never met someone who was so obvious. I wanted to ask you why, but it’s not my place. Each time I’ve seen you since then, you’ve seemed a little better, lighter if that makes sense. I was surprised to see you at the bar tonight.”

“I haven’t been out—” I almost said since Caroline died, but I stopped myself. “In a while. Nolan finally dragged me out. I didn’t think it was a good idea at first but—”

“Then I showed up and it was easier?” Hadley smiled.

“Yeah.” It had been. I didn’t know if it was hanging out with someone who didn’t know my past. Someone who didn’t walk on eggshells waiting for me to break. Or if it was her.

“I’m glad.” She squeezed my elbow, not pressing me for more details. She was in the moment with me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hadley

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT WHEN I SAW CADE AT THAT BAR. HE was so handsome in his flannel shirt—that appeared soft to touch—rolled up to reveal muscular forearms, worn jeans, and boots.

I intended to walk over to him, to say hello, then leave him to his evening. I waited while they finished giving their order to the bartender, admiring the strong line of his jaw and the way his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. His blue eyes landed on me, sending a zing through my body. Being so close to him made me feel fizzy inside—as if I'd been shaken like a soda can, waiting for the right person to pull my tab.

Cade's brother bore a striking resemblance to him. He was a couple of inches shorter, a little stockier, and more easygoing than Cade. I never expected Nolan to invite us to dinner or that Cade would agree.

This unexpected time alone was a chance to get to know him better. We walked among the tourists on the dock until we reached the park at the water. It was a large brick patio with boats tied along the edge to the dock. Large flowerpots hung from street posts and benches were scattered over the space filled with couples and families. It reminded me of New Orleans and home.

“Want to sit?” Cade led me to a vacant bench.

“Sure.” I let go of his elbow to sit next to him, immediately missing the contact. His legs were sprawled wide

as he leaned back in the bench relaxed, his arms crossed over his chest.

“So, what do you think?” He raised his brow at me, and I realized he’d meant the view of the water, but I was watching him.

I forced myself to look away from the way his biceps bulged in that position and how sexy his thighs filled out his worn jeans. He smelled faintly of sawdust and soap. “It’s beautiful but busy.”

“Friday night in Annapolis attracts tourists, locals, and families visiting the midshipmen. The Naval Academy is right there.” He gestured behind us. “You can take a tour.”

“That would be nice.”

“Relax.” His eyes traveled over me and his lip twitched.

I was perched on the edge of the bench, feet flat on the ground, and spine straight with my fingers folded in my lap.

“I don’t bite.” His voice was teasing, but it was so unexpected my eyes darted to his. He usually seemed haunted by something or someone, but now his face was relaxed, his eyes bright, and his lips tilted up in humor.

“You’re so beautiful when you smile.” The words came out on a sigh as I relaxed back on the bench next to him. I felt him tense. When I realized what I’d said, my face heated. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. You’re my client.”

“It’s okay.” But his voice was tighter.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. You’re usually sad and when you smile it’s—”

“Unexpected.”

“Yes.” He didn’t deny he was sad or that there was a reason for it.

He was silent for a long time. I wondered if it was a mistake to come here with him when we should only have a professional relationship.

We watched the water lap against the dock, the tourists slowly dissipating the later it got.

“There are things you don’t know.”

His voice was so quiet I shifted subtly closer to him to hear. I didn’t want to say anything to stop him from talking.

“I can’t talk about it yet. You’re right. I was sad for a long time. I’m trying something different.” His tone was wistful.

“Not being sad?” I asked softly, wanting to reach out to him and comfort him. To tell him I was proud of him for saying anything.

“Exactly. I thought I’d moved on, but I realized I hadn’t moved on in every aspect of my life and I’d like to.”

My heart clenched at the depth of his emotion. His words were rare and beautiful. He was beautiful. Did he want to move on in a relationship?

“I can’t remember the last time I came down here to watch the water and just be.” His expression changed from melancholy to serene.

“I’ve never been here, so thank you for showing this to me.” He hadn’t revealed his past, but the fact he’d opened up to me, admitting he was struggling with something was telling. He thought I was someone he could talk to in the future. I held that close to my chest.

“My apartment is located near the little park with the geese statues. Do you know the one?”

“I do. Your apartment is in a better location. You have a view of the water, but not all the tourists that come with it.”

“Yes, it is nice.” It was more than nice—it was what I needed to escape my family.

“You want to tell me what you’re running from?” I felt rather than saw his body shift toward me, his crossed arms falling to his sides.

“Excuse me?” I leaned away from him.

“Why did you move here? Who’s in New Orleans that you’re running from?” As elusive as he was with questions, I got the impression he wouldn’t let me off easy. Maybe if I opened up to him, he’d feel more comfortable about opening up to me in the future.

I was a little ashamed to tell him that my father’s control went far beyond my nonprofit. “I’m not running from anyone.”

“I don’t believe you.” He arched one brow, not saying anything else. The pressure to speak weighed heavily on me.

“I’m not running.” I chewed my lip. The catalyst for leaving was Layton’s proposal. “My boyfriend proposed to me at this charity event. It sounded ridiculous each time I tell the story.”

He tensed and his eyes flashed to my hand. “I don’t see a ring. You must have said no.”

I laughed without any humor. “He proposed in front of everyone at a *charity event*. It was the wrong time and place.”

“And the wrong person,” Cade offered gently.

“Yes. We’d only been dating for three months—not long enough to even know each other much less decide to spend the rest of our lives together. The proposal made everything clear to me.”

“Why the distance? Why did you feel the need to move so far away from him?”

“I didn’t move because of him. The opportunity to open the firm came up. It was something I wanted to explore.” I debated telling him about my dad and his manipulation. All of my issues were tied up in him. “My father dictated most of my decisions. I wanted to do something for myself and figure out who I was without his pressure.”

“You don’t get along with your family?” He tilted his head.

“It’s more than that. He was angry I didn’t say yes to Layton’s proposal because he’s trying to close a business deal with Layton’s father. One that will save his company.”

His forehead wrinkled. “At the end of the day, it’s your life. You have to be happy with your decisions—not your dad.”

“He’s guilt-tripping me. He paid for my tuition and everything else. It’s time for me to come back and work for him. To smooth things over with Layton so his father will sign the deal. If I don’t come back, he’s refusing to fund the expansion for Kids Speak.”

“I wondered why you’d said he wouldn’t back the expansion at dinner. Look, you’re already brainstorming ways for the nonprofit to continue without his money. It’s not as easy as having his financial backing, but in the end, you’ll be happier having complete control and you’ll know it was your hard work that made the charity a success.”

“You act like it will be a success no matter what.” I scanned his face. His expression was sincere.

“It will be. You think you owe your success to your father and the money, but you’re the one who came up with the idea, approached schools, hired experts, and made sure it ran smoothly.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that.

“And you want to please your dad, but you can’t.”

He thought highly of me, but he didn’t know the whole truth. I couldn’t let him think I was this amazing person because I wasn’t. “I went to law school because Dad wanted me to. I lived in the apartment building he owned. I dated Layton because he wanted me to. I feel like I’m a fraud.”

“You wanted him to love you. You wanted his approval. It’s what any child wants from their parents, but your dad uses that desire against you. To manipulate you.” Cade leaned closer to me, speaking with more force as if he wanted me to believe what he was saying.

Was that what I was doing? I knew there was a shift in our relationship when my mother died. He was the only parent I had left, and I wanted him to fill the void of my mother dying. I shifted so that I faced Cade on the bench, his eyes on mine.

“Of course, he loved me.” But doubts were sinking into my conscious.

“He baited you with his love. He didn’t give it freely. It was his time, attention, and love you wanted.”

I tried to appeal to my dad to spend more time with us after Mom died, but he’d shaken his head and said he worked so much so I could go to private school, my lessons, and activities. With mom gone, we needed him, but it fell on deaf ears. I needed someone when I had a bad day at school and Colin needed him to soothe him when he skinned his knee falling off his bike. Instead, we had nannies. It wasn’t the same. I knew what a parent’s love felt like and after mom died, I searched for that same connection with Dad, but I never got it.

A chill ran over my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. I wrapped my arms around my middle, trying to get warm. It was so obvious now that he’d pointed it out. I’d always felt shame that I had given in to my father. I thought I was weak when it was sad. I was seeking what my father couldn’t or wouldn’t give me.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t say anything wrong. You’re right. I just need to process things and I’m tired.” I stood. I needed to sift through my childhood memories on my own. Cade listened to a few facts about my life and came to this conclusion.

“I’ll drive you home. It’s too far to walk at night.” He gestured toward the parking lot between the restaurant and the harbor where I assumed he’d parked earlier.

“That would be great. Thanks.”

He took my elbow, steering me to the parking lot. He helped me inside his truck.

I felt like I should say something to fill the silence which had fallen between us, but I couldn’t think of anything.

He drove through the packed streets with people going out to bars and restaurants. He parked in front of my apartment.

“This is me. Thanks for the ride.” I placed my hand on the door, wondering if I should thank him for pointing out what should have been obvious all along.

“Wait.”

I paused but didn’t look at him. “I’m sorry if I upset you. I’m not around people much. Maybe I was too blunt, or you weren’t ready to hear it—”

I stiffened, my shoulders creeping up toward my ears.

He leaned over and covered my hand with his. “I’m sorry.”

“I promise you didn’t say anything wrong. I’m a little embarrassed. I didn’t realize what was going on. I always thought I was weak for going along with what he wanted and maybe I still am—wanting my Dad to love me. It sounds pathetic.”

“You’re not pathetic. You’re anything but. You’re strong, courageous, and kind.”

I sunk back into the seat as warmth spread through my body. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s get you inside.” He opened the door, rounded the hood, and opened my door.

It was a courtesy I was used to from my ex-boyfriends, but it was different with Cade. It wasn’t just a courtesy or a gesture—I felt safe with him. If something happened, he’d protect me.

Layton would have protected himself first. Maybe that’s why I never trusted him or felt at ease with him. He was all about appearances, how he looked, how others perceived him. He didn’t waste time worrying about how I felt or if we were on the same page. If he wanted to get married, I did too. It never entered his mind that I wouldn’t, and maybe that was my fault. I should have been clear about my wants and needs. I was so used to pleasing my dad maybe I’d transferred that same idea to Layton. I was too busy pleasing him and not pleasing myself.

I walked with Cade down the sidewalk and up the steps leading to my apartment. The breeze off the water lifted my hair. The sounds of crickets and frogs permeated the otherwise quiet night. I paused on the wrap-around deck.

“This is nice.” Cade looked over my shoulder at the water.

“It’s what sold me on this place.” I unlocked the door but hesitated my palm on the wood ready to push it open. “Thanks for seeing me home.”

“You’re welcome. Look, I’m sorry again if things got too personal. I shouldn’t be giving anyone advice.”

“No. It was perfect. It was exactly what I needed to hear.” He thought I was *strong, courageous, and kind*. I wouldn’t forget that anytime soon.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hadley

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE EARLY. WHEN I CAME HOME LAST night, I found several messages from Layton. It was like he sensed I was out with another man.

Layton: Your dad said you're coming back for Kids Speak's gala. This has gone on long enough. We need to talk.

Then, when I hadn't responded, he'd sent another.

Layton: I won't be ignored.

I wasn't sure what there was to say besides *I'm not interested*. I think I was clear when I said no to his marriage proposal.

I took my coffee out on my side porch and slid into the rocking chair overlooking the water. I placed my steaming mug of coffee on the small wicker side table and pulled out my phone.

Hadley: I'm not ready to get married to you or anyone else. We should have talked about marriage before you proposed publicly.

We'd had a similar text exchange the night of the proposal.

But something else niggled in my brain. I'd sifted Cade's words through my head all night as I weighed them for accuracy—*your dad withheld his love*.

Had he purposely dangled the promise of love in front of us? I could see how I'd gone out of my way over the years to gain his approval. I wrapped my sweater tighter around me before I picked up my mug and blew on it. Taking a sip to

warm myself, I drew my knees to my chest and placed my feet on the seat of the rocker.

Then a different thought entered my mind—was he capable of loving us at all, or was I chasing an impossible feat? Had I run myself ragged to please someone who not only was impossible to please but couldn't provide the love I needed?

As the coffee slid down my throat, warming me from the inside out, I blocked out thoughts of my dad. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the cool air and the smell of the water. I focused on my evening with Cade before things got personal. My heart clenched, thinking about last night.

Cade was confident and sure of himself, even if he wasn't overly demanding of his clients for payment. He was hard-working, was proud of the charity he started. He was older than me, but it was more than that. He knew who he was, what he was capable of, and he wouldn't allow anyone to tell him differently. Why couldn't I be more like that?

My phone buzzed, interrupting my guilt.

Cade: Are you coming to class this morning?

I smiled. It was only seven a.m. and Cade was texting me? My heart pinched. Was I the first thing he thought of when he'd woken up?

Hadley: I hadn't planned on it.

Cade: I'll make it worth your while.

I smiled even as the small voice in my head said—but he's your client.

Cade: Breakfast? Crepes by the water?

It was so tempting, but he was my client. We'd crossed a line last night from a professional relationship to friendship. I could pass off the chance-encounter in the bar, but the walk alone to the harbor? That was reckless.

Then I rationalized it. I could use a friend and he'd proved last night he was a good one. If it seemed like he wanted more,

I'd remind him we couldn't date because of our professional relationship.

Hadley: Sure.

My heart thumped harder in my chest. Was I making a huge mistake, or was it the best decision I'd made since moving to Annapolis? Cade was honest and real. All of those facts made him more attractive, not less. He was the opposite of any guy I'd met before.

I put down my phone. Picking up my mug, I watched the birds dive into the water, looking for their breakfast. Anticipation coursed through my veins that in a few short hours, I'd see Cade again.

I wanted to know more about him, but I had to be patient. If men like Layton were everywhere—men like Cade weren't. It would be worth being his friend, being there for him, and when our attorney-client relationship came to an end, maybe he'd be ready for more with me.



Cade

MY CONVERSATION LAST NIGHT WITH HADLEY AGITATED ME. I'd ripped out the small bathroom on the first floor when I got home, questioning if I'd made the right decision. I hated that something I said hurt her even if it was the truth.

No, there was no way to sugarcoat how her dad had handled her over the years. The longer she'd talked, the more anger coursed through my body. My muscles tensed. No one should treat their children like chess pieces—pieces to some game they don't even know they're playing. The part that kept me ripping out tile at two a.m. was that he was still doing it.

Her father wanted her to come home and work for him. To make nice with an asshole, maybe even marry him. He was using her love for her family to twist her arm. Hadley hadn't even seen it.

I wanted to ask where her mother was, but something inside of me knew there wasn't a good answer. I sensed her soul-deep pain as similar to mine.

I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to help her. But my competing desire to be more for her prompted me to tear down another wall between a tiny bedroom upstairs and the master. With every swing of the hammer and impact with the drywall, I wondered if I could be her friend or I should stay away from Hadley Winters. The problem was, I was physically attracted to her even if I wanted to ignore it and push it down deep in the box labeled *I don't deserve love again*.

"Cade—are you upstairs?" Nolan's voice drifted up the staircase where he stood at the bottom.

"In the master." Or I should have said the expanded master since I was looking from the master bedroom into the small bedroom. I'd acted a little spontaneously last night when I demoed the wall, but considering it in the daylight, it was the right decision. The room was brighter.

"I didn't realize you wanted to combine the two rooms."

"What do I need five bedrooms for?" When I first saw the house, I thought about tearing the wall down and making the space work for me.

"I thought you were selling?" Nolan observed me.

"I am. This room is too small. People want a master suite these days. I can make the closet and bathroom larger too."

Nolan looked around at the space. "It's a good idea. Four bedrooms are still good for resale. I thought you said you were doing the master suite last."

"I changed my mind." I cleaned up the debris and shoved it into large garbage bags, hoping he wouldn't ask why.

"How did things go last night after I left?" Nolan leaned against the door jamb and watched me.

My eyes narrowed on him. "Did you set things up last night, so I was alone with Hadley?"

Nolan shrugged. “It just worked out. I’d parked by Avery and Dylan.”

That was something I didn’t know about my brother because I’d been in my head for the last few years. What was he like when he dated a woman? Was he a one-night stand kind of guy or into relationships? I hadn’t heard of any serious girlfriends over the years, but I also hadn’t been paying attention. “Are you interested in Avery or Dylan?”

Nolan’s eyes shot to mine as they widened in surprise. “No. I’m not interested in anyone. I don’t want anything serious and those girls have serious written all over them.”

I tied off the bags. I’d need to keep a closer eye on Nolan. I didn’t want him to be wary of relationships because mine hadn’t worked out. “Want to help me carry these out?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

I tossed him a bag before walking down the steps ahead of him.

“What about you? You take a romantic walk with Hadley?” Nolan asked when we walked outside into the sunshine.

I paused a second before throwing the bag into the truck bed. Did I want to keep what happened between Hadley and me?

“I was joking, but did you?” Nolan raised his brow.

“We walked around the harbor and sat on a bench to watch the water. She had some family issues she wanted to talk about.”

“With you?” Nolan crossed his arms over his chest.

“Why are you so surprised?”

“It’s just the last few years you’ve been so—”

“Closed off?”

“Yeah and out of touch. Why would Hadley talk to you?”

That was a good question. “Maybe she was comfortable opening up to me?”

“I can’t believe you went out to a bar, ate dinner, and took a woman for a walk to have a heart-to-heart.”

He was right. It was a big step for me. “She’s a friend—or she might be. It felt good to help someone else.”

“I get that, but isn’t she your attorney?”

I had thought about that. I didn’t know if there were rules forbidding a relationship but getting involved with someone you had a professional relationship with wasn’t a good idea. “I’m attracted to her, but I don’t have to act on it. I’m not sure I’m ready for anything anyway.”

Nolan raised his brow. “Just being open to the idea of someone else is progress.”

I’d texted Hadley about class a while ago. I checked my phone and it was nine-thirty. “I need to get cleaned up and head over to the studio for class. You can continue what I started.”

“You know, if you’re serious about your contracting business and you want to expand, maybe it’s finally time we go into business together.” Nolan’s face was serious.

Hope filled me. “I think it’s time.”

Nolan smiled. “Good. Maybe you’ll come to family dinner on Sunday?”

“Maybe. Don’t tell the parents yet.” I wasn’t sure if I was ready.

“If not this weekend, soon.”

I nodded. It was time to fix the strained relationship with my parents. Listening to Hadley talk about her family last night made me realize how lucky I’d been. My parents loved me when I was too depressed to see them. When I pushed them away. They might want me to be happy sooner than I was ready for, but they loved me. They deserved better than how I’d treated them these last few years.

I washed up, putting on my uniform before driving from my home to the studio. My fingers tapped the wheel, my heart thudded in my chest, and I shifted in my seat. I couldn't seem to sit still. I pulled in front of the studio. My eye caught the sign for the law firm sending blood rushing to my head. I was looking forward to seeing Hadley.

I opened the door to the studio to get things ready for class. A few minutes later, Hadley pushed the door open. She walked inside in her black uniform pants, the blue belt tied tightly around her black shirt. Her hair was swept up in a ponytail. A surge of happiness flowed through me.

"Am I early?" she asked as she scanned the room.

"Not really. Maybe everyone decided to enjoy the beautiful day and skip class this morning." I wouldn't be upset if that was the case. I'd told Nolan she was a friend. I wanted to help her, but there was no getting around the fact I was physically attracted to her. She was confident in her professional life yet appeared to be vulnerable when she talked about her family. It was a contrast that intrigued me on a personal level.

It wasn't just physical. It should scare me. I didn't have anything to offer her, but she hadn't expressed any interest in anything either. Other than hanging out with me and helping me in a professional capacity. It was a harmless crush.

I might have been lying to myself, but it was what I needed to allow myself to see what would happen next. I'd take it one day at a time.

Stowing her things in the cubbies by the door, she caught my eye. When I nodded, she bowed. She padded across the mats and stopped in front of me. I wanted to pull her to me. I wanted to feel her curves. I wanted her to feel what she did to me. Shifting a few steps back, I flexed my fingers to keep my hands and thoughts to myself.

I cleared my throat, realizing I hadn't said anything. "Looks like you're my only student. Ready to get started?"

"Sure." Her tone was uncertain as if she didn't trust herself alone with me.

We ran through the warm-ups. I held the paddle while she kicked it methodically. Her eyes focused on her form and the point where her heel struck the paddle. She'd tuned everything out. I was sure she needed the release karate gave her—a physical outlet and a way to de-stress. It was what brought me back to the sport a few years ago too.

“Do you want to practice your kicks?” Hadley asked, taking a step back, falling out of her fighting stance.

Usually, I didn't participate in classes. I worked out on my own when everyone was gone and the studio silent. I preferred solitude when I worked out, but there was another reason. We weren't matched strength-wise and I didn't want to hurt her. “I use the bag after class.”

Hadley glanced at the red bag hanging in the back corner and shrugged. “You don't have to today. I'm here.”

“You can show me your moves.” Something about the breathy way she said those words caused heat to gather in my limbs and my body.

“Alright.” My agreement was out of my mouth before I could think better of my decision. I handed her the paddle.

Her brow raised, she asked, “Are you going to show me what you can do?”

My eyes narrowed on her as I moved into my fighting stance, focusing on the paddle. I began my litany of kicks. She counted the repetitions as I reveled in the satisfying thud on the paddle. I dialed back my force slightly so that I wouldn't hurt her.

Out of breath with sweat dripping down my back, I took a step back to recover.

“That was impressive.”

My hands were on my hips as I tried to take a deep breath. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, can you teach me to kick like that?”

“That's why you're here, right?” My eyes met hers. There was a challenge in her eyes combined with a spark of desire.

She was here to learn. I was here to teach, but these classes felt like we were dancing around our feelings. My body was primed for a workout. I wanted to take her to the mat, press my body over hers, and kiss her. I wanted raw fucking. Blood pounded in my head.

I took another step back, my breaths coming easier. I tried to focus on anything but the primal need flowing through my body. I couldn't get the idea of touching her out of my head.

The bell over the door rang. Our heads swung in the direction of the sound. One of my regular Saturday students, Dean, came in. "Sorry I'm late. I overslept. Do you mind if I get a little work out in on the bag?"

"Of course not." The moment was gone. The awareness between us dissipated with his arrival.

I forced my attention back to Hadley as Dean walked out onto the mats to warm-up.

Robotically, I went through a few defensive moves with Hadley, aware that there was another person in the room with us. I didn't allow myself to dwell on the way her body felt in my arms the second before I'd grab her arm and she'd practice her moves against me. I didn't focus on the smell of her hair or her soft skin. I kept my attention on the sound of Dean kicking the bag.

"Looks like it's time."

Hadley glanced at the clock. "Right. Thanks for inviting me to class. Always nice to be the only student. I get all the attention."

"Right," I managed to croak. She was the only student. She was here to learn karate and I was lusting after her like a teenage boy. I needed to get ahold of my feelings for her.

"Were you still up for breakfast?" Hadley asked, her eyes hopeful.

"I need to work with Dean first." I still wanted to see her.

"That's fine. I need a shower anyway. Meet you at twelve on our bench?"

I knew she was referring to the one we'd sat on last night. I wanted to spend more time with her. She was the real deal. "Looking forward to it."

She smiled. "Great. See you then."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hadley

WHAT WAS I DOING? I REPEATED THAT TO MYSELF AS I showered and dressed in jeans and a light sweater. Nothing good could come from continuing to hang out with Cade Morrison. When I was with him, thoughts of him being my client fell away, until it was only us. But as soon as I walked away from the studio, reality came back in the form of a pit in my stomach and tension in my neck.

I tried to argue with myself. I was just hanging out with a guy who clearly could use a friend. *I* needed a friend. But I knew that was wrong because I didn't feel friendly toward him. He surprised me last night when he was so observant about my family. His sensitivity made me want more from him than friendship. Even if he was my client, *I wanted more*. On a subconscious level I knew he wasn't capable of more.

I'd enjoy his company, but that was it. I put on converse sneakers to walk to the harbor since it was such a beautiful warm day. As I walked, I reminded myself he hadn't asked for more. He hadn't touched me inappropriately, even if I wanted him to. If I thought his eyes were appreciatively roving my body, it was my imagination. He'd done nothing to encourage me.

I slowed as I approached the bench. Cade spread his legs wide, arms crossed over his chest, and he'd tilted his head back. Children's laughter ran out over the water.

"Are you going to sit down?" Cade asked without opening an eye.

“I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“You aren’t. I was waiting for you.” His eyes opened, immediately flashing to mine.

That statement pierced the wall I’d erected, leaving a hole that wouldn’t be filled. “It seemed like you were thinking deep thoughts.”

He focused on the water. “I guess I was. I was thinking about how beautiful it is and how lucky I am to be here.”

A tingle ran down my spine. It felt like he’d revealed something important even though I didn’t know what it was.

“It is.” I was lucky to be here with this unassuming man—someone who didn’t want anything from me.

He shifted forward on the bench, his elbows on his knees as he looked up at me. His hair was curled and damp at the ends as if he’d recently showered. His T-shirt stretched taut over his chest and he was dressed casually in jeans and sneakers. My heart fluttered in my chest.

“Are you hungry?”

“Uh huh.” The thought that this could be a date circled my brain on a loop. We’d showered and made an effort to look nice for each other. We met at our bench and we were sharing a meal. It couldn’t be more date-like.

“I can grab some crepes at Sophie’s Crepes if you want to save our seat.” He pointed at the sign behind us.

“Sure.” I sat on the bench.

“Do you know what you want, or can I order for you?”

My mind immediately flashed to *I want you*, but I looked away, so he didn’t see the thoughts reflected in my eyes. “You can pick something.”

“Any allergies?”

“No.”

“Be right back.” He smiled and winked before turning away.

Did he have any idea how much younger he looked when he winked? When he smiled, I swore my heart stopped for a second before it started galloping out of control in my chest.

If this was a date, I needed to tell him nothing could happen.

I watched a bird stop on the bricks in front of me, pecking at crumbs until a child ran by scaring it. My mind wandered to last night, Cade listening to my issues, offering his opinion. It was like he'd opened up something inside of me, something no wall would cover up. I jumped when the tourist boat's horn blew, signaling it was leaving.

Cade chuckled as he sat next to me and dropped a wrapped crepe in my lap. "Did the horn scare you?"

I turned to face him, my hand still covering my thudding heart. "Yes. I wasn't expecting it."

"You get used to it. The boat comes and goes all day long."

Passengers lined the railing of the boat and waved as it pulled away from the dock.

"It's a good thing I rented an apartment away from here."

"You learn to avoid the crowds and the boat shows. That's when it's crazier down here." He nodded at the wrapped crepe in my lap. "I got you the Caprese. It's the best."

I slowly unwrapped the warm crepe and took a tentative bite savoring the mozzarella, fresh tomato, and basil flavors. "It's good. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I should probably take you somewhere more touristy."

"I've had crab cakes already. What could be more touristy than eating at the harbor watching the boats?"

"Ice cream from one of the many ice cream shops while we toured Annapolis on foot." His tone was light and playful, and I wondered if it was an invitation.

I pictured it clearly in my mind—strolling arm in arm with him, ice cream in my other hand while he showed me what

was special about his town. “That sounds nice.”

The sun warmed me as we ate in silence for a few minutes.

Cade cleared his throat. “I wanted to apologize for last night.”

“There’s no need. You already apologized and you were just being honest.” I was touched. I couldn’t think of a time my father or Layton had ever apologized, much less twice for the same thing. They saw it as a sign of weakness.

Cade’s brow furrowed. “Still. It wasn’t my place to point out things about your family. I don’t know you or them.”

“Really? Because it seemed like you did—like you knew what happened. Sometimes it takes an outsider to point out something we can’t see ourselves.”

Cade’s expression was conflicted. “But I didn’t mean to hurt you or tell you something you weren’t ready to hear.”

“I moved here to discover who I am outside my family. Facing the harsh reality of Dad’s motives is a part of that.”

“Who are you?”

I sighed, frustrated with my lack of progress. “I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure that out.”

He finished his crepe, picked up his trash, and threw it in a nearby trash can. He returned to sit next to me, his long legs stretched out in front of him, but he sat closer than before.

A gust of wind blew my hair into my face. I tried to tuck a piece behind my ear, but the wind continued to blow hard, my hands still holding my partially eaten crepe and napkins.

“Here, let me help you.” I felt Cade shift closer to me, his thigh touching mine from knee to hip, as his hand slid my hair behind my ear.

His focus was on my hair, so I took in the faint lines in his forehead, his tan skin, and the flecks of yellow in his blue eyes.

Then his eyes met mine, his fingers shifted from holding my hair to sifting through strands. I wanted to lean into his

touch. “Is that better?” His voice was low and intimate.

I nodded, unable to say a word. There was no space between us. I unconsciously swayed closer, wanting his lips on mine.

“Mister, can you help me with my kite? It’s stuck on your bench.”

The voice startled me. I jumped away from Cade. A boy stood in front of us pointing at his kite. The line wrapped the leg of the bench.

“Of course.” Cade stood and slowly unraveled the string while I took deep breaths to calm myself before he handed the kite to the boy.

“Thanks, Mister.”

“You’re welcome.” But Cade stared after the boy, a flash of sadness in his expression.

The boy ran off to his parents, who stood a few feet away watching.

Cade’s expression was thoughtful. “I’d love to show you more of the city today, but Nolan is waiting at home to help me with the renovations.”

My body flushed with excitement that he wanted to spend more time with me.

“That’s great. I didn’t realize you had plans.” I brushed nonexistent crumbs off my lap before standing to throw out my garbage. I experienced a small twinge of disappointment that we wouldn’t be exploring Annapolis together.

When I returned from the trash can, Cade stood in the same spot watching me.

“Well, thanks for lunch.” How could things be so awkward when a minute ago it felt so natural—to be close to him, to be touched by him? My heart ached with the need for that moment back. The idea of something with Cade scared me. Maybe he felt it too and wasn’t ready.

“You’re welcome. I still need to schedule an appointment with you to go over the contracts,” Cade said.

It was like he’d dumped cold water on me. When I met him at our bench, I hadn’t thought once about the fact he was my client. It was good that he’d reminded me of the line we couldn’t cross. Even if I desperately wanted to. “You can text me or call the office, whichever’s more convenient.”

Even though it was the right thing to do, I felt a sense of loss that he’d reset the boundaries between us. We said goodbye before I watched him walk toward the parking lot.

I had nothing planned for the rest of the day, so I walked around the historic downtown area and wandered into a few shops. I’d have loved to do this with Cade or even Avery, but instead, I was alone—alone with my thoughts about what was happening between us. I’d thought we’d had a moment.

I took stock of what I knew about him and realized I’d only discovered he had a younger brother, he was renovating his home, and he owned two businesses. There were no pictures in his office or the studio—not even framed photos of his students competing.

There was no reason for him to be more forthcoming. His past was none of my business, but I couldn’t ignore the pang in my chest. I was vulnerable last night. His observations of my family and our interactions touched me. Yet, I knew he wasn’t capable of opening up to me.



Cade

I ALMOST SUGGESTED SPENDING THE DAY TOGETHER. I WANTED to show her what I loved about the town—not what the tourists saw when they came here, but Nolan was waiting for me at my house.

I wanted to make sure I was making the right decision before I took another step with Hadley. Between last night and

lunch today, we were standing on a precipice and the next move would change everything.

I found Nolan inside the house, tearing out carpet in the living room. “What are you doing?”

“Did you know there’s hardwood under here?” he asked, without looking up from his task.

“Yeah.” I vaguely remember the realtor advising me of that when I toured the home.

“They’re beautiful. Shouldn’t need much to refinish these.” He held the end of the carpet up to show me the hardwood underneath.

“You’re right.” But my mind wasn’t on the renovations.

“Did class run late?”

“I went to lunch with Hadley after class.” I wanted to talk to someone about this and make sure I was doing the right thing.

“Did something happen?”

“Is it right to pursue something with her if I don’t know if I can fully move on from Caroline?”

Nolan thought about his answer for a few seconds before speaking. “If it feels right, then I think you can. Just be honest with her.”

He made it sound so easy.

“You like her?” He dropped the carpet and straightened.

“I do.”

“But you feel guilty for liking her?” He raised his brow.

“A little. I’m worried we’ll get in too deep and I’ll realize I can’t love someone else like I loved Caroline.”

“I would think any love you felt for someone new would be different. You’d be opening up your heart to her, not replacing Caroline.” His tone was thoughtful and considerate.

I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“I think Hadley’s good for you. She might be a rebound. Not everything has to lead to marriage.”

“That’s true, but do you think that’s fair? That feels like I’m using her to get over Caroline.”

“That’s not what it would be. It would be spending time with someone good for you. Be honest. Tell her about Caroline and lay it out for her. Let her decide if she wants to pursue something with you after she knows all the facts. How do you know if she’s looking for anything serious?”

“I don’t know. She recently turned down a marriage proposal. She moved here to get away from everything.” I’d never betray Hadley’s confidence. It wasn’t her ex’s proposal that left her vulnerable. It was her family who had her twisted in knots.

“She has baggage too. Be there for each other. As long as it feels good—do it.”

Could I enjoy myself and damn the consequences?

“That’s because it’s easier to be happy than you think. Caroline would want you to be happy.”

She’d tried, but I always put her off. I think I was in denial until the very end. I hoped she’d get better—a new clinical trial would form or a new treatment, but it didn’t. Caroline accepted her fate well before I did. Nolan’s suggestion that Caroline would want me to be happy took root and I knew what I needed to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hadley

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I POURED MYSELF SOME TEA AND took it out on the balcony. I'd spent the rest of the Saturday shopping for decorations for my apartment. I wanted to make it a home. I chose a few things which were quintessential Maryland, a pottery bowl from a shop on state circle, a metal crab to hang on the wall in the bathroom, and fresh-cut flowers from a street vendor by the courthouse.

When I first moved, I'd unpacked the necessities, but I hadn't bought anything for the walls or accents for the windows and furniture. We'd picked up more clients this week and I felt more comfortable spending money.

There was nothing like retail therapy to get over a guy—one who was out of my reach. I leaned back in the chair and watched a couple wander the path by the water. Would I ever have something like that? My doorbell rang. I was surprised someone was at the door. My heart sped up, thinking it could be Cade since he was the only one who'd been here.

I placed my tea on the end table. I walked through the apartment to answer the door not wanting whoever was at the door to know the porch extended from the front door to my bedroom. It wasn't entirely safe for a single-woman living alone but I'd fallen in love the wrap-around porch when I saw the pictures online.

I pulled open the door, my heart lifting thinking it was Cade. Instead, Layton stood there in a suit and tie, his hair slicked back with gel, and a town car parked on the curb.

“Layton? What are you doing here?” I kept my hand on the doorknob, not stepping back to let him inside.

“We need to talk. You’ve been ignoring my messages.”

“I think I was clear when I said no to your proposal and in our messages since. I don’t want to date you much less marry you.” I allowed the frustration and anger to seep into my words.

He stepped forward as if to enter my apartment.

I shook my head. “That’s not a good idea.”

“You want to talk about this on your porch where anyone could hear?”

He was appealing to the manners drilled into my head since birth. Sometimes, protecting yourself was more important than appearances or reputation. “Anything you have to say to me, you can say out here.”

His lips tipped down in a sneer.

I stepped forward and pulled the door shut behind me. I raised my brow. “If you want to talk to me, this is your opportunity.”

“Fine. I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation with your dad’s business. If my dad doesn’t invest, then your dad has to declare bankruptcy.”

“So, invest.” I tried to appear nonchalant even though my heart was beating fast and my palms were slick with nerves.

He laughed and shook his head. “After everything your father did for you, this is how you repay him? You walk away when he needs you.”

“If it were a true emergency, it would be different. It’s my dad’s business. It has nothing to do with me.”

“It has everything to do with you. You’re the key to fixing this.”

I opened my mouth to disagree.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” Cade’s voice came from behind Layton.

Relief flooded my brain. I’d somehow missed the tread of boots on the steps. When he reached the porch, his eyes darted from me to Layton.

“You’re not interrupting anything. Layton was just leaving.”

Cade shot me a disbelieving look before offering his hand to Layton. “I’m Cade Morrison and you are—”

“You’re fucking someone else?” Layton’s accusing eyes swung to mine as he ignored Cade’s hand.

Rage filled me. “Don’t talk to me like that. You have no right to come here and accuse me of anything. You proposed. I turned you down.”

Cade’s concerned eyes rested on mine as if waiting for a signal to step in.

“You can’t be serious?” Layton asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest. I didn’t bother correcting his assumption. If he thought I was with Cade, maybe he’d back off.

“You need to come back and smooth things over. Everyone’s been talking about you walking away from my proposal.”

“That seems like your problem, not mine. When you ask someone to marry them, you take the risk they’ll say no. I’m not a part of your world anymore. You’re manipulative, you’re entitled, and you don’t know the meaning of the word no. I can’t control who my dad is, but I decide who I marry. I dictate my future and I don’t want you.”

Layton edged closer and lowered his voice to shut Cade out of the conversation. “You’re willing to risk the future of Kids Speak?”

I faltered at that. I didn’t want to risk my nonprofit. “You don’t care about Kids Speak. You’re only out for yourself. You’ve proven that over and over again.”

“You owe me.”

Anger pulsed through my body. “I don’t owe you anything.”

“Enough. You need to leave.” Cade edged between us and directed his words to Layton, who ignored him.

Cade was so close my shoulder brushed his arm.

I wanted to reach and grab his arm for support. “You shouldn’t have come here.” My voice was tight.

“You’ll be sorry. I could have made things easier for you.” His disgusted gaze swung from me to Cade before Layton turned and jogged down the steps.

I let out the breath I’d been holding. My back ached from the stiff way I’d held my spine and shoulders during the confrontation.

When Layton slid into the back seat of the town car and pulled away from the curb, Cade asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure.” I was proud of the way I handled Layton, but embarrassed Cade had seen it.

Cade touched my elbow lightly and pushed open the door to my apartment. “Let’s get you inside.”

I allowed Cade to steer me inside and to the couch. I didn’t trust Layton in my space, a man I’d dated for three months, but I trusted Cade.

“That was the ex.” He shook his head and tilted his head toward the door.

“Yeah—that was him. I’m embarrassed that I ever dated him.” My dad would never approve of me dating a contractor.

“Don’t be. We all make mistakes. At least you figured it out before you were married to him.”

I smiled at his attempt to lighten the mood. “Yeah, the proposal made me realize that I didn’t even like Layton as a person. He didn’t see me.”

Cade slowly moved a finger on the inside of my wrist.

I sucked in a breath at the contact. The warmth spread up my arm to my heart. “Why did you come?”

“I wanted to talk to you—”

My eyes moved to his, which were brimming with emotion. I sensed he was here to talk about something personal. “Explain why you seem sad sometimes?”

He smiled sadly. “Is it that obvious? I thought I’d been better lately, but I guess not.”

“You don’t have to tell me.” But I wanted him to open up to me like I had with him.

“I was married before.” His words hung in the air between us.

I had a sense of foreboding that something had happened to his wife. His face was ashen and his eyes filled with sadness.

“We’d been married for two years and we were just starting to talk about the possibility of kids when she started getting headaches. We spent a few months bouncing around from doctor to doctor until we discovered it was cancer. It was an aggressive form. She accepted that quicker than I did.”

“God, I’m so sorry, Cade. I had no idea.” I turned my hand under his so that our fingers were interlaced. I wanted to take the raw pain in his eyes that seemed to weigh him down.

He dropped my hand, leaned forward so that his elbows rested on his knees, and dropped his head into his hands. I couldn’t take the sheer pain etched in the tense set of his shoulders, his back. I moved closer, put my arm around his back, and rested my head on his shoulder.

“You loved her.”

“She was my future and when she died—it was like—”

“Your future was gone.” I tried to put myself in his shoes. What would it feel like if your spouse died? All of your hopes and dreams died with them.

“Exactly.” He lifted his head and our lips were inches apart.

I wanted to ask why he’d confided in me, but when his eyes lowered to my lips, I had a pretty good idea.

My arm dropped from his back when he’d shifted upright, but I wanted to touch his thigh. I longed to lean into his body and feel the warmth. I should pull away and create some distance between us, but I couldn’t.

“I don’t know why I feel compelled to tell you, but I do. You opened up to me last night and I wanted to do the same.”

It was honest. It was real, but I wanted a declaration that I was different. I had an ex-boyfriend causing trouble in my life and Cade was my client. We couldn’t be any more wrong.

“Since I met you, I started to feel things again. I’m not in this never-ending cycle of surviving minute-to-minute and day-to-day. I looked forward to seeing you. I don’t know what that means, and I can’t promise you anything, but I’d like to see where it goes.”

The words spread like liquid through my chest and down my limbs until my body throbbed with the need to reduce the small distance between us. This was my moment to remind him we couldn’t be anything, but if this was the only moment I got with him, I’d take it. My mind was at war with my body because I leaned in closer, erasing the few inches that separated our lips. The touch was tentative as if he was still unsure of himself. Then his hand cupped the back of my head, holding me to his mouth and sending heat to my core.

I moaned and angled my head to explore his mouth. I wanted to tangle my fingers in his hair and tug him closer, but I was scared that any movement would break this moment. His grip in my hair tightened and he shifted to face me. Our legs were in between us on the couch—in the way. I wanted him on top of me and between my legs. “Cade, please.”

But instead of bringing him closer, my words had the opposite effect. He pulled away and shifted away from me on

the couch. I felt the loss of his touch and warmth immediately. “What’s wrong?”

The regret on his face was almost too much to bear. He was right to pull away. I was breaking one of the most important ethical rules of my job—the one I’d scoffed at in law school. Who would sleep with their client? It was so unprofessional—so wrong. So entirely unlike me.

“I want to see what this is.” He gestured between us. “But I’m scared. I have all of this baggage you don’t need. You deserve everything. You deserve more than that douchebag who was just here and more than me. I’m not sure I have anything to offer you.”

“Let me decide what I need.” Everything he said was true, but I’d never been drawn to another person. I wanted to erase his pain. It was idealistic. It was beyond the scope of my relationship with him, but I didn’t care.

“Is it that simple?” His expression was hopeful.

Of course, it wasn’t, but I didn’t want to admit that. I dreaded having to tell him the reality. “Technically, nothing can happen between us as long as we have an attorney-client relationship.”

His eyes searched mine for a confirmation that what I was saying was true. “You’re serious.”

My stomach churned because I was torn between what I wanted and what was possible between us. “It’s an ethical violation for us to date while I represent you.”

“Because of that agreement I signed?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll rip it up.” The doubt from a minute ago was replaced with his determination.

As much as I loved to hear that, I wanted to make sure he wasn’t making a rash decision. I didn’t want him to keep operating his business without someone following up on overdue payments. “It’s not that simple. You came to me for help and I wanted to help you.”

His hand cupped my face. “You have. You have no idea. For the first time in a long time—I have hope.”

“I’m supposed to help you legally.” My mind had turned to mush as his thumb caressed the sensitive skin on my throat.

“Legally?” His lips touched the spot his fingers were a second ago, spreading soft kisses down my neck.

“Uh huh.” I nodded, not sure what I agreed to.

“Maybe I need a different sort of help.” He’d lifted his head and cupped my face with both hands.

Goosebumps popped up on my arms from his touch and the intensity in his eyes. “You do?”

He kissed me, surrounding me with his scent and his touch. The reverent way he touched me with his lips and his fingers—I knew he’d be an attentive lover. I’d give anything to find out.

“You’re fired.” He breathed the words across my lips.

A tingle shot through my body. Then his mouth was on mine again, his hands drifted down my back to my ass, as he lifted me into his lap to straddle him. Our lips never moved from each other’s. I wanted to slide into him—I wanted to get so lost in him I’d never find myself again.



Cade

I LET ALL OF THE FEELINGS CRASH THROUGH ME, FILLING ME up with anger, need, and want. Feelings I hadn’t felt since Caroline died. They were somehow more than before. I was numb for so many years, but now every inch of my skin was alive with want. I wanted to be as close as I could get to the person who’d brought me every emotion to the surface—Hadley.

She rocked her core over my cock, her lips on mine, her needy moans filled the air.

I pulled my lips from hers to breathe. “I need you.”

“Yes.” Her acquiescence filled me with relief. This woman wanted me—not the shell of a man I’d been but who I was now and who I could be if I let her in. Everything hummed through my body, my heart beating like a drum, telling me to let this woman be the one.

I should have asked her if she was sure. I wanted to remind her I was no good for her. I was using her body, her goodness, and her warmth, but I couldn’t. I wanted her more than my next breath. She was my key to healing. I knew it with every breath in my body and the truth rocked me to my soul. I wanted her slick heat around my cock. I wanted to feel her bare skin on mine, but at the same time, I had to slow this down.

I cupped her face, gentling my kisses until it was more exploration than passion. I needed her to know that anything between us was more than one night. I wanted to do this right. I pulled back slightly, brushing her hair out of her face, and tucking a strand behind her ear. Her face was flush, her lips swollen. She’d never looked more beautiful.

“So, what now?” Uncertainty filled her eyes.

“I guess I need to find a new attorney.” I wanted to lighten the moment.

“Avery could represent you at the same fees I quoted you.” Worry and fear settled in her eyes.

She thought I’d hire a new firm. “That’s perfect. I don’t want you to worry about it.”

She moved to sit next to me on the couch, close enough we were still touching from shoulder to thighs.

“I want to take my time with you.” Shifting to stroke the soft skin of her arm, my lips brushed her temple. I breathed in the scent of her shampoo.

Her body melting into mine. “You still can. We have all weekend.”

“We do, don’t we?” For the first time, since Caroline died, I was content. “Let’s go out to dinner.”

“I’d love to.” Looking up at me, her eyes softened as the uncertainty dissipated.

I didn’t want her to think we’d keep this to her apartment—that she was a secret or something I was ashamed of. She was the best decision I’d made in years.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Hadley

WE WALKED HAND-IN-HAND THROUGH THE STREETS OF Annapolis. Cade had a small smile on his face and his shoulders were back and relaxed. He'd let go of everything holding him back and he was *with me*. This morning, I never thought we'd be here. He was just as attentive, focused, and intense as I suspected he'd be, but so much more.

He was so different from anyone I'd dated. He anticipated my wants and needs. He was attentive, focusing on me as if I was important.

Pursuing something with him would be difficult. He'd probably never get over his late wife. I didn't delude myself into thinking things would be perfect because he'd kissed me. He hadn't shown any signs of regret. I was going to enjoy every moment I had with him.

"Where do you want to eat?" Cade asked.

"I haven't been to many places yet, just the bar we ran into you the other night. Do you have a favorite place?" I tensed, wondering if eating out at his favorite place would bring up memories of his late wife.

"It's been a while since I've been there and I'm not sure even sure it's still open but—"

"I'd love to try it."

"It's a place the tourists miss because it's not on the main drag." He gestured up Main Street, where most of the tourist-driven shops and restaurants were.

“Sounds perfect.”

He gripped my hand tighter in his.

We passed by the restaurants, shops which faced the water, the small marketplace buzzing with people, and up a narrow side street where the sidewalks were rough with uneven brick. Each house was unique, a different color siding and style of porch, but almost everyone had window boxes or pots of flowers.

It was noticeably quieter here with fewer pedestrians. I peeked down the alleyways to get a glimpse as to what lay behind the houses, finding wrought iron gates, ornate gardens, brick sidewalks, and water fountains. The small historic homes held a history similar to parts of New Orleans.

“Are you sure there’s a restaurant on this street?”

“The one I remember. The further you walk north, you’ll come to state circle. There’s coffee shops, bookstores, and clothing stores there.”

“I was on state circle yesterday buying things for my apartment.” I hadn’t realized there were so many side streets with hidden treasures.

We finally stopped at a white building with a black hanging sign which read McGregor’s Pub. I liked that we were more alone here than on the main streets the tourists frequented.

“Here it is.” Cade held the door open for me as I walked inside the dark bar.

When he caught the skeptical look on my face, he said, “I promise the food’s good.”

“Two for dinner, or would you like to sit at the bar?” A man appeared at the hostess stand.

“Dinner, please,” Cade said.

The man led us to a secluded booth in the corner.

Warmth flushed through me because this was very much a date—meandering through the streets like tourists and dinner.

It was still early. There were only two other couples.

The man placed menus in front of us and left.

“What’s good here?”

“The crab cakes,” Cade said like I’d asked a ridiculous question.

“Is the answer always the crab cakes?” I smiled at him.

“Yes, unless we’re at a place you can order crabs.”

“Taylor used to talk about eating crabs. She missed them.”

“She told you to move here?”

“Kind of. The other attorneys at my firm are her friends from law school. She told me about their plan to open a firm.”

“Is your dad still upset you’re here?”

I didn’t want to talk about my dad. I didn’t want to ruin the high I’d been on since Cade stepped into my apartment. “He’s not happy. I have an event for Kids Speak in a few weeks and I worry he has something planned for it. Something I won’t like.”

“You’re planning to go back to New Orleans for it?” His stance was deceptively relaxed, but every muscle in his body tensed as if waiting for my response.

“Yes, we planned on announcing the expansion into other cities. I wanted to start here, but with his threat to withdraw funding, I’m not sure what’s going to happen.” I was a little worried about dealing with the fallout of the proposal. I was sure there would be rumors and talk about why I’d said no, and I worried Layton would confront me again.

“Layton wants you back.” Cade shifted in his seat and his jaw was tight.

“I don’t understand why he’s so intent on getting me back. He didn’t love me.” He didn’t want me with the intensity Cade did. It was like I was the one who got away and he couldn’t handle the rejection.

“You’re beautiful. You’re kind, caring, and smart. Anyone would be lucky to be with you.”

I chewed my lip. “That’s sweet, but I’m not sure that’s what Layton values or wants in a wife. Reputation and family wealth are the two big requirements.”

“I can’t understand the world you grew up in.” Something pulsed between us and I couldn’t look away from him. Was he disgusted by it, or was he sympathetic?

“It’s hard to imagine anything else when it’s all you’ve ever known.” My voice was soft.

“Hi, I’m Casey. I’ll be your waitress tonight. Are you ready to order?”

Cade’s eyes slowly broke from mine to acknowledge the waitress, ending the connection, but I kept my eyes on him. “The crab cake sandwiches and fries, please.”

Casey took our menus and left.

“I hope you don’t mind that I ordered for you.”

“Not at all. I trust your judgment and I loved the crab cakes Friday night.”

Cade’s shrewd eyes watched me for a few seconds. I suspected he was still thinking about our conversation before the waitress interrupted us. “You’re stronger than you think.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t.” But he was right. I didn’t feel particularly strong.

“No, but I can see the doubt in your eyes. You’re worried Layton or your dad will convince you to go back. You told him no in front of a room full of your family and so-called friends. That took guts. You’ve moved across the country on your own to start a new business and a new life. It’s because you’re strong.”

I’d viewed it as cowardly, so it was mind-opening to hear his perspective. His words filled the cracks in my confidence. “Keep saying that and maybe I’ll believe it.”

“If I were stronger, I would have moved away too. That way, I could avoid any reminders of my life with Caroline and my family who couldn’t give me any space in the beginning, but I didn’t.”

“I think you’re strong for staying and facing it.” I reached across the table, covering his hand with mine.

He cleared his throat, determination filling his eyes. “We’re both strong and we’re both fighters, but I think we could be stronger together.”

His soft words settled into my consciousness, giving me hope that what I’d found with Cade could be my future.

The waitress placed our plates in front of us as I pulled my hand from his.

I focused on Casey, who’d asked if we wanted anything else. I said, “No,” and she left.

We ate in silence while I reveled in the feeling we could be together. We didn’t need to fill the silence. There were no appearances to maintain.

We finished eating then Cade paid the bill. We walked outside where it was dark and cooler than when we’d arrived.

Cade put his arm around me, pulling me into his side. “I loved showing you my town. I haven’t really looked at it in years. I haven’t appreciated the beauty—it’s uniqueness—how lucky I am to live here close to my family who loves me.”

I squeezed his side with my hand, happy for him. “They don’t manipulate you and your feelings?”

“No. They’ve been nothing but supportive—a little stifling at times but supportive.”

“I’m glad I can make you feel better about your situation.” There was no sarcasm in my voice. I was glad I could ease things for him.

“I think you help me to see what I’ve been missing. I’ve taken everything for granted. I lost one person, but I didn’t lose everyone. But if I’d kept going the way I was—I would have pushed my parents further away.”

“I’m sure your family understands that even if it was painful for them.”

“It’s you.” He kissed my temple. “You’re the reason I see things clearly. I want to keep seeing you. I want to be around you. You make everything better.”

His words flowed through my body. When had anyone said those words to me? My brother leaned on me. My parents pushed me. Layton wanted things from me. But Cade just wanted to be with me. My presence made his life better. “Thank you.”

“Do you want to come back to my place?”

I paused. I hadn’t expected Cade to invite me there. I didn’t know if he lived there with his late wife or if he’d moved.

“It’s not the house I lived in with Caroline if that’s what you’re thinking. I couldn’t breathe in that home. I sold it to her parents. They weren’t ready to let it go.”

“That was probably a good idea. I can’t imagine living in the same place—” I couldn’t finish my sentence because I didn’t want to say his late wife’s name out loud. It made her more real somehow, which was ridiculous because she was a huge part of him.

“Have you ever been in love?”

“No.” I hadn’t loved anyone the way he’d loved his late wife. It made me long for something like what he’d had.

“You seem pretty positive about that.”

“I see you, grieving your late wife five years later. I know I’ve never felt that way about anyone. I probably thought I was in love with one at the time, but I can see now, I wasn’t.”

I knew he’d always feel something toward Caroline, but I hoped he’d make room in his heart for me. Maybe it was naïve, but I’d never met anyone as real as him. Everything he went through made him the man he was today—the man I wanted to be with.

We stopped in front of his truck. He walked me back so that I leaned against the passenger side door his arms braced on either side of my head. “I can think of a few things that make me feel young.”

“Yeah and what’s that?” I liked this playful side of him.

He leaned in closer as he breathed his words over my lips. “You, for one.”

My arms wrapped around his neck before I pulled his lips down to mine. My fingers tangled in his hair as he kissed me.

He pulled back slightly. “Your body under mine. Your lips on mine. You naked in my bed.”

“Let’s go home then.” I smiled to see his face relaxed, the tension gone from his shoulders. The ever-present sadness in his eyes dissipated. I wanted him like this more often. I loved that I brought this out in him—that I’d made him see there was more to life than how he’d been living these last few years.

He pulled me away from the truck to open the door. “Let’s go.”

I climbed inside. I watched as he walked around the front of the truck. He wasn’t from a wealthy family. He worked hard and lived simply. He was someone I admired.

The idea that someone else’s happiness could fulfill you, not the amount of money in your bank account or the brand of your shoes, was intoxicating.

We drove in silence to his home. I tried to pay attention to my surroundings but quickly became disoriented since I hadn’t explored outside the city.

“Do you live on the water?” The light of the moon reflected off the water in the distance.

“I do. The house needed a ton of repairs, but the water sold it for me. I’d sit out on the porch and watch the water for hours.” He pulled down a long driveway to an older home with a detached garage and an overflowing dumpster.

I got out of the truck, placing my hand in his. Rocking chairs lined the wraparound porch. It was inviting. I could see

him sitting on one, staring out over the water.

“I just started on the repairs. I meant to renovate a long time ago, but time got away from me.”

It was like this house told his story since Caroline died. He’d moved on in some ways and not others. It was his solace, his sanctuary, but still a reminder of what he’d lost and how far he needed to go.

“Can we see the water?”

“Sure.” He led me around the house.

The slight breeze cooled the air. It was more peaceful than my apartment because he had no neighbors. It felt like we were all alone. “It’s beautiful.”

“I love the view and the quiet.” His tone was more relaxed. He seemed at peace here.

He moved behind me, pulling me back against him. He nuzzled my neck. “I like having you here—in my space.”

My breath caught. I doubted Cade brought people here. My stomach flip-flopped at the thought of him trusting me, like when I drove too fast over a hill. That same thrill—excited, scared, and unsure, but determined to live in the moment raced through my body. I turned in his arms to cup his cheek. “Thank you for inviting me here.”

“Thank you for coming.” He pulled me tighter to his body. His eyes shimmered with emotion before he grabbed my hand, pulling me to the door. He unlocked it before pushing it open. We walked through the living room where a wall had recently been removed revealing the studs.

I wanted to explore his home to learn more about him, but he led me through the kitchen then up a set of stairs to the second floor.

“Are we on a mission?” I teased.

He stopped a few feet inside a bedroom. “You could say that.”

He hadn't turned on any lights, so it was dark, but I could see he'd recently removed a wall. "I'm expanding the bedroom."

Other than the construction, I could make out a king-size bed, two nightstands, and a door to a bathroom. There were no decorative items, not that I'd expected any. It was the same as his office.

"Come here." His voice was a low command that sent blood humming through my body. The moonlight through the window illuminated his face. He sat on the edge of the bed—his softly spoken command combined with the raw craving *for me* in his blue eyes, compelled me to move the few steps until I stood between his wide-spread legs. His hands gripped my hips, anchoring me.

"Who are you, Cade Morrison, and what are you doing to me?"

Emotion swirled in his eyes. "I'm a widower—so I know what love is when I see it."

I shifted closer, placing my hands on his broad shoulders. The muscles tensed beneath my fingertips. Was he saying that what we had could be love?

"I'm a contractor." He raised his brow, gripping me tighter. "So, I'm good with my hands."

My core heated. I caressed the hair at the base of his scalp.

"I'm a karate instructor." His voice lowered, his breath heating my skin and igniting me. "So, I'm a good teacher."

He leaned forward, the whisper of his breath tickling the bare skin—sending shivers of desire curling through me. "But right now, I'm just a man—a man who wants you."

"Yes." *Yes, I want you, and yes, you're enough.*

I smoothed a lock of his hair away from his eyes. It was like everything in the room came to a stop—I held my breath as I looked down into his eyes—seeing the depth of this man's soul. The pain, the yearning for more, and the desire for me.

His lips parted as I lowered my head, my lips hovering over his. The anticipation. The want. The need.

When our lips touched—something unleashed inside of him. It was as if he couldn't restrain himself anymore. He groaned a deep guttural sound, that had me panting. Satisfaction flowed through me that he wanted me. He lifted me to straddle his erection. I tilted my head to the side as he placed open-mouthed kisses on my neck. I was desperate for more—nothing between us—and I wanted him inside me.

He slowly gently lowered me to the bed and cupped a breast in each hand through my shirt. He pulled back to look at me. I bit my lip as the warmth of his touch and heat of his eyes seared me through my clothes and heated every nerve in my body.

“More, Cade. I need more.” I frantically pulled on the edge of his shirt until he sat back on his heels and ripped it roughly over his head.

I removed my shirt before he reached around to unsnap the clasp of my bra—his hot breath on my neck. My breath hitched as the bra slipped down my arms and I flung it to the side.

“So, beautiful,” he rumbled as he admired my breasts—with his eyes, then his hands—calloused and rough over my skin. A startling contrast to his warm wet mouth on my nipple, the scrape of his teeth.

My fingers traced the planes of his chest, the smooth ridges of his stomach. My head chanted—*more, more. Now. Not enough. Never enough.* My breath was sharp and ragged. My core burned for him. I unbuckled and unzipped my jeans—as I tried to shimmy them down with his lips still locked around my nipple. He groaned as the motion pushed me deeper into his mouth. The sound was reverberating down my body to my pussy. When I couldn't move to get them off, he pulled his mouth off my nipple, the air cold on my wet skin. I lifted my hips as he shifted down my body, pulling my jeans and panties off.

His shoulders pushed my legs farther apart. His hot breath teased the sensitive skin of my inner thighs and my muscles quivered. He placed a kiss on each one, teasing me, as I shifted closer to his mouth before his lips circled my clit and he sucked hard. I closed my eyes, losing myself to the feel of his lips on my clit and his finger entering my pussy.

“Oh, God.”

“It’s Cade, baby.”

“Cade.” I couldn’t form a coherent thought—his skin was hot under my touch, his muscles flexed, and his hair soft as I tangled my fingers in his. I was naked in his bed—bared to him. My body was on fire—hotter than I’d ever been for anyone. “Please, Cade.”

I didn’t know what I wanted, but when his second finger entered my pussy, he curled it just right. I arched into him, crying out. The climax slammed into me as my pussy clamped around his fingers as he continued to lick and suck. When I recovered, I sank into the bed sated yet still needing more. He moved up my body, placing soft kisses on my hips, my belly, my breast, and on the skin behind my ear.

“Cade, I—” *I love you.* I’d never felt a more intense emotion than at this moment. His body tensed above mine—his eyes intent on me. Wasn’t it too soon?

“I know, baby. Me too.” His lips found mine. I wanted to ask what he knew. Did he know the depths of my feelings for him? There was no way he could possibly feel the same way I did. Not when he’d loved and lost.

He braced himself on one hand as he continued to kiss me, but my mind was hyper-focused on his large hand cupping my head, before drifting down my neck, my shoulder, my side, and digging into my hips, his cock nudging my entrance—my body quivered under his touch until I was shaking with need for him all over again.

“You feel so much, don’t you?” He watched me carefully, taking in and making me aware of my uneven breathing and the tremors in my legs.

I reached out to cup his cheek. “Only with you.”



Cade

HER WORDS REPEATED IN MY HEAD, *ONLY WITH YOU*. A TWINGE of guilt entered my consciousness. Was this right? Was I betraying Caroline? I closed my eyes against the onslaught of emotions—guilt and shame warring with need and want.

Hadley pulled my head down so that I was kissing her. I pulled away long enough to grab a condom from my nightstand. I forgot everything, but the smell of her skin and the feel of her hot and slick beneath me. I flexed my hips, my cock sliding inside her. Her warm heat surrounded my cock, urging me to move faster and harder.

“So, good.” Hadley’s nails skipped down my back, leaving goosebumps in their wake, and pulling me deeper inside her.

I pounded into her, wanting to forget my past, Caroline, anything that distracted me from where I was. I concentrated on the physical sensations—her smooth skin, the sweat trickling down my back, the flex of my hips, and the feel of her hot wet pussy. I was here. I was alive. *I deserved everything*. Emotion burst out of my chest—indescribable and larger than anything before and spilled from me over to Hadley. This woman was special. She was beautiful, larger than life, and here with me.

Hadley cried out as her pussy spasmed around me. I lowered to my elbows, kissed her neck, and slowed my movements while she rode out her orgasm. Her whimpers and cries of pleasure washed over me.

When her body relaxed, she placed light reverent kisses on my cheek, my neck, my shoulder. Being with Hadley was more—it was special.

I ignored the nagging thought that I wasn’t ready. I’d had sex with a beautiful woman who intrigued me. Nothing more.

I shut my eyes tightly. I tucked my head tucked next to hers, concentrating on the tightening of my balls. She turned her head, her lips pulled on my earlobe, and when she bit lightly, I exploded.

I sagged into the mattress, trying to keep the bulk of my weight off of her. That was intense. My brain flooded with emotions, but I focused on the feel of her body—hot and sweaty under me. Her arms tightened around me. I didn't want to move. I wanted to stay inside this woman and avoid reality for as long as I could.

"That was—"

"I know." I didn't want her to say it out loud. Then it would be real. The glimpse I had of what we could be, scared me. I didn't want to screw this up and feel guilt or remorse for being happy.

I kissed her shoulder. "I'll be right back."

I didn't look at her as I walked to the bathroom to clean up. If I stayed, I would have said what I was feeling. I closed the bathroom door seeking separation from her and everything we'd shared. I gripped the counter and looked at myself in the mirror—my hair was messy, my skin flushed, and my eyes troubled. This was wrong. I wasn't supposed to be with anyone after Caroline. She never permitted me to move on, but I hadn't discussed it with her either.

Why did being with Hadley feel so right when it should feel wrong? A chill ran down my spine as the sweat dried on my skin.

"Cade, are you okay?" Hadley's voice filtered through the closed door.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'll be out in a minute."

I washed my hands and cleaned up. I took a deep breath before I returned to bed. Hadley watched me from the same position she was in while I left. She lifted her arms to me, and I quickened my steps until I placed one knee on the bed and allowed her to pull me next to her.

"Everything okay?" Her eyes filled with concern.

“Of course.” I immediately felt awful for giving her a rote answer, one that wasn’t even remotely true.

“That was intense, huh?” She’d kept her voice light, but her eyes were dark like she knew this was tough for me.

“It was.” I was surprised she seemed to understand how difficult this was for me. It stirred up so many emotions I hadn’t felt in years.

“It’s okay to feel guilty.”

I winced. “Is it?”

“Have you been with anyone since Caroline? I know it’s none of my business but if I’m your first—”

“I was with one other woman, but I didn’t feel anything for her. Not like you.” That was vague enough to get my point across without revealing the emotions spinning like tumbleweeds through my body.

I settled on my back and pulled her to rest her head on my shoulder. I kissed her temple.

“That’s something at least.” Her voice was soft and tentative.

I couldn’t see her face. Was she relieved or disappointed? If I couldn’t love again—if I wouldn’t allow myself to have something with a woman, shouldn’t I walk away before she got hurt? It was the last thing I wanted. I wanted her in my arms, under me, and next to me. Any way I could have her, for as long as I could have her.

For the first time since Caroline was diagnosed, I felt my heart thudding in my chest, the blood pumping through my veins, and something else—hope, excitement, and anticipation for the future with Hadley. One where I showed her my town, taught her karate, listened to her worries, and supported her. I stroked her back.

“Let me know if anything changes or you feel differently. I don’t want to get hurt.”

I pulled back slightly surprised at the vulnerability in her words and her expression. “Look at me.”

She slowly tilted her head, her eyes sparkled with unshed tears, her face open and vulnerable.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t intend to hurt you.” But I was scared I would anyway.

At the spark in her eyes, she knew I would. It was inevitable. How could I move on—truly move on? Hadley hadn’t even been in love before. She’d want a future filled with marriage and kids—everything I thought I had at one point and lost. I couldn’t make those plans again when I could lose her.

“I’m not sure I can give you everything you need. I’m not sure I’m capable of it, but I want to try.” I didn’t like watching the hope in her eyes dim.

Her eyes were flat. Her mouth pinched. “That’s honest, at least.”

I wanted her to understand where I was coming from. “I’ve never told anyone this, but I wasn’t there when Caroline took her last breath. I wonder if she waited for me to leave the room before she took her last breath to spare me the pain of being present for her physical passing. At first, I felt guilty and robbed of that moment, but eventually I realized she wanted to do something for me to make my life easier, even as she lay unconscious. It was an act of love even though it didn’t feel like it at the time.” I waited for the usual wave of grief that accompanied that memory, but it didn’t come.

Hadley moved closer, laying her arm over my chest. “That’s a beautiful memory.”

“I swore I’d never get close to someone again. At the time, moving on was unfathomable but now, being here with you, anything is possible.”

I shifted so I was leaning on my elbow, caressing her cheek with my hand. “You can’t be my first love, but maybe you’ll be my last. I can’t guarantee anything. None of us can, but I like being with you and I want to see where this goes.” It was better to tell her the truth and give her the option of

walking away now rather than later—after she'd fallen in love with me.

Her eyes softened and she touched my cheek. Her eyes were swimming with unshed tears. I hoped I'd said the right thing. She pulled me down for a kiss. I poured everything I was feeling into it. I hoped it would be enough.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hadley

THE SUN FILTERED THROUGH CADE'S WINDOWS THE NEXT morning unhindered, reminding me where I was—Cade's house. I should have felt warm and cozy, but I felt unsettled. Was it the memory Cade shared with me? Was I setting myself up to be hurt?

I glanced over my shoulder to find Cade watching me thoughtfully, his arm folded behind his head.

"Do you have to go to work?" Cade rolled over, slinging an arm over me.

The weight of his arm was comforting. I relished in the feeling for a few seconds before I said, "Yes. I have to go to the bathroom and go home to get ready."

I needed space to think about what I was doing. Cade pulling back last night was a good thing. He'd done me a favor. I couldn't go from my overbearing father and Layton to yet another distraction. That's exactly what Cade was—a distraction.

He didn't say anything when I went to the bathroom—wearing only his shirt. I finger-brushed my hair before brushing my teeth with a spare toothbrush I found in the drawer. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. I couldn't believe I'd jumped into something new so quickly. Last night, I'd felt the highest of highs, but Cade's words centered me. Reminded me that he was probably still grieving Caroline. I could very well be a rebound for him.

Ever since I'd told Layton no, things in my life had gone into a downward spiral—the new firm wasn't gaining clients as quickly as I hoped, I had pressure from my dad and Layton to return to New Orleans, and now Cade. Why did I think I could be happy when I hadn't fixed the reasons I'd moved here? I still didn't know who I was. I needed to be happy and content with who I was before I could be with someone else.

Cade couldn't complete me. He had his own issues.

Disgusted with myself, I pulled open the bathroom door with more force than was necessary.

"Everything okay?" Cade raised his brows from his position against the pillows. One arm tucked behind his head and his bare chest visible above the sheet.

"Yup. I should probably get going." I averted my eyes, picking up the pieces of my scattered outfit and got dressed.

I paused by his side of the bed, where he eyed me warily. "I'll see you." I dropped a chaste kiss on his lips, but before I walked away, he caught my wrist and tugged me back.

"Does this mood have anything to do with what I said last night?" He kept hold of my wrist, distracting me with light strokes on my skin.

I pursed my lips, unsure whether I should tell him everything I was thinking. "Maybe."

"Nolan said I should be honest, but maybe that was a bad idea." His expression was uncertain.

"You talked to Nolan about me?" I liked that more than I should. That meant he wasn't hiding me. I was important to him.

"Yeah, I don't want to screw this up."

Warmth filled me and I sat on the bed next to his hip. The sheet slid down to reveal his toned abs. "So don't."

"What we have is special. I want to see where this goes."

His hand cupped the back of my head as he pulled me down to capture my lips. I straddled his hips, wanting to be

closer to him. My pussy settled on the length of his cock. Emotion crept up on me with each sweep of his hand, each pass of his lips on mine, each slow, calculated thrust of his hips. Slowly and surely, he'd slipped under my defenses and wrapped around my soul. He was so entangled with me. I couldn't see straight. I couldn't think about anything but him and those words. *I was special.*



AVERY GREETED ME AT OUR OFFICE DOOR WITH TWO TO-GO cups of coffee in her hand. "Hey, this is for you."

"Thanks."

"Guess what?" She unlocked the door before leaning her back against the door to open it. Her face was animated, her eyes filled with excitement.

I put Cade and our weekend out of my mind to focus on Avery. "What?"

"I got a call from the public defender's office late on Friday that they have some overflow cases. I'm going to go pick them up soon."

"That's great news."

"And Dylan was able to score a spot in the paper to advertise car accidents. Hopefully, we can expand on the civil law side taking personal injury cases, and eventually family law and estates and trusts."

Relief flooded my body at the same time questions filled my brain. "Are you sure that was a good idea? I thought we were going to wait before we advertised for personal injury cases."

We walked down the hall to our offices. "Dylan's anxious to get started. Don't forget our lease will increase soon."

"In five months, but you're right, we have to plan for it." I placed my coffee on my desk.

“I’ll go pick up the files so that we can get started on them.”

“I’ll come with you.” I was still riding the glow of spending my weekend with Cade and I didn’t want it to end.



Cade

AFTER I DROPPED HADLEY OFF THIS MORNING, I RETURNED home since I didn’t have karate class until four p.m. One of my jobs fell through so I had free time to work on my house.

I worried I couldn’t be the man Hadley needed, but I wanted to be. She deserved everything, a husband and children. It hurt to think about those things with someone other than Caroline, but maybe I’d be ready for them at some point.

I ripped out the remaining carpet in the living room. I was excited to have original hardwoods refinished and restored.

The front door opened. Nolan called, “Hey, finished a job and thought you could use some help.”

I jogged down the steps to greet him. “I could use help hauling the carpet to the dumpster.”

Nolan took in the bare floors visible on the first floor and the stairs. “Wow. You were busy this morning.”

“Yeah, I have some things on my mind.” Working always cleared things up for me, but my conversation with Hadley still bothered me.

“Should I be concerned?” Nolan studied me carefully.

I grabbed two beers from the fridge before handing him one. I led the way to the couch in the living room. “I’m worried things with Hadley are going too fast. I tried to slow things down, but I think I hurt her feelings instead.”

I didn’t like the uncertainty on her face this morning. I poured everything I was feeling into that kiss and what came after. It felt a lot like making love.

“What did you tell her?”

“That I wasn’t sure what I was capable of in a relationship, but I wanted to try. When I was with Caroline, it was a slow progression. We were younger. We had all of this time to date and get to know each other. It was this easy thing that happened. With Hadley, everything’s coming at me hard and fast. It’s good but a little scary.”

“You were honest with her. I’m not sure what else you could say. It’s understandable you’d want to take a new relationship slowly.”

“I can’t. Nothing with Hadley is slow. I’m drawn to her.”
When we’re together, we ignite.

“That’s great, man.” Nolan’s face relaxed, his shoulders dropped as he eased back into the cushions.

“I’m worried being honest fucked things up with her. I caused her to doubt me.”

Nolan chuckled. “Well, you’re bound to screw something up.”

“What do you mean?” Was I destined never to be with someone again? Not because I didn’t want to move on but because I was irrevocably broken?

“Men always screw up in relationships. That’s why I avoid them. I’m sure Hadley understands it’s harder for you since Caroline died.”

Hadley wasn’t a short-term relationship with caveats and restrictions. She was the open-ended future any man would want but I wasn’t sure I could give her that.

“It’s okay if your relationships with Caroline and Hadley are different. They’re different people. What’s really bothering you?”

“After Caroline, I told myself I wouldn’t hope for marriage or kids again.”

“You deserve that future. Just because it didn’t work out with Caroline, doesn’t mean it won’t work out with Hadley.”

“I never thought I’d feel that way about someone again.” Initially, I thought I could be with Hadley, form a connection with her, and keep it light. With Caroline, we’d dated for a year before I’d been comfortable saying those words. Our relationship was slow and methodical. Decisions were made after careful thought and discussion. This thing with Hadley was zooming out of my control faster than a freight train with failing brakes.

“Maybe this is a good thing. If it moved slowly, you’d have time to doubt your feelings.” Nolan observed me as he spoke.

Maybe he was right. I should go along with things as long as they were good. Why question it?

“You should bring her to Sunday dinner.” Nolan had a gleam in his eye, like he was happy about Hadley. Like he wanted us together.

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it. It might make it easier for you to be in the house again.”

I hadn’t realized he knew the real reason I never went to family dinner.

Nolan stood before dropping his empty bottle on the counter. “Want to work or keep talking about women?”

I chuckled, feeling a thousand times better. I could be with her and let things happen naturally, right? “Let’s get to work.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hadley

AVERY FLOPPED INTO MY CHAIR. “IT’S NICE HAVING WORK TO do, isn’t it?”

“It is. I like being busy.”

“Dylan’s a natural at drawing in clients. I had two new ones call this morning. I’m excited to see the growth when she officially starts next week. The website should be up and running then. I’ll send you a link to view the draft.”

“Good. If we want to be taken seriously, we need to look professional—an attractive website, a receptionist, and—” I looked around at the dated carpet, the walls which still bore the holes from the prior tenant.

“I was hoping we could get away with holding off on renovations, but I think we should do it before we get too busy. Maybe Cade knows someone who could come in and install new carpet and throw on a fresh coat of paint.”

“Or we could hire someone to do the carpet and paint it ourselves over the weekend?” I wanted to do it myself.

“Ah. That’s a good idea.” Avery tapped her lips with her finger before her forehead wrinkled. “I’d need to run any improvements past the landlord.”

“Won’t he be happy we’re improving this place?”

“You would think, but he’s perpetually unhappy. He’s either always grumpy or just with me. I can’t decide.” Avery’s face was pinched.

“I can’t imagine you pissing anyone off.” Avery was quiet. She wasn’t as outgoing as Dylan or me.

She shifted on her chair. “Things come out wrong when I talk. I’m a little awkward.”

“I haven’t noticed that at all.”

Avery rolled her eyes. “Stick around long enough and I’ll say something embarrassing. I don’t think the landlord wants us to get too comfortable here.”

“Seems to me he’d rather keep a tenant than find a new one.” I folded my arms over my chest, trying to figure out what to do.

“You would think, but I think he has it out for us because of the mix-up in the contract.”

“I can handle him if you want.”

“I’ll let you know if he gets worse.” She smiled, focusing on me. “What’s going on with you and Cade? Did you have a moment after we left dinner the other night?”

I plopped into her guest chair. “Yes. He showed me the harbor. Then the next day, I went to a class and we’ve been kind of seeing each other since then.”

“Wow. That’s great, isn’t it?”

“Things have been going great, but he mentioned something last night that worried me. It was honest but set me on edge. I’m wondering if I’m setting myself up to get hurt.” I debated telling her that Cade’s wife died. I didn’t want to violate his trust, but I knew Avery would keep it between us.

“What makes you think that?”

“His wife died of cancer five years ago and he’s unsure if he can be in a relationship again. He’s not sure he can give me all of him. That’s kind of how I took it. He said he wanted to try, so that’s good, right?” He’d recovered nicely this morning, but I couldn’t get what he’d said out of my head.

“That’s noble of him but also cocky. You’ve been seeing him for what, a week? How does he know something serious

is even on your radar?”

My cheeks heated and Avery’s eyes widened.

“No. You don’t have feelings for him already, do you?”

I nodded miserably. “I don’t know what to do. I moved here to find myself—to figure out who I am. This thing with Cade is intense.”

“Cade’s a distraction?”

“We’ve barely gotten the firm off the ground. My dad’s threatening to withdraw money from Kids Speak. I should be focused on that and not whether Cade is ready for a relationship.”

“Maybe you don’t need to figure out who you are so much as set boundaries with your family. You can go home on your terms. You set limits and stick to them. We’ll figure out Kids Speak together.”

It felt good to have friends to count on.

“Maybe he’s not the right guy forever but the right guy for now.”

She’d made a good point, but my stomach dropped when she said he was the right guy for now. I didn’t want to think about him moving on with someone who wasn’t me.

The office phone rang. “I’ll get it.” Avery disappeared into her office. I tried to get back to work but I couldn’t get the image of Cade with another woman out of my mind.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hadley

EACH NIGHT THIS WEEK, I'D SEEN CADE IN CLASS, OR WE'D met up after to cook dinner together and watch a movie. It was very relationship-like and nothing I'd experienced before. My dates in the past revolved around charity galas, business dinners, and appearances for one thing or another. Something as simple as dinner and a movie never happened. I loved it.

Avery and I spent the afternoon on Friday in the conference room, with Cade's contracts spread out on the table.

"Let's organize them into paid, unpaid, and partial payments. Then we can get an idea of what's going on," I said.

"How are things with Cade?"

I paused and placed the file I'd been reading on the table in front of me. "Good."

"You don't sound overly excited."

"I think it might be tough at times for him. I worry he's not ready to move on or that something will trigger a memory and he'll pull away from me."

"It's to be expected, I guess."

"Right."

Dylan burst into the room, filled with energy and excitement. "Hey, guys, I'm glad I caught you both here."

I exchanged an amused look with Avery before setting the files aside.

“First of all, did you get an appointment with the county superintendent yet?” Dylan asked me.

“I scheduled it for next week.” That was my first step. I started with the superintendent. Then spoke with the teachers and assistants, who worked directly with the kids. I found the process was smoother that way, giving me a feel for how welcome my program would be.

“Perfect. I talked to several PTAs in the county. They’re so excited to have you come in to talk to the parents and teachers.”

“That’s great.” The PTA was the heart of the school. They were in charge of fundraising and ensuring teachers had what they needed in the classrooms.

“They want to include you in the back-to-school programs in August. You’d talk to the parents at back-to-school night and send an email out before school started outlining your program. If there’s a good reception, they’ll include your program in their funding.”

“What do you mean?” I’d never asked for that before. I’d never needed to.

“The PTAs here do one large fundraiser a year. The money raised goes to school assemblies and teacher’s supplies. They want to include your program pending the superintendent’s approval, of course. Everyone I talked to was so excited to get started.”

“That’s amazing, Dylan. I can’t thank you enough.” She’d made a tremendous amount of progress in a week.

“It was fun. I love doing stuff like this.” She pulled out a conference chair and plopped into it. “What are you guys working on? Did we get our first big murder case?”

“Ha! No. This is Cade Morrison’s business records,” I said.

“His files are a mess. It’s a good thing we’re helping him,” Dylan said.

“Tell me about it.” I shouldn’t have been surprised. Cade got so caught up in making things beautiful, he’d neglected to follow up on the business side of things. “I’m hoping to free up funds so he can use it for his charity.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot. He runs a charity too,” Avery said.

“Let me know if he needs any help with his charity. I’m loving doing the groundwork for your nonprofit,” Dylan said.

“I’m sure he’d love that. He pays for a lot of the supplies out of his own pocket. Maybe there’s an organization that could help fund the renovations?”

She tapped her lips with her finger as if she was already formulating plans. “Let me go do some research.”

“Dylan’s amazing,” I said to Avery.

“She is. We’re lucky to have her here. She’s the heart around here.”

She totally was. She brought in clients, she drummed up excitement, and everything she was doing for Kids Speak was great for the firm.



AT SIX P.M., MY PHONE BUZZED WITH AN INCOMING TEXT. I blew out a breath and kneaded my neck to work out the cramp from leaning over files all day. After drinking a sip of my now cold coffee, I swiped my screen.

Cade: Can I see you tonight?

Warmth filled my chest despite the cold coffee I’d just drank. I loved that he’d asked. That he made me feel special.

Hadley: Sure.

Cade: Are you still at work, or are you at home?

I glanced at the clock. His class should be over by seven.

Hadley: I’m at work.

Cade: Can you wait for me?

I wanted to see him.

Hadley: I'll wait.

When his class was almost over, I put away the files and tidied my desk. I walked through the empty office, turning off lights as I went. When I opened the door, Cade stood there in his work-out pants and T-shirt smelling of soap like he'd just showered.

My stomach flipped. He looked so handsome. Was it possible to set limits to our relationship when each time I saw him, he drew me in closer? Each time we talked, I fell deeper into him.

"Hey, you could have waited inside." His voice was gravelly, his eyes taking me in from head to toe.

I turned to the door to lock up, loving that he couldn't wait to see me again when we'd spent every evening together. "I was done anyway. I thought I'd come over while you cleaned up."

"I let class out a few minutes early, showered, and locked up."

We stood, facing each other. I wondered if he'd ended class early because he couldn't wait to see me. Other than Colin, I'd never been the most important person in someone's life.

"Want to go for a walk?" He raised his brow.

"Sure." I placed my briefcase strap on my shoulder.

"I've been thinking about us a lot. I said something last weekend and maybe I didn't explain myself very well. I want you to know that what we have is different from what I had with Caroline. I don't want you to think I spend time comparing you, but it is different in my mind. You're different people. Our relationships are different. Not in a bad way. In the best way possible."

My cheeks flushed at the memory of what he'd shared and how we'd only grown closer this week. "You said you wanted

to be my boyfriend. You didn't do anything wrong. You were being honest."

I wanted to know the depth of his pain, but I couldn't push—I wouldn't. I barely took in the bars we passed, the laughter filtering through the closed doors, the couple who passed by, arm-in-arm with large smiles on their faces. They only had eyes for each other. Would I ever have that with Cade?

He interlaced my fingers with his. "I'm only telling you this because I do see a future with you. I'm hoping you can be patient with me."

My eyes whipped to his. I almost expected him to say he'd never love anyone like he'd loved Caroline. My heart soared—was it possible he could love again? Or was that too much to hope for so soon?

I should walk away when the pain would be minimal. But if I stayed, I knew without a doubt I'd fall hopelessly in love with him. He'd have all the power to walk away and leave me in pieces.

If I continued this thing with him—would he take steps back when I got too close—when he felt too much, or would he relax and let us see where this could go? There was no way to know for sure. I'd have to give him a chance. "Okay."

He smiled softly. "Yeah?"

I sighed. Maybe it was time to tell him I understood what he was going through. "I was twelve when my mom died, so I understand grief. I know it's different when it's a parent versus a spouse. My mother was my past, but your wife was your future. You mourned the loss of your future when I'd mourned my past. It's similar, but not the same."

He was quiet as he processed my words. I could move on, but could he? Could he let someone into his life again? Not just temporarily but to fill all the crevices of his heart and his life?

When I saw him standing outside my office door, my heart ached for him. I'd never be satisfied with scraps or pieces of him—not when I deserved all someone had to give. If at some

point, it became too much, or he wasn't willing to give more—I'd have to decide if it was enough.

"I'm sorry about your mother. I suspected she wasn't in the picture, but I didn't want to bring up any painful memories."

"You didn't. It was so long ago I barely remember what it was like to have her in my life." In some ways, I'd blocked that time so it would be easier to move on but I suspected Cade didn't have that same luxury.



Cade

I WANTED TO SUPPORT HER, HELP HER, AND LOVE HER THE WAY she deserved, but I didn't know if I was capable of being that man. My mind drifted to my conversation with Nolan—how I needed to talk to my parents and include Hadley. It was a way to show her I was serious about her.

The light breeze tickled my scalp. We leisurely walked around the couples and families congregating by the water. Their laughter filtered out over the water.

Hadley wrapped her arms around herself, shivering.

"Here." I pulled off my hoodie before handing it to her.

"Thanks." Pulling the large hoodie over her head, it dropped down to engulf her. I grabbed her hand—the coolness of her fingers couldn't alleviate the warmth in my body at the thought she was mine. I didn't want to screw this up. I didn't want to push her away. I wanted to absorb her goodness—her warmth, her smell, and the love she freely offered me. I wanted to be the man who deserved her.

I may not have talked to Caroline about moving forward, but I knew now she wouldn't begrudge me happiness. I deserved to feel again—the breeze on my face, the warmth of her skin, and her soft hair. I stopped, still holding onto her hand as I brushed her hair behind her ear. She looked so small, almost vulnerable in my sweatshirt. My heart burst with emotion—with feelings I couldn't name yet. But there was no

need to rush. I could take my time. Get to know her and me again. I could reinvent myself.

“What?” She licked her lips, drawing my eyes down.

“I was just thinking about how beautiful you are.”

Her lips curved up. “Thank you.”

I dipped my head to her shoulder and drew her closer to my body. I barely registered the people who walked around us. It was only me and her standing in the moonlight. I closed my eyes. I never wanted this moment to end.

This moment was perfect. It was worth holding onto. Hadley had slipped under my skin as if she'd been there forever. “Hadley,” I breathed before my lips touched hers in the barest—lightest of touches.

“Cade.”

I opened my eyes to look into hers—worry and depth warred in the depths of her blue eyes. I stroked her jaw. I'd protect her. I'd do everything in my power to be worthy of her. “My parents have a family dinner every Sunday night.”

“Yeah?” She tilted her head slightly.

“I'd like you to come.”

She opened her mouth the answer, but I covered her parted lips with my thumb. “There's more. I haven't been as close to my parents since Caroline died. I have to apologize. To make things right. I should do it on my own, but I don't want to. I want you with me.” For the first time, I wondered if she'd say no. Would she be uncomfortable?

“Of course, I'll be there for you.” The worry cleared from her eyes until all that was left was yearning.

“Thank you. Sometimes, I feel like I don't deserve to love again.”

“You deserve everything.” She didn't hesitate. She said it with such certainty I wanted to believe her.

Instead of arguing with her, I kissed her. I kissed her until her lips were swollen and I forgot everything but her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hadley

THE NEXT MORNING I WAS STILL RIDING THE HIGH OF OUR perfect evening walk as I sipped my coffee. What he'd said was everything I wanted to hear so I tried to ignore the small voice in my head that told me to be cautious, to hold myself back. When I looked into his eyes, surrounded in the warmth and scent of his sweatshirt, his hand cupping my cheek, his thumb on my lips—I wanted to lean into him and soak in his words. I wanted to believe I was enough to overcome everything—both of our pasts and our future.

Cade walked into the kitchen, smelling of soap, his hair still wet from the shower. “You want to come with me this morning? Nolan and I are revealing one of the homes we renovated.”

I turned to face him. “The family won’t mind if I’m there?”

He placed both hands on the counter behind me and leaned in to nuzzle my neck before pulling back to answer, “No, I called yesterday and asked if it was okay. I said you were running your own nonprofit and hoped to gain some ideas.” Cade shrugged. “I know our nonprofits are different, but it might be beneficial to observe and I want you there. I want you to see what I do.”

“I’d love to come.” I smiled up at him. I was giddy he’d asked me to go with him.

He leaned down to kiss me before taking a few steps to pour his coffee. “I could get used to having you in my home

every morning.”

“Me too.” I didn’t want to get too comfortable, but it was nice waking up to him.

“I’ll whip up some pancakes and then we can stop by your apartment for you to change.”

“Sounds perfect.” I sat on the barstool so I could observe him cook.

He grabbed pancake mix from the pantry, milk and eggs from the fridge and placed them on the counter between us. “It’s a mix from a box, but it will get the job done.”

“When are you planning on renovating the kitchen?” I asked, looking around at the room. So far, it looked like he’d taken down the wall between the two rooms but hadn’t touched anything else.

He poured the ingredients into a bowl. “So far, I’ve been in demo-mode in the rest of the house because I can’t seem to figure out what I want to do first or how it should look. I’m waiting to do the kitchen until I can come up with a plan. I have this mental block when it comes to my own home. Normally, I can see exactly how the space should look before I start.”

“Wow. That’s incredible. I don’t have that same vision. I need to look at pictures for inspiration. Not that I’ve had a place to renovate before. I mean, for accents and decorations.”

“I’ve done so many renos. I have an idea of what people want or don’t want, but no idea of what I want.” He turned on the stove and poured the mix into the pan.

“Hmm.” I wasn’t sure what to tell him. “I guess it would make sense to finish the bathrooms first and do the kitchen last?”

“Makes sense. If you’re around, I might cook more.” He winked before turning to the stove to check the pancakes.

I considered the space and the view of the water from the kitchen since he’d knocked down the adjoining wall. “Maybe

bright white cabinets. They're clean and will open up the room even more."

Cade flipped the pancakes before turning to brace his hands on the island counter. "I like that."

I didn't know if I'd overreached in suggesting it, but he hadn't seemed to mind. I wouldn't be surprised if he chose white.

We ate quickly before stopping at my apartment so that I could change.

When we were on our way to the family's home, Cade told me about the family's needs. "Their son was injured last year when a large branch fell on his head. He suffered brain damage and isn't able to speak or walk."

"That's heartbreaking. I can't even imagine." I mentally prepared myself, so I wouldn't get upset when I met him.

"He's the cutest little kid with blue eyes and spiked blond hair. When they submitted their request, I didn't even have to think twice about it. I wanted a home that would make it easier for the parents to maneuver his chair around. We widened doorways and lowered countertops. We also added an in-law suite because the grandparents are moving in to help with his care."

"I know I've said it before, but what you're doing is amazing. Are you paying for all of the work or you set up to receive donations too?"

"At first, I was paying for everything out of my pocket, but Nolan started a website where we could post the family's stories with before and after pics. I always ask the family before I post any before and after pics. Some prefer privacy. The pictures helped spread the word."

"It's a feel-good story that people can get behind." Although, most of the people I'd grown up around would prefer to donate for the accolades and didn't care to see the results of their donations.

"Exactly. Sometimes people receive grants from other charities who raise money or even from the state and we use

those funds in the renovation.”

That was interesting. “Maybe you could partner with a charity that raises the money so that you can focus on renovations.”

“I’ve thought about it. At first, I wasn’t sure if I would continue to do this, but I love it. Each time we meet with a family and come up with a plan, the family is so excited and happy to have someone doing something for them. Sometimes, they don’t even know what they want or need and we research it for them. We’ll talk to their therapists and doctors and develop a plan.”

“I didn’t realize so much went into it.” He went above and beyond to ensure these families were set for years to come.

“I try to anticipate what they’ll need, so they’re not frustrated with the space. I want it to work for them.”

We pulled down a long driveway to a rancher and parked behind a truck. There was a large black van parked to the left of the truck.

“This house is all one floor which is perfect for this family. We added the in-law suite, but it’s separate from the house.” He pointed to the right of the home where there was a new addition, joined to the main house by a screened-in porch.

“Is this the first time the family has seen the finishing touches?” I asked as Nolan got out of the truck in front of us and made his way to ours.

“They haven’t been here since we visited the first time and went over their needs and wants.”

Nolan leaned down to talk through Cade’s open window. “You ready for the big reveal?”

“Yes, I’m so excited to see their reaction.” I hadn’t even seen the house or met the family, but I was confident they’d be ecstatic with their new home.

Nolan stepped back and opened Cade’s door. “Let’s go, then.”

“Do you help with the renovations too?” I asked Nolan as I rounded the hood to meet them.

“I do when I have time between jobs. I’m hoping to go into business with this guy and I’ll have more time for these kinds of projects.”

Before I could respond, Cade held his hand out to a blonde woman in her late thirties. “Thank you for meeting us this morning, Mrs. Wallen. This is my girlfriend, Hadley, and you met my brother, Nolan.”

“Nice to meet you. We’re so excited to see what you’ve done.” A man with a receding hairline rounded the van and placed his arm around her. There was excitement in their eyes but sadness too.

“This is my husband, Ned Wallen.”

“Nice to meet you. I hope it’s okay that I’m here today too.”

“Of course. I don’t mind. Let me get Kai out of the van and we can go inside.”

“Do you need any help?” Cade asked.

Mr. Wallen opened the side door to lower the ramp for the wheelchair. “No. Thank you. We’ve got this.”

“I’ll go unlock the front door.” Nolan walked on the sidewalk leading to the porch and front door. There were three rocking chairs and a swing on the front porch. All had comfortable pillows and there was a small table.

I wondered if Cade had bought those items too. If so, he’d made an effort to make the home inviting as well as functional.

I waited next to Cade while the Wallens rolled Kai’s wheelchair out of the van. Kai was just as Cade described, except his legs were in braces and his beautiful blue eyes were unfocused. His hands rested on top of each other limply. I took a deep breath to stop the tears. I was sure the Wallens had enough pity in the last year. This was supposed to be a happy moment for them.

Cade crouched down in front of Kai and touched his hand. “Morning, Kai. Are you ready to see your new house? I brought my girlfriend, Hadley, to meet you.”

Kai didn’t react at all, but it was sweet for Cade to treat him as if he could.

I crouched down next to Kai and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Kai. I can’t wait to see your new house.”

At the Wallens’ soft smiles, we stood and followed the Wallens to the porch to the double front doors.

Nolan opened both doors so they could easily fit inside.

As soon as Mrs. Wallen entered the home, her hands flew to her mouth. We stepped in behind her, waiting for her to move further inside the home. It was a large open space for the kitchen, living room, and dining room.

“You said you were going to widen doorways, make the bathrooms handicapped accessible, and lower counters. You didn’t say you were going to tear down the walls.” Mrs. Wallen looked from Cade to Nolan.

I couldn’t gauge if she was happy or upset.

“We were going to widen the walls, but it made more sense to open everything up so you can see Kai wherever you are.”

Mrs. Wallen’s eyes welled with tears and she hugged him tightly before doing the same with Nolan. Mr. Wallen patted Kai’s shoulder.

I had to clear my throat, taking a deep breath so I wouldn’t cry with her. It was intense following them through the house as Nolan and Cade showed them each new detail and convenience. Every aspect of the house was improved from the floors to the cabinets to the walls. Cade had thought of everything.

When we finished in the in-law suite, Mrs. Wallen said, “I can’t thank you enough. This is beyond anything we could imagine.”

“We want you to be happy here and have everything completely accessible,” Cade said.

If Cade was doing more than handicapped accessible improvements for everyone like he'd done for the Wallens, it was no wonder he needed additional funding. He couldn't continue to carry the financial burden himself. But the thought that he did all of this and didn't expect praise caused me to fall even more for him.

We followed them to the front door before Nolan handed the Wallen's their keys. "Let me know if you have any problems with anything. We'll come back and take a look if something isn't working."

"This renovation is very generous of you. It was beyond anything we were expecting. Are you sure we shouldn't be contributing to this?" Mr. Wallen asked.

"No. This is what we do. You had the partial grant from the state, so we were able to use some of our funds for opening the walls and new cupboards in the kitchen. Now you shouldn't need to fix anything for a long time."

I didn't say anything, but they'd made significantly more upgrades than walls and cupboards.

"Thank you. I'll be singing your praises everywhere," Mrs. Wallen said.

"We appreciate it, but seeing your happiness is all we need."

Cade's words sounded cheesy, but I could see Cade and Nolan felt that way.

I shook their hands wishing them happiness in their new home. I had this overwhelming desire to do more for them. I made a note to ask Cade if he followed up with them as Kai grew to make additional adjustments to the house.

"I have a project I have to check in on. I'll see you later," Nolan said as he opened his door and backed down the driveway.

We got into Cade's truck before taking a minute to study the house.

Cade turned to me. "Where to? Are you hungry?"

“I am actually. I would have thought those pancakes could have tided me over until dinner, but I guess it was all of the excitement of the Wallen’s seeing their home for the first time.” Seeing the results of Cade and Nolan’s hard work on the Wallen’s face was everything. It was the same high I got from seeing the kids speak more confidently in my program.

Cade backed out of the driveway.

“Thank you for inviting me today. It was amazing to see their reaction.”

“Yeah. You can’t get a feel for something like this unless you’re there. That’s why Nolan wanted to invite the local media to one. He thinks it will generate more interest and funding.”

“You need it if you keep adding all those extras to the renovation.” I watched his face to gauge his reaction. I wondered if he’d be embarrassed.

“I can’t help myself. While we’re demoing, it’s easy to just keep going and take everything out. I think of how happy they’ll be once they see it. That’s what motivates me. Their happiness and the thought of making their lives easier with the accommodations. They’ve had a tough go of things, but I like to help any way I can.”

I studied his face. His hand was moving in time with his words, his eyes were bright with excitement. He’d given me a glimpse of himself this morning. One that showed me he was deeper than he gave himself credit for. He was amazing. His charity was doing wonderful things. He was kindhearted and incredibly generous. Was it selfish that I wanted some of that intensity focused on me?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hadley

I SMOOTHED MY DRESS OVER MY THIGHS. I WAS MEETING HIS parents tonight. I was more nervous than I usually would be. In my circle, I knew the parents before the first date. But this meeting was about more than me. Cade had pulled away from his parents and needed to make amends. I wanted to support him, but I was scared for both of us. I hoped they would accept me into his life.

A knock sounded on the door. With one last look at the mirror, I headed to the door before I pulled it open. Cade wore a tie, button-down shirt tucked into dress slacks, and dress shoes.

“Wow. I’ve never seen you in anything but casual clothes.” He was attractive in whatever he wore but I’d come to love his worn faded jeans, soft flannels, and the smell of sawdust that always permeated the around him.

His eyes darkened as he looked me up and down. “I could say the same about you.”

I looked down at my summer dress and sandals. “I’ve dressed up around you before.”

He took a step closer, his eyes intent on mine as he cupped the back of my head. “Not like this—soft, warm, and all-woman.”

The warmth of his body surrounded me. “Cade, we’re supposed to meet your parents. We can’t—”

He’d backed me into the apartment, shut the door with a loud click. He gripped my hips, pulling me into him to feel his

erection. He tilted his head, a smirk playing on his lips. “You were saying?”

“I don’t think we have time—”

“We have time for a kiss.” Then his lips crashed down on mine—possessive and claiming.

I wrapped my fingers in his hair and pulled him tighter to me. I wanted to wrap my legs around his waist and for him to carry me to bed, but we didn’t have time.

When he finally pulled away, both of us were panting. “Later.”

It was a promise that filled me with longing and anticipation. “Yes.”

“Are you ready to go?”

“Let me just fix my hair and then we can go.” I hurried back to my bathroom to smooth the hair he’d mussed. I took in my flushed cheeks, my bright eyes, my hard nipples visible through my lace bra and thin dress before I reapplied my lip gloss. No one had ever had this effect on me with one kiss. Kisses had never meant anything more than the physical act, but with Cade, it was as if he was staking his claim.

Satisfied I was presentable, I headed back to the living room where Cade stood looking at the framed pictures on my bookcase.

He turned slightly—a picture in his hand of our family at Christmas. “Is this your family?”

“It is. It was the last picture taken before—”

Cade’s eyes softened as he placed the picture back on the shelf. “I’m sorry.”

Whenever I looked at that picture, I felt a sharp pinch in my heart. But as the years passed, it dulled. “It’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

“I’m sure you don’t ever get over losing a mother.”

“You don’t. Time helps and you adjust to a new normal.” There were still times I missed her presence more acutely, like

when I graduated from college and high school. I knew it would be worse on my wedding day or when my children were born. It was different sharing those things with a mother. Nothing could replace her.

“What was your new normal?” He shifted, so he faced me.

What to tell him? The truth was something I didn’t talk about with anyone. I hid the worst of it from my brother and friends. I wanted to show him a piece of myself like he’d done at the home reveal. “It was different because my mother raised us. My dad was focused on work.”

“And after?”

“He focused on us, but not in the way you’d think. He made sure we were taking the right classes, activities, and friends with the right kids. Kids whose parents he knew from the country club or were business associates.” He wasn’t worried about our safety or our needs.

“What about what you needed—love, affection, and care.”

“He was never like that with us. My mother was the one who provided that.” That was the hardest part to adjust to. The stark cold reality of our house without our mother’s warm presence. Afterward, we had a housekeeper and a nanny who cared for us. But it was a job for them and they’d report to my dad if we did something outside his rules.

“I tried to fill her absence in my brother’s life. I’m not sure if I was able to. We had nannies, but it wasn’t the same. I was there for him. I gave him band-aids when he scratched his knee, I helped him with his homework, and I asked him how his day was at school.”

“How old were you when she died?”

“I was twelve and Colin was five. It was a brain aneurysm, so it was sudden. I had to be strong for Colin even though I was falling apart inside.”

“I’m sorry. My heart breaks for the little girl you were, but you were also brave and fierce to protect him like that.”

“I didn’t feel courageous.”

He stepped closer as he played with a piece of my hair and stared into my eyes. “You were. The way I see it, you were doing everything a twelve-year-old could do to love and protect her little brother.”

I flushed. “I never thought about it that way.”

“Well, you should because you’re pretty amazing.”

Staring into his eyes, I could fall so easily into him—I’d lose myself. A relationship was lifting each other up and supporting each other. Being each other’s safe place and that’s what we were doing for each other tonight. “Thank you. But your parents aren’t going to think so if we’re late for dinner.”

“They’ll be happy if I’m there at all. Family dinners were a tradition once we moved out of the house, but I couldn’t sit at a table without Caroline and pretend everything was fine week in and week out—I couldn’t do it. There were so many memories of her there.”

“I’ll be next to you.” I placed my hand on his chest—feeling his heartbeat under my palm.

“You will.” He covered my hand with his before lowering both to our side—not letting go.

We walked to his truck and rode to his parents’ house in silence. His hand held mine on my thigh. It was comfortable. It was nice. I tried not to think too hard about what it would be like to be with him like this all the time—weekly dinners with family, hanging out with friends at the bars, exploring the town with him. Because if I thought about that, I’d want more—marriage and kids, and he couldn’t give that to me. I’d told him a relationship was enough—but each day I spent with him the further I fell.

I leaned back in the seat admiring the strength of his muscles in his forearms as he’d rolled his sleeves, the outline of his muscular thighs beneath his pants, the set of his jaw. He was all-man, confident, hard-working, and real. He didn’t put on airs, didn’t pretend to be someone he wasn’t, didn’t live on his father’s money and reputation.

He'd taken a risk in life by marrying Caroline and he'd stood by her when she was sick. It was a love so strong he still mourned her loss and probably always would. What would it be like to be with someone like that? What would it be like to be loved like that? The thought caused my heart to race. I wanted it more than anything, but it was probably the one thing he couldn't give me—all of him. He'd always be holding himself back.

“Are you ready to go in?”

He turned the truck off. With a hand braced on the steering wheel, Cade turned in his seat to look at me. We were parked in his parents' driveway. “Sorry, I wasn't paying attention.”

“I'd ask what you were thinking about so hard, but I don't want to be late. My mom will notice if we're sitting in a dark car in the driveway.”

He nodded to a curtain which twitched before it fell back to its usual spot.

“Of course.” I took a deep breath, feeling vulnerable after the realization that Cade had the potential of being everything to me, but would I always come second to Caroline?



Cade

I MET HADLEY AT THE HOOD OF THE TRUCK, HOLDING MY hand out to her. I wouldn't be here without her at my side. Her silent support and encouragement was everything, but tonight she seemed preoccupied with something. Was she worried about impressing my parents? I'd been so caught up in bracing myself for the onslaught of memories at my parents' house, I hadn't thought about how Hadley would feel.

I raised my hand to knock—the other still rested in Hadley's. I squeezed it to reassure her. She was my lifeline tonight. I wouldn't let her go.

After I knocked, the door opened, revealing my mother wiping her hands on her apron. She had new lines on her face

that weren't there before and bags under her eyes, but she seemed pleased to see me on the porch. "Nolan said you were planning to be here, but I wasn't sure."

My mom's eyes widened when her eyes followed my hand, where it was entwined with Hadley's.

"Hello. I'm Maureen Morrison." She held her hand out to Hadley.

"Hadley Winters." Hadley shook Mom's hand. Her cheeks were pink.

"Hadley is my girlfriend." I'd introduced her to the Wallens as my girlfriend, but this was different, more meaningful.

I watched Hadley's face, her lips tilted into a smile as she looked from me to my mother, probably to gauge her reaction.

"Well, that's wonderful news. It's so nice to meet you. Please come in." Mom stepped back to let us in.

I dropped her hand so Hadley could precede me inside.

Being here with Hadley felt right. Maybe I'd follow Nolan's advice to go with my gut.

Nolan's voice drifted from the kitchen. I placed a hand on Hadley's lower back, guiding her down the hall to the kitchen. She gave me a reassuring smile.

"You're here." Nolan's eyes landed on me then Hadley before he smiled his approval.

Dad stepped forward to greet me.

"Dad, this is Hadley Winters, my girlfriend. Hadley, my dad, Philip Morrison."

"Mr. Morrison. It's so nice to meet you." Hadley leaned forward to shake his hand.

"No, it's nice to meet you. How did you two meet?" Dad's voice was measured, his face carefully blank.

"We met through work, you could say, and then I took a few classes at his studio." Hadley shot a nervous look my way.

Maybe she wasn't sure if she should mention I hired her to be my attorney. It was probably something we should have discussed earlier.

Mom bustled past us. "Dad is cooking steaks and baked potatoes on the grill. Want to help me with the salad, Hadley?"

"I'd be happy to." Hadley smiled, her shoulders lowering as if she was feeling more comfortable now.

"I could use some help bringing in the food." Dad gave me a pointed look before he carried several serving dishes outside.

Nolan and I exchanged a look before we followed him. Dad wanted to talk—whether it was about Hadley or finally coming to family dinner again, I wasn't sure.

We stepped outside onto the brick patio. Dad lifted the lid on the grill to check the steaks before turning to us.

I widened my stance, bracing myself for his questions. I owed him honesty even if I wouldn't like it.

"It's nice to have you back." Dad shot me an expectant look.

I knew he wanted more information. He wanted to know why I was here now. "It was too hard to come here after Caroline died. I didn't think I could handle the memories."

Dad nodded thoughtfully, probably remembering how I'd given that as my reasoning for selling the house we'd shared together. "We can always have it at your house or rotate between all of our houses. That would give your mother a break from cooking for everyone."

"That's a great idea," Nolan said.

It meant a lot that he was so understanding, but I should have mentioned it earlier.

"Hadley seems like a nice woman."

"I encouraged him to date her." Nolan's tone was light and playful. He was intentionally diverting the conversation from Caroline.

"I have a mind of my own, you know," I said.

“Oh, please. You’d still be contemplating whether it was a good idea to date her at all if I hadn’t pushed you.”

Dad stared intently at me. “Are you ready for a relationship?”

“Trust me. I’m as worried about that as you are—that I’m not ready and I never will be. But what Nolan said stuck with me. What we have feels good and she makes me happy.” That statement sounded immature even to me. It was like she was a toy I couldn’t put down.

Nolan huffed and tried to cover his smile.

“Not like that. I meant she makes me feel something again.” After Caroline died, the pain was a flaming red beacon, bright, all-consuming and crushing. It was all I could see and all I could feel. Then everything turned gray. I was merely existing. I was doing enough to get by so that people didn’t step in and question my sanity. Now, I saw all the colors of life. I appreciated waking up in the morning, the smell of fresh-brewed coffee, the sawdust smell of a job site, and sore muscles after a long day of hard work.

“You’re an adult. You make your own decisions. And if you’re happy, then I am too.” Dad turned back to the grill, placing the steaks and foil-wrapped potatoes on separate serving platters.

“What about you? You dating anyone?” Dad handed Nolan the platter of potatoes.

Nolan laughed. “No. Definitely not.”

“Why is that?” I’d spent so much time focusing on myself in the last few years I’d neglected Nolan. I wanted to know why he seemed to have an aversion to dating. When he raised his brow at me, I said, “You owe me—you’re always in my business.”

Nolan shrugged and opened the sliding door for us to walk back inside. “I’m not interested in anyone.”

Was Nolan afraid of commitment? He’d seen the pain I lived with every day, so I didn’t blame him. But I did feel guilty I wasn’t a better example for him. I’d been so focused

on myself I hadn't stepped in sooner to remind him not all relationships are the same. Plenty of people get married, have kids, and live long lives. But I wasn't even sure that was the issue. I made a mental note to ask him about it when we were alone.

"We're eating in the dining room tonight. You can put everything on the table."

I scanned the room for Hadley. One hip resting against the counter, she listened to a story about when we were kids. A small smile played on her lips and her eyes twinkled. "Tell me more."

I smiled, relieved Mom wasn't asking her a lot of questions and making her uncomfortable. "I don't think we need to go into childhood stories."

Hadley laughed, her eyes bright with happiness. "Why not? I'm enjoying this."

All Hadley knew was the man I was now—not the one before Caroline. When I was still a good brother, a good son. I could barely remember who I was before, but my Mom did. She could give Hadley what I couldn't—a glimpse of better times. "Nothing too embarrassing, Mom."

I passed through the kitchen and into the dining room with the steak.

"Oh, we're just getting to the time you ran naked out the front door," Mom called after me.

"Yeah. We're just getting to the good part," Hadley said.

"I was three! Everyone runs around naked when they're three." My voice trailed off as Nolan walked in.

"I don't think we need another woman around. It will be two against three." His tone was light and teasing while he placed the platter of potatoes on the table.

"I think the odds are still bad even if we outnumber the women."

"I think so too." He sighed and we listened to Mom share the time we made a make-shift ramp to jump over the garbage

can on our bikes and I broke my arm. We were wild and reckless. We weren't worried about getting hurt or what the future would bring.

"I told you it would be easier if you brought her." Nolan lowered his voice, so no one in the kitchen would hear.

"She's definitely distracting them from asking why it took so long for me to come to family dinner." Her presence helped. I'd barely thought about Caroline since I'd walked in the door. I was so focused on Hadley being comfortable, I hadn't had a second to remember. Hadley had filled up all the dark and empty spaces.

"You can't use Hadley as a buffer. You should smooth things over a bit with Mom and Dad. Explain what was going on with you the last few years."

"I will." My jaw tightened. I needed to do it, but I worried about my parents' reaction.

Nolan studied my face and must have been satisfied with what he saw. "Good."

"I accepted the meals she cooked, and I listened to her." Even though what she said hadn't registered. I wasn't ready then.

"I think Mom was hurt that you wouldn't let her be there for you more."

"I'm here now and things are going to change for the better. I promise." After I fixed my mess, I'd pay more attention to my parents, Nolan and what was going on in his life, and, maybe, call the friends who'd drifted away over the years.

Mom came in with a pitcher of water, followed by Hadley carrying several glasses. "Here, pass out glasses and pour everyone some water. Beer's in the fridge and I can open a bottle of wine if you'd like, Hadley."

"I'd love that." Hadley set the glasses at each setting. Her face was devoid of any tension.

That sense of rightness that sparked when we'd walked in the door settled in deep in my body.

Mom touched Hadley's shoulder lightly as she passed her to go back into the kitchen. After dinner, I'd need to discuss everything else with them.

When all the food and drink had been set on the table, we sat—my parents at either end of the table, Hadley next to me, and Nolan across from me.

"Nolan, will you say grace, please?" We held each other's hands as Nolan bowed his head.

Nolan closed his eyes and sighed heavily as if the weight of his words were too much. "Thank you, God, for bringing our family together at one table—for sharing this delicious-looking meal." He paused and I looked up to see if he'd finished. He squeezed his eyes tighter and added, "For bringing Hadley into Cade's life and showing him that life is worth living. Amen."

Hadley's breath caught as her hand twitched in mine.

I was touched both by Nolan's words and Hadley's sweet reaction to them. Is that what Hadley had done? She'd shown me all the ways I wasn't living life fully.

"Amen," everyone repeated.

"That was beautiful, Nolan." Mom placed her napkin in her lap.

I squeezed Hadley's hand. When she looked at me, I said, "Thank you."

Her eyes shined with unshed tears and she whispered, "You're welcome."

Maintaining eye contact, I brought her hand to my mouth before kissing the back. My feelings for her threatened to boil over, but I restrained myself and let go of her.

I looked around the table to find everyone's eyes on us. Mom's eyes were wet and Dad looked away before I could see. I'd avoided their home because of the memories of Caroline, but now that I was here, I was replacing those

memories with ones of Hadley. I could see it wasn't wrong. It was a natural progression.

Nolan smiled pleased. "So, tell me, how things are going at work? You thinking about retiring soon, Dad?"

Dad picked up his fork. "You know. I am. Someone approached me last year about selling and I think it's time. There's some travel your mom and I wanted to do."

Nolan gestured at me. "Cade is cleaning up his businesses too. He hired Hadley's firm to collect on unpaid contracts and created membership contracts for his studio."

I exchanged a look with Nolan. We'd discussed going into business together. Maybe this would be a good time to tell our parents. "Nolan and I talked about finally going into business together. We could take on more handicapped accessible renovations."

Hadley paused. She returned the glass she'd been holding to the table as her eyes moved from me to Nolan.

"We've talked about it for a long time. I'm in a good place and I'm ready to expand."

"I like the sound of Morrison Brothers Construction." Nolan smiled.

Pride crossed Mom and Dad's face. They wanted us to work together for years.

Mom covered my hand with her own and smiled. "I think that's a great idea."

"What do you do, Hadley?" Dad asked her.

"I'm an attorney. I used to work at the U.S. Attorney's office in New Orleans, but a friend of mine mentioned her law school colleagues were starting a firm here. It seemed like a good opportunity," Hadley said.

She couldn't have said anything better to my dad. He respected small businesses—having owned a garden center for years.

“Nothing like being your own boss. It gives you a sense of pride and makes you work harder.”

Hadley’s eyes widened at his comment.

Was she surprised my dad supported her when hers didn’t? Maybe my family could fill in the absence left by her mother.

“Do you have any family here, Hadley? Or are they all still in New Orleans?” Mom cut a piece of steak, placed it in her mouth, and chewed.

“My dad and brother still live there.” Hadley sipped her water.

“Oh, what do they do?” Mom asked.

“Well, my dad owns several hotels. He’s been expanding the past few years and my brother, Colin, is a college student.”

My hand found hers under the table and I laced my fingers with hers to show her my support.

Dad smiled at Hadley. “I’d be happy to pass along your firm if anyone needs legal services if you want to leave a card.”

“That would be amazing. Thank you,” Hadley said softly.

I wanted to be alone with Hadley to thank her for coming tonight, but I still had a difficult conversation with my parents ahead.

Dad and I cleared the dishes while Mom washed them. Hadley helped place leftovers in containers for Nolan and me. When the table was cleared, I sat with my brother and Dad in the living room watching the news until Hadley and then, Mom drifted back in the room.

Nolan stood and kissed Mom on the cheek. “Thanks for dinner. I’m going to get going. I have an early day tomorrow.”

I sensed Nolan was leaving to give me time alone with them.

“It’s good to have my boys under one roof again.” Mom hugged him.

Once we'd all said our goodbyes to Nolan, Mom settled in the living room.

I took a deep breath. It was time. I'd waited long enough to make things right. "Mom, Dad. I have some things I need to say."

Hadley shifted closer on the couch as she took my hand in hers.

Dad lowered the volume of the TV before he leaned his elbows on his knees. "Go ahead."

"I want to apologize for being distant the last few years."

"You don't have to—" Mom said.

I held up my hands. "I do. These last few years, I pushed you away. I could have been more present. I could have dealt with things in a better way."

Dad winced. "Son, everyone handles their grief their own way."

"I know, but I'm ashamed of how I acted over the years. You didn't deserve that." I looked at Mom because she was the one who'd tried the hardest. I'd seen the hurt in her eyes, but I couldn't deal with it at the time. I couldn't get past my own pain to acknowledge I was hurting everyone around me.

"An apology isn't necessary. I'm just so happy you're here now. And if Hadley's the reason for that—I'm grateful to her as well." Dad glanced at Hadley.

Hadley chewed her lip thoughtfully. "I don't know about that. I think he was ready, and I came into his life at the right time."

"We're both grateful to you, Hadley, and we're happy to have you back, son." Dad turned the TV back up, effectively ending the conversation.

I wasn't expecting the conversation to be so easy. Maybe I'd built things up in my head too much.

We made small talk for a while until I stood. "We're going to head home."

“Of course. Let me get your leftovers.” Mom went to the kitchen while we gathered our jackets. Hadley handed Dad her card.

Mom handed me the container of food before taking Hadley’s hands in hers. “It was so nice to meet you, Hadley. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You’re welcome, Maureen. It was nice to meet you as well.”

When I hugged Mom, she whispered in my ear, “She’s lovely.”

Mom’s approval spread through my body, giving justification for my decision to see where this thing with Hadley could go. She was special.

Dad slapped my shoulder and said, “It’s good to have you back. We hope to see more of you, Hadley.”

Hadley smiled. I knew she loved hearing that.

Opening the truck’s passenger side door, I helped her inside.

When we were on the road back to my house, I said, “That was not what I expected.”

When she was quiet, I glanced over at her. She seemed to be thinking about her words. “You were grieving, and I think they’re just happy you’re here now and on the path to recovery.”

I was the only one not so willing to forget my actions for the past few years. “I guess.”

“I just can’t get over how my family would be different if my mother had lived. Would my family be more like yours?”

I sighed. The pain in her voice was a living breathing thing in the air between us. “What I’ve tried to remind myself over the years is that when someone dies, it was meant to be. That future I thought I’d have with Caroline was never in the plans for me. It wasn’t meant to be. I fought that idea for years and it gave me nothing but pain.”

“You’re right. Most of the time, I’m fine with the way things are, but sometimes when I see a loving mother like yours, it comes back.”

“I think that’s natural.”

“Maybe, that’s what I was trying to do by moving here and starting over. It wasn’t just to find out who I was. It was an acceptance that I wasn’t happy living the life my dad wanted.”

Her father wasn’t living the life he’d planned for either. “Maybe he’s wallowing in his grief too. He can’t see past it to see that you’re hurting. Or that Colin is hurting. He’s holding on so tightly to the control over his business and his kids. He doesn’t see that it’s pushing you away.”

I felt Hadley’s eyes on the side of my face, so I looked over at her. “What?”

Her eyes were filled with respect and admiration for me. “You’re amazing, do you know that?”

“Only with you.” Our eyes connected and a current of awareness shot from her to me sending a shiver from my scalp to my neck and down my spine. I turned my attention from Hadley to the road, tightening my grip on the steering wheel.

Those words. They’d flowed out of my mouth without thought. They were the same words Hadley said in my bed. Maybe this woman was meant to be my future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Hadley

WHEN HE SAID THOSE THREE WORDS, A CHARGE PASSED between us, sending tingles through my body. Was he the only one for me? I settled back into the seat, turning my head so I could study him. His fingers tightened around the steering wheel—his eyes focused on the road, but what was he thinking?

The words were heavy with expectation, but when I'd said them to him—they'd felt true. When he told me—they felt right. Was Caroline his past and I was his future? Was it fate? Was it possible for Cade to love two women in his life? Did he have enough space in his heart for me?

Would he make space for me in his life? Could he hold onto his memories of Caroline and make new ones with me? The idea filled me with such hope I felt jittery. I shifted in my seat and played with the strap of my purse.

I was bursting with love for this man. Was it too much to hope he'd love me back?

We were building something, however tentative. I wanted to see it through. If he were the one for me, then I'd be patient. I'd give him time to grow with me. I'd allow for setbacks when it became too much and perhaps, one day, he'd feel the same way I did.

“About last—”

My phone buzzed in my purse. “Sorry, let me turn it off.” I sifted through my bag until I found my phone. It was my dad calling.

“Do you need to get it?”

I chewed my lip. Wasn't this a good opportunity to set some boundaries with my dad? I was with Cade and I should be focused on him—not whatever thing my dad thought was important. “No.”

I let it go to voicemail. When I looked at my missed call list, I had three missed calls from Dad and a couple of unread texts from Layton. The phone immediately started ringing again.

“You'd better get that.”

“Sorry.” I swiped answer on the phone and lifted it to my ear. “Dad. Is everything okay?”

“You haven't answered your phone all night.” Anger filtered through the line.

“I was busy.” My shoulders tensed.

“When I call, you need to answer.”

I bit my lip to stop the retort on my tongue. He didn't pay for my phone anymore, so threats like that fell flat.

“What's so important that you needed to speak to me?” My jaw ached from clenching my teeth.

Cade's eyes filled with concern.

He probably was worried a family member was in the hospital, but my dad's emergencies weren't normal. By most people's definitions they weren't emergencies at all.

“The Kids Speak gala is next weekend. If you promise to come work for me, I'll announce its expansion. If not, you'll need to figure out what to tell people.” Dad's voice raised with each word. I held the phone closer to my ear to block Cade from hearing.

“Dad, we can discuss this later. Now isn't—” I'd never refused him before with good results. My heart thudded painfully in my chest—the blood roared in my ears.

“You work on my schedule, not the other way around.” It was the same annoyed tone he always used with me.

“Things are different now.”

There was a light tapping in the background—like he was drumming his fingers on the desk. “Stop this foolish act.”

He’d banked on me wanting the money for the Kids Speak more than anything else.

“Why would I want to work for you? You said yourself the business is a sinking ship.”

His voice hardened. “If you come back and smooth things over with Layton, Aiden invests in the company and you get the money for Kids Speak. We’ll announce everything at the gala.”

“This again? I’m not getting back together with Layton or coming to work for you so that you can make a business deal with Aiden Black.”

“You do what’s best for this family, not what you want.” Frustration filtered through the speaker.

“Not anymore. I need to do what’s best for me.” The sick feeling in my stomach, the pounding in my chest, and my tight grip on my cell told me being near my dad was not a good idea.

“You want Kids Speak to shut down? You know, you would never have gotten this far without my backing.”

“You know I don’t want to end the program.” My voice was smaller—my resolve cracking. I’d just left the Morrison’s loving home and the contrast between my family and others had never been more evident.

I looked at Cade—wanting to draw strength from him. He pulled into his driveway, turned off the ignition, before he faced me, concern etched on his face.

“Listen, Dad. I’ve got to go. I’m with someone.”

“It’s time you fulfilled your responsibilities to this family. If not, you won’t like the consequences.” Dread filled me as I pulled the phone away from my ear to see he’d hung up on me without another word.

He hadn't asked me once how I was. If I was happy, safe, or content, it wasn't something he'd ever done, but these last few days hanging out with Cade, the Morrison family, and Avery—the difference was noticeable. I'd always mourned the loss of my mother when maybe I should have been mourning the loss of my father. After mom died, he held on so tightly to his control—almost as if he was afraid one tug would unravel him completely.

“Are you alright?” Cade's eyes filled with sympathy and something else—was it love or the beginnings of love? I hoped so because I would need every ounce of his love to resist my father.

“I think so.” I took a deep breath and tried to smile to reassure him. “It was nothing.”

“Don't lie to me.” Cade grabbed my hand, stroking the delicate skin on the inside of my wrist. “What's going on?”

I took a deep breath. “He thinks he can manipulate me to work for him and smooth things over with Layton. If the merger doesn't go through, he won't be able to fund Kids Speak.”

His fingers stilled and he gripped my hand tighter. “You're going to New Orleans.”

His disappointment struck me dead center in my chest.

“Yes. I have to go to the gala. I'm the face of Kids Speak.”

“I want to go with you.” His tone was determined.

“That's sweet, but I need to do this on my own. I need to face my dad. Otherwise, he'll think you're controlling me and making my decisions. I want him to know I'm strong and independent. That I make my own decisions.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “I feel helpless in this situation. I want to be there for you. I want to stand next to you.”

After speaking to my dad, I was off-center. I felt out of control like I was careening down a hill without brakes. “On one hand, I'd love to have you there, but I feel like this is

something I have to do myself. I came here to separate myself from my family. To find out who I was. I feel like facing him again is something I need to do on my own. Otherwise, he'll never respect me." I knew my dad. He'd assume Cade was influencing me. If he could eliminate Cade, I'd come around.

He shook his head but didn't say anything else. A muscle in his jaw ticked, his mouth tightening into a thin line.

I couldn't stand fighting with him—the distance between us. I unbuckled my seat belt, moving as gracefully as I could over the console and into his lap. His body was stiff. He didn't make a move to touch me because he was unhappy with my decision. I laid my head onto his shoulder, my legs over his. I stroked the soft material of his shirt over his chest, breathing in his familiar scent.

After a few seconds, his fingers stroked my hair and his lips lowered to my temple. "I hate how your father makes you feel."

"Me too."

"I wish you'd cut the strings." His frustration tightened the muscles under my fingers. His shoulders drew back. I could feel him physically withdrawing, but was he emotionally pulling back as well? I couldn't bear the thought of that.

"I should go home." I meant to go home to my apartment, but the silence after my words made me feel like I'd said go home to New Orleans.

The air between us cooled, the longer Cade was silent.

I hesitated, my fingers lifted from his chest. I'd moved to his lap to feel his strong arms around me, but instead of tightening around me—they were loosening.

"If that's what you want." He enunciated each word carefully as if he were holding himself together.

My heart was breaking. Why did I have to choose between standing on my own and having him by my side? I was so confused. I needed time to think. I needed time to calm down after that conversation with my dad and sort things out in my head.

I pulled my head back to look at him, but his eyes were fixed on a spot over my head. I wanted to tilt his face down to mine. I wanted to pull his lips to mine, kiss him until this space between us disappeared. But I didn't know if it would be okay. His body and expression radiated his displeasure with me.

Maybe space was a good idea for both of us to calm down. I needed to figure out what to do and I couldn't think clearly with Cade.

"Okay." He shifted his legs so I returned to my seat to fasten the seat belt.

He turned the truck on, the engine rumbling to life. We didn't speak on the ride to my apartment. When he parked at the curb in front of my apartment, I unbuckled, my hand hovered over the door handle. "I'll talk to you later. I just need time to think."

Cade's eyes filled with emotion—frustration, fear, and love. "I want to be here for you."

"I want that more than anything too. I need to think. I need to do this one thing and stand on my own two feet for once."

Cade nodded, but he didn't respond.

"Thanks for introducing me to your parents. They were amazing." Tears prickled my eyes because if Cade and I didn't work, that meant I couldn't claim his family as mine. I wanted to with every fiber of my being. I wanted Cade and his family. I wanted to live here and make the firm and Kids Speak expansion a success. For the first time since I moved, I saw a future.

As quickly as the lightness entered my body—a black fog clouded my vision—I had no future with Dad still calling the shots from New Orleans. I needed to deal with him once and for all. "I know you don't agree with it, but this is important to me."

"If you go back there..." He shook his head. "He'll continue to manipulate and control you."

I tensed, poised to leave. "I need to do this. I need to stand up to him."

"You can do just as easily with me at your side." He turned to me finally, his eyes pleading.

"You don't know my dad. He won't take me seriously if you're there."

I shifted closer to Cade and cupped his cheek and turned his face toward me. I wanted to make him understand what he'd done for me. "For the first time, I feel strong enough to take Dad on and it's all because of you. You made me feel this way."

He shook his head and I dropped my hand. "You were there for me tonight and I want to do the same for you."

"The difference is I don't need you there. I can do this on my own." Was it possible to love someone, yet let them stand on their own? If my dad had loved me over the years, he'd fought every step of me going out on my own and being independent.

"That's the problem. We're in a relationship. You don't have to do things on your own."

"We're just rehashing the same thing over and over again. I need time to think." What I thought was right and what he thought were all jumbled up in my brain and things were going downhill no matter how much I tried to explain my side.

"That's a good idea."

I opened the truck door and Cade met me at the steps to walk up to my apartment. When we reached my door, I turned and said, "Goodnight, Cade."

"I'm here for you when you're ready." He kissed me on the cheek, turned, and jogged down the steps.

My stomach sunk. I didn't want this to be the end of us, but I didn't know how to be true to myself and our relationship.

I didn't hear the rumble of his truck pulling from the curb until I was safely inside. I sagged against the door. What had I

done? I pushed away from the only person who meant something to me to stand up to my dad. I was torn between what I thought I needed to do and Cade's desire to be there for me.

Wasn't I supposed to be asking what I wanted? I'd been subject to other people's desires and wants for too long to give in to it again. I ignored the voice in my head—telling me Cade was different. He was asking me to do what he thought was right for me, not what was right for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Cade

WHEN I DROVE HOME, MY BODY VIBRATED WITH ANGER AND frustration. Why wouldn't she let me be there for her? I worried she'd be sucked back into that life—the one I couldn't possibly understand—the one filled with money, privilege, and countless expectations. *Attend this event, work here, and marry this person.*

I knew she was strong enough without me, but it never hurt to have someone by your side.

Was this about getting her father's approval? He was her only living parent, none of his demands were about her—they were about him. My body sagged at the thought. She didn't have what I had—a loving family who was there for her no matter what.

Her father's love and approval were conditional on her doing what he wanted and following his orders. When I heard the harsh tone of his voice through the phone, I clenched my hands on the steering wheel to stop myself from taking the phone to give him a piece of my mind.

I tried to take a few deep breaths to calm myself—to turn off the emotion from our argument and be reasonable.

Hadley lost her mother and her father lost his wife. Maybe he'd closed in on himself and shut off his emotions like I did. Maybe his control of Hadley was a fear of losing her like he had his wife? My body vibrated with the need to do something. Call her?

No. I'd give her time. I hoped she'd think things over and realize she was wrong. That you weren't weak if you needed someone by your side. I parked in my driveway and grabbed my phone. I ignored the blank screen that was devoid of missed calls and waiting texts. I scrolled through my contacts and clicked on Nolan's name.

Cade: Can you meet up tomorrow?

Nolan: Is this about what happened at Mom and Dad's?

I hesitated, unsure at first what he was talking about. The worry over my conversation with my parents seemed so long ago, but it was only a few hours.

Cade: No. They were great. It's something else.

Nolan: Sure thing. I can come over tomorrow, or we could go out to a bar?

Cade: Come over. I need to work on the house anyway.

I rested my head back on the headrest. Had I fucked up with Hadley? I was just starting to feel like we could be something—that she could be it for me. We felt right together. My parents loved her. *I loved her.* Blood rushed to my head and I felt dizzy. My chest constricted. *I love Hadley.*

My relationship with Hadley was so intense. I fell faster and harder, but maybe because our relationship was born out of my grief. Or because it followed the trauma and despair of the last few years, it was bound to be more emotional, more everything.

Or it was Hadley. Each relationship in your life was different. Hadley was no exception. I thought I couldn't offer myself to someone else, but I had. I'd opened myself up just enough that she slipped inside, filling me with hope and love. I thought I was protecting myself, but I couldn't—not with her.

I loved her. My heart clenched at the idea that the way I'd left things meant we were over before I had a chance to tell her. I couldn't lose someone I loved again. I would do everything to get her back.



I WAS TOO WIRED TO SLEEP LAST NIGHT. THE REALIZATION that the happiness and hope I'd been feeling was love for Hadley had energized me. I put all of that restless energy into the house—ripping out the tile from the guest bathroom upstairs. It was hard work, but it kept me focused and helped me formulate a plan. I threw the last of the tile and debris in the dumpster outside when Nolan's truck pulled in next to mine and he jumped out.

He slammed the door and slowly walked up to me. His eyes were assessing me. "You look like shit. You fuck things up with Hadley between our parents' house last night and now?"

I hoped I hadn't fucked it up. "Hadley's going back to New Orleans this weekend for her nonprofit's gala."

"Okay."

I debated telling him everything because what was going on with her dad felt too personal to share. But I trusted Nolan not to repeat anything and I wanted to talk to someone about it.

"Her dad is threatening to withdraw his financial backing unless she comes to work for him."

"That's fucked up."

"She depended on his money to expand the nonprofit here. She intended to announce her expansion plans at the gala. She can't do that if he withdraws funding."

"That sucks, but I don't understand why you're upset?"

"I want to go with her to support her when she deals with him. He's intense." I explained how angry and manipulative he was on the phone with her last night.

Nolan rubbed his chin as he thought. "You said it was this weekend, right?"

"Yeah."

“Don’t forget. We postponed the Flores’ renovation reveal to Saturday morning. You couldn’t go with Hadley even if you wanted to.”

“Shit. I’d completely forgotten about that.” Hadley had consumed me so completely I’d forgotten about my responsibilities. The Flores’ reveal had been postponed for several months because their daughter was hospitalized.

I turned to go inside as Nolan followed. In the kitchen, I poured cups of coffee for both of us. “Hadley’s event is Saturday evening though. I could still get there in time.”

I pushed Nolan’s mug across the counter to him.

I leaned a hip against the counter.

“Why are you so intent on going with her?” His hand wrapped around the mug as he studied me.

I leaned a hip against the counter. Should I tell him everything I was feeling? It was the only way to make him understand why I was conflicted. *“I’m in love with her.”*

“Oh shit.” He studied my face, narrowing his eyes. “You’re serious?”

“Never been more serious about anything. I want to be there for her like she was for me.”

“Did you tell her you loved her?” His forehead wrinkled as he seemingly tried to sift through what I was telling him.

“No. I realized it on the way home.” What was Hadley thinking? Had she taken my words as an ultimatum? I’d told her I’d be there for her when she was ready. A cold chill ran up my spine. She could have taken it as a sign that I didn’t want to be with her unless she let me come with her.

My hands shook at the realization. I’d been fueled all night by the idea *I loved her*, but she didn’t know that. I was in this—I wanted to be with her. I just had to prove it to her.

“I need your help.”

Nolan scrubbed his hand over his face. “I’m not sure I’m the best guy to ask for help in a relationship. I’ve never had

one, but you could tell her you love her. Maybe if she sees how strongly you feel, she'll give in to your wishes to be with her."

"It's more than that. She wants to face her father alone. She feels like she has something to prove to him."

"If she won't let you be there for her, there's not much you can do. You could show up and surprise her, but somehow I don't think she'd like that."

Remembering how she was last night, I didn't think so either.

My hands itched with the desire to fix things for Hadley. Instead, I worked on my house. I couldn't always fix the things in my life with action. Sometimes, you had to let life happen. Let those you love make choices on their own.

"She has to deal with her dad. It's up to her whether you're there or not. And it's up to you if you can deal with it. There's no easy answer."

"I hope she wakes up with a clearer head than last night. That she realizes it isn't a bad thing to have someone on your side."

"I don't want you reverting to that asshole you were the last few years. I liked having my brother back. But this is something she has to decide on her own and you need to decide if you're truly okay with her decision."

"Thanks, man. I can't thank you enough for standing by me through everything. I'm not just talking about today, but Caroline too."

Nolan placed a hand on my shoulder. "It's what brothers do."

Understanding and respect passed between us. "I'll be a better brother to you."

Nolan dropped his hand from my shoulder. "You forget that you were a great brother before Caroline died. I looked up to you. I saw you and Caroline as an example of how things could be."

“You haven’t limited yourself over the years in relationships because of what happened with Caroline?”

“No, of course not.” But his face had closed off and his tone was stiff.

“You can’t live your life based on what happened in mine.” I had no idea if what I was saying was true, but I wanted to make sure he understood.

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m just not ready to settle down.” He’d effectively dismissed the conversation, but I’d keep a close eye on him and approach him later. I didn’t want him to miss out on things because my first marriage hadn’t lasted.

We worked on the house, avoiding talking about Hadley. It didn’t stop my thoughts. Whether I’d completely screwed things up? If I should speak to her about it or wait for her to come to me?

The reeling questions made my head throb. I’d told her I wasn’t sure if I was capable of a relationship, but I was wrong. I wanted to give her everything. Whatever she wanted. If it was a different house, marriage, or kids. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her. Part of that was letting her decide whether she wanted me in New Orleans. I didn’t have to like it, though.

“You need to buy fixtures, cabinets, and tile for the house.”

Mostly everything was torn out. It was time to pick out what I wanted my house to look like, but I wanted to make those decisions with Hadley. It was too early to move in together, but if we were going to be together, I wanted her input. Would she want to live here with me eventually? Or would she want to choose a house together? “Is it ridiculous I want her to help me make the decisions on that stuff?”

“You’re so gone for this woman. I hope that never happens to me. I don’t want to get sentimental over tile choices.” His voice was light and teasing.

I laughed—the first cleansing emotion I’d felt all day. “I do and I hope you have to work for it. The woman won’t want anything to do with you.”

“I don’t see that happening, but thanks.”

“That’s what brothers are for.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hadley

I SAT IN MY OFFICE, STARING BLANKLY AT MY COMPUTER screen on Monday morning. I'd tossed and turned all night. When the sky finally lightened to gray behind my curtains, I'd grabbed my phone to text Cade but hesitated my finger over his name and his last text. I had to be strong. That was the whole reason I moved here to start over.

I didn't want to talk to him and make things worse. I needed time to figure things out in my head.

I needed to confront my dad and draw the line between us. I thought the physical distance between New Orleans and Annapolis would be sufficient, but my dad wasn't letting that stop him.

The pain throbbed in my chest and no amount of rubbing the spot helped. The ache would be there until I talked to Cade.

Instead, I texted Colin.

Hadley: I'll see you this weekend.

Female voices drifted down the hall from Avery's office. It was too early for a client meeting, so I headed to her office, where Avery sat at her desk talking animatedly to Dylan. I'd forgotten she was officially starting this week.

"Hey!" I sat in the empty chair next to her.

"Hey, yourself. I'm officially a partner in a law firm. No more bosses for me."

"Just us three, lady bosses."

“That’s right.” I laughed. It felt good to ignore my troubles for a while, focusing on the positives. The firm was gaining ground, slowly but surely.

“Thanks for all the work you did to get the word out about the firm,” Avery said to Dylan.

Dylan wiggled her brows. “People are my specialty.”

“Word of mouth is everything. The website’s up and running now too.” Her body practically vibrated with energy as her knee bounced, her hands flying in time with her words.

Avery shifted the computer so I could see the screen. The firm’s name: Arrington, Gannon, and Winters, stretched across the top of the screen.

“It looks great.” Each time I saw my name as part of the firm’s name pride filled my chest in a way it didn’t when I worked for my dad during the summer breaks from law school. I’d accomplished this on my own.

“Arrington, Gannon, & Winters. We even sound professional.” She placed her hand over her chest.

“And eighty.” At Avery’s raised brow, Dylan continued, “We sound like we’re eighty years old.”

“We totally do.” I laughed. The stress and worry from the fight with Cade and the lack of sleep eased.

“As long as people don’t expect stodgy old men when they walk in and get twenty-something year old, beautiful women.” Avery gestured at us.

“We’re finally doing it. We started our firm.” Avery smiled with pride as she looked back and forth between us.

“We need to celebrate.” Dylan clapped her hands together.

“Should we go out tonight?” Avery asked.

I wanted to celebrate. I wanted to forget last night, but I had other things to deal with too. “What about painting these walls and celebrating afterward with champagne?”

“Ugh. I don’t like the sound of that.” Dylan held up her perfectly French-manicured hands.

“We can’t afford to hire painters, especially if we’re paying for ads. We can deal with the carpet for now.” Avery tipped her head slightly toward Dylan as she tried to reason with her.

“Fresh paint on the walls will make a huge difference.” I gestured at the holes in the walls left behind by the previous occupants and the scuff marks on the bottom half of the wall, most likely from bags rubbing against it.

“Fine. I’m in charge of wine and food.” Dylan laid her hand flat on her chest before pointing at us. “You two are in charge of paint and supplies.”

Avery looked pointedly at me. “Make sure you keep any receipts for supplies. They’re all business expenses.”

“Aren’t you coming with me to get the supplies?” I asked.

“You’re the one with the contractor-boyfriend.” Avery smirked.

I opened my mouth then closed it. I had a boyfriend. I wasn’t so sure if I did today.

Avery rested her elbows on her desk and leaned toward me. “Uh oh. Did it not go well with his parents?”

They both waited for an answer. I didn’t want to tell everyone about our fight, but Avery was a friend and Dylan was fast becoming one. “No, dinner with his parents was great.”

“Then what happened?” Her face was pensive. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

“My dad called on the way home.” The sound of my voice hung in the air between us.

“You didn’t answer, did you?” Avery’s face fell. “Ugh. You did, didn’t you?”

Dylan looked uncertainly between us.

“He called several times in a row. I thought something was wrong.” My excuse was lame. Even I knew that.

“There’s never anything wrong.” Avery shook her head before explaining to Dylan, “Her dad likes to control everyone around him, especially his kids.”

“Dad wants me to go back to New Orleans to work for him. His business is in trouble and he needs my help.”

Shaking her head, Dylan shifted in her chair. “Nope. Not happening. We need you here.”

“I agree. I have too much invested in the firm.” It wasn’t just money. My sense of self and independence was wrapped up in this office and this town. I had to do this for myself. I wouldn’t let him talk me into going back. Last night, it hurt that Cade thought I was too weak to resist my dad. He thought I’d cave, but I was stronger than that. At least I was now. It would take more than my dad’s presence or his threats to get me to leave these women, who were becoming my friends, in the lurch.

“He has to respect the fact you started your own business in a new town,” Dylan said.

“You would think so, but he wants me to work for him and he won’t settle for anything less. He claims this merger will go through and save the business if I smooth things over with Layton. Plus, he likes me close and—”

“Under his thumb,” Avery added.

“A bad combination,” Dylan said.

“Exactly. Anyway, my dad wanted me to date his friend’s son, Layton Black. Back then, I did what my dad wanted me to do.” I played the part of the dutiful daughter even when I formulated a plan to escape.

Avery raised her brow at Dylan. “Then the asshole proposed in the middle of a charity event after they’d only been dating a few months.”

“Why do men think public proposals are romantic?” Dylan asked.

“I realized he never cared about me. He wanted a show and a trophy wife. It was that moment I realized I wanted

more. I didn't want to be under my dad's thumb or Layton's. That's when I took Taylor's advice to apply here."

"Good for you, but why is Cade upset with you?"

"Is he worried about another public proposal?" Avery's forehead wrinkled.

"Ha! No, he wants to go with me to support me."

"And you told him no?" Avery asked, her face serious.

"I want to face my dad on my own. Why does everyone think I'm too weak to do this? That I'll fall right back into my old ways?" I shifted in my seat, looking from Dylan's face to Avery's.

"We don't think you're weak, but this is *your dad*. Every kid wants to please their parents. Deep down, you want his approval. Don't you think it's time you did what was right for yourself?" Avery asked.

"Of course. That's why I'm here." But what was right? Was I pushing Cade away?

"But you continually allow yourself to be sucked back into what's going on in New Orleans. If your father's business fails—it's not on you. If your father throws a tantrum—you don't need to run to him." Avery leaned her elbows on her desk.

"We'll raise funds for Kids Speak, don't worry. I've got this." Dylan's voice was steady. Her eyes focused on me.

"Cade should support you no matter what you decide," Avery said gently.

"It felt like he issued an ultimatum last night." When Avery's eyes narrowed, I added, "Not in so many words. But he withdrew from me when I insisted on going by myself to the gala. He said he'd be there for me when I was ready."

"So, talk to him. Tell him you're ready to talk to him," Avery said matter-of-factly.

"But what if what I have to say is not what he wants to hear?"



I WALKED OUT OF THE OFFICE AT LUNCHTIME INTENT ON grabbing a crepe from the same place I'd gone with Cade when I almost ran into Nolan.

"Oh, hi. Are you looking for Cade?" I glanced at the dark studio.

Nolan's face was pensive. "No. I was looking for you. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Is Cade okay?" I couldn't imagine why Nolan would approach me by himself unless something was wrong with Cade.

"Yes. He's fine."

I tilted my head and studied his face. He looked nervous and unsure. "I was going to pick up lunch."

"Can I walk with you?" He raised a brow.

"Of course." We fell in step beside each other, walking in the direction of Annapolis Harbor. I kept glancing at Nolan's tense face wondering what he had to say to me.

"Cade doesn't know I'm talking to you." He chuckled. "He probably wouldn't want me here."

"Okay." My stomach churned.

"He told me what happened. How he wants to go with you to New Orleans, but you want to go alone."

My face flushed. I hadn't expected Cade to tell Nolan about our fight, but I'd talked to my friends too. "That's right."

I wanted to say there were things he didn't know about my family, but I wanted to hear what he had to say first.

"My brother only recently started reaching out to my parents and me again. He's there for the families that are part of Morrison Construction Rebuilds, but he hasn't been there for anyone close to him. It's a big deal for him to offer to go with you."

He looked at me pointedly. I could see this was a big deal to Nolan too. He wouldn't be here otherwise. I respected that he wanted me to understand where Cade was coming from.

"It's important for me to go on my own. There are things you don't know." I didn't feel comfortable talking to him about it.

"I get that. But I think you're looking at things—" He paused and shook his head. "I'm screwing this up. I want you to understand what a huge deal it is for Cade to offer to go with you. For Cade to make that step means he feels deeply for you. He's opened himself up to you and let you in. I didn't think he would do that for anyone again after Caroline."

My heart swelled at what Nolan was saying. I knew this thing between Cade and me was serious. That it had potential to be the real deal but to hear Nolan say that too, was affirming. Maybe I was looking at this the wrong way. Cade wanted to be there for me, yeah, but also for him.

Nolan stopped walking. "You were there for him last night, let him be there for you. I'm not an expert in relationships, but I think compromise is important. I get that you *can* deal with your dad on your own, but should you have to when you have someone who wants to be there for you. No, he *needs* to be there for you. I can't explain it any better than that."

A tingle ran through my body. The way he was describing things, it almost seemed like he was saying Cade loved me. Could that be the case? If it was, did I love him?

"I hope you do the right thing. We have our big home reveal on Saturday morning. The one the local news is filming. I'm not sure when you planned to leave, but if you left early on Saturday, you could do what you needed to do with your dad and Cade could join you for the gala that evening. Does that help?"

I smiled. "So, we both get what we want."

Nolan's lips twitched as if he was trying not to smile. "Yes. Don't tell him I told you."

I nodded. We resumed walking as I sifted through the possibilities and implications in my head. I had early morning airline tickets on Friday since I'd scheduled an appointment to meet with Dad at the house early on Saturday.

"For what it's worth. I think you're good for him and maybe he's good for you too."

"Thanks, Nolan."

"I have to get back to work, but I'm glad I caught you."

I wanted to ask him the best way to talk to Cade about it, but he'd done enough. I needed to handle the next part on my own. We said our goodbyes before I continued walking. The sun warmed me in a way it hadn't when I'd come outside. I felt lighter than I had this morning when everything was weighing me down. When I thought I had to do everything on my own.

I pulled out my phone, wondering if I should text Cade to ask him if we could talk. But I wanted to talk to him as soon as possible. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to tell him he was important to me too. I pushed dial on his name. Then held the phone to my ear.

I moved toward one of the side streets for privacy.

"Hey."

I felt his low and rumble voice in my chest. "Hey." I wanted to put this behind us. "Do you have time to talk?"

"I'm just working on my house today so I can take a break."

"Great. Want to meet me for lunch at the harbor?"

"Sure. I can be there in fifteen."

"Great. See you then." I took it as a good sign that he was willing to meet with me. Hopefully, I hadn't screwed up too badly last night.

I sent Avery a quick text to let her know I was meeting with Cade to talk so that she wouldn't wonder if I was late getting back.

I went to the crepe store and ordered two, one for each of us, and two iced teas. When I walked outside with the bag under my arm and iced teas in my hands, I saw him waiting by our bench. “Hey!”

Cade turned, immediately taking our drinks. His hair was disheveled as if he’d been running his hands through it all morning and there were dark circles under his eyes.

My heart clenched at the idea that I’d done that to him. “Thanks.”

“You didn’t have to buy lunch.” He sat on the bench before he placed the teas next to him.

“I’m sure you’ve been working all morning without stopping to eat, right?” I sat next to him and placed one of the wrapped crepes in his lap.

He looked sheepish as he quickly unwrapped it. “Yeah. I’m starving.”

I unwrapped my crepe more slowly, thinking of what to say to him first. I couldn’t eat yet, not until I explained things to him. I hoped it wasn’t too late. “Listen. I wanted to talk to you about last night.”

He placed his crepe back on the wrapper as he shifted to face me.

“I’m sorry for pushing you away. I get that it’s important for you to be there for me and I’d like that. I’d like you to come to New Orleans with me.”

He paused and looked at me. “Yeah?”

I smiled. “Yeah, I want to introduce you to my brother and my friends. I want to show you what I love about New Orleans.”

“I’d love to come. When do you need to leave?”

“My flight is at seven a.m. on Friday.”

He grimaced. “I have my reveal Saturday morning. The local media stations will be there. I’m supposed to speak.”

I didn't mention that Nolan reminded me already. I got the impression he didn't want Cade to know he'd interceded on his behalf. "You could still come on a later flight."

Now that I'd decided to have him there, I would be disappointed if he couldn't come.

"Yeah. I'll look at flights when I get home."

"Great."

"I'm happy, but what brought on this sudden change?"

"I thought about everything important to me, you and our relationship, and I realized I want you there. Going to New Orleans isn't just about standing up to my father. Kids Speak is important to me. You're important to me too. I want you to share it with me. And I understand it's important for you to be there for me."

"It is. Thank you." He placed his hand over mine and leaned over to place a light kiss on my lips.

"So, I'm forgiven?" I asked him when he pulled back slightly, his hand still on mine.

He smiled sweetly. "Yes."

"Good. Because I think—I think I'm falling in love with you and I was worried I'd screwed everything up last night." I sucked in a sharp breath. I hadn't meant to say that out loud.

He smiled wider and brushed a few strands of my hair behind my ear. "Good. Because I am too."

He kissed me again and all I could think was how my heart was bursting for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hadley

THE REST OF THE WEEK, I TALKED TO NEW CLIENTS, researched the law, and filed motions. In the evenings, we painted, first our offices and then the reception area.

“We did it!” Dylan exclaimed when she swiped the brush over the last dry spot in the reception area.

I stepped back to admire our work. We’d gone with taupe which was warm and inviting. I didn’t think things could get any better than Monday when Cade declared he was falling in love with me too, but the last few days were filled with more happiness. We were getting an influx of new client calls. Dylan even heard from interested donors. It would take time to expand Kids Speak, especially without my father’s backing, but hopefully, it would work out.

Glancing down at the carpet, I groaned. “Are you sure we can’t afford carpet?”

“I called someone in for an estimate and it’s too much. I swear they charge more for business than personal,” Avery said.

“Probably.” I sat in the receptionist’s chair and spun a little.

Dylan pushed a chunk of hair out of her face getting more paint on her face when she placed her brush in the tray. “I swear there’s more paint on me than these walls.”

“What time is your flight tomorrow?” Avery asked.

“Seven a.m.” Initially, I was adamant that I could face my dad on my own, but now that I would potentially be facing him alone, I was worried. I didn’t want to back down from the decisions I’d made, but I never knew what my dad would use against me next.

“Ugh. We can’t even go out and have a proper celebration.” Avery picked up her tray of paint before heading to the sink in the back.

“No worries. I brought champagne.” Dylan went to her office, returning with a bottle held high in her hands. She opened the door to pop the cork outside so it wouldn’t spill in our newly painted office. She poured a glass for each of us.

When we held our glasses up, she said, “Let’s toast to us and our firm, Arrington, Gannon, & Winters.”

I smiled. “To Arrington, Gannon, & Winters.”

“I’ll never get sick of hearing that.” Avery smiled, clinking her glass with Dylan’s.

“May we have so many clients, we have to turn them away,” Dylan added.

“That would be a nice problem to have.” I drank a small amount of the bubbly liquid, letting it slide down my throat.

“No, kidding,” Dylan muttered. “Now, who’s going to clean this mess?”

“I know you wanted to do this on our own, but we could have at least invited your boyfriend and his hunky brother to help us clean,” Dylan said.

“He has his big reveal tomorrow for Morrison Construction Rebuilds. I didn’t want him to be out late.” Whereas I didn’t want to go home. I was afraid I wouldn’t get any sleep tonight. The thought of facing my father was daunting.

“Hey, you got approval to paint from the landlord, right?” Dylan asked.

Avery was usually the organized one of all three of us, so I’d assumed she had before we started painting.

“Well—”

Dylan drank the rest of her champagne, before placing her empty glass on the desk between us. “You did, didn’t you?”

Avery winced. “I talked to him, but it didn’t go well. He wants us out after the current lease is over, so he didn’t see the need for us to change anything.”

“Fuck, Avery.” Dylan placed her hands on her hips.

“Why did we spend all week painting when we didn’t have permission?” I’d been too distracted with thoughts of home and Cade to even think about it. I assumed Avery took care of it like she did everything else.

“It looks so much better than it did before I can’t imagine he’d complain about the change,” Dylan said.

Avery’s pinched face said otherwise, but I didn’t argue.

“Let’s get this cleaned up,” Avery said, bringing me back into the room with the girls.

I slowly stood, feeling my muscles protest. My muscles ached from lifting my arms over my head to paint. My head pounded from the combination of the long week and alcohol. I took the paint trays to the back to rinse them in the sink.

On Saturday, I’d have to face my dad and Layton. I wanted to hide in Annapolis so I didn’t have to deal with it. I wanted to bury my head under my pillow.

My phone dinged when the last of the trays were rinsed and rested on paper towels. I dried my hands on a towel before I pulled my phone out of my back pocket. My heart soared thinking it was Cade.

Colin: I’m still picking you up at the airport, right?

Hadley: Yes. See you then.



AS SOON AS THE PLANE LANDED ON FRIDAY MORNING, I WAS restless with anticipation to see Colin. It had only been a few

months since I'd left, but it felt like a lifetime. I walked through the airport toward baggage, scanning the area for him. I finally found him next to the carousel with a big grin as he watched me approach.

"Hey, sis." He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me into him. "Long time, no see."

"Too long."

He placed a finger under my chin, tilting my face up. "Hey, I don't blame you for leaving. I'd escape too if I could. I graduate next year. Then I can do what I want."

I hoped that was the case for him. That he didn't wait as long as I did to distance himself from our dad.

"How are things in Annapolis?"

"Great. We're getting more clients at the firm and the attorneys I work with are working with me to get donors to expand Kids Speak there."

The carousel dinged as the conveyor belt began to move. He gave me one last squeeze before stepping away from me.

I pointed out my bags. Colin lifted them off the belt before we walked toward the garage where his car was parked. I waited until we were leaving before asking all the questions swirling in my head. "Tell me everything. How are your classes? Do you have a girlfriend?"

Colin glanced over at me. "One thing at a time. College is awesome. Classes are interesting."

"You're going, right?" I remembered what college was like. It was easy to sleep in and have fun rather than take your classes seriously.

"Of course, Mom." He smiled teasingly.

I laughed. "Your grades are good?"

"Again. Yes, Mom."

"Sorry, it's a hard habit to break." I looked out the window at the familiar scenery passing by. I'd expected to feel

nostalgic when I was back here, but I just wanted Cade here to show him everything I loved about my town.

I sensed Colin sober. “I know. But you don’t have to worry about me anymore. I’ve got things under control.”

“I don’t worry about you necessarily.” I was more worried about dad doing to him what he’d done to me. He’d strong-arm him into a career he didn’t want or a job he didn’t like.

Colin raised his brow.

“I worry about Dad telling you who you can date, what classes you should take, or what your major should be.”

Colin smiled at me, his dimple popping. “He tries, but I don’t let him.”

“What?” I shifted to face him. When had Colin grown up?

“He tries. I nod like I agree. Then I go do whatever I want.”

“You do?” I tried to remember how Dad was when he was demanding things from me. I rarely considered disobeying him.

“Yeah. He’s too busy to check my grades or my schedule. By the time I graduate with a degree in what I want, it will be too late.”

“It can’t be that easy.” I looked at him now all grown up. The muscles of his arms flexed as he shifted his hand on the steering wheel, his strong jaw ticked with irritation.

“It is that easy. You didn’t have to move across the country to live your life. You just have to know how to handle him.”

I didn’t know if it was because I was the oldest or if I felt the need to hang around here to be there for Colin, or I needed Dad’s love more than Colin, but I wished I had seen things this clearly when I was younger.

“Do you know what’s going on with the business? He told me he’s in danger of going bankrupt. He needs Aiden Black to invest.”

Colin whistled. “Uh. No. I have not heard that. Do you believe it?”

“He’s threatening to withdraw funding for Kids Speak. If the business goes under, he won’t be able to afford it.”

“How are you supposed to help with that? It is what it is.”

“He wants me to smooth things over with Layton and come work for him.”

“No. Fuck that. Layton is a weak bastard for asking you in front of everyone. You’re not going to, are you?”

“No, but I was going to talk to Dad tomorrow morning. I want to discuss things with him before the gala.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“If I don’t work for him, he won’t fund Kids Speak, so it affects the gala. How can I announce an expansion if I don’t have his backing?”

A muscle in Colin’s jaw ticked, but he didn’t answer.

“I want to be clear with him about what I will and won’t do. I’ll tell him the plan for Kids Speak. I intend to go out on my own. If it’s not as successful, then so be it.” It sucked, but I knew if I worked hard enough, I could expand on my own.

“You’ve done what he wanted in the past...”

“He usually has leverage. He paid for my tuition, car, phone, whatever it was at the time, and I had to toe the line. When I worked at the U.S. Attorney’s Office, I bought a car and phone, but I still lived in his apartment. In Annapolis, everything is mine.”

“When we were younger, he should have paid for those things because he’s our father and he can afford it. Not because we have to do what he wants.”

“He thought he could use the same tactics with Kids Speak, but he underestimated me. He’s so confident that I need him, I’m sure he hasn’t even thought about the fact I’d walk away if he pushed hard enough.”

Colin glanced at me. “Kids Speak is important to you and he knows that. He’s tried that shit with me over the years too. It got worse when you went to law school.”

I hadn’t wanted to move out of our house during college, but it was easier during law school. I studied all of the time and I didn’t want any pressure or interference from my father. Once I was out of the house, I didn’t consider moving back. “What did he do, Colin?”

I wanted to ask why he hadn’t told me immediately, but I knew the answer. He wanted to protect me as much as I wanted to protect him.

“He wants me to change my major to business. To stop playing baseball.”

“But baseball is your life.” As soon as he tried out for baseball in middle school, he’d been hooked. He loved it. He acquiesced to my dad’s demand that he attend college, but I knew he wanted to pursue playing in the minors. His coaches had encouraged him to over the years.

“You know him. He thinks it’s a distraction, a game.”

“Not if it’s what makes you happy and you have a real shot at it.”

“I applied for private loans for next year that will cover my tuition. I won’t change my major from sports management to business. I’d hate working for him. It’s a good fallback if baseball doesn’t work out.”

“But the interest rates on private loans are so high.”

“This is something I need to do for me.”

“I agree, but I hate that for you.” I didn’t have any loans when I graduated. That, combined with the fact that Dad paid my apartment until I moved, allowed me to save enough money to invest in the firm. An opportunity I wouldn’t have had otherwise, but I could see independence was more important to Colin. Especially when he wanted something Dad didn’t.

“The good news is that Dad can’t manipulate you or me anymore. I’m so proud of you and I’m going to be even prouder when you’re a famous baseball player.”

“You should be. I’m pretty great.” He smiled and winked at me before returning his attention to the road. Gone was the serious tone and tight jaw. He was back to his relaxed persona I was used to.

I smiled, happy to be in his presence. The one person who loved me unconditionally. “I love you, brother.”

“Love, you sis. Now tell me about this guy you’ve got in Annapolis.”

A ping shot through my heart. “How do you know I have a guy in Annapolis?”

A knowing smile crossed his lips. “You’re different. More relaxed and settled.”

“I went to Annapolis to figure out what I wanted. I didn’t expect to be attracted to anyone.”

“Does he treat you right?” He raised his brow.

“He does. He wanted to be here, but he has his charity event tomorrow morning. He renovates homes to make them handicapped accessible and he’s doing a big reveal for the family.”

“He sounds perfect for you.” Colin smiled and his shoulders relaxed.

“He is.” I chewed my lip. I thought I was looking for who I was, but maybe I wasn’t lost. I needed to listen to the voice in my head telling me what I wanted and what I liked. I needed to block out other influences. When I cleared all of the useless noise, what was left?

A picture in my mind formed of Cade—blond hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, capable hands, and eyes filled with longing for me as he reached to pull me in for a hug. I longed to feel his strong arms around me now, his scent surrounding me, and his lips in my hair. I missed him already.

I was anxious to confront my dad and see Cade tomorrow evening. I'd told him I was falling for him, but I needed to tell him he's all I want. I thought I was searching for myself, but I was here all along, I needed to listen to the voice in my head.

It wasn't my firm, my career, my friends, or even my apartment. All that was left was Cade. How he made me feel and how important he'd come to be over a short time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Hadley

I SLEPT ON COLIN'S COUCH LAST NIGHT AFTER GOING OUT FOR drinks with his friends. He had a small one-bedroom apartment with used furniture he'd purchased from graduating seniors, but it was his. He was proud of it and I was too. He'd done what I couldn't in college. He'd been accountable for finding his way through life. It had taken me a bit longer, but I was doing the same. Starting with the event tonight.

I scrolled through my phone from my spot on the couch when Colin stumbled into the room, scrubbing his unshaven face.

"What's on tap for today?" I smiled.

He winced as his hand slid off his face. "How are you so chipper right now?"

"I didn't drink as much as you."

"I need coffee." He slid the carafe into the coffee maker and spooned whole beans into the machine as the smell filtered through the room.

I stood, carefully folding the blankets on the couch before sitting on one of his kitchen stools.

Colin grabbed a pitcher of water from the fridge. Then he poured it into the machine while scrolling his phone. "Are you ready for tonight?"

I knew what he meant. There would be talk about Layton's failed marriage proposal.

“Can I expect another public proposal?” Colin winked at me as he turned on the coffee machine, the noise of the beans grinding filled the room.

I waited until the machine quieted before I spoke. “No. I don’t think he’ll try that again.”

“What’s the plan then?”

“I scheduled a meeting with Dad this morning at his house. I want to make an announcement tonight about going forward without Dad’s backing, but I’m not sure how to do that. I think I’ll discuss my plan for expansion, my progress in Annapolis, and the need for funding.”

Colin leaned his elbows on the counter. “Maybe say you intend to be the sole director going forward, anyone who wishes to contribute can. It’s probably not a good idea to mention you lost your biggest investor.”

I had worried about the implications of Dad backing out, but if it weren’t known, then hopefully it wouldn’t affect me too much. “How did you get so good at diplomacy?”

“Years of attending these events. Some of it filtered through, unfortunately.”

“One day, when you’re a baseball player, you can lead your own charity.”

His eyes sparked with interest. “If I do that, I’ll hire you as my director. You’ll be a seasoned pro by then.” He paused before adding, “Or maybe I could partner with you. I don’t have money to back you, but I can help out. I could offer baseball or sports lessons to the kids when they stay after school. Make it part of the program. Then if I ever make it big, we could start a program in every city. Don’t forget, you started Kids Speak because of me and I feel just as strongly about making it a success.”

The coffee machine beeped, signaling it was ready.

He was right. He was the perfect spokesman. He could talk to the kids about his experience with stuttering as a child. “Colin, I just got chills. That’s an amazing idea.”

He winked. “I’m full of amazing ideas. Coffee?”

“Yes, please. I need something to get through this day.”

He pulled two mugs from the cupboard.

“Are you serious about what you said?” The idea of partnering with athletes to encourage kids was genius. The kids would love it. When local athletes were involved, money flowed.

“I’ve thought about it. I think it could work.”

“I do too. I’ll talk to the acting director here and get the ball rolling. I assume you want to be the first athlete to work with them.”

“I’d love to.”

I nodded, my brain already projecting possible scenarios and events we could do. Take the kids to a ballgame day and meet the players. Athletes could visit the school during lessons as a motivational tool for the students.

Colin poured both coffees. “I’m coming with you to Dad’s.”

My attention was so focused on his suggestions, it took a second to process the change in conversation. “No. You’re not. I want to do this myself.”

“I’m coming with you. This is a family matter and I won’t have him threatening you. Plus, I’m a part of Kids Speak too, right co-director?” His tone was teasing, but his expression was serious.

I sighed. He was right. It affected him too. “Fine, but you stand with me tonight when we announce this new development. We’ll say we’re in the planning stages.”

He slid my steaming mug over to me and covered my hand with his. “I’ll stand beside you tonight if you let me go with you to confront Dad. Got it?”

“Yes. Can I drink my coffee now?” I smirked.

“Yes.”

I blew on the coffee. I loved spending time with my brother. I hated not living in the same city as him. “Any chance you’ll move to Maryland after graduation?”

“If I play baseball, who knows where I’ll end up. I could be traveling around for years before I ever make it. If I make it at all.”

“If someone had a chance, it’s you. You’re more determined than I ever gave you credit for.”

He winked. “I’m glad you think so. I just have to convince the scouts.”

“Keep working hard and you will.”



COLIN PULLED INTO THE ELABORATE CIRCLE DRIVEWAY OF Dad’s estate in the lower garden estate where we’d grown up. The tinkling of the fountain greeted us through Colin’s open window. It was beautiful, but when I lived here, I hadn’t seen it that way. It felt more like a luxurious prison.

With six bedrooms and seven baths, it was enormous, especially since Dad lived here alone. He needed a team to care for it. The grand white siding home had two large porches on each story, a pool and gardens in the back. Would he need to move if the business went under or had he saved some money over the years to sustain his lifestyle?

I couldn’t feel bad about the situation he was in. He wasn’t my responsibility. I needed to remember that during our meeting.

“What does he think we’re here to talk about?” Colin’s tone was tight.

“He probably thinks I’m going to accept his job offer.” Dad was usually too busy to schedule meetings with us. He called and demanded things but never took enough time to discuss anything with us.

“So, this isn’t going to go well.”

“I’ve been telling him I don’t want to come back here and work for him, so if he’s expecting anything else to come out of my mouth, he’s going to be disappointed. But you know how he is, he assumes we’ll go along with him eventually. He just has to find the right motivator.”

Colin rubbed his chin. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

“What can he take from us at this point? We have a solid plan for Kids Speak. You’re independent with your college and your living expenses. We don’t need him.”

“We don’t need him for material things, but what about as a father?”

“It would be nice to have a loving father, but—” I shrugged at a loss for words. Over the last few months, I’d realized I couldn’t force something that wasn’t there. If Dad changed his ways, I’d give him a chance, but not until then.

“It’s never going to happen.”

“I don’t think so. If it comes down to it, we’ll be firm. Say what we have to say and leave. We don’t need to sit there and listen to his manipulations.”

I looked up the staircase leading to the front porch. “Thank you for coming, Colin. I thought I could do this on my own, but I feel better with you here.”

“I’ll always be there for you.” He smiled, and an image of his five-year-old face at our mother’s funeral, came to mind, lined in sorrow and pain. The one thing I’d cultivated over the years was a strong relationship with Colin. I wasn’t alone.

“Let’s do this,” Colin said.

We pulled open our doors at the same time. I took a deep, steadying breath before we headed up the steps and knocked on the door. A butler quickly answered as if he’d been expecting us. This was a new one since I’d been here last. Dad was difficult to work with, so he frequently hired new staff. It was another source of instability when we were kids.

“Right this way. He’s waiting for you.”

If he was surprised Colin was with me, he didn’t show it.

“Mr. Winters, your children are here to see you.”

His reference to us as children made me feel five years old again. I straightened my spine, squaring my shoulders before I entered.

Dad glanced up from his papers. “Colin, what are you doing here?”

Colin filled the small space of the room. His shoulders were so much broader than I remembered. Even his face had filled out. He was a man now. “I thought we’d both come to see you at the same time.”

“Whatever for? Do you need money or something?” His voice rose with each word.

Colin laughed without any humor in his voice. “No, Dad. I’m working now, so I don’t need anything.”

Dad paused, raising his brow. “You always need something.”

We sat in the chairs in front of his desk. Did Dad know how to interact with us without having to dangle something we wanted or needed in front of us? “Dad, I wanted to tell you in person, so there’s no question. I’m not going to work for you. Now or ever.”

“That’s nonsense. I paid for your law school tuition. You were supposed to work for a few years and then work for me. That was the plan.” He turned his attention to his paperwork as if he’d finished the conversation.

The usual frustration when I dealt with him crept up my spine. I straightened in my chair knowing this time would be different. I wouldn’t let him ignore my wishes. “No. That was your plan.”

He slowly lifted his head. “Excuse me?”

“I live in Annapolis. I’m a partner in a law firm. I’ve invested my life savings into my business. I have no intention of leaving.” I spoke slowly, enunciating each word so that it was clear.

Colin shifted, so his elbows rested on his knees. “If your response is to threaten my tuition payments, let me stop you.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed on him.

“I’m paying for my senior year. I have my apartment and car. I’m paying my way.”

Dad laughed. “You have no idea what you’re saying. You’d have to take out student loans. Why do that when you could start debt-free?”

Colin chuckled without any humor. “I’d rather start in debt than go to school for a major I’m not interested in.”

Dad shook his head in disgust. “Is this about baseball? For God’s sake, it’s a game—a fun way to pass the time in high school, but you’re an adult now. It’s time to grow up.”

“Taking responsibility for myself is being an adult.”

My chest swelled with pride.

“Isn’t that what you want?” Colin asked carefully.

It was a loaded question. Parents want their kids to be independent and responsible, but Dad thrived on our continued dependence on him.

“I want you to take care of your family and the family business. This could all be yours someday.” He lifted both hands as if referring to the home.

“I don’t want the house. It holds too many memories and I’m not interested in the hotel business.” Colin shook his head, his lip tipping up in a sneer.

Darkness passed over Dad’s face. I felt sympathy for the man he used to be. He was strict when we were younger but nothing like this. I could track the changes to when Mom died. I spoke softly, hoping he’d listen to what I had to say. “When Mom died, everything changed. Maybe you felt out of control and to get it back, you needed to exert control over everything and anything else—including Colin and me.”

“That’s ridiculous.” He waved me off.

“It’s not though, is it?” I asked gently.

Dad refused to look at me. “I don’t have time for this.”

“We want to have a relationship with you because you’re our father, but without all of the strings attached. We’d like to help you with your business out of love for you, but not because you manipulate me into working for you. Colin would love you to watch his games or be interested in his life even if you don’t want him to play.”

Dad’s eyes clouded over, but he remained quiet. Maybe he wasn’t ready to hear what we had to say. I exchanged a look with Colin. He nodded slightly and rose. “Think about it, Dad. We’ll be here for you, but we won’t do your bidding anymore.”

My chest felt tight, but at the same time, I felt lighter than I had in years. I needed to prove to myself that I could stand up to him.

We turned, starting toward the door when Dad said, “You’ll be there tonight.”

He wasn’t asking—he was telling us to be there and on our best behavior. We represented a brand—our family name and business. Why had I thought the reasons for his actions were born from grief? Or he was a selfish person. It was his way or no way.

I paused at the doorway before turning to face him. “Of course. It’s *my* program.”

“Good. Don’t forget Winters Hotels will no longer be backing it.” His eyes were hard.

I laughed. “I don’t think we’ll need it anymore. Colin gave me an amazing idea to expand Kids Speak. One that will fully fund it.”

I walked out without waiting for an answer. He wanted the last word, but he wasn’t going to get it this time.

Colin squeezed my shoulder. I used his support to keep walking out the door to our childhood home. If Dad lost the business, it might be the last time we were here.

I waited to speak until we were driving down the drive away from our father. I blew out a breath. “Well, that went well.”

“It could have been a lot worse.”

“You’re right. There was no shouting.” I watched the scenery as we drove—luxurious homes, gardens, and expensive cars.

“Only demands.”

I shifted in my seat to face him. “Do you think he believes us?”

Colin shook his head. “No. Not for a minute. He expects us to change our minds as soon as things get hard.”

“Nothing is free. Everything comes with a price.” One that wasn’t worth paying. “Our dad is supposed to say this, but I’m proud of us.”

Colin smiled at me. “I am too. It felt great to stand up to him.”

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. “I know I already said this, but thanks for being there for me.”

“I did it for both of us. I had things to say too.”

He’d grown up to be a man—one I helped raise. I let the road noise relax the tension in my muscles. I hadn’t realized how tightly strung I was.

“Want to get lunch?”

“Yes, I need all the energy I can get to deal with those people tonight.” The snarky people I used to call my friends. I could just imagine the whispers, questions, and judgment from my refusal of Layton’s proposal.

“The public proposal is on him. There’s a risk of refusal, especially when you’d barely dated and you hadn’t even discussed marriage ahead of time.” He looked pointedly at me. “And I think most people would agree that Layton is not a catch. Smart people anyway.”

“You’re right.” I laughed. Now that I’d been with Cade, the difference between the men was apparent. Cade was a man who took responsibility for his actions. He learned from his mistakes and he wanted to live an honest life.

“What do you care what those people think? We aren’t part of that circle anymore. We work hard and make our own way. We don’t align ourselves with the right people to get the right job or marriage. It’s a chess game for those people.”

I let out a long breath. “You’re right. That’s what it is. Since I moved to Annapolis, things are simpler. It’s easier to see what life’s about. It’s not social standing, money, and your job title.”

“You went and grew up on me.”

“I guess I did.” It was Cade who’d showed me how things could be different. I pulled out my phone to check for messages.

“Have you heard from your boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he messaged during the meeting to make sure everything went okay. He wanted to be here, but he had that big reveal for his charity. I wonder how it went.”

“You should call him before lunch.”

It was 11 a.m. “I think the reveal is now. I’ll text him.”

Hadley: It went as well as expected. Colin had an amazing idea for Kids Speak. I’ll share it with you when we talk later—going to lunch now. I hope your event went well 😊.

I added *I miss you* before I could change my mind.

He didn’t respond until we were seated at a restaurant in the French Quarter.

Cade: That’s great news. I miss you too. Will call you when I’m done here.

“Is everything okay?” Colin eyed me over his menu.

I smiled, putting my phone on the table. “Everything’s perfect.”

“You’re going to the Kids Speak gala tonight. Tomorrow you’ll get on a plane and go home. You’re going to kick ass at your firm and make a life for yourself.” Colin returned his attention to the menu while I sucked in a sharp breath.

I could see my future with Cade with stark clarity. Him going into business with Nolan and growing Morrison Construction Rebuilds to help more people. My firm being successful, Kids Speak becoming a presence in Annapolis, and with hard work, other cities. If athletes got involved, the sky was the limit for it and me. I saw Cade beside me every step of the way. It didn’t make me weak or less of a person to accept his support and help. It made everything better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Cade

I TUGGED ON THE STIFF COLLAR OF MY RENTED TUX AS I stepped inside the New Orleans Museum of Art with Hadley on my arm.

“I’m going to run to the bathroom. You’ll be okay with Colin?” Hadley’s concerned eyes rested on mine.

“Of course.” I was more at home ripping out walls, not socializing with the upper crust of society, but I could get through this for her. If Kids Speak took off like I suspected it would, there would be more nights like this ahead of me.

She kissed me on the cheek before walking away, the sway of her hips in a form-fitting red dress, held my attention.

I turned to Colin before he decked me for checking out his sister. “Is there a way to pledge money before she gets back?”

Colin assessed me. “I like you already.”

He led me to the pledge table to introduce me to the acting director of Kids Speak, Winnie Fieldman. While they chatted, I wrote a check with Morrison Brothers Construction on it for the first time. It felt good. Avery had already helped me recover some of the overdue payments and started the process of signing my karate students to yearly contracts guaranteeing me a steady income. One I could use to fund my Rebuilds program and help Hadley out too.

I took a step back from the table, surveying the room. I didn’t mind if Hadley found out about my donation, but I’d prefer it to be after and not before.

“Hey, you.” Arms wrapped around me from behind and I recognized Hadley’s perfume. She walked around me until she was in front of me.

I pulled her in closer and kissed her. “Are we making a statement?”

“We’re not helping the rumors that’s for sure.” Hadley smiled.

She’d worried about this evening, but she seemed relaxed. I hoped I was the reason for that. As much as she wanted to do this on her own, together was always better.

Her face pinched. “It’s time to mingle. I don’t want to field any questions about Layton, but I’m excited to discuss the plans for Kids Speak.”

“Lead the way.” I intended to be by her side, but not interfere in her event.

We went from group to group, my hand on her lower back for support, while she introduced me as her boyfriend, told everyone she was happy in Annapolis and excited to start a new branch there. She was holding off on announcing Colin’s partnership and ideas until her keynote speech.

Hadley’s shoulders relaxed when we approached a couple standing by themselves. She grabbed my hand. “I want you to meet my friends, Taylor Leeds and Gabe Adler. Taylor and Gabe, this is my boyfriend, Cade Morrison.”

I shook their hands. “Nice to meet you.”

Taylor’s eyes skidded from mine to Hadley’s before she smiled. “We have a lot to catch up on.”

Hadley smiled at me. “Yes, we do.”

“When do you leave?” Taylor asked.

“Not until tomorrow evening,” Hadley said.

“Perfect. Brunch tomorrow?” Taylor looked from Hadley to me.

“Yes, definitely.”

“Isaac and I donated on behalf of the bar,” Gabe said.

“You did? You didn’t have to do that. I hate asking my friends to donate,” Hadley said.

“You didn’t ask,” Gabe said, his tone final as if he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Well, thank you. We appreciate it.” Hadley glanced at Colin.

“We?” Taylor asked.

“Colin is coming on as a partner. He’s going to help me manage Kids Speak here with Winnie, and I’ll be in charge of Annapolis. I think things are going to take off soon and I’d love for him to be involved.”

Taylor tilted her head as if to ask her more questions, but Hadley interrupted, “I’ll explain more after my speech.”

I glanced at the time. “Speaking of which, I think it’s time —”

“You’re right.” Hadley went up on tiptoes and kissed me.

“Good luck.” I caressed her upper arms.

“Thanks.” She smiled, taking a step toward the stage when someone tapped the microphone at the front of the room and asked for everyone’s attention, but I couldn’t tear my eyes from Hadley. She’d shifted her focus to the speaker while I edged closer to her. She tensed as the man opened his mouth to speak.

“What’s he doing?” she hissed at Colin.

“I have no idea, but it’s not going to be good.”

I put my arm around Hadley, drawing her in close. I kissed her forehead and whispered, “Who is that?”

“My father.” Her tone was tight and filled with anger.

I got the impression his speech wasn’t planned. The man scanned the room, only stopping when his eyes rested on Hadley. An uncomfortable sensation slid down my throat when Mr. Winters smiled. His expression was triumphant.

“I wanted to thank everyone for coming. I wanted to take this time to announce Winters Hotels entered into a business partnership with Aiden Black. We predict considerable growth in the coming years of tourism to the area and we are committed to making the city great.” After a round of polite applause, Mr. Winters continued, “We planned on making a generous donation to Kids Speak, but due to a disagreement with the director—”

I couldn’t believe he’d announce he was backing out or that he’d referred to his daughter as the director. Anger filled me as I forced myself to listen.

“We will be withdrawing all funding. I wish Kids Speak good luck.”

Murmurs began as soon as he stepped down from the podium. Seeing her father in action, using her platform to announce his business deal, and in the same speech cutting Hadley down, I could see why she didn’t want anything to do with him.

“I think it’s time for your speech, sister.” Colin’s jaw was clenched tight.

“I think you’re right.” Then to me. “I’ll be right back.”

“Good luck.” I squeezed her hand before she walked toward the podium. Her brother followed so he could stand next to her when she made the announcement she’d been so excited to make earlier.

I was so proud of her. She hadn’t faltered when her father gave that speech. She’d steeled her spine to confront it head-on. I knew she’d come out brighter on the other side.

“I can’t believe that asshole announced publicly he was withdrawing funding,” Gabe said in a low tone to Taylor and me.

“I can’t say I’m surprised by everything she’s told me and what I’ve observed, but it was a dick move.”

“I’m glad you’re here. You’re good for her,” Taylor said.

“Thank you.” I glanced at Taylor before I turned back to Hadley. She stood at the podium, smoothed her dress, before lowering the mic to her level. I wouldn’t relax until this was over.

“I have an announcement as well, one I’m very excited to share with all of you tonight. I intend to expand Kids Speak to more cities. My initial focus will be in Maryland where I’m based currently, but eventually I’d like to continue expanding to other cities, with the potential for a national program.” Enthusiastic clapping from the audience caused her to pause her speech, her face relaxing as she looked around the room.

When the noise died down, she continued, “We have a promising new development that will ensure Kids Speak’s growth. My brother, Colin Winters, had this amazing idea to pair athletes with the children. He intends to test the idea out here in New Orleans by getting fellow college athletes to visit them during their classes, to invite them to practice and games, and provide instruction in their sport if they’re interested. I’ll be approaching professional athletes as well. I anticipate that this will be a highly successful, mutually beneficial program for the students and the athletes. I have an acting director here in New Orleans, Winnie Fieldman.” Hadley paused to point Winnie out to the room and waited for the applause to slow before continuing.

“My brother will work with Winnie to handle the athletic side of the charity. I will direct the chapter in Annapolis, Maryland. We will develop those two chapters before we expand further. I want to thank you for your support over the last few years. I can’t tell you how satisfying it is to see the children in the program flourish. To see them gain confidence. Winnie prepared a slide show for you that will play the rest of the evening.” Winnie pushed a button for the overhead projector.

She took a deep breath. “I want to thank my father for his financial backing. We would not have gotten this far without him, but I’m excited to see where this program will go with your support going forward. Thank you for your donations

tonight and I hope you'll keep Kids Speak in mind going forward."

The applause for her was deafening. Pride filled my chest as she took in the crowd's reaction. Her dad tried to steal her night, but he hadn't. Her vision for the charity outshone his plans to discredit it.

Hadley turned away from the podium before heading toward me, but she was stopped by person after person. She patiently talked to each one as I waited for her to get to me.

When she was free, she walked into my arms. I pulled her close and whispered in her ear. "You were amazing."

"Thank you. It felt amazing." She was trembling from being in front of all of those people or their reaction. I wasn't sure.

I pulled back slightly to see her face. "What did everyone have to say?"

"Oh, you'll never believe it, but people offered to put me in touch with their PR teams and professional athletes they have connections with. Everyone I talked to is so excited with this new direction we're taking." Hadley hugged Colin. "It's all thanks to you and your awesome idea."

When Hadley released him, Colin puffed out his chest and smiled. "Anytime."

Hadley shook her head. "Stop being so cocky."

"But the charity wouldn't be anything without you," Colin said.

"I'm so happy everyone could be here tonight. I just wish Dylan and Avery could be here too." Her eyes twinkled with happiness. She hadn't let her father's actions or words get her down.

"You can have a similar event in Annapolis at some point too—a kick-off for the program. We have connections with the media now," I said.

"I can't wait to get back and get it off the ground. I have so many ideas," Hadley said.

Taylor hugged Hadley and congratulated her before she left with Gabe to check out the finger food in the back of the room.

Winnie pulled Colin to the side to discuss his plans for the athletic side of things. I finally had Hadley to myself. “If I haven’t said this already. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you.” For the first time since the positive reaction to her speech, she looked down. “I was surprised my father went to such lengths to punish me in front of everyone.”

I thought her father was an asshole, but I wouldn’t say that to her. I thought he was vindictive and mean, but I hadn’t thought of what he did as punishment.

“When you do what he wants, you get money or things, when you don’t, he does things like this.” She gestured at the podium where her father spoke earlier.

“As long as he can’t hurt you anymore, that’s all the matters.”

“I’m not going to lie. It hurt, but the more I see what he’s doing as a game and not my father, it’s easier. I have you. I have Colin. I have my friends both here and in Annapolis. I don’t need him.”

“I’m sorry your father hasn’t been much of dad to you.”

Hadley shook her head and her smile was bittersweet. “It’s not your fault.”

I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “But you’re right. You have so many people in your corner. We’ll be here for you.”

Her eyes lost their melancholy look and brightened. “Have I thanked you for coming yet?”

“No. You haven’t.”

“I’m so glad you came. It’s an important night for me and I can’t imagine not having you here.”

“I’m glad you invited me.” My chest was full of love for this woman. She was brave, strong, and hard-working.

“I love you.” She wrapped her arms around my middle.

“I love you too.” I wanted to hold her all night and whisper everything I was feeling in her ear. I’d never get enough of her. She was it for me.

“Come on. You have people who want to talk to you,” Colin said.

The rest of the night, Hadley fielded questions. Most were excited for her and wanted to help in any way they could.

On our way out, Hadley said in a low tone. “That was our best night ever for donations.”

I squeezed her hand. “That’s great news.”

“It is.” Her smile fell off her face. I turned to see what or who had caught her attention.

Layton pushed off the wall where he’d been waiting for her.

“What are you doing here?” My voice came out harsh.

“I’m here to see you.” He nodded toward Hadley.

“I have nothing to say, and anything you have to say, you can say in front of Cade.” Hadley stepped closer to me. I dropped her hand so I could put my arm over her shoulders.

Layton looked uncomfortably from her to me. “I wanted to apologize for how things went down.”

“You mean how you proposed publicly or how you confronted me in Annapolis?” Hadley was practically vibrating from anger.

“Both. I’m sorry I put you in that position.” Layton’s expression was contrite.

“Why did you do it then?” Hadley asked.

Layton glanced at me before he turned his attention to her, rubbing the back of his neck as if what he had to say was difficult for him. “Our fathers are the same. My dad controls me the same way yours does. He wanted me to propose in front of everyone. Our engagement was supposed to look good

for their business merger and if I wanted to keep my job, I needed to go through with it. He assumed you'd go along with it. He never expected you to say no."

Hadley's chin lifted slightly.

"I saw you up there tonight. You stood up to your dad and found a way to gain funding for your charity. It was inspiring." He looked away from her. "It made me think about how I want things to be different for me."

His plea was so heartfelt, I almost asked what he planned to do now, but I waited for Hadley's reaction.

She was quiet for a few seconds, her face softening as she chewed her bottom lip. "Apology accepted."

Then she grabbed my hand to make a move around him.

"I hope we can still be friends," Layton said.

Hadley paused and said over her shoulder, "Acquaintances. That's all I can offer you."

Layton nodded. "That's fair."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Cade

WE SLEPT FOR A SOLID NINE HOURS AFTER WE WENT OVER every detail of the evening and made love. We stayed overnight in a hotel I'd booked in the downtown area. I thought it would be perfect for exploring New Orleans before we had to head to the airport. I'd never been to New Orleans. I wanted to see the sights.

"Are you awake?" Hadley rolled over in my arms so she could face me.

"I have been for a while. I'm excited to see the city." I'd flown in yesterday afternoon, met Hadley at Colin's house, dressed and gone straight to the gala.

"Brunch with Gabe and Taylor first. Then we can walk around."

"Sounds perfect." Anything with this woman sounded perfect—a lazy Sunday, brunch with friends, or sightseeing.

She kissed me. "We'd better get showered and dressed. It's almost eight a.m. and we're supposed to meet them soon."

"I wish we had more time to stay in bed."

"Me too. But how often are we in New Orleans? I'm excited about coffee and beignets."

She kissed me again and headed for the bathroom naked. She sent a saucy look over her shoulder. "Care to join me?"

I was up in no time. I grabbed her by the hips, pulling her into me. Her laugh turned to a moan when I kissed her neck and bit her shoulder lightly. "You don't have to ask me twice."

“Just don’t make us too late.” Her voice was breathy.

“I make no guarantees.” I guided her to the bathroom, still kissing her as I turned on the shower.

I took my time with her in the shower. I dropped to my knees, spreading her legs before I devoured her with my mouth. When she was limp after her orgasm, I lifted her into my arms, taking her against the wall. I relished in each inhalation, each whimper, her slick skin, and tight pussy pulsing around me. When my release roared through me, the only thought I had was *this woman is mine* and *I am never letting her go*.

After we dried off and dressed, we headed out for beignets. We approached Gabe and Taylor, who were already waiting for us outside the restaurant.

“You two look cozy,” Taylor said before turning to lead the way inside.

I exchanged a smile with Hadley before we followed them in.

We waited in a long line for bags of beignets and French-roasted coffees. Since it was warm, we found a table outside. We ate in silence for a few minutes, before I said, “The beignets were worth the trip.”

“Aren’t they? They’re one of the things I miss most about New Orleans. Other than Colin and you guys, of course.” Hadley brushed white powder from the donuts off her skirt before looking at Taylor. “When are you going to visit Annapolis?”

I knew Taylor was from Annapolis originally, but not much else.

“Soon. We haven’t been back in a while. Gabe’s been so busy as co-manager of the bar.”

Gabe shook his head. “We can get away. I told you that.”

“If you’re sure.” Taylor’s forehead scrunched.

“I’m sure. Isaac wants me to scout a new location for the bar in Annapolis anyway.”

“Are you moving back at some point?” Hadley watched Gabe’s serious face and Taylor’s more cautious expression.

“We’ll see. I love it here, but I think it will make more sense for us to spend part of the time in Annapolis.”

“How will you work, though?” Hadley asked after the waiter took our order and left.

“I’m still working on the details. I think I’d need to get a different job.”

I placed my hand on the back of Hadley’s chair and listened to them talk about the pros and cons of Taylor’s job and the prospect of working part-time at Hadley’s firm if it was successful.

I turned my head toward Gabe. “Let me know if you buy a place and need a contractor. My brother and I are going into business.”

“That would be great. I don’t have any contacts there.” Gabe leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

I talked with Gabe about going into business with my brother and the Rebuilds program while the girls talked about the logistics of Taylor and Gabe living in two different cities.

This right here was everything I’d ever wanted. A future with a woman I loved. The possibility of marriage and children. I let the hope fill my chest, filling all the cracks until nothing was left but my love for this woman and excitement for my future with her.

EPILOGUE

Hadley

I'D BEEN FLOATING AROUND ON A CLOUD SINCE THE REACTION from the crowd at the Kids Speak gala. I was brimming with excitement and couldn't wait to talk to Dylan about the new direction we were taking.

"Stop daydreaming." Cade pulled to a stop in front of my office.

"It's hard not to after the weekend we had." My stomach plummeted when my father revealed he intended to pull his support, but I quickly pulled myself together, intent on winning everyone back with my ideas for Kids Speak's future.

"I have a surprise for you." Cade smiled and his knee was bouncing.

I tilted my head. "Does that have anything to do with bringing me to work earlier than I need to be here on a Monday?"

Cade leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. He pulled back slightly to say, "Yes. Come on."

Then he was out the door and rounding the hood to help me out. He was relaxed and happy.

We stood on the sidewalk holding hands. "Is the surprise in the karate studio or the office?"

"Your office. Still no idea?"

"None." I was stumped. "Did you procure a thousand new clients for us, and if so, are they waiting in the office to jump out and yell surprise?"

He laughed. “No. Can you unlock the door?”

“How is there a surprise in here when you don’t have a key to the office?”

“I don’t. But I may have enlisted Avery’s help.” At my raised brow, he added, “And Nolan’s since I was gone this weekend.”

I pushed open the door. “The carpet’s different.”

The old carpet was gone. The walls were still the same color we’d painted them last week, but there was crown molding on the ceilings. My mouth dropped open when I saw the gold letters mounted on the wall—Arrington, Gannon, & Winters in the same script as our website.

“Wow. This looks amazing. You did this?”

“I commissioned the sign with a local company and asked them to rush it, but Nolan handled everything else while we were gone.”

“Why would you do this?”

His fingers gripped my hips and pulled me into his body. “Because I love you and I’d do anything for you. After the fight we had, I wanted to do something for you.”

“Okay.”

“Nolan also designed built-ins. He does custom work.”

“What built-ins?” I looked around, not seeing any new additions to the reception area.

He tugged me down the hall until we were standing in front of my office. He leaned over and flipped on the overhead lights. Behind my desk were two floor to ceiling shelves on either side of the window, lined with my law books, and my degrees hung on the newly painted wall. “The sign and shelves are mounted to the wall but can be removed.”

“What happens when the lease is up? The landlord didn’t want us doing any renovations.” It was great that the built-ins were removable, but the carpet and crown molding were not.

“Avery’s working on that.”

“You didn’t have to do all of this.” I stroked his cheek and leaned into his body. “But it’s everything. Thank you.”

Then it hit me. This was real. My dream had come true. I was a partner of a firm and worked with my friends. The possibilities with Kids Speak were endless. I was with the man I loved and starting a new life—one without the constraints and judgment of my old one. Here, I could be happy.

“I’d do anything for you. Anything to make you happy,” Cade said.

“I’m starting to get that.”

Cade kissed me before pulling back slightly. “I want to erase the moment I said I wasn’t sure what I could offer you because I was scared. I’m not now. I know what I want. I want you in my life forever.”

I didn’t think it was possible to be happier, but I was wrong. “Me too.”

“There’s only one thing left to decide.” His tone was light and playful.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” My heart beat faster in anticipation even though he couldn’t possibly propose. We’d only been together a few weeks.

He tilted his head slightly. “Do you want to move into my house one day and live, or do you think we should flip it?”

The fact that he wanted my opinion on his home hit me directly in my chest. My heart clenched. “You really want to know what I think?”

“Yeah, we’re together now. We make these big decisions as a couple.” His hand cupped my cheek and his eyes were sincere.

The idea of us planning a future together when I hadn’t been sure Cade would want that with me was everything. “I want to live in that house with you. I love the water and the porch. I love that you picked it.”

A small smile played on his lips. “Then that’s what I want too.”

“Are you asking me to move in with you?” I tilted my head slightly, considering him. Was that what I wanted? Maybe not this second, but someday I did. I wanted a house, marriage, and kids.

“Not today. But someday soon. In the meantime, I’m going to need your help picking out the finishes.”

My eyes widened. “I can pick anything I want?”

He held his hand up. “Within reason, of course. I’m not sure what kind of taste you have.”

I slapped his arm. “I have good taste.”

“Uh huh.” He stepped away from me and placed his hand on the desk. “Are you ready to break in this office? Avery might have mentioned that she’s in court this morning and Dylan has a client meeting outside the office. I made sure I locked the door when we came in.”

I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. “You’ve clearly thought of everything.”

His eyes darkened as he stepped into me and placed his hands on either side of my face. “I love you, Hadley Winters. Never forget that.”

“As long as you don’t let me forget it.”

Then his lips were on mine, his fingers gripping my hair as he pulled me impossibly closer to him.

I hope you loved Hadley and Cade’s story. To read Cade’s marriage proposal, download the [bonus epilogue](#).

The law firm in my building, and its managing attorney, Avery Arrington, have been nothing but trouble. I want to ignore the spitfire who fights me at every turn and kick her firm out at the end of its lease, but I need her help. [Pre-Order *Lost Without You*](#), book two in the Annapolis Harbor Series.

Read more about Taylor and Gabe in *Easy Moves*. New Orleans was a fresh start, a chance to reinvent myself and do some good. Too bad the first person I met was a grumpy bartender with a chip on his shoulder. Gabe said I knew nothing about his city, the people or what they needed. But one

look at the bad boy bartender and I knew exactly what I needed. Even if I refused to admit it. [*One-Click Easy Moves*](#).

Have you read my All I Want Series yet? In book one, *Choose Me*, city girl Emma moves from the big city to Chestertown immediately attracting the attention of the sexy protective cop Luke. When his race for sheriff heats up, will he choose Emma or his dream job? [*One-Click Choose Me*](#).

BOOKS BY LEA COLL

All I Want Series

Choose Me

Be with Me

Burn for Me

Trust in Me

Stay with Me

Take a Chance on Me

Annapolis Harbor Series

Only with You

Lost without You

Perfect for You

Boudreaux Universe Novel

Easy Moves

Download a free novella, Swept Away, when you sign up for her [newsletter](#).

To learn more about her books, please visit her [website](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lea Coll worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

She currently resides in Maryland with her family.

Get a free novella when you sign up for Lea's [newsletter](#).

Check out Lea's books on her [website](#).



EXCERPT FROM CHOOSE ME

Hadley

“I heard the sirens and everything, but I didn’t know if it was real cops. It was dark and I was by myself. You’re not supposed to pull over. You’re supposed to wait until you reach a gas station or something.” Missy explained, and her boyfriend, standing beside her, nodded in agreement.

“Did you call the police department to verify that an officer was following you?” I asked, glancing around to see if the judge had come out on the bench yet.

“No, I didn’t know I could do that.” Missy shrugged at her boyfriend.

“Why did you speed up once you heard the sirens?” I continued.

“Who said that?” Missy snapped.

“It’s in the police report. It says right here.” I showed her a copy of the police report and pointed at the line I had highlighted. “Suspect sped up once lights and sirens activated, an object was thrown out of the window...”

“Listen, lady, you going to get this dropped or what?” The boyfriend interrupted.

I turned my attention to him for the first time. He was dressed like he just woke up and rolled out of bed, in a wrinkled white shirt hanging over loose-fitting greasy jeans and tucked into untied high tops. He reeked of cigarette smoke. “Were you at the scene?” I asked.

“No, but I know what happened,” he said.

“Look, I only have a short amount of time to speak to Missy before the judge comes out. If you weren’t at the scene, then I don’t have any questions for you and I would appreciate it if you would let your girlfriend answer my questions without interrupting.”

He scowled but before he could say anything, someone touched my arm. I turned around to see who it was. The first thing I noticed was a police uniform stretched tightly over broad shoulders. My eyes traveled up to an amused face and sparkling eyes tilted down toward me. My eyes widened and my breath caught. Not wanting him to see the effect he had on me, I asked in a professional tone of voice, “Yes?”

“Are you representing Melissa Koon?” he asked, tilting his head in my client’s direction.

I tucked my hair behind my ear and said, “Yes, I am.”

“We need to talk.” He took my arm with gentle authority to steer me out of the courtroom as he spoke.

“You’re the arresting officer?” I asked, glancing down at the police report to the part that said in block letters Sgt. Hudson.

“That’s me. Sergeant Luke Hudson.” Once we stepped into the hallway, he held his out his hand for me to shake. I placed my smaller hand into his. He had a cool firm grip.

I cleared my throat to hide my nerves at his touch. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Emma Ryan, the new public defender.”

He leaned up against the wall next to the courtroom and crossed his arms over his chest. The hallway had cleared out since court was about to start.

I stood in front of him, hugging my file to my chest. He was leaning against the wall so it was difficult to determine how tall he was. Taller than me though, and I was wearing my four-inch heels today. His hair was in a longish messy style like he just ran his fingers through it. He had piercing brown eyes and a close-trimmed beard along a strong jaw line. His gaze was intent as he waited for me to speak.

I took a deep breath. His mere presence affected me in a way I hadn't experienced before. Trying to remember why we were here, I took a look at my file to gather my bearings. After a quick review, I knew I wasn't going to like what he had to say. "So what happened?"

"I will testify that Melissa Koon was belligerent. She led my officers on a high-speed chase for thirty minutes, throwing baggies out of the window. She was combative when we finally got her to pull her car over, cussing out my guys..."

"So she was cooperative then?" I asked with a grimace. I really hated cases when the defendant was uncooperative with cops. It made my job an uphill battle.

He looked down at me with an intensity that made me shift on my heels, but didn't answer, and I hoped he knew I'd been sarcastic with my prior comment. Not everyone got my sarcastic humor.

"All right, thanks for the heads up. I better talk to the state's attorney before the judge comes out." I said it with a smile and turned quickly to get out of his proximity. I needed to focus on my case and his presence made it difficult.

I glanced back over my shoulder. Luke hadn't moved, but his lips tilted up in amusement as if he knew he affected me.

I approached the attorney at the trial table. He was tall and lean with blond hair, and when he lifted his head up I noticed his beautiful light blue eyes. "Hey, are you checking in?"

"Yes, I'm representing Melissa Koon."

He looked down at his docket list and pulled a file out of his pile. "I'm Logan Gray, by the way."

"Emma Ryan," I answered, offering my hand for him to shake.

He glanced down at his notes on the front of his file and shook his head. "Whew, this one. I know it's her first offense but it's a doozy since she led police on a high-speed chase. The official charges are possession of CDS, fleeing, and eluding arrest, reckless and negligent driving, and resisting arrest. I can agree to drop the resisting arrest and reckless

driving charges, and I will recommend ninety days to the judge. We both know I don't have a case for resisting arrest." He looked at me with regret. "I have Luke breathing down my neck on the fleeing and eluding."

I sighed in understanding. "I get it. Let me explain the plea deal to my client and see if she will agree." High-speed chases place everyone at risk.

"Nice to meet you, Emma. I look forward to working with you," he said with a friendly smile as I braced myself for my client's reaction.

I just shook my head at him, a smile playing on my lips despite myself. He was charming, but my mind was still on Luke Hudson.

I explained to Missy that the judge would not buy her explanation when there were several officers willing to testify to her speeding and general combativeness. Leading officers on a high speed chase was frowned on by judges. Throwing drugs out of the car was the nail in her coffin. She was lucky. The amount of drugs the police had recovered didn't warrant a distribution charge.

"*State vs. Melissa Koon*," Logan called out to the gallery.

As we walked to the front of the courtroom, I veered over to Logan and whispered our assent to his plea offer. He nodded and I turned back toward the defense table. Logan read the facts of the case into the record.

"Counsel, is Ms. Koon in agreement?" Judge Norris asked.

"Yes, your honor," I answered, and then led my client through the litany for a plea agreement. I felt the usual sick feeling watching my client being led out of the courtroom in cuffs.

As I left the courtroom, I saw a movement from my left, someone grabbed my arm and I teetered on my heels. "What the hell? Missy didn't do nothin' wrong." Spit hit my face with every word that Missy's boyfriend spoke.

I flinched and tried to pull my arm back. His grip only tightened, causing pain. "Let me go!" I exclaimed. I looked

around frantically for a bailiff or anyone to intervene. Court was in session so the hallway was deserted.

“I can’t believe Missy hired you. Everyone knows public defenders aren’t real attorneys.”

I swallowed so loud I was pretty sure he could hear it. “Listen, you can’t run from the police when they try to pull you over. It looks bad. Judges hate that.”

“That’s not what happened and you know it,” he answered squeezing my arm even tighter.

“It’s her word against the testimony of several police officers,” I tried to explain.

A commanding voice came from over my right shoulder. “Hey, what’s going on here?”

I sighed in relief, still struggling to free my arm. Before I could register whose voice it was, the hand was forcibly removed from my arm and the boyfriend’s arms were behind his back and cuffed. I rubbed my arm at the pain.

“What happened?” Luke asked me, holding Missy’s boyfriend by his cuffed arms. More people were starting to crowd into the hallway now to see what the commotion was about.

“I just came out here and he grabbed my arm. He’s unhappy about his girlfriend’s case.”

“She’s a fuckin’ bitch! She got my girl locked up and for nothing!” Missy’s boyfriend yelled at me and his voice echoed off the walls.

It was then that Luke realized who he was holding. His eyes narrowed and he nodded at another officer, “Take him to lock-up downstairs until he settles down.”

“Sure thing, boss,” the officer answered as he took him by his arms and led him away.

“And no need to be gentle,” he whispered so softly to the other officer, I wasn’t sure I heard him right. Once we were alone, Luke asked, “Are you okay?” as he nodded his head toward my arm.

I glanced down at my arm. “Um, yeah, I might have a bruise though.”

He placed both of his hands on my shoulders and leaned down into my space. “You need to be more careful.” He pulled back as if to go, and then stopped to say, “I don’t know how you represent those assholes.”

I still felt the warmth of his hands on my shoulders. My eyes closed for a second, remembering the vision of his face near mine. “Oh, you get used to it,” I answered flippantly so he wouldn’t know the effect he had on me. “Thanks for helping me out.” Thankfully, my clients usually didn’t touch me, but I’d been called every name in the book.

“Sure. Try and stay out of trouble,” he answered gruffly and then pulled open the courtroom doors to go back inside.

I stood there for a minute trying to get my bearings and then I picked up my briefcase. I headed to my office on the second floor. On the way to my office, I popped my head into my coworker, Ashley’s office. Seeing her on the phone, I moved files from a chair to the floor and sat down to wait for her to finish.

Ashley took off her glasses and asked, “How was court?” Her long dark brown hair was in a high bun but tendrils were starting to escape.

I looked around her office and answered, “My crazy client’s boyfriend grabbed my arm after court. He wouldn’t let go.” Everyone had two long desks in their office configured in an L-shape, and a window overlooking the front of the courthouse. Ashley’s degrees were framed on the side wall and Ravens and Orioles bobbleheads sat on her desk, which was piled high with files.

Ashley looked over at me with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, a little shaken up. Sergeant Hudson intervened, thankfully.” I didn’t mention that I was equally shaken up by my encounter with Luke.

“Luke? Is this the police chase case?”

I sighed deeply. “Yes, that’s the one.”

“I guess she was surprised she got jail time?”

“Yup, she got ninety days. She tried to say she didn’t know she was being pulled over,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You would think the multiple police cars chasing her with lights and sirens would have clued her in.”

I snorted, “It clued her in enough to throw her drugs out the window.”

“Why do we get the crazy clients?” Ashley sighed. “They expect us to work miracles.”

“I know. I was hoping my clients would be tamer here than in the city.” When I left my hometown I vowed never to live in a small town again. I’d grown up in my parents’ footsteps. They were the golden couple in my high school, popular and social. I was the opposite, quiet and studious. It baffled my parents, the teachers, and the gossips in town. I left for college and never looked back. In the city, I could blend in. Then my boss transferred me here. With a population of five hundred, it was small. A new resident was a curiosity and I felt the stares as I walked through town. It reminded me so much of my childhood, I was anxious to return to the city.

“You would think. Hey, did you talk to Samantha about renting the apartment above the bakery?”

“No, but I need to. I can’t stay at the inn for three months.” This was the other issue with a small town. There were no apartment buildings, so there were few options for short-term rentals. I was filling in for a coworker who was out on maternity leave and only needed to survive the next three months. Then I could go back to the city.

“I’ll walk over with you after work to talk to her. Okay?”

I nodded in agreement as she picked up her ringing phone.

“Emma and Luke are complete opposites, even down to their professions. But it makes for an entrancing romance. Add in the mystery of someone sending threatening text messages and trying to scare Emma out of town and this book becomes an absolute page- turner!” -Brianne from A Book Nerd, a Book Seller and a Bibliophile

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