

SMALL TOWN SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE



Pretend
For the **BILLIONAIRE**

LEXI ASHER

PRETEND FOR THE BILLIONAIRE

Small Town Second Chance Romance

Small Town Billionaires Book 1

Lexi Asher

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Contents

[Chapter 1 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 2 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 3 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 4 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 5 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 6 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 7 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 8 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 9 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 10 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 11 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 12 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 13 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 14 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 15 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 16 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 17 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 18 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 19 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 20 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 21 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 22 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 23 - Silas](#)

[Chapter 24 - Harper](#)

[Chapter 25 - Silas](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Lexi Asher](#)

Chapter 1 - Harper

I was barely keeping up with my walk-in client's nonstop stream of gossip, as I hustled to finish up her trim and style. I was happy enough to catch up on the goings on down at the Ladies Auxiliary, but my phone alarm had been dinging every five minutes to remind me to pick up Addison from school. She'd been back for a week, but I was terrified I'd have a brain blip and forget. Which of course made me feel awful for thinking I'd forget her rather than feeling responsible for setting the alarm. I mean, surely real parents forgot to pick up their kids from school sometimes, right?

Well, even if they did, as Addison's temporary guardian, I couldn't afford such innocent mix-ups. I scowled, thinking about being Addy's guardian, as if no one at the school could just say aunt. The bright-eyed and blinky art teacher called me her caregiver on Back to School night and even that had a questioning ring to it as she said it. It was as if they were all secretly disgusted that her mother had the nerve to die.

I had to shut down thinking about my sister, Rowan, finally succumbing to her lifelong fight with type 1 diabetes. It was too much when I was already overwhelmed with the custody battle I shouldn't have even been in. But, how could Rowan have possibly known that Addison's *other* grandparents would suddenly crawl out of the woodwork after not seeing her since their deadbeat son took off for parts unknown when she was only two? It should have been a clear cut case. Addison would live with me.

Addison *would* live with me, if I had to spend every last penny of my savings. Not people who were no better than strangers, just because they shared some DNA.

My client got distracted from her stream of consciousness chatter about how her neighbor's hens kept

getting into her yard and eating all the cat food. She was strongly against free roaming hens.

“You have to be somewhere, hon?” she asked, admiring her fresh curls in the mirror.

I gave her a final fluff, my eyes zoning in on her roots. “I have to get my niece Addy from school. Do you want to make an appointment for a touch up?”

She shrugged and reached for her bag after I undid her hot pink cape and shook out the hair onto the speckled linoleum floor. If this was going to be my salon, which had been my dream ever since Kay announced she was going to retire at the beginning of next year, the linoleum and the hot pink would be the first to go. I’d get some nice, cool shade of wood—I knew I couldn’t afford real wood, but easy care vinyl could look just as nice—and then everything else would be pale and neutral. Soothing, calming, making people want to stay longer and get their nails done. But that dream was slowly circling the drain every time I had to pay for a lawyer consultation.

“That’s okay,” she said, pulling out her wallet. “I’ll just drop in when I have time.” Her face turned serious and she patted my arm. “So sorry about your sister, hon. She was a sweetheart.”

I nodded, mentally changing it to the present tense in my mind. Did death negate how sweet you are? I didn’t think so. “Thanks,” I said, making one last ditch effort to get her to commit to an appointment.

We needed the customers, but walk-in dye jobs were hell on the schedule if she did manage to come in on a busy day. My phone was going crazy, my final alarm telling me I had to leave immediately.

I had to close up on my way out, even though normally Kay would still be there for another couple hours. She was out sick that day with something I didn’t want any part of, so I’d been there all alone. I hated thinking one of our regulars would

head to Bayberry if they stopped by and saw we were closed, but there was nothing I could do. The new salon the next town over was turning out to be the bane of our existence, all modern and sleek, with an entire row of manicure and pedicure stations, compared to our sad little area crammed back by the wash sinks. When our manicurist Shelby came in on the two days a week she could work, she never lacked for clients, but Kay already had one foot out the door and refused to listen to any of my pleas to get a full timer and make the manicure area bigger.

I wasn't late to pick up Addy, but I was late enough that I was at the end of the car pick up line. I envied the parents who lived within walking distance and could just stroll up and leave with their kids, rather than be stuck in a rattletrap car that did or didn't have working air conditioning, seemingly dependent on my mood. Since I was already frazzled getting out the door at work, it should have been obvious that I'd have no AC on my way to the elementary school.

My phone rang out a jarring death metal ringtone. It was my best friend, Luna, who changed all my ringtones the night before Rowan passed. She refused to leave our side at the hospice center, doing everything in her power to keep my parents' and my spirit from flagging. Hers had originally been the bluebird music from *Sleeping Beauty*, which was certainly more like her than the angry screeching coming out of my phone now. But I had been in a mood and the song grew on me. It was especially appropriate now since I knew she was calling to nag me some more about the dang ten-year reunion.

"Go Lions," I said as a greeting.

"Damn straight," she said. "That means you're going after all? Green and gold and always bold?"

I was absolutely certain that our high school reunion would be a great time since I knew Luna had been busting her butt and she never did less than her best, but I just plain didn't want to go. At all. The thought of the condolence avalanche

when everyone saw me for the first time since Rowan passed, telling the ones who didn't yet know—just, no, thanks.

I made a whiny noise, unable to express my thoughts, but Luna's known me since preschool and was the most empathetic person I'd ever met; she knew exactly what I meant.

"I've already told everyone close to us not to bring it up," she said. "And I'll make sure nobody from out of town hounds you."

I sighed, knowing there was nothing I could do but ride out her sales pitch and keep lobbing back excuses. "I don't have a babysitter I trust yet," I said, leaving out the fact I had no money for one if I did. "I can't have some high school girl let Addy burn the apartment down while she's got her face glued to her phone, and mom's back on her oxygen."

My parents had Rowan and me later in life. My dad's arthritis had put him in a wheelchair a few years back, and my mom's chronic lung issues had her on a portable oxygen tank sometimes. They loved Addy to bits, but I wouldn't ask them in their conditions, just so I could be miserable at the old Loblolly High gym for a few hours.

"Oof, sorry to hear about Barbara," she said. "I'll pop by sometime this week. But, the babysitter issue is not a problem, because my mom said she'll stay with her. She's really excited to watch cartoons and teach her how to crochet, so you'd be hurting her feelings to say no."

"I'm sure," I said skeptically.

"No, really," she assured me. "And Metzger's Barbecue is catering, Jimmy's band will be playing. It's going to be—" her voice faltered, not at all like my super positive best friend. She cleared her throat and continued in a less than chipper voice. "It's just that nobody's returning their RSVPs and I'm afraid it'll be a bust."

Being one of the jerks who didn't RSVP, I felt instantly responsible for her uncharacteristic self-doubt. I simply could

not let Luna, who'd always been there for me, think anything she did could be a bust. Now that my main concerns were neatly taken care of, I still have one last reservation. Probably the most important one. But, no. There was no possible way he'd be there. He put this town, and me, in his rearview approximately ten seconds after graduation. I'm sure he won't be there, and if I asked Luna about it, she'd think I still cared. Which, I don't.

“Well, if you're sure about your mom, then I can't wait,” I said, actually sounding like I meant it.

She squealed with delight and promised I wouldn't regret it. Doubtful, but I was glad she sounded like herself again. As we chatted, I found myself getting into the idea of a fun night of binging barbecue and dancing. I even decided to swing by my parents' house to see if my senior prom dress was still stuffed into the back of my old closet.

After we ended the call, I moved up enough in the line to where I could see Addy standing slightly outside a group of girls her age. Her little shoulders were rounded and she stared at the ground while occasionally kicking at a crack in the sidewalk. Were they leaving her out or did she just want to be left alone? Both scenarios upset me, hating the thought of her being lonely, or too sad to even talk to the other kids. At least she seemed to have the same type of sneakers and backpack as they did. I needed to keep up with that sort of thing, because while it might not matter now at age seven, I didn't want anyone to ever ostracize her because I'd screwed up. I owed it to Rowan to keep her daughter happy and safe.

I just hoped that I was given the chance to prove that I could.

Chapter 2 - Silas

After my meeting ran long I barely made it onto the flight down to Roanoke. If I was lucky, I'd have just enough time to get my rental car and make it to the high school gymnasium in time to appease my old best friend, Mark. Well, if I was really lucky I'd miss the entire damn reunion and at least be able to say I tried while still getting to meet Mark's wife and see his newborn son.

That was the only reason I agreed to take time off and fly to the town I had long since relegated to the past, but I didn't ever seem to want to stay there. I felt guilty for not going to his wedding, but I had important business in Tokyo that week. And now his new baby was three months old, and I still hadn't seen the little fellow in real life. I sent lavish presents for both occasions, but I knew Mark didn't care about the presents. We'd been friends since fifth grade and stayed in contact even after I fled Loblolly. He refused to let me ditch him the way I ditched every other aspect of my life there.

I shouldn't have been so anxious about going back. I had plenty more important things to worry about, namely how poorly the meeting I just had with Chotech Corp went. Normally companies were chomping at the bit to have us develop their apps and I probably shouldn't have been so pressed to get their business, but I didn't like the reasons they were so ambivalent about signing with us. The contract would mean millions of dollars added to our yearly numbers, which certainly mattered, but my personal pride had been stung and to be honest, it was still stinging.

I was twenty-nine years old, single, and successful in New York City. And by successful, I meant that the company my two college roommates and I started from our dorm room was now a multi-billion dollar tech giant. I could look like Quasimodo and still get attention from Broadway starlets and swarms of models, and since I was very definitely single, what

was the problem with accepting the attention? The problem, according to Mr. Cho, was that sometimes I ended up in the tabloids. Some of those tabloids had nicknames for me, all of them ridiculous and none of them having anything to do with my ability to run my company.

After we landed and I found my rental car waiting for me, my irritation shifted back to anxiety. I definitely had time to get to the reunion. I looked down at my suit, the same one I'd been wearing all day, but the tailored shirt was still crisp, the dark jacket in pristine condition. I should have been less careful with the wine on the flight, but I couldn't use my clothes as an excuse to not go. I was fairly certain they would be far nicer than anything my bumpkin classmates would be wearing.

Sliding behind the wheel of the rental, I silently laughed at myself, wondering when I became such a snob. The closer I got to Loblolly, the more I felt the two aspects of my old life returning to strangle me. One was the worst thing that ever happened to me, the sudden car accident that took my parents' lives at the beginning of my senior year. I nearly lost it, filled with grief and rage at the drunk driver who stole them from me. I wouldn't have made it through if it wasn't for the best thing that ever happened to me. My old girlfriend, the love of my life, or so I believed back then. She kept me on the straight and narrow and was the only light in the vast tunnel of bitter darkness that surrounded me.

Of course I ruined it by running. The second I got my acceptance to New York University it was all I could focus on. I meant to ask her to come with me, but I feared she would refuse, since she was the quintessential small town girl who'd never want to leave. I had to leave, to run from the tormenting memories of my parents. I meant to get myself settled and make things up to her, but by the time that happened, I heard from Mark that she'd moved on.

Well, I hadn't moved on and it pissed me off, so I threw myself into the startup with Jax and Raylen, vowing never to return to Loblolly.

Except, there I was, pulling into the high school parking lot, but I only agreed to go to the reunion because Mark swore up and down that Harper wouldn't be there. He assured me she was so busy with family and her job that he hadn't even seen her in weeks.

Damn it, now that all this familiar territory had dredged up so many old memories and feelings, I couldn't help but wonder if there was enough water under the bridge to get in touch with Harper while I was here. Catch up over coffee. We were friends, good friends, before we started going out in our junior year and got all tangled up in our youthful passion. Before I fled the town as if it were on fire. What were the chances she'd still be mad at me after all this time? I sighed, dismissing those thoughts as foolish nostalgia trying to make my life more difficult than it needed to be. *See Mark and meet his family and get back out.* That was the plan I was sticking to.

I paused in the hallway outside the gym doors, listening to a pop song I hadn't heard in ages. The lyrics rushed back to my mind as if it was blaring on the radio of my old clunker Chevy the way it did every afternoon while I drove to my part-time job at the hardware store. I straightened my tie and pushed open the doors, making my way through a festoon of green and gold streamers. I nearly staggered under the weight of memories at the sight of the nearly unchanged gym, the slightly stale air, the same music that played during my senior prom. Harper had dragged me, telling me I'd regret it if I didn't go, even though all I wanted to do was mope at home. She'd been so utterly beautiful in her satiny peach gown with the ruffled hem that was longer in the back than it was in the front, the strapless top dusted with rhinestones and clinging to her lush curves. We'd danced in each other's arms under the sparkling disco ball, and she made me forget for a few hours how sad and angry I was.

I stopped dead in my tracks as soon as I was past the streamers. Harper was standing right there in front of me, still looking utterly gorgeous in the exact same dress, her long,

dark blonde hair cascading down her back. I had to blink, sure I'd been snatched back in time or lost in a daydream.

Nope, she was really there. I was rooted to the spot, staring at her beautiful face, which turned stony the second she turned and recognized me. It seemed I was wrong about the amount of water under the bridge washing away her old anger at me.

Harper was clearly pissed as hell.

Chapter 3 - Harper

The band sounded good and the barbecued spare ribs and brisket smelled delicious, but I was double spanked into my old prom dress after a long day so I wasn't exactly in Lion fighting spirit after the first half hour of the reunion. Talk about awkward.

Most of the people I'd seen at least within the last year, more likely the last few days, so it wasn't as if we needed to catch up. There were a few people who came from out of town, but I hadn't worked up the gumption to greet them yet. Every passing minute was a minute I wasn't soaking in a nice, hot bubble bath. I decided to grab some food and then sneak out. The place was hopping with our old classmates, so there was no reason to stay just for Luna anymore.

I saw her heading toward me and whirled to get out of her path before she could settle me at a table with people who might inhibit my escape plan.

When I turned around, it was like everything around me came to a pinpoint. I was at the end of a tunnel, or more like staring down the barrel of a gun. Straight at the love of my life, the man I dreamed of marrying, the one who stamped my heart into a pulp. Silas Donovan.

He looked even more handsome than I remembered, with broader shoulders and a better style to his shiny dark hair, which always used to be so shaggy. I had an idiotic surge of jealousy over whoever was giving him his trims. His navy suit was tailored perfectly to his tall frame and his coffee and cream brown eyes... I couldn't look away. How many times had I gazed into those same eyes, never suspecting he'd ever let me down in any way, always completely trusting him.

His stunned look at seeing me turned to one of terror. Still sharp as a tack, I could see, because a fury overcame me like nothing I'd ever felt. Ten years without a peep, without a

trace, and he dared to waltz into my town, my old school, looking better than the entire buffet?

I felt my fists clenching and forcibly relaxed them. Some people tried to get in the door behind him, and he had to move out of their way to let them in the gym. Instead of choosing life and heading away from me, he sealed his fate and took two big steps to stand right in front of me. Towering over me and looking down with those soulful, searching eyes. I reminded myself I was kind of a mother now and should keep my cool in front of all these witnesses, but that look on his face, the face I used to cover in kisses, made my heart turn over. The same as it did all those years ago.

“Harper,” he said in a strangled voice. “It’s—”

If he told me it was good to see me, I’d lose it and do something that wouldn’t play well in family court, so I took a step back to get out of the range of his crisp, breezy cologne.

“It’s good to see you didn’t fall off the face of the earth, after all,” I said, cutting him off.

He blinked at the venom in my voice, but surely he couldn’t be confused about why I might be a little miffed at him? I opened my mouth to really lay into him when his old buddy Mark hurried over.

“Wow, this is a blast from the past seeing you two together,” he said with forced cheer, pulling him away. Silas followed him gratefully.

I would have bet money he told Silas I wouldn’t be here, which made me even angrier. He’d only come if I wasn’t here? What in the ever-loving-heck did I do so wrong back then?

I barely made it to the girl’s room before my eyes spilled over. I dabbed at my carefully applied makeup and bulged my eyes open to stop the tears. He didn’t deserve any tears, and if I wanted to cry over something, I had a long enough list of things without adding him. I looked around the bleak, painted cinder block walls and the scratched and faded

mirrors, turning so I could see the floofy back of the dress I'd loved so much way back then. The first time I wore it, it was a much, much better night.

There was no reason this night had to be ruined. I had a free babysitter until ten o'clock, and there was a huge feast I'd been looking forward to. Silas wasn't going to steal my chance to eat Metzger's famous barbecue, except now I knew my pride wouldn't let me slip out like I had planned. He'd assume it was because of him, and it wasn't like I could flounce up to him and tell him I was going to flee well before I saw his stupid, gorgeous face again.

Back in the gym, Jeannie Holger shoved her husband at me, begging me to dance with him so she could have a break. Tim was the kid who used to get a circle of people clapping around him while he showed off his moves on the dancefloor, but he had a little bit of a beer gut now. His heart was still in it, but his feet had lost their magic. Still, we ended up laughing as we jumped around to our past favorite songs. He was in the middle of twirling me when I caught Silas on the sidelines, next to Mark and his wife Annie. His eyes locked with mine and were still resting on me after I completed the circle. I felt the smile slide right off my face. How dare he.

"You okay?" Tim asked over the booming music.

"Fine," I gritted, pulling him further into the crowd.

But now I kept peeking through the gyrating bodies to find Silas still looking at me. Every time I met his eyes, I felt my face get hot and would quickly look away, as if I had something to be guilty about. Ugh, he'd even ruined dancing. Well, he wasn't going to ruin the barbecue. After the current song ended, I hauled Tim back to his wife and went to get in the buffet line.

Not even a minute later, Silas bumped into me.

"Sorry," he said, those intense eyes of his still searching my face.

I snorted. As if that was what he needed to be apologizing for. I gave him a lingering onceover, trying not to get a shiver at how great he looked in his suit that probably cost more than my rent. Probably for the entire year.

“Hmmpf,” I said. “You sure do look fancy. That from this season’s Paris shows?” He could tell from my tone I wasn’t complimenting him and his face dropped. Used to getting a much different reaction from women, I was sure. I got another little stab of jealousy and my anger rekindled.

He looked me up and down in the same exact manner, and my arms and legs tingled as I remembered how much I used to like him looking me over like that. A few people had told me I looked great and how cute it was that I wore my old prom dress. There was no reason to wish I had on something sleeker and more sophisticated.

His eyebrow went up as his eyes settled back on my face. “You look like you haven’t moved on.”

How bleeping dare he. Oh, I was pissed. I stood up on my tiptoes and put my face right next to his, ignoring the heady feeling I got when I sniffed his cologne.

“And what would you know about that?” I demanded, voice a low hiss. “Because you certainly didn’t move on. You ran away. There’s a big difference.”

“Harper,” he said. Commanding. Irritated.

Suddenly I was exhausted. Silas shouldn’t have been on my very long list of things that upset me at all, let alone at the top. I piled on some ribs, corn on the cob, and coleslaw, then waved him off as I headed toward my table, which was thankfully empty at the moment.

I didn’t want to argue, I just wanted to eat the damn food in peace and then go home. I got to keep my pride, but I couldn’t keep up the ruse much longer. The usually delicious, tender meat tasted like Styrofoam, but I kept forcing myself to eat to keep the tears that were threatening again at bay.

After a few minutes, things started regaining their taste, then Silas plopped down next to me, once again ruining my tenuous grasp on a state of calm. I pointed my fork at him, ready to tell him where to go.

“I’m sorry about Rowan,” he said before I could get the words out. “Mark just told me.”

He looked devastated. He and Rowan hadn’t been close, but of course he knew her since we were inseparable for several years. I knew his compassionate look was sincere and my anger went out of me like a popped balloon.

“Even though we all knew it was coming, it was still so hard,” I admitted, cracks forming in the dam.

He nodded. “I know.”

I knew he did know about losing family. He lost both his parents in one fell swoop. He definitely knew how I felt. A long, long time ago, before we were passionately in love, before he stamped on my heart, Silas was my friend. A good friend.

“It was supposed to be all settled that I’d get Addison —” I paused, realizing he might not know who that was. I pushed away the slight bitterness that tried to rise back up. I needed to let everything out. The dam was about to burst. “That’s my niece, she’s seven. You know Rowan shouldn’t have even been able to have kids.” I choked up and shook my head when his hand moved towards mine. It stopped on the table next to my plate and I was sorry I didn’t let him touch me. “It probably sped things up, but she loved Addy so much. Her miracle baby. I can’t lose her.”

“Why would you?” he asked. “Is it her father who’s trying to get custody?”

“Pfft,” I said in disgust. “He hasn’t seen her since she was a baby. I think he’s on the west coast somewhere. It’s his parents. They haven’t seen her since she was two but came out of the woodwork like cockroaches, all of a sudden needing to

be there for her, wanting what's best." I had to stop or I'd make a gagging noise.

"That's certainly you," he said, making me swell with gratitude. I was that pathetically unsure of myself where Addy was concerned.

The bone deep exhaustion crept up on me again. "I like to think so, and Rowan thought so. It would break my parents' hearts if I lost her. But the lawyer fees are draining me dry so I'm afraid they'll look better because they're pretty well off, plus they're a couple and all the lawyers I've talked to think that makes them seem like a more stable option since I'm single."

I sighed after I finished. It felt good to let it all out since I had been keeping a brave face for everyone else and pretending not to worry. He looked at me for so long I felt my face heating up under his gaze. Then he took my hand and, this time, I let him.

"What if you weren't single?" he asked.

Chapter 4 - Silas

The look of shock on Harper's face accurately represented how I felt after I blurted that out. But I quickly realized my knee jerk reaction to want to solve her problems meant a way to possibly solve mine. I had been wooing Chotech Corp for months, trying to get their app contracts over to our company, and that meeting earlier dashed my hopes of that happening. Not if they kept thinking I was the bachelor playboy the press portrayed me as. What if I wasn't a bachelor, at least as far as they were concerned?

It all fell into place as she blinked her pretty blue eyes at me in disbelief.

"Are you freaking kidding me right now?" she asked, finally finding her voice.

"I'm being one hundred percent serious," I said, quickly explaining my own problem. I put up with her massive eye roll at my expense and ignored the disgusted curl of her lip. "It's a completely unearned reputation," I said.

But she already had her phone out, pulling up the last few paparazzi shots of me and various women. "You've clearly been victimized," she said, shaking her head. "Poor, poor you."

"I also need to deal with my parents' house," I said, letting her take the potshot. "We can move in and I can get it fixed up for sale."

Her sneer dissipated, and she turned serious. "Are you going to be okay with that? Living there again?" I waited for her to take another jab at the fact I ran away, but she only kept looking at me with compassion.

I suddenly recalled that we really had been great friends. Hell, we'd been great, period. But this had nothing to do with that. We both had a problem that the other could help solve, and it would behoove me not to get caught up in the

past. Especially when that tender look in her eyes made me want to lean closer to her and wrap my hand around the back of her neck to pull her in for a kiss. I pulled my gaze away to look at the band, gearing up for their next set.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, even though the thought of going into the house again filled me with dread. “It needs to be done. I uh... put it off for too long already.”

She nodded. “So how would it work?”

I appreciated her turning business-like so I could stop thinking about kissing her. “You and your niece move in with me while I get the work done. I’ll go with you to talk to the social worker or whoever you need me to, and you impress my conservative client and let them know I’m family oriented and responsible.”

“It doesn’t seem shady to you?” she asked. “I mean, it’s kind of dishonest.”

I shrugged. “My company can do the job better than anyone else. My being married or not shouldn’t enter into it. Same as you getting custody over people who may as well be strangers.”

She scrunched up her eyebrows the way she always did when thinking hard, and I was hit with a blast of nostalgia. I wanted her to agree to my scheme for reasons that had nothing to do with getting the account. She sighed and looked at me with such hope in her eyes that my heart tugged, then broke a little when she forcefully extinguished it. She really thought she was going to lose her niece. I reached for her hand.

“She belongs with you,” I said.

She huffed. “How do you know?” she asked bitterly. “You don’t know me at all anymore.”

“I know you enough to know you always help out a friend in need. This would be huge for me.” There, maybe I could appease her stubborn pride.

“That’s bold of you to assume we’re friends,” she said. Her lips began to curl into a smile. “But I’m also known for being kind to strangers.”

“Ouch,” I said. “But that means you’ll do it?”

“What’s the rent?” she asked.

Now I wanted to shake her instead of kissing her. “Are you kidding? With the state of that place, I think I should pay you to stay there. So, nothing, obviously. And after I go back to New York, you two can stay there until it sells.”

“Putting my current rent toward lawyer fees would help a lot,” she said.

“Jesus, woman, just say yes.”

She laughed and the sound brought back every happy moment of my youth tumbling down around me like confetti. When she finally agreed, I stood up and dragged her toward the dance floor to celebrate. It was nice to see the sadness and the worry erased from her eyes and I managed to keep her laughing as I whirled her around during the band’s upbeat songs.

The music changed to a slow song, and the lights dimmed while the disco ball scattered golden flecks across her face and reflected off the rhinestones on her dress. She looked magical. Without thought, I pulled her into my arms and she melted against my chest as we swayed to the sweet notes of a song we’d danced to a lifetime ago.

For about eight seconds.

“Nope, too much,” she said, pushing away. She bounded off the dance floor, leaving me standing there, bewildered.

I pulled myself back to the present. “Start packing,” I called after her. “I’ll be back in a few days to move in.”

She waved at me without turning back, and I stood there getting jostled by our old classmates still dancing all around me. I watched her grab her bag, hug Luna goodbye,

and head out through the green and gold streamers, until finally leaving the dance floor myself.

I was more excited than I was when our first app took off, a feeling I wouldn't have thought possible based on my mood when I flew in earlier. It had to do with the fact that I was on the way to closing the deal I'd been busting my ass over for the last few months. Not a single thing to do with the fact that I made the woman I used to love, and who I thought despised me, smile and laugh while we danced to our old favorite songs.

Chapter 5 - Harper

I was surrounded by suitcases and boxes of Addison's toys, wondering for the hundredth time why I had agreed to this wild plan. Was it the nostalgia of the reunion? Was it the kindness and compassion I saw in Silas that eased some of my bitterness? I mean, make no mistake, I still had plenty of heartache with his name attached to it, but he was going to save me a lot of money. Lawyers, even small town lawyers, weren't cheap, and the first time the social worker assigned to our case visited my one bedroom apartment after Addy moved in, she didn't seem that impressed.

I looked over at Addy, sullenly eating her breakfast cereal, slurping every spoonful. Since she was having to move again so soon after losing her mom, I decided telling her to chew with her mouth closed was a battle I wasn't going to pick. I'd been poring over child rearing books and that was something all of them reiterated.

I tried to make my buyer's remorse about this crazy plan go away by reminding myself how excited Addy had been when I told her she was going to have her own room, and that the house had a backyard. But what if she didn't get along with Silas? God, what was I thinking? It had to be the music, his handsome face, the wash of cozy, warm memories temporarily blocking out my grudge. I needed to be careful about that, because no amount of being able to save some money was worth all that heartache again.

But, I'd certainly be saving a lot of money.

Even paying for the rest of this month on the month to month lease I had at the town's one and only apartment building, it was going to be huge to live rent free for the next few months. And when I went into the office to ante up with Lois, the apartment manager, she breezily told me not to worry about the remaining two weeks and that she'd get back to me about the security deposit as soon as she did the inspection. It

seemed like one small miracle after another, a rest stop on my long highway of problems. I'd spent every minute of my time off the last two days scrubbing the place so I was certain to get the deposit back, and I could maybe get Addy a small slide or something for the backyard at Silas's house.

"Am I going to get to help you guys paint?" she asked, putting her spoon down.

"If you want," I said.

I didn't know how to explain Silas's whackadoo plan, so I just said we were going to stay with a friend and help him fix up his house, acting completely neutral about it. Another thing the books all said was to not involve little ones in your grown up problems. I had to at least act like I was in charge of my own life if I was going to prove to the family court I could be in charge of a kid's life.

She seemed fine with it, but she was pretty lethargic lately. I'd taken her to the doctor for her back-to-school checkup, and she was perfectly healthy, and the grief counselor told me that it was normal. Still, I worried all the time.

When Silas showed up, he was friendly and open with Addy, but didn't try too hard to make her like him, which I'd been afraid of. He loaded everything up into his big rental SUV, and we drove to his old house. I hadn't been to that neighborhood in ages, since my parents and Luna lived on the other side of town, but except for new blocks of mailboxes on every corner and a few new privacy hedges, everything seemed exactly how I remembered.

I started drifting back in time again, remembering how we'd race our bikes up and down the long, straight street, before skidding to a stop right before we got to the big intersection at the end. We weren't much older than Addy at the time and now it seemed stupidly dangerous. We went through the garage to get into the house and the first thing Addy spied was Silas's old ten speed, covered in inches of dust and cobwebs.

“Can I ride that bike?” she asked, her voice full of awe.

It had to be tough having a sick mom and disabled grandparents and an aunt who worked all the time. The fact she’d never owned a bike stabbed at my heart.

“That one’s too big for you, but we can check out the second hand shop for one your size after school tomorrow,” I said recklessly. I had been hoarding every penny like it was going to be the one to save our lives, but I knew she needed a bike now that she had a nice, quiet street to ride it on. “Plus, you’ll need training wheels to start off.”

Silas gasped. “Training wheels? You’re seven, aren’t you, Addy?”

She nodded. “But I never had a bike.”

He pulled out the old bike and blew away most of the dust. “Yeah, your aunt is right, this one’s too tall for you, but I bet I can teach you so you can forgo the training wheel phase.”

I imagined a trip to the emergency room and the look on our social worker’s face when Addy showed up to the next meeting in a cast. “We can talk about it later,” I said, giving him a look that he must surely understand meant I was about to kill him if he didn’t shut up.

Inside, I went around opening up the windows to let in some fresh air. The place definitely needed upgrades everywhere if it had any hope of selling, but it was a nice house. I leaned into Silas’s old room, with his single bed still pushed up against the wall, and his bookshelves still full of sci-fi novels and manga. On the shelf above his bed I saw there was a framed picture of us there. We were about sixteen, shortly after we’d gone from just friends to dating. He had his arm around me, and my smile could have melted an ice planet. It was hard to remember ever being that happy.

My heart was the ice planet now, but being in this room where we had so many deep conversations and got up to things that his mom’s open door policy couldn’t have stopped, I just wanted to enjoy the memories. I heard them cackling

about something downstairs and hurried down before Silas promised Addy something else she shouldn't have.

He was staring out at the overgrown jungle of the backyard while Addy tried to force her way through the grass that was well past her knees to get to the tire swing that hung from the big oak tree.

"You're going to get a tick," I warned her.

"And that rope's probably rotten," Silas called.

I nodded approvingly at him and he gave me a smile that made me lean toward him in the snug doorway, but also sent warnings screaming to guard my heart.

"This yard was supposed to be taken care of," he said, pulling out his phone.

After he told me who he hired, I only laughed. "You don't remember this place very well."

He scowled. "It was all scheduled, though, and I paid extra for the rush job. This is unacceptable."

"Oh, unacceptable, is it?" I asked. "You know nothing goes to schedule here, not even for fancy city slickers who throw money around. Or, you used to know that, anyway."

He raised his eyebrow and got on his phone. "We'll see about that."

I rolled my eyes and called Addy to come back in before she got bit by a snake. She trailblazed her way back inside to run upstairs. After Silas ended his call, he looked at me smugly.

"They're on their way."

"Mmhmm, sure they are." He'd see and eventually recall that small town time ran differently from NYC clocks.

He grabbed two of Addy's boxes and hauled them upstairs while I followed with the suitcases. Addy followed with an armload of her stuffed animals. In Silas's old room, Addy immediately opened the suitcase with her favorite

striped sheets and pulled the dust cover off the bed to start to make the room her own. I was about to go back down for another box when she asked if she could paint a rainbow on the wall.

Since she and Silas seemed to be getting along, I didn't want him to be the bad guy for saying no, so quickly jumped in. "We have to keep it neutral since it's going up for sale," I explained.

"Sure," Silas said at the same time. "How about clouds on the ceiling?"

Okay, I didn't want him to be the bad guy, but did he have to keep trying to be the hero? I was struck dumb as Addy jumped on the bed, spreading her arms to show him her vision of where the rainbow should go. He started discussing moving the bookshelf, and she eagerly agreed it would look better on the other side of the room, shyly suggesting it might look better pink. Silas thought it definitely would and said they could paint that too. I watched them with a mix of irritation and the overwhelming urge to gather them both up in a hug, they were acting so cute. So, Silas was a natural with kids and wanted to please Addy. There wasn't much I could pick apart about that.

As I brought the last box upstairs, he pulled my suitcase into the master bedroom and I followed him.

"I'm not sure you should have told Addy she could paint up the room like that. It'll make it harder to sell," I said, not even bringing up how easily kids could be spoiled, according to the books.

He shrugged. "It won't be a problem to have it painted over for the new owners," he said. "Why not give her something to be happy about?"

I couldn't explain how I felt, but it wasn't good. I tried to keep my lips clamped, I really did. But what if Addy got used to getting whatever she wanted while we were in this

bizarre situation, and then I couldn't give her anything she wanted once we were back to normal?

"Must be nice to be able to throw money at everything like that," I said.

"It is."

I would have kept arguing my weak stance but then I realized he was pulling my second suitcase into the master bedroom.

"Whoa, what are you doing?" I asked. "Don't you want the big bedroom?"

He smirked. "Now who can't remember anything," he said. "I wasn't always rich. This house only has two bedrooms."

Of course, how could I have let that important bit of information slip? My heart sank because I already promised Addy she wouldn't have to share her room anymore and there was no way I'd go back on that. The thought of sleeping on the springy old couch downstairs did not appeal at all, especially since I was on my feet all day at work, which made my lower back grouchy enough.

I knew it would be far too dangerous to try and share this room with him. Especially since all those memories of the amazing, perfect times we had together in this very house kept jumping out at me. Watching him hoist my overstuffed, heavy suitcase onto the bed, his arm muscles rippling and a sheen of sweat making his hair curl slightly at the back, I found myself really wanting to share the bed with him. I meant the room, not the bed. No, it would be much too dangerous.

I stood there watching him and starting to short circuit, almost positive I'd made the worst mistake of my life.

Chapter 6 - Silas

Day three of Operation What in the Hell was I Thinking, and things were going as well as could be expected. And considering I didn't expect much, I guess I couldn't complain. The house was in much worse condition than I thought, and after speaking to a realtor, I knew I had to overhaul almost everything if I didn't want to sell it at a huge loss to some impersonal house flipper.

I owed it to my mom and dad to do better than that. They'd loved this house, and it was a point of pride to them to have it paid off at such young ages, scrimping and saving and then putting so much of their own hard work into it to make it a comfortable and welcoming home. There were times I wished I had a separate game room like some of my friends, and always envied Mark's seemingly giant two-car garage where there was plenty of room for our short-lived band to practice, but this house had been full of love.

Being there had stirred up a hornet's nest of emotions, and the only thing that could distract me from sinking into the morass of missing my parents was the tornado of emotions that swirled around every interaction with Harper. There was no getting past the fact she was as pretty as ever, and my traitorous eyes couldn't help but seek her out whenever we were in the same room together. I supposed I should have been grateful that it wasn't often, since she worked all day while I oversaw the workers, but to be honest I could have used her help.

It was like leaving this place for ten years suddenly made me an outsider, almost as if I spoke a different language. The plumbing company I hired to come out and give me an estimate on possibly adding on a half bath downstairs to increase the value, didn't show up for the first appointment, and then didn't seem all that interested in making another one. And the owner was someone I used to play peewee football

with. The cold shoulder from the companies who didn't know me was astounding, and it seemed to get colder when I offered to pay extra.

Harper's smug looks whenever I complained about it weren't helping, nor was the fact that my spine felt like it had been put through a meat grinder from sleeping on the couch. I decided to do the noble thing and volunteer to take the couch when I saw Harper's face go blank with terror after she recalled there was no third bedroom. I regretted it the first night and decided we could be adults and sleep platonically in a queen sized bed, but then I saw her fresh from her shower, wrapped in a short, fluffy blue robe, her damp hair clinging to her shoulders and her cheeks rosy and dewy. The sight of her bare legs, beads of water sliding down her shapely calves made it almost impossible not to pull her into my arms and slide my hands into the opening of her bathrobe to feel her soft skin under my palms. I stayed on the couch where it was safe. For the most part, we were getting along. Sometimes, she even gave me one of her sunny smiles that made my heart ease, but then she'd seem to forcibly shut it down. There was no reason to rock the boat just because my back was a little sore.

I stood up and stretched after spending part of the early morning taking the lower kitchen cabinet doors off. I'd been up since four AM to get in an overseas meeting online and then decided to get that chore done as long as I was up. The verdict was still out on whether or not to sand and stain them their original wood color or paint them a modern, soft gray. I didn't think my mother would have liked the paint idea, but it was what the current, comparable houses in the area all had. Not for the first time in my life, but the first time since I'd been back in town, I wished she was here, still living in the house, so there would be no need to change it and sell it.

I knew if they had lived and I offered to buy them a much bigger and better house, they wouldn't have left. The idea of home really meant something to them. Every day on my way to the building supply store, I had to pass the

cemetery, and I knew I should turn in and visit them, but I wasn't ready. Not by a long shot.

What I was ready for, though, was the rainbow wall project. I'd picked up all seven colors, plus the bright white for the clouds, and as soon as Harper and Addison came down for breakfast I suggested Addy tell me where she wanted it, and I'd get started taping it off while she was in school.

She squealed and ran ahead of me up the stairs. Harper followed us with a sigh and leaned against the doorframe, looking grumpy while Addy jumped onto the bed.

"Look, Silas," Addy said very seriously, sliding her hands across the wall. "This is how we should do it to keep the colors from running together. We put the tape in layers like this."

I listened as she explained, just going along with her at first, certain we'd have to do it some other way, but her plan was a good one.

"That's really smart," I told her. "We'll do it just like that."

She smiled, and I got a hint of a resemblance between her and her mom and aunt. Harper and Rowan had always looked a lot alike, but Addy seemed to have some of her father's side to her looks as well, with darker hair and a lankier build.

"I just searched how to do it on YouTube and decided which one I liked best," she said.

I eased back to Harper, who still leaned against the door with one of those rare smiles melting off her face as I approached. "Is that normal?" I asked, impressed by Addy's innovation.

Harper's brows shot together. "What do you mean? Of course it's normal. What's not normal about it?"

"I just meant I think she might be gifted, looking all that up herself." I tried to get her smile back with one of my

own. “Put away the claws, mama bear, and lighten up.”

No dice. Her scowl grew worse. “I can’t lighten up,” she hissed. “Come on, Addy,” she said, forcing a much nicer voice. “We need to get you to school, or I’ll be late to work.”

“I can take her,” I said. “I don’t have another meeting until noon.” Working remotely was the one thing that was going perfectly smoothly.

Harper made a huffing noise. “No, that’s not necessary. Let’s go, Addy.” She turned and stormed down the stairs. Addy skipped past me, not noticing her aunt’s snippy mood, probably since it was aimed solely at me.

“See you later, Silas,” she called when they left a few minutes later.

Not a peep out of Harper. I started taping out the arches for the rainbow, unable to figure out what I did to upset her this time. I decided it was probably better not to try. As I was climbing the ladder and my lower back tweaked with pain, I wondered if a multimillion-dollar contract was worth all this upheaval.

Chapter 7 - Harper

I listened to Addy chatter about how great Silas was on the way to her school, fearing that I was doing irreparable damage by letting her get attached. I was going to be irreparably damaged if I kept letting myself soften towards him every time he did something sweet for Addy. That weekend I had managed to find her a nice bike her size at the thrift store and he immediately set to work oiling the chain, pumping up the tire tubes and checking the brakes.

Then he actually took his dusty old bike out and rode alongside her until she came back begging to take the training wheels off. I'd never felt such fear in my life watching her wobble off on her own after Silas let go, but she was perfectly fine. He came back to offer me the use of his bike; all my anger and spite welled up until I thought I'd burst a blood vessel trying to decide if I should let loose on him for hurting me so badly all those years ago or go have fun with my niece.

Thankfully I chose fun, and by the time we circled the neighborhood about ten times, I felt much better. Of course, it was silly to hang onto my anger. We were both adults now, well over our childish infatuation.

If only that infatuation didn't keep threatening to return every time I saw Silas doing something manly like pulling down the old wood paneling in the hallways or effortlessly tossing the huge bags of mulch for the front path. He certainly hadn't let himself go. If anything, he was more fit. Positively rippling with useful muscles that belied his cushy office job. And what was even sexier than his capability with a hammer was how cute he was with Addy. It made my ovaries cry out in anguish.

Which only reminded me that he was completely uninterested in me that way anymore. I'd decided we could certainly be adults and platonically share the master bedroom,

but before I could tell him, he set himself up on the couch, all but fleeing when he saw me straight out of the shower.

I had been in a fine mood that morning, even getting a little excited about Addy's room upgrade, when I saw him rubbing his back and grimacing. The fact he found me unattractive with no makeup on and my hair all wet was one thing, but the fact he would rather put up with back pain than sleep two feet away from me hurt more than I could admit.

"Yes, it's going to look amazing," I told Addy as we pulled into the drop-off line and she wound up her thesis on Silas's good points. "Have a good day and please eat the fruit I packed you."

"I will," she said, running to join her class.

I watched her as I pulled slowly forward toward the exit. She still hung around the fringes, but a few of the other kids greeted her and she spoke to them, so I tried to stop worrying. I was in contact with her teacher, and we'd been going to counseling once a week since Rowan left us, so I didn't know what else I could do but hover and hope for the best.

Work that day at the salon passed in a whirlwind of unexpected walk-ins and I collected Addy with my pocket full of tips. She was in a good mood herself, only having to study for her spelling test for homework, and we went over the words on the way home. She nailed all of them, even the bonus words.

"Maybe Silas is right," I said. "Do you think you'd want to take the test to see if you should be in gifted classes?"

She shrugged. "What if I fail it?"

Great. What had I just done? Maybe I should have talked to someone at the school before bringing it up to her. "It's not that kind of test, hon," I said. Oh, shit, what was this doing to her self-esteem? "It's just to give you more work, so you don't get bored. Didn't you say you were bored sometimes at school?"

I looked in the rearview mirror to see her horrified reaction to that.

“Uh, yeah, because school is boring. But I don’t think extra work is the solution. I really don’t want to take that test.”

I cursed myself more for possibly ruining any chance of her getting a scholarship to an Ivy League school, but let it go. There was a big sedan parked on the street, and I had to maneuver to get around its back end to pull into the driveway. I was looking forward to getting my PJs on and becoming boneless on the couch after barely getting off my feet for ten minutes all day and didn’t want to harangue Addy about something that could surely wait until at least second grade.

She ran toward the backyard which had finally been mowed to practice her cartwheels and diva dance moves, but she came skittering back to me with huge, round eyes.

“There are strangers in the backyard,” she hissed.

“It’s probably more workers,” I said. “Just play upstairs or watch a movie with me.”

She shook her head wildly. “They’re *grilling*.”

I pushed her behind me and went to peek out the kitchen window. Sure enough, there were two tall men, both of them looking like they might have stepped out of the pages of a men’s fashion magazine, turning steaks on the old coal grill Silas had pulled out of the garage, promising we’d have a cookout on the weekend. Well, this wasn’t the weekend, and Silas wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

I pulled my phone out and keyed in the nine and the one, keeping my finger hovering as I shooed Addy away and flung open the back door. They didn’t seem like they were dangerous, but they were still trespassing.

“Excuse me,” I said, stepping onto the back stoop. “This is private property.”

Maybe they were squatters who thought the house was still empty? They were pretty well-dressed for that. One had

on crisp, dark jeans and a gray t-shirt that clung to his flat stomach. He waved the long spatula at me, not sure if in greeting or threat, because I was distracted by his biceps. The other one had on suit pants and a white button-down shirt that was open at the neck and half-untucked, but he still managed to look put together. He also smiled and waved at me.

“You must be Harper,” the more casual one said, pushing a wayward lock of jet-black hair off his forehead.

“Of course she’s Harper,” the other one said, wiping his hands on a towel and holding one out to me.

I kept my hand on my phone, but stopped hovering over the final emergency number. “And who are you two?”

The fancier one’s grinned, nearly knocked me off my feet. “I’m Jax, this is Raylen. We’re Silas’s partners.”

Silas’s partners? I was tired. My feet were red hot and screaming for me to get off them. How hard could it have been for Silas to message me and at least tell me there’d be company when I got home so I didn’t get my backside all primed for the couch?

Before I could say anything, the subject of my disappointment came through the side gate, a twelve pack of beer under his arm and a stuffed grocery bag in his hand. He beamed at his buddies, then at me. I must have been scowling because he quickly looked abashed.

“They just flew in from New York,” he said, holding up his hands after he put the beers and other things down on the rickety old picnic table that had been moldering under the overgrown lawn for so long, I expected it to collapse at any moment.

“Yeah,” Raylen, the one in the t-shirt and jeans, said, still waving his spatula. “Don’t get mad at Silas. We just showed up after he didn’t turn up to work for a week.”

I softened towards the newcomers but gave Silas an evil eyebrow. “Yeah, he’s good at disappearing without a trace.”

“Ooh, what’s that all about?” Jax asked, looking as gossipy as the best of my clients. “We need to hear the backstory on that.”

“No, you really don’t,” Silas said, shutting down their teasing looks with an eye roll.

I sniffed, meaning to show disdain but only getting a nose full of the delicious-smelling meat sizzling away over the coals. His quick dismissal of his past misdeeds stung. “Well, have at it,” I said, turning back toward my original destination—couch and TV land.

“Join us for the cookout,” Raylen called, but I only waved as I went up the porch steps.

“Dude, what did you do?” Jax said in a low voice I clearly wasn’t meant to hear as I pulled the kitchen door shut behind me.

I quickly sank into self-pity, more so after Addy joined them, leaving the back door open so all those savory smells could waft in and torment me. The sound of their laughter and the music made it worse, especially when Addy looked at me like I was crazy when I called her in for chicken nuggets. I felt betrayed, but couldn’t blame her and knew I was being stubborn, but all the child-rearing books told me I needed to follow through when I made a decision. It probably didn’t mean missing out on a fun time because of stubborn pride, but I sat on the couch anyway, staring at a show I wasn’t paying attention to, stewing about the past. A past that Silas didn’t seem to think was worth so much as a mention.

My hunger was pushing me towards joining them, but my pride wasn’t letting me cave, even though I wished I could at least see what was causing Addy’s merry laughter. I hadn’t heard her laugh like that in a very long time.

The couch cushion next to me sank, and I tore my unseeing eyes from the TV screen to see Silas holding out a plate piled high with food. The steak looked grilled to perfection, and the corn glistened with butter.

“I’m sorry,” he said, putting the plate on my lap and forcing a fork into my hand.

“It’s your house,” I said with a shrug. “You can have guests over whenever you want.”

“Harper, please look at me.” The tone of his voice made me turn to him. There was a pleading look in his eyes. “I’m sorry for the way I left.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, waiting for more. An explanation, regret. Then I could finally get it off my chest how much he hurt me.

“Can we call a truce? Move on? For Addy’s sake?”

Well that was neither an explanation nor regret. And he had the gall to bring Addy into it, as if I were harming her in some way? I couldn’t admit anything to him now. I would have rather choked on a corn kernel.

“Sure,” I said flippantly, taking my plate and heading out back. He followed me, but I slid onto the picnic bench in between Addy and Jax, digging into my meal.

“Yay, Harper’s here,” Addy said. Jax and Raylen good-naturedly echoed her, and I couldn’t help but smile at the three of them.

“I figured you’d need at least a few embarrassing stories about Silas,” I said, ignoring the scowl building on his face. I ignored him completely as I ate and dug through my memory for some really good ones. “Do you know he tried to cheat in chemistry class in eighth grade? He thought his lab partner, Izzy, who moved to Roanoke a few years back, had a huge crush on him and would cover for him, but she instantly turned him in when she saw the answer sheet up his sleeve. So he told her loudly, in the crowded hall, that they were through and he wouldn’t take her to homecoming anymore. She had fliers printed up that said they were never an item, and she was always going to go to homecoming with Ronny Cheng. Ronny moved to Seattle during tenth grade, by the way.”

Their hoots of laughter warmed my heart almost as much as Silas's grumpy glare. I told them some more of Silas's botched attempts to get out of school work, how on our first official date he took me to the upscale restaurant all the way in Roanoke to show off and I ended up getting food poisoning. I started in on how he tried to free the class turtle in sixth grade, which was actually pretty sweet and heroic, but Jax interrupted.

"So you two did date," he said, eyes gleaming.

"Yes," Silas grunted.

"That's pretty cool you two reconnected over the reunion," Raylen said.

I finally looked at Silas and shook my head slowly. He shrugged and silently begged me not to out the real reason we were together again. He was safe because Addy was within hearing range. I changed the subject to get them talking about their college years. It seemed like Silas completely changed during college, becoming focused and work obsessed. When tales of their college days wound down, Jax took a deep breath and sighed.

"God, the air is fresh here," he said.

"People are nice, too," Raylen said, then grinned. "I thought it was going to be fully populated by children's show puppets because of the name. What's with Loblolly, anyway?"

I snickered, but Silas scowled and pointed to the huge pine towering over the neighbor's roof. "It's the name of the trees around here, asshole. Pffft, puppets."

"I think it would be cool if we all turned into puppets," Addy said, shaking her head at Silas. "You shouldn't swear at all, but especially not to your friends."

"You tell him, Addy," Raylen said, and Silas sheepishly apologized.

After we were done eating, Raylen turned the music up a bit and asked Addy if she liked to dance. Those were magic

words because Addy loved shaking her tail feathers and soon we were all twirling and skipping around the table and the big shade tree. All except Silas, who grew increasingly agitated the more fun I had. Not going to lie, that did add to the fun at least a little. I glanced at my phone to see it was after eight when I had to take a break for some lemonade, turning down a beer for the third time.

“I’m trying to be a good influence,” I said to Jax. “I was never much of a drinker, anyway, and I’m having way too much fun without it.”

“Well, good,” he said, pulling me away from the table to twirl me under his arm. “I have to admit this is way more fun than poring over contracts back in Manhattan.”

Addy was showing off some kind of makeshift jitterbug to Raylen, so I decided to let her stay up a little bit longer. According to the books, a schedule was important, but it was also important to know when to relax the rules. Honestly, those books were a mess of contradictions, but that was the first time I’d seen her so relaxed and happy in a long time. For that matter, I was feeling pretty good myself, getting passed back and forth between two handsome men while rowdy country music played. Silas nursing his beer all by himself and looking morose was the icing on the cake.

As I did a pretty impressive dip on Raylen’s arm, I noticed from my upside down standpoint that Addy was opening the side gate and letting a woman into the backyard. My good mood evaporated, and I jerked out of Raylen’s embrace to run to turn the music down and greet Mrs. Artemus, our social worker. A quick and guilty glance at my phone showed it was now past nine and a sweep of Addy showed her all sweaty and amped up, her hair a fright from getting tossed around by the two muscle men at our makeshift dance party. I tried to see the scene through her eyes, and it didn’t look good.

Her face told me she agreed. “I tried to ring the bell, but no one answered,” she said. “I knew you were home from

the loud music, so I came around back.”

The music wasn't *that* loud. I hurried forward to greet her, with Silas at my back. “I thought our appointment was next week,” I said.

“Well, as you know, we do surprise visits, too, and I was on my way through the neighborhood so I thought I'd check out your new residence.”

Why didn't she say home?

Her eyes moved over the table, laden with our plates and the guys' empty beer bottles. I tried to remember if I was still hanging upside down in Raylen's arms when she actually came around the gate. Either way, I was freaking out. After nine, beer bottles everywhere, loud music, dancing like I wasn't trying to win a custody battle while surrounded by three hunky men. Did she think I was... I took a deep breath to calm myself and felt Silas's hand rest on my lower back.

“You'll have to forgive us for this impromptu party,” he said, after smoothly shaking her hand. “We met last week when we filled out the change of address forms at your office?”

Her tight smile loosened a little. He could be very disarming. “Of course, Mr. Donovan.”

“You have to call me Silas, please,” he said. “My business partners, Raylen and Jackson. They were so excited to see Harper again and of course they hadn't seen Addy in so long, that they flew in to surprise us.”

Addy hated everything to do with Mrs. Artemus, so she tugged on my elbow. “I'm going to get ready for bed. Thanks for letting me stay up late for once.”

Maybe she was innocently thanking me, maybe she really was a genius, but the ‘for once’ seemed to tip Mrs. Artemus over into fully relaxing. The guys continued charming her and trying to get her to join us, saying they'd fire up the grill again. She refused, and thanks to Silas being ruthlessly careful about putting his tools away after he worked

on something, the house didn't appear to be a deathtrap when she did a quick perusal of the downstairs. She didn't want to keep Addy up any later, so she promised to do the rest of the tour on our scheduled appointment.

After she left, I collapsed onto the couch, waving weakly when Raylen and Jax left to go to their hotel.

"I think you might have saved me there," I said to Silas, rubbing my tired eyes. I felt bad for ignoring him all night, but I couldn't make myself apologize for it. Not when he was so flippant about his own apology earlier.

"Not at all," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. It was my exhaustion that made me lean toward him. His face was serious as he looked me over. "I know you said you can't lighten up, and I get it, but really, you should try not to be so hard on yourself."

I grunted. How did he even know I second guessed everything? Was I that obvious? There, I was doing it again.

"You're doing fine, Harper," he said. "Better than fine."

I nodded and stood up. "I guess I'm on your bed," I said, feeling heat rising in my cheeks.

He shrugged, still looking at me intently. "Stay as long as you like."

I turned on my heel. "Good night," I called from halfway up the stairs. It was too dangerous to stay close to him when he somehow made me feel all warm and gooey toward him. Maybe I'd start being nicer to him, though, starting tomorrow.

Chapter 8 - Silas

I was glad when Jax and Raylen finally went back a few days later, sick of them flirting with Harper and more sick of the fact it got under my skin so badly. I read through the lasagna recipe I downloaded, looking forward to it just being us for dinner again. I was also looking forward to surprising Addy since she said it was her favorite and she hadn't had it in a while.

I had just gone ahead and secured one of the top family lawyers in Manhattan and wondered how I was going to tell Harper without starting a war. I had to make her see it was the best move since I knew the local lawyer she had just wasn't equipped, especially if Addy's other grandparents had more resources. I was only trying to even the playing field. Well, not really, I was trying to tip the scales in Harper's favor. I hated that she so clearly doubted herself because she was a natural with Addy. Easygoing but firm when necessary, and their relationship was so close it would have been a crime to rip Addy away from her to live with virtual strangers.

When they got home, I had a snack ready for Addy and she sat down at the kitchen table to start her homework like usual. Harper sat down across from her and gratefully accepted the glass of iced tea I poured for her, looking as tired as she usually did after a full day at the salon. Then, seemingly out of the blue, Addy burst into tears and ran upstairs.

"What's wrong?" I asked, alarmed.

Harper's eyes filled. "Her mother died six weeks ago, that's what's wrong." She angrily swiped at the tears that rolled down her cheeks as she rose. "Damn it, I need to act strong around her."

It took me a moment to remember how raw grief that fresh could feel, how utterly debilitating. I pushed her back down into the chair. "No way, you stay here and cry all you want. I'll go check on Addy."

I turned and left before she could play the hero, and I was only two steps out of the kitchen when I heard her break down. The sound of her sobs broke my heart, but I knew she didn't want Addy to be alone. I also knew from experience how awful it was to be alone while wrestling with the loss of your mother.

In her room, Addy sat on the floor, leaning up against her bed. Her head rested on her knees, which were drawn tightly to her chest. I sat about a foot away from her as she quietly cried, resisting the urge to pat her shoulder. It shocked me how attached I'd become to her in the short time she'd been in my life, and I only wanted the best for her. I also knew there wasn't a damn thing I could do to alleviate her pain.

After a few minutes, she sniffled and turned to look at me sideways. "Harper said your mom died, too."

I nodded, feeling the old twinge that never really went away. "My dad, too."

"It sucks," she said.

I nodded. "It really does."

"My mom said I shouldn't be sad, but I can't help it," she said, more tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes. "I don't want her to be disappointed, though."

"Oh, Addison," I said, feeling out of my depth. People used to say that sort of shit to me, all the time. They meant well, but it didn't help. "She only said that so you wouldn't let it take over your whole life. Ultimately, she wanted you to be happy, but she wouldn't be disappointed to know you're sad. Of course she knew you'd be sad."

"She hated it when I was sad, she hated when I cried after her treatments."

Harper had told me that Rowan's kidneys had failed toward the end, and I couldn't imagine how hard it would be to watch someone you loved go through that.

“I know,” I told her, finally patting her shoulder. “That’s just moms for you. Always wanting you to be happy even though they know it’s not realistic. Aunts, too,” I said, trying to remind her she wasn’t alone. She still had Harper who loved her more than the world.

Addy wiped her tears on a blue plush horse. “I’m not just sad, Silas, I’m scared I might have to live with strangers.”

If I had any qualms about hiring a new lawyer behind Harper’s back, they disappeared at that confession. “You won’t have to,” I promised rashly.

We sat there in silence for a while until Addy seemed to perk up, and Harper poked her head in the door. Her eyes were red and puffy, her cheeks blotchy, but she had a smile on her face.

“Pizza Palace after homework?” she suggested.

It was exactly the perfect thing to do, not badger Addy if she was all right. I could so plainly see how perfect Harper was as a parent, and knew she’d eventually see it herself. Especially when she was finally awarded custody.

“Oh, heck, yeah.” Addy jumped up and ran downstairs, scooting past Harper in the doorway.

I stood up and on a whim, opened my arms. Harper walked into them and I lightly rested my hands on her back.

“I’m exhausted,” she said, her voice muffled against my chest. “And not just my feet.”

I eased her onto Addy’s beanbag chair and tugged off her shoes, massaging her left foot and causing her eyes to roll back in her head.

“I can at least help with the feet,” I said. She tried to pull away, but it was a halfhearted attempt, so I kept massaging while she looked at me with dull eyes. “Stop having a mental war and just let me do this.”

She snickered, and I felt her tense leg muscles relax. Soon, her tense shoulders lowered, and I even managed to get

a soft moan when I dug my thumbs into the ball of her foot. That's when I decided to tell her about the lawyer.

She jerked her foot out of my hands the second I finished explaining, her tear-stained face going red with anger. "Absolutely not," she said. "It's too much. No way."

I shouldn't have been shocked that she was furious, but her abject refusal to accept infuriated me in return.

"Half the reason Addy was crying is because she's terrified she'll have to live with the other grandparents," I said harshly, not caring when she flinched. "Bob Wilkens isn't equipped for any custody case, let alone one that might get ugly."

"You still had no right to go behind my back," she said, putting her foot in the middle of my chest and heaving me backwards. She stood up and stepped over me to leave, but I grabbed her ankle, pissed off that she'd actually just kicked me.

She lost her balance and tumbled forward, but I caught her before she hit the floor. She landed on top of me instead, knocking the wind out of me. I still kept a firm hold on her as she scrambled to get free, all the while telling me where I could shove my fancy lawyer.

"I'll shove my fancy lawyer right into your damn court case," I said. "And you'll like it."

She punched me in the side, and I rolled her onto her back. She stared up at me, blinking as her face struggled to stay serious.

"You've got Hello Kitty stickers in your hair," she said, finally snorting a laugh.

I laughed too, realizing we'd been wrestling like kids Addy's age. "Yeah, I'm sure they look good, too," I said, staring down at her. She was still so damn pretty.

In a flash, she rolled me back over so she had the upper hand, whacking me in the chest. "They actually do," she said,

grabbing my shoulders and squeezing. “You just make me so mad I want to burn the whole world down.”

I reached for her, sliding my hand behind her neck. “You make me feel exactly the same way.”

“God da—”

I pulled her face down to mine and silenced her with the kiss I’d been thinking about since I saw her on the other side of the green and gold streamers. Hell, since long before that.

Chapter 9 - Harper

When Silas's mouth crashed into mine I forgot how mad I was at him for thinking I couldn't do anything right on my own, for using his giant bank account against me, and for making me feel guilty for not accepting his ridiculous gifts. Bob Wilkens charged two hundred bucks an hour, and I could barely afford it. How much was his highfalutin lawyer from Manhattan charging?

All of that was just gone, and all I could do was let his tongue part my lips and the years melted away. We were seventeen again, rolling around on this very floor, praying his mom wouldn't get suspicious, so we could explore each other as long as possible.

Except we weren't, and this kiss he was laying on me wasn't anything like his clumsy, impatient teenage kisses. This was strong, masterful, and yet tremulous with barely concealed control. He wanted me with as much fervor as I wanted him. The way his hands moved down my back, light yet firm, made me press against him, eager for more. *Desperate* for more. He even tasted good, like the fresh lemon slices he put in our iced tea. I ran my fingers through his hair, pulling away the stickers I'd shoved him into, then felt something I used to like very much pulsing against my lower belly.

"Well, hello," I said against his lips. "I remember you."

He groaned. "God, Harper. I mi—"

He stopped at the sound of Addy's feet thumping up the steps. I cursed first grade math for not taking longer and flung myself off him. He rolled to sit casually against the bed as I pulled my blouse down, still feeling his fingers on my back. Nothing at all to see by the time Addy burst through the doorway.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” she said. “I want to play all the games before we eat, and then again after.”

“We’ll see about after,” I told her, but hurried to get changed.

Addy was my little shield against the massive bullet I never would have been able to dodge on my own. Silas had completely made me lose my ever-loving mind. And what had he been about to say before he heard her coming upstairs? Did he miss me during our years apart? Had he thought about me even a little?

I came back to my senses at Pizza Palace, letting the drone of the big TV screens and the dings and whirs of the computerized games lull me into a near fugue state while I waited for the pizza and Silas played with Addy.

When they returned with the arrival of the pizza, I marveled at his energy, just about matching Addy’s youthful exuberance.

“Well, I mostly sit in front of a computer,” he said. “It’d be a different story if I was on my feet all day.”

I tried to picture him in a high rise Manhattan office building, with an assistant to bring him coffee. I knew he was the chief financial officer for his and his friends’ tech company, and imagined most of his employees had a similarly cushy life.

“Can you teach me how to code apps?” I asked teasingly.

He frowned. “Don’t you like your job?”

“I actually love it,” I said. Seeing that Addy was zoned in on the TV, I quietly admitted my dream of owning my own salon one day. “I thought that day might have been not too far off since my boss, Kay, is retiring next year and was giving me first dibs when she puts the building up for sale.” I lowered my voice a little. “But now with legal fees my savings is too depleted to put up the down payment.” I shrugged, feeling the familiar ache of putting my dream on hold. The pain slipped

away when I looked at Addy munching on her pizza as she giggled over the cartoons. There wasn't anything I wouldn't give up for her. "A new opportunity will come up when it's a better time," I said.

"Why not apply for a loan?" he asked.

I laughed, once again reminded how out of touch with reality he'd become in the last ten years. "No bank will give me a loan without a down payment, and besides, I don't want to do something risky like take out a big loan now that Addy's in my life."

He kept frowning, and I noticed how his hair was a little scruffy around his collar. Almost against my will I ran my fingers through it, suggesting he come to the salon the next day for a trim, on me. My hand lingered on his shoulder, and his eyes locked with mine. It was only Addy asking for the shake cheese that made me come to my senses. I let my hand slide down his chest and tried to concentrate on dinner, but found it difficult to snap out of my daze. I was certain I was just tired and started dreaming about a long, hot bubble bath if I could stay awake long enough after Addy's bedtime routine.

At home, Silas nudged me toward the master bedroom. "I'll read Addy a story and make sure she brushes her teeth. Why don't you get a bath?"

It was as if he'd been reading my thoughts, and this was one wish I was more than happy to let him grant. I eagerly filled up the small tub to the brim and soaked in the steamy suds until I was loose and relaxed in both body and mind. For that moment, everything seemed fine, and I had Silas to thank for that little reprieve.

After I got out and wrapped up in my robe, I went to check in on Addy and say goodnight if she was still awake. Silas backed out of her room and turned to me with a finger to his lips.

"Out like a light," he said in a low rumble that made my skin tingle more than the hot bath.

“Thanks,” I said. “That bath was heavenly.”

Our eyes met again, but this time he quickly looked away. “Well, good night,” he said awkwardly, edging past me in the narrow hall.

Oh, I knew what I was about to do was a mistake, but no power on earth could have stopped me from reaching out and putting my hand on his chest to stop him.

“Don’t sleep downstairs tonight,” I said.

Chapter 10 - Silas

She was like the sun, and I was nothing but a wayward planet veering off course to get closer to her heat and light. I couldn't have resisted the way her eyes searched mine, asking me for something even though her pride would never let her say the words.

And I would have given her anything. Done anything. Seconds later she was in my arms, my hands drifting down the soft fabric of her robe. Our lips collided, furious and hungry at first, but as I backed her further into the room and shut the door behind us, she pulled away and sighed.

"Don't stop," I begged, praying she wasn't coming to her senses. I briefly wondered if I should come to mine, but I was lost in her damp and freshly scrubbed beauty.

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me again, pulling her body close to mine.

"I just wanted to slow down a little," she said.

"Great idea," I agreed. Her tongue traced my lower lip, and I felt my cock jump. She smirked against my mouth, pushing against my hard length.

I reached down to get under the short bathrobe, desperate to feel her skin. She'd always been as soft as velvet. I pulled her roughly toward me when my fingers finally brushed the backs of her thighs.

The way our tongues tangled and the clean, peach scent of hers made me pull away before I picked her up and threw her onto the bed. "You're so damn beautiful," I said, trailing my finger down her jawline. "Prettier than I remember; you were always the best looking girl in town."

She rolled her eyes and grimaced. "Sure," she said, running her palms up my chest. "You sure did fill out nice, though."

I should have taken the compliment and gotten back to business. My lower half was certainly urging me to. But it didn't sit right with me that she didn't seem to believe me. I took her by the shoulders and squeezed.

“What's with your sudden lack of confidence?” I asked. “That's not like you at all. Surely you know you're still gorgeous? The way you used to prance through the halls, I constantly had my fists clenched, just waiting for some jackass to hit on you.”

She snorted. “We call that toxic masculinity now.”

I kept my grip on her shoulders. “And you know you're great with Addy. She adores you. But you walk around like you're on eggshells.” She tried to pull me down for another kiss, but I needed to erase that constant fear in her eyes. I quickly kissed her, but pulled away again. “Just talk to me for a second, Harper.”

She let her head drop back and then nodded. “You built your company from the ground up, right? You know it inside and out, left and right. But what if you just got dropped in as CEO or whatever you are and everyone expected you to know what you were doing?”

I thought about it for a second, then sighed, pulling her close. “Okay, I get it. But you've been in her life since she was born. Sure, it was as aunt and not mom, but you're smart and capable and caring. And you've probably got the equivalent of a PhD with all those books I see you reading.”

She leaned back in my arms, holding onto my shirt, her eyes traveling all over my face. I figured I ruined my chances to get further under her robe and pulled her in for a chaste hug.

“I guess we're probably done for tonight, huh?” I asked, breathing in her shampoo scent to further torture myself.

Her fingers slid up my chest to wrap around the back of my neck. She tugged my head down with a devilish smile on her face.

“Are you kidding me? That little speech of yours was hotter than softcore mailman porn.”

I laughed as I dipped to taste the skin below her ear. “Mailmen? That’s what does it for you these days?” My fingers found their way back down to the hem of her robe to curl into her soft flesh.

She moaned and pressed against me, grinding against my stiff shaft. “They perform a valuable service. And those mid-length shorts...”

She gasped when I cupped her ass cheeks and lifted her, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Well, I have a package that needs your signature,” I said.

We both burst out laughing, and I really thought there might be something wrong with my heart, it felt so full. The two years before my parents died had been the happiest of my life, and that was all down to being hopelessly in love with Harper. The times we laughed like this as we playfully roamed each other’s bodies were memories I’d had to shut out so I could concentrate on building my new life. Now they were flooding back.

I pressed her onto the bed, lying half on top of her as I studied her face. “You’re more beautiful,” I said, putting my finger over her lips. “Don’t argue with me either. I’m not a pushover like I used to be.”

“I really did have you whipped, didn’t I?” she asked, her hand moving down.

I closed my eyes, waiting for her to grip me. “We’ll see who’s whipped after this,” I warned her. “I’m much better than I used to be.”

Her hand tightened almost painfully. “Are you trying to remind me about all those mean models who hound you mercilessly into getting your picture taken with them?”

My eyes flew open to see she was teasing, and she began to gently stroke my throbbing cock. I loosened her robe to slide my hands up her smooth stomach to her breasts,

tweaking her nipple to a taut peak. “I promise I’ll win if we’re competing,” I said, moving my other hand between her thighs.

She was slick with need for me, and I pulsed in her hand. She made a soft sound as I found her swollen nub, which turned into a moan as I slid my fingers inside her wet heat.

“Okay, I don’t mind losing that bet,” she said, her eyes drifting shut.

I watched her mouth drop open and moved to kiss her, tracing her lower lip with my tongue. She tasted like cinnamon, reminding me that she never used to use mint toothpaste. She wouldn’t even eat candy canes at Christmas time. I wanted to taste her everywhere and rediscover all her flavors. I slowly kissed my way down her throat, pushing her robe fully open, then continuing trailing kisses down her chest. I licked each nipple, smiling when her fingers curled in my hair.

“Are you getting impatient?” I asked, blowing a soft breath across her tight peak.

She writhed under me and I looked up to see her nodding. “Maybe a little bit. I mean, you did talk pretty big a second ago.”

Once again, she made me laugh, and I realized how much fun this was, how it had always been fun. She also set me aflame with her eagerness, and I grabbed her hips, digging my fingers into her soft, firm flesh as I dove between her thighs. Her soft laughter ended in a gasp as I lapped the length of her slick folds, then plunged my tongue inside. Her body went stiff and then relaxed as I settled into a rhythm, with her legs over my shoulders and her hands in my hair. As she began to gyrate along with my tongue I got hungrier, her moans of pleasure driving me on. It nearly killed me when I heard the cute little high pitched grunts she made. How could everything have changed, and yet, nothing at all? I knew her like the back of my own hand and seconds later she cried out my name.

As much as my aching cock wanted to be inside her, I couldn't keep my eyes off her as I watched her come for me. She really was so very beautiful. After a few moments, as she seemed to realize I was staring at her, her eyes flew open.

“Why did you stop?”

I shook my head to clear it. “I got lost,” I admitted, rising up to pull her legs around my waist. Then I nearly short-circuited with agony as I realized my rookie mistake. “Holy shit, I don't have a condom.” How could I have seen this coming? I'd been meticulously fighting it since we moved in together.

She stifled a frustrated groan and lightly slapped my side. “You said you were better at this now.” She wrapped her fingers around my shaft and stroked, then nodded toward her dresser. “In my bag. Maybe. I think.”

I jumped up and turned her purse upside down. Finally, in a small, zippered pocket, there was a foil-wrapped square. I was seized with jealousy I had absolutely no right to feel, then just grateful the damn thing was there.

“I had a date about six months ago,” she said, her cheeks turning pink. “As you can see, it didn't work out. I hope it's still good.”

“It's still good,” I said, already rolling it on.

I pulled her up to kiss her, and she pushed me backwards onto the bed, rising up on top of me. A smile took over her face, making every cell in my body yearn for her. I grabbed her hips and she leaned onto my shoulders, her long hair brushing my cheeks. She centered herself and rubbed sinuously back and forth, teasing the tip of my cock until I thought I'd explode. I wanted her to be able to have her fun, but I was in dire need. I finally grabbed the back of her head to bring her to me for a kiss, plundering her mouth with my tongue while I pushed her neatly all the way down onto my shaft with my free hand.

She made a languorous noise against my mouth and began to move, first slow and easy, a special kind of torture. I couldn't keep my eyes off her radiant face, as she tossed her head back, or her perfect breasts as they bounced while she rode me. I could only take so much and soon flipped her onto her back, brushing the hair from her face as her head landed on the pillow.

She pulled me tight to her body and linked her legs around my waist. Her little noises began as I pushed deep inside her. The pleasure I felt was off the charts and still a drop in the bucket compared to watching her experience the bliss I was giving her. I knew if I wasn't careful that powerful urge to give her every last bit of myself would consume me, but at the moment, I didn't care. I was hers, completely.

"I can't wait much longer," I said at last.

"Any time," she told me, her eyes heavy and glazed.

I slid my hand between us to find her swollen clit and within seconds she came, those noises I loved so much close to my ear. I followed close behind, having to stifle a roar into the pillow beside her, as I slammed deep inside her one final time. I lay on top of her, panting for a second, with her fingers trailing up and down my back, before I rolled to the side and wrapped her in my arms.

"Holy fuck."

She giggled and pressed her face into my shoulder. "Isn't that what you said after the first time?"

"Was it?" I asked. "It still applies."

"I agree," she sighed, resting her cheek on my chest. "Oh, Silas."

"Don't think," I urged, never wanting the haze of ecstasy to end.

"Okay, good idea."

She kissed my shoulder and grew quiet while I stroked my fingers along her arm. As we lay there in each other's

arms, drifting off to sleep, I remembered the meeting I'd set up.

"We have the first meeting with the new lawyer at nine tomorrow," I said softly, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

She went completely stiff, then shoved away from me. "I never agreed to that," she said, fully awake again. Even in the dim light, I could see she was turning red with fury.

"Wait," I said, confused. "I thought you were over your stubbornness about this."

"And I thought you believed I was the best option for Addy."

"You are," I said, still befuddled by her anger.

"Then why should I need your fancy lawyer?"

I suppressed a groan and the urge to shake her. "Because that's how life is, Harper. Stop being naive."

"I have to work tomorrow morning," she said, rolling over and pulling the covers to her chin.

I stared at her back in dismay. "I think this is important enough to take an hour off."

She craned her head back around to glare at me. "I can't just take an hour off. I don't own my own business. I can barely make ends meet. I actually need that money I'd lose if I just took an hour off."

"Then I'll reschedule it," I said. "Tell me when."

"That's ridiculous. I'm sure that'll cost a fortune."

"I don't care about that," I huffed.

She made a tutting noise. "Of course you don't. Forget it. I'm using Bob Wilkens. And it's not stubbornness, it's what I can afford. I won't take your charity, Silas."

The way she spit out my name made my stomach turn over, nothing like the way she'd softly called it out not even a half an hour ago. How had things gone so wrong? My own

anger rose up, drowning the hurt. This woman was going to ruin her chances to give Addy the best possible life because of her pride. And the fact she still clung to that pride, especially after what we just shared, pissed me right off.

“It’s not charity,” I said, my voice dangerously close to gruff. “Consider it as helping out a friend if you want. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

She rolled over even further, now about to teeter off the side of the bed. “Maybe we were a long time ago. But it was a long time ago.”

“So, what are we now?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” she sighed, the misery in her voice plain.

Well, okay, then. I got up and pulled my shirt and boxers back on, heading downstairs to sleep on the couch. She didn’t try to stop me. I pounded on one of the especially obnoxious springs that tormented my spine and tried to get comfortable. I was pissed off, which I clung to so I could keep from feeling the sting of her rejection. One thing I knew for certain was I wasn’t going to back down on the lawyer. I’d made that foolish promise to Addy that she’d get to stay with Harper and I meant to keep it.

The fact I was so attached to that kid gave me pause, but I pushed it aside. I was only doing what was right, what I would have done for anyone in the same situation.

Chapter 11 - Harper

Unbelievably, I was disappointed that Silas never took me up on the offer of a haircut the next day. All day long as I let the clients' gossip wash over me in a far off hum, nodding at appropriate times, I wondered if I was being foolish for turning down his offer of the new lawyer. The one thing I absolutely did not think about was the amazing, toe-curling, perfect sex. I couldn't let myself remember how right it felt when his hands roamed my body or the way his eyes reached straight into my soul. Especially not after I blew it so spectacularly.

Was I hurting Addy in the long run? Despite being riddled with insecurities, I knew I was the best option for my niece. Rowan believed it, my parents never doubted me, it was only me who kept thinking I was screwing up at every turn. I'd had a long talk with Kay that morning and she assured me that even after having four kids of her own, who among them had six kids, she still felt like she was making the wrong decisions sometimes. She said her kids admitted it to her as well. Supposedly it came with the territory, and while it sure sucked, it must prove I was really a parent now. And if I wanted to stay that way, I had to put aside my pride.

As I finished up my last client, I decided I'd hear what the new lawyer had to say at least. After all, she'd come all the way from New York. While I was waiting in the pick-up line for Addy, I got a call from Bob Wilkens and my stomach sank, hoping the other grandparents hadn't come up with something new for me to worry about.

"Hey Bob," I said with a forced cheer.

"Hey there, Harper." He took a deep breath and let it out. I braced myself. "Listen, some hotshot lawyer came in to talk to me today about your case."

"I'm sorry about that," I said, my sinking feeling turning to cold fury. "I'm not switching lawyers. Silas had no

—”

“Listen,” Bob interrupted. “You should go with the hotshot. She’s the best in her field and made some good points. I’m always here for you if you need to take someone to small claims court, but we both know this custody battle is above my pay grade.”

“Bob...” I felt backed into a corner. I had promised myself I would talk to the new lawyer as long as she was in town and then make my own decision. That was all. I refused to let Silas force my hand.

“No, Harper, I don’t want to mess with your chances of keeping Addison.”

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t be stubborn about this one,” he said, ending the call.

Bob had been three years ahead of us in high school. He was a jovial man who was popular in town, always showing up to fun runs and other charity events, helping out at all the civic clubs. He was no litigation shark and had even admitted to me the last case he had that went to court was over a tree branch that fell onto a fence. By the time I was at the top of the line and Addy pulled open the passenger door, I knew my pride had taken over again and I was gearing up to refuse the new lawyer solely because Silas went behind my back.

I was definitely going to let him have it, but I needed to accept the lawyer, for Addy’s sake. She chattered away about how there had been a fire drill that afternoon, always a nice break to the monotony, and I knew my heart couldn’t stand it if I lost her on top of losing Rowan.

I suppressed a sigh, thinking about my lifelong dream of owning my own salon getting pushed further out of reach. The only way I could accept letting this new lawyer take our case would be if I paid Silas back. Even if it took ten years, I would do it. My chest constricted a little at the thought of such a debt, especially when Silas and I were on such uneven

footing. When I glanced over and saw Addy trying to get a head start on her math homework, with her little shoulders bent over the pages strewn on her lap, the band around my chest eased. She was worth it, and more. Whatever it took, I'd make sure she had a happy, secure life.

When we got back to Silas's place, she bounded toward the kitchen for her snack and to finish up her math. I followed her, knowing I had to face Silas eventually. He had an orange cut up alongside one of the bakery's fancy cookies waiting for Addy, and held out a plate with another of the cookies for me, all with a sheepish look on his face.

Addy looked over his head and I followed her gaze to see he stood under a taped together, printed out banner that read "Please Don't Kill Me." There was a big bouquet of wildflowers in the middle of the kitchen table.

My heart was dangerously close to melting, but I just shook my head. "You pick those yourself?" I asked, nodding at the flowers.

He rolled his eyes. "Would it help if I did?"

Addy dug into her cookie. "Why does Silas think you're going to kill him?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I said, accepting the plate he was still holding out. The stirrings of a smile managed to sneak past my better judgment. "He's not right in the head."

"What?" he asked incredulously, sitting down beside Addy and looking over her homework. "I have to disagree on that."

"Yeah, I think he's all right," Addy said.

I sat down across from them and bit into my cookie, concentrating on the sweet frosting and not how much I liked the little configuration we made in that cozy kitchen. How nice it would be if it could last. Or really, if it could just begin. I nodded to Silas and let myself fully smile.

“I guess you’re right,” I agreed. “I probably won’t kill him today.”

Chapter 12 - Harper

I dug through the sale rack at Luna's sister's boutique, not sure which of the dresses would be best for the charity event I was going to with Silas. It was time to do my part and make him seem grounded and responsible to the big, conservative company he wanted an account with. Since Silas was actually very grounded and responsible, despite those gorgeous women draped all over him in those pictures, I didn't have any problem with our little deception. He'd been going to all of the meetings with our social worker after all, and while we never came right out and said we were in a relationship, the way he acted told enough of a story to Mrs. Artemus, who thought he was just the bee's knees.

I held up a dark blue dress for Luna to give me her opinion, all the while thinking of those women in the pictures with Silas. All of them head to toe in the latest designer items, while I was trying to convince myself this sale dress was going to be good enough for a Manhattan gala.

I'd been to Roanoke many times and of course, Virginia Beach back when spring break was something we celebrated, but this was the big apple. I knew the clearance dress in my hands wasn't going to cut it, but even at forty percent off it was still over a hundred dollars. That was a lot of tips.

Luna bit her lip and wrinkled her nose, a clear sign she was trying to be diplomatic. Her sister Lynette came over with a dress that had been prominently displayed in the center of the shop and held it up in front of me.

"Stunning," she said. "You have to try this one on."

I looked down at the tag, and she swept it inside her palm, hiding it. Which meant it was going to make me pass out. I pulled out a black mid-length dress from the sale rack.

"This one's pretty," I said.

“It is,” Lynette agreed. “For a funeral or a job interview at a funeral home. And it’s from last season.”

“And it would cover up your curves,” Luna added unhelpfully.

They weren’t wrong; the dress Lynette wanted me to try on was dreamy. All floaty layers of cream silk with subtle beading on the deep neckline. I managed to wrestle the price tag out of her hand and gagged. I pulled the dark blue and black dresses off the rack and headed to the fitting room.

“Wait,” Lynette called.

“Just hear her out,” Luna said.

I sighed, gearing up to argue with them, knowing they were going to offer to chip in or Lynette was going to take a loss or something equally ridiculous. I really didn’t want to cry over what great friends I had, and then feel bad about myself for being a statewide charity case. I decided to ignore them and turned toward the dressing room again.

“Silas came in earlier and left his credit card info,” Lynette blurted. “He made me promise to get you to treat yourself and said since you were doing him such a huge favor by going to this thing it was only fair he paid for the dress.”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that. My heart did a little flip, which I squashed, all while staring at that beautiful cream dress and trying not to drool. Lynette tossed Luna the dress and turned and pulled three more, each one more of a fantasy than the next.

“Just try them on,” Luna urged. She pulled a red one that was just her bright and cheery style. “I’ll try one on, too, for fun.”

“He made me swear you’d get the perfect dress,” Lynette said. “I mean, you want to properly represent Loblolly, right?”

“Oh my God, you have to let them know we’re not all wearing overalls all the time,” Luna said.

I let them cajole me into at least trying them on. “You know, it’s really him that’s doing us the favor,” I said, shimmying the beaded dress over my head. It slid down in a perfect cascade, fitting like it was made for me. “He’s letting Addy come with us, and he hired a babysitter to take her to a Broadway play while we’re at the event. And he’s taking us to the natural history museum before we come back. Addy is so hyped—” I stopped when I saw them looking at me with funny grins on their faces. “What?”

They shared a sisterly look. “He sure got hotter since high school,” Luna said.

Lynette, who was four years older and didn’t even go with any of us, nodded appreciatively. “And he was pretty hot back then. I looked up his company, it’s impressive what he’s done.”

“I think he must be filthy stinking rich, since he never once stops to think about money,” I said, maybe with a trace of bitterness.

“Well, then, let him not think about spending it here,” Lynette said, bringing me shoes that matched the cream dress.

“I guess it would be helping the local economy,” I said, kicking off my comfortable work sneakers.

We laughed and Luna and I tried on a few more dresses while Lynette helped her other customers. After trying on half the store, I decided to go with the original cream wonder, along with the matching, strappy heels. Luna dragged me over to the jewelry section and we started piling on gold bracelets, giddy under the shopping influence.

“You’re so lucky you two reconnected like that,” Luna said, turning her face to the side to admire some big hoop earrings in the mirror. “It’s so romantic.”

I couldn’t stand lying to her and lowered my voice so none of the gossipy ladies who were shopping would overhear. “He’s just helping me out while I get the custody thing sorted out. With rent and making me look more settled. I’m doing the

same for him, pretending to be his fiancée for..." I paused, my cheeks burning as she gaped at me. "For mutual benefit."

She looked me up and down and my cheeks nearly caught fire. "Mutual benefit, huh? You're telling me you've been living in that tiny house with him all this time and nothing's going on between you two?"

She knew me way too well. "We slept together once."

She cackled gleefully. "I knew it. You two couldn't keep your hands off each other back in the day. It was only a matter of time—"

"It was a huge mistake," I said, cutting off her happiness. "It won't happen again. How can it? He'll be going back to New York as soon as he's done working on the house. I'm happy to go for a few days, but I certainly don't want to move there."

She kept looking at me as if she didn't believe me, and I started that pesky wishful thinking again. Sure it would be great if what we were pretending was real, but it wasn't and it would serve me well not to forget that. I moved to the other side of the jewelry counter to get out from under her gaze and held up a dainty gold necklace, changing the subject back to my outfit. Since she was such a good friend, she wisely let it go.

I ended up getting the cream dress, the high heel sandals, new underwear because Lynette made it seem like it was a crime to wear my Target undies with such a dress, and a set of subtle jewelry that wouldn't distract from the beading on the neckline. Lynette glowed at the huge purchase, which erased any guilt I might have had for accepting Silas's generosity.

On the way to pick up Addison, I was still buzzing from shopping endorphins, and began to wonder why things couldn't be real with Silas. We had been magical back in high school, and yes, he had broken my heart, but maybe he was the one to repair it again. What could it hurt to give it a shot?

I knew from past experience, it could hurt a lot. But weren't we both different people now? No matter how much I pushed it out of my mind every time I remembered our tryst the other night, I couldn't lie to myself and pretend I didn't want more of that. Addy adored him to the point it was almost annoying, and he was great with her.

Was I going to really try to make our fake relationship real? I pulled into the lineup, not at the very end for once, and decided I was. I went back and forth the whole drive home, finally deciding he was for sure going to be sleeping in the bedroom with me again by the time we pulled into the drive. If we hadn't been leaving for New York the next morning, I'd have arranged for Addy to spend the night with my parents. Well, we could be quiet.

My excitement fizzled when Addy brought me a note she found on the kitchen table.

I had to fly out early, but I'll get you two at the airport tomorrow. There's lasagna in the fridge, just bake it for forty minutes or until the cheese is bubbling.

I crumpled the note and went to fix Addy her snack, scowling at the lasagna. I had to force my face to relax so Addy wouldn't ask me what was wrong. And really, what was wrong? I couldn't fault him for having to fly back early, and he'd even made us dinner before he left. I didn't understand my sudden bad mood at all.

It couldn't be that I missed him or that the disappointment of not getting to sleep with him again was like a hammer blow. The very fact I felt that way reminded me how dangerous Silas was to my well-being, and the fact he raced off to New York like that reminded me of how impossible a real relationship with him was. This was a wake-up call. Fate had helped me dodge this new bullet that surely would have killed me in the long run.

Chapter 13 - Silas

I loved watching Addison peer out the car windows as my driver made his way through the Manhattan traffic, and even Harper couldn't keep up her faux worldly facade for long when we drove through Times Square. I had the driver take a circuitous route from the airport to my apartment so they could see some of the sights. I only wished Harper had let me make the visit a little longer so I could really show off, but she refused to miss work or let Addy take even one day off school. It foiled my plans to take them to see the Statue of Liberty, but I admired her resolve.

In my apartment, Addy took off running through the large, airy rooms, oohing and ahing at the views. I introduced her and Harper to the babysitter I hired from a prestigious agency, and Liza took Addy to check out her room and get to know her before she took her to the show tonight.

"This place is nice," Harper said, pausing at the big bank of windows to ogle Central Park.

She was trying to play it cool, but I was gratified to see she was impressed. The fact I still wanted to impress her made me inwardly laugh at myself. I never cared about that sort of thing and often wished the women I dated would see me for myself rather than what I owned.

I showed her the kitchen and told her to make herself at home, then guided her toward the bedrooms. As we stood awkwardly in the doorway of Addy's room, she and Liza seemed to be getting along well, so I showed Harper where she could get ready, since we didn't have much time before the gala.

"Is this your room?" she asked, poking her head into the bathroom and raising her eyebrows.

I had a moment of panic. Did she want to stay in my room? Did I want her to? Of course I did, but we'd been

meticulously pretending we hadn't fallen into bed together that one time, so I assumed she wouldn't.

"It's a guest room," I finally admitted, studying her reaction as if the fate of the world rested on it.

Her eyebrows went up again. "This place is huge. Two guest rooms?"

"Four," I corrected, still trying to figure out if she was disappointed this wasn't my room. She seemed completely neutral, and I had a stab of disappointment. But then I remembered the clock was ticking down to a very important night for my company. "Er, we have to leave in about an hour." I started reeling off some talking points about Chotech, stopping when she laughed.

"If you're not careful, you'll scare me into not being able to speak," she said.

"You're right," I told her. "Don't worry about a thing."

"Even though you're clearly terrified." She put her hands on my shoulders. "Take a breath."

I did as she told me, lost in her twinkling eyes. She was making fun of me, but being deadly serious at the same time. Only she could do that, since she knew me so well.

"I promise I'll do my best," she said, patting my chest. "Go get even more handsome."

I glowed at the compliment, a rarity from her. "I swear I'm not worried. Just have a good time tonight. That's all I care about." Oddly, this was true. "It is a big account, though, and I really do want it."

She smiled. "I like to see that old fire. There were so many things you didn't care about, but when you did want something, you got so focused on getting it, never giving up until it was yours." Her eyes dropped. "You used to be that way about me."

For the life of me, I couldn't tell what she meant by that, or what she was feeling. I only knew we didn't have time

for it right now. I kissed her hand and told her I'd meet her by the front door. Then I turned, fumbling in my pocket.

"I almost forgot," I said, not meeting her eyes. I snapped open the small box to reveal the engagement ring she needed to wear to seal the deal. "Your fake ring."

"I may be a bumpkin, but I can tell that's not fake."

I felt my cheeks burning, not wanting to admit how carefully I'd picked it out, hoping she'd like it. "Yeah, well, they'd recognize it too," I said. "So don't lose it."

I was teasing, but she went pale, refusing to take the box from me. I assured her it was fine. The look on her face, when I grabbed her hand and slid it on the proper finger, gave me a yearning I couldn't explain. It had to be nerves, and the fact we were going to be late if I kept staring at her. I finally fled to get ready before I forgot altogether that millions of dollars were hanging in the balance.

I forgot everything when I saw her a little while later. So far, I'd only seen her in her old prom dress and the comfortable, casual clothes she wore to the salon. Now she was stunning in a sleek dress that tastefully hugged every curve. Her skin glowed and her eyes were bright, her glossy hair falling in soft waves around her shoulders. She took my breath away as well as stealing my ability to think. I couldn't help but adjust the strap that didn't need straightening, just to be able to brush my hand against her shoulder. I knew she didn't believe me when I told her she was more beautiful now than she was at eighteen, but it was true.

In the car on the way to the event, she gave me a pep talk, telling me not to worry.

"I've got this. I won't let you down," she said, straightening my tie, which I knew wasn't crooked. Her fingers lingered near my neck and I huffed a sigh of discontent as the car pulled up to the entrance, wishing we had time to go around the block a few times just so I could stay in close quarters with her longer.

“I know you won’t,” I told her.

And she didn’t. The CEO’s wife adored her the minute she learned about Addison, since her granddaughter was also seven. They had their noses together, chatting away during the entire droning presentation before dinner.

“This must have been a whirlwind romance to get engaged so quickly,” the CEO said when the presentation ended and the salads arrived.

“We were actually high school sweethearts,” Harper said. “Silas was my first love, and when we reconnected at our reunion, it was like no time had passed at all. We knew there was no reason to wait.”

Mr. Cho nodded and his wife nearly swooned. “And now he’s your last love,” she said, beaming at her husband. “Isn’t that precious, darling?”

“It is. There’s nothing more important than family,” he agreed.

He then began telling me about what he envisioned for making his company more interconnected via different applications, and while Raylen was our app whiz, I could hold my own enough to be able to assure him we could cover his needs.

Even being distracted every time Harper laughed, I felt like I was killing it and was fairly secure that the contract would be ours after this. All thanks to Harper. I should have felt completely victorious, but instead I felt a little bit empty, knowing it was all fake. My eyes kept straying to her, and she finally looked over and smiled at me. I smiled back, full of gratitude, but also something more I couldn’t quite understand. I just knew that I should have been a lot happier than I was.

Chapter 14 - Harper

“Did you hear Mrs. Cho inviting us up to their Connecticut house?” I crowed as Silas’s driver slowly wound his way through the congested traffic, even well past eleven at night.

I was riding high on my success. The fact I was in the back of a car that had a driver, with the lights of New York City sparkling in through the darkly tinted windows, would have been enough to account for my good mood, but knowing I’d all but clinched the deal for Silas made me giddy.

“We’re practically best friends now,” I sighed, leaning back against the plush leather seat. “You have to admit, I did great.”

He beamed at me. “You were amazing,” he said. “Better than amazing.”

Now that I had his praise, I magnanimously waved it off. The giant sparkler on my left hand caught my eye, and I rolled it around my finger, coming down a little when I remembered that none of this was real.

“I’m glad you got what you wanted,” I said, a little less perky than a few seconds before.

He tipped my chin up to look at him, and the look in his eyes matched how I felt all of a sudden. “I’m not one hundred percent certain I did get what I wanted,” he said, leaning close.

I was drawn to him and when he kissed me, I leaned closer, parting my lips to the gentle swipe of his tongue. His hands rested softly at my waist, then the kiss began to deepen, and I curled my fingers into the heavy fabric of his expensive white shirt. The car eased to a stop and I blinked my eyes open to see we were in front of his apartment building. He got out and opened the door for me, and I kept fiddling with the ring, trying to see it as a symbol of exactly what we didn’t have

together. I needed to keep my wits about me, because having a driver, an apartment with four guest rooms and the world's most expensive views, this huge, glittering ring on my finger, Silas looking better than any iteration of James Bond—none of it was my life. None of it could be mine forever.

We were silent as we stood on opposite sides of the private elevator up to his floor, which told me he must be thinking along the same lines as I was. I checked in on Addison, who was fast asleep with her playbill on the bedside table, while Silas saw the nanny out. I worried about the college age girl being out on the big city streets alone at night for a moment, but heard him tell her his driver would take her home. Of course, he thought of everything.

He caught up with me in the hallway, as I was trying to remember which door was mine. The way he smiled down at me reduced the defenses I built up in the elevator to nearly zero.

“Do you want some tea or coffee?” he asked. “I can make you some waffles.”

“Waffles?” I echoed, unable to make a move out of his orbit.

He shrugged, reaching out for my hand. “Or anything you want. I just don't want the night to end yet. I'm too happy. You're my lucky charm.”

And just like that, my wits flew the coop. Defenses smashed. I launched myself at him, my hands linking behind his neck as our lips collided.

He wrapped his arms around my back and lifted me off my feet as our tongues tangled. He carried me down the hallway to the last door, flinging it open to reveal a massive bedroom in dark wood tones with pale beige and gray bedding. Inside the room, he kicked the door shut behind us and loosened his grip on me. I slid down the length of his hard body and melted against his chest, holding onto his shoulders. The crisp cotton of his shirt brushed my cheek, and I pressed

closer to hear his heartbeat play a drum solo against my ear. My heart must have been beating just as fast, faster when his hands slid down my sides to slowly lift the hem of my dress until his palms rested on my bare thighs.

I took in a breath, filling my nostrils with his heady cologne, a hint of lime and sea spray, mixed with the whiskey shot he'd taken with Mr. Cho shortly before we left the gala.

“You're not drunk, are you?” I asked.

“Not even a little bit,” he answered, his hands moving my dress higher until he gripped my hips. His thumbs hooked into the sides of my panties and he pulled, making me moan at the pressure against my aching need.

“Okay, good,” I said, pushing him backwards toward the bed.

We crashed onto it with a soft laugh, which was soon stifled by a fresh round of kisses. He soon veered off from my lips to work his way down my throat to the low neckline of my dress, pushing the straps off my shoulders as he went. Pretty soon my dress was more of a belt as he smashed the top part down and pulled the bottom part up. The way he was making me feel with his mouth and hands, I wasn't giving the dress a single thought. I did want it all the way off, though, so when his fingers finally made their way between my thighs, I pushed him away just long enough to wriggle out of it completely, tossing it aside.

He paused for a moment to peruse me in my strapless bra and panties, both very pretty and very expensive. Both a gift from him. I got a delicious shiver as his eyes roamed my body with a predatory gleam. He ran his fingertip along the top edge of the panties, his eyes moving lower.

“You actually paid for those,” I said, then giggled nervously. It was a little disconcerting the way he was eyeing me like a steak dinner. That, and exhilarating. I wanted him to start his meal already.

“Did I?” he asked, his eyes skating up to meet mine. His lips curled devilishly as he wrapped his hands around each side of the delicate lace fabric. With one quick movement, they were torn in two. “Then I guess it’s okay to do that.”

His fingers slid into my wet heat and all I could do was moan in answer. It was impossible to admit I hadn’t been wanting this since the last time. He was always on my mind. I leaned down to kiss along the length of his neck, savoring his taste and scent, and the way his cock throbbed beneath me. His fingers worked their magic until I was gasping against his shoulder and all but begging for more.

“Please,” I whispered near his ear, the plea finally slipping out.

His smug chuckle did nothing to dampen my desire, and he kept teasing me with his fingers while smiling up at me. My breath was now coming in short pants, and I writhed under his touch.

“You know what I want,” he said, our eyes locking.

I shuddered and clamped my teeth down on my lower lip so I wouldn’t call out too loudly as the waves of pleasure washed over me, making me go limp against him. I weakly kissed his shoulder as he kept gently stroking me while I pulsed against his hand.

“That?” I asked, still breathless from that fierce orgasm he gave me.

“Exactly that,” he said.

With me still boneless on top of him, he reached to fumble in his bedside table drawer. I turned to see him pull out a long strip of condoms. Of course, we were on his territory now. He’d have to be prepared for all those gorgeous socialites and models who couldn’t seem to get enough of him. Jealousy tore through me, almost strong enough to propel me right off of him and out the door. When he gripped my hips and lifted me, effortlessly switching our positions, I figured I’d stay a little longer. When he started kissing me again, I completely

forgot everything but the feel of his firm lips against mine, and the way his tongue quested inside my mouth.

He nudged my legs apart with his knees, and I eagerly spread them, wrapping them around his hips as he lowered himself to my needy core. I glanced down to see he'd somehow managed to get the condom on while kissing me senseless and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, clinging to him as if he were my life raft in a sea of pleasure.

He was teasing me again, and I'd had enough. I squeezed my legs around him, simultaneously pushing on his chest so I could look into his eyes. Arching against him, I ran my nails down his chest to wrap my hand around his thick, pulsing shaft.

"I need you, Silas," I said, trapping him with my gaze and reveling in the power I felt when he groaned, long and loud. "Stop torturing yourself and get that big cock inside me."

His eyebrows flew up and he barked a laugh at my naughty talk, certainly much different than what he remembered of me. He instantly turned serious again when I gave him a final rough stroke and guided him to my opening.

"Oh my God, I need you too," he said, voice ragged. "So much."

Finally, he buried himself deep inside me. It was hard and fast and furious, and I came again within seconds, riding the waves as I kept holding onto him for dear life. He dropped his face to my shoulder, gasping out something I couldn't make out, then drove one last time with a growl of satisfaction. I pulled him close to me as he slowly revived, getting a rash of goosebumps when he rolled to the side. He smoothed them away and pulled the blankets over us, snuggling me into the crook of his arm.

"We're pretty good together," he said, trailing a finger along my side and bringing the goosebumps back. "Not just this, either."

I knew he meant the success with Chotech at the gala, and kept my mind from wandering to anything else. He dropped a kiss on my forehead and when I looked up at him and saw him smiling at me, I decided it was enough to just be happy right then. Happiness was something I barely remembered and good moments were few and far between during the last year of Rowan's life. I wanted to savor this and not think about tomorrow. I felt my eyes drifting shut as he continued to run his fingertips up and down my arm.

"I should get back to my room," I murmured, tipping my head up so he could kiss my lips.

"Just stay a few minutes more," he said. "I don't want to let you go yet."

I sighed and let myself relax completely against his comfortingly strong body and closed my eyes. "Just a few more minutes," I agreed, letting the steady beat of his heart lull me further into a cocoon of nearly perfect bliss. "Then I'll get up."

The next thing I knew, Addison's sing-song voice was waking me, which was already odd because I always woke up before her.

"Get up, get up, today is the museum!"

That's when my eyes flew open to see Silas staring back at me in horror. I was in Silas's apartment, in Silas's bed, and Addy was heading into the room to wake us up. We hurriedly rolled apart as she burst through his bedroom doors.

"Museum!" she said. "Can we feed pigeons in the park, too?"

"Sure thing," I said, frozen. I was stark naked under the luxurious sheets, so I couldn't get up. I lay there clutching the covers to my chin and trying not to explode into flames. "Why don't you go get ready?"

She twirled in a circle. "I am ready." She didn't add a *duh*, which I'd been getting on her about lately, so despite my

horror, I felt a little proud. She was indeed fully dressed. Unlike Silas and me.

Silas pulled his phone off his bedside table to check the time. I saw it was a little after nine, incredibly late if this were real life.

“Hey, Addy. Go see if the cook’s here yet and if so, she’ll make you anything you want for breakfast. If not, you can dial double zero on the wall phone and the concierge will send you up some donuts or bagels from the coffee shop.”

Her mouth dropped open at such decadence and she took off. I let out the breath I was holding and went limp.

“That was a close call,” I said. “I can’t believe she saw us like this.”

“She didn’t seem shocked or anything,” he said. “We were both covered. We both wake up before she does, maybe she thinks we’ve been sleeping in the same room this whole time.”

“No way,” I said, getting up and finding his plush robe so I could get back to my guest room without having to put on last night’s dress and making a ten foot walk of shame. The torn remnants of my panties on the floor made me feel warm and gooey all over again, and I mentally shook myself. “She’d have noticed the sheets on the couch. We need to be more careful. In fact—”

“Okay,” he interrupted before I could say it couldn’t happen again. I didn’t know if it was by design that he didn’t want to hear me say it, and I was glad the words didn’t have to come out.

The engagement ring caught on one of the terry cloth loops of his robe, and I realized I never took it off, let alone gave it back to him. I wrenched it off and all but threw it at him. He turned it over, making the brilliant diamond sparkle in the sunlight coming through his windows. For a split second, I thought he was going to ask me to keep it, like it was nothing more than the costume jewelry I stupidly let him buy me from

Lynette's shop. I couldn't handle that and scooped up my discarded dress so I could get out. By the time I reached his doorway, I heard the shower running behind me and took off before I turned around to join him.

I should have said it out loud. This couldn't happen again. This was a mistake. Why did he have to be so irresistible, though? I didn't know how I was going to get through spending a fun day at the museum with him without chucking something at him. Or more dangerous, falling hopelessly back in love with him.

Chapter 15 - Silas

On the Sunday after we arrived back in Loblolly from New York, we went to the old Dante Cinema, which only showed movies on the weekend. It was playing an animated film from several years ago, that I was sure Addy had streamed a dozen times in her life, but she was still excited about the popcorn and nachos. I had been hoping that sitting next to each other in a dark theater would get Harper to come out of the shell she pulled herself into after Addy caught us in bed together. I figured our hands would brush together in the popcorn bucket, I could nudge her knee with mine the way I did when we were teenagers. Maybe I could sneak in a kiss or put my arm around her.

But she very obviously settled Addy between us, and ordered individual sized popcorn. I tried to give her a meaningful look, wanting desperately to talk about us, even just to put forth the notion that there could be an us again. I finally gave up when she made a point to greet every single person who sat down anywhere close to us, all while ignoring me.

“Why is this place only open on the weekends now?” I asked, looking around the old theater.

It was built in the forties and had that old-fashioned grandeur, with balconies that no one was allowed to sit in anymore, a red velvet curtain that still swept open to reveal the modern screen, and curving, amphitheater style seating. I remembered it being much grander, but it was probably always this run down, something that made me inexplicably sad.

“There’s a big multiplex that serves real food and has reclining seats about twenty minutes away now, so people stopped coming here,” Harper said, looking up at the high, domed ceiling with the remnants of a mural of the sky. “Kind of a shame.”

On Monday morning we had a video meeting with the new lawyer to go over everything and once I introduced them, I left the kitchen so they could speak in private. I heard Harper laugh once during the consultation, so I stopped sanding the same spot of baseboard by the kitchen door and moved further down the hall so she wouldn't know I was snooping. When she came out, she was smiling and seemed confident in the upcoming first court date to determine if the other grandparents would get visitation. I suggested we get an early lunch since I didn't have a meeting until later in the afternoon, but she hurried off to work, so I still didn't get to really talk to her.

The rest of the week passed peacefully, meaning we didn't get into any squabbles, and I managed to get the hallway baseboards ready for sanding and the old linoleum pulled up. Unfortunately, it was just concrete and not some fantastic old hardwood underneath, but Harper showed me some examples of different finished concrete that looked almost like marble, so I started researching that. I made frequent trips to the hardware store, which always took much longer than necessary because I'd always get to talking with Jack Simpone, the same guy I used to work part time for after school. He'd seemed impossibly old back then, but he was only in his early forties, which didn't seem old at all to me now. We got along great now that I wasn't a teenage part-timer who was often late because I was always trying to get a few more minutes with Harper.

Our next visit with the social worker went well. Mrs. Artemus was doing some bathroom remodeling in her own home so we ended up talking about tile for half the meeting and, for the first time, Harper didn't have her shoulders up around her ears. She didn't flinch when I put my arm around her as we waved Mrs. Artemus to her car, and for about four seconds, she rested against me after the social worker drove off.

"I have to get back to work," she said, pushing away and refusing to meet my eye.

I wanted more than anything to force the issue, make her talk to me about things that were deeper than what we'd be eating for dinner. Then I noticed one of my mom's ancient rose bushes, which I had pruned back against advice from one of our many nosy neighbors, had a bud on it. Those rose bushes had been my mother's pride and joy, and they used to produce dozens of fiery peach and yellow blooms. I got lost in a memory and by the time I escaped the past, Harper was chugging down the road in her old, beat up car.

Jax and Raylen were getting on me about coming back to the office, but they had no real argument since I was covering everything fine from here, and I didn't admit it to them, but I didn't miss the hustle of the city at all. I'd even started drinking my morning coffee out on the porch so I could wave at the neighbors as they started up their own days. Javier Orlen admitted he was wrong about the pruning schedule when he saw the roses really start to pop off, and Mrs. Dunston always stopped to let me pet her dog and catch me up on her grandchildren's college applications. The only two things that darkened my mood were the guilt that bloomed faster than the roses whenever I drove past the cemetery and couldn't make myself turn in, and the fact that the other grandparents were granted monthly visitation.

At the courthouse, they were polite but reserved. They didn't try to hug Addison, which I took less as being standoffish and more of being respectful of her feelings. Their smiles didn't meet their eyes, though, and when the day she was supposed to go rolled around, we were all on edge.

We sat at the kitchen table with uneaten brownies in front of us. It was a Friday so Addy didn't have any homework, but she listlessly colored in a Pokémon cartoon printout. We all jumped when Harper's phone dinged. She looked at me with hollow eyes as she pulled it out of her pocket, then read the message aloud in a falsely chipper voice.

"We're nearing town. Please have Addison ready in about ten minutes." She smiled at Addy. "Do you have your backpack all ready?"

She was going to be gone until Sunday afternoon, but had balked at packing, in denial that she really had to spend two nights away from Harper, and not be with her real grandparents or Luna's mom. The other grandparents were strangers to her, probably the worst villains in her young mind.

"I bet you have a ton of fun," I said, way too forcefully.

"Yes, I think Delia said something about them having a zoo near them," Harper said. "Go on and grab your stuff."

To my shock, Addy let out a scream to rival a banshee and threw herself onto the ground. I had never seen her like that before, kicking the table leg while the scream seemed to never end. A glance at Harper showed she was just as shocked, and tears filled her eyes.

"Addy," she said, pushing away and looking under the table at her. "Come on, hon."

The screaming got louder, and she kicked hard enough to shake off one of the dessert plates, the brownie on it crumbling on the floor.

"Stop!" I shouted.

Addy was shocked into silence by my bellow, and I hurriedly dropped to my knees beside her.

"I'm sorry I yelled," I told her as she stared at me in dismay. "But you need to listen. I get what you're doing, okay? You think if you act horrible enough, they won't want you. But what will really happen is they'll think Harper's doing a bad job."

I heard Harper groan softly behind me, and Addy's eyebrows shot together. "Harper's doing a great job," she snapped indignantly. "I only want to live with her, not those stinky other grandparents."

"I know," I said. "And that's what we're working toward. But in the meantime, you have to be your sweet, normal, polite self."

“Fine,” she said, sitting up and crossing her arms over her chest. “But I won’t eat their food, so I’ll need snacks in my bag.”

“Oh my gosh,” Harper said, reaching down to pull Addy up off the floor, as she glared at me. “This is from reading all those Greek myths to her. Addy, you can’t compare visiting your grandparents with Hades, okay?”

“I bet it’s worse,” she said. But she was resigned to going and traipsed upstairs to get her things.

Once Addy was out of the kitchen, Harper shook her head at me. “I think you might have been a little too honest with her.”

“We should always be completely honest with her,” I said.

One of her eyebrows shot up. “*We?*”

There was no fight at all behind the question. I could tell she was scared half to death to give up Addy even for the weekend, seeing it as the thread that could unravel the whole sweater. She kept looking at me though, as if she wanted an answer. I got flustered, not sure I should admit I just said it without thinking, and not sure that was really true. I did view us as a unit of sorts. A strange one with no rules, rhyme, or reason. Maybe I was getting too close, but it was only human to care about a little kid’s welfare. Thankfully Addy returned with her backpack over her shoulders so I didn’t have to answer.

Delia and Landon were as polite as they were at the courthouse, their smiles just as stiff. I tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, as it had to be strange for them as well. But it wouldn’t have been strange at all if they’d been in Addy’s life from the beginning, so I couldn’t dredge up much compassion for them.

Harper sighed as they rounded the corner in their dark Mercedes, and I could hear her swallow back her misery.

“They’ve got a lot more money than me,” she said.

I put my arm around her and squeezed. “It’s a lower end model.”

She snorted. “That’s oddly comforting, thanks.” She turned and leaned against me, wrapping her arms loosely around me and resting her cheek against my chest. “How am I going to get through this weekend?”

I began to rub her back, and it took all my willpower not to drop a kiss onto the top of her head. She looked up at me, her arms tightening around my waist. Finally, it seemed like the ice between us was breaking.

“I know a way to distract you,” I said

She looked up at me expectantly, our eyes locking.

Chapter 16 - Harper

I had been doing a good job the entire week since we returned from New York, keeping my distance and guarding my heart, but he was so darn sweet with Addy and his hands felt so right running comfortably up and down my back. I could definitely use a distraction from my fears of the other grandparents taking Addy to Mexico where I'd never be able to find her. I let my cheek rest against his strong chest and finally looked up at him, ready to agree to whatever he had in mind.

His lip quirked up in a smile. "We can use this time to finally tear up the living room carpet," he said.

I froze in his arms, then pushed away, searching for a way to get out of doing that dreaded chore we'd been putting off.

"Pull up the carpet?" I repeated, trying to figure out if I was disappointed that he wasn't about to carry me to the bedroom or the fact that I'd be doing hard labor the rest of the afternoon.

He was grinning now, feigning innocence, but unable to hide his glee in tricking me. "Did you have something else in mind?" he asked, tugging me toward the living room.

I grumbled, but helped him drag all the furniture out into the hall and the garage. We both stared at the old, matted beige carpet, much brighter and fluffier where the big furniture had protected it all these years. We gave each other a long look, probably hoping the other one would propose something more fun. He finally opened his shiny new toolbox and handed me a hammer, showing me how to pull up the tacks all around the edge of the carpet.

"Don't worry about dinging the baseboards, I'm going to replace them all with something taller," he said, starting on the opposite side of the room. "Mrs. Dunston down the street

showed me how she had hers redone and it kind of gives it a mid-century look that I think buyers would like.”

“You’re friends with Mrs. Dunston now?” I asked. “I thought she hated you.”

“One of her grandsons is a rowdy teenager now, and I think she finds it comforting that I stopped being such a wasted case and got my shit together. Plus her dog loves me.”

“You were never a wasted case,” I said, disgusted. “What a thing to say. You were sad.”

I paused in yanking out the sharp little tacks to look at him. He shrugged. “I don’t think I would have made it if I stayed here,” he said, scrunching his brows together. “I had to get away from all that anger I had.”

“Were you mad at me, too?” I asked in a small voice. I had pushed him back then, to the point I’d go to his house in the mornings and shout at him to get to class. I kicked him once. Not hard, and not to be mean, but he would lay there like a log, not looking at me or making any effort at all. When Rowan first died, I kind of understood him and felt bad about how I’d been so unsympathetic, but I had Addy so I couldn’t lay around like that. But if I hadn’t, I might still be lying in my old bed, staring at the ceiling and wishing the pain would stop.

“What? Hell, no. You saved me, Harper.”

“Funny way to let me know,” I muttered, turning back to the tacks. I felt his eyes boring into my back.

“Harper...”

I held up my hand, not turning to face him. “I know. I know you’re sorry and I believe you. I get it now that I’ve lost my sister. But it doesn’t change the fact that you broke my heart.” I took a deep breath and let it out in a gust. “I freaking loved you so damn much.”

“I loved you too, but my heart was gone. I had nothing to give you. And by the time I got it together, you’d moved on.”

I felt his hand on my back, and I reached around and shoved him away. Sure, I'd started dating again, mostly out of spite and desperation to forget him.

"It was a long time ago, and we're past it now."

"Are we?" he asked, still hovering behind me. "I really want us to be, if you can."

The past weeks flashed through my mind. Yes, we'd bickered, but I'd also been on edge and raring for a fight most of those times. He'd been such a help to me, and without his lawyer, the other grandparents might have been taking Addy for good instead of just the weekend.

"Just tell me you're sorry one more time," I said, finally turning to him. He looked incredulous, and I shook my head. "I'm not being a jerk, I swear. But..."

He grabbed my hand, making me drop the hammer. "I'm so sorry for leaving the way I did. You deserved so much better."

I nodded and plucked my hand out of his, my heart feeling like it had lost a hundred pounds. "Okay. We're good. Get back to work."

"That's it?" he asked. "After that heartfelt conversation, you want to get back to work?"

I gave him a long, slow look. "You have a better idea?"

The panic in his eyes was delicious, and also a little disappointing. But we couldn't leave the living room unfinished, so he got back to work. We both knew we couldn't go back in time and neither one of us wanted fresh heartache. This was better.

We worked in companionable silence for a bit, then I leaned back to stretch out my back, feeling pretty good about my progress.

"I've always loved this cute little house," I said. "I'm sure it'll go fast once it's finished."

He grunted and stretched out his own back. “Emphasis on the little. I don’t know what family will want a two bedroom house, and what single person wants to live in this tiny town?”

I was both single and a family in my own way, and would have jumped at the chance to live there permanently if I could have afforded it.

“Of course you’d think that way now that I know what kind of beast of an apartment you live in all by yourself. Most regular people are fine without four guest rooms.”

He frowned at me. “When did you become such a classist?”

“Classist?” I asked with disdain. My goodwill towards him was evaporating.

“Yes,” he continued. “You’ve been sniping at me about my money since the reunion. Everything I own is ‘fancy’ and I couldn’t possibly know what ‘regular’ people want or need.” He thumped the ratty carpet. “You know where I come from. You know nothing was handed to me. I worked my ass off for what I have. You want to see my tax returns to prove I pay my fair share, or maybe you want to approve all my charity donations?”

I was taken aback at his outrage, and it dampened my own rising heat a little. Had I really been sniping at him about his massive wealth? Now that I thought about it, I did probably tease him a little about his expensive clothes, his beautiful watch that was the price of a car, that giant apartment in Manhattan. Did I begrudge him his success?

No, that wasn’t it. I was proud of him. I only wished I’d been there for that journey. I hated that he broke my heart so badly and then went on to have such an amazing life without me. I turned back and started ruthlessly pulling up tacks again, scratching the side of my hand on one of them. I hissed in pain and anger, hating that I was getting wishful about the past. A past he ruined.

“If you’re so proud of your hard-earned money, why don’t you hire someone to do all this work? You don’t seem to have any issues throwing money at problems.”

His scowl was out in full force. “Are you still mad about the lawyer?”

I huffed. I couldn’t admit what I was really mad about, especially after I had supposedly forgiven him not a half an hour ago. “I hurt my hand on your dumb project.”

We had a minor stare down across the room, then he crawled over and took my hand, kissing the barely visible scratch.

“I’m not hiring people to do most of the work because I find it therapeutic,” he said slowly, still holding onto my hand. “I owe it to my parents to do right by the house. Don’t you remember how much my dad used to love DIY projects?”

I smiled at the memories. His parents had been kind and loving people, easily accepting me into their family. “He used to get so excited when there was a leak to fix,” I said.

I saw him retreating into his own memories and could see how much pain he was still in, probably because I had a feeling he never really faced the grief and anger from the sudden loss at such a young age. It was why I had Addy in counseling, and why I went myself. I knew how easily that kind of sadness could eat you alive.

“I went to see Rowan’s headstone the other day,” I said. “It’s really nice. I put some daisies on her grave and some roses on your parents’ graves, and noticed there were already some fresh flowers there.”

He squeezed my hand. “That was nice of you. I pay the cemetery for the upkeep. I’ve never gone myself.”

I didn’t want to nag him, but he really needed to go. “At first I thought it would be awful to see Rowan’s name on the stone,” I said. “But it’s kind of peaceful to sit and talk to her.”

He nodded and let my hand slip out of his, then went back to his section of the floor. "I'm almost done," he said.

"Me too," I answered, letting him drop it.

I couldn't fix his past, but I could keep helping him through the present as best as I could. I had let go of enough of my bitterness to admit to myself we were still friends. Or, friends again. And that's what friends did for each other.

Chapter 17 - Silas

When it was time to get Addison on Sunday, I managed to talk Harper into letting me drive. My rental car was far nicer than her old beater, and I won the argument only when she stubbornly started it up to find the air conditioning was on the fritz again. It was eighty degrees without a cloud in the sky and I could see her thinking about how wilted and sweaty she'd be when she faced the other grandparents after the nearly hour-long drive.

Pressing her lips together, she went and stood by the passenger door of my rental. I didn't say a word. Things had been lighter since our mini therapy session while we tore up the living room carpet and except for catching her gnawing on her cuticles with worry a few times, she seemed to make it through the first visitation fairly well.

The closer we got, I found I was getting as excited as Harper was to see Addy again. We pulled into the large, gated neighborhood, the kind that backed onto a golf course, with soulless, cookie cutter houses set into professionally maintained lawns. We drove past a small playground that made Harper's face blanch. I was sure she was thinking about how good a private playground might sound to a judge.

"We've got Dancy park just a block away," I said, flinching when I said 'we' again without thinking. Thankfully she was too nervous to notice.

"Stop reading my mind, it's creepy," she said, but without any bite.

Delia and Landon's house had the beige faux stone exterior instead of the brown, and their driveway was crushed shell instead of gravel. I walked with Harper to the front door.

Delia answered it with her tight smile. "Oh, hello," she said as if she was surprised to see us. "Are you early?"

“We’re right on time,” I said, using the voice I’d cultivated over the years to put new employees at ease while simultaneously brooking no argument that I was in charge.

“How are you, Delia?” Harper asked.

Delia glanced over her. “Very well, thank you.” After a long pause, she asked, “Would you like to come in?” She didn’t move out of the way, though, so we just stood there.

I was about to either barrel past her or shout for Addy when she came out, wearing a ridiculously frilly, pale purple dress, unlike anything she usually wore. She had her backpack slung over her shoulder and slithered past her grandmother to throw her arms around Harper. She gave me a quick hug and headed for the car.

“Addy,” Harper called, her cheeks turning red. “Come back here and say goodbye and thank you, properly.”

Addy turned around and robotically said goodbye and thank you. I put my hand on her shoulder before she could bolt again.

“You’re certainly welcome, Addison,” Delia said, her smile softening as she looked at Addy. It slipped when she turned to Harper. “Doesn’t she look so pretty in her new dress?”

“Oh, yes,” Harper said. “She always looks pretty.” I’d seen her look of horror when she first spotted Addy, so I knew my assessment of the dress was correct.

“She didn’t pack anything to wear to church. That’s why we went on a little shopping spree yesterday. Don’t you normally go to church?”

I could tell Harper was about to blow a gasket so I jumped in. “Our church is quite casual,” I said.

“Hmmm,” Delia answered. “Well, have a safe trip back.”

As if she’d been released from a race track holding area, Addy ran to the car. I clicked the fob and as soon as she

heard the beep, she hauled the back door open and climbed in. We said a few more awkward goodbyes and finally got back in the car.

Harper turned in her seat to look over Addy as if she might have visible welts, frowning at the outfit. It was extraordinarily hot even for a Virginia fall, and she wore thick white tights under her frilly, layered dress. With a sigh of disgust, Addy pulled them off and wadded them in a ball, tossing them to the other side of the car. I kept sneaking glances at her in the rearview mirror as I pulled out of the sprawling neighborhood. Her shoulders were rounded, and it looked like her little spirit was broken.

“How was it?” Harper asked, still leaning into the backseat.

“It was all right,” Addy answered listlessly. Harper kept dragging information out of her, trying to seem upbeat and positive about the whole thing, even the part where Addy got candy at Sunday school.

“Candy,” she said under her breath. “Did she even eat breakfast first?”

“I ate breakfast,” Addy answered, her ears like a bat’s. “Western omelet.”

Well, that was certainly a better breakfast than what we’d eaten that morning. “So, it wasn’t Hades after all?” I asked, as we neared the outskirts of town.

“I didn’t say that,” she countered. “But it wasn’t awful. They said they’d sign me up for tap dancing lessons.”

Harper’s head swiveled back around. “I didn’t know you wanted to take tap.”

“I know we can’t afford it so just never said anything.”

Harper faced forward again, not having anything to say and visibly withering. I saw her begin to gnaw on her cuticles and gently put my hand on hers, lowering it to her lap. She let out a long breath and shook her head.

I couldn't stand seeing her like that and knew she'd never in a million years let me pay for the damn lessons. Then as we passed the old costume shop, I got a burst of inspiration and did a U-turn in the middle of the street. I prayed they still carried that sort of thing as I dragged them both inside, and to my relief, they still had the small theater and dance section in the back, behind the racks of costumes.

"Get yourself some tap shoes," I said. "And ballet and jazz shoes, if you want. Better get a few costumes, too."

The kid who was working on a Sunday afternoon seemed happy just to see anyone and helped Addy find her sizes, then led her through the store, showing her the costumes.

"Can I get this one?" she called, holding up a flapper dress.

"Yep," I called back. "Hey, don't you think we should get tap shoes, too?"

"Sweet! That would be so fun," she said, beaming.

Harper finally snapped out of her daze, as she watched Addy and the salesperson rampaging through the store, tossing costumes into a basket.

"I'm not sure this is the best way to handle things," she said, rolling her eyes when I pushed a pair of tap shoes in her size into her hands. "I still can't afford lessons."

"Please let me cheer her up," I pleaded. "She just spent the weekend in Hades, after all."

Her eyes filled with tears that she quickly blinked away, then she nodded, finally trying on the shoes.

Back at home, I pulled the couch back out of the living room and showed Addy the freshly swept concrete floor.

"This is your studio now, until we get the new flooring in. Why don't you use your internet sleuthing skills to find some lessons online?"

Within minutes Addy had some instructional videos queued up. She raced upstairs and came back down in her flapper costume, the tap shoes clacking on the concrete in a very satisfying manner. At hearing it, Harper came in from the kitchen and smiled, her shoulders lowering from the tense position they'd been in all weekend.

"I think you're a natural," she said as Addy followed along with the video.

"I bet we're not," I said, kicking off my sneakers to put on the tap shoes. Harper followed suit and we clumsily tried to keep up with her.

"I wish there were lifts in tap," Addy said.

"Why can't there be?" I lifted her up over my head, ducking so she wouldn't crash into the low ceiling.

She squealed with laughter, and she seemed younger than her seven years. I realized she was actually acting her age, and that normally she was so reserved from sadness that she seemed older. I set her down and she immediately began twirling and tapping, her own hybrid dance style. Just, having fun without a care in the world. That was how all children should be.

I turned to see Harper watching us with a soft smile on her face I couldn't read and swept her into a clickety waltz, the sound of her laughter like the first sip of coffee in the morning.

It struck me suddenly how purely happy I was, in the old house I thought I'd never want to enter again. How utterly content.

But this was not my life, and the house would go up for sale when the renovations were done. Harper would move... somewhere else. Somewhere without me. She had spoken about the heartache she felt when I left, but I'd felt that, too. Deep under my grief, I mourned losing her just as strongly as I'd mourned losing my parents. I knew she'd never leave this town, and I had to go back to New York eventually. Didn't I?

Of course I did. The one thing I was sure of was I couldn't handle that kind of pain again.

The swirling waltz started making me feel sick to my stomach, and I pulled away, saying I'd bring us some lemonade and snacks. On my way out of the living room, I paused in the doorway to watch them, clasping hands and making as much noise as humanly possible with their shoes. As much as I might have wished they were mine, they weren't. They looked so happy, and I was glad enough to take credit for it this time.

But I couldn't toy with their emotions or risk breaking Harper's heart again, as well as Addy's now, too. I definitely didn't want mine broken again, either. I took off the tap shoes and slowly padded toward the kitchen, thinking there was probably some work I needed to do instead of spending the evening dancing.

Chapter 18 - Harper

After Silas brought us our snacks, he said he had some work he needed to do and left us to keep dancing around the empty room until we were spent. I missed having him around, and knew that I needed to ferociously beat back any feelings like that. Addy and I had been enough before he showed up, and we were still enough.

I broke up the dance party at her normal bedtime, and she was so tired she didn't argue. I thought she was glad to be back in her own bed, even though it had only been hers for a few weeks. I knew that was because home was more people than places. Even if we had to go back to live with my parents or get another tiny apartment, it wouldn't matter as long as we were together.

By the time I tucked Addy in bed and took out the book we'd been reading, she had lost her dancing glow and was back to looking haunted. I didn't open the book and after a second she heaved a deep sigh.

"Did you know my dad?" she asked.

I should have seen that coming, but it was still a shock. "Of course. Not very well, though." After all, he didn't stick around long.

"They said we would visit him in California and even go to Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm."

I kept my face neutral, but inside, I was fuming. They had no right to promise things like that to her; they were getting way ahead of themselves. It also shook me because it meant they had enough confidence they'd win custody that they thought they could make those promises.

"That sounds like fun," I said, the words barely scraping past my rapidly closing throat.

She sighed again. “Disney and Knott’s Berry Farm sound fun,” she said. “And I guess I don’t mind meeting my dad.” She reached for Hootie, her stuffed owl, and the last gift her mom gave her. “But at first Grandma said visit, but then one time she said *live* in California. I don’t want to live there or change schools or be away from you and real Gran and Gramps. Disney’s not worth that.”

That didn’t just shake me, it rattled me to my bones. “I’m sure she just said it wrong. There’s no way you’ll have to move to California.”

Addy clung to my hand, her other arm wrapped tightly around Hootie. “Promise?” she begged. “Promise I get to stay with you and Silas.”

The fact she included Silas nearly doubled me over with guilt about our charade. Feeling sick, I promised, praying it was one I could keep. I managed to not break down and pretend everything was fine as I kissed her goodnight.

Down in the kitchen it was another story. As soon as Silas saw me, he stood up and rushed to my side.

“God, Harper, are you okay? You look like you’re going to faint, you’re so pale.” He took my elbow and guided me into a chair.

I shook my head, all my fears spilling out. “They’re talking about taking her to California, and I know they can’t now, but even with this new lawyer, I’m scared to death. Once Kay sells the building, there’s no guarantee the new owner’s will keep it a salon, and even if I can get a job at the one in Bayberry, then I won’t be able to pick Addy up in the afternoon. That’ll mean an added expense for after school care. And what judge will think that’s better than stay-at-home grandparents who have fresh cookies waiting every day? A real family.” I ended my tirade on a sob.

“We are a real family,” he said vehemently. I glared at him, and he cleared his throat. “I mean *you* are a real family. You and Addy.”

I didn't tell him how Addy had included him, or how I regretted getting into this fake relationship that probably wouldn't help me win custody and that I was starting to wish was real. Not just for Addy, but for me. So, that was two broken hearts when he went back to New York.

He tried to offer me tea and kept saying comforting things. I wanted to be comforted. I wanted to let him pull me into a warm embrace. The pretending felt so nice. But if I kept letting him be sweet to me, we would only end up in bed again, and we were already two mistakes in the hole.

I snuffled up my tears and stiffened my spine. "I'm just tired," I said, hurrying toward the door when he looked like he was about to stand up and try to hug me. "Things will be better in the morning."

"Of course they will," he said, nodding firmly.

In the lonely master bedroom, I pulled the covers over my head and willed sleep to take me, hoping that I'd wake up in the morning to a different life where I made better choices.

Chapter 19 - Silas

I was resigned to sleeping on the couch in the hallway, not wanting to lug the heavy old thing in and out of the living room after I promised Addy she could use it for her studio. I tried to check my emails to see if there was an update on when the new flooring would arrive, but just like when I tried working after ditching the dance party, everything was a blur.

I couldn't concentrate and I couldn't sleep, not with Harper upstairs, hurting and anxious. I got a message from Jax asking if I'd be back in the city for our monthly staff meeting. As the executives, we always liked to stay on top of everything that was going on, and we always put out a nice spread and made it seem more like a party to keep up morale. I messaged back that I'd be there remotely and that my assistant would set up the video link.

Why don't you admit you're never coming back? he replied.

I started a few rude answers, but ended up ignoring it. He and Raylen had no cause to complain, as my remote working had been going perfectly. Still, his message hit a nerve. I'd been having fun, not just with Harper and Addy, but with Mark and his wife, my nosy neighbors' morning updates, and doing the physical labor on the house was giving me an odd sense of accomplishment that years of running a multi-billion-dollar company couldn't match.

I got off the couch, giving up on sleep. I knew it wasn't just renovating that needed to be finished before I could put the house up for sale. I put on my shoes and headed down into the dusty basement where there were dozens of boxes of my parents' things. All through college, I used part of their insurance settlement to pay for someone to come in and clean the place, but it wasn't until after I graduated that I finally got someone to go in and pack up all their personal items. At first I was going to have them send me an inventory so I could tell

them what to sell, donate, and dump, but it was too hard, and it all ended up down in the basement. I cracked my knuckles and sat down on the cool floor, pulling one of the boxes toward me and tearing open the taped seal.

It was mostly my old schoolwork, terrible kid artwork, and my few sports trophies. Definitely trash, though it pulled at my heart that they'd saved any of it in the first place. I was the star of the show as far as they were concerned, though I'd been nothing better than average until the anger over their unfair deaths had pushed me to single-mindedly succeed. It was sheer luck and probably a healthy dose of pity that I'd gotten accepted into NYU, but I proved I belonged there eventually.

As I pulled out my mom's carved wooden jewelry box from the next carton, I wondered how things might have been different if they'd lived. Would I have continued working at the hardware store? Would Harper and I be married, having Sunday dinners over here instead of tearing the place apart? I wouldn't be rich, but wouldn't I have been happier? Wouldn't I have given everything I owned so they could live the lives they were supposed to before it was all stolen from them by a lousy drunk driver?

I barely realized I was bawling like a little baby until I felt a soft hand on my back. I turned to see Harper in her oversized t-shirt and raggedy sweatpants. She knelt down beside me on the dirty floor and put her arms around me.

I tried wiping the river of tears away. "I'm sorry, I'm fine," I croaked.

"No, you're not, and that's okay," she said. "Go ahead and cry all you want."

A sob broke out of me and I buried my face in her shoulder as she held on, patting my back. "I still miss them," I managed through the tears.

"I know. I never once saw you cry back then. Not even at the funeral, and I was in floods."

There were a few times I couldn't stop it in the last ten years, but I always ruthlessly turned my mind to something else. After all, what did it change? It felt good to get it all out. I finally got myself together after what felt like an hour but was probably only a few minutes.

I pulled back and wiped my face with my t-shirt, then wiped the wet spot on her shoulder. "Oh my God, I'm embarrassed," I said.

"Don't be such a macho dingbat," she said, and I laughed at the silly name.

I did feel a great deal better, like I could go through my parents' things without dreading what I'd see next, what memory it would dredge up. She still had her hands resting on my arms, and I took one of them and kissed it.

"You're great," I said, then snickered at my lack of eloquence.

"Maybe sometimes," she said. "Sometimes you're great. Like this evening, with Addy."

I kept a hold of her fingers; her other hand slid down my arm. I tugged her closer, getting lost in her compassion-filled eyes. I thought she might say something when she opened her mouth, but she just as quickly shut it again and pulled away.

"Do you know how much I want you right now?" I asked.

"Yes," she sighed. "Because it's probably as much as I want you."

We stared at each other and both said, "But..." at the same time. I laughed ruefully, and she stood up, holding out her hand to help me to my feet. We kept our fingers intertwined as we walked up the stairs, leaving my parents' belongings for another time. We paused at the couch, wedged into the hallway at the base of the stairs, and she kissed my cheek before turning to go up to her room.

I reached for her to pull her into my arms. “Thank you for being there for me,” I said into her hair.

She leaned back and rolled her eyes, waving toward the living room that was strewn with Addy’s costumes and dance shoes.

“It’s no big deal. We’re nowhere close to even.”

I could tell she’d get snippy if I told her that her emotional support was worth more than the lawyer or the gifts, so I just lay down on the couch and waved her up the stairs. I felt refreshed and exhausted at the same time after crying like that, but I was also able to focus better. And what I was focused on was Harper; the strength of my feelings for her scared me half to death.

Chapter 20 - Harper

I was more pleased than I should have been when Silas came into the salon for the haircut I promised him, and it wasn't just because he needed one. All the regular morning ladies getting their blowouts gaped at him, and I had to admit he really was gorgeous. Much better looking than he'd been in high school. Broader, more confident and self-assured.

I watched him in the mirror while I began his cut, studiously working on his tablet, at least pretending he didn't hear the ladies loudly whispering about him while they sat under the dryers. I kept having to reposition his head every time he looked down at his tablet, finally telling him he was going to be uneven and give me a bad reputation if he didn't keep still. He put his tablet away and smiled at me in the mirror.

My heart keeled over; there was no more fighting it. I loved him again. I was pretty sure I never stopped, but it was back in full force now. I was in it, and there was nothing I could do but brace for the hurt.

As I finished up, dawdling with the styling so I could keep my fingers in his hair for longer, Kay came out from the back. She stopped in the middle of the salon with her hands on her hips as she stared at us.

“As I live and breathe, if this isn't a blast from the past. It's just exactly like when you used to do your training, and Silas here was the only person you could hoodwink into letting you practice on.”

He laughed and jumped up to hug her. “I forgot all about that.”

I'd forgotten it, too, but she was right. I'd done the beauty vocational program in junior and senior year, knowing I didn't want to go to college. In senior year, I got to work on

real people, but nobody wanted a trainee, so Silas bravely offered his rock and roll locks to be shorn.

“Give me a tour,” he said.

“Oh, nothing’s changed,” she said, but led him into the back.

I followed as she showed him the wash sinks, which were currently in a separate room, but if I’d been able to buy the place, I wanted to tear down the wall and make it one big open area. I was surprised when Kay started telling him that, along with my other ideas as we made our way upstairs.

“This used to be an apartment,” Kay said, showing him the small living area up there. “It’s just my office and some storage now, but Harper thought it would be nice to have a full mani-pedi station and then have a posh waiting area with a wet bar and use this whole wall to showcase more products than what we can fit downstairs by the register. They’re all good ideas, but I’ve been itching to be a full time grandma for too long so she’ll just have to convince the next owner.”

I tried to keep my smile bright as she looked at me hopefully. She still thought I should wrangle together a down payment, but I’d put that dream firmly in the ground.

Silas looked around and nodded. “Yeah, I can picture it. That would be nice. This is a small town, but there’s money here. And there should be places to spend it.”

“Agreed, kiddo,” she said. “Bayberry can’t have all the good stuff.”

“No, it cannot.”

They went on to talk shit about Bayberry for a while as we drifted back toward the stairs. I had a cut and color waiting so I got Silas’s attention to say goodbye. He reached into his pocket for his wallet, but I told him the cut was on me.

“I told you that,” I said, putting my hands behind my back.

He took out a fifty and reached around and wedged it into my hand. “You have to take a tip, though. If you don’t accept it, I’ll spend every penny of it on candy for Addy.”

I faked a scowl at him, knowing he wouldn’t dare. “I’ll accept it if you let me take you to dinner with it.” I lowered my voice. “To the nice restaurant in Bayberry.”

“That sounds like a plan,” he said with a grin.

“I’ll even see if my mom or Luna’s mom can watch Addy,” I blurted, then immediately backpedaled. “If they can. I don’t know...”

He shrugged. “It’s fine if she goes with us. I mean, it’s not a date or anything.”

His face started to get red, which made mine get hot in response. “No, of course not,” I said. “It just might be fun to have grown-up talk.”

He gave my shoulder a squeeze as he walked away. “Either way,” he called on his way out the door.

The blowout ladies immediately laid into me.

“Why isn’t it a date?” Shirley asked. “He’s dreamy.”

“Right?” Martina agreed, jabbing her with her elbow. “If I was thirty years younger I’d be all over that.”

“Oh, you and me both,” Darla said.

They erupted into cackles, and I ignored them, or they’d never stop. As I prepped my next client for her color, I started wondering what would happen if it was a date. What if I gave it another try? I had already admitted to myself I was hopelessly in love with him again, so I knew I’d regret it if I didn’t. Yes, might as well go big, and then maybe Silas wouldn’t go back to New York at all. Full of nerves, but feeling giddy about my decision, I resolved to find someone to watch Addy so we could be alone that night and I could start to make him see we could be together for real.

Chapter 21 - Silas

On the way back to the house from the salon, I was freaking out. Harper had made my thinking veer off into space and I lost sight of what was really important to me. What was important to me? After our wistful goodnight on Sunday, finally making a smart decision and not falling into bed together, I promised myself I'd keep my distance, keep things light. I'd done a good job for exactly three days, making sure I was either out of the house or deep into a project when she and Addy came home. We had pleasant dinners together, then I hopped on my computer, catching up with work or inventing work so I could decline watching TV or dancing with them. The dancing was dangerous, and that moment of pure happiness with the three of us together was most certainly what unleashed my flood of emotions later that night in the basement. But then I found myself pacing in the kitchen this morning, missing her, trying to think of an excuse to call. My scruffy hair was the perfect excuse, and she'd promised me a haircut.

I enjoyed having her fingers in my hair way too much, and catching glimpses of her smiling at me in the mirror. Even those gossipy ladies and getting a tour of the salon from Kay brightened my day more than anything in New York had in a long time. Everyone here was just so friendly, finally accepting me again as if I'd never been gone.

I nodded hello to the baristas at the coffee shop I frequented, and I was pretty sure I could identify the people who worked at my local bodega, but I didn't know their names and certainly never spent half an hour shooting the breeze with them. I couldn't possibly be getting attached to my old hometown, could I? The same town I couldn't wait to get away from ten years ago?

Then I'd ended up agreeing to a date, and not only agreeing but looking forward to it far too much. I entered

panic mode. It was worse than when I thought I had lost the Chotech account, and now that I thought about it, that still wasn't finalized. Was any of this turmoil worth it?

Yes, I was sure that when I got to the meeting with them this afternoon that they would finally agree to sign the contracts. Once that was finished, I'd no longer have any real reason to stick around. Sure, the renovations were fun, but at what cost if I kept unstopably slipping toward Harper? The house was just an excuse, another distraction from my real life. The question that wouldn't stop nagging me though, was why was I suddenly so distracted? My real life was perfect, wasn't it? I had no earthly idea why I wasn't on the next plane back to New York.

When I got back to the house and realized the internet wasn't working, I got even more worked up, and I was plenty on edge. This would have never happened at my apartment. I also never tinkered with the electrical box at my apartment, which I'd done the night before, rendering half the house completely dead. I got everything back on and since it didn't affect the upstairs, Harper and Addy were none the wiser about my mistake. But now it seemed like I permanently fried the router with a surge or something and no matter what I did, it wouldn't come back online. I called up a reputable electrician and the internet provider, trying not to use my New York voice because it didn't work here at all. Instead, I jovially explained how important it was that I be online within the next hour, then gritted my teeth while they laughingly promised they'd do their best.

Which meant I needed an alternate plan if I was going to make that meeting with Chotech. The little coffee shop on the main drag had Wi-Fi, but it was often crowded and the last thing I needed was to have one of the overly friendly and nosy patrons peering over my shoulder to see what I was doing while I tried to impress Mr. Cho. I took a deep breath, sure my blood pressure was dangerously high, and packed up my computer to head for the local library. At least I wasn't obsessing over the pseudo date with Harper anymore.

As I tried to pull out of the driveway I had to wait for Mrs. Dunston to drag her wheelbarrow across the sidewalk, finally jumping out and grabbing the handles out of her hands when I couldn't stand her snail's pace any longer.

"Where do you want it?" I snarled.

"Oh, uh, I was returning it to Javier," she said, flustered.

I had a stab of guilt which just pissed me off more. I was going to be late, have a row of mystery paperbacks behind me for the meeting, and now I'd been an ass to my elderly neighbor. I forced a smile and wheeled it two houses over, setting it down in Javier's yard. I waved off her thanks and burned rubber getting to the library.

None of this would have happened in New York. In New York, I'd be ensconced in my office with the expansive view of the river behind me, calmly waiting for my assistant to tell me we were connected. Instead, I was probably going to get pulled over by some yokel police officer for going eight miles over the limit. My extreme irritation almost felt like vindication, proving beyond all doubt that small town life was not for me. I remembered a shortcut to get to the library and turned, but by saving a few minutes, I had to drive past the cemetery.

I kept my eyes straight ahead, but the stately old trees shading the headstones behind the tall, wrought iron fence was clear in my peripheral vision. A wave of guilt ten times worse than being a bit short to Mrs. Dunston washed over me. I couldn't deal with my parents' belongings, I couldn't bear to face their graves, all I wanted to do was run from the sadness that was eternally lurking.

I shouted out a string of swear words as I hit the steering wheel four times in a row, hard enough to make my palm sting. I knew I was being an idiot letting myself get so angry, but I also knew from experience that the rage was so much easier than the grief.

Chapter 22 - Harper

I only had one last client to see that day, and it was my favorite regular who always left me a big tip, even for something tiny like a bang trim, which was what she was coming in for today. I figured I'd swing by Lynette's shop after I picked up Addy and see what was on the sale rack for my date with Silas. Yes, I was thinking of it as a date with no more reservations. My mom swore she felt up to having Addy over to spend the night, so I had that covered, too. To say I was excited about the evening ahead was an understatement.

A few minutes before my last client was due to arrive, I got several back to back calls from a number I didn't recognize. After ignoring the first few times, I finally decided I better pick it up in case it was someone from Addy's school.

It was the flooring delivery that we'd been waiting for, and the guy was telling me no one was there to sign for it or let them in. I was getting a little tired of the loud clatter Addy's shoes made on the concrete every night and very tired of bumping my hip trying to squeeze past the couch in the hallway. Mrs. Artemus was due for a visit in another week and I didn't want her to see the place in such disarray.

"No, don't leave," I said. "Did you knock and ring the bell? I know someone is home." When Silas had been there getting his haircut he'd told me he was logging on for an important meeting that afternoon, so he might have been ignoring it. I'd kill him if he didn't take ten seconds to open the door.

"Yes," he said. "We went around back, too. I called the first number listed and nobody answered. Listen, I have a schedule so we can't wait around much longer."

"So when can you get it back out to us?" I asked, not wanting to miss my nice, fat tip that was going to buy a new dress for my date.

“Uh, end of next week? Or the Monday after that at the latest.”

That was not an option if Mrs. Artemus was coming in the middle of next week. Even having the flooring delivered today was cutting the installation pretty close, especially since neither one of us had done it before. Where in the heck was Silas? I begged them to leave it on the driveway since there was no chance of rain.

“Sorry, we’re not allowed to do that. Too many people have claimed it got stolen, and probably in some cases it did get stolen. We need a signature from a resident or the construction manager.”

Well, hell, that put my final argument of going next door and dragging Mrs. Dunston over, though I was certain she wouldn’t let them put all those boxes in her pristine, plastic-covered living room.

“I’ll be there in less than ten minutes,” I said. “I’m begging you not to leave.”

“Sure thing.”

I sent a message to Silas, going to see if Kay could cover my last client, hoping he’d answer within the next few seconds. He didn’t, so once I cleared it with Kay, I flew out of the salon, trying not to be irritated with the man I was looking forward to spending a nice evening out with. I really didn’t have any call to be able to depend on him, after all. Not that he wasn’t dependable, although right then he wasn’t, but because I had no claim to be able to rely on him. I was letting my past feelings and my current feelings get all mixed up into thinking Silas and I were already a couple. We weren’t. He didn’t even really think we were going on a date tonight.

At the house I was stunned to see it wasn’t just a few boxes of laminate that they were trying to deliver. Apparently, Silas had been thinking ahead and he’d ordered the new tile for the kitchen and three rolls of carpet for upstairs.

“Where do you want it?” the delivery man asked.

Well, since the project manager was missing in action, I had no idea where to put it all. The laminate went into the living room, and I pushed aside the rolling coffee cart to make room for the tiles in the kitchen, then I had to clear a space in the dusty garage for the rolls of carpet. By the time I signed for everything I was fifteen minutes late to pick up Addy. I was sure everyone was glaring at me as I found the office where forgotten children of degenerate guardians were kept. Addy and a few other sad kids sat on the floor next to the secretary's desk.

"Sorry," I said, wanting more than anything to blame it all on Silas. But how could I? I was ultimately the only one responsible for Addy.

She gave me an attitude, which I couldn't really fault her for, so I let it slide, but it made my increasingly bad mood even worse. As soon as we got home, she sulked upstairs to her room saying she'd already done her homework while she was waiting. Big emphasis on waiting.

"Okay, fine," I said with forced cheer. "Pack up an overnight bag for Gran and Gramps," I reminded her.

She grunted in reply and I decided to make her a special snack as a bribe to get her to forgive me. I stubbed my toe on the damn couch, hard enough to bring tears to my eyes, and slammed into the kitchen to cut up an apple and make it look like a damn smiley face with raisin eyes.

There was Silas, ending a phone call and looking up at me in an annoyed manner that put my tolerance for bullshit right over the edge. I was about to snap at him, but then he ran his hand through his fresh haircut, mussing it up in an adorable way that melted my bad mood a little. Very little, but I wanted to get back on track with the excitement I felt all afternoon. I also wanted to smooth his hair with my fingers, and I felt a smile working its way past my scowl.

He gave me a tense smile in return and pulled out a box of noodles from the cupboard.

“Hey, what about dinner tonight?” I asked.

“What about it?” he answered tersely.

Okay, not even a thanks for skipping out on a client to accept the delivery. I could deal with that. No apology for not answering my messages, kind of a big deal, but we could talk about it on the way to the restaurant. But the fact he’d forgotten we were going to the restaurant hurt my feelings.

“Our... I was taking you out tonight, remember?”

He huffed and yanked out a jar of pasta sauce. “I’ve had a shitty day. I had to have my meeting at the damn public library, and I’m still not sure about the Chotech account. I’m in no mood to go out.”

“What?” I asked, my heart sinking. “I’m sure you’ll feel better once we’re there. Addy’s staying at my mom’s so you don’t have to cook.” There, hopefully that would get him out of his snit. If I could get over my crap, he could get over his. He didn’t seem to want to, frowning and shaking his head. “Come on, I owe you, remember?” I cajoled. “Because of the tip you gave me?”

He set the sauce jar down a bit too forcefully and turned to me with a fierce scowl. “Look, Harper, you don’t owe me anything, okay? Can you just knock it off with that?”

I was taken aback at his harsh tone, and my hackles went straight up. “Listen, my day wasn’t any better. I had to miss my last client because you couldn’t be bothered to be here for the giant delivery you scheduled, and it made me be late to pick up Addy and now she’s mad at me.”

He had the audacity to roll his eyes. “She’ll get over it, and I’m pretty sure this contract is a tiny bit more important than your client’s dye job having to reschedule.” His voice was laced with sarcasm.

Now I was really pissed. “Of course, that’s just like you to bring it all down to money,” I said scornfully. It was like the new him, not the one I used to know, not the one I

wanted to try a relationship with. This new Silas could jump off a bridge.

“You should have just rescheduled the damn delivery,” he said, his voice rising. He glanced up and lowered it to an angry hiss. “I can’t deal with this right now. I don’t need this. I’m leaving.”

He edged past me and stormed to the hall closet where he’d been keeping most of his clothes. How did this escalate so quickly? I was too hurt and stunned to say anything as he tossed a few things into an overnight bag and stomped toward the front door. As he jerked it open, I found my voice again.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Do what you’re best at. Run away.”

His shoulders went up and for a split-second, I thought he’d turn around and keep fighting with me until we could work it out. But he left without looking back, because we didn’t really have anything to fight for. That was all in my mind and even that was over before it began.

Chapter 23 - Silas

I knew I was being an ass. I was horrified by my behavior, but something came over me, and I was powerless to stop it, knowing I had to go before I ruined everything. I didn't want to hurt Harper, but I couldn't face the pain of ultimately losing her when our little pretend bubble popped. Yes, I was in a foul mood from the mishaps of the day, but that had nothing to do with my flipping out like Gordon Ramsey when a chicken breast came out with pink in the middle.

I wanted to go to that dinner at that zero star roadside diner with Harper more than I wanted anything and it broke me. I acted like a cranky toddler because I was scared, plain and simple. I turned toward Roanoke and the airport, getting Jax on speakerphone to distract me from every fiber in my body wanting to turn around and grovel at Harper's feet.

"I'm heading back," I said after he answered.

"For good?" Jax asked. I could tell by the background noise he was in his office. He always kept a white noise machine on soothing ocean sounds and the swoosh of the waves was up extra high, which meant he was concentrating hard on something.

"For good," I said, trying not to look left or right as I rolled to a stop at a red light. Everything about the town reminded me of something we used to do together, and all those memories I'd been having the last few weeks just made me want to make new ones.

"How'd you get Harper to agree to move to Manhattan?" he asked.

"What does Harper have to do with it?" I asked, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

"Oh, that's why you sound so pissed off," he said. "I thought it was because you couldn't close the deal with Chotech."

“The deal is very much still on the table and I’m not pissed off.” It seemed like my attempt to not sound bitter had failed. There was nothing but ocean waves on the other end. “I guess I’m a little pissed off,” I admitted. “I acted like an asshole and walked out, but it’s best since I don’t want to hurt her or Addison. And there’s the Chotech deal,” I added hurriedly.

I could almost hear him rolling his eyes. “I thought you just said the deal was fine. You know I’m not a psychologist, but I don’t think it needs any special training to see you’re not worried about Harper and Addison as much as you’re worried about getting hurt yourself.”

Those insightful words were about as welcome as rotten eggs. “Hey, Jax?”

“Yeah?”

“Kindly go screw yourself.”

I ended the call. I’d deal with him and his emotional advice when I landed back in the city later. But his words haunted me and as I had to pass the cemetery before the final road out of town, I bellowed in rage, hitting the steering wheel until my palm stung. Once again I was coming unhinged and had to get it together. I knew that wouldn’t happen, ever, until I faced the thing I’d been fearing the most. I swung a U-turn and pulled into the cemetery. I was sick and tired of being scared to face my parents’ graves and, if I was leaving Loblolly for good this time, this was my last chance to do it. I didn’t really want to leave town for good, but I squashed that thought.

I found their simple headstones, neatly tended with fresh flowers. There wasn’t a bench close by, so I sat on the ground, heedless of my clothes getting grass stains. I sat there for a long time, not saying anything. Not knowing what to say. Seeing the names and dates on the stones didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would and after a few minutes I started to feel a sense of calm. Harper was right, it was rather peaceful.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said. “I wish I came here sooner.”

They were always quick to forgive me, even after some of my dumber stunts, so I figured they’d let me off the hook for waiting so long to visit them here. On each of their headstones they were referred to as the other’s loving spouse and I remembered how happy they were together.

“I need your advice,” I said, desperately wanting a relationship like theirs. I tried to push my feelings for Harper aside, trying to concentrate on how much we bickered, but I remembered my parents squabbling sometimes, too. “I wish you could tell me what to do.”

I still missed them so much and I didn’t think I could stand missing anyone like that again. If I worked hard to create a life with Harper and it ended, I’d be devastated. I stood up, touching each of their headstones.

“Bye, Mom, bye Dad. I think about you every day.”

I turned and went back to my car to head for the airport.

Chapter 24 - Harper

The next day at work I was numb and sad, on top of being tired from checking my phone all throughout the night to see if Silas had messaged or called. He never did. Addy came down, after he stormed out and asked what was up, certainly overhearing our fight. I played it off as nothing to worry about and managed to keep up a brave face while I took her to my parents' house, then spent the evening alone, stewing and obsessively checking my phone. I jumped at every creak and groan of the house, thinking it was him coming back, but he never did.

There had been a few cancellations and no walk-ins so I was rearranging the tiny product display to make it more appealing, when Kay told me she was going to close up for the afternoon.

"I want to start making the decorations for Tyler's birthday cake," she said, explaining that her four-year-old grandson wanted a certain dog police force themed party and she had been tasked with the cake.

Normally I would have argued to stay there on my own and hope for business, but I figured it would be as good a time as any to get Addison and I packed up to move in with my mom and dad until I could find us a new apartment, or wrangle my way back into my old one if it hadn't been rented yet. Whether or not Silas was returning, I couldn't keep putting Addy through our constant arguments or getting her hopes up that we might be a real family when times were good. Or getting my own foolish hopes up. I knew going in that this was going to be temporary, but I never expected to be angry and heartsick when it finally ended, or for our rekindled friendship to go up in flames.

In the house, I heard a thud from the living room and found Silas sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by the new laminate boards and holding a hammer. The sight of him

made my bruised heart beat a little faster, especially when he looked up at me with tired eyes.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said.

I couldn’t do it. Comfort him, start a fresh argument, none of it. I was tired, too. I shrugged and went into the kitchen to eat a sandwich before I started packing. There were several piles of papers taking up the entire kitchen table and I huffed. Fine, I’d eat my lunch upstairs. Better yet, I’d just grab an apple. When I turned to leave the kitchen, Silas stood in the doorway, blocking my way. I started to wedge around him, but he stuck out his arm, lowering it when I tried to duck under.

“I mean, I don’t know what I’m doing with us,” he said, his eyes pleading. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I yelled, I’m sorry I ran off like a stone cold idiot.” He gently pushed me back into the kitchen and held out a chair. I sat and crossed my arms, waiting for more, because I’d accept his apology, but I didn’t know what else he wanted from me, if anything. “I took off because I was afraid to lose you,” he said, sitting across from me.

“I don’t know how running away solves that,” I sighed. “Either way, you lose me.”

“I thought I already established I was an idiot,” he said. “I figured that out on the plane to New York last night. I thought I could spare myself the pain of losing you by preemptively self-inflicting the pain of giving you up on my own.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty dumb.”

We both laughed, but it was tentative. His hand moved across the table but stopped halfway and I didn’t make a move to meet it with my own. He turned serious again. “I finally got up the nerve to visit my parents’ graves before I headed to the airport.”

Now I reached for his hand. I knew how rough that had been for him. “That was brave.”

One shoulder went up in a shrug. “It hurt so much back then that all I could do was try and get away from it. I blocked out everything that made me think about the accident, including the most important thing in my life back then.” He looked up from our linked hands. “You, Harper. And I really don’t want to run again. I want a relationship like they had, in a friendly town like this, with a woman like you. With you.”

Tears pricked at the back of my eyes, but I blinked them away. “You know how much you hurt me back then, and you hurt me last night, too. I was ready to let my guard down, but it’s back up now, even more so because Addy’s in my life.”

He swallowed hard enough for me to hear it and pushed one of the piles of papers in front of me. “Look at this,” he said. “I made Jax get up in the middle of the night and draw this up, before I flew back here.”

I skimmed down the first page and then gave it more concentration when I saw what it was. It was a contract for an interest-free loan for the amount I’d told him I’d need to buy the salon. Not the down payment. The entire amount. I pushed the papers aside.

“I can’t accept this,” I said, my throat about to close up. “You say it’s a loan, but it’s really a gift. It’s too much.”

He nodded, pushing the next stack of papers in front of me. “I knew you’d say that so I had Jax draw up this contract, too. I liked your ideas for the salon when Kay gave me the tour. I know the place is already successful and I have no doubt it will only grow and prosper under your management.” He cleared his throat and flipped over the first page of the contract, continuing on in his business-like tone. “I want to invest in the salon. Ten percent of annual earnings until the loan is paid off, then we can renegotiate. I also woke up my financial advisor and he agrees this is a sound investment. It’s not a gift.”

I felt like I might throw up, but in a good way, like when you’re heading up on a roller coaster and looking

forward to the thrill. “Okay,” I said. “Give me a pen so I can sign, or whatever I need to do.”

I didn’t hesitate because I didn’t think I needed to be prideful. I was at least as confident as he was that I could do wonders with that salon if it was mine. This would be best for Addy too, since being a business owner had to look good to a judge.

“I think we can call it a handshake agreement for now,” he said, holding out his hand. “And we can discuss it more over dinner.” He paused to grin. “After all, you still owe me a meal in Bayberry.”

I grasped his hand and shook it, and he kept a soft grip around my fingers. I was stunned that my lifelong dream of owning a salon had just instantly come true.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” I said. “With you, or us.”

He stood up and tugged me out of my chair, looking down at me with a broad smile. “I want us to give it a shot. I’m as in love with you as I was ten years ago and I’m crazy about Addy. I want to take the house off the market and make new memories here with both of you. Maybe when Addy’s a little older, we can upgrade to something big—”

I cut him off by throwing my arms around his shoulders and kissing him, melting against his firm chest when his hands slid around my waist to pull me closer. I let my lips part when he nudged against them with his tongue, then pulled away to look at the clock above the stove.

“We have some time before I pick up Addy,” I said, pushing my hands under his t-shirt to slide up his back.

His eyes twinkled with a devilish look. “Sure, do you want to go over the contracts some more?”

I dug my fingers into his sides and stood on my toes to kiss him again, rubbing the length of my body against his. “If that’s what you want to do.”

He groaned and pulled me toward the stairs, trying not to break our kiss as we stumbled along. His phone buzzed furiously from his pocket and he took it out.

“Let me turn this nuisance off... oh, it’s Jax. I should answer to make sure nothing’s wrong.” He looked apologetic, but I waved at him to take the call.

“I get it,” I said. “I’m a business owner too, now. We have to stay on top of things.”

He snorted and lightly smacked my behind as I walked up the stairs ahead of him. I couldn’t see his face, but he was clearly excited by whatever Jax had to tell him.

“We got the Chotech account,” he said after he ended the call. “They finally agreed to sign the contract, and he’s flying to Beijing tonight.”

“That’s wonderful,” I told him, overjoyed for him. “Do you have to go, too?” I tried not to show any disappointment, but I didn’t want to give him up so soon, even for a few days.

“Hell no,” he said, sweeping me into his arms when we got to the landing. “Nothing could drag me away from you right now.” He kissed me deeply before pulling back. “Or ever. I love you, Harper. I always have. I always will.”

I clung to him as he carried me toward the master bedroom, our bedroom now. I wasn’t going to let him sleep on that couch ever again, no matter what kind of fight we got into.

“I love you too, Silas. Always have, always will.”

Chapter 25 - Silas

Three months later

Leaving the courthouse that day, I didn't think I could be happier. Harper had finally been granted sole custody of Addy, with the other grandparents getting visitation rights. Delia and Landon actually weren't so bad, once we got to know them. It turned out they were both shy and reserved, having been put through the wringer by their son, who not only skipped out on his responsibilities to Addy when she was a baby but caused them more than their fair share of heartache. They were now allowed to see her two weekends a month, with strict rules about not leaving the state. If Addy's deadbeat dad wanted to meet her, he could get off his butt and come to Virginia.

Even though I had started paying for tap lessons last month after Harper finally eased up some of her restrictions on what I could do for them monetarily, Delia begged to be allowed to take over. Harper was busy with renovations now that the salon was officially hers, and I was still knee deep in the house reno, so when Delia offered to drive up every week to take her to the lessons, it was a big help to both of us, and she got to watch her granddaughter dance her little heart out on top of the bimonthly visits. We've even had dinner together, including Harper's parents, and everyone got along fine. Addy still referred to them as the other grandparents, but there was no more anxiety or malice behind it, just a way to keep everyone straight when we talked about them.

After we got done hugging and dancing in a circle in the courthouse parking lot, Harper suggested we go to Pizza Palace to celebrate. Addy was all for that, but we were in our best court clothes so headed home to change first. I kept sneaking looks at Harper on the drive home as she called up Luna and her parents to invite them along. She looked

radiantly happy, and the lines of stress between her brows that I could sometimes alleviate but never make disappear completely were finally gone.

My heart swelled with love and pride for her, managing to juggle the salon, Addy's custody case, and of course all my nonsense, all while helping to fix up the house. Now that we decided to live there, we argued endlessly about how to decorate it, but I only put up a fight because I knew she expected it. I think she enjoyed our little sparring sessions over such trivial things as oak or maple kitchen cabinets, and of course she won every time. I didn't care if she wanted to paint the entire house purple as long as she lived in it with me. So far though, it was coming together quite nicely. The living room floor was back together, and I cleared out the garage, putting up a big, long mirror on one wall to make it Addy's new dance practice area. The other side of the garage stored all our bikes, which we tried to ride together at least one or two days a week.

Another thing we had a few tussles about was Harper's awful car, but she finally let me get her a new, modest sedan. Addy was starting to want to do things with her school friends again. When I told Harper it wasn't safe or kind to drive a bunch of kids in her old beater that rarely had working air conditioning, she caved, making me swear I wouldn't get her a Christmas present for the next ten years. As if I would keep such a promise.

At home, Addy and Harper ran upstairs to get changed and I decided to make myself a quick cup of coffee, feeling a bit overwhelmed, but in the best possible way. So many things had changed in the last three months, but I never once second guessed my decision to stay. Things were about to change even more, if things went according to plan.

I carried my cup of coffee upstairs, knowing if I dawdled, Addy would have a fit. She poked her head out of her room, already in play clothes, when I passed in the hallway.

“Are you all prepared?” she asked.

I nodded. “You know I am. What about you? You’re sure about this?”

“Of course. Duh, *Dad*.” She rolled her eyes at me and popped back into her room.

She had taken to teasingly calling me dad off and on, but every time it made my heart soar; I hoped she’d settle into calling me that permanently one day. It was one of the overwhelming things I was more than ready for.

In our bathroom, I slid out of my shirt and tie to put on a t-shirt and jeans, but when I heard Harper start to sing in the shower, I went in and peeked around the curtain. She had her hands in her hair, suds flowing down her smooth back and cascading in a foamy heap at her feet. At the feel of the cool air I let in, she opened her eyes and smiled at me.

“Careful, you’ll get soap in your eyes,” I said, slipping out of the rest of my clothes to join her.

She pulled me under the stinging hot spray and turned the temperature down a notch since she knew I liked it a bit cooler. I kissed her neck while she rinsed her hair, working my way down to her breasts. I was as hard as a rock. We didn’t have too much time before Addy began pounding on the bedroom door, but I had to have Harper, then and there. I had to show her how much she meant to me.

After her hair was rinsed, she looked down at my stiff cock and reached for me, sighing as I pulled her close.

“I never thought I could be so happy,” she said. “I didn’t realize how scared I really was until the judge gave his decree.”

“I know exactly how you feel,” I said, running my hands down her back to cup her behind.

She moaned and ground against me. “I guess we have to be fast.”

“I’ll make it worth it,” I promised.

I waited for her to get sassy and challenge me, but she only held on tighter. “You always do,” she whispered against my neck.

We fit together so perfectly and she held on tight as I pushed her up against the new quartz tile. The water beaded over us and the steam surrounded us as I kissed her deeply, laying claim to her mouth. My hand slid down her body and between her thighs, which she eagerly opened for me. Her sigh was like the sweetest music and her soft lips trailing down my neck as I kneaded her swollen clit inflamed me with desire.

“I love you,” I told her, needlessly, but I couldn’t seem to ever stop saying the words.

I never got enough of hearing them back from her and smiled against her neck as she repeated them to me. Her voice had the tremor I loved to hear, and I slipped my fingers inside her, pushing her over the edge.

“Oh, hurry,” she said when her breathing calmed down a bit. She looked up at me with lust-glazed eyes, her wet hair clinging to her shoulders. “I need this before we spend the next three hours playing video games.”

“I need it too,” I assured her, lifting her close to me.

We both groaned when I sunk my cock into her tight heat. She gripped my shoulders as I bounced her. Soon we broke out into giggles as the water started to turn cold. I knew we needed a bigger water heater, but she hadn’t wanted to spend the money. Well, I’d be overriding that.

She held onto me with one hand and shut off the water with the other, looking searchingly into my eyes. I rocked her close to me, starting up our rhythm again, and she let her head tip forward onto my shoulder.

“Oh, Silas,” she sighed, but it was no longer with a wistful edge. Now we knew we belonged together.

“I know,” I told her, my pace quickening.

I reached between us, wanting us to come at the same time and found her swollen nub where our bodies joined. Her fingernails dug into my shoulders, and we both stifled our cries, ending up in a heap in the bathtub, panting and fully satisfied. I yanked our bathrobes off their hooks to cover her before she started shivering.

“I guess you were right about the water heater,” she said, and we both laughed as we hurried to get dressed.

At Pizza Palace, it felt unreal how happy I was, watching as Harper’s parents, Luna, Mark, and his wife all enjoyed each other’s company. Addy took a real liking to Mark and Annie’s baby, who was now crawling, and embarrassed Harper by loudly asking when she’d get a little cousin. Jax and Raylen popped in on video chat to congratulate us, then hurried back to the hustle I didn’t miss one little bit. There I was, eating greasy pizza while cartoons blared on big screen TVs all around us, a far cry from the gala in Manhattan that we’d flown in for a few weeks back. This certainly wasn’t how I thought my life would be a little more than three months ago, but I wouldn’t have changed a single thing.

I looked up to see Addy giving me the signal, and I stood up, loudly clearing my throat until I had everyone’s attention.

“I’ve thought of a million ways to do this, but it seems right, here in front of family and friends.”

“It was my idea,” Addy piped in.

Everyone gasped, but I only had eyes for Harper, suddenly afraid I was moving too fast. She had a look of shock on her face. I smiled at her and took the diamond ring I’d never returned to the jewelry store out of my pocket and dropped to one knee on the grubby Pizza Palace carpet.

“You changed my life for the better,” I told her. “And I only hope I don’t screw yours up.” There was a smattering of

laughter, and her eyes filled with tears. “Marry me, Harper. Make me the happiest man in the world.”

With a little sob, she scrambled out of the booth and threw her arms around my neck. “Yes,” she said, kissing me. “Of course.”

The entire restaurant had taken notice and broke into applause when I stood up, Harper still in my arms. A server came out with a big sheet cake with sparklers on it and set it on our table, joining in the cheers and congratulations.

“That’s for Addy,” I clarified, pointing to the cake.

“No,” Addy said. “It’s for us, since we’re an official family now.”

Poor Harper lost it at that, and I let her go so everyone could gather around her to look at the ring. I’d have her all to myself again soon enough. I stood there, enjoying the feeling of being surrounded by loved ones without the barrier I built up and maintained for ten long years, grateful to Harper for being able to break through it with her love and forgiveness.

Epilogue

Harper

Three years later.

I closed up the salon, then smiled down at the books. We’d been busy, with customers coming from as far as Roanoke. I made the last payment on the loan to Silas a month before, and I didn’t care how hard he rolled his eyes every time, it was important to me to do it. And now I was a debt-free business owner, with my husband as a silent partner. Maybe it wasn’t at the top of his investment portfolio, but my salon had been turning a very nice profit lately, of which he still got ten percent. I knew as soon as he noticed the payment, he’d want to renegotiate, since I knew all along that his taking a percentage was the only way he could get me to accept the loan. I couldn’t help smiling at how tricky he was when he wanted to spoil me.

I smiled wider as I got into the brand new SUV, complete with its brisk new car smell, my birthday present from Silas. Once we were married and I realized how rich he really was, I started letting him do nice things without an argument, and even though I still didn't like him to go overboard, the bigger car helped shuttle Addy and all her friends around to their various after-school activities.

I was eager to get home since Addy was going to a slumber party directly after school, and I couldn't wait to get Silas alone for some grown up time. When I got in the house, I smelled something delicious baking and went into the kitchen to find him pulling a pie out of the oven. Ever since he cut back on his workload he discovered a real knack for baking, even teasing me the other day about opening up a new bakery in town. At least I hoped he was teasing, because I liked having more of his time and attention.

I got a thrill seeing him standing proudly over his pie. My passion for him hadn't waned even after starting a business, doing a house renovation, and raising Addy. He was still just as handsome and sweet and sometimes maddening as ever.

After he came around the table and kissed me, I sighed, looking around at the kitchen we worked so hard to make perfect in every way, all the way down to the cabinet door handles.

“What's that sigh for?” he asked, squeezing me close.

I rested my head against his chest, enjoying his warm embrace and the smell of peaches that clung to him. “I love this house so much,” I said wistfully.

“But...?” he asked, leaning back to look at me with concern.

I couldn't hold in a smirk any longer and felt my face getting red. “It's going to be too small soon,” I said, holding my breath.

His brow furrowed. “What? Addy hasn’t complained even though she has friends over all the time...” It suddenly dawned on him what I was trying to get across, and he sputtered, rendered speechless. He looked down at me with excited, questioning eyes. “Are you sure?” he whispered.

I nodded happily. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m pregnant.”

He whooped with joy and swung me in a circle, then plopped me down and grabbed my shoulders. “I can’t believe it, this has to be fate,” he said, full of wonder. Before I could say anything, he pulled me toward the front door, almost forgetting to lock it as he dragged me toward his car.

“What’s going on?” I asked as he sped toward the outskirts of town.

“Just wait,” he said, grinning at me. “I don’t know what you’ll think, but—just wait a few more minutes.”

We pulled up on the side of the road and he got out, hurrying around to open the passenger door and pull me out to stand in front of a huge meadow. He stamped down the overgrown wildflowers and guided me to the wooden fence, pointing out at the big, green space with a creek and a small, wooded area at the back edge.

I looked at him quizzically. “This is pretty,” I said, not sure what else to say.

He nodded. “Yes, it’s beautiful. I ran into Mr. Anderson at the grocery store today. He’s the farmer who owns this land—”

“I know him,” I said, still confused.

Silas laughed nervously. “He told me he was downsizing and selling this piece of land. It’s going to go on the market next week.” He bobbed on his heels, his grin about to split his face in two. “Let’s build our dream house, Harper. Really go crazy with it. Abby can have a dance studio, you can have your own office, so you don’t have to do the books at the kitchen table. Any kind of nursery you want. Whatever we can dream up.”

I was speechless until his face started to fall. “I’m not against it,” I said in a hurry. “But we barely put the finishing touches on the old house, and it’s been three years. How are we going to get the kind of place you’re talking about ready in less than nine months?”

He clapped his hands and looked triumphant. “Ah, that’s because I wanted to do as much of the old house as I could by myself, but I’ll throw money at this project so hard, it’ll practically appear by magic. You’ll see.” He put his hand on my stomach and scrunched up his face. “The baby’s telling me it wants a pool with a waterfall.”

I burst out laughing and swatted his hand away. “The baby’s as crazy as his dad, then,” I said, pulling him into a hug. “But, why not? Let’s do it. Addy will go nuts with all this land.”

He whooped as happily as when I told him I was pregnant and the next thing I knew he was lifting me over the fence. “Let’s go put our toes in our creek,” he said.

We linked hands, our happy laughter getting carried away on the warm breeze as we raced across the field of flowers to start planning an even brighter future together.

THE END

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He calls a truce and puts his arm around me
only to say something obnoxious the next
second.

But the heat of our arguments leads to
heated make-out sessions.

And as a nurse, I should know that heated
make-out sessions can lead to...a positive
pregnancy test.

He says he could never be the small town
husband of my dreams.

He says he could never be a good role
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But I've seen the sweetness behind the
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About the Author

Lexi Asher gave up a promising career in the medical field to focus entirely on her family—and her writing. She lives in the beautiful, luscious Virginia countryside with her husband, 3 young children and 4 pets.

The Ashers' rustic cottage is bustling with activity all day long, so when Lexi wants to get her head down and let her creative juices flow, she will often take refuge in their beautifully ornate conservatory where Lexi does most of her writing.

When it comes to love, Lexi is a big believer in second chances—sometimes you just meet the right person at the wrong time. So, her stories often feature old flames that are reignited and broken hearts that are mended. But is love really better the second time around? Well, read and find out!

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