

LIA HUNI



Stolen Heart Strings



*A Sweet, Small-town
Romantic Comedy*

Stolen Heart Strings

A SWEET SMALL-TOWN ROMANTIC COMEDY

LIA HUNI

IPH MEDIA

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Also by Lia Huni

For

Jerome and Stephanie

Who know waiting for the right one

Is the right thing

Chapter One



MATT

PULLING the last sheet of cling wrap tightly across the doorway, I smooth out the wrinkles and tape it in place. Eva will never see this coming.

I check the lighting in the hallway, then retreat to the end to set up the tripod and camera. The remote control I bought last summer will make triggering the video easy. I peer at the screen, framing the door perfectly in a vertical orientation. Then I tiptoe down the stairs.

I have years of experience pranking my family, but that mostly ended when Judy and I got married. She didn't appreciate my brand of comedy—at least not when she was the victim. But after Judy left, I let my inner prankster loose. Fortunately, my daughter Eva shares my sense of humor.

The key to a good prank is not giving it away in advance. I need to pretend this is just any other morning.

Hoping she's forgotten the date, I tromp back up the stairs at my usual pace, pausing outside her door. I knock three times, as always, then twist the knob and shove it inward. "Time to get up, sleepyhead."

Vague muttering issues from the dark room.

"You have to drive back to Eugene today. I made pancakes for your last breakfast!"

More muttering. "Coming."

Holding back a snicker, I retreat toward the stairs and hit the record button on the remote.

The door swings wider, and Eva ducks under the plastic wrap. She straightens, rolls her eyes at me, then waves a hand at the camera. “Very funny, Dad. You tried that my senior year, remember?” Her yellow Tweety Bird pajamas add a splash of bright color to the dim hall.

I groan. “I hoped you’d forget. It’s been two years since you were home on April Fool’s Day.”

She bares her teeth in an almost feral grin. “You’ve lost your touch, old man. I’ll be down in a minute.” She strides across the hall.

And bounces off the plastic wrap stretched across the bathroom door.

A cackle of laughter bursts out of me, and I sag against the wall. “You should see your face—oh, wait, you will as soon as I load that on the TikTok. And the Instagram. And the SnapChat.” I add “the” to the names because I know it drives her crazy. Wiping a tear from my cheek, I click the stop button on my remote. “That was perfect!”

“It *was* perfect.” She lunges down the hall, ripping the phone from the tripod. “But not if I delete it first!”

I give myself a dramatic head slap and hurry toward her. “No, don’t do that! I never get you. Leave an old man his tiny victories.”

She holds the phone away from me as I try to grab it. “I’m sure you’ll tell everyone about it. But without evidence, no one will believe you.” Turning her back to shield the phone, she presses the home button, but the screen doesn’t unlock. I stretch around her, but my fingers miss the device. With a mock glare, she types in a passcode, but it doesn’t work. She huffs out an exasperated sigh and tries a different code. The phone unlocks. “Ha!”

I let my shoulders sag. “You’re right. Gimme the phone and I’ll delete it.”

“Not a chance. I’m doing this myself.” She flicks into the photo app and deletes the video.

I hold out a hand, but she waggles a finger at me. “Nope. Not done yet.” She swipes into Google Photos and deletes the automatic backup copy, too. “Too bad you taught me all your tricks, Dad.”

“That’s what a good father does. You’d think a good daughter would leave him one copy of his best prank in years.”

She grins again and hands the phone back. “Not gonna happen.”

I pocket it and head down the stairs. “In that case, you can take down the plastic wrap yourself.”

She chuckles. “You wish. I’m outta here in an hour or two, remember? I can duck under it in the meantime.”

“It will still be here when you come back in June, then.” As I return to the kitchen, the bathroom door clicks shut. I wouldn’t really leave the plastic up until the end of the school year, and she won’t either. Since her mother left two years ago, we’ve pranked each other more often, but we’ve also developed a much more adult relationship. Eva works hard to fill the void when she’s home.

Judy walked out the week after Eva graduated from high school. She told us her job here was done. She’d never been the most nurturing of mothers—I was the one who attended school conferences, concerts, and field trips. My professional life offered more flexibility and less earning power, so it made sense. But the cold way in which she’d announced her departure still burned—more on Eva’s behalf than from any lingering sense of personal loss. We’d stopped being a couple many years before but had continued to live in the same house. I’d long suspected Judy stayed because she felt an obligation to our daughter, and at the end, she made it crystal clear that was her only reason.

I pour some batter into the sizzling electric skillet and sprinkle chocolate chips across the top. While the batter cooks, I unlock my phone and tap the Dropbox icon. Ha! The old man still has a few tricks up his sleeve. I upload the video to

TikTok—an account created solely to embarrass my darling daughter—and add some text and a catchy song. Post.

Humming the melody I just uploaded, I flip the pancakes and put plates on the table. I pour maple syrup into a small pitcher to microwave it, then pull the bacon from the oven.

“Daaaaad!” Eva arrives in the kitchen, menacing me with her phone. “How—”

I do my best evil laugh. “I don’t share all my secrets.”



AFTER EVA DRIVES AWAY, the house is quiet. Too quiet. I grab the remote and flick through the channels, stopping when I see a familiar face on the screen. Nica Holmes has always been my celebrity crush, but I’ve watched her a lot more since Judy left. I can recite all her movies from memory, which is impressive, if I do say so myself, since she’s done a lot of them.

I finish putting the dishes into the dishwasher and go upstairs to strip Eva’s bed. As predicted, the plastic wrap is gone. With a quick yank, the shades open, spilling bright sunlight across the cluttered floor and overflowing bookshelves. I pull off the sheets, spread the duvet over the mattress, and move the pile of stuffed animals to the foot of the bed.

The door opens and closes downstairs, and a voice echoes up. “Where are you, Matt?” Rachel Foster, my next-door neighbor and best friend.

I grab the pile of sheets and head for the hallway. “Cleaning up after Eva.” I give the cluttered room another look, then pull the door shut. I’ll vacuum later. “What’s up?”

When I reach the living room, I find Rachel watching television. She turns, her short blonde hair flaring around her face. “Eva’s just left, and you’ve already got Nica on?”

I ignore the question, carrying my burden around the corner to the laundry room. “Did you need something? You know I won’t let you come between me and Nica.”

She chuckles as she follows me. “I wouldn’t dare. I’m having trouble with my water. Is yours working?”

I dump the towels and sheets into the top-loader and turn. “Trouble with your water?”

Her face goes a little pink. Rachel hates to ask for help from us mere mortals. “Yeah, I figured I’d check with you before trying anything drastic. Maybe the city is having an issue?”

“The city?” I give a little headshake and press the start button. Water gushes into the washer drum. “No trouble here. What’s going on at your house?” I dump some soap into the machine and shut the lid.

“It’s just not working.” She heads into the kitchen, and I follow. Something weird is going on—Rachel doesn’t do vague. She’s a former fighter pilot and figuring out technical details is child’s play for her. She stops by the kitchen sink. Stepping to one side, she waves at the faucet. “Is yours working?”

I hesitate as I step closer. Rachel’s face is still pink, and her lip is twitching. Is she about to cry? Her fiancé, my brother Blake, had been out of town for a few weeks, but it’s not like Rachel to get flustered because she doesn’t have a man around to deal with this kind of thing. She is one of the most competent people I have ever met. Besides, Blake got back three days ago. “Why wouldn’t it be?” I reach for the faucet and pull the lever. A gush of water sprays into my face. “Whaaa?” I slam the water off.

Rachel bursts into laughter, joined by Eva, who pops up from behind the kitchen island. “Ha! Got ya, Dad!” She waggles her phone in the air.

I glare at Rachel. “Really, you double-teamed me? After you refused to help me with—” I break off, glancing at my daughter.

“Help you with what?” Eva looks up from the phone, gaze zeroing in on me. “Did you plan something else?”

Avoiding her eyes, I wipe the water from my face, then unwrap the packing tape from the kitchen sprayer. There’s nothing to tell—it was a minor prank I wanted to play on Blake—but keeping Eva in the dark is definitely more fun than coming clean. And probably good parenting, right? I’m teaching her resilience, or something like that. “You don’t need to know. Aren’t you supposed to be driving to Eugene?”

“Yeah, I really gotta go now. Thanks for the help, Rachel!” She grins and throws her arms around me in another hug. “Ew, wet.”

I smack her hip. “Drive safely. Text me when you get there.”

“Of course.” She hugs Rachel, then blows me a kiss as she heads for the door. “Don’t forget to check my TikTok. You’re going viral!”

The front door slams closed as I holler back, “You wish!” I pull a handful of paper towels from the roll and crouch to mop up the front of the cupboard, craning my neck to look up at Rachel. “I assume there’s nothing wrong with your water.”

She rolls her eyes. “Please. I know more about plumbing than you do. I can’t believe you bought that. I told Eva we should have sent Blake over instead.”

I snicker. My little brother may be a big-time country music singer, but he’s almost useless with household repairs. Good thing he can afford to hire people—and that his fiancée is pretty handy. “That would have been way more believable. But your acting has gotten better.”

She grins and flourishes her arms as she takes a theatrical bow. “Your praise warms my heart. Don’t forget we’re meeting with the wedding planner tomorrow afternoon.”

“Got it. Hey, you want some coffee?”

Her head turns toward the television, where a single tear rolls down my favorite actress’s perfect cheek. “You sure you

want me here? I don't want to come between you and your true love."

I finish soaking up the water and toss the wet paper towels into the trash. "She doesn't mind. Did you hear she has a big screen movie coming out? With Hugh Harper and Ryan Davis. You'll have to come see it with me."

"Sure. You know I like Hugh." Her gaze falls on the extra pancakes cooling on the counter. "Ooh, chocolate chip. Can I have one?"

"Help yourself. The rest are going in the freezer until Eva comes back. Or Blake shows up for a snack. In fact, maybe you'd better take one for him, too." I pull a zipper bag from a drawer and stack the remaining pancakes inside. "Or you can take them all."

She grabs a pair of pancakes and heads for the slider door to the backyard. "He doesn't need that many carbs. You wanna ride with us to the Ranch tomorrow?"

"I have to work. I'll meet you there."

She gives a thumbs-up, then pulls the slider open. "Perfect. We can do dinner after." We're visiting the chapel at Copper Butte Ranch to meet with the wedding planner for her wedding. I know, that's not a real he-man kind of thing to do, but I'm the best man, and Blake has a surprise cooked up.

I wave as she disappears around the corner of the house. Then I go in search of any other pranks my daughter might have left behind.

Chapter Two



I HOLD THE PHONE AT ARMS' length, hit the countdown button, and make a kissy face. When the cam goes live, I hold the pose for a second, then lean in close to whisper into the mic. "I'm at a secret location for a secret event! I really want to share the details with you, but it's not safe. The paparazzi are everywhere." I drop my voice low on the last word to give the video some drama. Then I look both ways and widen my eyes as if I've spotted something terrifying. "I gotta go! Cross your fingers for me! I'll tell you all about it as soon as I can." I blow a kiss at the phone, hold the pose, then tap the red button to stop the video. A quick edit to add some text and hashtags and I send it off into the ether.

With a deep sigh, I drop the phone into my pocket. Something must be blooming nearby—my eyes itch like crazy. I can't rub them—I don't want to smear my makeup—so I pull out the eyedrops I stashed in my dog-print fanny pack. After some blessed relief, I pull my hood over my currently blonde hair and slide a large pair of sunglasses onto my nose. It's not a great disguise—apparently my nose and mouth are quite recognizable. Probably due to the mole—luckily a cute little one at the corner of my mouth that gives me a Marilyn Monroe vibe. I'm not an A-lister, but when your face has been on as many Romance Channel movies as mine, someone is bound to recognize you.

Sucking in a deep breath of the pine-scented air, I turn in a slow circle, taking in my surroundings. My family has been vacationing at Copper Butte Ranch since I was a kid, but I haven't been here in years. My father owns a house here, and

to say our relationship has been rocky is an understatement. We finally reconciled a few years ago, but since my career took off in the interim, I've had little time to visit my childhood haunts.

A wide golf course stretches before me, the grass newly green. Red cinder "sand" traps provide a startling splash of color—they're one of Copper Butte's signature features. I suck in another breath—I hope I didn't catch one of the traps in my video. A quick check reassures me. No identifying features behind me. I'd planned the location to be nondescript—a parking lot surrounded by pine trees—but one can never be too careful.

Bright sunlight glints off the massive mountains that dominate the scene, but the air is still cool, and I'm grateful for my hoodie and glasses. Birds chirp in the distance, and a brown horse trots across a field by the lake. There's something about this place that soothes my soul.

Then a beige sedan skids to a halt beside me, and a small, bald man jumps out. Louis Boitano! How did the notorious paparazzo find me? "Nica! Nica Holmes! Look over here!" He pulls out a camera with a massive lens. I wonder what he's compensating for.

I scramble over the split rail fence and sprint across the field, dodging horse pucky and mud patches. An appaloosa looks up when I stumble past and whickers a greeting.

"Sorry, no apples or sugar today!" I glance over my shoulder. Boitano hasn't followed—with his short legs and large belly, he'd have a hard time keeping up. I veer right, aiming for the wedding chapel. Maybe I can have someone pick me up there.

Slowing my pace, I duck behind the building and stroll past the huge multi-story windows that face the golf course. This is where my father will marry wife number six this weekend. It's also the site of weddings two and three. This place is not good luck for my dad's marriages. Maybe the third time's the charm?

As I round the corner of the building into the parking lot, I tap in a text to my half-sister, Madison.

Can you pick me up at the chapel?

MADDIE

I'm getting my hair done. Where's your car?

I didn't rent a car.

Daddy has three in the garage. You should have taken one.

Nica (thumbs-up emoji)

She's so helpful. I shove the phone into my pocket and look up. A big black SUV and a dusty green Subaru sit next to a white Smart Car in the mostly empty lot. I can walk back to the house, but Boitano is sniffing around, and the odds of him catching me along the route are high. I'm betting the Subaru belongs to a local—probably an employee of the Ranch. Maybe I can convince them to give me a lift home and keep quiet about it.

As I pull open the big, well-oiled glass doors, the beige car rolls into the parking lot.

Crap!

Hoping he didn't see me, I dash into the lobby. Maybe I should just give up and brazen it out. There's nowhere to hide, except maybe the restroom, and I wouldn't put it past Boitano to barge right in. Male voices rumble from the chapel, but no female. Knowing my chances of going unrecognized are better with men, I pull the door wider and let it whomp closed behind me.

Two tall men stand at the front of the chapel. One holds a blue velvet box. The other is familiar—country singer Blake Stein. We've never met, but I'd have to live under a rock to not recognize the most popular country singer of the year. This is better than I'd hoped! Blake has been hounded by Boitano. He'll be sympathetic to my predicament.

The other man shoves the blue box into Blake's hand and stumbles toward me. "Nica Holmes?"

What are the odds I'd run into a guy who can identify me? I glance over my shoulder. I know, it's a bit dramatic, since the door is closed, but drama is my middle name. I reach out a hand, like Princess Leia appealing to Obi Wan. "Will you hide me?"

The guy—I'm guessing he's Blake's brother, based on the resemblance—stops and stares. "What?"

"A photographer followed me—I don't want to be seen here."

The brother jerks out of his trance and points to the front of the chapel. "Get behind the altar."

"Thanks." I hurry past the two men and slink behind the fabric-draped table. I consider ducking under, but the back side is only covered halfway down. If Boitano gets this far, he'll see me. Easier to maintain my dignity if I can just stand up instead of crawling out from underneath.

"You." It's Boitano's voice. Although he's a photographer, not a journalist, I've heard it too many times to mistake the faint Brooklyn accent. "Why are you everywhere I go?"

"Maybe because you're in my hometown?" Blake says. "Why are you here? And how'd you get through the front gate?"

Good questions, Blake! I'd like to hear the answers, too.

"I have my ways." There's unmistakable glee in the smarmy little man's voice. "Have you seen Nica Holmes?"

"She was amazing in *Valentine Dreams*." The brother's voice is similar to Blake's but a little lighter. He must be one of my few male fans. My most well-known roles have been in made-for-TV romances, which means most of my followers are women. I hope this doesn't turn out to be a problem. I don't need a clingy admirer right now.

"You watch that crap?" Boitano asks.

"It's not crap!"

“Chill.” Blake’s velvet drawl lowers the tension. “Are you saying Nica Holmes is here? Doesn’t she live in SoCal?”

“I’m going to call the Ranch police,” the brother says. “This guy is trespassing.”

Way to go, brother!

“She’s here for her father’s wedding.” Boitano throws this out as if it’s common knowledge. Who could have leaked it? My money is on the bride—she seems like the type. “His sixth wedding, I believe. I’ll find her.”

“You aren’t welcome here. This chapel is reserved for me right now, and I don’t want you here. Go away.” Stein’s voice is cut off by the whomp of the chapel door closing.

“He’s gone.” The brother hurries up the aisle as I peek around the altar. “I’ll help you get away.”

I beam my “you’ve saved the day” smile at him and take his hand when he reaches out to help me up. “How can I thank you?”

His blue eyes light up. Faint lines crinkle at the corners when he smiles. His warm hand squeezes mine, then releases. “Would an autograph be too much to ask? I’m a big fan.”

I let my smile widen and slide a business card-sized photo from my obnoxiously bright fanny pack. I’d never wear one like this in LA, but I thought it might provide some camouflage here. Typical tourist gear. And I have to admit it’s super convenient. I pull out a gel pen. “Who shall I make it out to?”

“Matt. I’m Matt Hertzprung, Blake’s brother. He changed his last name.”

“Nice to meet you, Matt.” Hoping it’s not considered sacrilege, I set the card on the altar and write out the inscription. “Listen, just between you and me, no one’s supposed to know I’m here. Can you not mention you saw me?” I pull my sunglasses down to peer over the top, giving him a puppy-dog look. “It would mean a lot to me.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask for a selfie.” He takes the card with a sad smile.

I glance at the front door, still firmly shut, then look back at Matt. He seems like a nice guy, but I’ve been fooled before. “If it were just me, I’d take a chance. But my dad is really trying to keep this wedding private.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” He puts a hand over his heart. “That guy has been hounding Blake for months.”

I bite my lip. I hate to disappoint a fan. And this guy has seen the crazy life secondhand. With a mental shrug, I take a step closer. “If you promise not to share it until next week, we can do a selfie.”

A smile like the sun coming out hits me. “Really? You’ll trust me?” He pulls out his phone.

“Blake seems to, so I will too.” I slide an arm around him and lean in close for the picture. “Thanks for watching my movies.”

“Thanks for making them.” As he puts his phone in his pocket, a faint siren grows louder. “There’s the police. You want to talk to them?”

I back toward the side door. “I’d rather just disappear. The more people who see me, the more likely word is to get out. Thanks for your help, Matt Hertzprung.”

His smile lights up again when I say his name. “My pleasure.” The front door opens, and he turns to look.

That’s my cue to exit, but I hesitate for a second. Part of me wants to stay here and get to know this guy better. We barely spoke, but there’s something about him. But I promised my dad I wouldn’t draw attention to the wedding. Hanging out with the brother of a country star—one who has been “hounded” by the same paparazzo I’m trying to evade—is not a good move.

I push the side door open and slip into a dark room. This is where the groomsmen gather before the ceremony—I remember having a shot of whiskey here with Dad before wedding number three. I was only nine, and it was vile. But I

sipped it for him. As a kid, I would have done anything for my father. Except maybe finish that drink. I still can't stand the stuff.

If I recall correctly, there's an external door. Can't have the groom coming in the same door as the bride. I tap my phone to pull up the flashlight. There. Pushing the crash bar as quietly as I can, I shove the door ajar to peek out. The parking lot is out of sight. Behind me, the sounds of a guitar and Blake's deep voice filter through the internal door. I feel the urge to go back into the chapel, but I squash it. A promise is a promise—even when it's made to a man who can't keep his own.

“I hope you appreciate this, Dad,” I mutter as I climb back into the horse field and head for his house.

Chapter Three



MATT

I STAB my fork into my schnitzel and slice off a bite. Checking to make sure we can't be overheard, I lean across our favorite table at the Lonely Goatherd Pub. "I can't believe I met Nica Holmes."

"Yes, Matt, we were there, remember?" Blake sips his beer, then sets it on the table, glancing at his fiancée. "I feel like I should be offended that my romantic proposal gets lower billing than meeting a celebrity."

"You sang a pretty song and gave her a ring. Big deal. You were already engaged. We're talking about Nica Holmes."

"I didn't see her." Rachel gives me a malicious grin over her roasted chicken. "I think you hallucinated her. You're so excited about her movie announcement, you just made her up." She turns to Blake. "Has he told you about her movie?"

"What movie?" Blake makes his face comically blank, then rolls his eyes. "Only fifteen times."

I wave the schnitzel-laden fork at Rachel. "I did not hallucinate. Blake saw her. He was there. Him and that photographer you made friends with."

Rachel holds up a hand. "I am not friends with that guy. In fact, I had to change my cell phone number, remember?"

"I can't believe you gave it to him in the first place." Blake gives his fiancée a smirk. "After all the trouble he caused us."

She shrugs and bumps her shoulder against Blake's. "If it weren't for him, we might not be together." Rachel did an

interview with the guy claiming there was nothing between her and Blake. Which prompted Blake to change that.

“I think we would have figured it out eventually.” Blake squirms a little. “I will acknowledge he played a role. However, that doesn’t give him the right to continue harassing us.”

“Which is why I changed numbers.” She picks up the chicken leg and points it at me. “I recommend you stay clear of Louis Boitano.”

“Now she listens to me,” Blake says to the table at large, but we ignore him.

“It’s not like I’ll ever see her again. Except on the screen.” I finally eat the bite on my fork. “We’re still on for movie night on Thursday, right?”

Rachel smiles. “Yeah. But no Nica Holmes movies after she dumped you like that.”

“I wish. Okay, I don’t wish she dumped me, but I wouldn’t mind getting to know her well enough to be dumped.” My face gets warm. “Whatever.”

Rachel pats my hand. “Hey, you got to meet your celebrity crush. I’m still waiting for Blake to introduce me to Chris Hemsworth.”

“I don’t know him. And I wouldn’t let you anywhere near him if I did.” He puts an arm around her shoulders.

“Don’t all you famous people know each other?” She elbows him gently.

“Yeah, we hang out in the famous people bar every weekend.”

“I wonder if that Boitano guy was right about why she’s here?” I pumped the wedding planner for information after Nica left, but the woman wouldn’t tell me a thing. Rightfully so. Famous people deserve some privacy, too. “Nica posted a video teasing a secret event. And she said something about her dad’s wedding.” I smack my free hand over my mouth. “Oops,

I promised I wouldn't tell anyone that part. You won't spread that around, will you?"

Blake gives me a look that makes it clear he's not interested enough to mention it, then concentrates on his schnitzel and fries. Blake usually watches his diet, but on schnitzel night, he's all in.

"I don't know about her dad, but I heard Nicholas Holmes was getting married out at the Ranch. Again. Wait—is Nica related to Nicholas?" Rachel wipes her hands on a napkin, her new engagement ring glinting in the overhead light. "Duh. Nica, Nicholas. Same last name. I can't believe I didn't realize that."

"They're one of Hollywood's famous families. Like the Baldwin brothers or the Cusacks. Or the Fondas."

"Or the Marx brothers." Blake finishes his beer. "You're a font of Hollywood trivia."

I shrug. "I love movies."

Rachel smirks. "Especially Nica Holmes movies."

"Guilty." I eat another bite, but I'm not hungry. My stomach has been in a knot since I met Nica. She's obviously staying at the Ranch. Maybe she'll come to town for dinner. The Lonely Goatherd is one of the best restaurants in town, and it's only ten minutes from Copper Butte Ranch. She could walk in that door any minute.

Yes, I chose this seat because it has a good view of the entry.

"We can get you a to-go box if you can't finish your meal." Blake puts his cutlery down and pats his stomach with a soft groan. "Old man."

"Why is everyone calling me old?" I push the plate away and look for our server. "I'm only forty-five. And you two are only a couple years younger. When I was your age, we respected our elders."

They laugh.

We pay the bill and head out without spotting any famous people. As an officially “cute” town, Rotheberg gets a sprinkling of celebrities among our tourists every year. And a fair number of the rich and famous have second—or tenth—homes in the exclusive Copper Butte Ranch. But early April is not prime star-spotting season.

Rachel and Blake head across the parking lot toward his new SUV. Blake travels a lot for work—concerts, collaborations, recording time—but he officially moved back to Rotheberg around Christmas, after he and Rachel got back together. I love having my brother nearby, but sometimes their happiness reminds me how lonely my life has become. With Eva back at college, I’m feeling it tonight. I turn toward the sidewalk. “I’m going to walk home.”

They exchange a look but don’t try to argue with me. Rotheberg is tiny, and our neighborhood is only eight or ten blocks from the Goatherd. I head down the quiet street, admiring the stars that are visible even from here. Tall streetlights that look like oil lamps illuminate the sidewalks along the main roads, but they were designed to conform to Dark-Sky recommendations, which limit the light pollution that makes the stars harder to see.

Oregon State Highway 24 bisects the town, but on an early April night, traffic is sparse. I cross the two-lane road and cut across the alley behind the first row of shops to the park. The playground’s thick rubber mats give my step a little bounce as I duck under the brightly colored bridge that joins a slide to the rest of the play structure. Across the street, the first floor of the alpine-themed fire department is dark, but light and a burst of laughter escape from an upstairs window. The glow illuminates the diamond cutouts in the wooden balcony railings.

I cross two more deserted streets and angle across the Stadtplatz toward the town hall. The cobblestone plaza takes up an entire city block, with more of the fake gas lamps running around the perimeter. Steep roofs—perfect for shedding our heavy snow—cover the top of the half-timbered buildings across the street. The entire town adheres to a

pseudo-Bavarian building code—it's part of our "Alpine Jewel of Oregon" schtick. Rotheberg looks like it was designed by theme park engineers who read *Heidi* as children and dreamed of living in the Alps. Blake, Rachel, and I grew up here, so it's old hat to us, but tourists eat it up. We play into the frenzy by hosting beer fests every month and a Sound of Music festival in the summer.

Which reminds me, I need to add musical rehearsals to my calendar. We start next week, and this year, I've finally moved up from generic townspeople/Nazi number 4 to Captain von Trapp. I wanted to play Max Dettweiler—in the stage version of the show, he has the two best songs. I'm not as good a singer as my brother, the "Velvet Drawl," but I've had some training. Maybe next year.

A cat meows, and I pause near a wisteria-covered pergola in the corner of the Stadtplatz to stroke Alf's fur. "Haven't seen you much lately, boy. Is someone else feeding you?"

The cat doesn't respond, of course, and the question is ridiculous, anyway. Everyone in town feeds Alf. The big calico rubs against my leg, then scrambles up the thick wisteria vines to stalk across the top of the wooden structure. The vines rattle against the frame.

"Oh, it's you!" A woman steps out of the shadow of the pergola. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare your cat."

I stare. It's Nica Holmes.

"You didn't—he's not my cat. And he's not afraid of anyone." I snap my jaw closed on my inane yammering and hope I haven't drooled.

"He? I thought calicos were always female."

"Usually. But Alf is a law unto himself. What are you doing out here? Not that you aren't allowed to be, but—" I shut my mouth again.

She laughs, and the familiar musical chuckle sends a tingle down my spine. My brain seems to splinter into a million glittery pieces: I'm standing in the dark, talking to Nica freaking Holmes!

“A little too much family togetherness out at the Ranch.” Nica wanders into the shadowy center of the Stadtplatz. “I wanted a walk, but I was afraid that photographer would be stalking the Ranch. So I caught a QuikTrip into town. Luckily, the driver didn’t recognize me. Most men don’t.”

“Really?” I follow her across the cobblestones. Behind us, Alf meows again, once, as if to reprimand us for ignoring him, then the vines rustle as he slinks away.

Nica shrugs one shoulder. She’s wearing a trendy denim jacket, a short skirt with sparkly pink leggings and matching cowboy boots, and huge sunglasses even though it’s dark. “Most of my work has been made-for-television movies on the Romance Channel. Men don’t usually watch those.” She peeks over her big lenses at me.

My face warms. I hope my blush isn’t visible in the dim light. “I guess that makes me special. But your new movie will change that.”

“I hope so! That should be a career-making project for me.” She turns in a slow circle, staring up at the sky. “Make or break. The stars here are amazing.”

“Yes, they are.”

She glances at me and points up with a sly smile. “I meant those stars.”

“I’d rather look at this one.” I turn away with a groan. “Ugh, I am so sorry. I sound like a psycho-fan.” I rub a hand over my face. “Can we pretend that didn’t happen?”

She laughs, sending the sparks up my spine again, and glides toward me, holding out a hand. “Sure. Let’s start over. Hi, I’m Nica. I’m sorry I scared your cat away.”

“I’m Matt.” I take her hand—her fingers are frozen.

“I remember. Matt Hertzprung.” She doesn’t stumble over my last name.

“Wow, good memory. But you’re cold. Here.” I drop her hand and unzip my puffy coat. “This will help.” I hold the coat out for her.

Nica gives a flirty smile over her shoulder as she slides her arms into the sleeves. “My hero. I forgot how cold it gets at night here.”

“We *are* in the mountains.” I mentally kick myself—I sound like a knob.

She slides a hand around my bicep. “Would you like to walk with me, Matt Hertzprung?”

I gulp. “Sure. Where do you want to go?”

“I haven’t been to Rotheberg since I was a little girl. My dad used to bring the family here—before he left my mom, of course.” She shrugs as if this was no big deal. “I came out in the summers after that, but I stayed at the Ranch. Show me your town. How long have you been here?”

I guide her toward the town hall, across the plaza. I can’t believe I’m walking around town with Nica Holmes. And in person, she’s as sweet and friendly as every character she plays on television. Except when she played the home-wrecker in *Snow Way to Love*, but that was a terrible movie. Although she was still amazing.

But why is she with me? Rotheberg isn’t that big—she won’t get lost on her own. And the town basically shuts down at five except in the summer, so there’s very little to see. Why would a star like Nica want to wander around with a small-town guy who’s almost twice her age?

I glance at her from the corner of my eye as we walk. “I grew up here. In fact, we lived in that apartment building when I was in elementary school.” I point at the fire department. “I mean, the building behind the fire hall. When I was seven, we moved to a place out that way.” I wave to the south. “A three-bedroom house, with a yard on the stream, so Blake and I had plenty of space to play. That was a long time ago.”

“That’s right—Blake told that photographer this was his hometown.” She squeezes my arm. “What was it like?”

“Growing up with Blake? It was—”

“No, I want to hear about you, not your famous brother. What was it like living here, in Rotheberg?”

The words send a surge of warmth through my chest. Once they find out I'm Blake's brother, most people only want to hear about him. Nica is either a genuinely nice person or an excellent actress. Or both. As a teen, I met a few celebrities while working at the Ranch. Most of them made no effort to be kind to the locals. I'm a glass half-full kind of guy, so I'm going to believe she's naturally friendly.

"It was great. We had two acres, with pine trees and the stream. We played cowboys and Indians, pirates, Batman. Built a racecourse with jumps for our bikes. All the things kids do—or at least used to do. We had a dog and a couple of cats, and Blake raised rabbits one year for 4-H." We stroll in front of the town hall, then cross the street toward the shops near the highway.

"Did *you* raise rabbits?"

"No, that was Blake's thing. And he only did it the one year. I was always into woodworking. I'm a luthier."

"What's that?" She stares up at me, her blue eyes glinting in the lamp light, as if I'm the most interesting man in the world.

"I build guitars."

Her eyes go ridiculously wide. It should feel fake, but she seems truly interested. "That's amazing!"

I bask in the glow of her approval. "I also teach a class at the high school. Once they've been through the basic shop class—where they learn to use the equipment safely—the kids can build a ukulele or guitar."

"Are they any good?"

"Yeah, they turn out some great instruments. It takes the whole year for them to make one, so they have time to create some really amazing pieces. Not on par with the professionals, of course, but pretty work with decent sound."

"If I wanted to buy one of *your* guitars, where would I find one?" She gestures to the candy store we're passing, as if they might sell musical instruments.

“I work for Lockheart. We make high-end guitars, and a lot of our sales are by word-of-mouth. We’ve made instruments for some of the big country names—Cash, McEntire, Nelson. And Blake, of course—he’s our newest signature artist. That means he uses our guitars exclusively on stage.”

She nods. “I have a similar deal with a yoga clothing line. But we also sell at Target.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, we don’t sell there. We have a more accessible line—something real people can afford—but most of those are sold at shows. Are you in the market?” I ask the question hoping she’ll laugh again.

She does. “No, I can’t play. I can sing and dance but never learned an instrument.”

“It’s not too hard to get started. I could teach you.” I go hot again and close my eyes. Like that would ever happen. Way to sound like a desperate loser, Hertzprung.

She squeezes my arm again. “That would be nice. But unless you can teach me in about four days, I’ll have to take a rain check. Oh, look, Helmut’s! I remember this place!” She points across the street.

The natural grocery store is housed in a building that resembles a massive cuckoo clock. A waterwheel hangs from one side, although it’s not currently spinning. A large clock dominates the front, with carved wooden figures above who dance on the hour, and a blue door hides a bright yellow bird.

“Does the cuckoo still work?” She hurries to the edge of the sidewalk, gazing up at the metal-trimmed door.

“During the day. It doesn’t run at night, though.” I pull out my phone to check the time: eight fifteen. An intense urge to make this woman happy surges through me. “We missed it tonight. But maybe I can pull a few strings.” With a quick look both directions—no cars in sight—I urge her across the road.

As we approach the store, Nica pushes her big sunglasses onto her face again. She catches me watching and gives a self-deprecating smile. “Don’t want to be recognized.”

I reach toward her glasses, then pause. “May I?” At her nod, I carefully remove the tortoiseshell frames from her face. “Wearing these at night probably generates more interest than not.” I pull the hood of my jacket over her shining blonde hair, leaving her face in shadow. “That makes more sense—it’s chilly out here.”

“It’s not that cold—you aren’t wearing a coat.” She giggles but doesn’t move to return my jacket.

I shrug. “I’m a local. We’re used to the weather.” I pull the front door open and gesture for her to precede me. “After you.”

Chapter Four



WHILE I WANDER through the aisles of Helmut's Natural Foods, Matt Hertzprung heads to the checkout and initiates a whispered conversation with the clerk. The tall shelves and narrow aisles give the store a kind of claustrophobic feel. We're the only shoppers in the place, so I push the hood off my head and grab a basket.

I stroll along the snack shelf, running a finger across the stocked items. A locally made chocolate bar, some nougat things from the next town over, and a bag of hard candies go into my basket. After the wedding, I'm headed to Georgia for a shoot, and it's always fun to bring unique items to share with my castmates. Especially since I really want to impress Hugh Harper and Ryan Davis. This is my first—possibly only—chance to transition to the big screen, and I'm doing everything in my power to make it perfect.

Men's low voices rumble from the front of the store, arguing softly. I hope Matt talks the boy into turning on the waterwheel. I'm sure that's what they're talking about—I'm good at convincing men to do things. If you wanted to be mean, you could say I manipulate them, but it's the Hollywood way. We all have our types, and I'm a sweet girl next door. Cute like a puppy dog. And when you're cute, you have to use that because no one will take you seriously otherwise. I can't play super-competent like Jennifer Lawrence or Charlize Theron. I've tried, but I always get cast as the spunky sidekick or the sweet victim.

Even in the big screen film I'm shooting next month, I'm a nice girl who gets rescued by the big strong man. It's my wheelhouse, and I play it well. Flutter the lashes, smile demurely, squeeze the bicep. It's become so natural to me, I barely notice I'm doing it.

And let's face it, men eat it up.

"Nica." Matt appears before me. "I talked Trevor into running the cuckoo clock." He takes the basket from my hand and leads me toward the front of the store.

Trevor, a tall, lanky kid wearing an AC/DC T-shirt with lederhosen, scratches his scruffy goatee. "You sure I won't get into trouble, Mr. H?"

Matt shakes his head. "I'll talk to Mrs. Fogelhaus if anyone complains."

Trevor rings up my purchases, and Matt whips out his phone before I can pay. "My treat."

"No, I can't let you do that." I make a half-hearted attempt to push his hand away from the charge terminal, but the phone beeps and it's too late.

Trevor puts the candy into a small paper bag and shoves it across the counter. "Here ya go. I'll start the waterwheel in a second." He taps a key, the register dings, then he heads for the back of the store.

Matt grabs my hand and pulls me out the front door. His hand is big and rough, but he holds mine loosely, his fingers warm around my always frozen ones. We cross the deserted road and turn to look at the store.

A cool, pine-scented breeze brushes against my cheeks, and I'm grateful for Matt's coat. I slide my hand from Matt's grip and pull the zipper a little higher. "I hope you aren't getting cold."

Matt tucks the paper bag under his arm and shoves his hands into his pockets, shaking his head. "I'm good." He has such a nice face. Fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes hint at his age. I'm not a huge country fan, but I know Blake has been big in the genre for at least ten years. Which means he

was probably hanging around Nashville for five or ten years before that. Most overnight successes are far from it. I spent four years playing bit parts before I got discovered, so I know what I'm talking about. Matt said the two of them played together as kids, so they're close in age. That puts Matt around his late thirties or early forties. Right in my usual dating age range—not that it matters. After tonight, I won't see him again.

While we wait, I tip my head back and look up at the stars. The blanket of sparkling pinpoints isn't as bright as at the ranch, where there aren't any streetlights, but it's spectacular, nonetheless. I sway, and Matt's hand touches my lower back, providing stability. I point. "That's the big dipper!"

Matt doesn't even look up—he's watching me. "Yup. I could take you up to the observatory, if you want to see the stars." His face goes dark—the color of his blush washed out by the low light. "I mean, if you want. I'm sure you're busy with the wedding and all."

"How did you know about the wedding?" I think back to our meeting in the chapel. Did I mention the wedding? Probably. I'm terrible at keeping secrets.

"That photographer said your father was getting married again. Everyone in Rotheberg knows he has a house up at the Ranch. He's a legend here. He stops by the Bäckerei every time he drives through town. He always gets a Berliner and a piece of marionberry streuselkuchen. Except at Christmas time, when he gets the stollen."

I laugh. "He's been doing that since I was a kid. He eats two bites of each, and whoever's with him gets the rest. Can't mess with the diet too much, but you can't miss the Rotheberg Bäckerei. It's a family motto."

Across the street, the front of Helmut's lights up. Spotlights shine on the clock, the door above it, and the carved dancers on the balcony. The clock winds backward to seven fifty-five, then forward to eight. The door opens, and a big yellow bird pops out, cuckooing eight times. Then music plays—*Edelweiss* from *The Sound of Music*. The wooden figures

turn and spin, and water pours out of a rectangular wooden conduit in the eaves, sloshing onto the wide blue blades. The wheel starts to move, spilling the water into a trough below with a musical splash.

I grab Matt's arm. (See? I'm doing it again. Can't help myself.) "Thank you! It's just as amazing as I remember! Look at the men sawing!" I point at two wooden lumberjacks pushing and pulling a two-man saw. "And the couple kissing under the tree! And the dog!" The carved sheepdog holds a bone in its teeth, raising and lowering its head in time to the music.

Matt smiles, clearly enjoying making me happy. And the cycle is complete. I'm rewarded for using my feminine wiles on an unsuspecting fan. But no one got hurt, so it's fine, right?

It's really not like me to be so introspective. I'm a surface dweller. I keep things light and easy, never looking too deep. It's served me well for most of my thirty years, and I'm not ready to change that now. I give myself a mental shake. Time to get back to normal.

The music stops and the spotlights go out. My eyes take time to adjust—Matt is barely visible. "I need to get back to the Ranch, I think. Thanks for walking with me."

"No, thank you. Do you need a ride?" His voice is deep, like Blake's, but with a slight burr the "Velvet Drawl" doesn't have. It tickles my ear in an almost physical way, pleasant and a bit sexy.

I lift my phone. "I can call a QuikTrip."

"You can try, but it's hard to get one here." He gestures at the empty street. "I can drive you home."

"I wouldn't want to inconvenience you." And I'm not going to give a random fan my address.

His nose wrinkles. "I promise I won't stalk you. You can check with my brother if you want—I'm trustworthy. How about this? I'll take you out to the Ranch and drop you off at the Visitors' center. Then you can walk home from there, and I'll have no idea where your dad lives."

His mention of Blake reminds me he isn't a random fan. He's the brother of another celebrity—a kindred soul. We may not know each other, but I've seen enough on social media over the last few months to know Blake Stein has experienced the same invasion of privacy I have. And his brother clearly hasn't sold him out. Can I trust him to extend that favor to me? Based on what I've seen so far, my answer is yes. “Where's your car?”

“Back at my house—I was walking home when I found you. Do you want to wait here while I get it or walk with me? It's only a few blocks.”

I glance at the quiet store and the dark buildings around it, then take his arm. “I'll walk with you. I don't think Trevor is going to run the clock again.”

We stroll down the street, moving a bit faster this time. The wind picks up, biting into my cheeks and neck. A little tremor runs through Matt's flannel-encased arm. “Are you cold? I should give your jacket back.” I reach for the zipper.

He puts a hand up. “I'm fine. But if we walk a little faster, I'll be finer.” He chuckles at his own words.

I pick up my pace, and he matches it. We cross the cobblestone plaza in silence and cross the street. He hesitates at a dark arch between two buildings. “This is a shortcut—if you trust me.”

“I trust you.” And I do, for some reason. More than I should, probably. But I'm a pretty good judge of character. “Lead on.”

“There's a courtyard back here, and it's lighted.” He starts forward, pulling me with him as I'm still holding his arm. “It's only the alley that's dark. Although, going into dark alleys with strangers is one of those things I warn my daughter against.”

“How old is your daughter?” We step into the dark, arched alley between the Alpine Coffee Shop and a bistro named Swiss Cheese, Please. At the back of the building, it opens out. Lights shine from the windows onto a half dozen cars parked

diagonally against the walls. At the far side, a slight ramp leads to the street.

“She’s twenty. Almost twenty-one. She’s a sophomore at University of Oregon. Go Ducks.”

I adjust my estimate of his age upward a few years. Still right in my range. I tend to date older men—my therapist says I have daddy issues. Not exactly breaking news.

I give myself a mental head-slap. This man is not dating material. He lives in the middle of nowhere and has a daughter. I date actors, and only those without any baggage. At least, no current baggage. Nearly all actors have a long string of exes, but children are a big no-no for me. I remember how my father’s multiple marriages impacted me as a kid.

But twenty isn’t a child—*cut the crap, Nica. Accept a ride home, but that’s as far as this is going.* Matt Hertzprung is a very nice man who doesn’t need my brand of crazy in his life. And I don’t need any complications right now. My career is finally heading in a new direction. Don’t get me wrong, I love being the queen of the Romance Channel, but what actress doesn’t dream of making it on the big screen?

We cross a couple more streets and turn into a residential area. All the houses here are cookie-cutter, but in a Swiss Alps style, with steep roofs, carved wooden balconies and big window boxes. It’s hard to tell in the dim light—there aren’t any streetlamps here, just fixtures beside front doors—but they appear to be pastel colors with light wood trim. Matt takes me down a side street and stops in front of one.

“Here we are. Come on in.” He hurries up the walk and unlocks the front door. With a flick of a switch, the entry light comes on.

I hesitate on the sidewalk.

“The car is in the garage. You can wait here while I pull out, if you want.”

I hold up a hand as I move toward the front step. “No, it’s fine. I either trust you or I don’t.”

He smirks. “Going into a stranger’s house is another thing I’ve warned Eva against.”

“Hopefully she listens better than I do.” I step past him and into the home. The small entry opens into a living room full of comfortable-looking furniture. The house is surprisingly well kept for a single man.

Oops. I assumed he was single but never asked. Maybe he has a housekeeper. Maybe he’s just tidy. Maybe there’s a jealous wife with a carving knife. Note to self: avoid the kitchen. “Your wife isn’t home?”

He gives me a look that makes me think he’s reading my mind and is disappointed by the crazy. “No, I’m single. Didn’t I mention that?”

“Why would you? I don’t need to know a man’s marital status before accepting a ride. I didn’t ask Peter.”

“Who’s Peter?” He scoops a set of keys from a bowl on a side table and gives me a narrow-eyed look.

“The QuikTrip driver. At least I think it was Peter. Maybe Paul. One of those old-style Biblical names.”

“Probably Paul Turner. I heard he was starting a taxi service.” He holds up his hands in response to my unstated correction. “His words, not mine. I’m surprised he figured out how to download the QuikTrip app, much less use it. Trust me, you’re safer with me.”

I follow him down a short hall and into the garage. It’s clean and almost obsessively neat. A workbench stands against the near wall with a white pegboard above. Black outlines surround each tool hanging there. A half-circle of saw blade protrudes from a bench along the back wall, but there’s no sawdust beneath. On the far side, a dark green Subaru sits in the parking space, and a rack of yard tools hangs beyond it. “Why is that? Does he have a wife with a carving knife?”

He opens the passenger door. “I would assume Mrs. Turner has something to slice the Thanksgiving turkey.”

I wave that off and sit. “Never mind. I’d rather ride with you. Paul smelled like tuna.”

“And he’s about eighty-five years old. I’m surprised he still has a driver’s license.” He gets in and hits the garage door button. As the panel ratchets up, he starts the car. “He drives like a lunatic.”

“Yeah, I was glad there weren’t a lot of cars on the road. I did a lot of praying on the ride. Well, maybe not praying. More bargaining with God. Do you know anywhere I can light a candle and get some holy water?”

“There’s a Catholic church two blocks that way.” With a chuckle, he points then pulls onto the deserted highway and heads toward the Ranch. “I’ve never been inside, but they usually have candles, I think. But they’re probably closed for the night.”

“Next time, then. So, what’s your daughter studying?”

As we speed down the highway, he tells me about Eva’s program—a major in English with minors in business and theater tech. “I have no idea what she plans to do with that. She keeps telling me it’s about the education, not the skill set, but I’m the one paying the tuition bill.”

“Pfft, money.” I wave an airy hand. “Easy come, easy go.”

The dash provides enough light for me to see the sardonic twist of his lips. “We can’t all afford to be so cavalier about it.”

We drive in silence for a few moments. I open my mouth a couple of times but can’t come up with anything that won’t sound trite. Money has never been a problem in my family—my father was a well-known and well-paid actor before I was born.

Right. New topic. “I saw a flyer for the *Sound of Music* auditions. Do you think they’d let me try out? I have a little acting experience.” I bat my eyelashes, hoping he’ll take the bait and leave the unpleasant talk behind.

“Are you staying that long? Parts have already been cast, but I’m sure the director would make an exception for someone as talented as you. And let’s face it, a big name would bring in a lot of interest.”

I laugh. “No, that was a joke. Filming for my next project starts next week. In Georgia.” I put on my southern accent. “Ah’ve been workin’ on mah accent. Do you think they’ll buy it?”

“I’d buy it.”

The warm appreciation soothes my soul. My therapist has been helping me work on my need for external approval, but I’m not there yet.

We turn off the highway, and Matt stops at an intersection marked by a large signpost with arrows pointing out different sections of the Ranch. “Do you want me to drop you at the Visitors’ Center or take you to your father’s house?”

I weigh my options. On the one hand, it’s a good half mile to my dad’s house from here. On the other hand, my father would be furious if I gave his address to a random local. Even though Matt doesn’t feel like a stranger anymore. Dad thinks I trust too fast, and he’s probably right. I sigh. “If it was my house, I’d give you directions, but it’s not my secret to share.”

“Fair enough.” He turns onto a side road and parks in front of a large, dark building. Unlike Rotheberg, the buildings on Copper Butte Ranch do not adhere to the strict alpine code. The Welcome Center is a modern Northwest style building with steep roofs, soaring ceilings, and lots of wood and glass. A single light on the side indicates the twenty-four-hour drive-up window is open.

I turn to Matt, reluctant to leave him. Something about this man draws me. He’s open and genuine, in a way many—maybe most—actors are not. He clearly thinks the world of me—even when I say stupid things. And he’s real, solid, dependable. I don’t know how I know that, but I do.

But he lives in the real world, and I live in Lalaland. I have a wedding to attend and a job to get to. He has a life here, with a daughter who must adore him. I’m an actress—a woman who makes her living pretending to be everything I’m not. Sweet, innocent, decent. I’m not really the girl next door, and when he realizes that, his interest in me will vanish. It’s better to exit now, leaving him with a fun memory of the evening he

spent with the famous Nica Holmes. “Thank you for the ride. And the walk. And the waterwheel.”

He hands me a paper bag. “Don’t forget your treats.”

“Oops.” I take it, our fingers brushing. The contact sends a little electrical thrill through me. Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss his cheek, the stubble of his beard brushing against my lips in a way that sets my pulse racing. I take a firm grip on my runaway heart and turn away to open the car door. “Thank you. Have a good life, Matt Hertzprung.” I shut the door and hurry away into the darkness.

Chapter Five



MATT

THE NEXT FEW days pass in a haze of happiness. I spent an evening with Nica Holmes, and she was as amazing as I've always thought she'd be. She was funny and sweet. She laughed at my jokes. She even kissed me. How many guys can say that about their celebrity crush?

"Are you still on a Nica high?" Rachel asks as she breezes in the front door late Saturday morning.

I'm sitting on the couch watching *Spring Fling* for the millionth time. I hit the pause button, freezing Nica and Brad somebody-or-other in a romantic clinch. "Are you kidding? I'm going to be sailing on this for weeks."

Rachel rolls her eyes. "Hey, I'm flying up to Seattle to pick up Blake. Wanna come?"

Rachel is a former fighter pilot, and Blake bought her a jet when he moved back to Rotheberg so they could maximize their time together. The six-seat plane can fly halfway across the country without stopping for fuel, and it got Rachel back into the air, which she loves.

"Not today." I click off the TV and get up from the couch. "I love riding along, but I've got some errands to run."

She follows me into the kitchen. "Like loitering at Helmut's in case Nica comes back?"

I flush. "No, I'm helping Rob Mead with something."

She laughs. "Rob? Who happens to live at the Ranch? Even better."

“You know I’ve been teaching him woodworking. We started long before I met Nica. He’s building a bed frame for his brother’s wedding gift. I can’t help it if he lives at the Ranch.” I don’t tell her the thing is almost done and he doesn’t really need my help at this point.

She pats my shoulder as she heads for the door. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Hertzprung.”

I wait until the door closes behind her before responding. “You got your happily ever after with a celebrity. Why shouldn’t I?”



AFTER LUNCH, I grab my water bottle and head for the garage. I open the door and roll my motorcycle out. I’m not a Harley guy—it’s an older Suzuki that is fun to ride both on paved roads and dirt. It’s great for camping, but that will have to wait until the weather warms up a bit.

The ride to the Ranch is only five minutes—ten if the highway is congested. On this sunny Saturday afternoon in April, I’m there in seven. I slow as I swing past the Visitors’ Center—the last place I saw Nica on Monday night—as if she’ll be hanging out there. Rob’s guest code opens the automated gate, and I roll through. On the bike, I could have gone around, but the Ranch police have a camera on this entrance and don’t appreciate unregistered visitors. All of us locals know how to find the unmonitored back gate, of course, but it’s at the end of a two-mile dirt road, and if I happen to see Nica, I don’t want to be dusty.

The road twists through neatly forested lots, with luxury homes hidden behind expensive landscaping or fences. Biking and walking paths parallel the street, veering away to wind around old pines and artfully placed boulders. I keep to the twenty-mile-per-hour speed limit, watching for pedestrians who might have blonde hair, but so far, no luck.

At the far end of the main loop, I turn past the golf course. The wedding chapel where I first met Nica is a little farther on. When I arrive, a double handful of cars sit in the parking lot. Most of them are Subarus, Hondas, and Toyotas—probably venue employees or contractors. I spot a pair of Mercedes and a Cadillac that might indicate the families of the bride or groom are on site.

I consider my options. Nica could be inside right now, helping with the prep for her father's wedding. Would stopping be too stalkerish? Yeah, probably. But I might get away with a quick drive through the parking lot. I can always claim I'm checking out the traffic situation in advance of Blake and Rachel's wedding. Lame and totally transparent, but I'm going to go with it.

I turn in, circling between the parked cars, riding as slowly as I can. I catch sight of Ms. Sew-it-Now, Rotheberg's local tailor, as she hurries into the building carrying a crate overflowing with fabric, but no sign of Nica. I knew it was a long shot.

After checking the time, I turn out of the parking lot toward the Meads' house. The Ranch was originally developed by Rob Mead's parents and two other families. They've sold most of the properties but maintain a large house in one of the prime locations, with views of the golf course and two of the Three Sisters Mountains.

The driveway slopes down a small hill, then winds around to the massive home. I roll to a stop next to the four-stall garage on the side. After making sure my bike is out of the way in case Gloria—Rob's mom—needs access, I head for the rustic-looking building sitting in the trees beyond the house. The small pole barn houses a studio apartment above and a single huge room below. The double door in front is open, as are the side panels. Rob's dad, Eric, built the place as a party barn. It has a full kitchen in the back corner, a bar on the other side, and two half-baths. I guess he felt the massive house wasn't big enough. And that the rec center and hotel ballroom were too formal. Or something. The glass walls on the side fold back to allow free access to the patio that looks out at the

tenth tee. Cool spring air wafts through the space, dissipating the overwhelming odor of varnish.

Rob looks up from the panel he's staining and raises a hand. Although he's fifteen years younger than me, and much more serious, he's become a good friend, and I've enjoyed teaching him to build the bed frame. We did most of the cutting in my garage, since I have the equipment for it, then moved the pieces here to put it together. I didn't mind working at my home, but he wanted to finish it where he wouldn't feel like he was intruding.

"Hey, Matt. What do you think?" He gestures to the headboard leaning against the wall. The highly polished quartersawn white oak shines in the sunlight. "I finished that piece last week."

"It came out great!" I slide a hand over the smooth surface. "Now that you've learned the basics, you should volunteer at the school. We're always looking for more adults to help with the classes. You could make your own guitar."

He looks tempted. "If I lived in town, I would do that. But the drive out from Portland every day would be a problem."

I wave the three-hour trip away. "You come out here on Thursday nights most weeks, right? You can volunteer on Fridays. In fact, that would be perfect—my usual Friday guy just told me he's taking off for the summer. Starting in May."

Rob shakes his head at the fickleness of volunteers. "You'd think you weren't paying him enough."

"I offered to double his salary, but apparently two times zero isn't enough for him. Anyway, if you have time, I'd love to have you."

"I'll consider it. Of course, I'd have to drop out during football season." Rob started as an assistant coach last fall, and the kids love him. Or love to hate him, sometimes.

"Not a problem. I can work around your schedule." I wander to the open side to look across the golf course. A foursome strolls down the long fairway which angles around this property toward the hole in front of the home's living

room. Across the swathe of green, the wedding chapel is visible, sunlight glinting off the tall windows. If I had binoculars, I would be able to recognize anyone standing outside. If there was anyone I might recognize. And if I was that creepy. I turn around. “You need help with anything?”

Rob shakes his head, concentrating on smoothing the pale stain evenly across beautiful wood.

“Matt! I thought that was your bike! How’s Eva?” Gloria Mead breezes through the open door, her short brunette bob swinging. She grabs my shoulders, pulling me down so she can kiss both cheeks. I’ve known her most of my life, in a distant way. Her husband was on the school board for many years. And Rachel babysat Rob and his older brother Dylan when we were in high school. I don’t really remember that—Rachel and I didn’t become close friends until she moved back to Rotheberg after leaving the military. But I’ve heard the stories about the mischievous Dylan and his quiet younger brother.

Last fall, Gloria donated her late husband’s classic Cadillac to our Soups and Songs auction—and we raised \$90,000. As a result, we won’t have to charge kids for materials for as long as I teach the luthier course. And since the auction, I’ve gotten to know Gloria better. She’s even come to the classroom a couple of times to see the kids’ guitars in progress.

“How are you, Gloria?” I step back as she releases my shoulders. “You’re looking well.”

She grins and shakes her head side to side. “New dye job. Do you like the green?”

“Green?” Rob looks up from his staining. “I didn’t know you were getting a new color.”

She flips the hair back from her ear so we can see the green underneath. “Don’t worry, I’ll go back to blue for football season. Gotta show my Rotheberg Edelweiss pride.” She watches Rob stain for a few seconds, then turns back to me. “I hear you met your crush.”

I choke.

Rob looks up, mild interest written across his face. “Nica Holmes?”

“How does everyone know about that?” And how do they know my celebrity crush? Have I been that obnoxious about it?

Gloria giggles. “Rachel told me, of course. I saw her in town when I was getting my hair done. Wait until you see what color she got.”

“I saw Rachel this morning, and her hair was still blonde.” I should have noticed her haircut, though. I’m the guy who always notices. This Nica thing is really throwing me off my game.

“I know. I tried to talk her into some purple, but she’s so boring.”

Rob shakes his head silently and goes back to his staining.

Gloria grabs my arm, reminding me of Nica. “Come on up to the house. I have something I want to show you.”

Rob raises a hand. He knows better than to try to stand in his mother’s way when she wants something. “See you later. Thanks for the help.”

“I didn’t do anything.” I let Gloria tug me toward the door.

“Good point. I meant, you’re welcome for the excuse.”

Gloria giggles and blows her son a kiss. “That snarky side is why you’re my favorite younger son.”

We stop beside my bike. The garage door is still open, as if Gloria parked her big SUV and came down to see us before going into the house. “Give me your phone.”

I pull out my cell slowly and unlock it. “Why?”

She holds out a hand. “Just give it to me.” She takes it, swiping to the search bar and typing in something. Then she taps and types some more and hands it back to me. “You didn’t get that from me.”

I look down at the screen. A map shows directions to another house on the Ranch. “What is this?”

“Oh, it might be directions to the vacation home of a certain famous movie star. I’ll bet you didn’t know I used to be a realtor. I sold that lot to NJH Holdings back before I married Eric.” She raises an eyebrow at me. “Use it well. With great knowledge comes great responsibility.”

I stare at the phone for a second. “I think you mean ‘with great power.’ I don’t know what to say.”

“You say, ‘thank you, Gloria,’ and stop correcting my paraphrasing.” With a snicker, she pats my arm and disappears into the garage.

The door begins to ratchet down as I call, “Thank you, Gloria!”

Chapter Six



I HIKE down my dad's driveway, my skateboard clutched under one arm. I'm not sure why I'm still refusing to borrow a car—probably part of those daddy issues my therapist likes to remind me of. Fortunately, Dad's property is near the center of the Ranch, so we're not too far from anything.

Maddie texted an SOS from the wedding chapel—something about the flower arrangements. She didn't say why she didn't ask the wedding planner to handle it—with a high-profile client like my dad, I'm sure she's on-site for the setup. Being the good big sister, I'm off to help, but I'm not in a hurry.

At the bottom of the drive—a little too steep for my skill-level—I set the board down and step on. A little push sends me over the crown of the first gentle hill, and I soar down the slope, flexing my knees and leaning to curve along the meandering bike path.

My speed decreases as I roll up the next hill, so I give a couple of good pushes to put me over the top. As I roll onward, a motorcycle passes going the opposite direction, and the driver raises a hand. I wave back—not because I know him, but because we always wave to other residents at the Ranch. I think it's kind of a solidarity thing—we know we've got a good thing going, and we want to celebrate it with the other lucky folks. Or maybe it's an automatic reflex. Whatever the reason, we always wave.

The motorcycle tires screech, but I'm picking up speed, so I don't risk looking. Probably tried to avoid a squirrel. They're

kamikazes, darting into traffic for no apparent reason. I mean, it's not like the pinecones on the other side are better. As I roll through the dip and up the next hill, the motorcycle pulls up beside me. The rider stops and puts a foot down, so I stop too. I probably should have brought my fanny pack with the autograph cards.

“Nica!” The man pulls off his helmet, revealing a familiar face. He beams at me, and warmth spreads through my chest—why am I so happy to see Matt Hertzprung again?

“Hi, Matt. What are you doing here?” I glance around, instinctively looking for photographers. Despite the evidence at our first meeting, paparazzi are rare on the Ranch. However, the details of the wedding were leaked, and the Ranch police have reported two trespassers with photography equipment today alone.

Matt's face turns a little pink. “I was helping a friend.” He waves in the direction I was traveling. “Rob Mead—you might know him? He's about your age.”

I frown and shake my head. “Doesn't ring any bells. Of course, I haven't been here since I was pretty young.”

“I don't think they lived on the Ranch then. But his parents used to own all this land.” He waves a hand around, as if there should be a plaque commemorating them.

As I shrug, my watch vibrates with an incoming text. “Sorry.” I tap the device and groan as I read the message. “I gotta go help my sister. We'll have to catch up later.” I'd much rather stay and chat with Matt, but I promised.

“Where is she? Do you want a lift?” He pauses. “I don't have a second helmet, so we'd be breaking the law.”

I smile and bat my eyelashes, and an automatic reply pops out. “Aren't you a bad boy?” My face goes hot, and I close my eyes. “Sorry, that didn't—”

He holds the helmet out to me. “I'm afraid I'm not very bad, and I'm a long way from being a boy, but I'll risk the citation if you want a ride.”

I pick up my skateboard. “Thanks. But you wear the helmet. If we get stopped, I’m more likely to be able to talk my way out of a ticket. Not that I’m doubting your persuasive abilities, but—”

“No, you’re right. I know all the cops out here, and they’re much more likely to turn a blind eye to you than me. Climb on.” He pulls the helmet over his head, leaving the visor up. “Plus, you know, helmet hair.”

I chuckle as I tuck my skateboard under my arm and straddle the bike. I wrap my free arm around Matt’s waist, my hand sliding up his surprisingly hard abs. He doesn’t wear tight shirts, so I had no idea he had all that going on. I put my feet on the pegs and tap my forehead against his upper back. “Ready!”

He revs the engine but pulls onto the road at a sedate pace. He turns his head and yells back, “Don’t want to give them an extra reason to pull me over. Where are we going?”

My heart flutters. He offered me a ride without any idea how far I needed to go. “Nebraska.” He jerks a tiny bit against my arm, and I laugh. “Just to the chapel.” Did his shoulders sag in disappointment? I lean my cheek against his back as if we’re flying down an interstate. There’s something sexy about riding on the back of a motorcycle, even at this speed, and I’m going to make the most of it.

Too soon, we pull up to the chapel. A dozen cars sit in the lot, casting long shadows as the sun kisses the tops of the mountains. I reluctantly slide my hand away from Matt’s waist and climb down while he holds the bike steady. “Thanks.”

“Do you need any help?” He pulls off the helmet and looks around the parking lot, as if checking for bad guys. “I’m pretty good in a bar fight.”

I giggle. “It’s a chapel, not a bar.”

“That’s good, because I lied. I’ve never actually been in a bar fight.”

“That’s okay—if there’s a fight, it will be between the bridesmaids. Don’t guys have some kind of code that prohibits

breaking up girl fights?”

His head shakes a negative. “I’ve never understood that one. Girls fighting doesn’t do anything for me.”

I stand beside the bike, reluctant to walk away. Every time I see this man, my heart does a little happy dance. It feels like coming home after being on location for a month. Warm. Comfortable. Safe. And now that I know about the abs... Putting a hand on his shoulder for balance, I lean in to kiss his cheek. “Thanks for the ride.”

His head turns just before my lips brush his cheek, and I plant one right on his mouth. His lips are soft and warm against mine, and we both freeze in surprise. I pull back, and he shifts, too. With my weight against his shoulder, I stumble into him. He braces the bike with his legs and holds me, rock steady.

I stare into his bright blue eyes, only inches from my own. My heart pounds. “Sorry. I didn’t—”

“Don’t be. I’m not.” He chuckles a little. It’s a soft, sexy sound that sends shivers down my spine. His eyes travel over my face, stopping on my lips, then back to my eyes. “Today just became one of the best days of my life.”

My face goes hot. I step back, trying to gain some composure with the distance. “In that case, you’re welcome.” I pull out my phone and spin to lean against his bike. “Smile for the selfie.” I shift so the camera frames us with the chapel in the background. Matt twists to slide an arm around my waist, and I put my cheek close to his. “Say camembert.”

Matt says the word with the correct French pronunciation. I glance at him in surprise, then snap the photo. “Have you been to France?”

The corner of his mouth tips up, and he gives me a sly side-glance. “You sound surprised. You think small-town luthiers don’t travel?”

“I—no.” But that’s exactly what I thought. Matt seems like a rural guy. His bike is dusty, as if it’s been ridden on dirt roads. His house is modest, and he drives a Subaru. His

clothing is generic—I looked up the brand on the coat I accidentally stole from him, and it’s from Costco. I suck in a breath. “I forgot—I still have your coat.”

He eyes me for a second, seemingly baffled by the change in subject. “Yeah, you do. You can keep it for now.” He holds out an arm—he’s wearing a worn leather jacket over his jeans and T-shirt. “Although I’d like to get it back eventually—I’ll need it next winter.”

I snicker. “I think I can get it back to you before next winter.” I tap my phone and hand it to him. “Give me your number. So I can arrange a time to drop it off.”

He doesn’t take the phone. “Oh, you can leave it on the porch any time. This is Rotheberg. No one’s going to take—oh.” He breaks off and his cheeks go pink. Then he grabs the device, ducking his head as he enters his number. I reach for it, but he hits the call button, waiting until his own phone rings before handing it back. The move comes straight from the single man’s guide to modern dating and seems out of character. His personality veers between bumbling single dad and hot player faster than I can process.

He hands me the phone with a grin and a patently fake leer. “Learned that from my daughter.”

Oh, yeah, the college-aged daughter. It’s easy to forget he’s got a kid who’s only ten years younger than me. That’s not too unusual in my world. The older guys with more disposable income are always looking for younger women.

But Matt is different. He’s not a slick Hollywood actor trying to reclaim his glory years or retain his young audience. Those guys want to date younger women to stay relevant. Matt doesn’t care about impressing the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old demographic.

Of course, he’s a fan. He probably thinks I *am* that girl he sees on the screen. That’s what the critics always say—I play one character: myself. The sweet little blonde next door. The girl who bakes brownies and takes romantic walks in the park, and yes, ice skates.

Side note: I had to learn to skate because EVERY Christmas movie on the Romance Channel involves an ice-skating scene, and that's my bread and butter.

But I'm not that girl. If I bake brownies, they're from a box—who has time to do that stuff from scratch? And I prefer skiing to ice skating.

Of course, Matt and I already took a romantic walk in the park. Maybe I *am* that girl. Do I want to be?

Ignoring another text—this one from my mom rather than Maddie—I tuck the phone in my pocket and give Matt a quick once-over. He isn't a wealthy actor or producer. He might like to brag to his friends that he dated an actress, but he isn't going to use me to build his brand. He's a nice guy in a nice town—someone I'd like to spend more time with.

And he has great abs.

“Hey, if you aren't busy tonight...”

His head pops up. “I'm not.”

I bite my lip. I'm supposed to keep this thing secret, but Matt already knows about it. “Would you like to come to the wedding with me? My dad may be the groom, but I don't really know most of these people. It would be a lot more fun if I had someone to hang with.”

He glances over his shoulder at the chapel. “I'm no expert on these things, but aren't you supposed to RSVP weeks in advance? Will there even be a seat for me?”

I wave that off. “I know of at least three people who said they're coming but definitely aren't, so there will be plenty of room. Hollywood types are unbelievably fickle. Besides, the bride already gave me heck for not having a plus-one—it was upsetting her seating chart.”

“She's going to be even more upset if you bring one after you said you weren't going to.”

“Perfect.”

“I take it you don't care for the bride.”

I snort. “Do you know who he’s marrying this time?”

Matt shakes his head. “I’m afraid I haven’t followed the celebrity gossip on Nick Holmes.”

“I knew I liked you.” I grin. “She’s second runner-up for this year’s Miss Oregon pageant.”

“Eva had a friend in that pageant.” His eyes go wide as his brain makes the connection. “Your dad is what, sixty?”

I look away. “Seventy. Don’t tell anyone—he likes to pretend it’s a secret. But yeah, he’s marrying a girl younger than his daughter. Almost as young as his other daughter.” I take pity on his confused look. “My sister Madison is twenty-one.”

“And you want to bring an older man to the wedding to prove a point?”

“No!” I wave both hands. “No, I’m inviting you because I like you. Besides, you’re not that much older than me.”

“I’m forty-five.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re twenty-eight. Seventeen years is a significant difference.”

“You know my age?” I shouldn’t be surprised—he’s made it very clear he’s a fan. And I’m actually thirty. But that’s a closely guarded secret. Don’t judge me—Hollywood is all about youth, especially for women.

His face goes a little pink. “I might have done some research.”

Instead of feeling violated, I’m flattered that he bothered. Funny how the difference between adoration and stalking is defined by how much I like the guy doing it. I push away the warm flutters in my stomach and try to focus on the subject at hand. “I like you. You’re smart and funny. And you probably look really good in a tuxedo. If I have to attend my dad’s wedding, I’d prefer to have someone to share the misery with.”

He chuckles. “Sounds like a good time. How did you know I have a tuxedo?”

“You do? I was going to send you to that rental place in Bend.”

He smirks. “My brother has taken me to a few awards shows. I decided it was a solid long-term strategy to have my own tux. Those rentals never fit right. And I don’t want to wear a suit after a seventeen-year-old wears it to prom.”

“Fair enough.” My phone vibrates again. “I gotta go. I’ll meet you here at six thirty?”

“I’ll be here. Tux on.”

I give him a brilliant smile. “Fabulous.”

Chapter Seven



MATT

BELTING out one of my brother's latest hits, I pull the car out of my garage. I glance at the tuxedo jacket swinging on a hanger behind the passenger seat. The thing cost a fortune, but Nica's right—I look pretty good in it. At least, pretty good for a middle-aged luthier. I may not have the shoulders and pecs my brother works so hard to maintain, but I've stayed in shape.

I'll probably look ridiculous next to the A-listers who will be attending this thing. Slick, polished men. But Nica asked me, not one of them. My huge smile reflected in the rearview mirror, I pull onto the highway headed for the Ranch.

When I reach the Ranch, I turn down the Meads' driveway but park in front this time instead of by the garage. Still humming, I stride across the walk and ring the doorbell. A deep tolling rolls through the house, like the doorbell from the Munsters.

I've just pressed the button a second time—really, who could resist?—when Rob opens the door, shaking his head. “Can you believe she picked that? A hundred different ringtones, and she wants that one.”

“Seems completely in character to me.” I walk past him and into the round foyer. “She said she'd help me with my tie.”

“You need my mom to tie your tie?” Rob gestures toward the arched doorway leading into the massive living room.

“Judy always—”

He cuts me off. “Yeah, sorry. Never mind. Mom! Matt’s here.”

Gloria hurries across the large room. Their house is huge, with double height ceilings, tall windows looking across the golf course, and wide, polished wood floors. The walls hold artwork, some of it expensive, some of it framed pieces Dylan and Rob did in elementary school. Neither of the boys were particularly artistic, so the juxtaposition is kind of amusing.

“Don’t you look nice!” Gloria takes my hand and pulls me toward a chair. “Sit, so I don’t have to climb on a step stool.” She pushes me down, then pulls the ends of the tie even and loops one over the other. “There’s a black-tie event at the Ranch tonight?”

I try to hide my smile, but it won’t stay off my face. “I’ve been invited to a private event.”

She gives me a speculative look. “A private event at the wedding chapel, perhaps? With a reception to follow at the hotel ballroom?”

I blink. I should have known Gloria would be in the loop. “How’d you know?”

“I know everyone at the Ranch, sweetie. It would be more surprising if I didn’t know. Besides, I was invited, too.” She waves a hand at her dress. She’s wearing a red gown with a full skirt that shimmers in the lamplight. “Did you think I put this on to do the dishes?”

I glance at Rob. He’s also wearing tuxedo pants and a white shirt. I guess I was so wrapped up in my own little fantasy I didn’t notice. I turn back to Gloria as she puts a finishing tug on my tie. “You look fabulous.”

She smiles and pats my cheek. “You’re not so bad yourself. Do you want to ride with us? Or would you rather have your own vehicle handy? In case you need to help a certain someone make a quick escape?” Her eyes narrow. “You aren’t driving your dirty old Subaru, are you? Or your motorcycle?”

“I washed the Subaru!” I stand and adjust my cuffs. “And cleaned the inside. Not that it will matter. I’m sure Nica will want to stay for the whole event.” After what she said about her dad and his new wife, I’m not at all sure of that. My face gets hot. Was I supposed to keep my date a secret?

“No, you need to drive something nicer if you want to impress a girl like Nica Holmes. And if you think she’s going to want to stay for the whole event, you don’t understand women very well.” She turns to her son. “Grab the keys to the SUV, Rob. Matt can drive it, and we’ll ride in your car. I almost wish I still had the El Dorado—now that’s a date car!”

“She’s already ridden in my car, and she didn’t mind.”

“Ooh, really? I want to hear all about it!” She takes my arm and pulls me toward the kitchen. “But for now, you need to get going. You said you’re supposed to be there at six thirty. Don’t want to be late.” Rob tosses a keyless fob, and she catches it one-handed, then presses it into my palm. “Take the Escalade. Even if Nica’s okay with your Subaru, the other guests won’t be. I don’t usually care what people think, but sometimes it’s good to fit in.”

“But my jacket is in my car.”

She pushes the door to the garage open and nudges me through. “Grab it on your way out, silly.” She pushes a button on the wall, and the big door rolls silently up.

I look at the big black vehicle. It’s definitely a classier car than Subie Doo. And I know Gloria well enough to know she won’t take no for an answer. “Thanks.” I lean down to kiss her cheek. “See you over there.”

“Save a polka for me.” She winks as she turns away.

I climb into the luxurious car and press the button to start the engine. The big vehicle rolls onto the driveway in what feels like silent splendor—this thing has much better sound proofing than poor Subie. I stop by the little green car to grab my jacket from the hanger. Tossing it across the passenger seat, I climb back in and drive to the chapel.

When I arrive, a line of high-end vehicles blocks the entrance to the parking lot. Half a dozen men and women with big cameras stand behind a rope to one side of the building, a Ranch police officer watching them. At the front of the chapel, uniformed valets open doors and take keys. I wait in line until I get into the lot, then cut between the orange cones to park in the back corner. I don't want to hand my friend's expensive car over to a teen in a red vest. As I walk toward the building, Riker Silver—the Rotheberg High School quarterback, whose dad owns a car dealership—revs the engine of a bright red Lamborghini and grins at me as he squeals away from the curb. I give myself a mental pat on the back. Excellent decision.

I slip through the open doors into the lobby which stretches the width of the building. The double doors to the chapel are open, and well-dressed guests stream through, taking seats on both sides of the main aisle. I move to the side, watching the rich and famous greet each other. Their voices fill the stone-floored lobby, but picking out individual conversations is almost impossible.

“See anyone you recognize?” Nica's voice murmurs, soft in my ear.

I start and turn. “You snuck up on me. And you look... amazing.”

She smiles and does a little twirl. A navy blue sheath clings to her figure. A wide band sets off her slender neck, while the halter-style top leaves her shoulders and arms bare. She wears impossibly high heels, and a slit reveals her right leg to just above the knee. Not exactly the usual wedding wear for Rotheberg, but perfect for this assembly.

Her eyes travel over me, and heat rises in my chest. “There's something about a guy in a tux.” She bites her lip and fans herself.

I laugh and take a little bow. “Thank you. Don't tell anyone I had to get help with my tie.”

She tucks her hand around my bicep and nods at the crowd. Her faint floral fragrance wraps around me, leaving my

knees weak. “See anyone you want to meet?”

I wrack my brains for a Hollywood A-lister’s name. The only one I can think of right now is standing next to me. Finally, I hit on her newly announced co-star. “Is Ryan Davis here? He seems like a nice guy.”

“Of course he’s nice. He’s Canadian.” She giggles. “I don’t think my dad knows him. Dad is old guard, and Ryan is... current. Now if you wanted to meet Frank Solari or Ed Bucholz, we’ve got you covered.” She nods at the well-dressed but mostly older people streaming through the entrance. “Or any one of a hundred different IP lawyers.”

“No, I’m good. Don’t feel you need to introduce me to people. I’m just a seat filler.”

Her brow wrinkles. “Don’t call yourself that. You’re here as my guest, not as a nameless body.”

A flood of warmth rushes through me at her easy words. Nica certainly knows how to make a guy feel like a celebrity. She tugs me toward the doors. “Come on, let’s get a seat.”

She nods to one of the ushers as we enter and takes a program, then pulls me to the right side of the room. The big windows behind the altar frame the mountains, and a nearly full moon hangs just above the Middle Sister. Light glimmers on the water hazard at the fifteenth hole, but the red cinder “sand” traps look like dark pits.

We stop near the fifth row in the little chapel. It holds ninety people comfortably with a maximum capacity of 120. Or so the Ranch wedding planner told Blake when we visited on Monday. It’s nearly half-full already. “Don’t you have an assigned seat?”

“Nope.” She slides onto a bench, leaving me a space at the end.

“But you’re the daughter of the groom.” I wave at the front pews that have been roped off with garlands and ribbon.

“I’m the *elder* daughter of the groom.” She chuckles, and the sound feels like champagne bubbles in my throat. “What

bride wants to be reminded she's now the stepmom to a thirty-year-old?" Her hand flies to her mouth.

"Thirty?" I raise my eyebrows with a smirk. "I thought you were twenty-eight."

Her eyes widen, and she bites her lip again, then places a hand on my forearm. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

I give her a puzzled look. "No, of course not. Who would even care?"

"You're kidding, right? Didn't we just have a conversation about how old my dad wants people to think he is? Hollywood is brutal on aging."

"That makes no sense. Everyone is getting older. Pretending you aren't only perpetuates the idea that youth is required for success." Something Rob mentioned one day while we were working on the bed comes back to me. "Although I guess it's similar in the computer industry. I have a friend who's only twenty-nine—for real—" I wink, then regret the action when she doesn't smile. "He's scrubbing his birth year from every public source for the same reason."

"I believe it. Age discrimination is for real. Especially for women. As soon as you hit thirty, they start casting you as someone's mother."

"Lots of thirty-year-olds actually are mothers."

"Not to thirty-five-year-old men." She nods emphatically but keeps her voice at a whisper. "Yeah, that's how Hollywood rolls. Dudes can age, women over thirty are past their prime. I am twenty-eight for the foreseeable future."

"Do you want me to tell people my age? I can lie, so you look younger in comparison." I turn a little and hold out a hand to an imaginary guest. "Hi, Matt Hertzprung. I'm thirty-three."

She bites back a laugh as she slaps my shoulder. "No. Don't talk about age at all. It's much safer."

I manfully change the subject. "Who's sitting in the front row, if you're relegated back here?"

She waves at the far side of the chapel. “The first two rows on that side are for the bridesmaids. She has eight of them, including my little sister, Maddie. My half-brother, John, is the best man. He’ll stand up front with my dad. The rest of the groomsmen will sit on this side. With the exception of John, they’re all dates of the bridesmaids.”

“Are you saying they couldn’t bring a plus one?”

“No, Destiny *required* each bridesmaid to bring a date to be in the wedding party. So weird. She wanted to make sure the wedding pictures are full of beautiful young people, I guess. My dad doesn’t have that many friends anymore—at least none who could be here.” She lifts a shoulder. “To be fair, his friends have already attended more of his weddings than anyone should have to.”

Before I can respond, the organ sounds the opening chords to the wedding march. The chattering breaks off, then resumes when the music doesn’t continue. The organist hits the notes again, and people finally filter into seats and settle down.

When the crowd has quieted, the music starts in earnest. The electronic piano in the choir loft is state of the art and features an impressive array of realistic musical voices. Strings soar and woodwinds sing. I turn in my seat to see a small orchestra packed into the tiny space. That’s why it sounds so real—it is. I should have expected only the best for Nicholas Holmes.

The bridesmaids and groomsmen pace in, doing that step-pause thing you only see in movies. They must have practiced for hours because the synchronization is perfect. Each couple waits until the one before gets halfway down the aisle before starting. Having been in a couple of weddings myself, I know how difficult it is to maintain that slow pace.

After the seven beautiful young couples reach the front, a small girl in a huge dress follows. I lean closer to Nica, my arm pressing against her bare back. I suck in a breath at the electric touch, but she doesn’t appear to notice. “That little girl is impressively focused.”

Nica's snicker vibrates through my arm and to my core. "That little girl is a paid actress. She's probably twelve, playing six. Destiny wanted everything to be perfect, and apparently her sister's kid isn't quite as coachable."

I shake my head. What would it be like to have a stand-in hired to replace you in your aunt's wedding? That poor kid is probably scarred for life.

As the little girl approaches the altar, the eighth bridesmaid steps into the chapel, and the main doors thud shut. The little girl sprinkles the last of her rose petals, twirls slowly, allowing the dress to bell out, then retreats toward the side door, drawing every eye. She steps out of the way as two men stride toward her—the groom and his best man. They pause just outside the door, and the little girl slips past them, her job done.

Nicholas Holmes looks exactly like his publicity photos. Thick white hair brushed back from his temples—if that's really a hairpiece, the designer deserves to be paid their weight in diamonds. Trendy glasses frame his famously blue eyes. His tuxedo lapels glimmer in the candlelight as his lips quirk in his well-known, closed-mouth smile—more of a smirk, really. He waits a beat, then paces to the center of the room.

His best man looks like a pale imitation. The same wavy hair but dark, less fashionable glasses, and a crooked grin that makes him look like he just tasted something bad. This is obviously Nica's half-brother John, a slick Hollywood lawyer. I've read Nicholas John Holmes II is as charming as he looks, which is to say, not very.

The strings crescendo, and the music ends. The maid of honor—a young woman who looks enough like Nica that she must be the half-sister—has arrived almost unnoticed and takes her place on the left, overshadowed by their charismatic father. The organist jumps in again, repeating the familiar opening chords to the wedding march, but this time, she goes on. The audience stands, and we all turn toward the back. Someone throws the double doors wide from the other side, and the bride is framed in the opening.

She's beautiful, of course. Every woman Nick Holmes has married was beautiful. There was a photo collage of all six of them on the cover of *Talk to Us* magazine. Not that I normally read it, but it's impossible to miss when I go to the checkout stand at Bi-Mart. Plus, I'll admit anything remotely related to Nica always gets my attention. I actually bought a copy of that one, but the article barely mentioned her.

An older man hovers beside Destiny—probably her father. With his dark tuxedo and gray hair, he seems to fade into the background beside her brilliance. She's wearing a form-fitting, tissue-thin white dress. Heavy beading accentuates the hem and covers the private areas in a decorative bikini overlay. The side is open all the way up, and the gauzy material is laced together over her hip with sparkling string, leaving a two-inch gap. I turn away, feeling a little ill.

The bride and her father pass us and proceed to the front of the chapel. I can't tell what the back of the "dress" looks like—her thick blonde hair streams almost to her knees. According to the magazine, her extensions cost thousands. Sparkling crystals and glittering ribbons of lace are woven into the blonde tresses, with the occasional flicker of pink and blue appearing as she moves.

I glance at Nica out of the corner of my eye, and her lips twitch up in an adorable smirk. Swallowing a snicker, I look away, trying to focus on the happy couple. The officiant has appeared from somewhere—he probably followed the groom out of the side room while we were watching the bride. He wears a brilliant rainbow striped robe as if trying to compete for attention. When the music stops, he flings his arms out, the fabric snapping. "Mawwiage! Is what bwings us together, today."

A giggle goes around the room as people recognize the line. I lean closer to Nica. "Did he really just quote *The Princess Bride*?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Destiny insisted." She pauses, then goes on. "It kind of makes her more likeable."

This opening sets the tone for the wedding. I'm hoping it was unintentional, but the officiant's opening statements sound like a tongue-in-cheek comment on the institution rather than heartfelt support of the commitment. There are no Bible passages read—instead, one of the bridesmaids reads a poem written by a famous rapper who couldn't be here for the occasion. Even the brief homily sounds ironic.

The bride and groom recite their vows. Holmes's deep voice carries easily through the room. He recites the words like a Shakespearean soliloquy, the professionally crafted sentiments that promise little beyond his current admiration rolling off his tongue. Destiny's thin voice sets off a feedback squeal which is immediately squelched by the sound technician in the choir loft, but we miss the beginning of her vows. She gets halfway through, then stumbles to a stop. The maid of honor hands her a small card, from which she reads the rest of the speech, pausing at all the wrong places.

Nica closes her eyes, but I can't tell if she's sympathetic or bored.

Rings are exchanged and the officiant pronounces them married. Holmes grips the bride and gives her an Oscar-worthy kiss that devolves into an R-rated grope as she paws at his clothing. Someone yells, "Get a room!" and the audience laughs half-heartedly. Then the strings swoop in, saving the day, and the couple hurries down the aisle.

"That was..." I start but can't think of anything neutral that's also true.

"Ironic? Sad? Uncomfortable?" Nica takes my hand and pulls me to the side aisle. "Come on, we're going to sneak out the back. I have to get to the reception."

She hurries up the side aisle, still holding my hand. I follow, just happy to be with her. We duck into the little room at the front where the officiant is pulling the rainbow robe over his head. He emerges from the folds of fabric as we reach the door. He gives a little one-finger salute and winks. "Beating the crowd?"

Nica smiles. “Sorry to barge through, but yeah. I’m the emcee for the reception, so I gotta hustle.”

“You have plenty of time.” The minister carefully folds his robe. “They’ve got a whole *thing* planned for the exit, with birdseed and butterflies and a flash mob.”

“A flash mob?” We’re out the door and headed around the side of the building before I finish the question.

“Where did you park?” Nica pauses at the corner, looking back at the golf course. “It might be faster to walk.”

“I’m at the back of the lot.” I pull the key fob out of my pocket. “If you’d warned me, I could have parked across the street.”

“Sorry. They had Guy Parker lined up to do it, but he came up with an excuse to cancel.”

“Guy Parker? The game show voice?” I stare at her. “Mister ‘let’s win some money’?”

She smirks. “Remember whose wedding this is. It’s all a big show. Gotta have the best. But when your big money announcer falls through, you gotta grab the next best thing. In this case, a D-list actress who happens to be your daughter.” She points at herself.

“You’re not a D-lister—did he say that?” I gape at her.

“Of course not. He wouldn’t be so crass. It was carefully implied.” She peers around the corner. The cheerful strains of a viral pop song blast out. “We’d better go.” She gestures toward the parking lot with her free hand, still gripping mine in her other.

I squeeze her fingers, pulling her around, and stare into her eyes. “You’re an A-lister to me. Always have been.” Her eyes flicker, and I realize how stupid that sounds. I don’t get to define who’s on which Hollywood list. Clearly her standing matters to her—and her father. “I—”

“Thanks. That’s really sweet.” She leans in, her high heels giving her extra inches, and kisses me on the cheek. The

feather-light touch of her soft lips against my skin sends my heart into overdrive.

Nica Holmes kissed me. Twice. I remind myself she's an actress. She gets paid to make men like me fall in love with her. She's putting on a show for anyone who might be watching. Making the fans feel appreciated is undoubtedly second nature to her.

But she's very good at her job. Even knowing it's all an act, I'm caught. Hook, line, and sinker.

Chapter Eight



MATT IS DRIVING a massive Cadillac with high seats and narrow running boards. He opens the front door with a chivalrous bow. I look at my tight skirt and the high step. This is going to take some effort. And potentially an embarrassing wardrobe malfunction. I dart a panicked look at the chapel. “They’re almost done! Hurry!” I give him a little push.

As he disappears around the front bumper, I turn my back to the car. Bending my arms up and back, I put both hands on the smooth leather seat, flex my knees, and jump. At the same time, I straighten my arms and shove myself into the car. I land half-way across the chair, my head bouncing off the armrest. With a quick twist, and a prayer of gratitude for my Pilates instructor who insists on a rigorous triceps routine, I get myself upright and into the seat before Matt can open his door.

He parks the Cadillac near the front of the hotel parking lot. We evaded the paparazzi at the chapel, and no one is stationed here yet. As I wait in the passenger seat for him to come around and open the door, I take a second to check my makeup and take a selfie. The overhead light and dark background lend drama to the shot.

The door opens, and I reach out to pull him closer. “Let’s get another picture.”

He laughs and leans in, his cheek close to mine. “I’m sure we can find a better backdrop than this.” He points at the image on the phone—a streetlamp hovers over our heads, giving us a weird full moon vibe.

“Good point.” I slide the phone into my tiny beaded purse and sling the long strap over my shoulder. Twisting sideways, I swing my legs out of the car and hold out a hand. Matt’s warm fingers close over mine, steadying me as I slide past the running board to the ground.

He swings the door shut behind me and beeps the locks as we stride into the beautiful lobby. A uniformed employee stands near the entrance, with a tablet in hand. “Name?”

Matt gives the young woman an incredulous look that makes me smile. “Nica Holmes. Plus one.” He jabs a thumb at his chest.

The woman bites her lip. “I have Ms. Holmes down as solo.”

A flicker of discomfort passes across Matt’s face before it goes blank. “I don’t have to stay.”

I put a hand on his arm. “Don’t be ridiculous. They must have you listed separately.” I turn back to the woman. “Surely Drew Robinson is on your list?”

Her eyes flick to Matt and back to me. “Ye—es, but that’s not him. That’s Mr. Hertzprung.”

Matt’s lips twitch.

“Do you know who Drew Robinson is?” I ask.

The woman—actually a teen, now that I get a closer look—shows me her tablet. A headshot of the famous jazz musician fills the screen. “That’s him.” She points, her face uncertain. “Right?”

I chuckle. “That’s him. But he’s not here tonight. And Mr. Hertzprung is with me.” The girl opens her mouth again, but I cut her off. “I’m the daughter of the groom, and Mr. Hertzprung will be taking Mr. Robinson’s place.”

“I’m not sure I’m allowed to make substitutions, Ms. Holmes.” She looks at Matt, as if he will confirm this.

“It’s okay, Typhanee. Ms. Holmes really is the daughter of the groom, and I can confirm Mr. Robinson didn’t attend the wedding. If he shows up, I’ll leave. Okay?”

She bites her lip again. “I should probably check with Ms. Mac.”

He nods as he pulls out his phone. “I’ll text Stella. Ms. Holmes has to get inside, so how about I let you know what Ms. Mac says when she replies?” He types something in, shows her the message with a smile, then edges toward the ballroom doors.

“I guess?” She pulls out her own phone and taps the screen.

“You know where to find us.” He points at the open doors, then grabs my hand and pulls me through.

I laugh. “That was a new experience.”

“What, you don’t get turned away from your father’s wedding reception by a teenaged bouncer every day?”

I pull him around and tow him toward the DJ set up in the corner. “No.”

“Or do you mean how my small-town-high-school-teacher-mojo saved the day? You may be famous, but in a place like Rotheberg, teachers are practically mythical. Kids are always shocked to see us in the real world. It’s like they think we don’t exist outside the school.” His phone vibrates. He looks at the screen, then shows it to me with a laugh.

STELLA

This better not be one of your pranks. If I find Drew Robinson locked in a closet somewhere, you’re toast.

“She believed you?” My brows draw down in surprise, and I carefully smooth my face. The last thing I need is permanent wrinkles. I’m not ready for Botox.

“We’re friends. She knows I’d never do anything to risk her job. Plus, I’m sure the rumor mill has already spread this across town.” He gestures between us.

It’s too late to worry about the “secret” wedding. The paparazzi are all over this thing, already. “What are the gossips

saying?”

He flushes. “Everyone knows I’m a huge fan of yours. I’m sure word got around that I managed to wrangle a date with you to the wedding. They’re probably all cheering for me.”

“That’s sweet. And I’m the one who did the wrangling.” I’m still not sure why, but I’m glad I did. This has already been more fun than it would have been solo. I take a couple steps closer to the DJ and wave to catch his attention. “Hi, I’m Nica. Dad asked me to kind of emcee this thing.”

The DJ looks affronted. He folds his arms across his broad chest, stretching his ABBA T-shirt tight under his tattooed biceps. “What’s he need you for? I’m a full-service DJ.”

Great, I’ve offended the over-priced celebrity tune-spinner. I shrug. “It’s my dad’s wedding, and he wants me to say a few words. How about you do the warm-up and let me introduce the couple, and we’ll call it good. I don’t want to interfere with your gig.”

The arms drop, and his lips press together as he considers this. “Fine. But I get to say Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Holmes.”

I frown at him. What does he think “introduce” means?

“I mean, you can do the wind-up, but I get to say the names. It’s in the contract.” He pulls his phone out and scrolls through it while Matt and I exchange a confused look. Then he shoves it at me. “See paragraph ten A.”

I squint at the screen. Sure enough, the contract says he introduces the couple. “I think that means you have to make sure it happens, not that... never mind. We’ll do it your way. Thanks for your help.” I step back, nodding.

He grunts and shoves the phone into his pocket. “You can talk during the toasts. That’s the appropriate time for family to speak.”

Matt catches my eye. He’s trying to hide a grin, but it’s peeking out at the corners of his mouth. “Seems like it’s all under control.”

“Great, thanks.” I nod and survey the room. “Where do you suppose Mr. Robinson was supposed to sit?”

Matt points to an easel near the front door. “I’m guessing the seating chart is over there.”

We walk around a couple of glittering tables and approach the easel. It announces the wedding of Mr. Nicholas Holmes to Ms. Destiny Blanchette with a discreet QR code. I point my phone at the square, and it opens to a webpage announcing the wedding. Under a menu with links to photos, wedding party biographies, weekend events, maps, and special offers by corporate sponsors, there’s a seating chart. I type in my name and a circle on the diagram glows. “I’m at table thirteen. Back here.” I tap a chairback at a table near the DJ, then point across the room. “You’re up front.”

Matt stares at the other table and back at me. “I have to sit up there?”

“No.” I read the names of the people seated at my table and grab a place card. “No. Oliver James, whoever he is, will be sitting in Mr. Robinson’s seat.” I hurry across the room and swap out the cards. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled. Ilka Stringer is sitting next to him.”

“Who’s Ilka Stringer?” Matt trails behind me as I swap the name cards and swing around to head back to my table.

“She’s an adult actress my father once had an affair with.” I plunk Robinson’s card in front of the now empty place. “She’s sixty years old, so Oliver James might not be thrilled after all.”

“Your dad invited his old girlfriend to his wedding?”

I snort. “Not just *an* old girlfriend. Ilka is the reason my mom divorced him. I’m sure it never occurred to him that Destiny might—heck, Destiny probably doesn’t care if a middle-aged former mistress comes to her wedding.”

“That is seriously messed up.” Matt stares at the place card for a second, then strides across the room toward the bar. “I think I need a drink.”

“Welcome to my world.”

The young bartender ignores us, busy rearranging boxes of booze under the bar. Matt knocks on the faux marble top. The guy doesn't even glance up. "Sorry, we're not open yet."

I move around the end of the bar to see what he's doing—and to flash a bit of leg. He shoves a second box of bottles under the lower shelf and straightens. "Sorry, ma'am, the bar doesn't open for—" He glances at his phone sitting on the bar top. "Twenty minutes. I gotta get organized."

Ma'am? Yikes! I glance at the mirrored wall—maybe it's time for that Botox after all.

"Can you make an exception for us, Bryan?" Matt asks.

The kid's eyes jump to Matt, and he smiles. "Hey, Mr. H! I never expected to see you here!"

Matt carefully avoids my eye. "I'm just hanging out with a friend at her dad's wedding. Any chance you can get us a drink? A soda is fine, if you can't open the hard stuff yet."

Bryan sets down a pair of highball glasses. "I can serve you now, Mr. H. What'll it be?"

Matt raises an eyebrow at me. I order a white wine, and he gets a beer. The kid hands over the drinks with a flourish and logs them into his tablet. Matt tries to pay, but he waves him away. "Open bar, Mr. H. Have a good evening." He nods at me. "Ma'am."

Matt shoves a couple of bills into one of the glasses and takes my arm to guide me away as Bryan goes back to organizing his setup.

I rub a hand against my chest. "Ouch. I'm used to going unrecognized, but I won't lie, being called 'ma'am' hurts."

"His parents were military—he calls everyone sir or ma'am. My friend Rachel loves it." He pulls out the chair at my place and gestures to it. We sit.

"Rachel?" Jealousy twinges in my chest, but I push it down. Number one, this is not a relationship. Number two, he said "friend," and it sounded casual. Number three—I mentally throw my hands up. I'm not fooling anybody.

“My brother’s fiancée. And my next-door-neighbor. We’ve been friends forever—we both teach at the high school.” He flicks his phone and pulls up a picture. He and Blake frame a blonde woman with striking features. A big sapphire ring glints on the woman’s upheld left hand. “They’ve been engaged for a few months, but he gave her the ring on Monday—at the chapel...”

The memory of Matt and Blake standing in front of the chapel altar with a blue box comes back to me, and I nod. “You did say teachers are like celebrities here.”

He mugs a big, cheesy smile. “You’re outta your league, Nica Holmes.”

Chapter Nine



MATT

BY THE TIME the guests finally start filtering in, Nica and I have finished our drinks. I'm telling her a story about the Halloween haunted house, and she doesn't even glance away when people wander past our table. Her laughter rings out, drawing every eye, and I bask in the glow of her attention.

Rob and Gloria arrive, finding their seats at the table behind me. I wave, but Gloria steers her son right past us. That woman is a gem—I like Rob, but next to him, I must look old and scrawny.

“Excuse me.” Speaking of scrawny, the guy standing behind Nica's chair makes *me* look buff. “I believe this is my seat.” He waves his phone at us. This must be Oliver James.

I tap my place card. “Sorry, this is my seat.”

He looks at the app again, then squints at the calligraphy on the white card. “You're jazz legend Drew Robinson? May I say you're looking good for seventy-five?”

Nica twists in her seat and flutters her eyelashes. “Don't be silly. He isn't *that* Drew Robinson!”

“Nica! How nice to see you again.” He shakes her hand.

She smiles uncertainly. “How long has it been?” She clearly has no idea who this guy is, and she's not really trying to hide it.

“It's me, Oliver James—I work with Richard Lewis? At the law firm?” The skinny man flashes crooked teeth at her and adjusts his glasses. “Destiny said she'd seat me next to

you, since you didn't have a plus one." He puts a hand on her bare shoulder. Anger sparks in my chest, but I clench my fists and wait to see if she needs my help.

She stiffens, and distaste flickers across her face, then vanishes into a conciliatory smile. "Oh, that's a shame. Destiny must have made a mistake. Drew here is my plus one." She twists in her chair and puts a hand on my arm. The move should have pulled his hand from her shoulder, but he maintains his proprietary grip.

I raise my brows at Nica. She must see the murder in my eyes, and she gives a tiny headshake. I push down my instinct to deck the pencil-necked geek.

"No." He finally removes his hand to poke at his phone. "I specifically asked if you had a date, and she said you'd be alone. There's nothing wrong with that." He puffs out his skinny chest, making it clear that being male makes his solo attendance more socially acceptable. "I told her I'd keep you company."

I get to my feet. "There's obviously been a mistake. Nica and I are here together. Maybe someone botched the seating chart." I pull out my own phone and find Drew Robinson's seat. "See—they had me at this table, but my place card was here. Clearly, there was an error."

"Yes, there was." He stretches his neck out, as if trying to make himself taller. I easily have three inches on him. "The mistake is that you're supposed to be sitting over there." He points across the room—in the wrong direction. "I'm supposed to be with Nica."

Rob Mead appears behind James. With his broad shoulders and perfectly fit tux, he looks like a secret service agent. His voice is low and smooth. "Is there a problem?" His eyes flick from my face to the place card, which he can't possibly read from this distance. "Mr. Robinson?"

I stand corrected. "There's been a small mix-up with the seating chart, but Mr. James was just going to his seat. At table three." I nod at the table in question.

Gloria appears on James's other side. "Did I hear you're a lawyer? I've been looking for a new one. Tell me about yourself." She grabs his arm and turns him away from the table. Rob closes in behind, herding him away.

Nica doesn't move, her eyes darting wildly, as if she's afraid of breaking the spell. After a couple of beats, she relaxes and giggles. "That was amazing. Who are those people?"

"Friends of mine. I'll introduce you later." I watch over Nica's shoulder as Rob directs James to his new seat and Gloria introduces him to a well-endowed woman on his right—the retired adult actress, no doubt. "I think Ollie just met his new BFF."

Nica turns to look. Her shoulders tighten, then she turns back. "Perfect. They deserve each other."

Other guests take their places at our table. Nica introduces herself to a couple of appreciative men, their start-struck wives, and another bland lawyer. They accept me without question—too entranced by Nica to pay me much attention. I chat with the bored kid on my left—son of the couple ignoring each other across the table. He shows me the game on his phone and challenges me to a match.

"Maybe another time."

A blare of music, like a discordant wall of sound, blasts from the speakers. "Yo, play-ahs! This is Sharp Hip Supreme in the hiz-ouse!"

The kid beside me cheers but colors and ducks his head when no one joins in.

Nica coughs. "Who hired this guy?"

I shrug. "I've never heard of Sharp Hip Supreme. But I'm not really up on my celebrity DJs."

"Either he's the latest thing—and based on that intro, I'm going to guess *not*—or he's a wannabe. I think Destiny's mom did most of the wedding planning, and Dad paid the bills. That's his usual wedding strategy."

I try to imagine a world in which anyone I know would have a “usual strategy” for their weddings but fail. I know plenty of people who’ve tied the knot more than once, but it’s never been “usual” for any of them. But I guess when you’re working on number six, you get into a rhythm.

Sharp Hip Supreme finishes telling us how wonderful he is and starts into a long introduction for the newly married couple, completely forgetting his agreement with Nica. The music blares again, and the doors burst open. The wedding party slinks and grooves into the ballroom like well-trained extras in a music video.

The bridesmaids all wear the same color, but their dresses are each styled differently. Nica’s half-sister Maddie spins in a move that obviously required years of classical training, her fluffy skirt belling around her. Her stiff-looking half-brother, John, takes her hand and guides her around the room, looking more like a robot than a dancer.

Lights flash, and colored smoke billows into the room. The bride and groom stride through it, smiling. Destiny, dressed in a new yet similarly risqué white dress, shimmies and dances around Nick, who regards her with a possessive smirk. The music finishes with a flourish, and the group all take a bow. I heave out a sigh of relief—the cringe factor on this display was ten out of ten.

Nica gives me an understanding yet mocking smile. “I’m sure we haven’t seen anything yet.” The bridal party take their seats, and the music drops to a tolerable hum as servers enter with the first course.

As the meal progresses, the DJ introduces and referees a series of unusual activities. We play two uncomfortable question-and-answer games at our table, then he starts pulling people away from their meals for party-wide contests. The constant activity gives us little time to chat with our fellow guests, which is probably the point. Nothing stops small-talk cold like an eighty-year-old singing “You Sexy Thing.”

Dinner is excellent, of course. I catch a glimpse of my friend Stella at the back of the room, pausing to speak with

each of the bartenders. Normally she'd delegate this kind of event to her staff, but Nick Holmes is important enough to rate the big dogs. I wink at her as I get drinks for Nica and myself, and she smiles back, her eyes tired.

The DJ reluctantly gives up his mic after dinner, and Nica gets her chance, introducing the best man and maid of honor when it's time to toast the happy couple. She moves on to the father of the bride, a man who looks to be at least a decade younger than Holmes. He chokes out a few words, but he's so wooden it's impossible to tell if he's proud or resigned.

"And finally, a man who needs no introduction, but I'm going to do it anyway. Because if I don't, I'll have to find a hotel room." The crowd chuckles—clearly Nica's rocky relationship with her father is well known among this crowd. She goes on to mention several of his famous movie roles and tells the story of stopping at the Rotheberg Bäckerei. It's charming, but impersonal. The audience applauds and laughs in all the right places, responding to Nica's excellent public speaking skills.

"Without further ado, the groom, my father, Nicholas Holmes!" She kisses the old actor on the cheek and hands him the mic. Holmes gives her a perfunctory one-armed hug, then beams at the audience, launching into a story that hopefully includes his new bride at some point.

Nica smiles her professional smile and takes her seat beside me. "That's done. You wanna get out of here?"

"Now?" I gesture at Nick who's clearly in his element.

"Do you want to stay for cake?" Her smile stays in place, but her eyes are tight at the corners.

"I can get cake at Helmut's."

She puts a hand on my arm before I can stand. "On second thought, let's wait until the dancing begins. It will only be—" She glances at her father. "I was going to say a second, but I'm revising my estimate upwards."

I tune out Nick's voice, focusing on Nica. She looks worn—as if that charming but impersonal speech took everything.

“Are you okay? We can go now.”

She smiles again and scoots her chair closer. “No. He’d never forgive me for walking out while he’s talking.” Her arm presses against mine and her hair brushes my cheek.

I suck in a deep breath, filling my lungs with her intoxicating scent. I’d sit through Nick Holmes reading the dictionary for her. “As you wish.”

She giggles and bounces her shoulder against my arm as we endure the rest of the speech. Nick offers the mic to his bride, but she declines. I can’t believe he’d allow himself to be upstaged, so I’m guessing that was planned in advance. Then he takes her hand and leads her onto the dance floor, swinging her in a wide circle that somehow makes him the center of attention rather than her. The DJ spins up “The Time of My Life.” The lights dim, and a spotlight glares down on Nick’s silver hair and his bride’s long blonde extensions.

Nica pushes her chair back with a jerk. “Now. I don’t think I can watch my dad dirty dancing with—” She smiles vaguely at the other guests at our table. “It was so nice to meet all of you.” Without waiting for a reply, she hurries toward the back of the room.

I nod at the others, give the kid a high five, and follow Nica, catching up to her by Bryan’s bar. She turns to face the dancing, inching backwards to stop beside the boy. “Is there a back way out of here?”

I raise an eyebrow at Bryan, who jerks his head toward the corner of the room. Nica gives him a wink and a thumbs-up, then grabs my hand and pulls me into the dim corner. The door has no knob, but swings open at her touch. We step into a narrow corridor, and I push the panel shut behind me. Then we take off toward the sounds of dishes and chatter.

The kitchen is hidden behind swinging double doors with round windows that cut most of the clatter of cleanup. Nica hurries on toward a blank door at the end of the hall. She pushes it ajar, revealing a smaller room that’s thankfully empty. Double doors release us into the lobby.

Gloria Mead rises from a comfortable chair as we enter. “Why’d you take the long way?”

“I didn’t want to get caught leaving.” Nica steps forward and holds out a hand. “I’m Nica Holmes. Thanks for rescuing us from the lawyer.”

Gloria ignores her hand and envelops her in a hug. “You’re welcome. That guy was *mucho* creepy. My son Rob is getting the car. Do you want to come over for a drink?”

Nica bites her lip and raises her brows at me. “I don’t have any other plans.”

I give her a tight look that I hope says, “only if you want to.” She nods, so I turn back to Gloria. “Sounds great. I have to return your car anyway.”

“Perfect.” Gloria heads for the door. “Meet you there.”

Nica grabs my arm. “Maybe I should go home—back to my dad’s place. I don’t want to intrude.”

“Won’t your dad and Destiny be going there tonight?” I make a face. “I’m sure your dad has a big house, but do you really want to share it with the newlyweds?”

“They’re spending the night in the honeymoon suite at the Lodge. Then they’re off to Tahiti in the morning. Or maybe Bali? I honestly wasn’t paying that much attention.” She smiles, but her eyes look tired.

“If you want to go to bed—” My face goes nuclear hot. “I mean, if you’re tired, I’ll take you home.”

She touches my cheek with one slim finger. “You’re sweet, but I’m too keyed up to sleep. Let’s go hang with your friends.”

Nica follows me across the parking lot to the Escalade. I open the door, but she just stands there, looking around the quiet parking lot. Whatever she’s looking for doesn’t happen, and she gives me a sheepish smile.

“Can you help me?” She gestures helplessly to the slit in her skirt. “It’s not high enough and I don’t want to tear it.”

“How did you get in earlier?” I reach out but can’t figure out how to help her without getting intimate.

She grabs my wrists and puts one hand on either hip. The cool fabric of her dress slides under my calloused fingers. I press my palms against her perfectly shaped hips, and my heart seems to stop. She sucks in an audible breath, then says, “Lift on three.” Her voice is husky, and she stares up into my eyes.

I can’t form a coherent thought. I’m here, in the moonlight with Nica, holding her. I swallow hard, and my breath catches in my throat. Her perfect lips part, and she leans in a little closer. My heart starts again, pounding in my chest like an avalanche.

A car honks, breaking the spell. She laughs shakily and looks away. “One, two, three!”

I lift her hips as she presses up with her arms. The force of our combined efforts almost throws her back into the car. Her legs fly up, and I leap back to avoid taking a stiletto to the throat. She lands across the seat and starts giggling. The tension leaves my body in nervous laughter. I wait for her to pull her legs into the car, then close the door and hurry around to the driver’s side, still snickering.

“We rode in this car before. How did you get in back at the chapel?” I pull onto the road.

She wrinkles her nose in an adorable smirk. “Pretty much the same as we just did.” She flexes her arm. “That was before I had three glasses of champagne and enough roast beef to feed a family of four.”

“I can’t believe I missed it.” I flush. “I mean, I thought I was watching you—” I break off. “Wow, I sound stalkerish. Sorry.”

She laughs. “That was when the fireworks went off. You were distracted.”

The flash mob in front of the chapel had included a pyrotechnic show as well as an “impromptu” live performance by upcoming pop star and YouTuber Dizzy Dee. Avoiding her

live song had prompted much of my haste. I don't understand why she's famous.

And yes, I realize I sound old. Get off my lawn.

We wind along the dark roads, turning into the Meads' driveway. Their house is located behind others on the street, offering them some privacy as well as the stunning fairway views. We crest the little hill, and their house comes into view below. Lights glow in the entrance, illuminating the arched doorway. Well-placed spots shine on the witches-hat top and the perfectly manicured front yard.

"It's like a castle! Stop the car!" Nica scrambles for the door handle.

I stomp on the brakes and put the vehicle in park. "What are you doing?"

"I can't pass up a vid op like this." She pushes the door open and twists around until she's standing halfway out of the car, leaning against the door. "Cut the headlights, will you?"

From here, I can only see her legs—which isn't a hardship, especially with one peeking through that slit. At her request, I peer at the dashboard and finally locate the headlight button. Then I lean across the seat to see what she's doing. She points her cell phone at herself, with the house in the background. "Isn't this amazing? My new friends have the coolest house!" She freezes for a second, then taps the screen. Still perched on the edge of the car, she twists around to film the house. Then she drops back into her seat and shuts the door.

I sit there, staring at her. "What was that all about?"

I can't really make out her face in the faint lights of the dash, but her voice sounds a little defensive. "Sorry. Self-promotion is a fact of life in my industry. If I see something I think my fans will like, it's second nature to take a video."

I look down at the house. It is pretty spectacular. "They won't be able to see where it is, will they? I don't want Gloria hounded by your fans."

"Oh, no, my location data is turned off. I don't want anyone finding me. And I'll wait until I get to Seattle to post

this one.”

I ease the car down the hill and past Subie Doo. The garage opens as we approach—whether it’s some automatic magic Rob has created or someone has hit the button, I don’t know. I pull into the garage and cut the engine, trying to stay casual. “You’re going to Seattle?”

She opens her door and glances over her shoulder at me. “On the way to LA, of course. There wasn’t a direct flight on Sunday.”

I get out of the car, taking a second to get my face—and my emotions—under control. Cold loneliness trickles into my heart, which is stupid—I just met this woman, and I knew she’d be going home. With a deep breath, I close my door and meet her at the front of the car. “You’re heading back tomorrow?”

She nods. “I’ve got a movie to make, remember?”

Chapter Ten



ROB MEAD REFILLS his mother's wine glass, then leans across the coffee table to top mine off. I put a hand over the glass before he gets there. "No more. I have to fly tomorrow, and I don't want a hangover."

The big man looks at his smart watch. "You mean you have a flight today. What time?"

I pull out my phone. It's almost one. "Yikes! I had no idea it was so late. My flight is in the afternoon, thank goodness. Three-ten takeoff. Which means I have to leave about noon."

The others laugh.

"What?"

Matt picks up our glasses and rises. "Redmond is a very small airport. An hour is plenty of time."

"What about traffic?"

They laugh again.

"You might have a ten second delay at the roundabout." Rob gets up, too. "But I have to drive back to Portland in the morning, so I'm going to head to bed."

Gloria wrinkles her nose and picks up her glass. "You young people are such party poopers. It's the weekend."

Matt comes back and puts a hand on her shoulder. "Next weekend is SpringFest. You can stay out partying as late as you want."

She points a finger at Matt. “You don’t have to be anywhere tomorrow. Stay and keep me company, young man.”

He grins and bows a little. “Thanks for the ‘young’ part, but I’m a morning person.” He yawns as if to prove the point. “This is way past my bedtime.”

Gloria jumps to her feet, shaking her head in dismay. With her back to Matt, she winks at me. “We’ll have to work on that. Nothing says ‘old’ like going to bed early. Look at me. I’ve got at least fifteen years on you, and I’m ready to party. Maybe I’ll go back to the wedding reception.” She stumbles a little, and Rob catches her elbow.

“Save the partying for next weekend, Mom.”

Gloria pouts. “In that case, *prost*.” She tosses back her wine, then detours to place the glass on the counter. She looks steady enough.

“Thank you for having us over,” I tell the Meads. “It was so nice to relax with friends after that...” I gesture vaguely in what I think is the direction of the hotel.

Gloria chuckles. “It was definitely... an experience.”

Matt holds my jacket, and I slide my arms into the sleeves. “Which part? The weird vows? The karaoke at the reception? The Pictionary game?”

“You have to admit, with a guest list that eclectic, having activities to keep everyone occupied was a good idea.” Gloria leads us toward the door. “The hula hoop contest was a bit much, though.”

I close my eyes. I will never get the image of my father swinging his hips out of my mind. I had to egg him on, though, since my brother radiated disapproval the whole time. He’s such a buzzkill. “Anyway, thanks for having us. This was so much nicer than staying there. Or just going home.”

“It was a pleasure getting to know you a little, Nica.” Gloria swoops in and gives me a squeeze. “And you’re always welcome here. Truly.” She pauses by a little side table in the entry and opens a drawer, then swings around and thrusts a card into my hands. “There’s my number. Call me any time.”

Rob and Matt close in to peer over my shoulder at the little rectangle. The gold-edged pink card has her name and phone number printed on one side and a QR code on the other.

Matt taps the graphic. “Where does that go?”

“My website. It has links to my social media.” Gloria grins in response to Rob’s look of confusion and horror. “You didn’t expect that from your old mom, did you?”

Rob shakes his head slowly. “Nothing you do surprises me anymore, Mom. Although I’m curious who made the QR code—and the website.”

“I hired Typhanee to do it for me. Gotta stay with the times.”

“Typhanee? That girl works everywhere.”

I pull out my phone and point it at the card. A website pops up with a stack of buttons linking to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. “You have a TikTok account?” I press that button.

A video of Gloria duetting TikTok phenom Dizzy Dee pops up. “You’ve got some moves, Gloria. You know this song is wildly inappropriate, though, right?”

Matt starts laughing, while Rob makes a grab for the card.

Gloria grins. “Spicy sells.”

“You are not wrong. It’s hard being the queen of clean rom-coms.” I close the app and slide the phone into my purse. Then I snatch the card from Rob’s fingers. “This is mine. You can get your own.”

Rob stutters for a second, then finally says, “I have no words.”

“I thought nothing surprised you anymore.” Gloria grins at her son as Matt pulls the front door open.

“I stand corrected.”

We laugh as we head for Matt’s green Subaru. Gloria and Rob stand in the doorway, waving. Matt opens the passenger door for me and helps me into the car, as if it were a royal

carriage. As we rumble up the driveway, the lights on the house change colors in a quick rainbow.

Matt looks in his rearview mirror. “That’s new.”

I start giggling again. “Do you think Rob knew about the lights? She is a hoot.” I type her number into my phone and save it, then tuck the card into my tiny purse.

“Gloria definitely marches to her own drummer. Everyone loves her, and with good reason. She’s the most generous person I’ve ever met. She donated a classic car to our auction last fall. We raised ninety K on that car alone. Enough to fund all our arts classes for—well, practically forever.”

“What’s Rob do?”

“He’s CEO of a tech company. Some kind of computer app. His office is in Portland, but he’s been spending a lot of time in Rotheberg lately. Gloria broke her leg last fall, so he started coming to help out, and I think he’s worried about her being lonely. And his brother is opening a new bakery in town. He might be involved with that, too.”

We drive through the pines, the almost full moon casting bright slashes of light across the dark road. We pass the horse pasture and wind around the golf course. “My dad’s place is near where we met this afternoon.”

“I know.” His voice sounds guilty.

“Did you spy on me?” I ask lightly.

He brakes at a stop sign and turns to look at me. “I might have had some intel.”

“I should have known your appearance wasn’t random. How’d you find me?”

He shrugs. “A friend was involved in the original real estate deal, believe it or not.”

“For my dad’s place? That was over thirty years ago.”

“Don’t you mean twenty-eight?” Laughter underpins the words.

I chuckle. “Dad bought it before I was born, so thirty-plus is accurate. I’m amazed anyone remembers that.”

“I think your dad was even more famous back then. He still makes quite an impression.” He turns up the driveway.

My dad’s house is bigger than Gloria’s but not as pretty. It’s a massive, modern slab that would look more appropriate on a cliff overlooking a California coast than in the pine forest of central Oregon. He built the monstrosity before Copper Butte Ranch instituted their building requirements. In fact, according to my mother, this house is the reason the Ranch added appearance restrictions to the homeowner’s regulations.

Brilliant lights shine on the flat white walls and reflective glass. Three wide garage doors break up the lower level, and a narrow deck wraps around the upper. A large swimming pool and deck stand to one side, and wide stone steps lead up to the front door.

“This is... unusual.” Matt stops the car on the broad, featureless front drive and stares at the blocky thing.

“I loved coming here as a kid. The place is huge and great fun for playing hide and seek. If you can find someone to play with.” I hear the hint of a whine in my voice and swallow it, forcing a cheerful tone. “The garages and storage are downstairs, and the living areas are all on the upper floor. It goes on and on with lots of steps up and down. Nine bedrooms, ten bathrooms, film screening room, gym, sound booth—you know my dad does a lot of voice-over work these days.”

“Hm.” He sounds distracted as he looks at me, his eyes roving over my face.

I know what’s coming—he’s going to want to stay in touch. I like Matt, but I’ve got a life in Tinseltown. Filming on my first feature film starts next month. I need to have zero distractions. When he reaches for his door handle, I touch his arm. “I’ve had a really good time tonight. Much better than I expected, to be honest.” That is one hundred percent true. “Thank you for spending time with me. And for introducing me to your friends. Rob and Gloria are awesome.”

“Tonight was amazing.” His blue eyes burn into mine. “I know I’m supposed to play it cool and be all detached, but I like you. So much. And I have for a long time. Spending an evening with you has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And I know you have to go back to California and that I’m just an ordinary guy, not one of your amazing Hollywood friends, but I feel like we kind of clicked. You know?”

I look away. I felt it too, but I can’t admit that. I’m not the girl he thinks I am. He’s in love with the characters I play on the Romance Channel, not the real Nica Holmes, who is a disaster. I’m not the sweet little girl next door—I’m a mess of insecurities wrapped in an attractive package. I’m like one of those mass-produced cupcakes. They look so delicious, but when you get one, it’s just meh.

I’d rather have Matt remember me as a single magical date. I put a finger on his lips in a gesture I’ve used a thousand times on film. “I had a wonderful time. Let’s not let reality spoil the moment.”

He pulls back a little. “I had fun too. Maybe we can get together next time you’re in town.”

I lean over to find my purse which slipped off my lap earlier. “I don’t come up here very often. In fact, this was my first visit since my teen years.” I find the sparkly little bag and check for my phone, then reach for the door handle. “But sure, next time I’m up here, I’ll look you up.”

“You have my number.” He reaches over to take my hand, holding it gently in his rough grip. His eyes lock onto mine again. “Call me. Any time.”

I smile, trying to hide the melancholy. I won’t be calling him. “Thanks, Matt Hertzprung.” I lean in quickly to kiss his cheek, his stubble rubbing against my lips in a way that sends a spike of fire through me. I pull back, fling the door open, and make my escape before my heart convinces me to stay.

Chapter Eleven



A THICK LAYER of yellow-green pine pollen covers the purple wisteria blossoms, giving them an almost neon glow. It happens every May—a sure sign that summer is starting. The temperatures rise dramatically during the day, but because we're in the mountains, we still get close to freezing at night. Then the trees let go with a glorious—and annoying—cloud of dust.

The Memorial Day ceremony at the Stadtplatz ended right on time, with the flag being hoisted to full staff at noon. Volunteers from the Rotheberg Veterans of Foreign Wars post flip burgers and brats on the grill. I bring my plate—loaded with an empty bun and a massive spoonful of potato salad—to the bratwurst line. With a conspiratorial grin, Rachel clicks her tongs, then gives me the crispiest sausage. “I saved the burnt one for you.”

“Perfect. The char gives it better flavor.”

“Sure. If your taste buds are defective.” She rolls her eyes, then makes a shooing motion. “Don't hold up the line, Hertzprung.”

With a smirk, I move out of the way before old George Braun steps on my heels again. Today he's wearing worn corduroy slacks and an ancient button-down shirt that used to be white. It's a delightful change from his two default modes: pretzel costume or nude. “Naked George” is legendary in Rotheberg.

I set my plate on an empty table, then detour by the coolers and grab a soda. The Goatherd has a bar doing brisk business across the square, but I'm not in a drinking mood. Plus, the soda is free, thanks to the VFW. I've got two more years of college to pay for.

"Is this seat taken?" Stella MacMillan arrives with her two boys in tow. When I shake my head, she turns to the kids. "Eat your lunch, then you can go play." The kids drop onto the benches at the far end of the table and dig into their burgers.

"Where's Mick?" I ask.

"Beer." Stella jerks her head toward the bar. Mick's red hair makes him easy to pick out among the customers milling in front of the Goatherd's stand. She picks up her brat. "It's been a day already. Did you know we have a cemetery on our property?" Displaying an excellent sense of dramatic timing, she takes a huge bite.

"What?"

Stella holds up a finger as she chews, making me wait for the payoff. She finally swallows, then grabs a plastic stein from her husband as he arrives at the table. She takes a quick swig. "You heard me. A cemetery."

"In Munich Meadows?" Mick and Stella have a home in a neighborhood about two miles south of town. Although they're well outside the city limits, the homeowners' association requires the houses to adhere to the alpine theme—as evidenced by the name. "That area was developed a decade ago. How was it not discovered when they did the excavation?"

Mick sits next to his wife, his face completely blank, except for a twitch at the corner of his mouth. He nods hello and digs into his burger, as if to say, "Don't ask me, I'm just here for the food."

Stella sends a dark glance down the table at her kids. "Oh, it's a new cemetery." She takes another slurp of her beer. You can't rush Stella when she's telling a story.

I try anyway. “New? Did they get a permit from the county? Wasn’t there a public comment period?”

Mick chokes on something and grabs for his beer. He avoids eye contact, focusing on his meal with laser intensity.

Stella shoots a glare at him that looks suspiciously like the one she threw at the kids. She points. “His children started a roadkill cemetery.”

Mick snorts a little.

I stare at Stella. When I realize my mouth is hanging open, I snap it shut. “What is a roadkill cemetery? Is this a southern thing?”

Stella slams her bratwurst onto her plate, her eyes blazing at me. “Do not pin the blame for this on me. There is nothing remotely southern about a roadkill cemetery!”

Mick is rocking in his seat, choking down his laughter, but failing to keep his amusement contained. Stella rounds on him, pointing her finger again. Her drawl gets thicker when she’s agitated. “Do not start again, Michael MacMillan!” She throws up her hands and swings around to me. “He has been laughing about this all morning! His children have been riding their bikes around town, picking up roadkill, and bringing it back to bury in our yard! They made headstones! HEADSTONES!”

Mick spews beer over his meal, and I’m grateful he didn’t sit across from me. He howls with laughter. Tears roll down his cheeks. Everyone in the Stadtplatz turns to look while Stella glares at her spouse.

I try to keep a straight face. “How civic minded of them,” I finally mutter.

Stella cracks a smile at that, and a giggle sneaks out. “Don’t try to make me laugh, Matt Hertzprung. This is serious business.”

Mick pulls his phone out and swipes. “Look at this one!” He hands me the device. The picture shows a chunk of pine tree—probably liberated from the family firewood stack. Someone has burned in a date and the words “Squirly McSquirilton. You were a cheeky guy.”

“That’s some quality woodburning.” I raise my brows at the boys giggling at the end of the table. “I hope you wore safety gear.” The kids nod solemnly.

“Don’t encourage them!” Stella reaches across the table and slaps my arm. Hard.

“I teach woodshop. They’re showing promise.” I bite back a smile as I turn to the kids again. “I hope to see you in my class when you get to high school.”

Noah, the older one, nods, while Aiden speaks through a mouthful of potato chips. “Can I make a saxophone? That’s what I want to play when I get to fifth grade.”

I shake my head sadly. “Sorry, only guitars. And ukuleles. I’ve never seen a wooden saxophone.”

The kid’s face wrinkles in disappointment, then brightens. “Maybe I’ll be the first.”

“Aiden, don’t talk with your mouth full!” Stella heaves a sigh. “Do you see what I have to deal with?”

“They’re boys, Stella.” Mick looks at his beer-sprinkled burger, then shrugs and picks it up.

“They’re boys with a psychopath for a father. If you hadn’t given them the idea, they would have never come up with it.”

I glance at Mick. “Did you have a roadkill cemetery as a kid?”

“We did all kinds of things back in Wisconsin. I was just trying to get them outside.” He taps the edge of his phone. “Gotta cut down on the screen time any way we can.”

“We do not have to encourage our children to collect dead rodents to keep them off the computer.” Stella glares, but the twitching of her lips makes it obvious she’s not really angry. “In fact, we have several bathrooms that need to be cleaned, if they’re looking for gross jobs.”

The boys give each other a startled look, then shake their heads. Noah grabs his half empty plate. “No, ma’am, we’re good. We’re going to go play now.” He darts toward the closest garbage can.

Aiden shoves a few more chips in his mouth, then follows his brother.

Stella waves them off, rolling her eyes. “Like I’d let them near my bathroom. They can clean their own, though.” She downs the rest of her beer and shoves the plastic mug at her husband. “And you can get me another drink, instigator.”

Mick puts down his burger and gets to his feet, shaking his head. “Good thing I brought my credit card to this free barbeque.”

Stella watches her husband move into the beer line, then turns back to me. She leans close, her voice low. “You didn’t hear this from me, but Nick Holmes is back at the Ranch.”

I sit up a little straighter. Stella never spills the tea on Ranch residents. Why is she telling me this? “He hasn’t been seen here since the wedding.”

She curls her fingers in a “come closer” gesture. I lean across the table, barely able to hear her words. “He had some kind of medical incident.” She sits back and raises her brows.

“A heart attack? Is he okay?” I do a quick google search, but this news hasn’t been made public.

Stella wags her hand back and forth. “I saw him arrive the other day. He’s got a caretaker with him. A man. The property manager requested a guest pass for him the day Nick arrived. But there’s no sign of Mrs. Holmes.” She wrinkles her nose in sympathy. “Or Nica. Poor guy’s basically alone.”

“She may not be aware he’s been ill. She said they don’t communicate particularly well, and it didn’t make any of the celebrity news sites. Besides, she’s been in Georgia.”

“How do you know that?” Stella arches a brow at me. “Have you been keepin’ up on our famous resident? Or did she tell you?” Her eyes sparkle with excitement. “Has she been in touch?”

“No.” I pick up my bratwurst, avoiding her gaze. “She hasn’t contacted me.” It feels like the whole town knows my business. Over the last three months, I’ve gotten questions, congratulations, and even jealousy as the rumors of my

“relationship” with Nica spread. I acknowledge that I attended the wedding with her—there’s no way to deny that, since too many locals worked the event—but offer no details. And every time someone has brought it up, the little stab of pain has lessened. A little.

I know, it’s stupid to feel loss over a relationship that never happened. But I’ve been a fan for so long, my imagination built our brief encounter into a whole romantic story. And let’s face it, a steady diet of Romance Channel rom-coms and Hallmark movies probably hasn’t been the best choice. That’s why I went cold turkey last month. Today marks my twentieth day without seeing Nica. And I’m feeling a lot better. Until now. I take a deep breath and let it out. I’m over her. Really.

“Sorry.” Stella pats my hand. “She seems like a lovely girl, but you live different lives.”

“And she’s way too young for me.”

Stella laughs. “You went to that wedding. There is no such thing as ‘too young for me’ in Hollywood.” Her eyes dart toward the beer stall. Mick has finally gotten two more and is headed toward us. She leans back in her chair. “Anyway, I thought you should know. About Nick Holmes. I know you won’t tell anyone.”

“Thanks.” Why did she think I should know? I didn’t even meet the guy. And obviously his daughter isn’t rushing to his side. Time to change the subject. “How are your rehearsals coming?”

Stella takes the beer from her husband. “I’m not sure Maria is going to make it. That girl has a voice like an angel, but she cannot remember her lines. Good thing they got an understudy.” She smiles.

“You?” I hadn’t realized Stella was vying for the main role in the town’s annual Sound of Music production. “Aren’t you a little—” I break off, not sure how I’m going to say this without getting slapped again. Or possibly murdered in my sleep and buried in a roadkill cemetery.

Her eyes narrow into icy slits. “Am I what? Too old? Too curvy? Too talented?” Her soft, southern drawl takes on a hard edge.

“No. I was going to ask how you’re going to wear Hannah’s costumes. She’s at least six inches taller than you.” She’s also fifteen years younger and built like a stick, but I’m not saying that.

Stella glares a few more seconds, then snickers. “Good save. But you know they have those costumes in a million different sizes. The woman who played Maria three years ago is built more like me.”

I nod. “Well, if you need to run your lines, let me know.” We’ve learned our music and done the basic blocking for the show, but the real work starts this week—at least for me. The director has been focused on the scenes with Maria and the kids. I shake my head. I love working with the teens at the high school, but you could not pay me enough to be the director of a play with seven kids in it.

“Thanks, sugar.” She puts a hand on Mick’s forearm as he sits. “I got my own built-in line runner. And he owes me. Right now more than usual. But if you need some practice, let me know.”

I nod. “Thanks.”

Chapter Twelve



MATT

AFTER THE BARBEQUE, I head home. I have some work to do on the upstairs bathroom before Eva comes back from college next week. I installed a new sink as a surprise—this vanity has a lot more counter space than the original. I probably should have done it years ago, but Judy didn't want to spend the money. The new cupboard has more storage space, and I painted the walls and replaced the mirror, too.

I hang a new shower curtain—to coordinate with the fresh paint—and reinstall the cover plates on the electrical fixtures. When I go to Bend, I'll pick up some coordinating towels, too. I'm not an interior decorator, but I can match colors as well as anyone.

After dinner, I pack my lunch for tomorrow and throw the bag of candy I bought into my backpack. This is the last week of school, and I like to give the kids a little treat. I'd normally work long hours this week—there are usually a few kids who don't get their guitars finished before the end of the school year. But this year was an exception. Three instruments still need their tuning pegs installed, but otherwise, we're done. It really helped to have a second luthier assisting with the teaching. I'm not a fan of Mike's guitars—he works for a rival guitar company—but he's a first-rate woodworker.

The doorbell rings, startling me. Blake and Rachel are the only ones who normally drop by this late, and they walk right in. A doorbell at this time of night probably means—I'm not sure what it means. I frown as I stride into the entry. Visions of state police reporting an accident quicken my steps.

I pull the door open. Nica Holmes stands on my doorstep, wearing jeans and a dark coat—my puffy jacket. The one I let her keep, in hopes she'd bring it back to me. "Nica!" I can't believe she's here. It's as if Stella conjured her into existence. "What a surprise!" I give myself a mental head slap. Stupid, inane thing to say.

"Hi." She just stands there, looking a little lost.

"I thought you were in Georgia." I snap my lips closed. Way to go, Hertzprung. Show her you're stalking her.

"I finished filming a week ago." Apparently, she's used to random acquaintances knowing her schedule. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." I swing the door wider and let her in. "How'd you get here?"

She waves a vague hand. "I borrowed a car from my dad."

I stick my head out the door. A vintage, bright yellow Porsche 911 sits in my driveway, the last glimmers of the setting sun burnishing the fender. "Wow, that's some loaner car."

She shrugs out of the coat, and I take it from her, draping it over one of the hooks by the door. "Dad has three of them. I don't touch his racing car, and I like the '75 better than the new one."

I gesture to the living room. "Would you like something to drink?"

She stands by the couch, gripping her hands together. Her pale face is devoid of makeup, and dark circles shadow her eyes. Her hair, a dark red now, falls around her face in a messy shag. "Actually, do you have anything to eat? It's been a while." As if agreeing, her stomach rumbles.

"Sure, come into the kitchen." I pull a stool away from the high counter as I herd her toward it. "Sit. Is leftover Chinese okay? It's homemade, so it's not very authentic. Peanut butter chicken with broccoli." I pull the still warm containers from the fridge.

She nods, so I scoop some rice into a bowl and top it with a generous serving of the chicken and veggies. “Water? Beer? Wine?”

She pulls her gaze away from the food as if it takes an effort. “Whatever you’re having.” Her eyes dart away again.

“I already ate.” While the microwave runs, I pull a couple of glasses from the cupboard and fill them with cold water. Putting one in front of her, I study her drawn face. Is this about her dad? “Are you okay?”

She sips the water and pushes a few wisps of hair away from her face. “I’m not sure. My dad—” She breaks off and gives a little shiver. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone, but I need to tell *someone*. I know I can trust you. He’s had a medical emergency.”

I nod. “It’s not quite as secret as you might think.”

Her eyes snap to my face. “How did you find out?”

I mentally curse myself. I don’t want to throw Stella under the bus. “Someone at the Ranch said they saw him. He’s not exactly hiding from his neighbors.”

She hesitates then nods. “That makes sense. Thanks for not publicizing it.”

I shift uncomfortably. “I would never say anything. And a lot of folks at the Ranch understand the need for privacy. How’s he doing?”

“I don’t know.” The words come out in a soft wail. “He won’t let me in.”

“But you have his car.” I wave toward the front of the house.

“Yeah.” She hunches a shoulder. “He came down a few days ago. I flew in today—took a QuikTrip from the airport. Not our old friend Peter.”

“Paul. Paul Turner.” The microwave dings, and I slide on an oven mitt to grab the dish. Peanut-scented steam rolls out as I pull the cover off the dish and set it in front of Nica. “Hold

on.” I grab a bag of chopped peanuts and sprinkle some on top, then hand her a fork. “*Bon appetit.*”

She leans forward and breathes deeply. “This smells fantastic. Did you make it?”

“One of my signature dishes.” I smirk. “You should try my chicken alfredo.”

She scoops up a tiny forkful. “Maybe I should.” She takes a bite and chews. “This is really good.”

I make a theatrical bow. “Don’t sound so surprised. I’m a man of many talents.”

Nodding, she eats a few more bites while I put the containers back in the fridge and wipe the counter.

After clearing half the plate, she puts the fork down and sips her water. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was. I haven’t eaten since—I don’t remember when. Maybe yesterday?”

I pull out the chair next to her and perch on it. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

She scoops up another forkful, then puts it down without eating. “I’ve been filming in Georgia. A movie with Hugh Harper and Ryan Davis. My big break, I hope—a chance to move to the big screen.”

“I remember.”

“We were mostly finished—doing a few pick-up shots over the last week—when I got a call from the hospital. Dad and Destiny were in Seattle for something, and he collapsed. She dithered around, then finally called the hotel concierge, and they called 911. Destiny is not good with emergencies.” She says this in a flat tone that doesn’t hide her disgust. “The hospital staff told her it was a stroke—that he’d likely be paralyzed on one side. I guess that really freaked her out. I flew to Seattle, and she was already gone.”

“She left your dad?” I had gotten the impression Destiny was immature and self-absorbed, but I had no idea it was that bad.

“Yes and no. She refused to go to the hospital. She stayed at the hotel and got everything second-hand. That’s why the hospital staff called me. She wouldn’t meet with the doctors, and I’m still listed as an emergency contact in his medical records.” She sips some water. “I got there last Saturday—a week and a half ago. It wasn’t as bad as they thought, but he’s lost a lot of mobility. I stayed for a couple of days but had to go back to Atlanta. I arranged for a car to bring him down here and someone to help him get settled in. While I was gone, Destiny showed up. And when I arrived today, she wouldn’t let me in! I demanded to borrow the car—told her I’d camp out on the deck if she didn’t give it to me.” She lowers her voice. “I didn’t tell her about Peter.”

I raise my eyebrows in question.

She smirks. “The QuikTrip guy. She thinks there’s no service out here.”

“Paul.”

“Right, Paul. Destiny arranged for a private nurse. Some guy called Justin. Destiny brought him in, told him some story about how I’m not to be trusted. Then she left.” She stops, staring off into the distance.

“How do you know all this? Were you still on the deck?”

She grimaces. “She told me Justin would take care of Dad while she was gone. She didn’t say where she was going or when, so I parked down the road and watched. She didn’t even notice me when she drove by. How do you not notice that?” She waves a hand toward the front of the house. “A yellow 911 is not exactly stealthy. I expected her to stop and pick a fight, but she just zoomed by—at a zillion miles per hour. I hope she got pulled over.”

“Maybe she was going to the store?” I wince a little as I offer this suggestion. I don’t want to upset Nica, but I try to be fair.

She shakes her head, her blue eyes sparking. “No. I went to the house. *Justin* wouldn’t let me in.” She says the name as if she believes it’s an alias. “But he did tell me Destiny was

headed back to LA. Dad will be furious if she leaves his Porsche in the airport parking lot.”

“Did you call your dad?”

Her eyes close and her hands clench. “I tried. *Justin* answered the phone. Said I wasn’t allowed to speak to him. I told him I’m Dad’s emergency contact, but he said not anymore. That Dad doesn’t want to see me.” Tears pool in her eyes. “He’s always been... mercurial, but I was just with him. I was there, in the hospital! I got him home! Why wouldn’t he want to see me?” The tears spill over, and she puts her hands over her face.

I jump off my chair and wrap my arms around her. She slides hers around my waist, pressing her face to my chest as she cries, her body heaving. I hold her tight, stroking her back and letting her get it all out. Her unfamiliar red hair feels oddly stiff against my fingers but smells just like I remember. Funny how scents stick with you over long periods of time. I’d recognize Nica with my eyes closed.

After a long time, she gives my ribs a little squeeze and pulls away, wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry. I just—I might have some daddy issues I’m trying to work through, and now this... Rejection always gets me.” She pats her chest, right over her heart. “But from him, it’s so much worse.”

I step back. “That makes sense. But it sounds to me like Justin is the one doing the rejecting. That Destiny told him to push you away, not that your dad did.”

A little life sparks in her dull eyes. “Do you think so?”

“I do. You need to talk to him. But it’s late and if he’s been ill, you won’t want to do that now. You should get some sleep. Where are you staying?”

She bites her lip and ducks her head, looking up at me in a way that makes me long to do whatever she asks. “Could I—I don’t want to check into a hotel. Even with the wig, people might recognize me. Social media from the filming is blowing up right now.”

“Do you want to stay here?” My heart jams in my throat, and I can barely get the words out. I swallow hard. “I have a guest room. And we could move your car into the garage, so no one notices it.”

“Do you mind? I hate to bother you—but you’re the only person I really know around here. Not that we know each other that well. But I know you won’t sell me out.” She lifts her chin and meets my eyes. “Only for a night. I know if I can talk to my dad, I can—I don’t know. If he doesn’t want me here, I’ll go home. But I need to hear it from him, not *Justin*.”

“It’s no problem. I have plenty of room.” I lunge across the kitchen to the key rack hanging by the garage door. “I’ll move my car out of the garage so we can put yours inside.”

“I don’t want to—”

“Trust me, if you don’t want anyone to know you’re here, we need to hide the car. No one will believe it’s mine. And in Rotheberg, everyone will be asking about it before lunch tomorrow. Especially if it’s out there overnight.”

“Won’t they think it’s odd your car is outside?” She follows me into the garage.

I wave at the woodworking tools filling the second bay. “I move it outside when I’m working on a big project. Subie Doo might be old, but he doesn’t deserve to be covered in sawdust.”

She smiles for the first time this evening. “You call your car Subie Doo?”

I hit the garage door opener, then move around to the driver’s side. “His predecessor was Subrina. But Subie’s obviously a guy.” I pat the roof of the car as I open the door. “Go ahead and back out of the driveway. I’ll park on the far side so you can get in.”

She nods and gives a thumbs-up, then hurries through the door before it’s completely open. The Porsche rumbles to life and rolls down the slight incline. I climb into Subie Doo and back out to park him in front of the closed second door. If anyone is really paying attention, they might note that I

usually park on the right side when I'm not in the garage, but I doubt anyone cares that much about my car.

The yellow car eases up the apron and into the garage. I beep my locks shut and follow the Porsche in, stopping by the door to click the closer.

Nica pulls a large, pink carryon from the passenger seat. I take it from her hand and lead the way into the house and upstairs.

"Your room is here." I flick on the lights and step into my guest room. A queen-sized bed with a log-cabin quilt in shades of green and brown dominates the room. A tall dresser stands beside the door to a small closet, and heavy drapes frame a window that looks out onto the backyard. I set down the case by the dresser and flip the quilt back. "I need to put sheets on this. The bathroom is across the hall." I nod at the door. "Eva's room is next door. Don't go in there."

"I wouldn't—"

I hold up a hand. "I wasn't suggesting you'd snoop. I'm just warning you it's not safe. There could be a yeti hiding in there, and I wouldn't know. The amount of junk that girl accumulates is terrifying. She doesn't even live here nine months out of the year! And when she gets home next week, it will be even worse." I try to stop babbling as I pull a stack of sheets from the bottom dresser drawer. "She tries to take over this room every summer, and I fight her off."

"I'll be gone before she gets home." She moves to the far side of the bed to help me stretch the fitted sheet over the mattress.

"There's no hurry. The room is yours for as long as you need it." The homey activity feels so comfortable and normal. As if we've lived together for years. My face gets warm as the thought registers. I turn away to grab the top sheet, then fling it over the bed, hoping to distract her from my undoubtedly bright red face. We tuck in the sheet and straighten the blankets in silence.

Nica shakes a pillow into its case and tosses it to the head of the bed. "I'm going to use the little girls' room."

"There are clean towels in the linen closet." I stack the four pillows and loiter in the hallway for a moment. It just feels creepy, though, so I pause by the bathroom door. "I'll be downstairs."

A muffled "thanks" comes through the door, and I head down. I fidget in the kitchen for a while, putting Nica's dishes in the dishwasher and setting the timer on the coffee maker. I set a pair of plates on the counter, ready for breakfast, then put them away again. Maybe she doesn't eat breakfast. Maybe she doesn't like coffee. Do I have any tea? I dig through a lower cupboard and unearth a container marked English Breakfast.

"Thanks for letting me stay."

I jolt to my feet in surprise, tea tin clenched in my hand.

Nica stands near the couch. She's wearing a pair of pink shorts and a matching tank top. The red wig is gone, and light brown hair falls to her shoulders. I like this look better than the blonde last spring. Her face is clean, almost shining. She looks so pure and fresh.

And so attractive. My heart starts to race as I realize she's in her pajamas. I suck in a deep breath. "You're always welcome here."

She smiles. "You're a nice man, Matt Hertzprung. I got really lucky when I found you." With a blown kiss, she disappears into the hall. She barely makes any sound on the steps, then the bedroom door closes.

I drop the box of tea on the counter, staring after her. *Matt, you are in so much trouble.*

Chapter 13



I OPEN my eyes and look around the dim room. Light leaks through a gap between the curtains over my head. It takes a second to figure out where I am. I travel so much, waking in an unfamiliar room doesn't bother me. As my eyes adjust, I note the plain wood dresser, the framed prints of alder trees and birds, the woodsy quilt, and memory returns.

I'm in Rotheberg, in Matt Hertzprung's house.

I clap a hand over my face. This may not have been my wisest decision. Staying with a smitten fan is number one on the celebrity "don't do it" list. Yet, here I am, sleeping in his guest room.

I sit up and check my phone on the bedside table. It's just after six. Birds twitter outside my room—that's probably what woke me. I can sleep through the usual city noises of garbage trucks and delivery drivers, but send me a flock of birds, and I'm wide awake.

I check my email, but there's nothing from Dad. I sent him a note last night, but I'm sure *Justin* is intercepting them. I start a message to Dad's lawyer, then delete it. Maybe John would be a better tactic. My half-brother and I aren't exactly friends—he's thirteen years older than me, and as kids, we only saw each other on special occasions. I think he resented me because I lived with Dad for six years, and his mom divorced Dad when he was a toddler.

But he's all I've got. Except Maddie, of course. Maybe she could find out what's going on—she and Destiny are the same

age. It didn't seem like they really bonded over the wedding, though.

I shoot off a text to John and another one to Maddie, then head for the bathroom.

When I come out, showered and dressed in a pair of Evergold jeans and a flowered crop top, cooking noises filter up from the kitchen. I take a minute to swipe on some makeup and brush my hair one more time, then check my phone. No response from my siblings. No surprise—we're all late night people. I tuck the phone into my pocket and pad barefoot down the stairs.

Matt looks up from the sink as I enter the kitchen. "Good morning. How'd you sleep?" He's wearing a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his strong forearms. A scar runs down the back of his left arm, leaving a white cut through his chestnut arm hair. He shakes a colander of strawberries over the sink, then sets it on a plate.

"Really good. Until the birds decided it was time for me to get up." I pull a stool away from the bar and slide on.

"Yeah, they're noisy buggers this time of year. Coffee? Or do you prefer tea? Please don't tell me you want some kind of green smoothie." He does a dramatic shudder.

I smirk. "I do coffee *and* green smoothies. They aren't mutually exclusive."

Before I can move, he spins to grab a coffee pot and pours a cup. "Cream? Sugar?"

I hold up a hand. "Black, thanks." Our fingers touch as I take the mug, and a little electric zing courses through my arm. *Cool it, Nica. Too many complications, and you need a friend, not a fling. Focus.*

"I washed some strawberries and have some pancakes in the freezer. I would make some fresh, but I have to get to work." He glances at his watch—an old fashioned one with an analogue dial.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't want to disrupt your schedule. You don't need to make me breakfast." I lift the mug. "This is all I

need to get rolling.”

“Don’t be silly. The strawberries are clean, and the pancakes only take a few seconds to heat up—unless you’re one of those low-carb people?”

Normally I am. But normally, my dad is fine, and I haven’t been kicked out of his house. “I’m all in on carbs today. But I can make my own breakfast. You have things to do.”

He pulls a pair of plates from the cupboard and sets them on the counter. “I don’t work until eight, and it’s only a fifteen-minute commute.” He pulls a plastic bag from the freezer and deposits four small pancakes on each plate, then puts one in the microwave. “They’re better fresh, but I don’t have *that* much time. Do you want syrup? Whipped cream?”

“Whipped cream?” I repeat.

“Done.” He whirls to the fridge.

“No, you don’t—”

He swings around with a can of spray cream in his hand. “Don’t worry, it’s the real stuff. Eva likes it on her waffles, and she’ll be home next week.”

Right, the daughter. It’s hard to remember this man is old enough to have a college-aged daughter. “How long has it been just you and Eva?”

While he reheats the pancakes and slices the strawberries, he tells me about his ex-wife and kid. He clearly loves Eva and doesn’t seem too bitter about the divorce. Sure, it’s been two years, but for someone like Matt, that doesn’t seem like a long time to get over a twenty-year relationship.

In my world, he’d have moved on long ago.

We eat our breakfast in relative silence, then I help him load the plates and silverware into the dishwasher. He closes it then pours another cup of coffee. “What’s your plan for today?”

I turn my mug around in my hands, watching the little bit of coffee slosh in the bottom. “I texted my brother and sister but haven’t heard anything from them. I figure I’ll go back out

to the Ranch and try my dad again. Did your friend say how he looks?”

He shakes his head. “Do you want to talk to her?”

“Maybe later. That’s probably a good plan. I’ll just run up and get my bag and get out of your hair.”

He waves his coffee cup at me. “No, you don’t have to do that! I’ve gotta get to work, but there’s no reason for you to hurry. I’m sure your dad won’t be up at—” He looks at his watch. “Oh, crap, it’s seven forty! I gotta run.” He dumps the last of his coffee in the sink and puts the cup into the washer. “Let me get you the extra key, and you can just let yourself out.” After pulling a green insulated bag from the fridge, he rummages in a desk drawer. “You’ll have to use the button in the garage to open the door, then come back in—wait, I’ll just give you the clicker from my car.”

“No, this is fine. I’ll lock the door and leave the key under the mat. Isn’t that what people in the country do?” I hold out a hand.

“Just hold on to it.” He puts the key in my palm, his fingers brushing my skin, sending a sizzle through my hand. I try not to react. I don’t want to encourage his crush.

He turns away, then swings back. “You don’t have to leave. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need to. In case he’s not—” He breaks off, making a vague motion with his free hand. “Or if everything goes well, you can come back for dinner. Tonight or tomorrow—any time. You said you want to try my chicken alfredo, remember?”

I smile. “I did say that. Thanks, Matt. You’re a good friend.”

His jaw clenches then relaxes. He nods, once. “See you later. I hope.” He disappears down the short hallway to the garage, then turns around and comes back. “I forgot—my car is out front.” With a wave, he heads for the front door.

The click of it closing is loud. I listen for Subie Doo’s engine. When the sounds of the car fade, I pull out my phone

and call my brother. He should be awake by now, and if he isn't, tough.

Chapter 14



MATT

I FLING myself down on the saggy couch in the teachers' lounge. The frame groans, and my hip comes in violent contact with a rogue spring. "Ow!" Shifting to find a better position, I stare across the room.

"Someone is in a cranky mood." Rachel looks up from scrubbing the coffee pot. "Does it have anything to do with the yellow sports car I saw in front of your house last night?"

I rub my hip. "You saw that?"

"The whole neighborhood saw it. Hopefully, I'm the only one who saw it drive into your garage."

"Who are you, Mrs. Kravitz?"

She gives me a blank look.

I roll my eyes. "Come on, you used to watch *Bewitched* reruns with us all the time."

A sly smile slides across her lips and away. "I guess I'm too young to remember that. You're so much older."

"Two years, Foster, and you remember it perfectly well." I glare.

She puts the coffee pot into the drainer and dries her hands. "Kitty and I were at the mailbox when you did the automobile do-si-do. But that car is louder than a jet engine and visible from space. It's not exactly a stealth vehicle."

"She borrowed it from her dad. She said she likes it better than the brand new one. Which is red, by the way, so probably

not any stealthier.”

“You wanna tell me what’s going on?” She sits beside me on the couch.

I look around the room—as if someone might have snuck in unnoticed. It’s four o’clock, and most of the teachers have headed home. I stayed late—one of the kids was having trouble with his tuning pegs—and I’m not in the mood to go back to my empty house anyway.

“It’s complicated. And there’s all this secrecy—you know how things get when there’s a celebrity involved.”

She raises a hand. “All too well. But I’m concerned my best friend is getting involved in something that’s not going to work out in his favor.”

I sit up. “I’m not getting involved. She spent the night in my guest room. Some kind of confusion with her father. But she’s going to stay with him now, so I won’t see her again.”

Rachel puts a hand on my arm. “That’s probably for the best.”

I launch to my feet, pulling away from her. “Yeah, I know.” The words come out angry. I wipe a hand over my face. “Sorry. It’s not your fault.”

She stands. “If you want to vent, I’m here. Well, not here—I’m heading home. But you can always be cranky at my house, you know. If it gets really bad, we can break out the Weed.”

I give a dramatic shudder. “No. If I feel like drinking, I’m bringing my own bottle.” Rachel learned to drink Jeremiah Weed when she was on active duty. She claims it’s part of Fighter Pilot Culture, but she has not converted me. I’ll stick with my Glenfarclas. “And you gotta be careful about saying that in a high school. The kids are gonna think we’re smoking.” Checking my watch, I head for the door. “Why are you still here, anyway?”

She reaches around to rub her own shoulder. “Had some tests to finish grading.”

“You gave a test?” We cross the empty commons, passing under the Fighting Edelweiss as we leave the building. “A week before finals?”

“I gave the final in my calculus class last week, since most of those kids graduated on Friday. I put off grading the juniors’ tests until today, but I wanted to get them done so I have a clean slate for my other finals.”

We stroll across the parking lot and down the street. In the good weather, we walk to work. Well, I drive from the guitar shop but park at home before I come over for classes. Early June weather is perfect for walking, before it gets too hot. We cross the highway and pass Walther’s Clocks before turning toward the Stadtplatz.

Our neighborhood is a few blocks south. A chipmunk races across the road, stopping when it sees a car, then takes the riskiest possible route. The car brakes to avoid it, then moves on. The usual four-o’clock wind whooshes through the tops of the pine trees, and a dove coos from under a bush. Alf, the calico cat, crouches behind a rock, watching the bird. He doesn’t spare us a glance as we pass. Heat radiates from the blacktop as we cross the street.

We pause in front of my house. Rachel gives me a long stare, then hits my shoulder. “Come on over if you want. I’ll even help you find a new movie girlfriend.”

I snort a laugh. “Thanks, but I’ve sworn off rom-coms for a while.” I wave as she crosses the thin strip of grass that separates our driveways, then I unlock my front door.

The rich scent of chocolate chip cookies hits me as I open the door. I haven’t baked any since Eva went back to school, but she knows I keep some dough in the freezer. “Eva! Why are you home early?” I round the corner into the kitchen and stop cold.

Nica pulls a cookie sheet from the oven. “Surprise!” Her bright smile falters after a moment. “Sorry, I didn’t think you’d mind. I saw the cookie dough at Helmut’s and thought it would be a nice way to thank you.”

I realize I'm staring. "Hi. No, it's fine. It's great. I'm just surprised to see you here. I thought you were going to stay at the Ranch."

She bites her lip, then picks up the spatula to move the cookies to the rack. "Yeah, no. I sat in front of Dad's house all day, and he never came out. Then I knocked on the door, and *Justin* told me Dad didn't want to see me. Ever." She sucks in some air. "But I'm not going to let *Justin* tell me what to do. And since you said I was always welcome..." She gives me a hopeful smile.

I drop my backpack on the chair by the desk. "Yes, of course. Stay as long as you like. But don't you have to work?"

"That's the beauty of my job. We do weeks and weeks straight through, then we can take some time off. Well, between appearances here and there, and awards shows, and all that PR stuff. I was thinking I'd do some of that here. Maybe bring some tourists to the town, too? I talked to my agent and my PR company this afternoon. Don't worry—Sylvia is getting me a place to stay, so I won't be in your hair. But I can't get in until tomorrow. So I thought I'd stop by here before finding a hotel for the night." She stops, sucking in a breath after that long, excited speech.

"You don't need a hotel. The room is yours."

Her brilliant smile makes my insides turn to goo.

I am definitely in trouble, but I don't care.

Chapter 15



AFTER DINNER—FANTASTIC chicken alfredo as promised—Matt grabs his keys. “I have to go to practice. You can stay here—make yourself at home.”

“Practice for what? Basketball? Church choir? Your grunge rock band?” I bat my eyelashes. “Hot rockers? Yes, please.” I snap my mouth shut. I keep telling myself Matt is off limits. That I’m not here for romance, and he’s too vulnerable. And then I get all flirty. I can’t seem to control myself around him. Which is one of the reasons I planned to stay at the Ranch. And yet, here I am. I give myself a mental talking-to.

“The musical. We do *The Sound of Music* every summer, and someone has a starring role this year.” He gestures to himself with a little flourish.

“The same show every year? Doesn’t that get a bit old?”

“We’re known for it. There are tourists who return summer after summer. The director changes it up a bit.” He chuckles. “The sci-fi version was not very popular.”

“*Sound of Music* in space? Is there a video? I am so here for that!”

He laughs again. “No. There is no evidence of that show. The mob nearly burned down the town.” I can’t tell if he’s kidding.

“I love it! Can I go with you?” The words are out of my mouth before I can censor them. Apparently, flirty me is ignoring reasonable me.

His brows go up. “Sure. You’re not trying to lay low?”

I shake my head. “No, I told you, I’m going to do some PR. That means getting stuff on social media to generate interest. I have another movie coming out in August, so we’re in the spin-up for that.”

He heads for the front door, then grabs his puffy coat from the hook and hands it to me. “It gets cold at night. You might need this. What movie? Not the one you just finished filming?”

“No.” I wait on the step as he locks up. “The trailer for that one will come out in a month or two, but the movie won’t be in theaters until next year. These big screen films have a much longer lead time. The August one is another Romance Channel piece. My bread and butter.”

He turns and heads across the driveway toward the sidewalk. “Hey, I meant to ask—where’s the Porsche?”

“I left it at Gasthaus Rodriguez. I’ll be staying there tomorrow, and they said I could park in their carport. They were really nice about it.”

“Suave and Amanda are good people.” He says the name the Spanish way: swah-vey.

“Suave?”

“We’ve called him that since he moved here in high school. That song was really popular.” He glances at me, and I raise my brows. “Rico Suave? I guess I’m dating myself. Anyway, we decided Rico was short for Rodriguez, and then it kind of...”

I slap his arm. “I know the song. And you aren’t old.” There I go again—being all coy and flirty. *Rein it in, Nica!* “Where’s the rehearsal? And what role are you playing?”

“Rehearsals are at the fire hall—they have a community room we use. The actual show is at the festplatz.” He takes pity on my confusion. “It’s an empty lot near the high school that we use for some of the bigger festivals. Polkafest, Christkindlmarkt, SommerFest. The Brauns own it. They could sell it for a fortune, but they prefer to keep it for the

community. I've heard it will be bequeathed to the town in their will, but Naked George is a fickle guy, so no one is counting on it."

"Naked George?"

"As advertised. When he's not nude, he wears a pretzel costume. And don't let him see you kissing anyone." His face goes pink, and he looks away.

"Why not?"

"The pretzel is inflatable. He likes to ram into anyone he thinks is getting too friendly. He only gets away with it because everyone knows he'll strip down if we complain."

I laugh. "I do not need to see that."

"No one does." He shakes his head. "Anyway, at different times, he's also sworn he's selling the property to the US Navy or donating it to the Freiberg royal family. He likes to keep people guessing."

"What would the Navy do with an empty lot in the mountains?"

"Who knows?" He stops at the corner to look both ways—the only car in sight is parked in a driveway with a cover over it. "No one is particularly worried about it. And in the meantime, we'll keep holding events there. They've started putting up the stage for the musical, and we'll have all the regular food and vendor booths during the show. If you're still in town, you should come."

"I will."

We cross the paved plaza between city hall and the fire department. The wisteria gives off a faint floral scent, but the blooms are fading. Across the road, the fire hall looks more like a Tyrolian hotel than a public works building. The balconies on the upper stories have boxes overflowing with red geraniums. We enter through a double glass door under one.

Inside, people mill around a big room, chatting. Blue painter's tape marks out a large section of the floor, and

folding chairs are scattered across the rest of the room. As we enter, the chatter turns to whispers. I catch people staring, so I smile and nod. I've grown somewhat accustomed to this reception, but it still makes my skin crawl a little.

A woman with long, frizzy curls that used to be red steps away from a group as we approach. "Matt! I see you've brought a friend." She wears an ankle-length, brightly patterned skirt and a loose top with multiple necklaces. A fluorescent green scarf holds her hair away from her weather-beaten face—a face I recognize.

"Dame Edith Reeves?" I stare in awe. This woman is a British theater legend. "I didn't know—"

She smiles smugly at my stuttering and holds out a hand. "Call me Edie. Pleased to meet you..." She raises an eyebrow at Matt.

"This is Nica Holmes." Matt jumps in quickly. "She's an actor."

"As are we all, dear." She waves a hand at the assembled crowd.

"No, but Nica's a professional. She just finished shooting a movie with Hugh Harper and Ryan Davis."

"I'm afraid I don't follow the film industry." She says "film" in a tone that cements its status many rungs below "stage" and turns to me. "Auditions were held months ago, but you're welcome to watch the rehearsal. If you can sing, there might be room in the chorus, but you'll have to learn all of the songs. Of course, this is *The Sound of Music*, so you probably know most of them. What's your range? We're low on altos."

Matt's dumbfounded face is hilarious. I pat his arm. "Thanks, but I'm not really looking for a role. I just came to watch."

Edie's left eye—the one Matt can't see—closes in the barest of winks. I'm ninety percent sure she knows who I am, but I can appreciate her desire to keep me in my place. Some actors can be such prima donnas. She looks at the clock, then claps three times. "Let's begin our warmup!"

I grab a seat as the others move to the blue tape “stage” and begin a sequence of familiar movements and vocal exercises. When they’ve completed the warmup, they start running through a scene. Despite the sparse props and lack of backdrop, I recognize the scene immediately—the one where Rolf brings a telegram for Herr Dettweiler. The captain’s dialogue rolls off Matt’s tongue, and his facial expressions are fabulous.

Then the children enter from stage left. They’re playing tug-o-war and inching onto the stage bit by bit. The young woman playing Maria forgets her lines more often than she gets them right. On the third run-through, someone lets go of the rope, and everyone falls. Maria screams.

“Continue!” Dame Edith calls out

“I can’t move!” Maria wails.

With a heavy sigh, Dame Edith holds up a hand and looks at Matt. “Captain, will you check on Maria, please?”

Matt hurries across the stage. The kids move out of the way as he approaches Maria, who lies halfway behind a large urn. He crouches, then turns to look back at us. “I think someone better call the EMTs. Her ankle is swelling.”

“Got it!” Another cast member darts through a side door. If you’re going to get injured, the fire hall is the place to do it. Half a minute later, a pair of buff young men wearing only shorts and athletic shoes hurry into the room carrying some medical gear. The harsh overhead lights glint on their sweaty shoulders, and a couple of women suck in air—loudly.

I smirk a little. When you’ve been in Hollywood as long as I have, you get used to seeing half-dressed men. It’s a hazard of the job. Not that I’m complaining.

I will also say these gentlemen could hold their own in my world.

As the paramedics converge on the young woman, the director tells the rest of us to take five. Stella hurries across the room to the director. “Is she gonna be okay?”

Matt leans close to me. “Stella is the understudy. She told me she didn’t expect Hannah to make it to opening night, so she’s been working hard on her lines and songs.”

“Ah, the plot thickens. You don’t think she engineered this, do you?” I ask, widening my eyes and making an exaggerated O of my mouth, so he’ll know I’m kidding.

“Trust me, Hannah is more than capable of sabotaging herself.” He launches into a story from when she was in his class five or six years ago, then breaks off, flushing. “I shouldn’t have said that. She was a student, and I have no business telling anyone about her classroom activities.”

I put a hand on his arm. “Don’t worry. I won’t say a word.” I mime locking my lips and throwing away the key.

His eyes grow warm as he focuses on my mouth. I pull my hand from his arm and turn to watch the paramedics as I chastise flirty Nica yet again.

One of the EMTs leaves and returns with a wheeled stretcher and two more young men. An almost audible sigh goes around the room—these firefighters are fully dressed. They get Hannah onto the gurney and raise it to waist height. The two guys in shorts jog back to their side of the fire hall as the uniformed men pull the stretcher across the room. The first one pauses to speak with Dame Edith, then catches up to his partner and Hannah at the door.

I half-expect Hannah to blow kisses as she sails by, but her face is gray and sweaty. The girl really injured herself. We all crowd around the door and front windows as the firefighters load her into a private van. One of the first responders returns in civilian clothes and climbs into the drivers’ seat.

“Attention, thespians!” Dame Edith claps again, and we all turn. “The EMTs think Hannah broke her ankle. Jack is taking her to the ER, since he was almost off duty. Let us return to the play. We’ll pick up where we left off, with the understudy filling in for Hannah. Stella?”

Stella darts a furtive look our direction and pulls out her phone. “I hate to do this, but I gotta go. Mick just texted—the

fire department may be responding to my house next!” She shoves her phone into her pocket, grabs her jacket, and heads for the door. “Maybe Nica can fill in for me.” Before anyone can respond, she’s gone.

Matt’s eyes narrow as he stares at the door. Then he pulls out his phone. “I haven’t heard any sirens. What is she up to?” He taps a message into his screen.

Dame Edith claps again, staring at me. “Young woman, do you know the part?”

I look around the room. Surely there’s someone else here who’ll jump at the chance to play Maria. But I’m not going to second-guess the director. If she’s asking a virtual stranger for help, she must think none of the others are up to it. Or that picking one of them for a temporary fill-in will cause turmoil in the cast.

“I’ve never done this show, but I’ve seen it several times. I can certainly read the part for tonight. Is there a copy of the script I can borrow?”

Several hands hold out battered paperbacks, so I take the closest one with a nod of thanks.

Dame Edith moves me into position and gives me a quick rundown on the blocking. She probably selected me in hopes my professional background means I can take direction easily. I listen carefully and check the script with a nod. “Ready.”

We run through the scene one time, then move on to the next one. Each time Maria appears on stage, Dame Edith rattles off the blocking, and I try to follow through. The other cast members help me hit my marks. I read the lines as if I’m in front of the camera, putting emotion into my part.

When we get to the scene where Maria and the captain sing *An Ordinary Couple*, Matt blows me away. His voice is lighter than his famous brother’s but it’s perfect for this part. He gazes into my eyes as we sing, and my heart surges into my throat, making it tight. I fumble the ending, my heart racing as he leans in for the kiss. He stops before our lips

meet, his breath warm against my mouth. I swallow hard, my gaze locked on his.

The rehearsal pianist plays the ending of the song, and the other actors applaud. Sucking in a breath, I look away, my face hot.

This was not a good idea.

Chapter 16



MATT

BACK AT MY HOUSE, I flip on the hot water pot, pretending everything is normal. Playing the captain to Nica's Maria was completely different from working with Hannah. My heart is still beating way above my normal resting rate. "Do you want a cup of tea? I need to unwind before I go to bed. Rehearsal always gets me spun up." Tonight more than usual.

Nica looks through the box of tea bags I offer and pulls out a peppermint. I hand her a mug, and we wait by the counter for the water to boil.

"So, what did you think? We aren't terrible."

She sucks in a breath and avoids my gaze. "You were great. I can't believe the kids were so professional. And whoever rearranged the music to let Elsa sing the lower harmony instead of those high notes was a genius."

The pot clicks off, and I grab the handle and pour. "You noticed that? Paula is a good singer, but that ending is a bit out of her range."

"It was a good compromise." She takes her cup and wanders to the sofa. "You have to work tomorrow, right? When does school get out?"

I bring my cup and sit on the other end of the couch. The intimacy of the play sent my romantic subconscious into a dream land where we're a real couple, but obviously she's not interested. I don't know whether to curse Stella or thank her.

I clear my throat. "Thursday is the last day of classes, but I don't get summers off at Lockheart. Although the whole place

shuts down for a week—just in time for SommerFest. It's Lockheart's way of contributing to the community, he says. I think it's because he's married to the director."

"The director? Dame Edith is married?" She finally meets my eyes, her brows up in surprise. "How did I not know this?"

I shrug. "It's a closely held secret. Well, not really. They've been together for decades. But she spends a lot of time in England, and his work is here. It seems to work for them."

Setting her cup on the coffee table, she pulls out her phone and starts clicking. "There is nothing online about this." She waves the phone at me. "Nothing."

"I don't know what to tell you." Or why it matters so much to her. Although after the media circus surrounding her father's wedding, maybe the idea of a publicity-free relationship is attractive. "Anything new from your dad?"

She shakes her head and leans forward to grab the mug again. "I've been texting all day, but he doesn't reply. I think *Justin* blocked my number. I'll go up there tomorrow. And I've talked to my brother. He said Dad isn't replying to his texts either. He's contacting Dad's lawyer to see if there's anything we can do."

Without thinking, I put a hand over hers. Her fingers are cold, despite the mug clenched in the other hand. I wrap both of mine around hers in wordless solidarity.

She glances at me from the corner of her eyes, then pulls her hand away to remove the tea bag from her mug. "Do you have any sweetener? Something low calorie?"

"Sure." I jump up to grab a glass bottle from the table. "Is stevia okay? Eva likes it in her coffee."

Nica nods and takes it without looking at me. As I sit, she shifts away from me. She's been blowing hot and cold all evening. Sometimes flirty, sometimes distant. I should probably try to stay aloof, but I can't seem to help myself. Having her in my home is like living in one of her movies—kind of unreal. I turn to face her, pushing myself into the

corner of the couch, giving her as much space as possible. “Thanks for filling in tonight.”

“My pleasure. I’m glad everyone joined in on the songs—it’s been a long time since I’ve done any real singing.” She settles herself in the opposite corner, so we’re face-to-face across the expanse of the sofa. “Did you find out what’s going on with your friend?”

I blink for a second, trying to figure out what friend she’s talking about. Then it clicks. “Stella? She’s not answering my texts, but her husband said everything was fine. Then he said Stella has a migraine.” I sip my chamomile. “I’ve known Stella and Mick for over ten years, and she’s never had a migraine before.”

“Maybe she panicked at the idea of taking over the role? I hope she didn’t burn any bridges with Dame Edith.”

“I don’t think so. Stella’s been itching to step in. She’s been complaining about Hannah since the roles were announced. And there’s no one else who can catch up quickly enough. The last two women to play the role have moved away. And no one wants April back again. Talk about a scene stealer!”

“Well, then I hope she gets over her migraine—real or imagined.” She stirs her tea for a few seconds, her eyes focused on the spoon swirling the pale liquid. “Although she’s a bit old for the part.” I start to protest but she holds up a hand. “I am, too. Maria is supposed to be in her twenties.”

I suppress a grin. “I thought you were supposed to be in your twenties, too.”

She snickers and looks away. “Early twenties. I guess that’s the difference between stage work and Hollywood—you can play much younger on stage. No one gets close enough to see the crows’ feet.”

“You don’t have crows’ feet. I’d believe early twenties.” The response comes out before I think, but it’s true. Even with the stress of her father’s illness and the separation, she looks beautiful.

“You’re hardly an objective third party.”

“I’m a fan, and that’s who matters, right? We’re the ones who decide if your next movie is successful or not.”

She holds up a finger. “Only if the casting directors give me a chance first. Once they decide I’m too old, it’s all over.”

“Then transition to something new. Start playing Frau Schraders instead of Marias. Not that I think you’re there yet, but someday. Lots of actresses stay relevant as they age.”

“Putting aside the inherent unfairness of the dual standard between men and women, you’re right. And that’s the plan, someday. But for now, I need to focus on my dad and my PR campaign. Sylvia wants me to grab some videos around town and talk about my upcoming movie. Any suggestions on locations?”

I give her a list of the most unique and photogenic locations around town. “That’s probably enough to start. There are some stunning views up on the mountain—I can take you up there this weekend, if you want.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

I can feel her pulling away. Does she want to distance herself from me? I thought we had a connection, but maybe I’m just another annoying fan. “I want to. You know, if it works out for you. I’m sure you’ll be busy with your dad.”

“I hope so.” She finishes her tea and stands. “It’s getting late. I think I’ll head upstairs.”

I stand, too. “Sure. I’ll be up and out early again—you can sleep in if you want.”

She puts her mug in the sink and heads toward the stairs. “See you in the morning.”



I DON’T SEE her in the morning. When I tiptoe past her door, I hear nothing from inside. I hover at the top of the stairs for a

moment, but I'm not sure what I'm thinking about doing, so I go down and fix breakfast. Since I didn't prep my lunch last night, I have to hurry through my morning coffee, and I'm out the door without hearing anything from my guest.

The day passes quickly, and I get home around four. The house is quiet and dark. As I pull into the driveway, Rachel's dog barks from next door, and Alf leaps down from the side yard fence. He stalks toward me, then veers away when I rev the engine. I don't want the town's favorite cat trapped inside my garage. I pull in and shut the door.

A note waits on the kitchen counter.

Thanks for the sanctuary. I'll be at Gasthaus Rodriguez until Sunday, then I'm moving to a house at the Ranch so I can stalk my dad. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your friendship.

Nica

Friendship. I snort to myself. That's better than being a random fan, but I want more. It's a good thing she's gone—I don't think I could have maintained my cool if she stayed here much longer. But if we're friends, surely we can continue to spend some time together?

I'm kind of at war with myself. Even if it's just friendship, I want to be with Nica. I love her sunshiny outlook on life and her occasional snarky comments. I feel like I've gotten to know the real woman—if only a little bit—and she's even better than the characters on the small screen. Independent, challenging, funny. Not to mention charming, beautiful, and smart. Exactly what I want in a life partner.

But my rational side knows that's not possible. For one thing, she's way out of my league. For another, her life is in California, not Oregon. And she's way too young for me. She's closer in age to Eva than to me.

It doesn't matter. Smitten me is not listening to the logical arguments I'm laying out. He's just whining for one more day with Nica. I reach for my phone. I could repeat my offer to take her sightseeing this weekend. We could take the motorcycle—she seemed to like riding with me on the Ranch.

I know a couple of stunning view sites that are only accessible via Forest Service roads. A four-wheel drive car can get there, but it's easier—and more fun—on a bike.

Before I decide whether to send the text, my phone vibrates in my hand, startling me. I fumble with it, nearly dropping it into the sink, then click the home button. The message is from Stella.

STELLA

Sorry I bailed on you last night.

Yeah, what was that all about? You've never had a migraine in your life.

Just trying to help. You're welcome.

I'm not sure it did, but thanks.

She doesn't respond. I consider calling, but I'll see her in an hour at rehearsal, so I shove the phone back into my pocket and work on dinner.

The fire hall parking lot is packed. As I approach, I pull out my phone to check the schedule. I thought full crew rehearsals didn't start until next week. The schedule shows actors only, but more cars pull into the last slots as I approach on foot.

A shiny yellow classic Porsche sits in the front row, gleaming in the setting sun. My heart bounces joyfully in my chest. Nica is back!

I push between the people milling in the entrance and make my way to the "stage." Nica and Edie stand by the cardboard boxes that stand in for planters at the von Trapp mansion.

"Hi." *Scintillating conversation, Hertzprung. Sure to win her heart.* I shove romantic Matt to the back of my mind and smile at Edie, pretending Nica and I are simply coworkers. "What's with the crowd?"

Edie waves an arm at the throng now settling into the seats usually occupied by off-stage actors. “Word of our change in leading ladies has reached the masses.”

I glance at Nica. She looks... nervous? Surely not.

“What change? Is Hannah out for the count?”

“She is.” Edie makes a flourishing bow toward Nica. “And Nica has generously agreed to step in.”

“But what about Stella? Isn’t she the understudy?” I look from one woman to the other.

“She still is.” Edie nods toward the far side of the stage, where I now notice Stella helping to line up the nuns. “She insisted she prefers to continue to be the understudy. Nica will take on the role.” Edie sails to the center of the stage and claps loudly.

I raise an eyebrow at Nica, and she shrugs. “Stella insisted. She found me at the Lodge today and told me she has a big project at work and doesn’t have time to dedicate to the part. I’ll be honest—I didn’t argue too hard.” She avoids my eyes. “I’ve always wanted to play Maria. And Sylvia worked out a deal with Dame Edith.”

“What kind of deal?”

She shifts uncomfortably. “No money changed hands. But we had to hammer out the extent of my involvement. SAG requirements.”

I don’t know much about the Screen Actors’ Guild, but I’ve heard there are rules around when and how pros can perform. I glance at the crowd. “And these people are here to see you?”

“I guess. I posted on my Insta account. I seem to have a few local followers.” She nudges my ribs and nods at Edie with a smirk. “Quiet, the director is speaking.”

Edie finishes her pre-rehearsal instructions with a stern look at the impromptu audience. “I know you’re excited to have a Hollywood actor here, but all of our actors are deserving of your respect. There is to be no talking during

scenes. I won't hesitate to have you escorted from the building if you cannot comply." She flings an arm toward the door, her loose sleeve snapping audibly. Then she spins and steps off the stage. "Act one, scene one! Actors, take your marks!"

Nica moves to stage left while I head to the far side to tackle Stella. I can't decide if I'm thrilled to be playing opposite Nica—spoiler alert, I one hundred percent am—or dismayed. I grab Stella's arm and pull her toward the windows, as far as we can get from the stage area. "What is going on?"

She smiles, her eyes still on the twin trail of actors processing onstage as they sing in Latin. "I told you, you're welcome. We all know how you feel about Nica."

"That's the problem, Stella. She doesn't feel that way about me and pretending to—to *woo* her on stage is going to be... painful. Probably embarrassing. Maybe even traumatic. Do you want my heart to break?"

"You are so dramatic, Matt." She finally looks at me. "This is the perfect chance to get close to your crush. You're a charming guy—sweep her off her feet. I did some research. She likes older guys, but she's never had a serious long-term relationship. Maybe you're the guy she's been waiting for. If you do nothing, you'll get the same results as if you take a chance and fail. Either way, I'll be bringing you brownies and chocolate chip ice cream. But maybe, if you go for it, you'll get the girl. You definitely won't if you don't try."

I suck in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. Maybe Stella is right. I'm already crazy about Nica—when she leaves, it's going to suck. Another thing occurs to me: maybe I'll get over my crush by spending time with her. Familiarity breeds contempt, right? And I don't know her—I only know what I see on the Romance Channel. Maybe if I spend time with her, I'll decide she's not all that, and it will be easy when she leaves.

I smother a snort of disbelief. That is not going to happen. "If she breaks my heart, I'm going to need something stronger than brownies and ice cream."

“Whiskey then. Whatever you need. We’re all with you.”

My eyes narrow. “You’re *all* with me? All who?”

She looks up innocently, her lips curving a little. “Your friends. We talked it over, and we’re behind you.”

I grab her arm again. “You talked to my friends about my love life? Who did you talk to?”

She doesn’t quite roll her eyes. “Blake, Rachel, Dylan, Jamie, Rob...” She ticks people off on her fingers. “If you crash and burn, we have a plan. Brownies and ice cream from me. Rachel will watch sappy movies with you. Blake will take you out shooting or drinking—or both, but not at the same time. We’re here for you.”

I groan and cover my face with my hand. There’s nothing quite so humiliating as knowing your friends are prepping to watch your romantic demise.

“Captain von Trapp, you missed your entrance!” Edie’s rich voice rolls across the room, and every eye snaps to me.

I gulp and hurry toward the stage. “Sorry!”

The nuns have dispersed into the audience, and Nica kneels behind the cardboard box that stands in for a sofa in the von Trapp living room. She looks at her folded hands, a little smile playing on her lips. My heart leaps, and I want to jump ahead to the love scene. I take a deep breath and frantically search my memory for my first line.

“We’ll take it from Maria’s entrance. Places!”

Chapter 17



AFTER REHEARSAL, the crowd lingers. At Dame Edith's insistence, I move to the door and take selfies with people, encouraging them to depart. A few people ask me about my body of work, making it clear they're only here because they heard someone famous had joined the cast, not because they know me. I answer pleasantly, smile serenely, and hustle them out the door as quickly as I can.

Behind me, Dame Edith talks to the actors and crew, discussing things they need to focus on for tomorrow's rehearsal and reminding them we move to the festplatz stage next week.

When the last guest finally leaves, I turn. The rest of the actors have retrieved their belongings and stand in a clump near the center of the room.

"Sorry about that." I bite my lip. "After Dame Edith asked me to step in today, I posted on social media that I'd be in the show. I was hoping to generate some buzz for the festival, not this." I wave helplessly at the now empty door.

Dame Edith sails toward me, her arms open and sleeves flapping. "We cannot control others' actions. We appreciate you—and the attention your *notoriety* brings. Tomorrow, we'll have some of the set crew on hand to keep the rabble outside. And once we're at the festplatz, we'll have the area roped off." She turns with one arm still extended toward me and sweeps the other to include the rest of the cast. "Thank you, all. Until the morrow!" She sweeps away, herding the few remaining cast members out ahead of her.

Matt appears at my side. “That sounded kind of...pointed.”

I slide on his puffy coat—the one I keep trying to return and keep taking again. He was right—it still gets cold at night. “I think she was a little disappointed I brought in a bigger crowd than she usually gets. Which is silly, since everyone here knows her. A prophet in their own land and all that.”

He nods and hovers a little uncertainly. “How’s everything with your dad?”

I shake my head a little. “Still the same. I’ve decided to let it go for a couple of days. John—my brother—said he contacted Dad’s lawyer, and the lawyer is going to check in with Dad. If he says everything is okay, there’s nothing we can do.” I had planned to head back to California, but I have a commitment to this show now. It will give me a little more time to work on Dad.

And to spend with Matt, flirty me says. I give her a stern glare.

He shifts from foot to foot, then speaks toward the floor. “If you don’t have plans for Saturday afternoon, I could take you on that sightseeing tour I mentioned.”

I really should say no. It’s so clear he’s got a crush on the me he sees on the screen, and I don’t want to perpetuate that. On the other hand, maybe spending time with me would be good. He could see the real Nica has very little resemblance to the characters I play. I don’t bake cookies or volunteer or help wounded forest animals.

Except you did bake cookies. And this play is a volunteer effort. Ugh. Fine. No woodland creatures. I nod to myself. I’ll be one hundred percent selfish, insecure-actor, ego-driven Nica on this tour, and he’ll get over me like that. I mentally snap my fingers, then give him a blinding smile. “Thanks, I’d love to come.”

“Great. Rehearsal should be over by noon. I’ll pick you up at the Gasthaus a little after one. Wear jeans.” He urges me out the door and flips the light switch. The crash bar locks behind us.

“But it’s going to be in the seventies this weekend.”

“Not where we’re going.” He gives a jaunty wave and heads down the street.

I stare after him. He didn’t offer to walk me home. Everyone says Rotheberg is safe, and I certainly don’t feel threatened, but this is totally out of character. Maybe he’s over me already?

Or maybe he has something urgent to do. *At ten o’clock on a Wednesday night?*

I strike out across the Stadtplatz, heading for my temporary home.



THE NEXT MORNING MORNING, I drive out to the Ranch. Despite what I told Matt, I can’t sit back and wait for John to talk to the lawyer. For one thing, Dad has a whole team of them. It will require lots of billable hours to find out what’s going on, I’m sure. Meanwhile, I’m here, and I can do a bit of sleuthing on my own. I throw my swimsuit and some sunscreen into my bag, just in case. The Ranch has several large pools and a couple of smaller ones. I may as well take advantage of them while I’m here.

The card in Dad’s Porsche gets me through the automatic gate, and I drive up to his house. Unlike his house in Bel Air, this one doesn’t have an eight-foot wall with a guarded entrance, so I pull up the drive and park in front. As I get out of the car, the sound of a garage door rolling up reaches my ears. I wait, but no one comes out.

Then a blinking light in the car catches my eye. I lean in. A small rectangular screen hangs from a holder attached to the vent. I noticed the phone-like device earlier, but this is the first time it has activated. The screen indicates an open garage door. This must activate it automatically.

If *Justin* won't let me in, I could sneak into the house this way. Although that might be unwise—I passed a gun safe in the basement when I “borrowed” this car. *Justin* might not have access to it, but that's not a risk I want to take. I hit the “close door” button, then stride to the front door and ring the bell.

A middle-aged woman answers. She's wearing a white polo shirt that has some kind of medical logo on the chest with her name embroidered in blue: Tammy. “Can I help you?”

I smile. “I'm—”

“You're Nica Holmes!” The woman steps onto the porch, pulling the door mostly shut behind her. “They told me you might come, but I didn't believe—I'm a huge fan!”

This could be easier than I anticipated. “Thank you, that's so kind.”

“You were amazing in *New York Christmas!* And *Time for Tinsel!* And *Twelve Dates of Christmas!* Oh, my gosh, I watch that one every time it comes on the Romance Channel, and I cry every time!”

Since the Romance Channel airs that thing about twenty times a month, this poor woman must shed a lot of tears. I put a hand to my chest. “That's so sweet! It's fans like you who keep me working.” I nod sincerely.

Who was it that said, “If you can fake sincerity, you fake pretty much anything”? Although I really do appreciate my fans.

She starts patting her pockets, probably looking for something I can autograph. “You're one of my favorite actresses. When they assigned me to this job, I was so psyched!” She pulls out her phone and checks something. Her friendly voice turns stern, and she reads from the device. “I must ask you to depart the premises. The patient has instituted a do not admit list, and it includes Nica Dolores Holmes.”

I blink at her sudden change in demeanor. Maybe I'm not the only actress on this porch. “But he's my father! I just want to make sure he's okay. I'm sure you understand.”

She smiles sympathetically, and the voice gets friendly again. “Of course. If someone was trying to keep me away from my mom, I’d be livid.”

I cock my head and frown. Is she going to let me in? Reading the refusal is probably required by her company. “So, can I see him?”

“No, of course not. You have to leave. Although I’d really appreciate an autograph. If you wait here, I’ll grab a piece of paper—”

I hold up a hand. “Don’t bother.” I spin on one heel.

“Please don’t hold this against me! I can’t risk my job!”

I stop, staring up into the treetops while willing my pounding pulse to slow. The wind has picked up a bit and a soft, ocean-like roar blows through the pines. I watch the greenery sway and let the rush calm me, then I turn back. “You’re right. It’s not your fault, and I don’t want you to lose your job. Hang on a sec.” I open the passenger door and find one of my photo cards tucked into a side pocket of my big bag.

Grabbing a pen, I return to the front steps. I sign the card and hand it to her. “Tell him he can call me if he needs anything.”

She holds the card to her chest for a second, a bright smile on her face, then tucks it into a back pocket. “I can’t do that, but thank you for the autograph.”

“You can’t even tell him I was here?”

“Oh, I’ll tell him *that*, but I can’t pass any messages. The instructions are very explicit.” She pushes the door open with her hip as she steps back into the foyer. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“Hey, wait. What happened to Justin?” I try to say the name without the intonation I’ve been using, but it still sounds kind of angry.

Tammy doesn’t seem to notice. “He’s off today. Probably taking advantage of the pools. It’s a great day for sunbathing.”

She stays in the doorway as I drive the car down the long drive. When I look back at the bottom, she waves wildly, then disappears inside. Great. My new number one fan, and she can't be corrupted.

I glance at the time. I think I'll check out the pools. Maybe *Justin* is more susceptible.

One of the smaller pools is only a short distance from my father's house, but the tiny parking strip is empty. I squint at a sign on the gate—it doesn't open until next week. Odd. I drive to the lodge and park in front. This lot is busy, with a steady trickle of swimsuit-clad residents arriving via car and on foot. I settle my big sunglasses on my nose, grab my bag, and follow the crowd toward the building.

Crossing my fingers behind my back in hopes my request will not set off some kind of alert, I give the woman at the front desk my father's lot number. She logs it into her computer and jerks her head toward the hall behind her. "Changing rooms are back there. Have a nice day."

Obviously, the Ranch staff have not been instructed to remove me from the premises. I guess that would garner too much publicity. I know for a fact that my father's homes are all owned by corporations or trusts. I'm sure there are tax reasons, but the innocuous names help with anonymity, too. Telling the Ranch staff to be on the lookout for a family member would result in everyone in Copper Butte—including hundreds of seasonal employees—knowing Nicholas Holmes was in residence.

I change into my bikini, slide a gauzy coverup on top, and pull my sunglasses back on, wishing I had a big hat. I don't really want people recognizing me. Normally, I don't have to worry about this too much, but people hanging out around a pool on a weekday morning are probably in my target audience: stay-at-home moms and retired homemakers.

The pool is surprisingly empty of children. Then I remember Matt said today was the last day of school. This afternoon will probably be wild. That also probably explains the smaller pool being closed—they need teenaged lifeguards.

I stroll around the deck, trying to check out the occupants of the loungers without looking like a stalker. As I predicted, a lot of women lie in the sun. The chance I'll find *Justin* here is small, but it's a place to start. I'm not sure what I'm going to say to him if I find him. Maybe I'll try to bribe him. Or flirt with him and suggest we go back to the house... ew.

After a full circle, I'm back near the changing rooms and haven't found Justin. There's another pool at the other end of the Ranch. The woman at the desk might get suspicious if I leave so soon, but the urge to do *something* pushes me relentlessly now. I swivel around and exit through the pool-side deli, nodding at the young man standing behind another podium at the door between the building and the deck. He barely looks up. "Have a nice day."

The car rumbles to life, and I drive along the tree-shaded road. Sunshine glints through the pines, and the vanilla-tinged air blows cool against my cheeks. I nearly have a heart attack when a cute little chipmunk makes a kamikaze run under my front tires, but he makes it to the other side.

Parking the Porsche in front of the South Lodge, I take a second to reply to a text from my mother. She and my dad have been divorced for over twenty years, but they've stayed in touch. She hasn't heard anything from him since the stroke.

I tell her I'm working on it, then get out of the car to walk past the bike rentals and give Dad's lot number to the attendant inside the building. He waves me through to the pool without comment.

This pool is big, too, but less crowded. Only half of the lounge chairs are occupied, and I spot Justin immediately. He's sitting next to an empty chair. This is my lucky day. I stroll up, drop my bag beside the drink table, spread my towel on the cushions, and sink back.

Before I can engage Justin in conversation, a waiter strides over. "Can I get you a drink, madam?"

I wave him off, but Justin opens his eyes and sits up. "I'll take a beer. You got any imports?"

Really, Justin? Beer at ten thirty in the morning? But I guess it's his day off.

I lie still as they discuss the menu, and Justin settles on a Beck's. Neither of them so much as glance in my direction. When the waiter leaves, Justin drops back into his chair, then finally looks at me. "What do you want?"

Chapter 18



EARLY FRIDAY MORNING, I drive to the Ranch again. The car's magic opens the gates like before, and I drive to the pool closest to Dad's house. Leaving the Porsche in a back row spot, I hurry across the parking lot, the sun already warming the pavement.

Stepping onto the shaded walking path is like stepping into a walk-in fridge. I pull my sweater closer and pick up my speed. A car noses out of Dad's driveway, and I jump behind a huge pine, hoping the driver didn't spot me. The little car rattles past, and I catch a glimpse of an older woman with spiky gray hair and tired-looking eyes. She must be the night nurse.

The realization that Dad still needs twenty-four-hour care brings me up short. Is he that incapacitated? And where is Destiny? Probably with her friends, moaning that she didn't sign up for this. Did no one warn her that seventy-year-old men sometimes develop health issues?

Back it up, Nica. You have no idea what Destiny is thinking. Just because she's not here in his time of need doesn't mean—oh, who am I trying to fool? That's exactly what it means. She was here for the good times, the fame, the money. But when it gets tough, she's gone.

I pull up Instagram as I walk, checking Destiny's recent posts. As I expected, there's no mention of my dad. She's apparently been in Las Vegas drinking and gambling away her sorrows since she left Dad here with the hired help.

I step into the shadows cast by the huge garage and text Justin. After a moment, one of the garage doors ratchets up and I duck inside. The vast space is empty except for the Mercedes. I have the classic Porsche, of course, and Destiny drove away in the red one. The racing car is in the second garage at the back of the two-acre property. And the last stall holds a dilapidated Nissan. That must be Justin's—my dad certainly doesn't own it.

Justin opens the inside door, and I hurry up the steps to the back hall. "Where's the Land Rover?"

He sticks his head into the garage, as if I might have overlooked the vehicle, then shrugs. "I dunno. There's only been the one car since I got here. There should be more?"

"Last time I visited, he had a big gray Range Rover. That was in April. Maybe he got rid of it." I follow him into the house, trying to remember if it was here when I took the Porsche, but I got nothing. We pass the closed door to the laundry room and cross the huge kitchen.

He stops at the bottom of the stairs and turns around. "I should warn you—he doesn't look like he does in the movies."

I half-smile. "He hasn't looked like that guy most of my life. He still fakes it pretty well in public, but much as he'd like to deny it, he's getting older."

He puts a hand on my arm. "That's not what I meant. The stroke changed him. It primarily affected his left side, which is difficult since he's left-handed. A physical therapist comes in every day to work with him, and we make sure he does his exercises on the weekend. Speech is difficult—it takes a lot of time and effort to say anything."

Alarm must show on my face because he pats my arm. "Just remember, he's still your father. His mind is in good shape."

"I knew there were some significant physical effects—I saw him at the hospital. But I thought he'd be better by now."

"He's definitely better. But he may never get back to how he was." He turns and leads me toward the master bedroom.

When we reach the door, he holds up a hand, telling me to wait here. Then he goes in, speaking cheerfully. “Good morning, Mr. Holmes. How are you today?” He stands beside the bed, blocking my view of the occupant.

A low, slurred mumble answers, sending a trickle of dread down my throat. The voice is my father’s but sounds completely unlike his usual crisp delivery.

“I have a guest for you today.” Justin waves for me to come closer.

I put my best “everything is fabulous” smile on my face and move around Justin to the bedside. My father lies propped up amid the rumpled sheets, looking small and old. His powerful frame looks collapsed. His face is wrinkled, and a shaggy fringe of wiry gray hair sticks out above his ears, leaving the top bald. Except for the few days in the hospital, I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him without his hairpiece. Digitally faked photos appear on the tabloids at the grocery checkout from time to time, but in real life, he never leaves his room without it.

“Dad, how are you?”

At the sound of my voice, his eyes light up, and he shifts his head to look at me. The left side of his face is droopy—as if a wax mask got too close to a flame. “Nica! I’m so glad to see you. I thought you’d abandoned your old dad.”

Still passive-aggressive, I see. “No, Dad. I’ve been here since the stroke. But you told the nurses not to let me in.”

Consternation ripples across the right side of his face. “I never said any such thing. James, what is this all about?”

“It’s Justin, sir.”

Dad makes an irritable sound, and Justin continues. “You know we’re monitoring your memory, sir. Not being able to remember caregivers’ names is one of the signs we watch for.”

“James, Justin, Joseph. Whatever.” His lips compress, but only on the one side, in an eerie, movie-make-up way. “I pay your salary. I’ll call you Steve if it suits me.”

I cringe. “Dad! You might not want to piss off the people who are feeding you. Besides, skilled care is hard to find. You can’t afford to have Justin quit.” I turn to the younger man. “Who told you John and Maddie and I weren’t allowed to come in?”

He crosses to the desk and picks up a thick stack of papers. “This is a copy of the contract on file at Home Health Aides. It’s signed by Mrs. Holmes.” He pages through and pulls out a sheet. “This is the special instructions page. It specifies no guests except Richard Lewis and Tony Aldrich.” Richard is one of Dad’s lawyers, and Tony is his agent. Justin pulls out a second sheet. “This page specifically denies access to Nicholas John Holmes II, Nica Dolores Holmes, and Madelyn Angelina Holmes.”

“Let me see that.” Dad’s left hand wiggles but doesn’t move. His jaw clenches, then he lifts his right hand. Justin gives him the papers, then slides Dad’s reading glasses carefully onto his face. Dad harrumphs and fidgets, demanding better light. Justin flicks on the bedside lamp and steps back. “What was she thinking?” He slowly lifts his left arm and grasps the pages in his resistant fingers, but they slide away. “Someone tear this up!”

“It won’t do any good, Dad.” I take the pages from him and rip them in half anyway. “This is just a copy. You’ll need to talk to the folks in the office.”

“Actually, Mrs. Holmes will need to talk to them. According to current medical records, she’s making legal decisions for your father now.”

“That’s ridiculous.” The words grow more slurred the more agitated he gets. “Nica, get Richard on the phone.” He picks at the blanket with weak fingers.

“I’ll call him. Why don’t you get some rest?” I pat his hand, but he pulls it away.

“I am a bit tired.” His hand goes to his head, and his right eye widens. “Where’s my hair? Go away, Nica. I don’t like you seeing me like this.” He turns a steely eye on Justin. “Jason, get my hair.”

I lean down and kiss his papery cheek. “You don’t need your hair, Dad. I’m leaving. I’ll call Mr. Lewis and have him contact you.”

“He can come see me, but not until I have my hair on!” He pats around the bed with his good hand, as if his toupee might be lying nearby.

“He can’t come see you. He’s in LA and we’re at the Ranch.” He looks like he’s going to argue. “Copper Butte,” I clarify, since he has a ranch in the Santa Barbara foothills, too. “We’re a long way from LA.”

“Tell him to get up here anyway. I pay him good money—have for years. He can spend some of it on an airplane ticket.” He seems to run out of steam, and his angry words fade into unintelligible muttering.

Justin nods toward the door, so I leave, calling out a cheerful, “See you soon,” as I go. I loiter in the hallway for a few minutes, then wander back to the kitchen. After sending a text to Richard, and another to my brother John, I dig through the kitchen cabinets. Finding a nice selection of tea, I start the kettle and pull out two mugs.

My phone rings. I glance at the screen, then answer. “Hi, Mr. Lewis.”

“Nica, call me Richard. What can I help you with?” His hearty voice sounds forced and phony.

“You need to call my dad. He wants to change the contract Destiny signed with the health care workers.” I drop a tea bag into one of the mugs.

There’s silence on the other end. I pull the phone away from my face to make sure the call hasn’t dropped, but it’s still live. “Mr. Lewis?”

“Sorry, Nica.” He clears his throat. “What makes you think your dad wants to change the contract?”

I explain about my siblings and me being on the no contact list. “Dad wants us to be able to visit.”

There’s silence again, then he asks, “How do you know?”

“He said so!” I don’t remember Mr. Lewis being this dense before.

“I thought you weren’t allowed to speak with him?”

Crap. How do I fix this without throwing Justin under the bus? “Oh, that. He called me.” I cross my fingers at the lie.

“Why didn’t he call me? Especially if he wants to change the contract.”

I dither for a second. “Because—I don’t know! All I know is he called me, and I told him I tried to visit but the nurse wouldn’t let me in.” That should protect Justin. “Dad said he wants me to come see him, and this stupid contract means I can’t. Look, can you just call him?”

“Yes, you can be sure I’ll do that.” His voice is clipped and judgy. “Is there anything else I can do for you, Nica? I have a client waiting.”

Why’d you call me back now if you’ve got someone waiting? “That’s it. Thank you for returning my call so quickly.” I’m already hurrying down the wide hallway. “Bye.” I click off and burst into the bedroom again.

Dad sits on the side of the bed wearing only a pair of boxer shorts as Justin attempts to straighten his hair piece. He yelps and the wig slides down over his good eye.

I skid to a halt, eyes wide. “Arg! Sorry, I didn’t mean—” I back out, averting my eyes.

“Who was that, Joshua?” Dad’s voice sounds querulous.

“That was your daughter, Nica, Mr. Holmes. And it’s Justin, not Joshua.”

“What’s she doing here? Mrs. Holmes told you not to let anyone in!”

What? Two minutes ago, he wanted me to visit, now he doesn’t? Maybe he meant not to let anyone into the bedroom. I pace up and down the hallway near the open door, carefully staying where I can’t see the occupants. Inside the room, Justin and Dad argue over the hairpiece, the clothing choices,

even the weather. Dad seems to automatically take the opposite side to any suggestion Justin makes.

Five minutes later, they're still arguing. I give up and go back to the kitchen to finish making my tea. I find a box of cookies and debate opening it. Instead, I grab a container of cut melon from the fridge. I putter around the room, pouring the boiling water, arranging a few slices of fruit on a plate, finding some sweetener. They still haven't emerged from the bedroom.

The doorbell rings, startling me. I automatically get up, but Justin races into the room. His eyes flick over the items on the counter. "Leave that stuff and go to the garage."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to get fired. That's the therapist. She knows who's allowed entry, too."

"Oh, sorry." I grab my big shoulder bag, take a quick look to make sure I haven't left anything incriminating, and slink down the hall to the garage. The lights come on when I walk in—motion detectors. I lean against the Mercedes and play with my phone while I wait.

The lights go out, leaving me in darkness with my phone screen casting a dim glow. I frown, then realize what happened and wave my arms over my head. The lights pop on again.

The door opens, and Justin hurries out. "You need to go. Until we get this sorted out, I can't have you here—I need this job." He presses a button by the door, and one of the big doors creaks up.

I grab his arm. "I got ahold of his lawyer. He said he'd call, but I had to tell him Dad called me. I didn't want him to know you let me in."

"Thanks." He herds me toward the open door.

"Is he alright? Why did he say not to let me in?" I stop on the cement outside the garage and plant my feet, refusing to let him push me farther.

“He gets a little confused. I’m not sure if it’s the stroke or something else.” His nose wrinkles as he shrugs. “I can’t really comment on his medical situation.”

Now you’re going to follow the rules, Justin? “He’s only seventy. Are you saying he’s got dementia?”

“No, of course not.” He waves both arms. “I’m not a doctor. I don’t diagnose, and I couldn’t tell you if I could. I gotta go. Please, get out of here without anyone seeing you.”

He hurries into the garage and hits the button. The door rolls down and thuds shut like punctuation to the end of this visit.

Chapter 19



MATT

ON SATURDAY, promptly at nine, we begin our first run through on the stage at the festplatz. The scenery and major props are in place and the backstage crew in attendance. Over the course of the three-hour rehearsal, we barely get through half of the two-hour play. The transition from the fire hall to the real stage always requires some adjustment, even though the town has been doing this for over twenty years. Maybe *because* the town has been doing it for two decades.

Edie calls the rehearsal at noon. “Thank you, everyone. We’ll pick up here Monday. Rehearsal starts promptly at six p.m. We’ll do a complete run-through of the entire show on Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday is final dress rehearsal, and Friday is opening night!” She shoots a steely-eyed glare at a few cast members. “Get your lines down. There were too many prompts today. You should be rock solid by now!”

“Are we still on for that tour?” Nica sidles up to me. “My afternoon is wide open.”

“We’re on. I’ll pick you up at two. Do you need to be back at any particular time?” This is my not-so-subtle way of asking if she’s got plans for the evening.

She shakes her head, her hair flaring. “I’ve got nothing on the calendar. I’m all yours.”

If only that were true.



WHEN I PULL my bike into the parking space in front of the Gasthaus Rodriguez that afternoon, Nica stands on the sidewalk in front of the half-timbered building. She wears a flowered top over ankle length jeans and a pair of tennis shoes. Smiling from behind her massive sunglasses, she lifts her leather shoulder bag. “You didn’t warn me to pack light.”

“I’ve got room here, unless you want to downsize.” Flipping up the visor on my helmet, I kick the stand down and lean over to unzip one of the bike’s saddle bags.

“Depends on what we’re doing today. I might need all of this stuff.” She opens the bag and pokes through the contents. “Sunscreen, bathing suit, towel—”

I look over at the bag. “You have all of that in there?”

She smiles. “I’m like a Boy Scout. Do I need it?”

I pretend to think for a moment. “Won’t hurt to have it on hand. I’ve got room.” We tuck the purse into the saddle bag, and I zip it shut. “Do you have a leather jacket?”

She eyes the bike. “Not with me. I didn’t know I’d be riding a hog.”

I twist around to open the other saddle bag and pull out a brown, leather jacket. “This is not a Harley. Not even close. Suzie is a Suzuki.”

“Why am I not surprised your bike has a name?” She shrugs into the coat. “Is this Eva’s?”

“No, I got it for Judy—my ex—but she never wore it. She had no interest in riding.” That should have been one of many red flags over the years. Don’t get me wrong—I don’t think couples have to do everything together, but they ought to have some common activities. In the twenty plus years Judy and I were together, we did a lot of the things she enjoyed, but “we didn’t like” most of *my* hobbies. Riding was one of the few

things I refused to give up, even though she also didn't like me going off on my own.

I unstrap the second helmet and hand it to her. She pulls it over her head and clicks the strap while I observe. "You did that like an expert. Do you ride, too?" I watch her in the rear-view mirror.

She swings a leg over the back of the bike in a move that looks like it came from a ballet. "I have a scooter back in LA. I call him Arnie." She gives the name her best Schwarzenegger pronunciation.

"You just made that up, didn't you?"

"No, I really have a scooter."

"But does it have a cool nickname?"

"Are nicknames for vehicles really cool?" She winks at me in the mirror, then pulls her visor down. Settling on the seat, she grips my belt on either side. "Ready."

I lower my own visor and start the bike. The engine rumbles against my legs, and I turn us toward the road. We pull onto the street, then stop at the highway. At a break in the steady traffic, I roll onto the road and twist the throttle. When we hit the edge of town, where the speed limit changes to fifty-five, I lean forward. Nica leans with me, her body against my leather-clad back, her helmet brushing my shoulders, and we blast off.

A few miles out of town, we turn down a dusty Forest Service Road. This is one of my favorite rides in the local area, so I know it well. I slalom around the potholes in the gravel, keeping the bike at a safe pace. Nica resettles her grip on my belt and sits back. I miss the pressure of her body against mine.

We roar along, cutting through the slashes of shadow and sunlight. Dust billows up in our wake, but we're moving fast enough to evade it. We crest a rise, leaving the trees behind. As I slow to a stop, Nica gasps behind me. "What a view!"

We stand on a road cut across the shoulder of the mountainside. A few trees grow on the slope below, clinging

to the steep land, but they're new growth, so they don't block the view. The valley stretches out before us, with Rotheberg tiny in the distance. A small plane takes off from the airstrip on the east end of town. Cars inch down the main road, stopping for pedestrians at almost every corner. A giant purple tube man flutters and blows beside the gas station, barely big enough to pick out.

Beyond town, the land flattens into the high desert that stretches to the Ochoco Mountains beyond Prineville. Behind us, the hills rise steeply, eventually becoming the Three Sisters Mountains. We can't see the peaks from here, but it's cooler than in town, and the fresh air brings the scent of resin, vanilla, and the pleasant mustiness of decaying foliage.

Nica climbs off the bike. I instinctively reach out to grab her arm as she approaches the abrupt edge of the road, but she stops before leaving the gravel surface. Taking a deep breath, she turns slowly. "This is magnificent."

I just nod in response.

After a few minutes, she pulls out her phone and snaps a few pictures. "You don't mind if I do a quick vid, do you?"

"That's why we came out here, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. But wow. Next time I'm coming just because—" She makes a helpless gesture at the town. "It really puts you in your place, doesn't it? I mean—look how small we are compared with all this! And how important we think we are."

"You probably don't want to say that on your video."

She giggles. "Maybe not. My feed is not really about deep meaning." A shadow crosses her face, then disappears. She glances at me, then looks away. "This is really stupid for an actress, but would you mind riding on ahead? I feel so self-conscious..."

My heart drops a little. Does she not trust me? "I guess I understand that. I couldn't make videos with anyone watching. I don't have a problem with the musical—that's someone else's script. But putting my own ideas out there? Yikes."

“No, it’s not that. I film in front of people all the time.” She turns a delightful shade of pink. “For some reason, I can’t do it in front of you.”

Do I make her nervous? Only me? Surely that’s a good sign? Pulling off my helmet, I climb off the bike. “I’ll push it, so you don’t get a cloud of dust. Gimme your helmet.” I hang mine from the handlebar and reach for hers.

“No, I need it for the shot.” She waves her fingers in a “get on with it” motion. Then she tucks the helmet under one arm and starts swiping on her phone.

As I roll the bike away, I hear her muttering. I’m not quite out of earshot when she starts talking about where she is. I glance over my shoulder. She stands with her back to the view. One hand holds the camera at a high angle, the other cradles the helmet. She starts to turn, so I resume pushing the bike away, not wanting her to catch me watching.

Ahead, the hillside flattens, and trees grow up around the road again. I stop in the shade of the first pine and kick the stand down. Unzipping my jacket, I settle against the bike to watch Nica. Her voice carries to me on the breeze, but I can only pick out a word or two. She turns back and forth, pausing in front of the valley again, then rotating so the hills behind come into view. As she works, she moves a little closer to the steep drop off.

“Watch the edge!” I run toward her, hands outstretched, jacket flapping.

She turns at my yell, her shoe slipping in the gravel. She looks at her foot and leaps back in alarm before I reach her. Then she turns the camera on me.

I slow to a stop.

“No, keep running!” She circles one hand while holding the other at arm’s length with the phone pointing at me.

I close my eyes for a second, but when I open them, she’s making a “come on” gesture with her empty hand. Shaking my head a bit, I jog toward her.

“No—look alarmed!” She takes a half-step closer to the edge of the road. “Like I’m going to fall to my doom.”

At the words, I imagine her tumbling down the hillside. Ice water surges down my spine, and my feet pick up speed. I must make an acceptably alarmed face because she stops filming before I reach her.

“I’ll need you to sign a release.” She doesn’t look at me as she pokes at her phone. “If you don’t mind being in my video, that is. I’ll send you the paperwork.”

“I’m not signing anything until I see how ridiculous I looked.” I make a comically terrified face and mime running.

She laughs. “The first one was better. But don’t worry, I’ll show you before I post it.”

“What are you using it for?” I step behind her so I can look over her shoulder.

“Just a social media post. Look at where Nica is now kind of thing. But I always make sure I have written permission to use others’ faces. I’ve had friends get sued.”

“Like in a court?”

“It doesn’t usually go to court.” She finishes on the phone and slips it into the jacket pocket. “Usually, someone has a falling-out—couple breaks up, friends argue, whatever—and one of them has a lawyer draft a letter to the other demanding compensation for the use of their image in promotional activities. If you’re smart, you just pay and have them sign a release. Going to court only makes the lawyers rich.” She pulls her glasses down to look at me. “I’ll pay you for your time. Market rate for the tour—I’d have to look online to see what similar tours are going for. Plus a daily rate for your acting. You’re not union, but this is more than an extra—”

Is that what this is to her? Some kind of business transaction? My heart drops and my stomach knots. My voice comes out kind of petulant. “I don’t want to be paid. I thought we were just a couple of friends out for a ride.”

“We are. But there’s no reason you can’t benefit from my success, right? Besides, I can write it off my taxes. Believe

me, every little bit helps. But if you don't want me to pay you, I can still pay for gas and food and stuff.”

It feels so impersonal to think this way, but Blake has done similar deals with me. Artists are usually independent contractors instead of employees, so they can take advantage of write-offs for work-related stuff.

“Sure. I'll let you cover the gas. As for food—that's already taken care of.”

As we return to the bike, she pushes her glasses back on. “Really? I'm intrigued. I figured we'd stop at the Burger Abbey on the way back. I haven't been there since I was a kid. Is it still good?”

“It *is* a Rotheberg institution. And the burgers are excellent. But I've got something else set up. You'll have to wait and see.” I grab my helmet from the handlebar but pause before pulling it on and jerk my chin up the road. “Up ahead, we'll go by an old ranger building. It was built by the Conservation Corps back in the nineteen forties. We use it for the haunted house every year.”

“How fun!” She waits for me to get on, then sits behind me. “Let's go see the haunted mansion.”

As we wind into the shade of the pines, the temperature drops. The road turns, then widens into a gravel parking lot. A long, low stone building perches on the hillside to the left. The front is a series of arches over square windows, with a steep roof. A pair of stone stairways lead up to the entrances on either side.

“That's fabulous!” Nica says as I slow the bike. “I wish I was going to be here for Halloween.”

I do too, but I don't say it. “That would be fun.”

Leaving the deserted building behind, we pick up speed as we ride deeper into the national forest. We stop along the way at a waterfall and another viewpoint, and Nica takes more videos. In a couple of them, she gets shots of me in the distance. At one point, she has me ride past, filming the dust billowing up behind me, then choking on it.

I climb off the bike and hand her a bottle of water from the saddle bags. As she drinks, a bead of moisture rolls down her neck. I'm mesmerized by it, and my mouth goes dry.

I tear my eyes away from her throat to find her smirking at me. "Like what you see, Mr. Hertzsprung?" Her sultry smile disappears, and she looks away. "Sorry, I don't know why—you bring out the flirt in me."

I step closer. "I'm not averse to a little flirting."

She glances at me from under her lashes. "I know." She hands the water bottle to me and takes a step back, crossing her arms. "I'm going to lay my cards on the table, Matt. I like you. A lot. But I have a terrible track record with men, and you're a really nice guy. I know you've got a crush on me. No—" She waves me off when I try half-heartedly to protest. "It's normal. You've seen me on TV, and you've fallen for the character I play. Because let's face it, I play the same character in every movie."

"Except *Snow Way to Love*." I can't help throwing in the one film where she played the antagonist. I hide a smirk when she winces—that movie was terrible. "And your characters are all different. In *Random Chances* you were a teacher. And in *Sorry, Not Sorry* you were a flight attendant."

She holds up both hands to stop me. "Yes, the characters have different jobs and circumstances. But they're all basically the same. Plucky young rom-com heroines. Smart, but not too smart. Friendly, nice to animals. She's honest, cheerful, loves her family, always does the right thing. But that's not me! Sometimes I'm a real witch. I don't always do the right thing. Look at how I manipulated you into attending that wedding with me. Or this ride—"

I cut her off. "You didn't manipulate me—believe me, I know what manipulation feels like. My ex was a master at it. You told me up front what you needed and why. I agreed."

"But you only agreed because you have a crush on me!"

I roll my shoulders, taking a moment to formulate my thoughts. "If asking someone who likes you to help you out is

manipulation, we're all in trouble. You didn't guilt me into it, or—"

"But I did! It was obvious you'd do anything I asked, and I used you."

She's spiraling. Eva does this sometimes, where she gets a negative thought into her head and just keeps reinforcing it. Sometimes being absolutely frank helps. "News flash, but I wouldn't do *anything* for you. I wouldn't have injured Hannah to get you that role in the play. I wouldn't get Justin fired so you can see your dad. And if I'd had plans with friends on the night of his wedding, you would have gone solo. I like you, but I'm not going to walk out on my friends for a chance to hang with a movie star who's only here for a few weeks."

She stares at me, her mouth open. "I—well, I guess that puts me in my place."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"No, you're one hundred percent right. There's nothing going on between us, so expecting you to be at my beck and call is not right. Don't worry, next time I need to do some filming, I'll hire Peter to take me around."

"Paul."

"Whatever!"

"Nica—"

She pulls her helmet on. "Let's get back to town."

I rub my forehead. This is not how I wanted this conversation to go. "We have one more stop before we head back."

"No, I'm done. Take me back to the Gasthaus, please." She swings her leg over the bike and folds her arms.

I put the water bottle back in the saddle bag, trying to ignore how close she is. My hand brushes against the back of her leg, and we both jerk away. I fasten the buckle and straighten. "I would like to finish my planned tour. Since we're here as friends, not employer and employee, I have as

much right to decide where we go as you do. Once we get there, if you prefer, I'll take you straight back."

She gazes at me, but I can't tell what she's thinking behind those big, dark glasses. Finally, her lips twist a little. "Ouch. That'll teach me."

I climb on, awkwardly lifting my leg over the gas tank—and nearly lose my balance in the process. She puts a steadying hand on my shoulder, and I make it. I reach for the throttle, then hesitate. "What do you mean?"

"Here I was bragging about how I can get you to do anything, and you refuse to take me back to town." She snickers. "Well played, Matt Hertzprung."

I chuckle as I kick the bike to life. "It wasn't intentional, but so there."

She grabs my belt, and we roar off down the road.

Chapter 20



MATT and I rumble past a sign that says Dreibäche Lake Campground. He slows the bike to a crawl, and we wind along a gravel road past tents and small RVs. The road loops around, and water comes into view through the trees. Just as we turn toward the lake, he pulls into a campsite. A shiny new black SUV sits beside a large tent. Camp chairs circle a firepit, and a gas grill stands on a picnic table beside a cooler.

Matt parks the bike beside the truck, and we get off.

I pull off my helmet and shake out my hair. “What’s this?”

He clicks the strap of his helmet closed and hangs it over the handlebar. “Blake and Rachel are camping here this weekend, and we’re having dinner with them. Rob will probably be up later, too, and maybe Dylan and Jamie. You haven’t met them yet.”

“That’s what you meant about the food being arranged already?” I point at the cooler. “They brought it.”

He nods as he scrubs his fingers through his thick brown hair. His matted curls spring up. “Yeah. But if you want to skip it...”

Why would I—oh yeah, the fight. “No, you were right, and I’m sorry. It’s all good. But where are your friends?”

He points through the trees. “At the lake.”

Leaving our leather jackets draped over the bike, we head for the water. Two towels lie on the shore. I squint across the bright lake, spotting three heads swimming in our direction.

Pale arms splash over two of them as they crawl forward at a good rate of speed. The third, a very dark and obviously not human head, bobs behind.

“Is that a bear?”

“That’s Kitty. Rachel’s Newfoundland.” Matt cups his hands around his mouth. “Hellooooo!”

The swimmers pause, treading water, and wave. The female head looks back, checking on the dog, then they strike out toward us again. In a few minutes, they emerge, like models in a swimsuit commercial. Water runs down Blake’s broad shoulders, over his pecs and well-defined abs. I suck in some air.

Matt chuckles.

I look away in embarrassment. It’s not nice to get caught ogling your date’s brother. I glance at Matt, but he’s striding closer to the water. Rachel stops about knee deep, waiting for the dog. She looks equally amazing in floral hipster bottoms with a matching halter-style tankini top. The big black dog trots out of the water, pausing on the shoreline to shake, splattering Matt and Blake as water flies from her thick fur. Rachel, who wisely stayed back, laughs.

“Nica, come meet Blake and Rachel.” Matt half-turns and holds out a hand.

I move closer, keeping an eye on the dog. “We met, remember? At least Blake and I did. At the chapel.”

“That doesn’t really count. Nica, this is my brother, Blake. Blake, Nica.”

I shake the country singer’s hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m envious of your little paradise out here. I haven’t seen any paparazzi this trip.”

Blake turns to look for the woman. “Rae, come meet Nica.” Then he turns back to me. “Yeah, once Boitano went back to Nashville, it’s been good. I’m the only real local, so it’s not worth his time, now that I’m off the market. This is my fiancée, Rachel Foster. And our dog, Kitty.”

I shake hands with the tall blonde and gingerly pat the wet animal's head. "Nice to meet you. I'm afraid I don't have a lot of experience with dogs."

Rachel shrugs. "Not everyone can be so lucky. We were just about to take a break. Come on up."

We troop back to the campsite. The dog shakes again, spraying everyone this time, and I squeal as the cold water hits my arms and face.

"Kitty, no!" Rachel banishes the dog to her bed on the far side of the campfire ring. It's a metal ring that sits in the center of a circle of stones—it almost looks like a car wheel on its side. Rachel notices my confusion. "No campfires allowed at this time of year, so we fake it with a gas ring." She points to the small green canister on the far side.

"Why can't you have a wood fire?" I ask.

Her face goes blank—as if she can't understand what I'm asking—then she blinks. "Right—you aren't a local. It's because fire risk is too high right now. We had a very dry spring. The folks in Munich Meadows have been evacuated twice in the last five years." She frowns. "You've had some bad fires in California."

I nod, slowly. "It never occurred to me a gas fire would be safer."

"You have to make sure there is a clear ring around it, of course. And never leave it unattended. If a branch fell on it, that could be the end." She waves at the picnic table. "We've got some snacks—help yourself if you're hungry. Dinner won't be for a while. I'm going to grab a T-shirt. It's kinda cold under the trees."

As Rachel and Blake disappear into the tent, Matt opens the cooler and pulls out a beer. "You want one? We've got cider, seltzer—hard and fruity—and water. I think there's some diet soda, too."

"I'll have a seltzer. Non-alcoholic."

He hands me a can then tosses a koozie at me. I slide the blue neoprene—emblazoned with a small white flower

wearing boxing gloves and the words “Rotheberg High School Fighting Edelweiss”—onto my can. We settle into a pair of lounge chairs, and Matt shows me how to tip mine back and lock it into place. When Rachel emerges from the tent, wearing a clean T-shirt and shorts, I try to swing my feet to the ground, but I don’t go anywhere. “I’ve taken your chair.”

Rachel waves a hand as she crosses to the cooler to pull out a can. “No worries. I’ll take the hammock.” The dog gets up and follows her to the red and white fabric sagging between two trees. Kitty settles to the dirt with a heavy sigh, watching the woman as she adjusts one end of the sling. “You picked the worst possible place, Kitty.” She straddles the dog to sit back into the center of the hammock, then swings her legs up. Once she’s in, the dog’s head drops to her paws with a thud.

When Blake comes out of the tent, the dog’s head comes up again. She lurches to her feet and stumbles across the clearing toward the man.

“Traitor,” Rachel mumbles from within the folds of the hammock.

Blake pulls a beer and a plastic bowl out of the cooler. He pops the cover off the bowl and gives the dog something, then offers the container to me. “Carrot?”

“No, thanks, I’m good.”

He sets the bowl in the center of the table, gives the dog a stern look, then points to her bed. “One is all you get. Go lay down.”

The dog’s head droops, and she shuffles to the dog bed, plopping down with another heavy sigh. Blake chuckles and tosses another carrot to the dog who snaps it up.

“Don’t subvert my training, Hertzprung,” Rachel says.

“How did you even see that?” Blake grabs a bag of chips from a crate behind the cooler and pulls it open.

“I’m a teacher. I always watch the troublemakers.”

Matt raises his can at the hammock. “He’s pretty predictable.”

The brothers argue inanely for a few moments, then silence falls over the campsite. The wind sways the trees above my head, adding a gentle background roar. I shiver a bit—although the sun is bright and warm, it's chilly here in the shade.

Matt gets up and goes to the truck. He returns a few minutes later with a blanket which he drapes over me. "It's warm in June, but probably not for a Californian."

I tuck the fleece around my arms. "Thanks." As the brothers chat quietly, my eyes drift closed, and warm contentment settles around me.



A DEEP WOOF ROUSES ME. I didn't think I fell asleep, but I must have—the sun is at a different angle now. Struggling with the locking levers, I finally get the chair moving and rotate my feet to the ground. "What time is it?"

No one answers. Bundling the blanket under my arm, I struggle to my feet. The campsite is empty. Laughter and another woof draw my eyes to the lake. Matt and Blake stand on the shore, throwing a frisbee back and forth. The dog chases from one man to the other, trying to snatch the disk out of the air. Every few throws, one of the men lets the disk sail by, and the dog catches it before it hits the ground, then returns it to the thrower.

Rachel sits in the other lounge, which has been relocated to the shore. Three more people splash water at each other, knee deep in the lake. I drop the blanket into my chair and grab a bottle of water from the cooler before making my way to the water.

Matt looks up as I approach, then tosses the frisbee at his brother. He lifts both hands. "I'm out." He turns to me. "You were out cold. Haven't been sleeping well?"

I shrug. "You know how it is. Strange bed in a new place. Usually, I settle in after the first night, but there's hardly any

noise at the Gasthaus. It's unnatural." I don't mention that I slept like a baby at his house, despite a similar lack of noise.

He chuckles. "Yeah, they get that complaint all the time. Maybe we can get a road crew to work on the street tomorrow morning."

I chuckle. "On a Sunday?"

"Good point. I'll schedule it for Monday."

"Don't bother. I'm moving to the Ranch tomorrow. Sylvia got me a short-term rental for the rest of the month."

He nods, then points at the lake. "We're going to start working on dinner in a few minutes, but you've got time for a swim, if you want."

I give a dramatic shudder. "If it's not heated, I'm not going in."

He turns toward the tent, putting his arm out to sweep me along with him. "Then I'll put you to work. You can peel the potatoes."

Back at the campsite, he pulls a large plastic bowl out of the crate, dumping potatoes onto the table. "There's a peeler in the silverware caddy. I'm going to get some water."

While he fills the bowl at a nearby spigot, I find the peeler and sit on the bench to start peeling. I've got the first one almost done when he returns. "Nice work. I'm surprised a big-time Hollywood star even knows how to do that."

I poke the peeler at him. "Believe it or not, I had a fairly normal childhood. I lived with my mom. I think she was a bartender when she met my dad. Of course, she didn't have to work after the divorce—the settlement was pretty generous, and he sent a hefty child-support check like clockwork." I give a dry laugh that only sounds a little bitter. "Probably completely automated." I pick up the next spud. "But my mom made sure I did all the normal kid things. I worked at a fast-food place in high school."

While I peel, Matt slices the potatoes and drops them into the water. The others wander back to the campsite as we work,

the swimmers taking turns in the tent to change clothes. I say hi to Rob as he stops to grab a beverage then takes a seat by the fire ring. When I finish peeling, Matt slices some onions, then drains the potatoes and divides them between two sheets of foil. He adds the onions, a couple of pats of butter, and some salt and pepper, then folds the tops over to seal the packets. “These will go on the grill.”

Blake fires up the grill. Rachel introduces me to Dylan and Jamie, then passes out beverages to everyone. Rob and Matt pull out a folding table and some chairs from another large, black SUV. Jamie tosses a red checkered tablecloth over it, and Dylan produces a box of cupcakes which he puts in the center.

It’s still light out when we sit down for dinner, even though it’s already eight o’clock. Matt notices me looking at my phone screen. “At this time of year, sunset isn’t until after nine.” He hands me a glass of wine. “Prost.”

“Cheers.” I clink the stemless wine glass against his. “These are real glass!”

“Camping doesn’t have to be rustic.” Rachel waves at the meal spread out in front of us. “Blake even has a fridge in his truck. That’s where we kept the steaks.”

We eat, and the entire meal is delicious. I learn Dylan is a chef, and Jamie teaches math with Rachel. Rob doesn’t talk much, but his occasional contributions are thoughtful and well-articulated. Conversation ranges from movies and books to the current news and even politics. These six people have obviously been friends for a long time—even their arguing is friendly.

I think about similar dinner parties I’ve attended in Hollywood—if you can call them similar. I went to a meal by a lake once—it was catered by professionals and included forty guests. Any discussion of politics would likely have ended with a fist fight. Or a lawsuit.

As we finish the meal, the sun disappears behind the mountains. Blake hangs a couple of battery-powered lanterns around the site, and Rachel pulls a bottle out of the cooler. “Rinse out your wine glasses—I didn’t bring any others.”

Blake passes a bottle of water, and everyone pours a little into their wine glass then dumps or drinks it. Rachel comes around the table, pouring a small serving into each glass. Matt puts a hand over the top of his. "I'm driving."

She glances at me, then at the motorcycle. "You're not going already, are you?"

"That depends on what you have planned." Matt jerks his head at Rob. "I'm not playing poker with that one."

"Smart move." She moves on to pour some in my glass.

"What is it?" I whisper.

"Marionberry schnapps. Local distillery. It's really good." He grabs the remaining water and pours it into his glass. "But it's strong, and I prefer to get you home in one piece."

Rob also declines the schnapps, but the others each take a glass. Blake raises his and the group follows suit. "To old friends. And new ones." He nods at me. Everyone sips their drink.

The alcohol hits my throat with a typical burn, but the sweet berry taste soothes it. It wouldn't be my first choice of beverages, but for an after-dinner drink, it's not bad. I try another sip.

Rachel glances at Matt, then turns to me. "Your turn."

"My turn for what?"

"Tell us about yourself. We know you're an amazing actor." Her eyes flick to Matt, and everyone else nods and chuckles. Matt's face goes pink in the lantern light. "And that your father has a place at the Ranch." At my involuntary jerk, she holds up a hand. "Don't worry, we don't care which house is his, but everyone knows he has one there. He hasn't exactly been stealthy about it. But we don't know much about you."

I shrug. "Not much to tell. My mom and dad got divorced when I was six. I lived with my mom in Pasadena. Spent part of each summer with my dad. Went into the 'family business.' My overnight success only took seven years. And I just finished shooting my first major film."

Jamie leans forward. “What’s Ryan Davis like?”

Dylan makes a face.

I shrug. “He was nice enough. Very professional. He and I didn’t spend much time together outside of filming.” Mainly because I wasn’t interested in the parties, but I don’t say that. In the weirdly sheltered atmosphere of Rotheberg, I feel the need to make Hollywood seem like it was portrayed in the nineteen fifties. Glamorous. Full of successful actors and upbeat go-getters. I tell them a carefully sanitized version of my last audition.

We move to the firepit, and Rachel lights it while Blake pulls his guitar from the back of the vehicle. Someone passes the schnapps bottle around, and I pour a bit more into my glass. I decline the beautifully frosted cupcakes and settle on a folded blanket against a fallen log. Matt sits on the log beside me, his leg warm and solid against my shoulder. Blake tunes the guitar, and he and Matt sing a couple of songs. Their voices mix well together, as one would expect from brothers.

Then Blake launches into a well-known John Denver song, and everyone joins in. Someone brings out graham crackers, chocolate bars, marshmallows, and long handled forks, and we make s’mores.

I try to get Matt to eat mine, but he refuses. “You made it; you eat it. That’s the rules. You didn’t have a cupcake—you can use the extra calories.”

He noticed I didn’t eat dessert—is that flattering or stalkerish? I already know the answer. If anything he did felt stalkerish to me, I wouldn’t be here. And even though I know he’s a super-fan, everything about Matt feels genuine.

I look at the sticky mess in my hand. The heat from the marshmallow has melted the chocolate, and it oozes out the sides. I lick the fluffy, chocolate-dripping goo from the side of the cracker and the sweetness is almost too much. Then I take a bite. The crispy cracker helps cut the intensity of the filling, and I finish the little sandwich almost too quickly. “That was good, but wow, so much sugar.”

Matt laughs and finishes his own. “I know. I can’t believe we used to scarf these down as kids and demand more.”

“I still love ’em.” Dylan shoves another marshmallow onto his fork.

Jamie takes it from him. “Nope. I don’t want to hear you moaning tomorrow about how much sugar you ate. One is all you get.” She looks at me. “He’s a pastry chef. Eating too much sugar is a hazard of the job, and he doesn’t need to compound it during his off time.” She turns back to her fiancé. “You’re the one who keeps talking about turning into the dough boy.” Dylan looks like he’s in decent enough shape, although he’s nowhere near Blake or Rob’s body-builder physiques.

I lick the goo from one of my fingers, then catch Matt staring, his eyes glued to my mouth. Heat flows into my face, and I bite my lip. He looks away with a barely audible groan. A heady sense of power surges through me, and I wait until he looks back to lick the next finger. Matt’s eyes close, and he gives himself a little shake. Then he pours some water on a paper towel and holds it out to me.

A little thrill of disappointment goes through me as I take the damp towel. Matt’s eyes flick past me, and I turn to see Rachel raising her eyebrows at him. For a brief second, I’d forgotten we had an audience. My face goes hot, and I duck my head as I wipe my fingers.

I check my cell phone. There’s no signal out here, but it’s already after eleven. Normally, I’m a late-night gal, but even with the nap, I’m tired. I take a moment to do a quick video of the group around the campfire—not so I can post it, but so I have a reminder of this evening. These people—this group of friends—opened their circle and welcomed me in. None of them seem to care about my celebrity status. No one has asked about my famous father or my Hollywood connections. Jamie asked about Ryan Davis, but only after I brought up the subject of our film. They genuinely seem to like *me*.

A movement to my left draws my attention, and I glance up to see Matt covering a yawn. I raise an eyebrow at him, but

he shakes his head. Our wordless communication is perfectly clear—we can stay as long as I like.

“Is it past your bedtime, old man?” Blake asks as Matt yawns a second time.

Rachel slaps her fiancé’s leg. “Some sad people have to work during the day.” She exchanges a grin with Jamie then points at Matt. “Too bad you don’t get the summers off like we do.”

Matt throws a marshmallow at Rachel. Before it reaches her, Kitty lunges from the ground and catches it in her mouth, startling a laugh out of the rest of us.

I push myself up, stumbling against Matt’s leg as I get my feet under me. He puts a hand on my back to steady me, warm and solid. Heat spreads through my body. “It’s past *my* bedtime.”

The group protests, and it sounds so real, my heart swells in response. Matt rises to stand beside me, his hand on my back again. “You heard the lady. She’s much younger than me, and she’s tired, too.”

I give him a sideways grin. “I didn’t say I was tired, I said it’s past my bedtime. But I actually am tired. And I have a busy day tomorrow—I have to move up to the Ranch.”

“Do you need help with the move?” Rob asks.

I smile in appreciation. “No, it’s just me and my suitcase. But thank you.”

He taps his index finger to his eyebrow in a one-finger salute.

We say our good nights, and Matt guides me through the darkness to his motorcycle. “I’d be happy to help tomorrow, if you need anything.”

I take the helmet he holds out. “I’m good, thanks. I’m going to try to see my dad again.” I haven’t heard anything from Justin or Richard, the lawyer. I need to know what’s going on up there.

“You finally got a hold of him?”

I explain about Justin sneaking me in on Thursday and my subsequent conversation with the lawyer. “My brother John is supposed to come up this week, but I’m hoping to have everything straightened out before he arrives.” I fasten the helmet strap. “Mr. Lewis, the lawyer, hasn’t gotten back to me or John—which is another reason to be suspicious. You’d think he’d have some kind of cease-and-desist type letter ready. The fact that he hasn’t even answered is just... odd.” Or maybe he contacted John who hasn’t bothered letting me know. It wouldn’t be the first time my half-brother has ghosted me.

We climb on the bike and ride for a while. The cool air makes me grateful for the leather jacket Matt loaned me. I slide my arms around his waist and rest my body against his back—warm, stable, comforting. I let my eyes close, the roar of the bike lulling me into a stupor.

After too short a time, the bike slows to a stop. I open my eyes, but it’s pitch black except for the wedge of gravel road lit by the headlight. “Where are we?” I let go of Matt’s waist and sit up straighter.

Matt twists around to talk to me. “I want to show you something. Slide off.”

I comply and pull my helmet off. “What?” I look around but can see only the shadow of trees around us.

He takes my hand and leads me along a dark path. “Right up here.”

We step out of the trees to a rocky aerie. The hills fall away below us, then rise again. The mountains are silhouetted like velvet against a blanket of brilliant stars—more than I’ve ever seen before. I gasp. “That’s incredible!”

Matt guides me to the left as I stare at the sky. He settles my back against his chest so I can watch the sky without losing my balance. We stand like that for a long moment. Once I get used to the glory of the cosmos laid out before me, I become aware of his hands on my hips, his warm breath against my ear, his heart beating fast against my back. Heat radiates from him, warding off the chilly mountain air.

“I keep telling myself I’ll stay clear of you.” The words whisper along my cheek as he leans closer. He almost seems to be talking to himself rather than to me. “That you’re just here for a few weeks. I’m not very good at relationships with expiration dates. Then there’s the whole age difference thing. You’re closer to my daughter’s age than mine. But I’m also not any good at keeping my distance.”

I grab his hands and wrap them around my waist. “I’m okay with that.”

He sucks in a deep breath and blows it out, pulling his hands from mine. He grips my hips and pushes me away from him. “I’m not.”

I turn away from the stunning view. Matt’s face is a pale blob in front of the dark trees. “Matt, I like you. I can’t do anything about the age difference, except say it doesn’t matter. Where I come from, fifteen years is nothing—at least not when it’s the guy who’s older. Look at my dad and Destiny. But I can’t change the fact that this is only a short-term thing. I have a career in Los Angeles, not Rotheberg. Why can’t we just enjoy our time together without any expectations? Keep it casual.” I reach out to press my hand against his cheek, but he jerks away.

“That’s not going to work for me. I’m looking for more than that. If that’s not what you want, then this isn’t going to work.” He turns away, moving along the path toward the bike. “Let’s get you back to your hotel.”

My shoulders drop, and I trail along behind, the dark shadows mocking me. What did I expect? I’m the kind of woman every guy thinks he wants—attractive, connected, amusing. But there’s no substance. It’s all smoke and Hollywood magic. Men get bored with the glamor and look for something new. I’m not a long-term girl, and if I tried to pretend otherwise, he’d realize it soon enough.

I climb on the bike, gripping Matt’s belt and leaning away from his warm, solid bulk. I need to get things figured out with my dad and get out of here. Back to the superficial life I’m used to.

I groan a little as I remember the musical. Why did I commit to doing it? The flyers are posted all over town, with a bright banner printed across the front: “Special Guest Star Nica Holmes.” Much as I’d like to cut and run, I can’t walk out on this. Dame Edith still has connections in my world. I can’t risk alienating her. Not to mention the contract. I may not be getting paid, but a deal is a deal.

We stop at the Gasthaus, and Matt unzips the saddle bag. He hands me my tote in silence.

I clutch the big purse to my chest. “Thanks for the tour. I enjoyed it.”

As I turn away, he grabs my arm. My heart leaps, and I swing around to face him.

“I need this jacket back.” He puts the emphasis on “this” as if I’ve kept other—

“Oh, my gosh, I still have your coat, don’t I?” I drop my bag by my feet and shrug out of the warm leather.

He takes the coat and folds it into the gas tank bag. “It’s okay. I don’t care about that one.”

“No, it’s not okay. It’s at my dad’s place. I’ll get it for you tomorrow.” I swallow and suck in a breath, reaching out to put a hand on his arm. “I wish things could be different.”

He pulls away. In the light of the streetlamp, his face is impassive as he looks past me. “Me, too.” When I shift, his eyes snap to mine and lock on, and his face goes from blank to bleak and blank again before he turns away. “I’ll see you on Monday.” Without waiting for a reply, he turns the front wheel of the bike and roars away.

With a shuddering breath and cold sense of loss, I pick up my bag and retreat to my room.

Chapter 21



MATT

SUNDAY MORNING, after the early service at the Lutheran church, I swing by the Bäckerei. When Nica steps out of the Rotheberg Gasthaus a little after ten, I'm waiting with the signature pink box in hand.

I was awake most of the night, wrestling with my feelings for her and our discussion last night. Early this morning, I decided I'd rather have whatever Nica can give than nothing at all. If all she wants is a short-term fling, I'm in. Because the only other option is to cut her out of my life completely, and I don't think I can do that.

And not only because I'm playing her love interest in the town musical. But that was definitely part of the decision. I considered texting my understudy and telling him he was on, but Edie would kill me. Mike Greenwood is in no way prepared to play the role, despite having had all spring to learn the part. Quitting now would put me in Edie's black books forever, and that woman has a long memory. Not to mention she's married to my boss.

If I'm going to have to play opposite Nica in the musical, I need to make peace with her. My heart will be broken either way, so why not enjoy what I can first?

"Peace offering?" I push the box in her direction.

She moves closer and lifts the lid to peek inside. "You got me a Berliner and streuselkuchen? I can't believe you remembered."

“Why not? The marionberry is my favorite, too.” I carry the box to a picnic bench in the Gasthaus’s side yard. I set the box down next to a pair of coffee cups I put there earlier and produce forks with a flourish.

“I don’t need a fork.” She reaches in and pulls out the huge streusel-topped chunk. Closing her eyes, she sinks her teeth into the moist cake, moaning a little. The sound sends a spike of want through me, but not desire for the cake. I watch as she chews and swallows, my gaze lingering on her closed eyes, her flushed cheeks, her long neck.

“So good! Just like I remembered.” Her eyes pop open, and she holds the cake out to me. “Wanna bite?”

I can’t turn down marionberry cake, and I definitely can’t say no to Nica. I touch her wrist to steady her hand, and electricity zings through me. Our eyes meet, and I get lost in her sea blue gaze. Her lips curve, and she pushes the cake closer to my mouth. Eyes locked, I take a bite, barely noticing the sweet, buttery taste.

With a laugh, she pulls away, putting the cake back into the box, clearly not affected by the connection I feel. The collision of my want and her friendly indifference leave me sagging. I step back to lean against the building, not sure my legs will continue to hold me up.

She picks up the fork and uses it to cut the remaining cake in two. “If I don’t divide this now, I’ll eat more than my fair share.” She gives one half a little push with the fork, then picks up the other, avoiding my eyes.

“I brought it for you.” I can’t seem to get enough air, and my voice comes out strangled.

She glances at me and quickly away, focusing on the pastry. “I’m an actor, remember? I can’t eat all of that. Not if I want to fit into my costume tomorrow.” She taps one of the coffee cups. “Is this for us, too?”

I nod and clear my throat. “One black, one with cream—take your pick. There’s sugar and artificial sweetener in the carrier.”

She pops the lid off one, then sets it aside and adds sweetener to the other. Stirring with the fork, she slants a look at me. “Why don’t you sit down?”

I sit at the far corner of the table, with the box and cups between us. I take the remaining coffee—the one with cream—and blow on it. I’m way out of my depth here. I decided I’d take whatever Nica was willing to give, but it’s been so long since I dated anyone, much less a celebrity. I’m awkward and nervous. The age difference between us disappears as if I’m nineteen all over again.

Nica finishes her cake and smiles at me, her eyes warm and inviting. My nerves disappear because, deep in my soul, I *know* she’s the one. No matter what she said about short-term relationships and returning to LA. This can’t possibly be one-sided. Can it?

“Do you need help with anything today?” I pull a corner off the remaining chunk of cake.

Her eyes follow the cake and linger on my lips in a way that gets my blood pumping even faster. When she tears her eyes away, I can almost feel the snap. She sips some coffee and shakes her head. “I have one suitcase. I think I can manage.” She stares into the distance for a few seconds. “But maybe you can come over for dinner? I owe you a couple of meals.”

“That sounds—no, it’s not going to work. Eva comes home today.” The shot of dismay is followed by a flash of guilt—I should be happy my daughter is back.

“Bring her with you! I’d love to meet her.”

A little chill goes through me. If she’s inviting Eva, she clearly didn’t intend for it to be a date. Nica is obviously attracted to me, but bringing a third wheel isn’t going to help build my case for a long-term relationship. Besides, Eva and I have a tradition. “I can’t. We always have steak and watch *European Vacation* when she comes home from school. Plus, I’ve got a prank to finish.”

“A prank?”

I nod. “It’s our thing.” I pull out my phone and open my TikTok account, swiping to the plastic wrap incident.

She watches the clip and laughs, then swipes to the next video, laughing even harder. “I can’t imagine my dad doing that. Or how he’d react if I did. We definitely don’t have that kind of relationship.” A hint of sadness underlies her cheerful tone.

I take the phone and slide it back into my pocket. “We’re kind of twisted. And I’ve got to run. She’ll be home this afternoon, and I need to finish the one I’m setting up. I’ve got most of her room covered in sticky notes. Now I need to fill it with balloons.”

Nica gapes at me with the Berliner halfway to her mouth. “You what?”

I pull the phone out again and show her a picture of Eva’s room. Every surface is covered in a clutter of bright Post-it notes. “I’ve been working on it since she left in April. A few pads each week. But I want to fill it with balloons, too.” I swipe to the next picture. The floor is covered in blue balloons. “That part is taking a lot longer than I expected.”

“Is this why you didn’t want me going in there?” She sets the phone on the table, zooming and panning across the picture as she eats the jelly-filled donut. “Maybe I can help you. I can’t get into my rental house until four.”

“You aren’t going up to see your dad?”

She shakes her head as she finishes off the donut. After a sip of coffee, she replies. “Not today. I’ll be up there for the next two weeks—I’ll have plenty of time to work on him. At least until SommerFest begins.” She licks the sugar from her fingers. “But for now, I’ve got nothing planned and nowhere to go.”

I stand. “In that case, I gratefully accept your offer of help.”

She slaps both hands on the table, then rubs them together. “Let’s do this! Did you drive here?”

I deposit the empty box in the Gasthaus's dumpster and laugh. "My house is five blocks away."

"Well, I'm going to drive so I don't have to walk back later. I've already checked out." She leads the way to a carport behind the building. It's normally the owners' parking spot, but the bright yellow Porsche sits in the middle of the shaded space, hidden from the road by the building and a short fence. "I'm sure Suave and Amanda will be happy to have their parking space back." We climb in, and she starts the car with an expensive-sounding rumble.

We drive down my street. Is it my imagination, or are people peering through their front blinds? Ignoring the crawling feeling of being watched, I climb out of the car when she parks in front of my house.

"Nica Holmes!" The smarmy photographer from spring break stands on the far side of the road. He snaps a couple of shots on his massive camera, then sprints toward us.

Remembering Blake's encounters with the guy, I point to the sidewalk, backing toward the front door where Nica is already standing in the shadow of the front porch. "No trespassing. You stay on public property."

"What are you doing here, Nica? Are you and this guy an item? Life imitating art?" As he yells questions, he continues to snap photos from the sidewalk. Nica stands with her back to the street, ignoring him.

I hurry to her side and unlock the front door, ushering her inside. "Sorry about that."

"I should apologize to you. It's my fault he's here. I've been posting photos and videos—it was only a matter of time before someone showed up to catch some pictures." She rolls her shoulders. "I've gotten used to the quiet." She tosses her massive purse on the couch and rubs her hands together again. "Forget him. Let's get to pranking!"

Upstairs, I open Eva's bedroom door. Nica bursts into laughter, pointing at the room. Every surface is covered in

sticky notes: bed, walls, dresser, even the bedside lamp. A layer of balloons almost covers the carpet.

“Is this why you told me not to go into her room? You said it was messy!” Nica steps into the room, scuffling through the balloons.

“I couldn’t exactly tell a stranger about this.” I smirk. “Do you know how long it took? This is the work of an insanely obsessed person. *I* think I’m crazy. What would you have thought?” I point at the balloons. “And this is taking way longer than I expected. Turns out a bedroom is pretty big when you’re measuring in inflatable latex.”

She turns slowly, taking in the magnificence. With a shake of her head, she gestures at the closet. It’s on the hallway wall, creating a little niche for the door. “What if we did your plastic wrap thing. We can put some across here—” She steps closer to me, raising her arms so she blocks the door. “Then we only need enough balloons to fill this little niche.”

“That’s a great idea. But part of the problem is the door opens in. I wanted the balloons to spill out when she opens the door, but if we fill the space, they’ll just block it.” I swing the door back and forth to demonstrate.

She hums, her finger tapping her jaw as she thinks. My eyes zero in, snapping to her full lips like a magnet to iron. The lush pink curves twist, sending sparks of heat through my body. Then they form an “oh,” and I’m almost lost. “What about this?” Her eyes sparkle, drawing my attention. She points upward. “How about we rig them to drop when she opens the door?”

I grab her shoulders and squeeze. “Genius!”

Chapter 22



BY THE TIME Matt returns from the store, my fingers are sore. I've been blowing up balloons. Inflation is easy—he's got a little hand pump specifically for balloons—but tying the things is rubbing the skin on the sides of my fingers raw.

The front door opens and slams, and his voice carols up the stairs. "Hi, honey, I'm home!" A few seconds later, he appears with a cloth shopping bag in his hand and a huge grin on his face. It grows wider when he sees me sitting on the floor in the hall beside the garbage bag I've filled with balloons. "This is going to be epic!"

"I hope so." I roll the tight rubber off my fingers, snapping the knot closed and taking some skin with it. "I think I need to take a break from tying, though." I hold up my hand.

His eyes narrow as he peers at my fingers, then he frowns. "Ouch! Let me find you a Band-Aid!" He disappears into the bathroom and returns a few seconds later. Sitting on the carpet beside me, he takes my hand in his. With a grimace, he rips open an antiseptic wipe. "This might sting a bit."

I suck in a gasp when the alcohol touches the raw skin.

"Sorry. You should have stopped. There was no need to injure yourself." He squeezes some antibacterial ointment onto the pad of a Band-Aid and wraps it around my middle finger. "Is the other one—"

I rotate my hand within his gentle grasp, showing him the pink skin on my index finger. "It's sore, but not raw yet."

He lifts my hand, kissing the tender spot. His lips are hot against my skin, and my eyes meet his for a timeless moment. My breath catches in my chest, and my heart almost stops. Swallowing hard, I pull my hand away slowly. “Let’s get this thing done before she gets home.”

I don’t know what else to do. After our argument last night, I was sure I’d never see him again—or at least only at the play. I halfway expected him to drop out. Working with someone you have a crush on can be exhilarating or excruciating. I can maintain a professional demeanor, but acting is my job. I wasn’t sure Matt would be able to do the same.

Then he showed up this morning with the donuts. No real explanation, just a peace offering. He knows I can’t promise more than a few weeks. Last night, that seemed to be impossible for him. Now, he’s taking my breath away with his sexy doctor routine. Did he decide short-term is enough? Or is it like I thought—I’m his kryptonite, and he can’t stay away? I don’t want to hurt him, but I don’t know how to prevent it. Maybe if we spend enough time together, he’ll get tired of me.

They usually do.

Matt drags a chair to the middle of the room. I hold the back while he steps onto it and tapes the corners of a cheap plastic tablecloth to the middle of the ceiling. Leaving the chair in place, he reaches up to tape the other end to the top of the door. His shirt pulls up as he stretches, revealing an inch or two of smooth skin over muscle. I suck in some air and bite my tongue on the flirty comment that springs to my lips.

He finishes with the blue painter’s tape and turns. I drag my eyes to his face, but not before he notices my gaze. I can see it in the smirk hovering at the corners of his mouth. He grabs the bottom of his T-shirt and slowly lifts it to wipe his neck, as if he’s been working out in the hot sun. I swallow hard when his abs come into view—a solid six-pack with a light tan. He may be in his forties, but he’s got a body many younger men can only dream of.

Suddenly, there isn't enough air in this room. My ears start to buzz.

The buzz turns to humming, then he belts out the opening riff of *The Stripper*. I burst out laughing, my face bright red. "Way to kill the mood."

"I was afraid you were going to pass out. From all this glory." He waves a hand down his now covered torso, but his tone is derisive.

"Don't undersell yourself." Trying to get back on task, I lift the garbage bag of balloons. "Now what?"

"Now you get up on that chair and put the balloons into the chute." He waves at the plastic hanging from the ceiling. "It's my turn to ogle." He grabs the chair's back to steady it.

With a chuckle, I step onto the chair. He puts his free hand on my hip. When I give him a pointed glare, he shrugs without moving his hands. "I just want to make sure you don't fall off."

His hand is hot against my hip, stable and comforting but distracting. I try to ignore it as I drop the balloons one by one into the chute. When I've got them all stowed, I climb down and step away. My hip feels cold.

"How do we get out without dumping the balloons?"

Matt stares at the shut door in consternation. "Uh..." He grabs the handle and pulls it open a few inches. The balloons shift overhead, then pile up behind the door as he pulls it wider. A few drop over the top, but most of them simply sit in the plastic now hanging loose behind the door. "Well, that didn't work the way I envisioned."

"I thought you knew what you were doing?" I try not to laugh, but a giggle sneaks out.

He chuckles, too. "I looked at videos on the internet, but they were all for purposeful balloon drops—like for a celebration, not a prank—where you pull a ribbon to release them. Let me think about this for a minute." He swings the door back and forth a few times and pokes at the balloons in the bag. A few more drop over the door.

I grab the garbage bag and slip past him to pick up the escaping balloons. While he plays with the door some more, I grab the pump and the extra balloons and stash them on the dresser in the guest room. I don't want to leave any evidence if Eva arrives before we're done.

Eventually, Matt figures out how to attach the end to the doorjamb instead of the door. He puts the chair back in the center of the room then retreats to the doorway. "The problem is, I'll have to stand here and keep the balloons in while you load the chute."

I step on to the chair and start loading the balloons. "I think I can be trusted to not fall off a chair." I shove a couple more into the plastic, then fake a wobble. "Whoa!"

Matt glares from the doorway. "Not funny. I can do this myself with the door closed and just climb out the window."

"Oh, yeah, because that's so much safer than standing on a chair." I glance over my shoulder. The window has a fake balcony below it, but I'm not sure that would hold a person. "If you think I'm holding a ladder out there for you, you're crazy." I load the last of the balloons and hop down. Sticky notes flutter from the back of the chair. I slide it under the desk, replace the sticky notes that fell off, then duck under Matt's arm and out of the room.

"Pull the door shut," he says. "My arms are getting tired."

I reach past him to grab the doorknob, putting a hand on his side where his shirt is riding up again. He sucks in a breath, and I snicker. Turnabout is fair play. I give his firm oblique a playful pat as I step away. My fingers don't seem to want to leave, though. His skin is warm and smooth under my touch. I give the back of my head a mental slap and retreat across the hall.

He turns with me, his hands dropping to his sides. We stare at each other across the narrow space, eyes locked, breath ragged, the air thick with unsaid things.

Downstairs, the front door opens. "Yo, Dad! I'm home."

I jerk my eyes from his face with a suppressed gasp.

“Eva.” He chokes a little on the name.

“You sure?” I’m almost inaudible, breathy instead of the snarky tone I intended.

He points a finger at me. “Stay here. I’ll deal with you later.” Then he clatters down the steps.

A young woman appears at the bottom. Her hair is pink, and she has a stud in her nose. She wears an ancient-looking T-shirt with a faded image across the front—I barely make out what might have been a guitar before Matt wraps his arms around her and swings her away. “I was wondering when you’d get here!”

I hover at the top of the stairs, unsure what to do. If I walk down the stairs as if I belong here, she’s going to wonder what we were doing. My face goes hot. She’s twenty-one years old—she’s not going to wonder, she’s going to assume the worst. I got the impression Matt hasn’t dated much since his divorce—how is Eva going to react to another woman in the house?

“Do you want help unloading your stuff?” Matt turns Eva toward the door, then waves at me behind his back with his other hand. I can’t decipher his short, choppy motions. Does he want me to hide? Or to come downstairs?

I pull out my phone and text him. “What should I do?”

Downstairs, the front door opens again. “I’ll be there in a second,” Matt says. Then he reappears at the foot of the stairs. “There’s a tripod in my room. Can you—”

I cut him off. “Got it!” I hurry the few steps down the hall to his room.

The space is tidy and almost barren. The queen-sized bed has a pale blue blanket and two matching pillows. Blinds cover the large window, and thin stripes of sunlight shine on the beige carpet. A craftsman-style dresser stands beneath the window, low and long. A matching, taller set of drawers flanks a closed door. There are no clothes scattered around, no knickknacks, no dust. It looks like a room in a model home—clean and comfortable, but not much indication of the character of the owner.

The tripod stands beside the door. I grab it and set it in the doorway, facing Eva's room. I pull out my phone and snap it into the jaws of the tripod's holder. Something bangs downstairs—the front door hitting the wall as it swings wide. Tapping the “switch” icon to use the back camera, I aim the phone at Eva's room and step back, hoping she won't notice the device.

Steps sound on the stairs, then pause. “What are you up to, old man?” Eva's voice is faint, as if she's turned away. “Did you think I wouldn't notice the tripod? It's not six a.m. this time.”

Matt's laugh filters up. “Rats, foiled again.”

Something heavy hits the ground—a bag maybe—and steps move toward me. I retreat farther into the room, debating the wisdom of trying to hide. Maybe I should just say “hi.”

Eva doesn't even look into the room as she reaches for the phone on the tripod. “I don't know what you have up your sleeve, but there will be no record—hey, did you get a new phone?” She pulls the device from the holder and turns away.

While her back is turned, I scurry toward the bathroom.

Despite my attempted stealth, she spins. “Who are—wait, I know you!”

I freeze in the doorway. In her father's bedroom, where I'm attempting to hide. I close my eyes for a brief second. Could I have made a worse decision? What a way to meet a romantic interest's adult daughter.

“You look like Nica Holmes.” Eva moves the tripod out of the doorway and advances toward me. “Are you—” She spins around as Matt appears in the hall behind her. “Is she Nica Holmes?”

“I told you I met her.” He gives an apologetic smile.

“Yeah, but honestly, I didn't believe—I thought you were messing with me!” She swings around again. “Why is Nica Holmes hiding in your bedroom?” Her eyes dart around the room, as if looking for evidence of something untoward.

I put on my best “meeting the parents” look—it should work for meeting the kids, too, right? “Hi, I’m Nica.”

Eva shakes my outstretched hand, her expression dazed. Behind her, Matt gives me a thumbs-up and steps out of sight. What is he up to?

Eva gestures helplessly around the room. “Why are you hiding in here?”

I wave at the tripod beside the door. “I was helping your dad with the camera.”

Her eyes go wide. “Were you going to post his prank on your account? Because I’d be okay with that. Let’s get it set up again.”

I laugh. “You don’t even know what we were going to film.”

She waves that away as she drags the tripod into the doorway again. “I don’t care! I’ve never gone viral. I’ll have a better shot on your account, right? And you’ll tag me? How many followers do you have?”

“Not that many.” I take the phone from her and put it back into place.

While I work, she pulls out her own and starts swiping. “Holy crap! Three point two million? That’s not that many?”

I chuckle self-consciously. “I know people with a lot more. Ryan Davis has a hundred and forty million.”

“Yeah, well, he’s Ryan Davis.” She slides the phone back into her pocket. “Everyone loves him. Plus, he has all those movies. And the phone company. And the whiskey.”

“Good point.” I aim the camera at the bedroom. “How are you at faking surprise?”

“I took an acting class this term. Got an A.” She winks outrageously. “I can be hella surprised.” She herds her dad toward the stairs. “Outta my way, old man. Time to become a star!”

I laugh and tap the record button. “Ready? Action!”

Eva lifts the plastic storage box she dropped at the top of the steps and walks toward her bedroom door. I can't see her expression from here, but that's probably a good thing. She leans the crate against the doorjamb, holding it in place with her hip, and opens the door.

Nothing happens.

Eva looks over her shoulder, directly at the camera. She raises an eyebrow. The balloons drop onto her head.

Matt crows with laughter. "Classic! You didn't see it coming."

"Are you trying to tell me the delay was intentional?" Eva grasps the sides of the crate and kicks balloons away from her feet. The last few fall as she flips the light switch. Catching sight of the sticky notes, she lets out a "Whaaa?" and starts laughing. She drops the box and moves into the room, turning in a circle. Head shaking, she covers her face. "Holy crap! I can't believe you—how long did this take?" She wanders around the room, touching the colorful squares hanging from the walls, the bed frame, the ceiling fan chain.

I get it all on film.

Matt wanders into the video. "Three months, off and on. I started the day you left."

She punches his shoulder, hard. "You are going to help me take these down, old man."

"Hey!" He rubs his arm. "Is that any way to treat your father? This was a labor of love."

"More like a labor of crazy." She pulls a note from the wall and sticks it to his nose.

I tap the button to stop recording and pocket my phone. As they cheerfully bicker over who will remove the remains of the prank, I tiptoe down the stairs.

Chapter 23



MATT

WHEN WE GET DOWNSTAIRS for the next load of Eva's belongings, Nica is hovering in the foyer. She looks from me to Eva and back. "Do you need help?"

"Sure!" Eva says before I can demure.

Nica follows Eva into the driveway. The photographer jumps out of his car and hurries across the road, snapping pictures again. He runs right up to Eva and gets in her face. "We got a threesome going now?"

"Hey!" I start forward. No one talks to my daughter like that.

Before I reach them, Eva pulls her elbow back beside her ear and smashes the heel of her hand into the guy's face. Boitano screams and goes down, blood gushing from his nose. He drops his phone, which Eva snatches up.

"Gimme my phone!" Boitano struggles to a seated position, reaching for the device. Blood pours down his face, and he grabs for his nose.

Eva steps out of reach, swiping and clicking.

"Check his cloud storage, too," Nica says.

"Already on it."

The paparazzo wipes his bloody hand on the grass, the other one pinching his nose. "Gimme my phone! I'm calling the cops."

I pull out my phone. “Too late.” I tap my contacts and dial the local sheriff’s deputy. “Brad, we’ve got a trespasser threatening my daughter.”

“I didn’t threaten anyone!” Boitano shouts as he backs away, blood still dripping from his nose. “She punched me!”

In my ear, Brad laughs. “Is that the photographer who was harassing Blake and Rachel?”

“Yeah, he’s back.”

“And someone punched him? Any witnesses?”

I take a couple steps away, turning so Boitano can’t see my face and lowering my voice. “Just me and Nica. Can he press charges?”

“That’s not really how it works. If I come out there, I’ll have to write up a report. Or if he calls us, we’ll write the report. The prosecutor decides whether to press charges. If it’s just a bloody nose, and he’s been a nuisance, I don’t think Worthington will bother. Where did it happen?”

“In my driveway. He got right up in her face and asked if she was part of a threesome!” My voice gets louder in outrage.

“Do you want me to come out?” Brad asks.

“If you don’t, and he calls you later, will it look bad for E— whoever punched him?”

Brad is silent for a few seconds. “Let’s file a report. Probably safer that way.” He disconnects.

I spin around and stalk to the sidewalk, looming over the short photographer. “The sheriff is on his way.”

“What? I didn’t do anything! And she punched me!” Boitano blusters. “I’m not on your property! And it’s not posted. You can’t prove anything!”

“Your blood is on the grass. How’d it get here if you didn’t come on the property?” Nica points at the ground.

“Doesn’t mean anything. Trespassing is a civil offense. And you aren’t allowed to just punch people!” Boitano lets go of his nose, which promptly starts to drip again. He regrasps

the bridge, holding his clean hand out. “Give me my phone back!”

Eva looks at the device in her hand, then lifts it as if to show him. Her voice takes on an innocent, questioning tone. “This phone? Is this yours? I found it here. On my dad’s property. How can it be yours? You said you didn’t trespass.”

A siren wails in the distance, getting louder every second.

Boitano’s face goes even paler under the blood. “Did you call the cops?”

“I told you I did.”

“I didn’t—you shouldn’t—never mind!” He backs away from me, pausing at the curb. “Keep that girl away from me!”

“How about you stay away from her?” Nica yells as he runs across the road. “I’m going to file for a restraining order!”

The rental car’s door slams in response. The engine turns over, and the wheels spin out as he careens away.

I turn to Nica. “I’m not sure you’d have much of a case.”

She crosses her arms, staring after the fleeing car. “Sometimes the threat is enough to scare them away. But Boitano is persistent. I suspect he’ll be back.”

Siren wailing, lights flashing, the sheriff’s car turns onto the street. We clap our hands over our ears as it pulls to a stop in front of us. The siren cuts off, leaving my ears ringing, and Brad climbs out. He’s in his mid-thirties, with powerful shoulders and arms but the start of a paunch leaning over his waistband. He hooks his thumbs on his belt and looks around, his eyes pausing on each of us.

“Where’s the perp?”

“That little weenie ran away.” Eva explains what happened and hands Brad the phone. “That’s his. I deleted the pictures he took. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that?”

Brad takes the device in two fingers, carefully avoiding the bloody fingerprints. “You know punching someone is assault.”

Eva's head drops. "I know, but he asked if we were having a threesome!" She waves at me and Nica. "With my dad! Ew!"

Brad grunts in agreement. "It's not a good defense for punching someone, though."

"He got right up in her face." I step close to Brad. He instinctively steps back, an arm coming up to block. "Like that."

"I have to get his statement. Where is he?" Brad takes another step back and peers around, as if the photographer is hiding behind Alf, who chooses this moment to wander out of the bushes. The big calico eyes us, then stalks away.

"Is that the same cat we saw in town?" Nica asks.

I shrug and nod. "I told you he gets around."

We watch the cat for a few seconds, then Nica turns to Brad. "If that little twerp doesn't talk to you, we're good, right?"

Brad waggles his hand. "I should file a formal report—so if he calls, we have the history. Can we go inside and sit down?"

I lead the way into the kitchen and get Brad a glass of water. Eva sits at the table with him, answering questions. Nica perches next to her, patting Eva's shoulder or murmuring encouragement as they go through the incident. I putter around in the kitchen, listening.

"When he grabbed my arm, I punched him." Eva lifts a defensive shoulder.

"He grabbed your arm?" I surge around the kitchen island to her side.

"Where?" the deputy asks.

Eva turns her left arm toward Brad. Faint finger-shaped bruises have begun to develop on her pale skin. My blood runs cold, and I suppress the urge to find Boitano and beat him to a pulp.

Brad nods and makes a note in his book. “May I take photos of your arm? For evidence?”

Eva agrees, and they move into the yard to use the natural light. Nica watches from the sliding glass door, her face troubled. “I’m sorry about this.”

I move close and put a hand on her shoulder. She leans in, her arm brushing my chest. The contact sends my blood fizzing through my veins, but I tamp down on my emotions. “It’s not your fault.”

“If I weren’t here, he wouldn’t be, either.”

I shake her shoulder gently. “He chose to come here. I don’t care why. He grabbed Eva’s arm. That’s all on him. No one should have to put up with that kind of behavior. If paparazzi were respectful, people wouldn’t hate them so much.”

She sighs. “Being respectful doesn’t get you the high-value photos. People like him don’t care about privacy or ethics. I kind of want the DA to press charges—he needs to learn he can’t behave like that.”

Brad opens the slider and motions for Eva to precede him through. “...finish the paperwork. You can pick up a copy of the report on Monday.” He glances at me, then turns back to Eva. “I’ll be honest. Worthington—the county prosecutor—probably won’t move forward on something like this. It takes too many resources away from bigger crimes. But if that weasel comes back, call me. And I’ll help with a restraining order, if you want to do that.”

Eva thanks Brad, and they shake hands. I see him to the door, pausing to look over my shoulder. The women are out of sight. I lean close and lower my voice. “What would you do?”

Brad looks up at me from under his thick eyebrows. “Exactly what you’re doing. File a police report. Watch out for the scum. I wouldn’t try to take matters into my own hands.” His lips press together, and he shakes his head a little. “Let me do my job. Any idea where this guy is staying? Maybe I can pay him a little visit.”

I shake my head in frustration. “No idea. He’s driving a rental car—shouldn’t be too hard to spot that.” I give him the make and model.

Brad puts his notebook away. “I’ll take a little ramble around town on my way back to the office. If I find him, I’ll *strongly* suggest he go back to LA or New York or wherever he came from.”

I clap a hand on the other man’s shoulder. “Thanks, Brad. Tell Tina we said hello.”

He tips his hat. “Will do.” He steps off the front stoop, then turns around again. “You don’t suppose your guest would sign an autograph for Tina, do you? When she heard about the musical, she was all—” He waves his arms overhead like Kermit the Frog.

I chuckle. “I’ll see what I can do for her.”

When I return to the kitchen, Nica and Eva have mugs of tea and cookies as they talk in low voices. They both look up when I walk in. Eva’s voice cuts out, and she shoves a cookie in her mouth.

“What mayhem are you two plotting?” I grab a glass and fill it with water.

“Nothing,” they say in unison, then laugh.

“No mayhem.” Nica smiles and lifts her mug. “We’re just two completely innocent women enjoying a cup of tea together.”

“Nothing to see here.” Eva waves her hand like Ben Kenobi. “These are not the women you’re looking for.”

I sip my water and snag a cookie. “I wonder where they went, then.”

“Who?” Eva asks.

“The women I was looking for. I was planning on taking them to dinner, but if they aren’t here...”

“Oh, look, we’re back.” Eva jumps from her stool and flings out her arms. “Father! I’ve missed you so! I didn’t see

you there.”

“It’s a good thing you aren’t in the play. No one would buy that act.”

Nica shakes a finger at me. “Play nice, children. Let’s get some dinner.”

Chapter 24



NICA

MATT SUGGESTED GOING out for dinner, but Eva convinces him she needs a home-cooked meal. “The meal plan food isn’t bad, but it gets old after a while. Besides, I don’t want to run into that photographer again. He’s bound to be watching for another chance to get photos of Nica.” Eva flexes her fingers.

“Where’d you learn to punch like that?” I ask. “And why didn’t it hurt your fingers? I thought punching was painful for the person doing it?”

Eva lifts her hand level with her shoulder, with her wrist cocked at a ninety-degree angle, palm facing me. “I didn’t really punch him. I shoved the heel of my hand into his face.” She pushes her hand toward me, stopping short of my nose. “I learned it in a self-defense course my dad made me take before I left for college. I can also stomp his instep and knee him in the groin.” She brings her foot down hard, then spins and mimes grabbing an assailant’s shoulders while swinging her knee up, fast.

“That’s my girl.” Matt pulls a package of steak from the fridge. “I don’t have a shotgun, so I had to make sure she could take care of herself.” He grinds salt and pepper over the beef and flips it onto a plate to do the other side. “What are we drinking, ladies?”

“I got it.” Eva opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle and a can. “Beer for Dad, soda for me.” With a mischievous look at her father, she puts the red can back and takes a pale green one. “Or maybe I’ll have a cider. I’m twenty-one now.”

“Go for it.” He pushes the meat aside and takes the beer.
“What will you have, Nica?”

“I’ll take a cider—if it’s not too sweet.”

Eva hands me the can, then pulls out some glasses. She passes one to me, then grabs a cola.

“I thought you were having cider?” I pour mine into the glass.

“That was mostly to get him riled up.” She nods at Matt.
“Didn’t work.”

“You’re legal now—you can drink what you want as long as you’re responsible. Besides, I’m betting you’ve had stronger stuff than that at school.” He rummages in a drawer and pulls out a bottle opener. “Why don’t you do some broccoli and a salad while I manage the meat?”

“Sure.” Eva starts pulling things from the fridge, and Matt gets out plates and silverware. Eva tells us about some of her friends at college while I set the table. I fold the paper napkins in half and slide them under the forks.

“Don’t get too fancy—we won’t recognize the place.” Matt sets three or four bottles of salad dressing on the table.

“It’s not like I’m making origami.” I pretend to fold something quickly, then hold one hand out, palm up, while flourishing with the other. “Look, a napkin swan.”

“Very nice. Can you work that magic on the sticky notes in Eva’s room?” He flutters his hands. “Make them just fly away?”

“You should have thought about the cleanup before you stuck them all over, old man.” Eva pokes her dad’s arm with her index finger. “I’ll be lucky if I can find the bed.”

“I covered it with a flat sheet before I did the stickies. You can just pull it off and voila, pre-made bed. I even changed it before I started sticking.”

“Really? Thanks, Dad.” She puts her soda glass on the table and bounds out of the room.

“She seems to like you.” Matt’s eyes linger on the doorway his daughter just disappeared through.

“What’s not to like?” I cringe internally. My usual reaction to a perfectly normal family surfaces—I am nothing like these people with their pranks and obvious love for each other. I’m a flighty, flakey Hollywood actress. More looks than substance. Using whatever it takes to get ahead in a world completely focused on money, power, and fame.

I give myself a mental shake. I’m not that far down the dark road of celebrity. I still have a moral compass. It might be dinged and rusty, but it keeps me straight most of the time. And just because I want success doesn’t mean I’ll sell out anyone who gets in my way. That encounter with the photographer has kicked my self-loathing into high gear, and I need to get him out of my head.

Matt moves closer, forcing me to look up at him. His eyes meet mine, searching—for what, I’m not entirely sure. He stands before me, warm, solid, dependable. He leans closer, and my head tilts up naturally, as if our lips are connected by a retractable line, drawing us together. He stops, his breath warm against my mouth as he speaks, and I swallow hard, longing rushing through me. “There’s nothing not to like.”

Eva’s feet clatter loudly down the stairs, startling me. I jump back, biting my lip. Matt’s lips twitch. “She’s twenty-one, you know. She’s seen adults kissing before.”

“But has she seen *you* kissing? Someone other than her mother?” His ex-wife might be two years gone, but from what Rachel and Blake let slip at the lake, he hasn’t dated since. Eva might like me, but that doesn’t mean she wants me as a stepmother.

I turn away and grab my cider as she saunters in. Stepmother? Where did that come from? I barely know Matt—marriage shouldn’t even be on my radar. In fact, despite my age, I’ve never seriously considered marrying anyone.

Until now. The idea has appeared, fully formed, in my brain, as if it’s been surgically inserted. I can see myself living in this house, decorating for Christmas, opening gifts with

Matt and Eva. Matt's hair goes gray, and Eva wears a white dress. There are even small children and a faceless son-in-law hovering around the edges of my daydream.

What is happening to me? I've attended a lot of weddings—and seen a lot of divorces. People in my social circle get hitched quickly and easily—and get unhitched just as fast. I've never wanted that. I figure marriage should be forever, and I've never found that forever guy.

Maybe you have now.

The thought scares the crap out of me.

“Nica?” Eva taps my arm.

I jerk, sloshing the cider in my glass. “Sorry, just zoned out for a second.” I look around the small kitchen. Eva stands by the sink. Matt is gone. After a second, I spot him through the sliding glass door, dropping the steaks on the grill in the backyard. He puts the last one on and picks up his beer, then looks away, raising a hand before strolling out of my eyeline.

Eva clears her throat and tilts her head toward the counter. “You wanna make salads?”

“Sure.” I take a sip of my drink and put it on the granite surface, looking over the selection of produce Eva has provided. “You like all this stuff?”

She looks up from the sink where she's rinsing green beans. “Except the onions. Leave those off mine, please.”

I unstack the three bowls and pull a plastic container of clean lettuce closer. “You do individual salads instead of one big one?”

“Yeah, Mom's pretty picky about what she wants on hers, so it was easier to do it that way. We never got out of the habit after she left.” She snaps the end of a bean, and it thuds loudly in the stainless-steel sink.

“That makes sense.” I keep my voice as neutral as possible. I'm not going to comment on her absent mother. I pull a few leaves of lettuce out of the bowl and start ripping them into bite-sized pieces.

“It’s okay.” Eva gives me a sideways glance. “You and my dad, I mean. I don’t mind. He needs someone... nice.”

I bite my lip. “How do you know I’m nice? Just because I play it on TV doesn’t mean—”

“Please.” She smirks and waves at the counter. “Look at you. You’re making salad. You helped my dad with that ridiculous prank. You cared about me getting charged with assault. You’re obviously a nice person.”

“I like to think anyone would care about a woman being charged with assault for defending herself.” As I say the words, I realize how often that doesn’t happen. “Okay, any *woman* would care about another woman defending herself.”

With a humorless laugh, she picks up the colander and shakes the water off the beans. “Right. Everyone likes you, though.”

“Everyone?”

“All of dad’s friends.” She puts the beans beside the stove, turns on the gas, and slides a frying pan over the heat. Another smirk twitches across her lips. “Seriously, they’ve all told me.”

I stare at her, my mouth open. Finally, I snap it shut. “They actually said something? To you? About me?”

Eva pulls her phone out of her back pocket. With a couple taps, she finds what she’s looking for and turns it toward me. “I started a Discord channel.” The app on the screen is labeled “Matt’s crush.”

I take the phone, sagging against the counter. “How long has this—” I break off as I scroll through the discussion. The earliest entries are dated April 2. “That’s the day we met. Who is on this?”

She takes the phone back and taps a couple of things, then turns it toward me. “Rachel, Jamie, Gloria, Stella. And me. Uncle Blake pops in once in a while.”

I take the device again and read a couple of entries. Each member of the group reports on their encounters with me and reactions to those encounters. Most of them are positive, with

Blake expressing a little bit of caution. Rachel promptly tells him to stuff it. Stella talks about refusing to take the main role in the musical, “so they can spend more time together.” I hand it back to Eva. “I’m not sure I should read this.”

She pockets the phone. “See—nice. Everyone thinks so. We know you won’t do anything to hurt my dad.”

I turn to the counter and pull a cutting board closer to me, grabbing a cucumber. “You don’t know that. You—all these people—only see what I want you to see. I’m a professional actor. I know how to fool people.” I chop some of the cuke.

She reaches around me to take the knife from my hand. “You’re getting a little stabby, which is making me doubt my assessment of your niceness.”

I look down. The cucumber has several ragged gashes in its side. “See!” I fling my hands at the innocent vegetable. “That’s not nice.”

With a chuckle, Eva puts the knife beside the cutting board. “As long as you take your crazy out on the produce, I think we’re fine.” She goes back to her pan. Oil sizzles as she tosses the beans in. “Maybe focus on the cherry tomatoes until you calm down. Rinse ’em and pull the stems off. Plenty of violence to get your feelings out.”

Despite my swirling emotions, this makes me laugh. Or maybe because of them. I chuckle as I clean the tomatoes and rip them off their woody stems. Plenty of violence.

The pan sizzles again, and the scent of roasting garlic fills the kitchen, making my mouth water. Matt returns with a foil-covered plate and an empty beer bottle. He puts the plate on the table and turns to Eva. “Rachel says hello. She wants you to come over after dinner.”

Eva dumps the beans into a bowl. “Did she say why?”

“She hasn’t seen you in three months. I think she just wants to say hi.” He glances at me, and his cheeks turn pink. “And probably to give me and Nica some alone time. Not that we need—I mean—” He breaks off, his face now beet red.

Eva pushes past him and sets her bowl on the table. She pats her father's shoulder. "You're so cute when you're embarrassed. But don't worry about it. Nica and I had a talk, and I'm fine with this." She waves between her father and me.

Now my cheeks are blazing. I busy myself with the cucumber, concentrating on slicing it into paper-thin circles.

"Thanks for clearing that up." Matt unties his apron and hangs it on the hook inside the pantry. He waits for me to fan the cucumber into the last bowl, then takes two of them to the table. "Dinner is ready. Let's eat."



AFTER DINNER, Eva runs to her room to get something, then hurries across the kitchen toward the slider. "Sorry, can't help with the dishes! Gotta go see Rachel!" She's out the door and galloping across the yard before we can answer.

Matt chuckles. "Me and my big mouth." He stacks the plates, scraping bits of fat and bone into the trash. "I shouldn't have told her to see Rachel until after the cleanup."

"There isn't much." I take the salad bowls to the sink and rinse the dressing down the drain before putting them into the dishwasher. "Hand me that frying pan, and I'll scrub it."

He puts the pan beside the sink, then moves the salad dressing bottles to the refrigerator. While I wash the pan and knives, he puts everything else away. We leave the wet dishes in the drainer, and Matt turns off the kitchen light, pausing beside the fridge. "You want anything else to drink?"

I raise my glass of water. "I'm good. I have to drive back to the Ranch tonight, so one is my limit."

He loiters by the couch for a moment. "You want to sit down? Go for a walk? Watch a movie?" He grins. "There's probably a Nica Holmes film on the Romance Channel."

I roll my eyes. "No thanks. I don't like her stuff. Too sweet. Besides, I thought you said you watch *European*

Vacation when Eva comes home.” I put my glass on the coffee table and sit on the couch.

“We can do that when she gets back. Or tomorrow.”

I clear my throat. “We should probably talk.”

“That’s never good.” He drops beside me with a grin. “Isn’t that the line that always follows ‘we should talk’?” His grin fades as he catches sight of my face. “Oh, it really isn’t good.”

I take a deep breath, but before I can say anything, he turns to me and grabs my shoulders. At his touch, a thrill of energy snaps through me, and the air catches in my throat. My brain might want to talk, but my body wants something completely different.

“Look, Nica. I like you. And I know I told you yesterday that I can’t do short term, but the truth is, I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give. I can’t seem to stay away from you. He lets go of one shoulder to gesture between us. “This isn’t one-sided. You feel it too—I can tell. I know you have work commitments, and I would never expect you to give that up for me. I’m just asking you to give us a chance. Let’s see where things go, okay?”

I can’t tear my gaze away from his beautiful blue eyes. They speak to my soul in a way I’ve never felt before—inviting me to fall into their depths and float there forever. I suck in a gasp of air through my tight throat. “I—”

He moves closer, and whatever I was going to say gets lost behind a hot buzz of desire. His hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb grazing my lower lip, sending an electric ripple into my core. I close my eyes, leaning into him, my lips angling toward his like a heat-seeking missile. Our lips touch, and I lose myself in a vortex of belonging, a longing that is both satisfied and demanding.

The kiss seems to last forever, and yet only for seconds. We break apart, and I gasp for air, my heart pounding. I want more—more of this man who makes me feel weak and powerful, vulnerable and strong.

He sits back, eyes wide. His chest rises and falls quickly, as if he's been running. When he licks his lips, another shock of want spears through me. We stare at each other, as if we can't understand or believe what we're feeling.

As if forever is possible.

When the slide opens, we both jump.

"Sorry!" Eva holds up a hand, as if she's trying not to see us. "Just passing through. Don't mind me!"

Matt rolls his eyes, then chucks a throw pillow at his daughter as she scoots around the kitchen island toward the stairs. "About time you showed up. We have a movie to watch."

She pauses in the doorway, eyeing us. "I didn't want to interrupt, but Blake and Rachel were getting all cozy, and I didn't want to be a third wheel." She glances at me, then focuses on her dad. "Oops, too late for that. Sorry! I'll just go upstairs. I would have come in the front door, but it was locked."

"That was my fault." I stand. "Habit. Can't leave a door unlocked in So Cal. I need to head out now anyway." They protest, but I shake my head. "I need to pick up the keys to my new place at the Visitors' Center before they close. Crap." I yank my phone out of my pocket and relax. "Yeah, I've still got time."

Matt follows me through the house to the front door. "This was fun." He opens the door, squinting against the setting sun. "Looks like the coast is still clear. No paparazzi."

"We didn't really get to talk." I glance toward the family room, but I can't see Eva from here. Still shielded from the street by the partially open door, I reach out and grab his shirt, pulling him toward me.

He comes willingly, pushing me into the corner behind the door. "Is that what you call this? Talking?" His hands move to the wall behind me, one on either side of my head as he leans in.

“Now that I think about it, talking can be overrated.” I rise on my toes and press my lips against his. The move takes us both by surprise. My fists clench in his shirt, pulling him closer, needing to feel his body against mine.

The THX sound booms out of the family room, followed by another “sorry!” from Eva.

Matt chuckles and steps back. “Remind me next time I start a new relationship to do it while she’s at school.”

“I’m not letting you start any new relationships, buster.” I freeze as my words sink in. That sounds like commitment. I wait for the panic to close in around me, but it’s strangely absent.

Matt’s eyes glow, burning into my soul. “That works for me.”

Chapter 25



I DRIVE Dad's little yellow Porsche to the airport to pick up my brother. The forty-minute drive seems to take forever, but I arrive way too early. Following the signs to arrivals—also the departures lane at the tiny airport—I park at the curb. Two other cars idle nearby, and a few people pull their luggage across the road to the terminal. The sun pours down through the car's open top, warming my head and shoulders.

A uniformed security guard ambles to my passenger door and puts two fingers to his ball cap in a lazy salute. “This is the loading zone. I have to tell you that, and if anyone asks, I told you to move on. Nice car.”

I chuckle. “Thanks. Busy day?”

We both look around the nearly empty sidewalk and road. He shrugs. “About average. When the flight from Seattle arrives, you'll see *tens* of cars here. Is that the flight you're looking for?”

I nod. “My brother is coming via SeaTac.”

“If it gets too crowded, you'll have to move, but late Monday mornings aren't usually too crazy. People leave on the earlier flights, and not so much inbound at this time of day.” He asks a few questions about the Porsche, and I answer as well as I can. Finally, he taps the roll bar. “As I said, if anyone asks, I told you to move. Have a nice day.”

“Thanks, you, too.” I lean my head back, enjoying the warm sun on my face. The locals seem to think eighty-three is too hot, but it's perfect in my opinion. I play with the radio

then flip through my phone while I wait. A plane lands on the runway just beyond the small terminal, and I check my airline app. That's John's flight. A half-dozen cars drive up and park along the curb before and behind me.

Ten minutes later, a dozen or so people exit the terminal. Trunks pop open, people greet their family. My half-brother strides out of the building, a young woman hurrying behind him. They both drag small suitcases. I jump out of the car and wave. "I didn't know Maddie was coming, too! The back seat is kinda tight." That's an understatement. I'm not sure even a tiny woman like Maddie will fit.

John waves a set of keys at me as he strides past the car, his eyes scanning the short-term parking lot beyond me. "I'm not riding with you. I'll meet you at the Ranch."

"Good to see you, too," I mutter.

Maddie drops the handle of her purple leopard skin suitcase and throws her arms around me, air-kissing both cheeks. "Nica!"

"Where's he going?" I release Maddie and turn to watch John march across the road.

"He's getting the other Porsche. Destiny left it in the parking lot. She was trying to sell it." Maddie pulls the passenger door open and jams her suitcase over the seat. Without waiting for a reply, she climbs in and shuts the door.

I run around the car and get in. "She tried to *sell* Dad's car?"

Maddie shrugs. "She posted it on Craigslist but didn't think about how she was going to deal with the rest. Not like the Land Rover."

"Wait, what? She sold the Land Rover? I was wondering where it went."

Maddie nods as she scrolls through something on her phone. "She's been selling a lot of things since Dad got sick. John says she discovered the prenup doesn't leave her with much."

I stop at the highway and turn to stare at my half-sister. “Prenup? Is she divorcing Dad already?”

A car honks behind me, and I jerk in surprise, glancing at the rearview mirror. John, driving the red 911, gives me a dirty look. Waving, I check the road, then pull out.

“Yeah,” Maddie continues, still scrolling. “She decided he’s too old, she said. Like she didn’t know that when she married him.” She shakes her head, eyes still glued to the screen. “Anyway, once she realized the prenup gives her nothing if she leaves him in less than a year, she started selling anything she could get her hands on. You should see the Bel Air house. It’s been gutted.”

A hot surge of anger flows through me, followed by a cold trickle of reason. I’m not too surprised by Destiny’s desertion. We didn’t expect the marriage to last—that’s the whole point of a prenup. But three months? I guess Dad’s stroke really drove home the age difference. “How’d John get the keys to the Porsche?”

She shrugs. “He said something about spares in the safe. I guess Dad never gave Destiny the combo.”

“Mr. Stevens isn’t going to let her get away with selling Dad’s stuff, is he?” I hit the accelerator as we leave Redmond behind and roar down Highway 24 toward Rotheberg. The red Porsche, guided by John’s stable, careful hand, falls behind.

“I dunno. You’d have to ask John. I wasn’t involved in all the lawyer talk.” She holds up her phone. “Have you seen this kid who sings about pizza? It’s hilarious.”

I let Maddie’s monologue about her favorite videos drift over me like ocean spray while I consider this new development. If Destiny is divorcing Dad, surely that means she no longer controls who has access to him.

When we get to the Ranch, I have Maddie text John, asking if he wants to go to my rental. He tells us to drive to Dad’s house, so I do. We pull into the garage and park both cars beside the Mercedes. Leaving Maddie to struggle with her

suitcase and the seat release, I hurry to John. “Does Dad know you’re coming?”

He pushes past me toward the inside steps as the big doors roll shut behind us. “I spoke with him this morning before I left LA.” He shoves the internal door open and strides down the hall.

Justin meets us at the bedroom door. With a stealthy glance over his shoulder, he tries to usher us into the kitchen. John refuses to be redirected. He plants his feet, his hands on his hips. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“I’m the medical assistant hired by your father’s health care company. As I told Ms. Holmes before, I’ve been instructed to keep you out.” He gives me an angry glare.

John pulls a sheaf of papers from his briefcase. “Your instructions are obsolete. Destiny Leroux Holmes has filed for divorce, and the court has agreed she is no longer in control of Nicholas Holmes’s medical care.”

Justin takes the papers and pages through them. He points to the top one. “But this says State of California. We’re in Oregon. I’m not sure—”

“The court in California has jurisdiction because that’s our father’s state of residence. There’s also a letter from Ms. Leroux abdicating responsibility for our father. Besides, he’s capable of making his own decisions, right?” John raises an eyebrow at me.

I shrug. “I dunno. He seemed kinda confused when I was here last week, but not incapacitated.”

Justin holds up both hands. “We were hired by Mrs. Holmes. I can’t just—”

“Call your lawyer.” John pushes past him. “I’m going to speak with my father.”

I pat Justin’s arm. “Why don’t you call your boss? I’ll tell them you tried to keep us out.”

“Thanks.” He retreats into the kitchen, and I follow John to the bedroom. Maddie still hasn’t come in from the garage.

“Who are you?” a female voice demands. I round the corner, to see the physical therapist from last week. She sits with Dad at a small table near the window.

Dad looks up from the huge pen he’s using to scrawl on a sheet of paper. Several others litter the small table, and a few have drifted to the floor. He’s dressed in gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt—clothing I’ve never seen on him before. He pushes his glasses on top of his bald head and scowls at us. “John, Nica! What a surprise.” It doesn’t sound like he thinks it’s a happy one.

The therapist leaps to her feet. “Mr. Holmes, these people are not supposed to disrupt you—”

Dad cuts the therapist off. “They’re my children. They’re welcome if I say they are. It’s about time you showed up.”

I exchange a look with John. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“I’ve been ill for weeks, and you’re only now coming to check on me?” He tosses the giant pen onto the table. “Family is supposed to take care of you when you’re ill.”

“Dad, I’ve been here. But Destiny wouldn’t let us in.” I perch on the edge of the bed and gesture to the therapist. “The company she hired to care for you has instructions to keep us out.”

“Destiny? Who’s Destiny?” He slaps the table. “Someone get Richard on the phone!”

“Destiny is your current wife, Dad.” John pushes past the therapist and sits in her empty chair without so much as an “excuse me.”

“I’m not married.”

“You got married in April.” John points at me and Maddie who just appeared in the doorway, still swiping through her phone. “We were all here for it.”

Dad shakes his head. “I think I’d remember if I got married again. Five times is enough for anyone.”

I frown. “You don’t remember marrying Destiny?”

“Who’s Destiny?”

Maddie swipes some more, then holds her phone at arm’s length, waving the screen at Dad. “Destiny. Perky blonde, barely legal? Doesn’t ring any bells?”

Dad scowls at the phone. “Gimme that thing! Where are my glasses?”

“On your head, Dad.” Maddie sets the phone on the table and reaches out to slide the glasses onto Dad’s nose. “Where’s your rug?”

“Maddie—” John glares at our sister.

“Sorry, but he doesn’t look right without it. Have you seen him like this before?” She steps back and gestures at Dad’s shiny head and bland clothing. Dad’s gaze swings from one to the other, like a spectator at a ping pong match.

“No, but that’s no reason to be rude.” John taps a finger against Maddie’s phone, drawing Dad’s attention back to it. “This is Destiny. At your wedding.”

Dad looks at the phone, then rubs his bald head. “Jerome! Where is that boy?”

Justin steps into the room. “It’s Justin, sir. Always has been, always will be. And I’m thirty-seven.”

“Whatever. Get my hair! I can’t look like this when there are guests in the house.” Dad pushes himself to his feet. “The rest of you can get out until I’m properly attired.”

The therapist puts a hand on Dad’s arm. “We aren’t finished with your exercises.”

“Yes, we are. Go away. You can come back some other time. You will, whether I want you to or not.” He makes shooing motions at all of us. “Everyone, get out. I’m not ready to see any of you.”

John strides out of the room, already talking on his phone with someone—probably the lawyer. Maddie grabs her device off the table and hurries out behind our brother. I follow them and the therapist brings up the rear, still muttering about her time being wasted.

We gather in the kitchen, where Maddie settles onto a stool. “I need a smoothie.” She taps the phone. “Do you think any place around here delivers? Last time I was here, I couldn’t find anything. This town is so rural!”

John wanders into the living room, talking into his phone in a low voice.

I open the fridge and pull out a container of yogurt and some fruit. “I can make you a smoothie, Madison.”

She looks up in surprise. “You can?”

“Sure. Berries, yogurt, protein powder, a little stevia, some spinach if there is any.” I dig through the produce drawer and pull out a bag of greens. “Or baby kale.”

She watches, fascinated, as I dig a blender out of a cupboard and set it on the counter. “I had no idea you could cook, Nic.”

“It’s hardly cooking.” Not like Matt’s chicken alfredo. Sighing, I turn to the therapist. “You want some?”

She shakes her head. “I need to call my agency. You aren’t supposed to be here.”

“Didn’t Justin already do that?” I scoop some yogurt into the blender jar. “Say, is it normal for people to experience memory loss with a stroke?”

She nods. “I can’t speak to your father’s condition, but I can confirm memory loss can be caused by a stroke. It can also be caused by medication. I can’t tell you what he’s taking, but at least one common stroke drug is linked to memory issues.”

“And he’s been sneaking cigarettes.”

I stare at Maddie. “How do you know?”

“Didn’t you smell it? Unless one of the nurses—”

The therapist’s head shakes in a jerky negative. “No. That’d get them fired. But it would make his condition—” She looks over her glasses at me. “Age is the number one cause of memory loss.”

I frown. “He’s only seventy.”

Maddie looks up in surprise. “I thought he was sixty!”

“Actually,” the therapist says, “according to his medical —” She breaks off, pressing her lips together.

“What?” Maddie and I ask together.

“I can’t tell you. I can’t discuss a patient’s medical or personal information with a non-authorized family member.” With an almost violent shake of her head, she hurries out of the room. The front door slams a few seconds later.

John stalks into the room. “The law firm is sending someone up to speak with us.”

“Richard?” I put the lid back on the yogurt and dump some berries into the blender jar.

“Richard is no longer with the firm.” John’s face is dark. “He’s been disbarred. Apparently, he and Destiny were caught...”

I stare at John, aghast, not wanting to say the words out loud.

Maddie has no such compunction. “Dad’s new wife had a fling with his lawyer? But Richard and Dad have been friends forever. Besides, he’s old!”

“So’s Dad,” I mutter under cover of the blender. As the smoothie whirls, so does my mind. I can’t help comparing Destiny’s relationship with my dad to me and Matt. Granted, she’s much younger than me, and Dad is much older. But is this my inevitable ending point as well? Marrying an older man, then running away when things get tough?

I have no illusions about myself. I might not be as self-absorbed and opportunistic as Destiny, but I’m no angel. I’ve had a number of short-term relationships. They all ended when my career became more important than our life together. What’s to stop that from happening again?

It’s time for me to face the facts. I’m falling in love with Matt Hertzprung, but it can only end in tragedy. He’s had enough of that in his life. As soon as this mess is cleared up, I

need to leave. Return to my Hollywood life and let him find someone who will love him the way he deserves to be loved.

I stop the blender, and the silence throbs in my ears. The idea of moving on leaves me empty and cold. But I know, deep in my freezing heart, that it's the right thing to do. Before I do more damage. If I leave now, Matt will get over me in time and find a real, normal woman to fill his home with light and love. But the longing to stay—to be that woman—leaves me in shock.

As I pour the smoothie into glasses, Maddie and John discuss Dad's situation, but I barely hear their conversation. My head hums in a tuneless whir, empty like the blender container. Like my empty life.

John takes one of the glasses. He sips, then nods at me. "Just like the pros."

My lip curls. "I guess I have a fallback career if this whole acting thing doesn't pan out."

Maddie frowns, her glass halfway to her lips. "I thought you were doing pretty well? I see your face every time I flip through the channels on Dad's TV." She picks up a clicker and points it at the big screen on the wall.

I take the clicker before she can push the button. "I'm doing fine. The Romance Channel is a good, solid living. But I just wrapped filming on a big-screen project, and I'm a little nervous."

She pats my hand. "Don't worry. Older actresses are hot right now." She sips her smoothie, missing my wince. "But John is right—you definitely can get a job at 'Smooth 'n' Easy' or one of those other chains. This is good."

Not bothering to respond to any of it, I turn to John. "What's the deal with the law firm? Did Richard really betray Dad with Destiny? They've been friends since college."

"No one should be surprised. Back in the day, Richard and Dad stole women from each other all the time."

I shudder. I hate that phrase—as if women are possessions to be passed around. Without agency of their own. What's the

old saying? It takes two to tango. “Destiny could have said no.”

“She’s young.”

“Hey!” Maddie flips her long red hair over her shoulder. “I’m younger than Destiny, and *I* wouldn’t sleep with my new husband’s lawyer only a few months after the wedding. Not unless the husband gave me a really good reason for doing it.”

John strokes his chin. “What would you consider a good reason for cheating?” His tone is conversational—as if cheating on your spouse is perfectly acceptable if there’s a decent reason. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised—four of Dad’s previous marriages ended thanks to Dad cheating, and he always had an excuse. They were pretty pathetic in my opinion, but maybe Maddie and John bought into his conditional view of life-long vows.

“Oh, you know, the usual.” She ticks items off on her fingers. “If he cheats first. If he gets violent. If he cuts off my allowance. If—”

I jump in. “If you have a job, you don’t need to rely on a man to give you an allowance.”

She waves that off. “I don’t want to work!” She returns to her list. “If he moves to a new place I don’t like. If he gets a dog and lets it sleep on the bed. If he—”

I take the blender jar to the sink and fill it with water, trying to drown out Maddie’s increasingly deplorable justifications for infidelity. As I wash out the jar, I make a mental note to call my mother and thank her for giving me a strong moral grounding. Except for my annual visits to the Ranch, she kept me away from Dad and his fast and loose lifestyle. Maddie wasn’t so lucky.

“Do you think your husband having a stroke and forgetting who you are is a good reason to sleep with his lawyer?” Maddie asks as I turn off the water.

“Is that what happened?” I put the blender pieces in the drainer and swing around. “Did she take up with Richard because of Dad’s memory problem?”

John shrugs. “That might have been the last straw. Although I caught Destiny in a closet with Richard at the wedding.”

“What?!” Maddie and I yell together.

“Why didn’t you say something?” I ask.

He holds up both hands. “It was too late. The legal paperwork was signed, the wedding was over. And they were both drunk—but not so drunk they didn’t freak out when I caught them. Richard left—I saw to that. And I didn’t think Dad needed to know. Let’s face it—we all thought Destiny would go the way of Number Four, right?” Dad’s fourth wife only lasted a few weeks.

John waits until Maddie and I both nod to go on. “Dad must have thought that, too. I saw the prenup. I figured Destiny didn’t have a shot at lasting the year, which meant she’d walk away with nothing. What’s done is done. No reason to tell Dad about it at that point.”

“No point in telling me what?” Dad finally straggles into the room. He leans heavily on a walker, and only one side of his face moves when he talks. He wears dark slacks and a designer bowling shirt. His wig is slightly askew, and Justin hovers behind him, herding him toward a chair. Dad sits with a heavy thud. “Go away, Joseph. This is a family meeting.”

“Is Justin so hard to remember?” He stomps out of the room.

“What’s his problem?” Dad stares after Justin.

“You keep getting his name wrong.” Maddie sits next to Dad. “Do you want something to eat?”

“Justin already fed me.” Dad scowls. “Like a baby. I can’t hold the darn spoon.” He lifts his hand and flexes his fingers.

“Hey, you got his name right!” Maddie says.

He waves this off, but an evil glint in his eyes tells me the name thing is not part of his memory issue. “Where’s Destiny?”

Our heads all snap around like lemurs noticing a predator. “You remember her?” John asks.

“Of course I remember my wife!” Dad growls and waves at his head. “This damn thing is messing with my brain, but I’m not going to forget my own marriage.” The bluster feels forced. His face is lined and tired, and his hands shake a little.

“Did Justin remind you?” John asks, more gently than I’ve heard him speak all day. “Because a few minutes ago, you didn’t know who she was. I’ve heard stroke meds can do that.”

Dad grumbles for a few seconds, staring at the table. Then he looks up. “My brain is foggy. I remember the wedding—it just feels kind of hazy. Like it was a film I did, and not for real. But that boy—Justin—showed me the pictures. And you were there, right? It was real?” His voice trembles.

My heart contracts. He may be a wild philanderer, but he’s still my father. It hurts to see the handsome, carefree, successful playboy actor reduced to this sad old man. I put a hand on his shoulder. “It was real, Dad. But she may not be who you think she is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

John opens his mouth, but I shake my head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll call her and see when she’ll be back.”

Maddie lifts her phone. “Don’t bother. I already texted her. Told her she’d better get her butt back here.” She glances at Dad, then surreptitiously passes me the phone. I take her empty smoothie glass and under cover of putting it into the dishwasher, I read the text exchange. Maddie told Destiny we’d sue her for breach of contract, theft, “implied slander,” and a whole bunch of pseudo-legal-sounding nonsense. Clearly Destiny knows as much about law as Maddie because she said she’d get a flight from Burbank today.

Hiding a smirk, I take a seat across from Dad and hand the phone back to Maddie. “Nice work, sis.”

She smiles and grips my hand. “I like it when you call me ‘sis.’ It makes me feel like family.”

“We *are* family. Maybe a kind of dysfunctional one, but we’re still a family.”

John nods and puts his hand on top of ours. “Agreed.”

Dad looks at our joined hands and puts his frail, shaky one on top of the pile. “You three are good kids.”

Chapter 26



THE MORNING DRAGS out into afternoon. Destiny texts her flight details to Maddie—she’s arriving at 3 p.m. John will pick her up and bring her back to the house. Which means she’ll arrive here about an hour and a half before I need to leave for rehearsal. I consider calling Dame Edith and telling her I can’t make it tonight, but I’ve committed to the show, and I can’t leave my fellow actors in the lurch. My social media posting over the last week has drummed up a lot of interest, and tickets for the first weekend are sold out.

Everyone is restless as we wait for Destiny’s flight to arrive. Dad wanders aimlessly around the house, the thud and scrape of his walker announcing his location. After a while, he tires and retreats to his room to rest. Justin takes him a late lunch, while the rest of us drive to the Ranch bistro for burgers and fries. When we return, the house is quiet. John drops us at the door and heads for the airport.

“What’s the story with you and the teacher?” Maddie asks as we finally settle in the comfortable family room off the kitchen.

“Me and who?”

She shows me a short video clip of the play rehearsal on Saturday. Matt and I are singing together, and we look like we’re in love.

I shrug. “He’s my costar. But he’s a luthier, not a teacher. Although I guess he teaches, too.”

“He’s more than a costar according to this.” She swipes through a series of pictures, including one outside Matt’s house and another at the campground by the lake.

“Who took this?” I snatch the phone from her and zoom in on the photo. It’s dark and grainy, making me think it was taken from a long distance, and shows the group of us gathered around the campfire. I click on the account owner, and my eyes narrow. “Boitano.”

“Care to comment, Ms. Holmes?” Maddie takes the phone back.

“He’s a friend.”

“This looks like more than friendship.” She smirks. In the photo, I sit on the ground at Matt’s feet, leaning against his leg while Blake sings nearby. My face looks dreamy and content. Matt’s hand massages my shoulder.

I push the phone away. “Looks can be deceiving.”

She raises her brows and gives me a flat stare.

“Fine. We’ve been... dating. Kind of. But it’s just for fun. While I’m here.”

She stabs a finger at the phone. “That doesn’t look like just for fun to me. That dude looks at you like he wants to whisk you away to his cabin in the woods and keep you all to himself.”

“That’s not creepy at all.”

“Kind of like Dad and Destiny. Older dude and a younger woman he can control.”

My stomach goes sour. “He doesn’t try to control me! And I’m nothing like Destiny!” If I tell myself this enough times, will it be true?

The sound of the garage door ratcheting open brings me to my feet. “I told you, this is just temporary. Once the show is over, and all this”—I circle a hand, indicating Dad’s room—“is resolved, I’m out of here. Back to SoCal where I belong.”

“I can’t believe you made me come in through the garage.” Destiny’s high-pitched voice carries easily to us as she stomps down the long hallway. “What’s the point of having a grand entrance if you don’t use it?” She stops in the open doorway, making a face, as if she’s tasted something nasty. “Mary. Nicole.”

I don’t bother rising to her bait. “Hello, Destiny.”

“Is that her name?” Maddie turns to me. “I was planning on calling her Number Six. No point in learning her name since she’s leaving so soon.”

I shake my head, trying to hide a smirk. “No need to lower yourself to her level.”

Destiny stomps her foot like a child. “You wish you were at my level. My level is so much higher than any level you’ve ever been to!”

My brother struggles in behind, dragging a pair of large pink suitcases that keep banging into each other, followed by a gangly, thin man in thick glasses and a very ugly gray suit. He carries a briefcase and pulls a small black rolling carry-on. It’s Oliver James from the wedding.

John interrupts Destiny’s tirade. “Maddie, Nica, this is Oliver James from Thomson, Friedmann, Lewis, and Klopfenstein. I’m going to take him in to see Dad.” Without saying a word to Destiny, he drops the suitcases.

“We’ve met.” I get up to shake hands with Oliver.

Oliver gives me a narrow-eyed glare. “I won’t hold it against you.”

John raises his brow and spreads his hands. “Should I ask?”

I shake my head and smile blandly at Oliver. “It’s not a problem, is it, Mr. James? I’m sure your personal feelings don’t impact how you conduct business.”

He glares at me again, then turns to John. “There’s no problem. Please, let’s go see Mr. Holmes.”

John leads him out of the room.

Destiny squeals. “You aren’t talking to Nicky without me!” She storms after them. An argument erupts, Destiny screaming in a voice so high we’ll probably end up with a pack of dogs in the front yard. John’s low tones sound clipped. Oliver mutters something. Then a door slams. There’s pounding, then a second argument and another slam.

Seconds later, Destiny stomps back into the room. “I hope neither of you think you’re staying here! This is still my house!”

“Have at it.” Maddie turns her back and flings herself down on the couch, pulling out her ever-present phone.

I watch until Destiny disappears up the stairs, leaving her two suitcases in the living room. She probably thinks there are servants to bring them up later.

I drop beside Maddie. “That was fun.”

She tosses her phone aside. “Can I stay with you?”

“Sure. Where’s your stuff?”

She waves at the ceiling. “It’s up there, but I didn’t unpack anything yet.”

As she says the words, Destiny’s indecipherable whine carries down the stairs, followed by a thud and a slam. “I think I’ve just been evicted.”

“She can’t take all the guest rooms, but I can see why you wouldn’t want to stay.” I grab her hand and squeeze her fingers. “I have plenty of space. Although, I vote we make John and the lawyer stay here.”

She nods. “Good plan. They can keep her from bamboozling Dad again.”

“You think he’d take her back?” When he caught Number Four with the gardener, she was out on her ear within hours, never to be seen again. He got lucky with her—if she’d known he was already cheating on *her*, she could have gotten a lot more money. As it was, he got rid of her at minimal cost.

“He seems kinda old and desperate now, don’t you think? I bet she could convince him to take her back.” She picks the

phone up again. “Now that he’s sick, he’s more like a normal old guy—you saw him today! He can’t expect to get another hot young girlfriend, so he’s gonna hold on to the one he’s got, right?” She looks at the picture on her phone—the one of me and Matt at the campfire. “I can see why you don’t want to get with this guy. I mean, look at Destiny. She married a hot older guy, and now he’s an invalid.” She does a dramatic shudder. “We’re too young for that.”

My heart contracts and drops into my stomach. Am I like Destiny? Chasing after an older guy, only to dump him when he’s no longer handsome and capable? It’s the Hollywood way. Dad dropped my mom for a younger woman—I remember them fighting over his late nights out. And her weight gain. After she had me, she wasn’t the slim young actress he’d married. They stuck it out for six more years, but most of that time was miserable. Then he left her for a series of younger women before marrying Maddie’s mom.

Walking out on your partner because they no longer meet your physical standards is about as low as it gets. Matt doesn’t deserve that, but it’s normal among my family and peers. I don’t want to live that way, but it seems unrealistic to think I can be better. I’m too much like my father. It would be kinder to end whatever this is before it gets to that point.

Why does making the right decision feel so bad?

Chapter 27



MATT

NICA SEEMS subdued when she arrives at rehearsal Monday evening. She pulls into the parking lot at the stroke of six, so I don't have time to talk to her. I spent the whole day thinking about her—about our amazing kisses last night. How she said she wouldn't let me start a relationship with anyone else. The words were flippant, thoughtless, a throw-away one-liner. But I can't help feeling she meant it. That what's growing between us is for real.

That's definitely what I want.

She waves as she jogs toward the dressing room but doesn't slow down. The show must go on. We're finishing the run-through from Saturday, with full props and limited costumes—mainly the nuns' habits, since managing those robes is difficult, and hats, for those of us who wear them in the show.

"I expect my actors to be here early!" Dame Edith announces, glaring at her leading lady as she runs by. "We'll start with the party scene—that was a little rough on Saturday, so we're re-running it. Places, everyone!"

"Sorry!" Nica calls from inside the curtained tent that serves as a dressing room.

Shaking her head and raising her hands dramatically, Edie moves to center stage. "We'll begin—Maria *will* be ready for her entrance. Orchestra, start with the *Favorite Things* reprise."

Andrew Washington, the high school music director, raises his baton, and the twenty kids who make up the orchestra lift their instruments. “Pick up at bar two-oh-six.” He sweeps his arm down, and the music begins.

The children assemble on stage. As they take their places, I amble around the end of the stage. Nica stands in the wings, her blonde wig slightly askew. She smiles when she sees me, then the expression fades from her face.

“Is everything okay?” I reach out, but she steps back. “What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head, the wig sliding a little more. She grabs it, turning a few degrees away from me. It’s a small movement, but it feels deliberate. Shutting me out.

“Stuff with my dad.” She glances at the stage, then back at me as her fingers resettles the hairpins. “I need to get in character—we can talk about it later.”

“Sure.” I watch her while she takes a couple of deep breaths. Then the music changes, and she moves past me to make her entrance.

I follow a few minutes later and we dance, but she won’t meet my eyes. I can’t tell if she’s avoiding my gaze or playing her part. Finally, she looks up. We stare—just like we’re supposed to, and something passes between us. My breath catches. She breaks away, her cheeks flushed, and delivers her line, then hurries off stage. It’s fantastic acting but feels too real.

I stare after her, not sure what just happened. Edie hisses at me, and I realize I’ve missed my cue. With a mental shake, I recite my bit and try to submerge myself in the scene.

We stop at intermission for a brief moment, and Dame Edith gives us a little pep-talk, reminding us of things to watch for in Act 2. I miss most of it, trying to catch Nica’s eye. She avoids me, focusing on the director, like a good actor should. I give myself a mental kick in the pants to get my head in the game. This play is important to the town—the SommerFest

brings in a lot of tourist dollars, and many of the visitors come for the production. They deserve the best I can offer.

Finally, we get to the love song. Dame Edith chose to go with the original song from the stage production, *An Ordinary Couple*, rather than *Something Good* from the movie. I cross the stage to Nica and take her in my arms, but it's like holding a stranger. She gazes through me, the lines rolling off her tongue. Everything feels different. I put my heart into it, trying to find the Nica from last night, but she's not here. Even the kiss feels stiff and phony. We finish the song, deliver the remaining lines, then the lights go out, and the other cast members clap. Nica gives me a brief, chilly smile and walks off stage.

The wedding scene and the festival at the end run like clockwork. Nica's voice is in perfect form, and she pulls a stellar performance from the children. I'm the only one who muffs line after line. After the finale, Edie calls us to gather "in the house for notes." We stand on the cement pad where chairs will be set for the audience, and she reminds us of things to correct before tomorrow's rehearsal. "We're doing a full run-through every night from here on out. Final dress rehearsal is Thursday. Full costumes and makeup. Be ready." She dismisses the cast and beckons me over.

"What's going on with you, Georg?" She always uses our character names when speaking to us during rehearsals.

"Sorry, I'm just having a bad evening. I'll be fine tomorrow."

She looks me over, then peers over my shoulder. I know she's looking at Nica. "Are you sure? Because it's kind of late to bring Mike Greenwood on."

I shake my head. Mike's a good guy, but he's been a terrible understudy. I'm not sure he even knows the songs, let alone the blocking and script. "I'll go over my lines tonight. I think the long break since Saturday is throwing me off."

Her lips press together as she crosses her arms. "Getting involved with a fellow actor during a show is always a mistake—especially when you're playing romantic partners. When

Stella suggested putting Nica in, I was worried. But she's a pro, and I thought she'd elevate our performance. Despite our little *contretemps* over the social media, she's done just that. But I've heard rumors about you two—" She wiggles her fingers with a distasteful frown. "I won't have your carrying on disrupting my show."

A spurt of anger pushes me a step closer. "My *carrying on*?" She leans back, a flash of concern flowing over her face. I take a deep breath and remind myself that while my relationship with Nica might be private, if I can't remember my lines, that is Edie's concern. "There's nothing to worry about. I'll be fine." Without waiting to see if she has more to say, I stomp away, looking for Nica.

As I cross the concrete pad where the audience will sit, Nica's little yellow car zips down the street. I stare after it, my mouth falling open. What is happening? Last night was magical, then tonight was like working with a stranger. And now she didn't even wait to say good night. She said stuff was going on with her father, but maybe I could have helped her with whatever it was. Isn't that what friends do? And I thought we were more than friends. But was that just an act?

As I trudge home, I replay yesterday in my head. She enjoyed spending time with me—I know she did. She might be a great actress, but why bother faking it? She wouldn't have stuck around all day if she was bored or uncomfortable. She could have given an excuse and left at any point.

And last night—the kisses. That wasn't acting. I may not have experience with a lot of women—I married Judy in college, and I haven't dated much since the divorce—but Nica wasn't faking those.

Maybe it's all physical with her? She keeps telling me she isn't the woman I think she is. That the "nice" persona is just an act. That could be why she said she didn't want anything long-term—because she's interested in me physically, but nothing more.

I feel a sick little surge of pride that my forty-five-year-old body can attract a Hollywood actress, but the thought that her

feelings might be so superficial leaves me reeling.

Dropping deeper into a pit of despair, I stumble into the house. Fortunately, Eva is out tonight. I trudge up the stairs and collapse on my bed. Maybe my “relationship” with Nica is just a pathetic, one-sided crush. With a groan, I bury my head under the pillow.

My thoughts keep returning to last night, replaying the memory over and over. After dinner, she wanted to talk. Then we kissed, and she left without saying anything. A seed of anger burns bright in my soul. Is this just a game to her?

Without thinking about consequences, I roll onto my back, yank my phone from my pocket, and text her.

What’s the deal? You run off without a word? I thought we were going to talk?

I hit send, then reread the words. They sound angry—fair enough, I am angry. But less confrontational might have been a better choice. Can I delete it? The screen shows “delivered.” I hold the little speech bubble down, but “delivered” changes to “read.”

I wait, but the three dots don’t appear. She isn’t texting back. Ugh. I toss the phone onto the bed and pull the pillow over my face, groaning into the soft, muffling folds.

The bed vibrates. I throw the pillow away and grab the device.

NICA

You’re right. Let’s talk.

My insides go cold. I don’t want to talk. I want to go back to this morning when my life looked beautiful and sunny. When the memory of our kisses warmed me like a campfire.

Now?

The phone rings and my stomach clenches. “Hello?”

“I’m sorry about tonight.” Her voice is low and rough. It could be from all the singing tonight, or she could have been crying. “I—I’m sorry about everything. I should never have gotten involved with you.”

I wish I could see her face. “But you admit we’re involved?” I cringe. I sound pathetic.

She sighs. “Yes. Kind of. Look, I told you I can’t do long-term. You said you’d take what I can give. Well, it turns out I can’t give anything right now. I’ve told you over and over, I’m not the girl you see on screen.”

“I don’t want the girl on the screen. I don’t even own any ice skates.” I wait for a chuckle, but it doesn’t come. “Nica, yesterday, the whole weekend... everything, since we met back in April... It’s all been amazing. And you’re right, you aren’t the women in the movies, but I don’t want them. I want you. Then last night—tell me those kisses didn’t mean anything to you.”

She’s silent for a long time. When she finally answers, her voice is even rougher. “Matt. I like you. A lot. But I’m not the woman you think I am. Sure—going to the lake was fun. Having dinner last night was fun. But there are a million times I’m not fun. You’d discover that soon enough if I hung around.” I hear the unspoken words—that she’s not going to stay long enough for me to experience it firsthand.

“Life isn’t fun all the time. I have twenty years of failed marriage to prove that.” I stare at the ceiling, not really seeing the pale wood slats. “But the good times get you through the other times—if you care about the person you’re with. That’s why I stayed with Judy so long—until the person I cared about disappeared completely.” I take a deep breath. “I care about you. And you are worth caring about. Can’t we try—”

“It’s not going to work, Matt.” Her tone is final. “I understand if you don’t want to see me again. Do you want me to quit the play?”

“What? No, Edie will kill me if you do that. ‘The show must go on,’ right?” A tiny flame of hope flickers in my chest.

Maybe I can change her mind. As long as we're working together, I have a chance to convince her.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then. Good night." The phone goes dead.

What am I going to do? I can't let her go. I need to convince her she is the woman I think she is. That we can make it work. But how do I do that?

My rom-com loving heart tells me I need to sweep her off her feet—to prove to her that she's worthy of everything I want to give her in some grand dramatic gesture. But she's used to Hollywood magic. Maybe I need something else. Something real. But what?

Chapter 28



WHEN I WAKE, the sun is high in the sky, glaring between the blinds of my rented vacation home. I squint and roll away, wondering what woke me. A screech answers the question: Maddie. I leap out of bed and sprint down the steps to the open-plan living room and kitchen.

Maddie stands in the middle of the kitchen staring at the empty blender pitcher in her hand. Green liquid drips from her hair and face. Her head comes up when she hears me, cringing like a dog who got caught shredding the couch. Squashed fruit covers the countertops, spilled yogurt puddles on the floor, and a splash of lumpy green drips from the ceiling. “I was trying to make you breakfast.”

I take the container from her hand and put it into the sink. “Did you forget to put the lid on?”

She hovers beside me, staring at her sticky hands and the green stain spreading across her pink T-shirt. “There’s a lid? You didn’t use one at Dad’s house.”

I plug the sink, turn on the water, and squirt in some dish soap. “There wasn’t a lid at Dad’s house because that jar screwed on from the bottom.” I twist the base off the pitcher and point to the opening. A splotch of cold goo hits my head, and I flinch back. “Can you look in that closet to see if there’s a stepladder? We should probably clean the ceiling before it stains the paint.”

Maddie holds the ladder while I scrub the ceiling. Then we tackle the walls and floor. By the time we’ve cleaned up

everything, I'm starving. "You wanna go out for breakfast?" I glance at the clock on the oven. "Or brunch, I guess?"

"Yeah, but I need to shower and change." She strips the pink shirt off, leaving a smear of green on her cheek. A damp patch stains her black sports bra. She grimaces as she notices it and reaches for the bottom band.

I pick up the shirt and wave it before she can pull the bra off, too. "I'm going to put this in the washer to soak. Why don't you throw that in—after your shower."

She laughs. "Why, Nica Homes, are you blushing? I've got nothing you haven't seen before."

"The rest of the neighborhood doesn't need to see it." I point at the kitchen window, which has a view of one of the pools, then hurry to the laundry room. "And just because I've seen it before doesn't mean I need to see yours up close and personal, thanks." I start the cold water running, then flip the lid open and toss the shirt in. "You're welcome to strip down naked and parade through the house if you want, but I'd prefer not to witness it. As you pointed out last night, I'm getting older. I don't need to be reminded of the fact by witnessing your young body."

"I didn't say you're getting old! I said you're still young." She follows me up the stairs, still wearing the bra and shorts. "I said your boyfriend is old."

A stab of pain goes through my heart. "Not my boyfriend. Not anymore."

She grabs my shoulder. "What did you do? I thought you were keeping it casual until you left."

I pull away. "That wasn't working for Matt, so I ended it." I pause as I open the door to the master bedroom. "I'm going to shower and get this smoothie out of my hair."

"I'll meet you downstairs in twenty!" She disappears into the second bedroom.

It's closer to forty minutes later when she finally traipses down the steps. She's wearing a short denim skirt and another pink T-shirt, but this one is tight with a scooped neck. She's

done her hair and makeup and looks very young Hollywood as she slides on a pair of trendy sunglasses. “Ready?”

I stand and tuck my phone into the pocket of my teal capri pants. “Can you walk in those things?”

She glances down at her high-heeled gladiator sandals. “Sure. They’re super comfortable.” Her eyes dart up to meet mine. “I mean, define walk. We’re talking stroll across the parking lot, not mountain hike, right?”

“I was thinking about walking to the restaurant, but it’s half a mile.” I grab the car keys from the table by the front door, check the lock, then lead the way to the garage. “Don’t worry, we can drive.”

In the garage, she ignores the car and hurries to a pair of motorized scooters. “Let’s take these!”

“Have you ever ridden one?”

“Sure, I’ve rented those green ones back home. I wanted to get my own, but Mom wouldn’t spring for it.” She unloops a card from the handle of one scooter. “Here’s the instructions for pairing it to your phone.”

We tap and connect, then I click the garage door opener. “Why don’t you get a job? Then you can buy whatever you want.”

She heaves a sigh and rolls her eyes. “You sound like my uncle. I told you, I don’t want to work.” She steps onto the scooter and zips out the door.

I push mine out and use the keypad beside the garage to close it. The scooters are fast and quiet, and we zoom across the Ranch to the Copper Barrel Bistro. After eating at one of their outdoor tables, we zip past the lake and over to Dad’s place. Leaving the scooters on the wide front porch, we ring the doorbell.

Justin answers, letting us in with a sigh. “I’m not getting anything done today! People keep showing up.”

“People?” I shoot a curious glance at the three black suitcases in the foyer. Destiny’s are pink, and the lawyer only

had one. “What people?”

“Well, okay, most of the people were already here.” He pinches his lips together, putting one hand on a cocked hip. “Your brother and that lawyer. And the wife, of course. But she left.” His eyes roll so hard it’s almost audible. “Then the ex-wife. Then—”

“Wait.” I fling up a hand, cutting him off. “Ex-wife? Which one?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’m not a Nick Holmes groupie! It wasn’t Brenda Thorne.” He names Dad’s glamorous first wife in a reverent tone and heaves another dramatic sigh. “She’s the only one I know. I love her. She was amazing in *The Longest Stripe*.”

“Isn’t she dead?” my sister asks.

I glare at her. “No.”

“Was it Victoria Weston? The model?” Maddie puts a wrist to her forehead and flings the other hand out to the side, lifting one knee and arching her back in imitation of her mother’s famous lingerie pose.

Justin’s eyes go wide. “Is she one of Mr. Holmes’s exes? I had no idea. I love her, too!” He points at Maddie. “Now I see it—you look so much like her! No, it was an older woman. Very classy.”

“Very classy” rules out Number Four, which leaves only one possibility. I push past him. “Where is she? Mom? Mom!”

“In the office with your dad.”

I barely wait for Justin’s response before racing to the room across from the master bedroom. I reach for the knob but stop myself from flinging the door open. Instead, I knock three times.

“Come in,” John replies.

I push the door open, hurtling inside. “Mom?”

She pushes up from the chair by the window and holds out her arms. “Nica!”

I throw myself into her embrace. Her perfume—always Chanel No 5—wraps around me in a familiar cloud. It's like going home. "Mom! What are you doing here?"

After a long moment, she steps back. "It sounded like Nick needed my help, so I came." She holds me at arm's length, looking me over. Her hair is dark, with dramatic silver stripes running through the smooth bob. Her ice-blue eyes narrow, wrinkles appearing around her mouth when she frowns. "Are you getting enough sleep, dear? You look tired."

"I'm fine, Mom." I turn to Dad, who sits behind the large desk. He's fully dressed, immaculate in a pale blue button-down shirt and gray slacks. His white hair waves away from his face in his habitual style, and his trademark black glasses frame his bright blue eyes. He looks like the well-known actor today, not the sad old man. "How are you this morning, Dad?"

"I'm fine. You interrupted an important meeting." He nods at the lawyer and my half-brother who sit across the desk from him.

"Where's Destiny?" I take the chair across the table from my mother, ignoring my father's raised eyebrow. Classic Nick Holmes. "Hey, your eyebrow is working again!"

A hand goes to his forehead, and he turns to look in the full-length mirror that hangs on the wall beside the desk. It's perfectly situated to allow him to check his appearance from the throne-like desk chair. "It is! Excellent. It's time to put this nasty business behind me. As to Destiny, she's gone."

Justin, who has appeared in the door behind Maddie, holds up a conciliatory hand. "It's excellent progress, Mr. Holmes, but it doesn't mean you're back to full health."

Dad's brows come down in a glare straight out of his Western days. "Don't rain on my parade, young man. Now, go away. We have business that doesn't concern you. You either, Maddie."

Maddie crosses her arms. "If Nica and John are staying, I'm staying. I'm an adult, and I'm just as much your kid as they are."

Shaking his head, Dad waves her in. “Fine. Let’s get back to it. Go on.” He waves at the lawyer.

Oliver clears his throat and ruffles the stack of papers he’s holding. “As I was saying. The investigator has unearthed some rather surprising information about Destiny Leroux. It appears she is not who she has represented herself to be.”

We all stare at the man. He clears his throat again, obviously going for drama, but he ruins it with a short coughing fit. When he catches his breath, he goes on. “She grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, not Bel Air. Never went to college. Did not participate in any beauty pageants that we can find. She lied about almost everything she’s told you. And she’s thirty-two, not twenty-three.”

“She’s thirty-two?!” My father’s face turns puce, and he chokes on the words. “She lied about her age?!”

“*That’s* your biggest concern?” John takes the papers from Oliver. “The fact that she’s almost half your age rather than less than a third?” He pages through the sheets and slams one onto the desk, stabbing the paper with a thud. It has to have hurt. “She hired actors to play her parents!” He turns to Oliver. “Does this mean the marriage isn’t legal?”

“Oh, no, she used her legal name. The last thing she wants is for us to declare the marriage null. She doesn’t get anything in that case. No, from what we’ve been able to determine, she intended to stay with your father for the first year—as stipulated in the prenup—then take the ten million when she left.”

I stare at Dad. “You offered her ten million dollars if she stuck around for *a year*?”

He flinches. “I figured if she stayed that long, she’d be in it for the long haul.”

Oliver shakes his head. “I would never have recommended this course of action. I am disheartened and embarrassed that a colleague of mine drew up such an agreement.” He doesn’t comment on why Richard might have done that, but we’re all thinking about it.

“Do you think that slimy Richard was working with her?” Maddie flops onto the couch, lying across it on her belly and propping her head up on her hands. “It sounds like one of those movies you used to play in, Dad. The best friend gets jealous and hires a woman to dupe the hero. Now you just need to expose the rat, and everyone cheers.”

“No!” We all flinch at Dad’s volume, and he turns it down a bit. “No one needs to know about this. It’s embarrassing. I’d rather pay her off and send her on her way. And maybe throw Richard in jail for embezzlement or something.”

“I think you’d have to air a lot of dirty laundry to make that stick, Dad.” John gathers the papers together and fastens them with a binder clip. “If you want to keep this quiet, you’re going to have to spend a lot of money and be satisfied with Richard being disbarred.”

Dad drops his head into his hands with a groan. Mom puts a hand on Dad’s shoulder, but he shakes it off and looks up. “No. Then he wins. He gets the money *and* the girl. I can’t allow that. I’m going to fight it.” He turns to Oliver. “Are you willing to work on this, or do I need to find a new legal firm?”

Oliver takes a step back and swallows. “I need to speak with the partners. If this gets out, it could negatively impact our business.”

“But if you don’t go after him and it gets out, you’ll be in worse shape.” Mom locks eyes with Oliver. “Potential clients will think you’ve covered it up.”

The lawyer shuffles a little closer to the door. “I need to consult with the partners. If you’ll excuse me...” He doesn’t wait for a response but bolts out the door.

Mom turns to Dad. “I think fighting it is the right thing to do. You know I’ve never liked Richard—he encouraged you to try all kinds of risky things. I’ve always thought he was acting out of jealousy—trying to get you into trouble—but you wouldn’t have it.”

Dad wipes a shaking hand over his face and reluctantly meets Mom’s eyes. “You were right, Loretta. You’ve always

been right. I can't believe I let you get away." His eyes warm, and he reaches out to touch her hand.

Mom gives Dad's fingers a squeeze. "You were young—well, younger—and under the influence of some unsavory friends."

"But you're back now." He gives his famous smirk—the one that reportedly seduced hundreds of leading ladies and contributed to several Oscars. "And now that I know what a gem I had, I'm not letting you get away again."

Mom chuckles and pulls her hand away. "Not a chance, Nick. I've been happily married to Timothy for eighteen years. I'm only here because you're Nica's father, and she made it clear you needed some help. And, to be honest, I'm thrilled to have witnessed your comeuppance."

Blood floods Dad's face as his jaw clenches and his nostrils flare. "You'd better not sell me out, woman!"

"Or what? You'll leave me for a younger woman? Been there, done that." She stands and reaches out to pat Dad's cheek. "Don't worry. I don't need to see you publicly humiliated. You're not that important to me anymore." She swings around and wraps an arm around my waist. "Come on, Nica, let's leave the men to their legal talk." She pauses at the door to hold out her free hand to Maddie. "You, too."

Maddie squeals and jumps from the couch. "Girl time! Girl time!"

Mom has always been nice to Maddie, even though her mother was one of those younger women Dad left us for. Or at least, she's the one he married next. There were a string of flings in between. But Mom has never held that against Maddie. Not that she spent a lot of time with us, but on the rare occasions they met, Mom has always been unfailingly kind.

"Where are you staying, Mom?" I ask as Maddie shuts the door of Dad's office behind us.

"I was hoping to stay with you." She peers into the kitchen as we pass. "Hasn't changed a bit. I'm shocked he never

updated it.”

“My mom was never into cooking, and Number Four wasn’t here long enough.” Maddie skips up beside us and flings an arm around me. “And Monica didn’t like Copper Butte. She never came here, from what I’ve heard.”

“Smart woman.” Mom shivers a little. “I need to get out of this house. Let’s go to your place.”

I consider borrowing one of Dad’s remaining cars to drive Mom and her three suitcases to my house but decide against it. I already have the yellow Porsche, and if I ask for another car, he might remember and demand I return that one. I suppose I could rent a car—especially since I like to remind him I’m an independent woman—but the Porsche would just sit there if I didn’t drive her. And she’s so much fun!

“I’ll text John to bring your luggage over later,” I tell her as we pass the cluster of cases in the foyer. “But Maddie and I rode scooters, so we’ll have to walk.”

We carry the two-wheelers down the steps and unfold them. Mom watches as Maddie jumps on and takes hers down the long driveway and back up. “I want to try!”

With a shrug, I tap the app and hand her my phone. “Keep that with you, or it will turn off. And don’t get too far ahead—” I’m already speaking to the wind. Maddie and Mom turn left at the end of the driveway, disappearing down the road. I hope Maddie remembers where the house is. I have no way to contact her if she doesn’t, since Mom has my phone.

I stroll along the shaded path, enjoying the quiet. A few cars rumble by as I move closer to the entrance—Dad’s house is one of the farthest from the front gates. It’s also much farther from my rental than I realized, and neither Maddie nor my mother have come back to check on me. Which makes me think they’re lost.

A black Tesla drifts up beside me, silent and ominous, and the passenger window slides down. “Hi. You need a ride?” I duck my head to see inside—it’s Rob Mead.

“Thanks.” I open the door and climb in. “My mom stole my scooter.”

He blinks twice but doesn’t comment. “Where are you headed?” He taps an icon on the massive dashboard screen.

I give him the address, and it appears on the screen in response to my voice. Then a map zooms in. “Would you like directions to this location?” a pleasant robot voice asks.

Rob confirms and a line appears, directing us to my house.

I stare at the map, then at the man beside me. “I haven’t seen that before.”

He flashes a grin at me. “It’s a little hack. The system has voice control, so I just needed to enable the connection to the mapping software.”

“You’re a talented guy.”

He shrugs and stops at an intersection, flipping the turn signal on. “It’s what I do. Was that your dad’s place?”

When I don’t reply, he holds up a hand. “Sorry. I know it’s supposed to be a secret. I’m just not great at small talk.”

“That’s okay. We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

He points at the map on the screen. “If you aren’t interested in hearing about the code behind my navigation tweak, that’s probably safest.”

I chuckle. “Luckily for you, I’m great at chitchat. But we can just be quiet if you want.”

We drive in silence for a few minutes. I gaze out the window, watching for Mom and Maddie, but we don’t pass them.

Rob pulls up my short driveway and parks in front of my rental. As I reach for the handle, he clears his throat. “You’re good for Matt.” I swing around to look at him. His face goes a little pink, and his broad shoulders twitch, as if he’s resigning himself to commenting. “I haven’t seen him this happy in a long time.”

I huff out a little snort. “You obviously haven’t seen him today.”

His eyes narrow. “No, I haven’t. Did something happen?”

I fight the urge to squirm under his direct gaze. “I told him we shouldn’t see each other anymore. This was always supposed to be casual, and I think he’s getting too—” I break off, looking away.

“Too serious?” Rob shifts his shoulders against the door of the car, to look more squarely at me. “You think he’s conflating his crush on Nica the movie star with his feelings for Nica the woman.”

I hunch a shoulder, not wanting to meet his eyes.

“You’re probably right.”

My head jerks around, and I meet his eyes in surprise.

He holds up a finger. “But that doesn’t mean his feelings are wrong.” He flicks a control, and the door lock snaps up. “Don’t hurt my friend.”

My eyes sting, and I sniff a little. “Better a little hurt now than a lot of hurt later.” My eyes blur with tears, and I pat at the door, trying to find the handle.

Rob reaches across me and opens the door. “Maybe you don’t need to hurt anyone. Now or later.”

I wave as Rob drives away, then use the keypad to open the garage door. I have too much to process. I’m not sure how to reconcile all the emotions I’m feeling right now. Destiny is not who I thought she was. For some reason, knowing she planned all of this makes me reevaluate my relationship with Matt. Which is stupid. Our situation was completely different from Dad and Destiny’s. Matt has no wealth or power. He’s just a kind, handsome man who thinks I’m the woman he wants to share his life with.

But I’m having a hard time believing that. I’m the flaky Hollywood actress, destined to bounce from one terrible relationship to another, messing each one up and moving on, never really settling down. Just like my father.

As I reach for the garage door button, Mom and Maddie roll up to the house on their scooters. Maddie sails into the garage, her long red hair streaming behind her like a flag, cool and classy in her miniskirt and designer shades. Mom putters in behind, her full skirt flapping around her legs. Her hair has taken a beating and sticks out at odd angles, but she's laughing as she stops a fraction of an inch from the wall.

"Looks like you two had a good time." I hit the button, and the door rolls down as they lean the scooters against the wall and converge on me.

"We should get another one, so we can all go out together!" Maddie holds up her hand, and my mom slaps it.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Mom pats around her body until she locates her crossbody purse and pulls out a comb. "We went back toward the house, but we didn't see you."

"I caught a ride with a friend." I point her toward the powder room as we enter.

Mom gives me a quick nod and disappears inside while Maddie and I head for the living room. Maddie throws herself down on the couch. "Your mom is always such a hoot. I wish mine was more like her."

I smile a little. "Yeah, I think I won the lottery on moms."

"You bet your booty you did." Mom sails into the room, her hair restored to its former glory. She puts a lipstick into her bag and pats her lips with a tissue as she looks around. "Cute place."

"It's the girls' pad." Maddie bounces on the couch. "We should have picked up some margarita mix!"

"Or some cab." Mom sinks gracefully into an overstuffed chair.

"Wine is in the kitchen, Mom. Sorry, I didn't buy tequila. Or limes. And I have a rehearsal to get to, so you two will have to occupy yourselves." I pull a pair of wine glasses from a cupboard and place them on the countertop. "If you promise not to drink too much, one of you can drive me to rehearsal,

and you can have the car while I'm gone. I'm sure I can find someone to bring me home."

Mom gets up and wanders to the stools by the kitchen island. "Maybe your hot new boyfriend can bring you home."

"Mom! I broke up with him." My eyes burn as I choke out the words.

"Oh, honey." She swoops around the island and wraps me in a warm, fragrant hug. "He sounded so perfect for you."

I pull back a little. "Why do you say that? He's fifteen years older than me, and he lives in the middle of nowhere. He makes guitars for a living. And teaches high school shop classes."

"So? Timothy is eighteen years older than me, and he's an accountant in northern California. None of that matters if he's Mr. Right. From what I could tell, Matt made you happy. That's the important thing."

"But what if I screw it up? I don't want to be like Destiny. I don't want to break his heart." More than I have already.

Mom grabs my arms and shakes me. "Please, you're nothing like Destiny. Heck, even Destiny isn't like Destiny—she was a con artist, remember? And before you go there, you're not that much like your father, either. You and I are made of the same cloth, honey. We're built for commitment, even though it takes us a while to figure it out. When you find the right guy, you gotta go for it. I married your father because he swept me off my feet. He was romantic and impulsive, and I was young and chasing a fantasy. But I married Timothy because he was steady and kind—and he made my heart sing. You need to slow down and listen to your heart. If he's the right man, all the sacrifices are worth it."

"But I already dumped him," I wail as I throw myself back into her arms.

Maddie comes up behind me and wraps her arms around both of us. "Then the three of us will have to come up with a plan to win him back."

Chapter 29



MATT

BACKSTAGE at the festplatz on Wednesday night, I roll my shoulders and straighten my Tyrolian jacket as the crew sets the last pieces of the abbey. The women playing nuns line up, whispering and jostling for their marks. I move deeper into the wings to give them space.

Dame Edith glides to the middle of the stage, barely visible between the set and the closed curtains. Actors peer between the masking curtains on either side. Music swells, muffled by the heavy fabric. The director spreads her arms, her voluminous blouse flowing with her movements. “Cleansing breaths, everyone! Clear your heads. This is our last rehearsal before Locals’ Night! Anything that can go wrong should do so tonight, so we have a chance to correct it! Places!”

Because the show has become so popular in recent years, the final dress rehearsal has become “locals’ night.” Anyone in town can attend with the understanding the show won’t be perfect yet. Although, the tourists seem to have caught wind of it, because final dress rehearsal has become more popular over the years, so we strive for our best work.

Edie claps once as she strides off the stage. Behind me, deeper in the wings, the stage manager mutters into her radio. Backlights come up, leaving most of the stage in shadow. The music builds, then falls, and the curtains slide apart. The nuns pace forward, singing in Latin.

On the far side of the stage, Nica waits for her cue. She’s wearing a dark dress and the braided, blonde wig. Just seeing her makes my heart pound louder and my eyes sting. I suck in

another “cleansing breath” and try to armor my heart against her.

“This is just a play,” I mutter to myself, pacing in a tight circle behind the sets. Since Monday, Nica and I have only spoken during our scenes together, reciting lines and singing as if the other were a stranger. Before each scene, I pretend Nica is Hannah—a young woman I have no interest in. The kiss at the end of our duet nearly broke my heart last night, but I made it as quick and painless as possible.

Apparently, I’m a magnificent actor. After last night’s finale, Edith congratulated Nica and me specifically on our stellar performances—something she almost never does. I couldn’t detect any sarcasm, and the rest of the performers echoed her praise.

I guess personal heartache is integral to good acting.

We get through the first half, ending with Nica’s duet with the Mother Superior. As they begin singing, I move out of the wings and along the side of the “house” where the audience will sit. Folding chairs have been set out in rows on the cement pad. A sprinkling of random people watch—probably friends and family of the actors or stage crew who can’t come tomorrow night. I stride across the gravel beyond the seats, intending to take a quick lap around the lot before we resume. I need to get into the right headspace.

A woman comes down one of the rows, smiling at me. She looks familiar—not like I should know her, but because the resemblance to Nica is stunning. Everyone says Nica takes after her father, but clearly, she got the best from both sides.

“You’re Matt Hertzprung.” She steps past the last chair with her hand outstretched. “I’m Nica’s mom, Loretta.”

I shake her hand and nod. “I know. Nice to meet you.”

Her blue eyes size me up. Because I’ve been crazy about Nica Holmes for years, I know Loretta married Nick Holmes when she was barely eighteen and had Nica two years later. They divorced when Nica was six and moved to northern California. Loretta remarried when Nica was fifteen and has

been with her second husband since. She's in her fifties now, and quite attractive, with blonde hair and a full figure. It occurs to me that I'm probably closer in age to Loretta than Nica. I try not to let that bother me.

She takes my arm and steers me back toward the stage. "So, tell me, Matt, why are you letting my daughter hide?"

I stop, pulling her to a halt. "I'm not *letting* her do anything. She made it very clear there's nothing between us, and I'm respecting that. I may be a huge fan, but I'm not a stalker."

She pats my arm with a sad nod. "It's hard to be involved with a celebrity. They get kind of paranoid. And to be fair, there's plenty of evidence many people are looking for the wrong things... But actors are real people, too. People who just want to be loved but are too insecure to believe someone might actually love them for themselves." She shakes her head. "How's that line go? Nica is just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her."

My heart rises, then crashes again. "I'm hardly a boy. And she pushed me away. Besides, that line doesn't work when it's delivered by her mother."

"Is that what this is about? The age difference?" She laughs. "Nick Holmes was twenty years older than me when we married."

I bite back the urge to say, "Look how that turned out." I try to make my face a blank, but I'm not successful.

She smiles. "I know what you're thinking. But my current husband is only three years younger than Nick. Some couples work. Some don't. Some people shouldn't be part of a couple at all. From what Nica tells me, you know that better than most."

I stop. Nica told her mother about Judy?

She chuckles again and pulls me forward. "Don't worry. She didn't tell me all your secrets. In fact, she said she didn't know much about your ex, just that you stuck it out for a long time. As far as I'm concerned, that shows you're a good match

for Nica. She's going to need someone who can help her work through her self-doubt. You know that's what this is about, right?"

I look around, as if "this" will appear suddenly before me. "I'm not—I—what are you talking about?"

"Nica idolized her father growing up. Even after he walked out, he would show up in her life and whisk her away into a magical land where everyone is wealthy and beautiful. Bel Air or the Ranch—they're both overwhelmingly attractive when you're longing for some glamor." She grimaces. "And it didn't help that everyone commented on the resemblance. So, Nica grew up thinking she was just like her daddy. In love with the glamor, but fickle."

She pauses, drawing me to a halt. "She walked away from your relationship because it was getting too real, and she's afraid she can't live up to that. With Nicholas Holmes as a role model, you shouldn't be too surprised. But I think she's coming around. She might need a little help from you—a reminder that you're here, waiting for her."

I pull my arm away. "What if I'm done waiting?"

She gives me a shrewd look. "Are you?"

The stage manager's voice booms out of the speakers. "Actors, take your marks for act two!"

"You'd better go." Loretta gives my shoulder a little push. "Think about what I've said. Take your time—as long as you don't take too much. When the show wraps, she'll be headed back to LA."

I try to put her words out of my mind as I return to the stage, but that tiny spark of hope has blossomed into a candle flame. Maybe I can salvage this.

The love scene is excruciating. Nica is still in "professional actor" mode. She turns in an amazing performance—even I believe Maria is in love with the captain—while somehow making it one hundred percent clear Nica and Matt aren't involved at all. I don't know how she can make the relationship feel real while simultaneously

maintaining a wall between us. The kiss is just as strange and cold as last night.

I go through the rest of the act on autopilot, hitting my marks and cues like clockwork. At the end, Edith pulls me aside again as the others gather their things and depart. I try to focus on what she's saying, but my gaze strays to the little yellow car waiting by the entrance. When Nica gets in and pulls away, my heart drops to my toes.

I drag my attention back to Edie. “—wooden and mechanical today. After last night's performance, I'm disappointed. I trust you can tap into whatever you found and bring it back for opening night.”

“I'll try.”

Her eyes narrow. “Do not try. Do.”

My brother runs up the steps to the stage, stopping at my shoulder. “Are you trying to quote Yoda? Because you've got it wrong.”

Edith gives Blake a stern look and slaps his shoulder. “I do not quote puppets, young man.”

“Muppets,” Blake and I say together. He smirks and offers a high five which I can't leave hanging.

Edith shakes her head as if we're hopeless and sails away to speak with the stage manager.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as Blake and I descend the backstage steps.

He directs me toward the parking lot. “I'm here to take you camping.”

“I can't go camping. I have to work tomorrow. And I have a show tomorrow night. And I haven't packed anything.” I follow him across the grass toward his glossy SUV.

With a grin, he beeps a fob, and the lights flash. “I've got your stuff in here—Eva let me in to pack a change of clothing and grab your sleeping bag.”

“But work—”

He cuts me off. “Lockheart loves me. I told him you’re working with me tomorrow, so problem solved. We can chat about my ideas if that makes you feel better. Make it official business.” Since Blake became a “signature artist” for my company’s guitars, our CEO has been after him to help design a new line of specialty instruments.

I climb into the truck and fasten my seatbelt. “Why are we going camping?”

“Because this Nica thing is doing a number on you. So, it’s time to get away, even if it’s only twenty-four hours.” He pulls onto the highway.

“Was this your idea?” I lean back and close my eyes.

He laughs. “Yeah, right. I’m not that intuitive. Rachel suggested it. Eva seconded, and here we are.”

We rumble up the road to one of our favorite sites on the shore of Crystal Lake. A big tent is already pitched in a primo site—Blake must have had to bribe someone to get the place because at this time of year, the campground is normally full. A black Tesla is parked next to the tent, bright moonlight glinting off its paint. Two men sit beside the gas firepit.

“Dylan and Rob are here?” I unfasten my belt. This feels like some kind of setup. Like a bachelor party. Or an intervention.

“Grab your bag.” Blake jabs a thumb over his shoulder, then jumps down.

I pull my gym bag from the back seat and follow him across the campsite to the fire. Rob waves a lazy hand without pushing his reclining chair upright. Dylan opens a cooler and holds out a bottle. “Beer or cider?”

I take the beer. Tension seems to drip out of my shoulders as the quiet night settles around us. We drink a little and talk less, just hanging out in nature. The fresh air and quiet sounds are a balm to my soul.

I have some good friends.



THE NEXT MORNING, Dylan cooks eggs, bacon, potatoes, toast, and coffee over the camp stove. There are definite perks to bringing a chef on a camping trip. After we clean up, the Mead brothers head back to town—they both have businesses to run. Blake and I spend some time talking about guitar design and his thoughts on a Blake Stein line. I sketch out a few drawings, but mostly we spend the day just lazing around the lake.

I try not to think about Nica, but thoughts of her intrude constantly. I remember our visit to Blue Lake. I imagine her sitting with us as Blake and I discuss the resonant qualities of spruce and haggle over mahogany versus rosewood backs. I can almost smell her perfume mingling with the scents of pine and water.

As the sun reaches its zenith, Blake pulls some bread and lunch meat from the cooler. “What are you going to do?”

“About what?” I spread some mayo and mustard and load the slice with ham and turkey.

“About her, dork.” He smacks the back of my head lightly. “About the woman we haven’t been talking about.”

“What can I do?”

Blake slaps some turkey on his bread. “Win her back, you idiot. Haven’t you learned anything from all those movies you watch? Pick your favorite and recreate the big dramatic moment.”

“I can’t chase her through an airport if she’s not going anywhere.” I take a bite of my sandwich.

He rolls his eyes. “Pick something different, then. But you aren’t going to win her back by doing nothing.”

“I was hoping the show would help me, but she’s kind of like a robot. I don’t know how she makes it look so good while staying completely impersonal.” I eat a few chips.

“The good news is you’ve got ten days to think of something. She can’t go anywhere until the show closes next weekend. Let me know if you need help with execution.”



WHEN WE FINISH LUNCH, I’m ready to head back to town. I pack the remaining food into the ice chest and move it to the back of Blake’s vehicle. Then I disconnect the propane tank from the gas fire ring and load that up.

Blake finally emerges from the tent, but he’s wearing a bathing suit.

“I thought we were heading back?”

He squints at the sun. “We’ve got lots of time, and it’s finally warm enough for a swim. You coming?” He flips his towel over his shoulder and strides toward the lake.

By the time I get changed and down to the shore, he’s halfway across the lake. I swim to a wooden dock floating offshore, then back to the sandy beach. Blake’s head is barely visible in the distance. With a shrug, I swim out to the dock again and watch from there. He shouldn’t go that far alone—if anything happens to him, I’m too far to reach him. But Blake is a very strong swimmer, and Crystal Lake is about as safe as it gets. Still, my older-brother instincts kick into high gear.

When he reaches the other side, Blake climbs out and waves at me. From his gestures, he’s either planning to walk back to the campsite, or trying to land a dirigible. I assume the former and dive in to swim back to shore. Crystal Lake isn’t huge, but the walk around the end will take longer than swimming back.

When he finally arrives at the campsite, I’m dressed and have everything back in the truck. I considered leaving the tent up for Blake to change in, but I’m anxious to get going. He’ll have to trek down to the bathroom instead.

“Why’d you walk?” I throw his backpack at him.

He shrugs and winces. “I must have pulled something. I didn’t think swimming was a good idea. But walking barefoot and wet sucked.” He looks around the barren campsite. “You packed up already? Why are you in such a hurry?”

“You’re welcome. And I have a show to do, remember? I was hoping to get a shower at home before.”

“Sorry for the delay. The bathhouse here has pretty nice showers.”

“Yeah, when I realized you were lollygagging around gazing at the sky and picking wild flowers, I made use of them. Hurry up. I need to get back.” I point my phone at him, so he can see the time.

“Oops. Yeah, I’ll be right back.” He slides his feet into his abandoned flip flops and shuffles away.

I retrieve one of the loungers from the truck and settle in to wait, resigning myself to going directly to the festplatz. I should have insisted he take me back first—he could shower and change at home. I am way too nice to my little brother.

When we get to town, he takes me to the parking lot we left only twenty hours ago. Showtime is five p.m. for the leads, and it’s four forty-five. I hesitate before getting out of the truck, but if I ride home with him, I’ll have to turn around and come right back. No point.

“Break a leg, old man.” Blake claps me on the shoulder. “I’ll be in the audience cheering you on. And good luck with the plan.”

“What plan?” I slide down from the tall vehicle and turn around to peer back inside.

“I mean with coming up with one.”

I slap the seat. “You’re a big help. But thanks for the trip. It was a good distraction.”

He gives a thumbs-up and flashes his famous grin. I slam the door shut and strike out across the scrubby grass to the dressing rooms.

Chapter 30



“NICA, WHAT’S TAKING SO LONG?” Maddie whisper-yells from outside the women’s dressing room. “Matt just arrived!”

My arms are pinned overhead as I struggle into my costume. Black fabric envelops me, and all I can see are my feet. If I didn’t know better, I’d think I’d gained weight—I can’t get the stupid top over my shoulders. “Come help me! I’m stuck!”

The curtain rings rattle, and Maddie’s pink sandals appear beside my black shoes. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know. I unzipped it, but I can’t get it on!”

Maddie laughs and pulls the costume from my head. The dim light inside the tent-like space is bright after the darkness of my fabric prison. She shakes out the dress and holds it up. “If this is yours, it shrank a few sizes.”

“That must belong to Marta.” The actress who plays the seven-year-old is actually nine but small for her age. She’s also kind of a diva and frequently leaves her costumes on the floor in a pile. Someone else must have hung it in my corner by mistake.

“Why does she have a black dress? Aren’t these for the nuns?”

“Everyone has multiple roles—there aren’t enough actors. She’s an extra in the convent scenes, too.” I chuckle as I sort through the racks of clothing, looking for mine. “She’s probably got her mother tearing her hair out looking for that,

since she's in the opening scene." Marta's mom is a textbook stage mother.

As if on cue, we hear an aggrieved woman call out, "Where is Amber's costume? The costume mistress should be fired!"

"I'll be right back." Maddie tucks the dress under her arm and slips between the curtains that act as a door.

I finally find my costume hidden between Elsa's evening gown and a clearly misplaced pair of lederhosen. They should be in the men's dressing room. Maybe Amber's mother is right—except the show is all-volunteer, so "firing" people is problematic.

I get into the dress and grab the head dress looped over the hanger. When I emerge from the dressing room, Maddie grabs my arm. "Come on! You don't want to miss your entrance."

"I have plenty of time, but you'd better get to your seat." But my heart pounds in my chest, as if this is opening night on Broadway, not Locals' Night at an outdoor community theater. My anxiety has nothing to do with the show. Tonight, I'm making the grand gesture, and I'm terrified. Maddie, Eva, and my mother have helped me set it up, with the assistance of half the town. Sure, I could just talk to him—tell him I made a mistake. That we should try for a real relationship. In fact, cornering him and telling him how I feel would probably be as effective, in the long run, and more mature. But I want to prove to him that I'm not just blowing smoke. That I want to tell the world how much he means to me.

Besides, I'm an actress. I love drama.

Maddie gives me a fierce hug. "You've got this!" She pats me on the butt, like a football player, and hurries around the curtains.

The stage fills one end of the festplatz. Long metal frames holding black curtains stretch out on either side, providing "wings" to house the costume rooms, props, and backdrops. The stage is a wooden platform about four feet high, and it's used for polka bands and other performances during the rest of

the year. A framework of wood and metal soars over the stage. For the show, the set crew has rigged a curtain, and lights hang from the structure. The convent backdrop is in place, and the women playing nuns have lined up behind in the wings, stage right. I take my place on the other side as the orchestra launches into the opening music.

I spot Matt lurking in the shadows on the far side of the stage. His entrance is midway through the third scene from that side. He looks so handsome in the short *trachten* jacket and fitted slacks. His eyes meet mine, and he nods, as if we're casual acquaintances. My heart stutters and my breath catches—could he be over me already?

Then Eva appears beside him, and they exchange a hug. She steps back and flashes a double thumbs-up from behind his back. The icy grip on my lungs relaxes a fraction—she knows her dad better than I do. If she says we're still good to go, I have to believe her.

I bring my mind back to the show. I need to get my head in the game. This may be Locals' Night, but thanks to my social media campaign, we've got some out-of-towners who arrived early, including my nemesis, Louis Boitano. If making my grand gesture embarrasses the town, this could backfire completely.

But that's the thing about grand gestures—they have to be high-stakes, or they're not very grand.

I take a deep breath and center myself. I'm a professional and the show must go on. Rolling my shoulders, I run through my pre-show routine. Although most of my work is film for the small screen, I still follow a ritual I learned from my dad. He may be a flighty father and a terrible husband, but in the acting world, he's one of the greats.

The lights go down as the nuns glide off stage. Set crews roll the trees into place, and I take my mark beside the biggest one. One more cleansing breath, and the music swells. The lights snap on, and I sing.

Thunderous applause greets the end of the title song. I pause as the lights go down again, then hurry off stage,

weaving expertly between the crew members as I pull the thin black skirt over my head, revealing the more fitted dark blue one beneath. Pauline, the recently maligned costume mistress, yanks the dress from my fingers and shoves a jacket at me. I slide my arms into the sleeves, cram the hat on top of my blonde wig, and follow Franz onto the stage.

I've always thought the meeting between Maria and the captain in the stage version of the show is less dramatic and more in character than the one in the film. Rather than catching her poking around the house, he finds her praying in the living room. Franz exits, and I drop to my knees on the cushion hidden behind a sofa that's supposed to be vintage 1940s but looks more like a reject from the 1960s. The lime upholstery clashes with my olive boiled wool coat. I fold my hands on the couch back and bow my head.

The lights come up. From the corner of my eye, I catch Matt's entrance. The audience applauds loudly when he appears, as if he's a famous actor. I guess in Rotheberg, he is. He slows his approach to delay his first line until the applause stops, and my partners in crime go into action.

Way too early.

The lights dim, and the spots go black. From behind me, Dame Edith's furious whisper hisses. A low voice answers her, but I don't catch the words. Rechargeable camp lanterns splutter on in the space between the stage and the audience, the LED lamps blue against the glow from the orchestra "pit" on the right. My collaborators, seated in the front row, raise a banner between us and the spectators.

Or they try to raise it. Muffled curse words filter up to the stage, and I hope Matt doesn't recognize Eva's voice when she pokes the cat sprawled across the white fabric. "Alf! Move your fuzzy—" The calico stands, stretches dramatically, and with a glare that's clearly meant to indicate he's only moving because *he* decided to move, stalks away.

"What's going on?" someone hisses from the wings.

The banner finally rises and hundreds of sticky notes flutter to the ground. Instead of spelling out "I'm sorry" on

one side and “Can we try again?” on the other, it looks more like “In sony” and “Con ve tiy agair?”

This was supposed to happen in the second act, when the captain and Maria confess their love for each other. I bite my lip and turn to look at Matt. He’s frozen halfway across the stage and is clearly trying to read the signs without facing the audience. His eyes roll so far to the right, he almost falls over.

I bite back a giggle and jump to my feet, hurrying across the stage to him. “Just look at the darn things, will you?”

“What is happening to my show?” Edith wails as Matt gives up and turns toward the audience.

He reads the banners, glances at me, then reads them again. “Does this mean what I think it means? You’re willing to give us another try? Or do you want to *tie* again? I’m not really into that kinky stuff.”

I smack his arm lightly. “I guess we shouldn’t have reused the stickies from Eva’s room.” As I speak, another handful of fluttering squares drops. “And I am sony.” I move a few steps closer. “Con ve tie again?”

“Kiss her already!” someone hollers from behind the banners. Then others take up the chant. “Kiss her! Kiss her!”

Matt’s eyes close for a second, as if he can’t believe the situation. I can’t really, either, and I helped engineer it. I don’t wait for him to make up his mind—I just fling myself at him and pull his head down to mine. “I’m sorry.” Our lips meet, and fireworks flash.

Actually, it’s the spots coming back on. They blind me, even with my eyes closed. Catcalls ring out, and the audience hoots and whistles.

Dame Edith appears beside us, her eyes blazing. Her voice is low and furious. “I realize you think we’re just some hick town festival—not as important as your made-for-TV dramas—” Venom drips from her voice. “But this is serious business in Rotheberg, and I won’t have you—”

“Edie!” A male voice calls from the front row. “Relax. It’s Locals’ Night. This is what they’re here for.” A short, round

man strides forward, stopping directly in front of us.

“That’s Lorne Lockheart. My boss.” Matt’s voice is kind of strangled. His wide eyes meet mine. “Was he in on this?”

I look away, trying to feign innocence, but it’s a lost cause, so I shrug. “He might have been informed of the project. Blake convinced him to let you off work.”

“Why?” He turns back to me.

Dame Edith makes jerky motions, urging her husband to the steps at the side where she lectures him in a stage whisper, arms flailing. The audience begins chatting, and the spotlights fade to black. We are too boring, I guess.

“We thought you might need a little softening up. Blake’s job was to keep you out of the house while we harvested the sticky notes and to make sure you were still—” I break off and look down, doubt raising its ugly head.

“Still what?” He puts his fingers under my chin and raises it until our eyes meet. “Still in love with you?”

My heart catches, then stumbles on, so fast it feels like a train rolling through. I try to suck a breath into paralyzed lungs. “Are you?”

“I never stopped.” He leans forward, and his lips brush mine, sending sweet fire through my veins. “But this was about you, not me. How do you feel?”

My throat tightens, but I fight through. “I—I think I’m—” I clutch the dark wool of his jacket and press my lips to his, desperate to show him everything I can’t say. His arms close around me, his hands splayed on my back, warm through the thick wool of my costume.

“Get a room!” someone yells.

But I don’t care. I lean back, and my eyes meet Matt’s. His are clear and blue, like a cool oasis in the desert. He’s my refuge. Indecision, anxiety, fear of the future all burn away, consumed by the strength of my feelings. He’s the one. This is right. Now and forever. “I love you, too, Matt Hertzprung.”

Matt’s arms tighten, and he kisses me again.

After a long, blissful interlude, Matt relaxes his grip, letting a fraction of space form between us, but still holding me close. Chatter from the audience registers, and a giggle bubbles up in my chest. “We kind of messed up the show.”

He smirks. “Somehow, I think that was part of the plan.” He tips his head toward the front row, where our families—Mom, Maddie, Eva, Blake, and Rachel—have dropped their banners and are high-fiving each other.

I lean in to give him one more swift kiss, then pull away. “A grand gesture needs to be dramatic. But now the show must go on.” My eyes find Dame Edith. I really should have included her in the plot. But while she is a great actress, and every bit as dramatic as me, she is also very serious about the show. She would never have allowed us to disrupt it.

At least that’s what her husband told us. But now, she seems to be reveling in the moment. She sweeps across the stage, hands outstretched. Putting one arm around each of us, she turns us toward the audience. “Our stars, everyone! Matt and Nica. A love story for the ages.” She pushes us to bow, then whispers fiercely, “Do that again, and I’ll bring on both your understudies.” She smiles at the audience and raises her voice again. “Thank you for your kind indulgence, friends, but now the show must go on.” She bows again, then backs away and strides off stage right.

I squeeze Matt’s hand, then scurry back to my position at the couch. He moves into the wings and restarts his entrance.

And the show goes on.

Chapter 31



MATT

A WEEK AND A HALF LATER, Sunday morning dawns bright and clear; a typical early summer day in the high desert. Birds sing, and as I drive to the Ranch, I catch sight of a pair of obviously pregnant does munching with a pack of yearling deer.

Which starts an earworm I will be stuck with all day. *Do, a deer...* But I don't mind because I hear it in Nica's voice.

I wave Nica's visitor card at the automated kiosk, and the gate rises. It's only nine and the swimming pools are already packed. Bikes whiz by on the trails that meander beside the road, and in the distance, a quartet of golfers tees off. I round the corner and pull into Nica's driveway, parking next to a shiny black Nissan.

The front door is open, so I call out a hello as I walk in.

"We're back here!" Nica waves through the window from the patio behind the house. She meets me at the sliding door. After a slow, sweet, soul-warming kiss, we turn toward the broad wood deck. The pines behind the house throw cool shade across the chairs and table and the group of women sitting there.

"Good morning." I lift a pink Rotheberg Bäckerei box. "I brought brunch. Berliners and marionberry streuselkuchen. Plus a couple of other favorites."

"Do you want iced or hot coffee?" Nica pauses in the doorway.

"Hot, please. With cream."

“I know.” She smiles, then disappears into the house.

“I didn’t realize you were having a party.” I set the box in the center of the table. “Nice to see you, Loretta. Maddie.”

Maddie looks up from her phone. “Is Eva here?”

“No.” My brows come down. “How do you know Eva?”

She turns back to her device. “When we worked on the sticky note thing. She’s coming up to swim this afternoon.”

I blink. “She said she was swimming with a friend—I didn’t put it together. She has a lot of high school friends in town, so I assumed...”

Without looking up, Maddie waves a languid hand. “Some of them are coming, too. It’s a girl thing.”

Loretta leans forward, drawing my attention to a stunning redhead beside her. Her hair is burnished copper, making Maddie’s look pale and almost strawberry blonde. “This is Gina Wilkes. She works with Nica’s publicist.”

Gina rises and shakes hands with me. Her grip is firm and business-like. “Nice to meet you, Matt. I don’t know if Nica told you, but Sylvia—her manager—asked us to take a look at —” She breaks off and sizes me up for a fraction of a second. It’s so fast, I almost miss it. “The situation. We want to make sure your relationship with Nica is presented in the best possible way to reinforce her brand.”

My jaw drops, and I stare for a second before finding my voice. “You want to present our relationship—what?”

“Will you ladies excuse us for a moment?” She doesn’t wait for Loretta or Maddie to answer before shepherding me into the kitchen to sit at the counter.

Nica smiles and puts a mug of coffee in front of me. Her expression fades to neutral as she looks at Gina. “Sylvia insisted on sending her. Let’s hear her out.”

“Thank you.” Gina nods regally. “Nica Holmes is a brand. Her fans watch her movies because they identify with what they perceive her to be: sweet, wholesome, romantic. Nica tells me you’re a fan of her work, so you know what I’m

talking about. We want to make sure her fans learn about your *affaire de coeur* in a way that reinforces that image. I'm going to arrange for a photographer to—”

“Not that Boitano guy!” I lurch forward in my seat.

“No, of course not. That man is the bane of my existence! His work is the exact opposite of what we're trying to do. He tries to catch celebrities at their worst. We're working to present your relationship at its best.”

“No offense, but I don't know why this is necessary. My brother didn't need a publicist when he and Rachel started dating.”

“Your brother?” She pauses for a second, her brow furrowed, as if she's paging through a client briefing. Then it clears. “Oh, right, the singer.” She makes the word sound small, as if Blake is a busker on the corner stumping for tips. “Musicians are easy. People expect indiscretions from them, so if they just keep their noses clean, they're golden.”

“My brother is very protective of his brand, which is quite similar to Nica's, actually. He's the clean and wholesome type. And he had no trouble dealing with that by himself. He certainly didn't need to hire a publicist. And besides, people have seen me on Nica's social media.” I turn to Nica. “Right?”

Nica nods, but Gina doesn't give her a chance to speak. “Look, Matt, I get it. And frankly, I agree. You fit the brand. But Sylvia wants to make sure it's done professionally. I'd like to schedule a photographer to get some good pictures of you two doing normal couple things. That's all. We'll use those on Nica's social media.”

“I thought she posted her own stuff? In fact, that was one of the things she was doing here. We did some video.”

“And those were great. Perfect for her followers. But I need images that can be used in professional media. I promise it won't take more than a few hours, and you'll be done.”

“I'm still not convinced this is necessary.” Nica folds her arms. “We aren't getting engaged.” Her face goes a little pink, and she avoids my gaze. “If we were, I'd be on board. But this

is too new—it's too soon to put out anything formal. I've posted a few pics and vids to my personal feed, and I think that's plenty at this point. Would you want to have to do a formal—” She looks around the room, searching for the right word. “A formal presentation when you've just started dating a new guy? I've never done one before.”

Gina's lips press together, and she looks away as if debating something. Finally, she sighs and leans a little closer. “I get it. And I actually agree. And I can tell Sylvia that. She seems to think this is different.” She nods at me, then raises her brows with a shrug. “I'll tell her what you said. But if she disagrees, you're going to have to take it up with her. Just between you and me, this is my last week at Webster Dillinger. I start a new position next month, so someone else will take over this campaign.”

“Perfect. Tell Sylvia you presented your case, and I—we —” Nica comes around the end of the kitchen island and puts a hand on my arm. “*We* said no thank you. I'll tell her that, too. Now that you're off the hook, let's go back outside.”

Someone knocks on the open front door. “Yoohoo? Anyone home?” Gloria Mead traipses into the room, followed by her son Rob.

“Gloria!” Nica exchanges a hug with the older woman, then gives Rob an air kiss. He twitches, as if trying to avoid squirming. Nica smirks, then herds us all onto the deck. “We're getting quite the party going, aren't we? Gloria, Rob, do you know everyone?” She waves at the women on the deck. “My mom, Loretta. My sister Maddie. And this is Gina Wilkes from Webster Dillinger.” Her voice cools on the last introduction.

Rob shakes hands with Gina and nods at Nica's family. He loiters by the door, as if he's anxious to leave. His mother hurries around the deck, hugging everyone in quick succession. “Did you all know Loretta and I have known each other for years? She used to come here when she was married to Nica's father. When I saw her at Locals' Night, I told her we needed to get together, and here we are. Rob's here because...” She turns to Rob. “Why are you here?”

Rob blinks in surprise. “Because you wanted me to meet Maddie.”

Gloria slaps Rob’s arm gently. “Don’t be silly. Maddie’s clearly not right for you. No offense, dear.” She aims this last bit at the younger woman.

Maddie drags her eyes reluctantly from her phone. “Don’t worry about it, Glo. Mamas try to set me up with their sons all the time.” She gives Rob a shrewd look. “Although they aren’t usually as hot as yours. You interested in moving to LA?”

Rob shudders. “Definitely not.”

Maddie shrugs. “There ya go. Not gonna happen.” She turns back to her phone.

Rob coughs. “I need to get some work done this morning.”

“But it’s Sunday!” Gloria shakes a finger at her son. “Didn’t your father and I teach you to rest on the sabbath?”

“I’m resting. I’m only working a few hours. I can come back and get you later if you want.”

“Don’t bother, dear.” Loretta waves Rob’s offer away. “Gloria and I are going to ride the scooters.” She turns back to her friend. “You have to try these things. They’re so much fun!”

Maddie grins and leans forward to pick up a donut hole. Gloria settles in next to Loretta, already chattering a mile a minute. I glance at Nica, then dart my eyes at Gina. Nica makes an “I don’t know” face.

Rob reaches behind his back to slide the screen door open and make his escape. “If you’ve got a ride home, I’m heading out. Nice to meet you all.”

“I think I’d better go, too.” Gina shakes hands with Nica, then turns to me. “Sorry to intrude. It’s been a pleasure not doing business with you. Best of luck.” She follows Rob into the house and slides the screen shut behind her.

Nica sighs and pushes me toward a chair. “Sit down. We’ve got about an hour before first call, and I need to eat one of these Berliners.”



AN HOUR LATER, we park in the high school parking lot. After another long, sweet kiss, she slides her arm around my waist, and we walk down the hill beside the football stadium to the festplatz. As we stroll by the box office, she lifts her chin toward the Fighting Edelweiss over the gate. “That’s an... unusual mascot. What’s the story?”

I chuckle. “You’ll have to ask Rob or Dylan. It was their doing. We were the Highlanders when I was a kid. Angus could kick Eckhart the Edelweiss’s flowery leaves any day.”

“You know leaves aren’t flowery, right?” She squeezes my waist.

I revel in the teasing. The few days we weren’t really talking were some of the longest of my life, and I would have done anything to have this woman laugh at me again. I lean over to kiss her hair, and she snuggles against me.

The Sunday matinee—our last performance—runs like clockwork. Every actor hits their marks, the orchestra sounds fabulous, and we play to a sold-out house. Actually, every show has been sold out, thanks to Nica’s social media posting, but this one is standing room only. More people loiter on the sidewalk, watching and listening from a distance.

After the finale, thunderous applause rings through the audience. Nica waves to Andrew Washington, the conductor, and gets him to cut off in the middle of the curtain call. She invites Dame Edith on stage and introduces her to the crowd, engendering another round of applause. The child actors present flowers to the director, Nica, and me, and the music begins again. We take our final bows and hurry off the stage.

Dame Edith rounds us up to give a quick congratulatory speech, and everyone cheers. We change out of our costumes and return them to Pauline’s team of costume wranglers. Most of the actors are greeting their friends and family in the audience, but Nica and I sneak away to Subie Doo. We parked

at the school hoping we could escape more easily. We'll still have to drive past the festplatz on the way out, but by then, it will be too late.

She ducks below the window as we pass the venue, but no one is watching this direction. The crowd mills among the seats. I spot Boitano on the stage, looking behind a set piece. At the end of the road, we stop at the highway where a stream of cars pushes by at twenty miles per hour. When pedestrians step off the curb, I gun the gas to jump into the gap while traffic is blocked. "We're clear."

She sits up. "Can't be too careful. That pesky paparazzo is still lurking around town."

"Yeah, I saw him in the wings before the show."

She turns to look out the back window. "He isn't following us, is he?"

I shake my head but wave a hand at the cars in front of us. "Who can tell? The highway is crazy with tourists today."

"Where are we going?" She adjusts her seatbelt and settles into her seat.

"You'll see."

We ride in silence for a while, then I turn off onto a dirt forest service road. A few bumpy miles later, I park in a wide spot and open my door. "Come on."

"Where are we?"

I take her hand and push Subie's door shut. "You'll see."

We follow a well-trod trail through the trees, then step out onto a rocky aerie. The hills fall away below us, then rise in the distance, layers of different hues of green stretching into infinity.

Nica gasps and tugs at my hand. "Is this where we—"

I move behind her, sliding my arms around her waist. "We came up here after the tour. I thought it would be a perfect way to finish the show. And start the next act in our lives."

She turns in my arms. “That is so cheesy. But I guess cheese is my brand. And I want to spend every act with you as my leading man.”

I lean forward, stopping as our lips almost touch. “That’s the plan.”



IF YOU ENJOYED Nica and Matt’s story, you might want to grab a bonus scene I wrote. Just [go to my website](http://liahuni.com), liahuni.com, and join my newsletter. I email every other week, slightly more often when I have a new book out.

Acknowledgments

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I hope you enjoyed Matt and Nica's story. If you have the time and inclination, I hope you'll leave a review on your retailer, Goodreads or Bookbub. Reviews help other readers find books they want to read, and they reassure us fragile authors that someone likes our work.

If you haven't already guessed, Rob gets his story next. I haven't come up with a title, but will update both this note and my website when I do. If you'd like to know when that happens, or when the book comes out, you can join my newsletter. I promise not to SPAM you, and I'll send you a free bonus scene.



Somewhere in this book, Nica says, "If you can fake sincerity, you can fake pretty much anything." I've seen that quote for years, but decided to track down the provenance, and discovered a lot of people have said something like that. The oldest quote I could find was Groucho Marx who purportedly said, "The two most important words in the world are honesty and sincerity. If you can fake these you've got it made."



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Also by Lia Huni

Stolen Hearts of Rotheberg

[Stolen Kisses](#)

[Stolen Love Song](#)

[Stolen Hearts Strings](#)

[Stolen Hearts book 4](#) (spring 2023)